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Diaspora aesthetics: Music performance and practices of belonging among the South Asians in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the concept of diaspora aesthetics to examine how South Asians use traditional culture, such as music, to negotiate belonging during their integration process in Hong Kong. Music is an embodied aesthetic practice through which diaspora materialises, shaping identity and belonging in ethnic minorities. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic observations of South Asians in Hong Kong, this article explores how expressions of South Asian-ness become embodied in people who participate in music performance at socio-cultural and religious events. While the South Asians have long been experiencing marginalisation in Hong Kong, the discussion of diaspora aesthetics demonstrates how music performance can concurrently demonstrate hybrid forms of belonging, intercultural dialogue, and a sense of integration.

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Introduction

When people migrate, music is among the cultural productions that travel with them, contributing to the formation of home memory, homeland cultural belongingness, and identity (Davis, Dorothea, and Johanna 2011). This article focuses on music, one of the most easily created forms of cultural production that mediates the negotiation of identity (Davis, Dorothea, and Johanna 2011; Turino 2008). The literature linking music to migration mainly focuses on song lyrics and meaning, music production, and the political messages of music performers, thereby perceiving music as a primarily textual and symbolic domain in relation to migration circumstances and processes (Baily and Collyer 2006). While there is a significant body of literature in that explores the relationship betwen identity and the arts in diasporic communities in Western societies (e.g. Alajaji 2008; Hemetek 2006; Naroditskaya 2019; Turino and Lea 2004), little is known about the social function of music in ethnic minorities' integration processes in Asian context. This article contributes to this body of knowledge by providing empirical insights from the experiences of South Asians in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, the South Asian community is largely made up of Indians, Pakistanis, and Nepalese. The earliest settlement of South Asians in Hong Kong were recruited by the British colonial government for military service, labour, trade, and government

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services between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Erni and Leung 2014). After Hong Kong's sovereignty was returned to China in 1997, many remained with their families, making significant social, economic, and cultural contributions to society. In 2021, more than 96,000 South Asians (Indian, Pakistani, and Nepalese) resided in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department 2022). A sizable scholarship on South Asians in Hong Kong has developed, providing insights on employment, education, public facilities and services, health, gender politics, and minority engagement (Erni and Leung 2014; Kwok 2020; Leung 2021). However, little is known about their cultural lives in Hong Kong. This research aims to examine how South Asians use music culture to negotiate belonging during their integration processes. Specifically, it explores the performative processes from which South Asian communities are created and maintained through music, and how music can promote more positive relations with the Hong Kong Chinese. In this study, music culture is defined as practices, attitudes, beliefs, networks, and institutions related to the production, distribution, and consumption of music. I use the concept of "diaspora aesthetics" to examine the practice and affects that emerge from the situation of bodies, sounds, and instruments in music performances among the South Asians in Hong Kong and the process through which these performances concurrently demonstrate hybrid forms of belonging, intercultural dialogue, and a sense of integration. My approach is informed by the works of Brubaker (2005) and Meyer (2009). Brubaker's (2005) concept of diaspora as a category of practice resonates with the concept of "aesthetic formation" proposed by Meyer (2009), which similarly focuses on the making of communities and belonging as a dynamic, embodied, and performative process. My analysis highlights music as a critical aspect of diaspora formation (Lidskog 2016) and music performance is an embodied aesthetic practice which facilitates recreating or strengthening social and emotional bonds and a sense of belonging among diasporic members (Agawu 2016). This approach shed lights on how diaspora are materialised and experienced in migrants' lives through the embodiment of sounds and instruments in music performance (Meyer 2009). In this research, the South Asian diaspora is perceived as a 'social imagining' (Dueck 2011, 23) in which the first-, second- and third- generations, through the practices of music culture, extend their respective ethnic roots across borders, where identities are reconstituted, and where belonging and otherness is appropriated and contested (Brah 1996). I focus my analysis on music performance in different South Asian festival celebrations and religious events organised by the ethnic associations in Hong Kong.

This article begins by examining the ideas of music, diaspora, and aesthetic formation. Ithen discuss the role of South Asian music in articulating identity, opening up space for unity formed from marginalisation, and fostering inclusion of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. Finally, we conclude by arguing that understanding the music culture of ethnic minorities in the host society is important for policy discussions around the culture-integration nexus in migration studies. Also important is the knowledge of the performative processes from which diaspora is felt and embodied in host societies.

Music in the migration context: diasporic practices and aesthetic formation

Ethnomusicological studies of migration have been a focus of social science research. According to Baily and Collyer (2006) studies on textual meaning and music production

in the migration context, music and identity, music as a form of political expression, music and community building, music and belonging, and music therapy have significantly contributed to our understanding of music as an essential field of cultural production, reproduction, and consumption through which identity and belonging are continually negotiated and redefined. However, this approach neglects the embodied and affective experiences of music and its capacity to uncover the relationships between ethnic minorities' lived experiences, daily practices of belonging, exclusion, and sociality (De Martini Ugolotti 2022). In her study about music-making among migrants in Bristol, De Martini Ugolotti (2022) proposed the concept of affective practice of diasporic belonging which highlights sociality as embedded in mundane activities from shared migration experiences that "enable momentary, but productive domains of belonging beyond ethnic, national, gendered, and religious lines" (De Martini Ugolotti 2022, 103). Expanding Brah (1996)'s concept of "diaspora space" in which every day social domains such as neighbourhoods are classed and racialized sites, De Martini Ugolotti (2022) argued that the affective and material states of music-making in migrants' lives enabled them to define and redefine their subjectivities and sense of belonging (Brah 1996).

Music plays a vital role in maintaining connections between South Asia and its diaspora (Ramnarine 2017). South Asian music is often intertwined with religion, and related activities such as dance are linked with cultural heritage discourses, the continuity of tradition, and identity politics (Ramnarine 2019). Diasporic members who perform South Asian music in the host societies offer generalised representations of South Asia, and specific ones relating to diasporic, regional and historical diversities (Ramnarine 2019). This research attempts to advance this contribution by examining the embodied, material and affective states of music among the South Asian diaspora in Hong Kong. Scholarly works have reported the discrimination and marginalisation against South Asians in Hong Kong at the day-to-day and institutional levels (O'Connor 2010). These ethnic groups face difficulties and challenges owing to their race and ethnicity when dealing with employment, housing, education, healthcare, social services, and even daily life. Alarmingly, South Asians in Hong Kong encounter everyday discrimination that is regarded as harmless by the dominant Hong Kong Chinese (O'Connor 2010). Nevertheless, the South Asians formed different music and dance groups and use music performance as a means of maintaining cultural identity, establishing a group identity in the perspective of the Hong Kong Chinese, and provoking intercultural encounters with them. This research explores how expressions of South Asian-ness become embodied in people who participate in music performance at different religious and socio-cultural events. Specifically, it addresses how the South Asians use music to establish networks across borders, facilitating connectivity with diasporic members, and shaping relationships with the Hong Kong Chinese in the context of marginalisation.

Diasporas are not static, but are dynamic and changing. Brubaker (2005) suggested diaspora not be perceived as a unified entity, but rather as a category of practice and social positioning. This resonates with the concept of aesthetic formation (Meyer 2009) which similarly emphasises on the making of communities as a dynamic and performative process. This concept, proposed by Meyer (2009) with reference to religious contexts, focuses on the process of community building through embodied aesthetic forms such as ritual performance and bodily sensations. Using and evaluating the

notion of "imagined community" coined by Anderson (1991) and Meyer (2009, 5) stated that "in order to become experienced as real, imagined communities are required to become tangible outside the realm of the mind." It means imagined communities need to materialise as tangible spaces and objects so that belonging can be felt though the primary experiences of all five senses. These embodied aesthetic experiences recognise the affective power of images, sounds, tastes, smells, and texts over the people in diasporic conditions (Meyer 2009). The concept of aesthetic formation can be applied in understanding the musical performance of diaspora. Music performance is an embodied and sensory aesthetic experience that "combines, on the one hand, presentness and instantaneousness and, on the other hand, duration in the sense of a continuous flow of multisensorial and multi-modal perception" Coessens (2019, 67), and facilitates a mode of creating or strengthening social and emotional bonds and a sense of belonging (Baily and Collyer 2006). These bonds are developed on the basis of shared history and experiences in the South Asian context. This research considers festival and religious sites as South Asian diaspora space (Brah 1996) and examines materialisation practices that fashion diasporic identity and a sense of belonging.

Musical practices, identity consciousness and homeland cultural belongingness

Existing literature has explored how immigrants in different host societies used musical practices as an agent in articulating identity consciousness and homeland cultural belongingness. Baily (2005) examined the music culture of Afghan refugees in two sites of settlement in exile, Pakistan and California. Baily found that these two sites demonstrated two distinct roles for music and identity in the life of the Afghan exile. For those settled in Pakistan which is spatially and culturally close to Afghanistan, music had a "quasi-therapeutic role" in reminding "people of their cultural heritage and gave them a feeling of being connected to a secure past" (Baily 2005, 230). Those who settled in California had no intention to return back to Afghanistan. For older Afghan, music performances had the same "quasi-therapeutic role" as those in Pakistan. However, for those new arrivals, music performances "addressed the future, using newly available technical resources in an innovative manner to build a new 'Afghan- American' popular music which helped to create a new Afghan-American identity" (Baily 2005, 230). In a similar vein, Dudrah (2002) also argued that listening and dancing to British bhangra in the U.K. could facilitate the formation of new identity among British South Asians and their sense of belonging to Punjab as 'homeland. He found that British bhangra is "a genre of British popular music fusing Punjabi lyrics and the beats of the Indian drum, the *dhol*, with black music genres and British pop sounds" (Dudrah 2002, 363), which involved cultural politics that produced a British South Asian identities in urban black Britain.

Identity can be shaped and constructed through and as a result of music performance in festival. Johnson (2007) argued that Diwali festival is a contact zone where diaspora identity is expressed through cultural performance. While diasporic imagined communities are often mental constructs which are detached from physical practices (Spaaij and Broerse 2019), the festival celebration and religious sites create physical spaces where the South Asians can establish social and emotional connections through their sensory experiences of playing and listening to South Asian musical instruments (i.e.

harmonium, *tabla*, *madal*, *sapp*), and singing and dancing in traditional clothes. The following sections illustrate how this dynamic and performative process materialises the South Asian diaspora through music performance in festival celebration and religious rituals in Hong Kong, which concurrently strengthens the imagined diasporic identity and develops intercultural dialogues with the Hong Kong Chinese.

Research methods and field sites

The empirical background of this article derives from in-depth interviews and participant observations conducted with 50 South Asians (Table 1) and 15 Hong Kong Chinese from September 2020 to May 2022. The South Asian participants were identified, contacted and selected from South Asian ethnic associations in Hong Kong. For this study, I first approached the leaders of ethnic associations to serve as core participants. Thereafter, I was introduced to more South Asians by attending their socio-cultural and religious events. In-depth interviews were conducted with individual South Asians, ethnic association leaders, musicians, and dancers. The interviews explored the participants' current experiences in Hong Kong, music culture, and views on its socio-cultural setting. Topics such as their motivations for practising South Asian music in Hong Kong, incentives for organising and/or attending music performance, memorable elements of the events, feelings and emotions encountered during event experiences, and opinions on South Asian music culture in general were covered. I also interviewed 15 Hong Kong Chinese who participated in South Asian cultural events and elicited their perceptions and attitudes surrounding South Asian music experiences. The interviews

Table 1. Characteristics of the South Asian research participants.

Characteristics	Number $N = 50$
Age	
Less than 30	10
30–34	9
35–39	8
40–44	8
45–49	4
50 and above	11
Sex	
Male	28
Female	22
Marital status	
Single	15
Married	35
Local born	15
Non-local born	35
Year of arrival in Hong Kong	
Before 1990	5
1990–1999	10
2000–2009	8
2010–2019	10
After 2019	2
Country of origin	
India	22
Nepal	15
Pakistan	13

were recorded (with consent), transcribed, and subjected to thematic content analysis using NVIVO 12.

In addition to interviews, I also conducted participant observations in the South Asian community. In this research, I celebrated South Asian festivals and religious events with the participants such as *Diwali* (festival of lights), *Dashain* (festival of victory of good over evil), Buddha's birthday, and *Eid.* I also joined the socio-cultural events organised by the South Asian communities with music and dance performances. I conducted fieldwork in community halls, religious sites, ethnic restaurants, dance studios, and at homes. Through attending these events organised by the South Asians which covered the whole spectrum of their music culture, different genre-based scenes were observed and participated in.

Ethnographic research offers rich insights into actual reality, cultural practices, social interactions and peoples' perceptions as expressed by the actions and the surroundings in which research participants live (Shagrir 2017). During fieldwork, researchers attempt to position themselves in the same situation as informants and gradually reflect on their emotions, identity-work, and roles during fieldwork through first-person accounts of their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours (Venkatesh 2013). Self-reflexivity determines the researcher's positionality which influences a study by creating power relations between the researcher and research participants, and by affecting how empirical results are interpreted (Bonfanti, Massa, and Miranda 2018). My participation in the cultural life of South Asians included attendance and participation at festivals, religious events, social gatherings as well as one-on-one engagement with the South Asian musicians and dancers of different backgrounds. I learnt how to play *tabla* (drum) and dance the *Bhangra*. This participation has enriched my knowledge of the history of South Asian cultures as well as my embodied experience of practising South Asian music in Hong Kong. Approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of Hong Kong Metropolitan University. All participants signed an informed consent form prior to their inclusion in the research. For the protection and privacy of the research participants, I use pseudonyms throughout this article.

Results

Diaspora in context: South Asians and South Asian music in Hong Kong

Leung (2021) argued that colonisation evoked 'racial and ethnic hierarchisation', which sowed the seeds of cultural segregation in the post-colonial era of Hong Kong. The government has implemented policies to assist ethnic minorities to integrate better into the local society including the legislation of the Race Discrimination Ordinance in 2009. However, most ethnic minorities still experience subtle discrimination in their everyday life (Erni and Leung 2014). In Hong Kong, the integration programmes largely focus on Cantonese language (a Chinese language spoken by Hong Kong Chinese) acquisition, education- related financial assistance, employment and poverty alleviation. The government believes that the ethnic minorities can achieve full integration if they can master the local language. This is problematic because it neglects the most essential element in building an inclusive society, which is how to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity among ethnic minorities. When asked about their integration experience in Hong

Kong, both locally and non-locally born participants expressed that they faced discrimination and found it difficult to interact with the Hong Kong Chinese due to language barriers. Ahmed, from Pakistan, is a postgraduate student. He expressed that although he was local born and could speak Cantonese, he was not welcomed by the Hong Kong Chinese. He stated:

> When I went to football pitch alone and wanted to play football, the Hong Kong Chinese saw me, but they didn't even ask me to join them. When I went there with my Pakistani friends, Hong Kong Chinese didn't want to play with us. When I am in a train or bus, no one will sit next to me even if the train and bus are fully packed. (Ahmed, 23 years old, male, Pakistani, local born, September 2020)

Shanaya, a teacher of *Hindustani* (an Indian classical music) and *Kathak* (an Indian classical dance) in Hong Kong, explained the importance of learning local language for integration: "Language is the main problem. Many locals don't want to speak English. If I speak Chinese, I think I can be fully integrated" (Shanaya, Indian, 40 years old female, 5 years in HK, January 2021). When asked how they dealt with their mental dissatisfaction in this host society, besides eating ethnic food, the most frequent response was playing and listening to South Asian music. Indeed, the notion of music is of a "safe and enactive transitional space" where participants can overcome home-sickness, particularly by playing or listening to music from their homeland (Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch 2017). A dominant theme in the accounts of the participants is how important South Asian music is in their diasporic life in Hong Kong. The participants stated that they listen to music from their home country every day through different media channels such as YouTube. Shalva, a 63-year-old Nepalese, is a trading business owner. He described how important Nepalese folk music is in his life in Hong Kong:

> Music and dance play an important role in our traditional festivals and religious practice. When we celebrate, we sing and dance. When we worship gods, we also sing and dance. I can say South Asian people live in a sing-and-dance world. (Shalva, Nepalese, 63 years old, male, Nepalese, 31 years in HK, October 2020)

South Asian music is diverse in styles and instruments. According to research participants, South Asian traditional music performance is generally classified into two categories: folk and classic. Folk music is often involved in their activities, and the storytellers generally sing about legends. Some folk songs describe the adventures of the manifestations of God as they rid the world of evil. Others are concerned with historical characters and describe the wars and heroic deeds of the regional rulers; some are connected to religious festivals. Such performances are accompanied by music and dances. The instruments commonly played by the South Asians in Hong Kong are the *harmonium* (a reed organ), *Table* (a pair of twin hand drums fundamental to North Indian music), and *madal* (Two-headed cylindrical hand-drum). The *harmonium* was imported to the Indian subcontinent from Europe in 1842 when a French musician patented a design for the first *harmonium* which was a foot-pumped, upright reed organ with two rows of free reeds (Rahaim 2011). Since then, the *harmonium* was widely used by pastors and travelling missionaries to accompany hymn-singing (Rahaim 2011). Nowadays, the *harmonium* is used in different contemporary contexts such as festival celebration.

Tabla (drum) are two pitched drums (the *bayan* or the left drum and the *dayan* or the right drum) played by a single performer. It is primarily made from wood, metal or clay. The goat/buffalo/camel skin is stretched across each drum with circles of black tuning paste which load a portion of the stretched skin with weight. *Tablas* are used in a variety of musical genres from devotional music of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to film, folk and fusion. *Madal* is a barrel shaped drum made of clay and leather. It is drum played by hand, beating on both sides. Drum skin is stretched over both ends with circles of black tuning paste and tightened with leather strings. *Madal* is a percussion instrument which is important for Nepalese folk song and dance.

In migration context, music is a constitutive part of diasporic culture which is an important element for identity and community formation (Baily and Collyer 2006). Music acts as a space and practice that ties migrants together, such that they recognise themselves as belonging together (Kaufman Shelemay 2006). In Hong Kong, South Asian music has been mainly practised and promoted at a community-level among different South Asian diasporic groups. They perform music and dance in festivals, religious events, and socio-cultural gatherings such as *Diwali*, *Dashain*, Buddha's birthday celebration, and *Eid*. These socio-cultural activities were co-organised by ethnic associations of the South Asian country and different South Asian music and dance academies in Hong Kong. Shirisha, chairperson of Nepalese association said:

> In the events, we play Nepalese music by using the *harmonium*, *madal*, flute, and guitar. People dance and eat in the Nepalese style. We are very happy! Playing music and dance is an icebreaker for getting to know each other. Local born Nepalese can learn from the seniors about their music culture. (Shirisha, 47 years old, female, Nepalese, local born, February 2021)

Festival and religious events are socio-cultural spaces in which South Asians not only gather together with people from same country for leisure, but also make the South Asian diaspora "real" and tangible through aesthetic embodied practices of music and dance. The following sections illustrate three dimensions of aesthetic formation: tangible expression of diaspora, music as a means of provoking belonging, and initiating intercultural encounters.

Materialising diaspora through music in festivals and religious events

Majority of the music learners I met in class regularly performed music in different festivals and religious events co-organised by ethnic associations and the music academy in Hong Kong. This is how they engage themselves and the other participants in tangible expression of South Asian diaspora. A dominant theme in the accounts of participants is how these festivals and religious events provide a meeting place. Festivals are found to nurture social cohesion and community capacity (Edwards 2012) and sense of community (Irimoto 2014). These activities accounted for valuable moments where the South Asians participants could meet and interact intensively with their co-ethnics. They participated in the festivals and religious events either as audience or performers. In these events, they had a chance to physically interact while following the social distancing measures during the pandemic, establish social relationships with their co-ethnics, and feel South Asian, all vital in the context of community creation (Irimoto 2014).

Dvarika is a Nepalese music teacher who migrated to Hong Kong in 2001. He was one of the *madal* performers in the *Dashain* festival. He said:

> I really enjoy Nepalese festival events because it allows me to meet new and old friends. We are living in this busy city. People are busy working every day. Besides the temple, there is no other place where I see so many Nepalese gather together, listening to Nepalese music and eating Nepalese food at the same time. (Dvarika, 50 years old, male, Nepalese, 21 years in HK, July 2021)

In the same vein, Shanaya reflected that "I really look forward to participating in the events because all Indians can come together, which is a sense of bonding in our community" (Shanaya, 40 years old, female, Indian, 7 years in HK, August 2021). Music also plays an important role in Indian festivals. One day, Jash invited me to join a *Diwali* celebration in an Indian restaurant co-organised by an Indian association and Indian music academy. He came to Hong Kong in 2001 and started teaching vocals and *harmonium*. His music team played the *harmonium* and *tabla* at the event. Two of his students sang devotional songs. Jash told me, "In Indian festivals, you only see Indian culture." When I stepped into the restaurant, I thought I was in India for a moment. The smell of different spiced food filled the air. Musicians were playing *harmonium and tabla* in a corner. Almost all Indians were dressed up in their traditional clothes: *kurta* (a loose shirt) for men and *kurti* (a loose shirt without a collar) for women. Many of them danced in groups to the music. The restaurant was decorated with countless oil lamps and colourful circle patterns. There was a table on one side serving homemade sweets such as *prasad, jalebi,* and *gulab jamun.* Jash described how plying musical instruments with specific hand movements was a tangible expression of Indian culture:

> We are not playing piano; we cannot use both hands. This is western style. We only play the keyboard with one hand. We use the other hand to pump the bellows because that's how the *harmonium* is traditionally played. There are particular hand movements like how the hand goes over, or the pinkie comes under, etc., and all that. This is a bodily expression of Indian culture through playing musical instruments. (Jash, 51 years old, male, Indian, 21 years in HK, October 2021)

Before, after, and between the celebration dinner, the Indian music band performed North Indian classical music. Most of the visitors sang along. Before they started dinner, they performed the Indian national anthem and most of the visitors again engaged in an aesthetic embodied performance.

Similarly, Ali, a Pakistani in his early 20s, described how his family celebrated *Eid* with *harmonium* music at home:

> *Eid* is important for Muslims. Besides eating at the mosque, my parents also celebrated with relatives and friends at our home with sweets and some *harmonium* music. Music makes the whole festival complete. (Ali, 24 years old, male, Pakistani, local born, November 2020)

During COVID-19 pandemic, all public events and gatherings were cancelled. Moreover, the pandemic travel restrictions hindered the research participants to visit their family in their homeland. Digital communication played an important role in maintaining musical engagement and community formation during pandemic. For example, a Facebook livestream enables participants to digitally connect with

people who cannot physically attend the festivals and religious events. The Sunday *Bhajan* (weekly prayer session) in a Hindu temple was filmed and broadcasted via a Facebook livestream. In this one and a half hours' weekly prayer session, most Indian and Nepalese Hindus dressed in their traditional clothing. The priest and two singers led all devotees in the prayer hall to sing different devotional songs and three musicians played the *harmonium*, *madal*. Some of the devotees even danced at the hall, while the overseas devotees watched the prayer session online and left blessings in the message box of the live video. After the prayer session, the devotees collected free food outside the prayer hall and interacted with their friends. Tanya, a kindergarten teacher in her 50s, highlighted the social interaction between Indians and Nepalese that occurs during the Sunday event:

> We get to know different people, Indian and Nepalese Hindus, in temple and online. I chat with them in Hindi when we eat. I met old friends and made new friends. I also type blessing messages online. When we sing, we are not just worshipping, we are also blessing other people. Last year, I found a long-lost Indian friend in Nepal through this online platform! (Tanya, 54 years old, female, Indian, 20 years in HK, October 2021)

Tanya's reference to "different people" is informative here. Many participants such as Tanya and Ali expressed how festivals and religious events facilitate social interaction and learning between co-ethnics, hence contributing to community solidity (Duffy 2005). Social networks, belonging, and playing music were the main reasons for participants to attend the festivals and religious events. The events thus offer opportunities to collectively experience and perform sensory aesthetic South Asian practices, such as playing music, speaking/singing and hearing Hindi, Urdu, or Nepalese languages, smelling and tasting South Asian dishes. Such materialisation practices produce the different forms of belonging experienced and narrated by the participants.

In Nepalese festival celebrations, Dvarika illustrated his experiences with Nepalese folk music as follows:

> In *Tihar* festival organised by our association, we play the *madal*, flute, and guitar to celebrate. Some people dance in traditional clothes. Even though there are Nepalese in the event who don't enjoy music, when people speak Nepalese with you, it feels motivational because we are all inside this unique Nepalese environment that reminds US of where we are from. (Dvarika, 50 years old, male, Nepalese, 21 years in HK, October 2021)

People's sense of belonging to a diasporic group is often determined by imagined and intangible connections to fellow members with shared nationality, culture, and ethnicity (Cohen 1997; Sheffer 1999). In fact, diaspora can be materialised and felt by people concerned in the lived diasporic environment (Meyer 2009). During the festivals and religious events of South Asians in Hong Kong, the organisers, performers, and attendants make use of various diasporic resources (Nassy Brown 1998), including traditional dresses and food, festive decorations, musical performances, and representatives from consulate general of the home country that together construct a tangible and instinctive experience of a South Asian diaspora. These socio-cultural gatherings offer a time-space for the participants to perform and engage in aesthetic embodied South Asian practices through music and dance. Although these events only happen once or twice a year, during the events the community hall, restaurants, and homes are transformed into South Asian cultural spaces.

Music as a source of diasporic belonging

As Frith (1996, 124) posited, "music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives." Music is not simply a manifestation of culture or identity, but also assists people to form a sense of identity and belonging. The participants experienced and narrated two inter-related forms of belonging through music: being Indian/Pakistani/Nepalese, and hybrid belonging.

Being Indian, Pakistani or Nepalese

Non-locally born participants appear to be proud of their Indian, Pakistani or Nepalese identity and their own music culture during the activities and events observed in this research. They actively engage in music performance and teaching, increasing their sense of belonging to and "root" in their home country. People who teach music and dance in the community are playing the role of cultural ambassadors who evoke nostalgia and reinforce ties to Indian, Pakistani, or Nepalese culture for the Hong Kong born. Shanaya comes from the northern part of India. She attended a music academy in India and started learning *Hindustani*, an Indian classical music and *Kathak*, an Indian classical dance, at the age of five. When she was twenty years old, Shanaya started teaching *Hindustani* and *Kathak* in India. In 2015, she migrated to Hong Kong with her husband who worked in the business sector. A year later, Shanaya established her *H* and *K academy* in Hong Kong. Majority of her students were young local-born Indians. When asked what the objectives of her music academy were, Shanaya emphasised that affirming Indian culture in diasporic conditions was the main goal. She said:

> I just need to educate them, because they are away from their country for so long. Their parents and grandparents are living here. They hardly know about India, Indian culture, and Indian music and art. Because I belong to a particular art form, I think I should teach it to them. (Shanaya, 40 years old, female, Indian, 7 years in HK, December 2020)

For the non-locally born participants, the purpose of attending the music classes is to maintain cultural expression in light of the overwhelming forces of acculturation and protect cultural diversity in the process of integration. Monisha, an Indian housewife who migrated to Hong Kong with her husband in 2015 for work, learnt *Hindustani* music and *tabla* from Shanaya for three years. Monisha reflected:

> My mum could play lovely *Hindustani* music in India. I am learning how to play the *tabla* because of my mother. When I play, I recall my childhood memories of how I danced next to my mother while she was played at home. Drum beats are my heart beats. I feel I am connected to my home country. (Monisha, 48 years old, female, Indian, 7 years in HK, January 2021)

In the same vein, Shubhu teaches *chyabrung* Limbu dance and *madal* music in her music academy which was established in 2018. She similarly described how important music courses were in preserving and confirming traditional culture among Nepalese in Hong Kong:

> Because many of the Nepalese are born in Hong Kong, they don't speak our language. They usually speak in English or Chinese as they are growing up here. In Nepal, we have different ethnic groups. So, we use very old songs that help them to remember their culture and let

> them know who they really are. (Shubhu, 30 years old, female, Nepalese, 23 years in HK, November 2020)

The accounts of Shanaya, Monisha, and Shubhu clearly demonstrated that the reason they teach South Asian music in Hong Kong is to create a place for the locally born to reconstruct their ethnic identity (Kuger and Trandafoiu 2014). It is because music has particular meaning and importance to individuals, such as containing strong memories and association to the past in their hometowns, which are crucial in affirming their identity as Indian, Pakistani or Nepalese. When asked about how they identified themselves in Hong Kong, non-locally born participants stated their nationality, such as 'Indian or Pakistani or Nepalese living in Hong Kong'. Their idea of home is the place where they are living as well as the place they originated. In the cases of Shanaya, Monisha, and Shubhu, listening to home music could ease their homesickness and reflect their cultural identity (Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch 2017). They seek experiences that remind them of their roots and bring them back to their South Asian country.

Hybrid belonging

Apart from a sense of belonging to their home country, the locally born participants experience a strong sense of hybrid belonging that is also closely associated with diaspora formation. Although most second- and third- generation participants have a strong sense of belonging to Hong Kong and desire to become "Hong Kongers" (see Leung 2021), they still attempt to maintain traditional South Asian customs, particularly in the practice of music and dance. Ethnic minorities' art may also reflect the transformation of traditions brought from their countries of origin to a modern urban environment in which hybridises it (Poupazis 2016, 157–158). Bhuv is a locally born Indian Punjabi. He learnt *Bhangara* – a Punjabi dance and music form among farmers that celebrates the harvest – through online lessons 15 years ago. Bhuv formed a music and dance group and has participated in Indian diasporic music and dance events in different countries with sizable Indian communities including USA, Australia and Malaysia. He explained the reason why he learnt *Bhangra* was because he is originally from India. But he also admitted that he hybridised the traditional music culture with modem elements:

> I am a Hong Konger. 'Cos it's our culture, I want to maintain it as a culture. We want to put in particularly like in a traditional way. But sometimes in the competition they require you to put more like unique style or something. Then, we have no choice. We have to change a little bit of the style. Through observing other Indian teams in competitions, we could also learn something new. We put more like contemporary, modern kinds of step inside it. So, I will say not more Indian now. (Bhuv, 35 years old, male, Indian, local born, October 2020)

Bhuv's account shared similar views of existing literature that *Bhangra* has become contemporary popular music of South Asian youth raised in the diaspora in which they developed their unique hybrid identity (Huq 2003). In Hong Kong, many South Asian music academies offers music and dance courses to locally born South Asians. These courses, which take place once a week, are mostly attended by younger South Asians, ranging from children of primary school age to people in their late twenties. Most of them are driven to join these courses by their parents. The children are encouraged to learn how to play the *harmonium*, *tabla*, or *madal*. In the classes, I talked to many second- and third-generation South Asians. They all expressed that learning music

from professional teachers was a way for them to broaden their knowledge and experience of South Asian music culture. Nisha, a local born Indian Punjabi, said:

> I am very local. I am a Hong Konger. But sometimes I think I still need to know my roots, where my ancestors came from. You know, I have just visited India three or four times. I don't know much about India. So, I think because of this dance form, I am more into my culture in Hong Kong. (Nisha, 24 years old, female, Indian, local born, October 2020)

When asked about how they identified themselves in Hong Kong, all local-born participants identified as 'Hong Kong Indian', 'Hong Kong Pakistani', 'Hong Kong Nepalese', or 'Hong Konger'. Their idea of home is the place where they were born. For those who have grown up in Hong Kong, listening to home music may not evoke their feelings of ethnic home. However, many of them, such as Nisha, expressed that listening to music performance with parents, family, and co-ethnic friends in Hong Kong might trigger their curiosity about their ancestral home.

Music as a way of initiating intercultural encounters

Many participants expressed that South Asian music culture could help them to interact with the Hong Kong Chinese because music is an international language. Ram and his five Nepalese friends formed a Nepalese music band calls *Gurkhas* in 2016. The band comprises a bassist, a vocalist, a drummer, a *sarangi* (short-necked Nepalese lute) player, a guitarist, and a flautist. They performed Nepalese traditional music in different cultural events in Hong Kong which attracted many Hong Kong Chinese audiences. In the events, Ram would invite some Hong Kong Chinese audiences to play the drum. People all sang together and at the same time they clapped out a rhythm. Ram explained although the listeners may not understand the language used in the songs, they could feel the musical mood:

> Music is an international language. If the local people come to listen to the music, they don't understand, but they can still feel the music, right? Sometimes they clap and dance to the music. And then they know, wow this music is about Nepal, at least they know what the music is about and then we can connect with them very easily. (Ram, 28 years old, male, Nepalese, 23 years in Hong Kong, January 2021)

The participating Hong Kong Chinese in this study mentioned having difficulty in communicating with the South Asians in Hong Kong owing to language barriers. However, engaging in South Asian music performance could melt barriers and boundaries. Most of them had their first encounter with South Asian music when they had meals at South Asian restaurants where the owners played music. Out of curiosity, they asked the restaurant owners where they could watch South Asian music performances in Hong Kong. This is how their South Asian musical journey in Hong Kong began. Over the years, they attended different music and cultural events where they met South Asian music teachers. A group of Hong Kong Chinese attended *Bhangra* music and dance workshops weekly. All of them expressed that Indian music and dance culture provided them with a social space where they could talk to and interact with Indians. One Hong Kong Chinese has been learning *Bhangra* for almost two years. She said,

> Before I learnt *Bhangra* music and dance, I didn't have South Asians in my friends' network because I didn't know how and where to approach them in my daily life. But after I watched

> *Bhangra* music and dance performances in a community centre a few times some years ago, I fell in love with Indian music. So I started to learn in this group and made a lot of Indian friends. (Rosie, 30 years old, female, Hong Kong Chinese, January 2021)

However, some Hong Kong Chinese participants believed that music has limited role in intercultural dialogue because they do not understand the languages used in the music and songs. Nevertheless, they enjoyed the rhythm of music which enabled participatory engagement for all involved in musical activities. One Hong Kong Chinese said, "Music has no boundaries. Although I don't understand the language, I enjoyed being included in this South Asian music community." Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) argued that interactions between minority and majority groups reduces prejudice and generalises attitude changes to other people. Such attitude changes only happen in meaningful inclusive music experiences between the groups (Jellison 2012). Direct positive interactions need to be structured by the performers towards building a culture of inclusion in the activities. Bhuv described how he used Indian music and dance to engage Hong Kong Chinese audiences as follows:

> At the end of the performance, we would invite people to come onto the stage and dance with us. We use *sapps* to count the beat. We teach them how to dance with the beat. Indian performers and Hong Kong Chinese dance together. After the dance, many Hong Kong Chinese would say, "wow! So amazing! This is so unique! This is a powerful dance!" We are all sweating! They also come to us and take pictures. Because we dress up very colourfully, like Power Rangers. (Bhuv, 35 years old, male, Indian, local born, October 2020)

Rice (2014) argued that music performances often have steady beat or pulse, which invites a physical response in those who hear it such as clapping or dancing to the beat of the music. It offers a way for players and listeners to bond together, understand and experience themselves as a social unit at that point in time (Rice 2014). The accounts of Ram and Bhuv demonstrated how they utilised music as a socio-cultural space in which all people acted the same way. People "turn an individual psychological response into a social resource that bring communities, affinity groups, and entire societies into sync with one another" (Rice 2014, 50).

Discussion and conclusion

Diaspora aesthetics: materialising diaspora through music culture

This article explored how expressions of South Asian-ness become embodied in people who participate in music performance at socio-cultural and religious events. "South Asian-ness" is not simply a matter of ethnic identity but rather a question of locality, which "is the means through which first- and second-generation immigrants, of varying regional, religious, and linguistic background, come to experience what it means to belong" (Mani 2012, 3). In the present research, the South Asian diaspora is perceived as a 'social imagination' (Dueck 2011, 23) in which the first-, second- and third-generations, through the practice of music culture, extend their respective ethnic root across borders, where identities are reconstituted, and where belonging and otherness is appropriated and contested (Brah 1996). South Asians have been living in Hong Kong for centuries. The first-, second-, and third-generations make sense of their identity

differently. All locally born participants identified themselves "Hong Kong Indian," "Hong Kong Pakistani," and "Hong Kong Nepalese" while those non-locally born identified themselves according to their nationality, such as "Indian or Pakistani or Nepalese living in Hong Kong." According to Safran (1991), diaspora articulates the tension of migrants, both in the host societies and their ethnic "home." For the South Asian diaspora in Hong Kong, the first-generation has stronger attachment to their country of origin. Their idea of home is the place where they are living as well as the place where they originally come from. Some of them ranked the South Asian country as their first home and Hong Kong as their second, whereas others ranked them the other way around. South Asian music is not just static objects to be comprehended in the context of South Asian rituals, but are themselves a patterned context of the reconstruction of their cultural identity (Frith 1996). DeNora (2000) states that music can be viewed as an "agency" which helps construct self and group identities. In the present research, the first-, second-, and third-generations of Indians, Pakistanis, and Nepalese created a South Asian subjectivity and diasporic group based on their shared history and experience as ethnic minorities who have long been experiencing different challenges in their integration into both colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong. Music is one of the domains where South Asians can behave and present themselves in daily life with ease by acting within the repetitions of performative cultural habits and religious rituals. They have developed a strong sense of awareness of being and belonging both "here" – Hong Kong – and "there" – the South Asian country of origin.

The concept of "diaspora aesthetic" allows us to have a better understanding of diaspora as category of practice, as being formed and navigated through social action (Brubaker 2005). Diaspora aesthetics are defined as "the sensual and performative medium through which diasporans enact their felt autonomy while laying claims to 'ownership' of the places and nations in which they settle" (Werbner and Fumanti 2013, 149). It focuses on the appropriation of cultural transnational aesthetics as an experiential and embodied process (Werbner and Fumanti 2013). In the present research, diaspora aesthetics reveal the collective memory of South Asians as well as the tangible and dynamic diaspora-homeland-host land relationships that are enacted in different festivals, religious, and cultural events (Butler 2001). It highlights the emotional attachment that the South Asians can obtain from having a place of their own to delineate and perform their own national identity. The South Asians use the performative musical space as an important site for self-expression, community formation, and intercultural encounters. The "diaspora aesthetic" created in this space spans local and transnational scales, which also foster their hybrid sense of belonging in Hong Kong and in South Asia.

A common concern shared among South Asian music performers in this research is the difficulty in finding a venue to organise events in Hong Kong. Official platforms to foster and promote minority cultural encounters in Hong Kong are scarce. At the policy level, the government should provide support to music and cultural associations in marketing their events to local communities. Concrete methods, including offering subsidies to ethnic businesses and associations booking government venues for organising cultural events, building community halls where ethnic minorities can showcase their culture to the Hong Kong Chinese regularly, and organising recurring cultural festivals that can foster social engagement among different ethnic groups (Quinn et al. 2021).

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