

BEYOND NOTATION: LI-YUE: FROM CENTRALIZED SPECTACLE TO A COMMUNITY MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Modern music theory has largely understood musical organization through the realization of musical works. This paper argues that Li-Yue is best understood as a **protocol tradition** rather than a music work tradition. Instead of producing autonomous musical objects, Yue employed sound more as an operational medium for coordinating bodies, generating affects and social relations through embodied procedures.

Drawing on historical ritual manuals, together with Lin Chiwei's participatory Sound Modules, this article develops a protocol-based account of musical organization. In this view, composition no longer consists of specifying sonic forms, but in designing new conditions under which collective structure emerges through interaction. Sound functions less as material for aesthetic object, than as an operational "signal" within a dynamic process of social coordination.

Reconsidering Yue as **protocol tradition** not only offers a new reading of early Chinese Music practice, but also provides a conceptual framework for contemporary music composition. Rather than producing musical works or spectacles, protocol-based sound practices explore how communities may be generated through shared procedures, distributed participation, and collective enactment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning with Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, Western philosophers have often dismissed East Asian art and music—as functional, repetitive, artistically underdeveloped, or “ahistorical”. Over the twentieth century, these criticisms were revised in significant ways. Scholars across musicology, sociology, ethnomusicology, and cultural anthropology began to critique their own academic legacies: challenging the Eurocentrism of

harmony-tonality, questioning formalism and “score-centered” epistemology.

Today, libraries are filled with field reports on Eastern music. Research grounded in Sinology and East Asian studies is increasingly visible, accompanied by extensive academic work in conservatory music and the sociological studies. Indeed, postwar scholarship has already produced generations of critical paradigms.

Yet revisiting 18th-century European philosophers' attitude toward Asian music is far from an obsolete exercise. These early critiques often reveal—more directly than their successors—the deep ontological misalignments between Eastern and Western theories. Put it strait forwardly: What if the idea of music (樂) spoken of in the Eastern classical context (Yue in modern Chinese, Gaku in Japanese, Ak in Korean)—was never meant to align with the Western notion of “Music”?

This foundational misalignment—due in part to the lack of integration between sinology, musicology, and social theory—has persisted across time. Even after full-scale Westernization in East Asia, the gap has not closed. It has not only shaped how the west misreads eastern music, but also how the East, through self-colonizing academic frameworks, scholars in the East inherit and apply Western categories to interpret their own traditions.

1.1 What Is “Yue”?

In classical Chinese, Yue(樂) appears in conjunction with Li (禮), forming the compound Li-Yue (禮樂). Sinologists often translate them as “ritual and music,” but such a translation is rather insufficient—if not outright incorrect. “Li” refers to a codified structure of rituals that presents order; “Yue” is the sensorial and affective interface through which “Li” becomes operable, while “music” plays an essential role within it. In any case, it is not 'Music' as we understand it today, but a cross-sensory, intermedia system that bridges the related actors.

The YueJi (Book of Music), compiled during the Han dynasty (ca. 130 BCE), expresses the Confucian view succinctly: “Yue arises from within and manifests outward.” and the manifestation is being organized

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through “Li-Yue” by the orchestration of affective states, bodily rhythms, synchronized gestures, and perceptual ordering.

Dance was at the core of Yue. In pre-Qin antiquity, all music presupposed movement. Dance was not an embellishment, but the primary way rhythm inscribed itself in the body. As the Yueji repeatedly emphasizes: “Where Yue arrives, dance begins.” Movement was not an optional addition—it was the visible, kinetic articulation of the system’s very rhythm.

Likewise, music in the narrow sense—voices, instruments, scores—was not the sole content of Yue. Sound played in the rituals generally has a functional role: to align with Heaven, stir emotion, synchronize rhythm, and enable coordination. Musical components such as melody and rhythm were not ends in themselves. Sound served as a temporal structure of body/spiritual synchronization—a frame for ritual.

1.2 *Li-Yue* as Ritual Topology

The “theatricality” within *Li-Yue* bore little resemblance to Western notions of drama. It was neither mimetic, psychological, nor narrative. There were no characters with inner lives. Instead, its logic was closer to ritual choreography—role allocation, spatial configuration, and procedural sequencing. Its aim was not representation, but the emphasizing of relational position within an ethical order.

Poems, chants, and liturgical texts served as mediators between sound and ethical position—embedding historical memory and guiding affective direction....Court garments, differentiated by rank and role, became wearable diagrams of hierarchical order. Spatial placements, musical instruments, ritual objects, and crafted artifacts together composed a legible visual grammar.

The architecture of Yue was not neutral, but a topological structure that embodied the cosmological symbol of the very ritual. Spaces such as ancestral temples, altars, or imperial courts were sacred sites of encounter between Heaven and human. Their spatial flow and acoustics represent holy/secular, male/female, near/far, intimacy/distance, ruler/subject divisions.

Even offerings—the placement, types, and timing of sacrificial items—materialized the rhythm and logic of cosmological order. They were not only symbolic, but also operational markers of time and space.

1.3 Not Music, Not *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Yue as Protocol

By definition, ancient Yue was neither a collection of musical “works” nor a form of total art (*Gesamtkun-*

stwerk) in the Western sense. Composition, as understood in Western art music, operates through the development of sonic materials toward a finished work—a self-contained musical object. Yue, by contrast, functioned as a device for producing **embodied order** through rhythm, rather than presupposing any musical object, the Li-Yue Model operated through node-based time, supplying control signals that enabled modular execution—such as for dance and ritual respects. In this sense, Yue is employed as a corporeal–normative system for generating ethical order, not so much as a musical work, but as a mechanism for coordination.

Many surviving Yue texts can be accurately understood as manuals—protocols for internalizing feudal cosmology through ritualized embodiment. A good example can be found in “**Notes on Li-Yue in the Confucian School**” (Shengmen Li-Yue Zhi 聖門禮樂誌), a comprehensive manual for the execution of the Confucian Memorial Ritual edited in 1716. The book presents an extraordinarily detailed prescriptive system: meticulous instructions for the building and tuning of each instrument; specifications of finger techniques; precise indications of when particular sonic patterns should occur within the ritual; and exact spatial positions within the temple from which they are to be performed. The level of its technical precision is doubtless remarkable for its time. [1]

Notably, each percussion instrument (totally 16 kinds) assigned with specific rhythmic patterns, is carefully described. By contrast, the melodic dimensions of wind and string instruments are largely left undefined, or reducing to minimal indications spanning barely a single page. Meanwhile, the book includes three full pages description of rhythmic notation for the large drum and half a page for the turtle drum. This asymmetry reveals a distinctive conception of classic orchestration; the ritual ensemble is conceived as a composite of seven types of wind instruments, two types of string instruments, and sixteen types of percussion instruments, while the exact number of performers and instrumental allocations remained adjustable, the full ensemble typically involved approximately eighty musicians.

From a Western perspective, what is most striking is the absence of an **orchestral score**. The fact behind the design is, Such a system would be only conceivable with **Modular Modes** of organization and with embodied training of musicians. Each musician group functioning according to memorized codes and pre-determined melodic patterns. Rather than being under the sole score and coordinated through a conductor, the ensemble operated through distributed knowledge of rule sets. This once again underscores that Li-Yue functioned not as a centralized representational system, but as a set of operational and procedural modules.

In the Confucian Memorial Ritual, bells and stone chimes serve as temporal markers within the ritual sequence. Bells typically announce the beginning of major

ceremonial sections and punctuate significant transitions. Stone chimes, owing to their shorter and more clearly bounded resonance, articulate internal divisions and structural points within the unfolding ritual. Together they do not regulate the performance through continuous command, but provide a shared temporal framework through which music, dance, and ceremonial action remain synchronized. In this sense, sound functions less as musical material than as a medium of collective coordination.

Each Confucian Memorial ceremony consists of a series of independent modules—action units that can be rearranged and redeployed across different sacrificial contexts (Heaven, ancestors, soil, or grain deities), corresponding to different ritual subjects. While the object and scale varied, the underlying structure remains constant. In this sense, the “Yue” works like an ever-evolving interface through historical time, in order to meet very different needs: an embodied mediation through which updated ethical and political codes became accessible, trainable, and internalized by participants.

We can consider the Yue system as a whole thus operated as a **protocol**—not just a set of contents, but a set of conditional rules that governed interaction. The execution of these rules existed only in runtime. When Yue is framed as an artistic object or compositional work, it ossifies and loses its essence. As a protocol, Li-Yue lives only within a living system of coordinated action.

During the historical course of modernization, from dynastic kingdoms to modern state-nation, Yue’s fate is inseparable from the broader transition: Along with the fall of the empire, the very function of Yue was fragmented, redefined, and redistributed to different institutions.

A decisive rupture occurred with the great westernization in Asia. The western “Art Music” occupied the yet young Asian national imagination. Symphony Orchestra and its associated institutions—such as conservatories—which effectively assumed functions once fulfilled by **Wen-Yue** (文樂, *Gagaku* in the Japanese context).

At the same time, the military music **Wu-Yue** (武樂, literally “army music”) was displaced by Prussian-style march music. Classical empire ritual music was largely erased (except in Japan). The remaining ceremonies fundamentally reconfigured, translated into a westernized ceremonial format, aligned with modern state’s culture apparatus in general.

As far as my main concern relies on musical protocol instead of “Classic Chinese Music”, the following chapter will focus exclusively on the transformation of national ceremony and re-examines its radical consequences.

2. CONTEMPORARY RITUALS

What, then, are the contemporary enactments of Yue?

Beyond the limited number of ceremonies preserved through cultural heritagisation—such as those maintained by the Imperial Household Agency in Japan or at the Munmyo Shrine in Korea, which persist largely as heritage artifacts with little vital forces—the ceremonial field is otherwise dominated by western styles. These ceremonies, embedded within compulsory national education systems, military drills, and televised mass propaganda, have remained largely unexamined. It is precisely within these modern ceremonies that the enduring logic of Yue continues to operate, albeit under transforming conditions. Here, Yue may be observed functioning across three major categories:

2.1 Festivals–Spectacular

Both East and West rely on grand ceremonies. But they play different logic. In the West, events like Bastille Day or 2023 Olympics opening are subject to critique. Itself can as well either be satire or humorous. Performer’s bodies are individuated and styles are plural. While the North Korea’s Arirang mass game or China’s 2008 Olympic ceremony center on synchronized mass embodiment. The goal is as affirmation as representation. The Music here functioned as a metronome and the bodies are anonymized into pixels. This is Yue in its most extreme visualized form—proving the perfect execution of order.

2.2 Education–Body Regulation

Flag-raising ceremonies, anthem singing and military drills erase the performer–audience divide, as do Japanese and Chinese radio calisthenics. Every participant becomes part of one disciplinary rhythm. Eastern ceremonies presume: ‘Regulate the body, then align the mind.’ (Book of Li, ca. 130 BCE), and they are often long, repetitive, and physically exhausting. Embodied discipline here outweighs ideological teaching. Japanese calisthenics models demonstrate normative, affective, educative nature, a sustained social rhythm embedded with daily life (with part of its origin in Zen Buddhism practices), with the main focus on internalized norm enacted through the body. Compared to Prussian calisthenics, it lacks the heroic implication and is closer to traditional ritual drill with strong civilian hygiene implication. [2]

2.3 Military–Sovereign

From Qing-era military reviews, to Emperor Meiji’s naval parades in Japan, to formation-based ceremonies in modern China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan, Wu-Yue (military yue) continues its march. Where Western parades often appeal to republican traditions, civic identity, and public pride, East Asian spectacles more readily project a claim to cosmic legitimacy—order presented as destiny. Music functions here as a metrical

governor: the parade becomes a mode of sonic governance, a residue of imperial ritual logic.

Yet it is difficult to argue that these twentieth-century state rituals are along the Yue heritage. Modern Rituals core operational grammars share a genealogy with nineteenth-century European militarized education and athletic nationalism; this grammar spread across East Asia through Japan's colonial and military apparatuses.

Anyway, crucial institutional differences remain. Modern rituals run through training and selection pipelines operated by the military, schools, sports clubs, and party-state apparatuses, whereas classical Li-Yue relied on ancestral temples and court/ritual institutions—ritual officials, music officials, and ritual manuals. Modern state rituals typically draw their legitimating vocabulary from the nation-state, revolutionary history, and narratives of achievement in modernization, while classical Li-Yue more explicitly grounded in heaven-human order and moral transformation.

It is reasonable to describe these national ceremonies as a structural homology of classical Li-Yue. The homology rest on shared logics of embodied coordination: synchronization, role assignment, spatial-topological installation (routes, grids, formations), regimes of visibility and constant correction, bodily discipline, and staged legitimization. More than this, We can further find some interior connections such as cosmological believes residue persists in modern contexts—not only in South Korea's Confucian rites, but also, more discreetly, in Chiang Kai-shek-era Taiwan, drills, daily flag-raising, and militarized school training, are integrate into Confucius dogmas, where Chiang repeatedly invoked the “Dao-heritage of five thousand years,” a phrase he often recited.

In the twenty-first century, with its secularism and hyper-technologization, Eastern Asian states continue to be shaped by the logics of Li-Yue. Stripped of its pre-Qin feudal foundations, interiority and generative ethical structure, the Li-Yue system has evolved into a technical module of governance and bodily discipline.

Today the national Li-Yue becomes a fantastic spectacle: Yet this spectacle rendering power as visible, verifiable, and closed, as the final output of a state-aesthetic system, while participants bodies are mobilized, emotions intensified, every elements designed and aligned to meet the ideal of state-nation.

However, If we look back to the long history of Li-Yue in the East, We can find an hidden historical trajectory, which anticipates the modernization and nationalization which was about to come, long before the wester influences.

2.4 The historical trajectory: Centralisation, Bureaucratization and Spectacularisation

From the late **Western Zhou** to the **Han** dynasty (5th century BC – 1st century AD), there was a deep influence from the Legalist school (centrism instead of feudalism, and bodily discipline instead of family ritual). The **Tang** dynasty (7th–10th century AD) saw internationalization in terms of court style and diplomatic music. The **Song** dynasty (10th–13th century AD) saw the return of Confucian ethics in a series of protocols under nation-wide bureaucratization. **Ming** Dynasty: (14th–17th AD): a state-wide standardized ritual financed mainly by the local government, with series of controls from emperor in practice. **Qing** Dynasty (17th–20th AD): combining Manchu ceremony with Confucian orthodoxy. Great spectacle with minimal interiority. Finally, from **Republic** to **People's Republic**: (20–21st AD): westernization and nationalistic implications, come together with extreme body discipline.

Looking back at history, as long as Yue remained a primary symbol of state legitimacy, each new dynasty carried forward—while also transforming—Li-Yue's framework of its predecessor. From this continuity, one can trace a clear long-term trajectory of **centralization, bureaucratization, and spectacularization** extending over more than 2,500 years. Beginning in the Han dynasty, Li-Yue gradually shifted from a cosmological state rite into a bureaucratic protocol governing bodies, and eventually into a spectacular system manifesting sovereignty. In this sense, the national ceremonies in China today are neither pure historical contingency, nor mere imitations of the west, but the logical outcome of her own history. Any way the history is never deterministic. We will never know what Li-Yue might have looked like without western influences (such as calisthenics, military drills, and march). But it could be safe to say the modern form of Asian state ritual is thus shaped by both western influences and endogenous continuities.

3. LIN-CHI-WEI'S MODULES IN PRACTICE

Yue's Pre-Qin models (ca. 11th–3rd century BCE) operate as educative and generative systems. Through the repetitive practice of Yue, participants regulate personal affect, calibrate their judgment, and allow collective order to emerge in and through embodied practice, rather than merely representing an established order.

By contrast, from the Qin dynasty onward (ca. 3rd century BCE to the 21st century CE), Li-Yue increasingly shifts toward a centralized model. It serves primarily to verify and to display the correct execution of a preconfigured order through bodily obedience and discipline. During this process, the confucian ideal about Yue of individual self-cultivation is reduced to a collective, visualized demonstration of a certain political order defined by it's own elites.

My theoretical inquiry—as well as my “Module Practice” takes shape as a counter-proposition to such established order. It is, in a sense, a reflection on Yue as it has been weaponized throughout the history, and especially through the culture movements in the course of asian modernization.

I am interested in whether, after some three thousand years of Yue practice, and after its full assimilation into nationalist agenda of corporeal training. Might Yue still be able to inspire the potential of generating non-statist protocols? Let's go back to the idea of confucius and make it updated : Li today can still be collectively computed? Embodied social order can still emerge horizontally, from within the community interaction, rather than being imposed from above? And most importantly: Can new rules evolve in real time, shaping constantly by the needs of a changing society, and can itself turn into the motor for the future changes?

3.1 “Inter-human Dynamic Coordination Modules” (IDCM)

These questions have shifted my musical attention away from traditional models of “composition/interpretation” and toward the practice of protocol: not fixed structures, but dynamic rule-sets, iterated and re-generated through live action. Since 2004, I have been developing series of experiments that would later be named “**Human Dynamic Coordination Models**” (**HDCM**)—systems built from simple rules that combine participants into temporal “human-computer” devices, capable of generating complex and often unexpected sonic phenomena. (see: <http://www.linchiwei.com>)

These so-called “**Sound Models**” include more than Ten basic series, such as:

- **Tape Music** (Mono and Multi-Tracks), inspired by the mechanics of analog tape machines, where audience members act as magnetic heads and speakers.
- **Cellular Automata Music**, based on the theory of Conway's artificial life model.
- **Chapelet Sonore**, where color beads functions as a triggering signal.
- **Quipou Sonore**, A 100 meter long Quipou transfered Incan knot systems into “digital sound notation”.
- **Calligraphie Sonore** , A graphic score with Chinese calligraphy embroidered on a black ribbon, which roughly represent the evolution of pitch, volume and phoneme. The tuning and tonality remained undefined, the singers are obliged to react to one another's sound in order to find their own role in the forming of an unknown harmony.

• **Balloon Music**, A series of instruments attached with a balloon were played by the assistants on stage, then passed to the audience, who were obligated to listen to the others and start the concert for themselves.

If the state's version of Yue reduces individual bodies into screws in a synchronized mega-machine—focusing solely on the correct execution of rules, culminating in a display of order—then I try myself to image alternatively:

A kind of sound protocol in which individual bodies are conditions for each other, interferences for each other, even their reactions can contribute to the next generation of evolving protocols. This idea leads to a sound practice without central conductor, without pre-determined score , where rules and rule-breaking coexist, and where overflow, deviation, and improvisation are not bugs but preconditions of emergence. Here, rules exist only through embodied actions , and the value lies not in the perfection of execution, but in the process of being enacted and tested.

These models have no strictly centralized rhythm, Structures arise not through total control, but through local feedback, lateral calibration, and emergent coherence. Participants form micro-groups keeping on self-correct in real time, and establish local tacit agreements (through sound), the completion of a piece is to certain extent impossible.

In HDCM, protocols are intentionally underdetermined. They do not prescribe detailed modes of expression, such as timbre, duration, pitch, or even precise timing, interaction patterns, or affect—in advance. Individual variation is not a flaw here, and errors are not failures. They are thus treated as signals. Delay, misreading, latency, deviation, and unforeseen (even exaggerated) reactions are structurally permitted. HDCM sets only minimal relational conditions.

The initiators do not “compose” the outcome in the traditional sense, nor do they oversee its progression—there is no conductor at all. Instead, the initiator designs an environment for distributed emergence. HDCM therefore does not claim to abolish power, but to shift artistic organization away from centralized execution toward spontaneous, negotiated, embodied, collective production—where participants generate the work themselves.

The following section offers a brief introduction to two IDCM modules, developed and matured through concrete long-term practices.

3.2 Case Studies in Protocol-Based Sound Modules

Tape Music (2004–)

A long ribbon divides the spectators into a spiral formation. Without any prior instruction, spectators

received a ribbon from initiator and mechanically transfer it to the next begin to transfer the ribbon clockwise, some starts reading or chanting the meaningless syllabic sequences embroidered on it. From these overlapping, not perfectly synchronized vocalizations, a dense acoustic mass gradually emerges—composed of many sub-patterns, it builds itself in volume and complexity, and it is slow, organic, and continuously evolving.

From a cybernetic perspective, traditional Western rehearsal works a parallel signal transmission model: each performer receives the same score simultaneously, and get synchronized through a conductor. **Tape Music**, by contrast, uses a serial transmission model (as described by researcher Tsai Hai-En): the “score” moves from person to person. It functions like a 1970s tape delay effector—or perhaps more accurately, like a live mechanical canon.

Each participant hears their neighbors first, entering the system based on the rhythmic patterns they perceive, which differs in different position. This moving framework gives individuals significant autonomy, regarding to pitch, duration and timbre, yet the loosely synchronized framework allows the sub-groups to produce emergent intensifications—patterns that can be perceived by the rest of the participants, yet remain unstable and keeping evolving. Much like how bees follow collective pheromone trails to form hives, participants collectively reinforce certain sonic patterns, producing an effective form of collective computation.

Notably, Tape Music is not a singular work. It has generated over twenty versions in the past 20 years—each evolving like software, with beta releases, updates, and full revisions. Other artists and social groups have adopted the structure in different contexts: and used them in wedding, party, therapy workshops, youth camp etc, and it became a staple in UK choir **Musarc**'s repertoire since 2016.

	Classic Music Rehearsals	Interhuman Dynamic Coordination Modules (Example: Tape Music)
Conducting	Conductor-Centered Tempo, volume, timbre, and balance are centrally controlled by a single conductor.	Decentralized Structure Volume, timbre, and melody are self-determined by each participant, who independently balances their sound or forms collective patterns with others
Synchronization	Following the Conductor's tempo – Strict Synchronization	The group synchronizes with ribbon symbols rather than a conductor's gestures, allowing for flexible timing.
Score	Individual Scores for Everyone	Equal Roles or Self-Defined Division of Labor
Labor Division	Divided Roles Assigned by the system	All Expressions Welcomed – Embracing diverse and distinct sound expressions.
Expression	Suppressing Individual Sound Characteristics—Divergent personal expressions are not encouraged.	Imaginative Instruments – reimagining power dynamics within existing ones.
Social	Fulfilling Established Roles Within Society	Imaginative Instruments – reimagining power dynamics within existing ones.

Table 1. A comparison to traditional music structure

3.3 Cellular Automata Music (2006–)

Thirty-six participants enter sequentially, forming a 6×6 grid. Each of them act as “cell” within a live system governed by the rules of cellular automata. A signal—such as a wooden fish strike or a flashing light—marks an Act. Before the first Act, each participant selects a small instrument from four provided instruments.

From the second Act onward, each participant's (next) action and choice of instrument is determined by the status of their four immediate neighbors (front, back, left, right). The rules are as follows:

- If your instrument differs from all your neighbors, you can continue to play it during three more Acts, then stop permanently (died).
- If it matches only one or two neighbor, switch instruments in the next Act.
- If it matches three, continue playing the same instrument in the next act—but if the same instrument is played for more than three consecutive Acts, stop permanently (died).
- If all neighbors share your instrument, stop immediately in the next Act.(died)

Participants need to listen to what the other “cells” are doing thus determined what to play, simply because there is no musical instruction but a sequence of instrument choices with slow diminution (of instruments). This produces a gradually evolving sonic system, capable of shifting sound textures. The same principles can be adapted to choreographic structures for group movement.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that pre-Qin Li-Yue is best understood not as a work tradition but as a **protocol tradition**. Rather than organizing sound toward the realization of autonomous musical works, Yue employed embodied procedures through which sound coordinated bodies, affects, and social relations. Its primary concern was therefore not musical representation but the operational generation of normative order.

Viewed from this perspective, HDCM is neither a reconstruction of Li-Yue nor an attempt to revive its historical moral or political agenda. Rather, Li-Yue serves as a theoretical coordinate from which contemporary sound practice may be reconsidered. If modern music has largely inherited a work-centered ontology, HDCM investigates the possibility of a **protocol-centered** one.

Here, composition shifts from prescribing sonic outcomes to designing the minimal operational conditions under

which collective organization may emerge. Protocols remain intentionally underdetermined. Rather than specifying sounds, they specify relations. Participants negotiate timing, response to each other, interact to form local decisions - sometimes even unconsciously, while delay, mis-interpretation and deviation become productive elements of the system rather than failures to be corrected. Musical structure is therefore not realized in advance but continuously enacted through collective computation.

The question is consequently no longer how to compose an ideal musical work, but how to design **operational protocols** through which new forms of collective organization may emerge. HDCM does not propose a new musical style, nor an updated version of Li-Yue. It proposes **protocol as a new compositional object**: one in which artistic practice shifts from producing works to designing the conditions under which societies may experiment with their own modes of coordination.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Ang Lu-Teng, Tsai Hai-En and Wolfgang Schwabe for their valuable feedback. Proofreading by Wolfgang Schwabe.

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