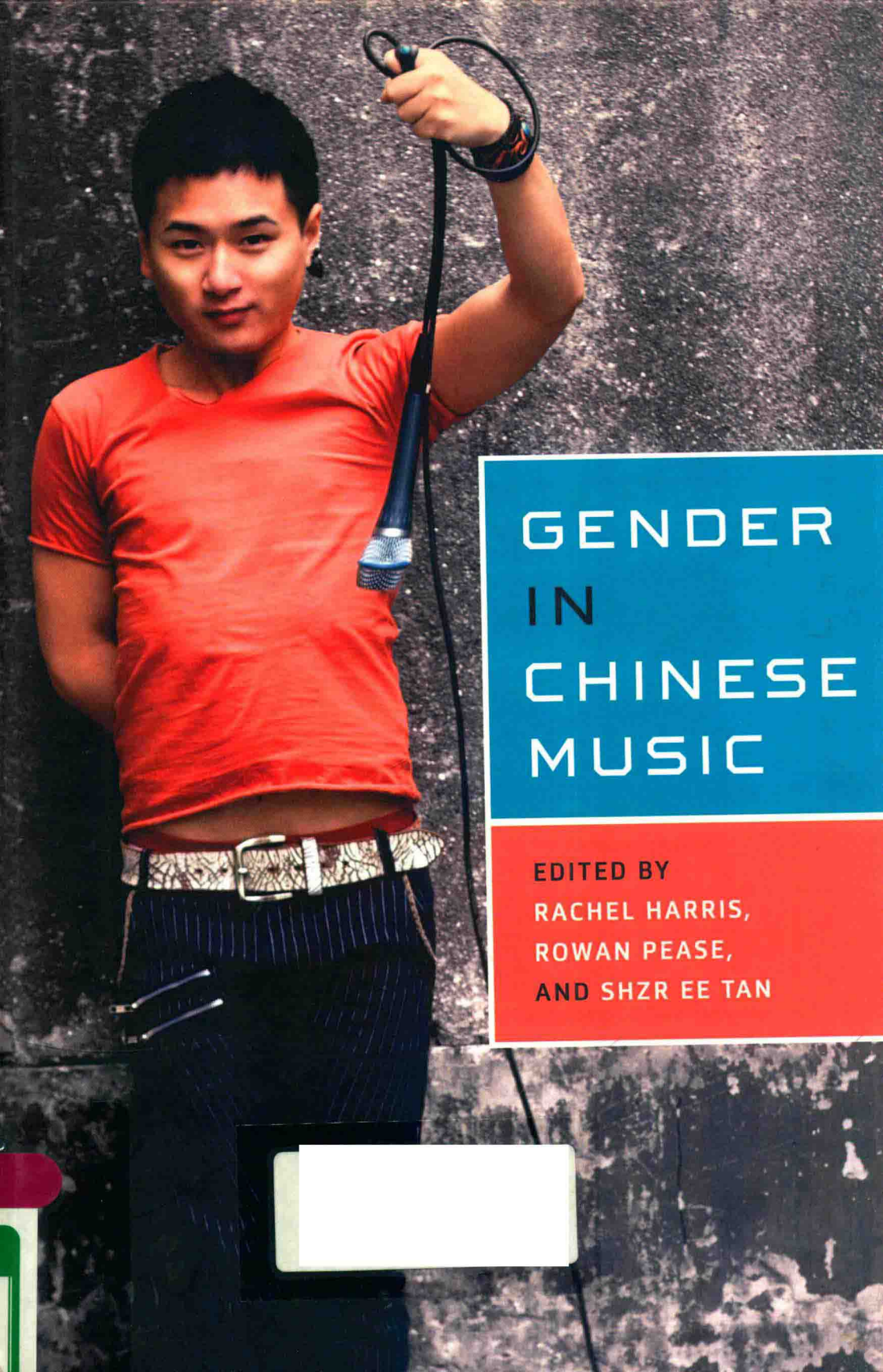

GENDER IN CHINESE MUSIC

EDITED BY
RACHEL HARRIS,
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AND SHZR EE TAN

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Burma's Pop Music Industry:
Creators, Distributors, Censors
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Identity, Agency and Performance Practice
Bode Omojola

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Sumarsam

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To Antoinet Schimmelpenninck
Sinologist and Musicologist
(1962–2012)

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Introduction

Rachel Harris and Rowan Pease

Between 2004 and 2006, a TV pop idol show produced by a daring provincial satellite station, Hunan Satellite TV, sponsored by the Mengniu Dairy Company, took China by storm. The delightfully named Mengniu (Mongolian cow) Yoghurt "Super Girl" (*Chaoji Nüsheng*) contests featured young women from the provinces, many of them without formal musical training. For many fans, it was the lack of polish of the performers, and the lack of predictability of the voting results, that made the program addictive: the show had more than four hundred million viewers. Unlike China's leader Hu Jintao—as Western media commentators were quick to point out—the winners were popularly elected, via text message, and the final contest of 2006 drew more than ten million votes nationwide. In 2005, the competition was won by twenty-one-year-old Li Yuchun, who went on to become China's first homegrown superstar of the twenty-first century. Li was very different from the conventional image of a mainstream Chinese pop diva: lanky, always in trousers and loose shirts, no makeup, and spiky hair. It was widely believed that Li won on personality and image, rather than vocal talent. Like reality-show stars elsewhere, Li Yuchun was most admired for being individual and authentic—and for crying. Her fan base was young girls who described themselves as her "girlfriends," and fantasy fiction posted on fan websites depicted her in lesbian relationships. Li Yuchun was not the only contestant on this show challenging ideas of female public behavior. Second-placed "Bibi" Zhou Bichang, like Li, also sang mainly male songs during the competition. She wore baggy hip-hop clothing, with cropped hair and spectacles, and like Li had a fan base of "girlfriends." Like Li, her albums eschewed traditional romantic ballads, with assertively titled tracks such as "Wow" and "*Han*" (Sweat), the latter about global warming.

These androgynous superstars sparked national debates about talent, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and democracy. They and their fans provide a springboard from which to outline some of this volume's themes. If nothing else, they reveal that gender roles are continually being negotiated and renegotiated in China and that musical performance is a significant medium where

these negotiations are played out. Within the space of half a century, women have been idealized as "iron girls" (represented by the immortal Tie Mei of the revolutionary opera *Red Lantern*), reclaimed their femininity in the reform era (notably in the glorious frills and trills of the Taiwanese pop star Deng Lijun), and now welcome a contravention of social norms in the tomboy look of Li and Zhou. It would be unwise to assume that such swift and radical changes are only a recent phenomenon, as though gender were a static concept in premodern China. As Tani Barlow argues, one cannot appeal to "Chinese women" as a transhistorical presence: femininity has been constructed differently throughout Chinese history.[1]

This book is not just about women, though. For its 2007 season, Hunan TV set up a Super Boy contest, but the government imposed restrictions on the show: text voting was tolerated but not the drama and the tears, which are as much a part of Chinese idol competitions as they are in US equivalents. In April 2007 the state broadcasting administration issued a set of rules, first banning the use of the word *super*, so that the competition was to be known as the "Happy Boys Voices" (*Kuaile Nansheng*) competition. Besides limiting its size and attempting to eliminate corruption, the rules "prohibit manners, language, hairstyles, accessories, and costumes that do not conform to the values held by the masses" and ban the "pursuit of weirdness." Also prohibited were screaming fans, crying losers, and "cruel or arrogant judges." The show's producers eliminated so-called girly boys, who predominated at the audition stage, in favor of so-called tuff boys, saying that they were more in keeping with the program's stipulated "Chinese values" and "happy image."[2] Here is an example of how the state also intervenes in questions of gender and music, especially where they relate to sexuality; again, this is true not only of the modern era but also throughout imperial history, from the famous Confucian prescriptions against the "licentious music" performed by women,[3] to the Emperor Qianlong's 1722 ban on female public performance.

Geographical Scope of This Volume

Li Yuchun looks like a rocker, but musically she covers a variety of styles, from rap to ballads, reggae, and tango. Is this Chinese music? The conception of "Chinese music" in this volume is wide-ranging and inclusive. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to take the nation-state as a privileged and self-evident site of investigation. Li Yuchun drew support in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as from the global Chinese diaspora, who were able to share each stage of the competition on Internet sites such as YouTube and its Chinese equivalent Tudou. As its popularity grew, the Super Girls contest drew the attention of Western newspapers: reporters eagerly sought signs of subversion in the public's taste and hope for democracy in the enthusiastic adoption of text message

voting. Li Yuchun became known abroad as Chris Lee; she launched the 2006 London Chinatown celebrations. Her 2008 album, the assertively titled *Mine* (*Wo de*), was recorded in New York studios using internationally renowned production and song-writing teams, and it was released on the label Taihe Rye, which was co-owned by a South Korean telecom company. Yet, despite Li being immersed in the global music industry, as British listeners, we feel there is an incongruity between Li's image and her (to Western ears) conservative lyrics; the album's mixture of musical styles is also unusual. In its aim for a mass domestic audience, *Mine* remains distinctively Chinese. Li's album shows that we must think transnationally and consider alternative forms of modernity in the non-West. The links between "local" formations and the West are fundamental to our study.

Previous Approaches to Gender in Chinese Music

Like musicology in general, English-language ethnomusicological studies of Chinese musical traditions have largely taken male music as their subject, whether court and ritual genres, instrumental music, twentieth-century composition, or minority musics. As Gail Hershatter argues, the study of gender is not so much an end in itself but a valuable tool for reassessing, enriching, and "making trouble for" all kinds of disciplines within Chinese and of course other studies.[4] In recent years a few studies on gender in Chinese music have attempted to redress this imbalance. Most notably, in a Garland encyclopedia entry, Su Zheng writes that the extraordinary achievements of Chinese women musicians are widely ignored, dismissed, minimized, and misinterpreted in Chinese and Western scholarship, despite an abundance of historical materials that document their musical contributions.[5] She highlights the discovery of twenty bodies of young women performers unearthed in the Marquis Yi of Zeng tomb, noting that though much has been made of a sixty-four-piece bell-chime set also in this tomb, there has been little interest in the lives of these women. Su Zheng's laudable feminist project to write "forgotten" women back into history, redressing marginalization, offers the possibility of a more complete documentation of female participation in and contribution to music in China. Since the publication of her article in 2001, efforts in this direction are beginning to grow in numbers and influence.

As the leading Chinese musicologist Xiao Mei notes, speaking to Shzr Ee Tan for this volume in 2008, the field of Chinese musicology is still "a man's world." The four-volume collection of modern musicians' biographies[6] has only forty-seven women out of 314 entries, and thirty of those are singers. Very few women are listed in the folk-song volumes of the *Anthology of Folk Music of the Chinese Peoples*.[7] This reflects their lesser public role but also prevailing scholarly understandings of what constitutes music and music making. Writing

in 2001, Su Zheng mentions two historical studies with a focus on female music making as pioneering attempts to rewrite the historical record.[8] Since then, gender studies have begun to take root in China: a 2009 international conference on gender studies in Shanghai's Fudan University included a range of approaches to gender from literary analysis to fieldwork-based studies. Notable is a new focus on masculinities and a few papers drawing on queer theory. In the field of musicology, young women are now joining the discipline in greater numbers; with an increasing awareness of international trends in ethnomusicology, gender is becoming an issue. China's leading musicology journals have published articles introducing the state of gender theory in Western ethnomusicology.[9] Xiao Mei's own recent work, featured in this volume, focuses on rural female spirit mediums among ethnic minority groups. These female musicians are doubly marginalized in scholarship and political power structures but hold important social roles in rural life across Han and minority cultures. Xiao leads a distinct trend for younger scholars to engage in field-based work with ethnic minority women's traditions.[10] In the field of Han Chinese traditions, Wu Fan's work on temple fairs in north Shanxi includes perceptive comments on gender, addressing not only the male world of local temple committees, Daoists, and shawm bands but also the female family members and female mediums, worshippers, and deities.[11] Chinese scholars, both male and female, are also increasingly publishing on gender issues in contemporary and pop music.[12]

Of the few English language studies of Chinese musical traditions to focus on gender, Joseph Lam's work on historical texts of the early Han and late Ming periods does the most to address the questions raised by Zheng. Lam explores the apparent contradiction between the fierce denigration of "women's music" in the classics and its popularity as evidenced by numerous references in the textual record.[13] Yang Mu's groundbreaking work on sexuality and folk song, especially his work on the *hua'er* festivals of Gansu, provides a welcome antidote to the tendency in Chinese musicology to sanitize ethnographic accounts,[14] though Frank Kouwenhoven and Antoinet Schimmelpenninck in this volume go much further. Jonathan Stock contributes an admirable attempt to relate questions of gender to vocal style in Shanghai opera.[15] However, in contrast to the burgeoning interest within ethnomusicology over the last twenty years, the work on gender in Chinese music is still strikingly sparse.[16] We are cautious of an overly positivist view of Chinese women's music making. Stephen Jones in this volume warns against overstating women's agency in Chinese music and ignoring the harsh realities of inequality and oppression experienced by these silenced voices. Little surprise, then, that it is marriage laments that have so far offered the most fertile ground for the study of gender and expressive culture in rural society,[17] although these contributions come from anthropologists and folklorists who provide little discussion of music; Anne McLaren, for example, characterizes the laments not so much as songs as "stylized sobbing."[18] Discussion of gender is more central in several studies of popular

Chinese music, most prominently in the work of Nimrod Baranovitch,[19] who reveals, for instance, that, despite the apparent liberation of women's voices in the 1980s, the music industry was as masculinized in the reform era as it was in Maoist China. Jeroen de Kloet's 2010 book offers further insights into gender in Beijing's macho rock scene and the ways in which female rockers negotiate gender stereotypes.[20] Marc Moskowitz focuses primarily on Taiwanese Mandopop songs, arguing that these songs, with their themes of loneliness and sorrow, provide vocabularies for the articulation of alternative versions of masculinity, expressing more female or androgynous sensibilities.[21] Some recent articles have used queer theory as a lens to examine Taiwanese popular culture.[22] Other groundbreaking studies come not from musicologists but from historians examining homosexuality and transgender identities in Chinese opera.[23] A theme running through all of these studies, as our vignette of Li suggests, is of transformations of self and of social constructions of gender.

Approaches to Gender in Ethnomusicology

The discipline of ethnomusicology is perhaps uniquely able to examine music and gender not only through analysis of music as text but through study of lived experience, agency, and practice.[24] Music serves as a particularly rich field for the analysis of gender because of its important role in the construction and articulation of identities. As popular music scholar Simon Frith argues, identity is not a thing but a process, an experiential process that is most vividly grasped *as music*. In his investigations into how and why music articulates identity, Frith interconnects music's experiential and referential powers with its inherent ability to express the individual in the social and the social in the individual.[25] He notes that music can be both fantastic (an idealization of self and society) and real (in the process of actual bodily music making). These twin poles of gender identities—representations and lived experience—are likewise frequently referred to in the literature on gender in China.[26]

The field of gender studies in ethnomusicology has advanced swiftly in the last few decades. Earlier volumes focused on the hitherto neglected areas of female expressivity. Koskoff's influential edited volume *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* examines how music both reflects and constructs gender, how women are present or absent in music, and how the public and private domains of music are gendered. The many case studies in Koskoff's volume explore the related spheres of the exclusion of women from musical activity and the social value placed on types of performance gendered male or female. Koskoff argues that across cultures "music is devalued by association with sexually active women" while female sexuality itself may be devalued by association with music.[27] Such themes are certainly apparent in China, where rural women may be excluded from rituals (the primary site of musical

performance in rural China) because of pollution taboos associated with menstrual blood, while the fleeting high status enjoyed by high-class *yueji*, female musicians and courtesans, was of course highly contingent on their relationships to male power holders (for an elegant deconstruction of these relations, see Judith Zeitlin in this volume). Koskoff suggests four categories of performance of intergender relations: confirmation, apparent confirmation, protests that maintain the order, and challenges to the order.[28] These categories are still interesting to ponder, although expressive culture rarely fits neatly into such schema. Should the Super Girls contest be seen as a ritual reversal that reinforces rules by symbolic subversion where women preside over the dangerous sphere of the dance?[29] Or is the presence of not one but two contrasting lesbian performers a confirmation of women's new social role as a rapidly segmenting, ego-driven consumer group within market-driven China, as outlined by Jing Wang?[30] Symbolic and real change cannot be separated, neither can construction and reflection.

More recent approaches have recognized the role of musical performance in constructing and maintaining a whole range of gendered identities. Judith Butler's work on gender and performativity has been influential in developing these approaches. Butler argues that gender does not exist as an "ideal" or an "essence" but instead is constituted from a series of performed acts that actually create the notion of gender: "gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing or believing in them; the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness."[31] The duality of lived experience versus representations of gender is collapsed in Butler's approach to gender theory. For her, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body."[32] This emphasis on gender performativity is strongly realized in Jane Sugarman's ethnographic study of Prespa wedding songs in Bulgaria. Sugarman reminds us that we need to focus on the capacity of musical traditions not merely to reinforce gender relations within other domains but to actively engender those individuals who participate in them. Gender is intrinsic to our musical performances, and any musical performance is thus also a performance of gender. Sugarman analyzes texts, vocal style, and ornamentation and their communication of attributes signified as male or female. She discusses gendered emotional qualities and the division of performance space, arguing for an understanding of singing as the practice of patriarchy.[33]

Although the understanding of multiple and shifting constructs of gender is well established within the discipline, masculinities are still less discussed, notwithstanding the work of Louise Meintjes in Zulu song and dance,[34] Viet Erlmann on *isicathamiya*,[35] and Pacini Hernandez on Dominican *Bachata*.[36]

There is a longer tradition within popular music studies addressing different forms of masculinity, and we have found many of these studies useful for our approach to this volume. One significant recent contribution in this field is Freya Jarman-Ivens's edited volume *Oh Boy*, which takes the male as its object of scrutiny and thereby illuminates the multiple and malleable variations on this supposedly normative gender. Jarman-Ivens considers all gender formations the "results of careful and sustained practice . . . not simply formations, but "*per*-form-ations,"[37] despite a tendency to define masculinity as "nonperformative." Our understanding of masculinity is broad: China's Super Girls remind us that "masculinity does not belong to men [and] has not been produced only by men."[38]

The literature on rock and masculinity is also useful for its interest in the gendering of musical sound. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie's article "Rock and Sexuality" discusses the overtly masculine performance conventions of "cock rock": loud, rhythmically insistent, and built around techniques of arousal and climax.[39] Similarly Robert Walser in his writing on heavy metal describes "impressive feats on the electric guitar, counterposed with the experience of power and control that is built up through vocal extremes, guitar power chords, distortion, and sheer volume of bass and drums." Such sounds, he argues, are produced out of "fantasies of masculine virtuosity and control."[40] Several articles in this volume emphasize the importance of listening to gender, placing musical sound at the heart of our analysis, rather than discussing only the visual aspects of musical performance conventions and the surrounding social structures. Susan McClary's pioneering work in the field of Western art music first drew attention to the notion of gendered musical structures,[41] but as the literature on rock and masculinity suggests, other aspects of musical sound are perhaps more significant in their ability to carry, and be decoded as, gendered messages. The discourse surrounding music links detail of musical style—for example, the use of melisma as opposed to playing it "straight"—directly to moral judgments and notions of authenticity and value. In this volume, Stephen Jones considers how the musical structure of the Shanxi shawm band suites might reveal underlying gendered ideologies, but a shift in focus, to a consideration of style and especially timbre, proves perhaps more fruitful. As Walser argues, harsh, abrasive timbres contribute to the Western cultural association between rock and masculinity: "timbre instantly signals genre and affect."[42] In this volume, Rowan Pease also draws attention to timbre, especially to vocal quality. As she argues, it is the way of singing that attracts audiences much more than what they sing, and timbre is the most recognizable aspect of song, instantly linked by listeners to categories of class, race, and gender.

Baranovitch traces the changing vocal style of Chinese female singers from the forceful, high-pitched production of the Cultural Revolution–era model operas to the breathy pop style of 1980s Canto-Mandopop singers like Deng Lijun, arguing that her huge popularity was based on her ability to supply the

much-needed sounds of a softer, romantic femininity to Chinese listeners in the aftermath of that period of political extremism and violence.[43] Yet soft and breathy vocal styles can equally purvey hard-line political messages. Mu Rongxuan, with her song "Don't Be Too CNN," became the voice of popular Chinese outrage against the Western media in May 2008. With her soft singing style and acoustic guitar accompaniment, she vocalized a wave of Chinese nationalist anger as she railed against the "lies" of the Western media concerning the Tibet protests surrounding the Olympic torch relay.

But clearly caution must be exercised here; while the Shanxi shawm bands sound extremely macho to our ears, we cannot assume that their Shanxi audiences make the same associations. Even where discussing Chinese rock, we cannot necessarily assume that similar sounds of rock and heavy metal signify the same for Chinese audiences as they do for Western audiences.

Theorizing Gender and Music in China

Tullia Magrini's edited volume on gender and music in the Mediterranean[44] offers a rich array of ethnographic studies from across the region, identifying as its dominant and unifying theme the twin concepts of shame and honor, classic tropes of Mediterranean anthropology. What themes might we identify in the field of gender and music in China? One theme running through much research is the well-worn trope whereby tradition is gendered as feminine and modernity as masculine. The twin concepts of tradition and modernity are, of course, twentieth-century constructions, and it is interesting to trace the twentieth-century development of professional Chinese traditional music (*minyue*) performance, and its shifting gender profile, in the light of this perception. When the "masters" of various instrumental traditions were invited into the newly built conservatories in the 1950s, they were almost exclusively male, but the gender balance quickly began to shift. In the contemporary conservatories it is striking that the prominent performers of Western classical music, the more highly valued tradition, regarded as international and progressive, are most commonly male (see Tan's discussion of the pianists Lang Lang and Li Yundi in this volume), while *minyue* departments, regarded within the conservatories as less prestigious and less dynamic, have become strongly feminized. Stringed instruments in particular, such as the *pipa* and *zheng*, are now almost the exclusive domain of women, with a parade of glamorous virtuoso star performers and thousands of students from better-off families, much in the way that the piano served as an ideal feminine accomplishment in Victorian England. Even the classically male world of the seven-string zither *qin* has been penetrated by female performers within the conservatories. The most striking example of this feminization of *minyue* is the glamorous, highly packaged Twelve Girls Band, which achieved widespread popularity with its shifting profile of unnamed and

interchangeable nubile young performers of traditional instruments and their contemporary fusion renditions of *minyue*. Less glitzy than the Twelve Girls, but a more widespread phenomenon, are the many older Chinese women, organizers of amateur groups, who act as preservers of traditional genres.[45] This has been best documented in the Chinese diaspora; for example, in articles about Grace Liu, who promotes and preserves Cantonese opera in England,[46] and Tsar Teh-yun, who maintains the *qin* tradition in Hong Kong.[47]

Related to this phenomenon is the gendered alterity of (male) self versus (female) other, a feature frequently noted in studies of the feminized and exoticized minority nationality song-and-dance troupe performances. Dru Gladney discusses representations of ethnic minority women in the spheres of Chinese art, film, music, and dance and argues that they are titillating in ways not permitted for representations of Han women.[48] Louisa Schein writes with insight of the position of the "divas" of professional ethnic minority performance, who proudly relate how they sang for Chairman Mao in the Great Hall of the People. She presents these encounters and others in which Miao peasant hotel maids in Guizhou put on ethnic costumes, perform songs, and pop food into the mouths of urban male tourists, as rituals of internal orientalism.[49] Rowan Pease and Olivia Kraef in this volume make original contributions to this debate. Yet it is not only feminine minority representations that are packaged and sold in contemporary China; minority masculinities are also alluring to Han consumers, as Baranovitch argues in his study of Teng Ge'er the Mongolian rocker.[50] The contemporary Beijing rock scene is rich in examples of minority rockers who draw on the links in the popular Chinese imagination between ethnic minorities, nature, and authenticity, from the extreme sounds of the Inner Mongolian heavy metal group Voodoo Kungfu, with their references to shamanism and use of the Mongolian horse-head fiddle,[51] to the more playful northwestern Uyghur group Jam, with their rock interpretations of the Uyghur Muqam.

These studies of the relationships among performance, ethnicity, and gender remind us that gendered sounds are also underpinned by politics. As we saw in our opening vignettes describing the Mengniu Yoghurt Super Girls and the spin-off Happy Boy Voices, the Chinese state still seeks to direct and control representations of gender in popular music performance, as in many other spheres. The government's anxieties over the representation of masculinity within the Happy Boy Voices competition reveal that the emasculated "sick man of East Asia" status imposed by colonial modernity still casts its shadow over China. In the existing literature, Baranovitch has been most alert to the relationship among politics, gender, and musical sound, arguing that the macho sounds (and the frequent misogyny) of Beijing's 1990s rock scene may be read as a direct reaction to the sense of emasculation experienced by the male musicians on this scene in the face of a controlling state and their nationalist sense of China's "backwardness."[52] Zheng Tiantian's chapter on