Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, economic development in China has accelerated significantly, supported by drastic reforms and preferential policies. Among these are government-imposed restrictions on population mobility. Overall, urban China has benefitted more from the economic boom than rural China, where poverty remains persistent and widespread. Seeking to escape this poverty, an ever-increasing number of laborers from rural areas have been moving into and between cities—most often in violation of these mobility restrictions. These migrants, having defied their assigned position within the Chinese social system, are disadvantaged in the urban job market, excluded from social welfare benefits, and characterized as a "diseased social body" (Zhang 2001: 141) in urban public discourse. To vent their anger and frustration, some have turned to making underground music. Others, by contrast, seek solace in performing in state-sponsored art troupes that offer the illusion of a harmonious society.[1] This book examines how their various forms of musical expression shape the Chinese imaginary of this marginalized community, contribute to social discrimination against the migrants, and serve as a means for migrants to empower themselves.

Who Are "Floating Migrants"?

"Floating migrants" is an official label given to these migrants by the People's Republic of China in the course of the country's economic transformation. As early as the twentieth century, China's governmental decrees and reports began referring to these migrants as "floating population" (*liudong renkou*). But who are "floating migrants"? How are they being disadvantaged and discriminated in

1 Some discussions and field materials included in this book were once employed in my article published in *Ethnomusicology Forum* in 2020, entitled "Social Imaginary and Musical Persuasion: A Partial Ethnography of 'Floating' Migrant Music" (see Tang 2020).

Chinese cities? This section will address these questions by providing an introduction to the historical socio-economic conditions that led to the formation of this segment of the population and that influenced their musical lives.

The Planned Economy and the "Hukou" System

After the Chinese communists took control of mainland China in 1949, they faced the daunting task of rebuilding an economic system that had been shattered by decades of wars. Amid the Cold War tensions at the time, communist China adopted the socialist path from the Soviet Union (Wasserstrom 2022; Dillon 2012). Mao Zedong borrowed the Leninist concept of a "planned economy" (*jihua jingji*, also called "command economy") from the Soviet Union to address China's economic problems. In *Land Questions and the Fight for Freedom*, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1962), the inventor of the planned economy, claims

> No laws on earth can abolish inequality and exploitation so long as production for the market continues, and so long as there is the rule of money and the power of capital. Exploitation can be completely abolished only when all the land, factories, and tools are transferred to the working class, and when large-scale socialized and planned production is organized. (Lenin 1962: 438)

Ironically, it was this "large-scale socialized and planned" economic system that led to the formation of the Chinese floating population and the discrimination against them, along with other inequalities.

One of the most fundamental features of a planned economy is that all enterprises are operated by the state and all resources are allocated through a centrally controlled planning mechanism. To achieve this, the central government assigns each citizen a social and economic position that best supports its plans and strategies. In 1958, the state introduced the *hukou* system (literally "household registration system") as a tool to help realize the planned economy (Miller 2012; Kuang and Liu 2012). This hukou system confined people to the area where they were born and registered, dividing them into two categories: rural residents and urban residents. Every registered rural resident was assigned land, while urban residents were given employment along with access to urban public healthcare and government housing. Anyone wishing to transfer to the other hukou category had to obtain approval from local governmental branches, although permission was rarely granted. This hukou system effectively prevented rural-to-urban migration and vice versa because urban residents who transitioned to rural areas without permission did not have land to farm, while

rural-to-urban migrants lacked access to social welfare and guaranteed employment in cities.

Industrialization, Economic Reform, and Rural-Urban Inequality

Although the planned economy and the hukou system were introduced to eliminate inequality, they actually made economic development even more imbalanced and widened the income gap between rural and urban areas. For example, the Chinese government's focus on promoting heavy industry resulted in the flow of material resources into urban regions, where factories were located. This benefited urban residents as these resources gradually filtered down to them. Meanwhile, rural residents were left at the forefront, unable to draw any gain from this type of industrialization. As Jia Ching Chen succinctly observes, "without hukou, the command economy could not have implemented its rapid urban industrialization while 250 million rural people were in poverty at the end of the Maoist era" (Chen 2012: 32).

Nearly two decades later, around 1980, Deng Xiaoping, who had succeeded Mao Zedong as the supreme leader of the People's Republic of China following Mao's death in 1976, introduced another wave of social and economic reforms. The planned economy was replaced by a "socialist market economy," characterized by a hybrid mechanism that combined market-oriented elements with state control (see Ding 2009: 235; see also Hsu 2007). Along with Xiaoping's Open Door Policy (*gaige kaifang*), these reforms accelerated economic growth and the modernization of Chinese cities, gradually shifting the economic focus away from heavy industry and toward manufacturing, commerce, and foreign trade. In that context, urban residents' incomes rose rapidly and many transitioned from blue-collar to white-collar work.

At the same time, the absence of a robust agricultural sector and well-structured subsidies has meant that many rural residents continue to endure severe poverty. According to both Chinese and Western scholars, the annual income gap between urban and rural populations increased from approximately 200 yuan (US$31.28) per capita in 1978 to over 7,000 yuan (US$1094.80) per capita by 2008. For instance, in 2003, China's economy grew by 9.1 percent, yet the number of rural poor increased by 800,000 (see Riskin 2007: 29). Similarly, since beginning my ethnographic research on this topic around 2011, I have witnessed rapid economic growth and infrastructure development in urban China, while many rural areas in the provinces of Hunan, Hubei, Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Guizhou, Guangxi, Shandong, Gansu, and Sichuan have remained underdeveloped.

The Floating Population, Precarity, and the Exploited Classes

The socialist market economy also created many casual, short-term, and heavy labor jobs in the cities. These jobs were unappealing to the urban citizens who already held stable-income positions at state-owned factories and organizations. However, they attracted large numbers of laborers from rural areas. To pursue these opportunities within and between Chinese cities, these laborers left their registered residences without permission, thus breaching hukou restrictions.

Starting in 1985, government reports began referring to these domestic migrants as the "floating population" (e.g., Communist Party Central Committee and State Council 1995; Ministry of Health et al. 1985). According to population census data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the floating population numbered approximately 22 million in 1990, representing roughly 0.5 percent of China's population. This figure rose to 44 million in 1995, 79 million in 2000, and 115 million in 2005.[2] The Chinese government later allowed some rural residents to convert their agricultural (rural) status to a non-agricultural (urban) status (see also Chan, Cai, Wan and Wang 2019; Whyte 2010), this permission was only granted to those who held a bachelor's degree or who purchased property in urban areas. Consequently, individuals without sufficient wealth or access to higher education had no choice but to continue living in the cities as temporary, unlawful residents. A large proportion of these floating migrants move within and between economically advanced urban regions, particularly large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Tianjin. According to the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China (2010), about 6.16 million floating migrants lived in Shenzhen, 2.5 million in Tianjin, nearly 6 million in Shanghai, and 7.6 million in Beijing in 2010—around the time I began my ethnographic research on which this book is based (see also Tay, So 2011: 133–134).

Official, mainstream, and academic discourses in China maintain that "class exploitation" or "exploited classes" have not existed in this country since the late twentieth century. They view inequality and the exploited as isolated "phenomena" (*xianxiang*) or "relationships" (*guanxi*) rather than outcomes of the socioeconomic structures or biased policies (see, e.g., Wang Yali 2016; Gong 2003). Yet, the experiences of these migrant workers—stripped of legal status—provide clear evidence of a structurally disadvantaged class within this authoritarian system.

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2 See the official websites of the National Bureau of Statistics https://www.stats.gov.cn/ (accessed on August 11, 2026) for the population census reports.

Scholars contend that the surge of the "floating population" is "both a symbol and a measure of the decline of the Communist regime's institutional structures and of its social system" (Solinger 2010: 275). My research suggested that, after the early 2000s, these domestic migrants' insecurity and instability were not merely a side effect of unbalanced urban-rural development, but rather what Isabell Lorey (2015) would term governmental precarization. While preparing for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, major Chinese cities faced a critical labor shortage to build new stadiums and facilities. The central government thus relaxed restrictions on the influx of rural labor without providing them with the employment protections they deserved. Rather than guaranteeing equality as promised by the communist forerunners, they normalized uncertainty to create a flexible labor force at minimized costs.

Since then, these floating migrants have been the main force of China's infrastructure construction and in its manufacturing industry, with insecure employment, unstable legal status, and limited access to social protections. In the meantime, government reports and state-owned media began to acknowledge the socio-economic contributions of a portion of the floating population, namely construction workers and manufacturing laborers, and gave them the label "peasant-worker" (*nongmin gong*) to reflect their dual identity (e.g., Luo 2005; Gu, Zheng, Yi 2007). Media outlets and state-sponsored art groups also started paying attention and giving positive portrayals of this segment of floating migrants.

In this book, I chose "floating migrants" over "peasant workers" for two reasons. First, "peasant workers" denotes only a part of the floating population, and many migrants I worked with were not construction or industrial workers. Second, some of my research partners[3] dislike the term because "peasant" in urban discourse also has vulgar connotations. After discussing with my research partners, with whom I still maintain contact, we agreed that "floating" is a neutral term that emphasizes the common struggles they face in the cities. This segment of the population feels rootless after leaving their families behind yet also excluded by urban society when they try to settle in the cities. They feel abandoned by the government, which once promised a communist ideal of

3 In this book, I use the term "research partner" to refer to the floating migrants with whom I have worked. This term reflects my understanding that ethnographic knowledge is not simply collected but produced through relationships and dialogue. The insights presented in this book have been shaped by our ongoing exchanges, through which we have jointly explored questions of migration, identity, and musical life.

social equality but now refuses to provide equal, stable income sources, forcing them to "float" between workplaces and cities in search of jobs.

Floating Migrants: from Familiar Strangers to Research Partners

I was born in a provincial capital located in North China. Floating migrants were familiar strangers to me in the earlier years of my life. I saw them mixing cement as I passed construction sites, watched them endure the disdainful looks of fellow passengers on city buses because their clothing and mannerisms appeared "out of place," and witnessed them being driven away by China's Urban Management Officers.[4] I did not regard them with the contempt that some city residents openly expressed, but neither did I stop to consider who they were or what their lives might be like. Like countless other urban residents, I had grown accustomed to seeing them without really noticing them, their presence becoming part of the city's everyday background.

On a Saturday afternoon in the fall of 2010, my attention was riveted by a roughly made video clip when surfing the web in the Seeger Room on the basement floor of Harvard Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library. In the video, several floating migrants were standing on a construction site and singing (or more precisely, shouting) about the bitterness of their urban life, in hoarse voices accompanied by heavy metal instruments. I was ashamed of the fact that, as a native ethnomusicologist studying Chinese music for years, I never noticed these floating migrants making music nor detected their sufferings. I was attracted by the music itself. They played rock, which, according to existing Chinese media and academic publications, is a subversive genre embodying an avant-garde urbanite spirit of rebellion. Strong rural accents, urban slang words, dowdy clothes, and electronic heavy metal sounds combined to challenge my knowledge of urban Chinese music and of the floating migrants.

After several weeks of initial research, I decided to focus on the musical culture of these floating migrants for my doctoral dissertation. Among thousands of scholarly articles and news reports about preventing and solving the "floating population problem," the culture or music of these migrants was rarely mentioned. Although I suspected that this complete lack of discussion was due

4 Urban Management Officers are responsible for preventing, detecting and punishing noncriminal violations of government decrees and laws, and maintain social order in Chinese cities.

to widespread censorship, I felt compelled to explore the unheard voices of this neglected group.

In June 2011, I returned to China and immersed myself in the musical world of Chinese floating migrants. I chose three Chinese cities as my primary field sites: Beijing, China's national capital with a population of over 19,612 million; Shenzhen, a highly developed international metropolis in southern China with a population of approximately 10,358 million; and Xi'an, a provincial capital in western China that accommodated registered residents of over 8,468 million. Xi'an is surrounded by underdeveloped rural areas and also attracted rural laborers from the vicinity who did not want to leave their families far away (see National Bureau of Statistics 2010). I worked with floating migrants of different ages, genders, ethnicities, professions, income levels, and cultural backgrounds. I moved into the slums on the outskirts of these cities, known for appalling living conditions and for attracting the floating population with cheap rents, and where the Urban Management Office and inspectors of the local Public Security Department did not intervene. I became a loyal audience member for their performances, whether they took place in an abandoned factory building, a basement garage, a crowded little tin shack, or concert halls. I sought to be a friend of these migrants rather than an objective researcher with a camera and a digital recorder. I joined their band, helped them design their websites, and volunteered to teach their children who were being shut out of the city's elementary schools. I maintain friendships with some of the floating migrants I encountered to this day.[5]

The Music and Lives of Floating Migrants: A Day in Beijing

In Beijing, Shenzhen, and Xi'an, I observed floating migrants facing various forms of discrimination and obstacles in the places where they spend their time and work. To local authorities, they were considered "socially destabilizing factors" (*buwending yinsu*) who did not hold "an accepted structural position in the existing societal order." In the job market, they were at a disadvantage when competing with local applicants protected by the hukou policy and other regulations. Urban employers often viewed them as "low-human quality" (*di suzhi*: lack of morality) people because of their "rootlessness."[6] As a result,

5 These experiences were also discussed in detail in my earlier article, see Tang 2020: 188.

6 These cited words are from the fieldnotes and journals I wrote down when working with floating migrants between September 2011 and July 2013.

they could only find low-paid jobs in manual labor, service, and household work. Floating migrants had limited or no access to public health care, social services, and local schools, and they often lived in crowded temporary shelters, dormitories with basic facilities, railway stations, or under bridges. In the following sections, I will quote from my field journals from the research period, during which I followed individual migrant musicians to document their daily experiences and activities. Through these life episodes, I aim to present some representative snapshots, if not comprehensive pictures, of the migrants' living conditions in Chinese cities.

Snapshot no. 1

Name: Xiao Wang[7]
Sex: Male
Hometown: Hebei Province
Interview date: July 18, 2012
Location: Haidian District, Beijing

Around five o'clock in the morning, Xiao Wang's day starts in his dorm, a 12-square-meter tin shack. He has been living there with 15 workmates for about 8 months. He looks drowsy and complains to me that he didn't sleep well the previous night. Beijing's summers are quite hot, even at night. At a temperature of above 30°C, without electric fans or air conditioner, this crowded little tin shack became a "steamer" (in Xiao Wang's words).

Around 5:20 a.m., Xiao Wang arrives at the temporary outdoor canteen, which consists of several big empty oil barrels serving as dining tables, some scattered bricks serving as stools, a huge cauldron containing rice gruel, and a (very dirty) plastic wash basin containing *mantou* ("steamed bread"). Xiao Wang and his workmates have three meals here every day. The food is provided for free by the construction company, for which Xiao Wang works. Xiao Wang receives a small *mantou* and a bowl of gruel from the cook. He asks for one more *mantou* but his request is refused. Carrying his food, Xiao Wang finds a group of his "hometown fellows" (*laoxiang*: people from the same village, county, or province), joins them, and begins complaining about the cook and food with them: "This guy [the cook] is cheap. The food he gave us is not enough." "These *mantou* have dried out. They are like dog food." "No, I don't think so. I heard our

7 This book will use pseudonyms for some research partners who requested anonymity and to protect the research partners whose voices and activities will be mentioned in a discussion of government actions and decisions. In these two snapshots, both "Xiao Wang" and "Lao Wu" are pseudonyms.

boss spends 3,000 yuan per month on his little dog. I'm sure that his dog's food is much better than these."

At 5:55 a.m., Xiao Wang arrives at his workplace, a construction site where he and his workmates are constructing an apartment building. Their working hours are from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. (with a short lunch break), Monday through Saturday. Many apartments in this building have been pre-sold. The average price per square meter is about 30,000 yuan, equivalent to 5 years' living expenses for Xiao Wang's whole family and nearly equal to 20 months of his salary. Xiao Wang's job is to mix water into cement and to send the mixture and bricks to bricklayers in a wheelbarrow. This is a highly labor-intensive job, especially under the hot summer sun. One hour later, his T-shirt is soaked with sweat. He takes the shirt off and starts to curse his boss, the foreman, the government, and all urbanites. "We are working like horses and cattle here to construct these buildings for them, but they are never grateful," he says. "They see us as trash that contaminates their beautiful life!" Then, he tells his workmates a news story that he heard on the radio several days before: a peasant-worker was kicked off the bus by the bus driver and passengers because they thought he was "reeking with sweat."[8] "Their conscience has been eaten by dogs," Xiao Wang comments angrily. "They think we are stinky, so what? I think they are stinky too! This world is a garbage dump!" Then he starts singing a rock song "Garbage Dump," which was composed by Yong He, a Chinese rock singer:

> The world we are living in,
> Is a garbage dump.
> People are like worms,
> Scrambling with each other.
> What they eat is conscience,
> What they poop is ideology.
> You see something,
> But you never understand.

His singing wins applause from his workmates but is soon interrupted by the foreman. "Get on with your work!" he says, "We are not paying you to sing. Don't goof off!"

Around 7:50 p.m., Xiao Wang gets off work and walks wearily toward the canteen to have his dinner. As soon as he sits down at a barrel-table, some workers gather around him: "I heard that you sang a song on the site. They said it was quite good. Why don't you sing it again?" "We all want to listen." After some self-effacing words out of courtesy, Xiao Wang sings "Garbage Dump" again. And again he receives enthusiastic applause and loud cheers. "Encore!

8 This event happened on July 1, 2012, in Jinan, the capital of Shandong Province.

Encore!" they yell. A worker brings several cheap beers and puts them on Xiao Wang's table: "One beer, one song!" After downing a bottle of beer quite quickly, Xiao Wang starts to sing another rock song, this time Cui Jian's "Nothing to My Name."

By 9:46 p.m., Xiao Wang's voice has become hoarse—he has sung nine songs, emptied five bottles of beers, and gotten slightly drunk. He stops singing and shouts to "No more!" to his audience. "We all have to get up early tomorrow morning. Go to sleep! I promise to sing for the entire day on Sunday." Once the crowd faded way, a worker approached Xiao Wang. "Your voice is good," he says admiringly, "Why don't you find a good teacher and get professional training? You could become a big star." "Are you kidding?" Xiao Wang replies dispiritedly, "Who will pay the fees for me? I have to feed my whole family, and I have to save money in order to be able to 'take a wife!'"[9]

At 10:30 p.m., Xiao Wang is back in his dorm and taking out his Walkman from the locker. "This is the only valuable thing I have. It cost me 80 yuan," he says. "I know it is expensive. But I need it. I can't sleep without music. My life sucks and is hopeless. Music is the only thing in this world that can cheer me up."

Snapshot no. 2

Name: Lao Wu
Sex: Male
Hometown: Shanxi Province
Interview date: March 23, 2012
Location: Fengtai and Chaoyang District, Beijing

About 3:10 a.m., Lao Wu is woken up by a patrol officer in the Beijing West Railway Station. "Get up! You can't sleep here," the officer says. "This is a waiting room, not your bedroom." "I've just laid down," Lao Wu murmurs and starts cramming his "bed"—a tattered quilt— into a plastic bag. The railway station's waiting room is not a good place to sleep, and Lao Wu is woken up or even driven out by patrol officers almost every day. However, the reason why Lao Wu (and many other floating migrants) chooses to sleep there is very simple— "it is free." The rents in Beijing are exceptionally high. "The monthly rent for a 4-square-meter cubbyhole in a basement is 1,200 yuan. But I only earn about 2,000 yuan a

9 In many rural regions of China, there is a traditional marriage custom. Before a wedding ceremony, the groom (or his family) has to pay certain amount of money (called *caili*, usually 50,000 yuan) to the bride's parents. Without paying *caili*, the groom is not allowed to "take" his wife, even though they love each other.

month. You do the math!" Lao Wu says. Carrying all his possessions—the plastic bag and a huge backpack—he walks toward the trash bin, in which he finds two empty beverage bottles. These bottles can be sold to recyclers for about 0.1 yuan each. Around 3:25 a.m., the patrol officer leaves the waiting room. Lao Wu returns to the corner in which he had been sleeping and spreads out his quilt. Two minutes later, he falls asleep again.

At 6:45 a.m., the waiting room starts becoming crowded. Lao Wu is awakened by the noise of travelers. After hiding his "bed" in a "safe place"—an unused toilet compartment—he begins to work. He first takes out a bag of bread, a cup of instant noodle, and a piece of newspaper from his backpack. Holding them in his hands as "samples," Lao Wu starts selling his goods to the travelers: "Comrades, do you want instant noodles? Only 3 yuan! No? How about bread? Newspaper?" Most of travelers ignore him and avoid eye contact. Nevertheless, there are a few who have not had breakfast and are interested in the foods he is selling. At 7:12 a.m., a middle-aged woman—Lao Wu's first customer today—stops in front of him: "Hey! Give me two noodle cups." "6 yuan! Which flavor do you want?" "Roast beef." "No problem." Lao Wu begins rummaging around in his backpack. "Oh, I found them. These are the last two roast beef. You're lucky, sister!" "How much is the bread?" a young boy asks. "2 yuan." "Too expensive." "Expensive? If you buy this bread at the kiosk, it will cost you 4 yuan!" "But I only have 1.5 yuan." "Deal!"

At 2:20 p.m., Lao Wu is counting his money on a bench in the waiting room. He has sold 11 noodle cups, 21 breads, 2 newspapers, which garnered him 31.5 yuan. "I'm in luck," he looks happy. "This money is enough to pay for my wife's medicine today." Lao Wu's wife has a serious liver disease and has to take medication every day. He has three children: two girls who are in elementary school and a two-year-old little boy. Because he violated the state's one-child policy, in 2010, he was fined 40,000 yuan, which plunged him into debt. To pay the debt, as well as his wife's medicine and his children's tuitions, Lao Wu was forced to leave his hometown "to make bigger money" (*zhengdaqian*) in the city. "Making money in Beijing is much easier," he says. However, Lao Wu does not like city life: "Beijing is too crowded and noisy. The air is not fresh, and the sky is not blue. People here are not as friendly and honest as my rural neighbors. I will leave here and go back to my hometown as soon as I earn enough money." He keeps a photo of his family and a small bag of soil from his backyard in his pocket all the time. "They are the source of my strength," he says, "Whenever I look at these keepsakes, I feel that I've never left my family and my hometown."

After a twenty-minute break, Lao Wu gets back to his "work" again. Since mealtime is over, he peddles newspapers this time. All the newspapers he sells are out of date and were collected from newspaper stands at the railway station

at a very low price (about 0.3 yuan each). "At the beginning, I collected these out-of-date papers because I wanted to know what was happening in my hometown." Lao Wu explains. Living in the railway station, Lao Wu doesn't have (and can't afford) a TV or radio. And the only programs broadcast on the big screen TV in the waiting room are various so-called red songs[10] and commercials. The only way for him to get information about his hometown is to buy a national newspaper and then search for news and articles related to his hometown and home province. Compared to "new" papers which usually cost 1 to 2 yuan, the out-of-date newspapers disposed of at reduced prices are more attractive to Lao Wu. "They are much cheaper, and at least they tell me what *has* happened in my hometown," he says. "And then I realized that I could resell them to make money." Although most people are reluctant to buy expired newspapers, there are still a few travelers who want to read something—anything—to kill their long waiting time. By 4:45 p.m., Lao Wu has sold 16 newspapers and found 7 empty bottles in the trash bin.

At 5:25 p.m., after carefully hiding his bags in the "safe place," Lao Wu walks out of the railway station. He plans to do something special tonight to see a musical performance. It took him a long time to make this decision—because it will make him miss today's dinner time (from 5:00 to 9:00 p.m.), during which he usually earns at least 15 yuan. After an hour's bus ride, Lao Wu arrives at a basketball court in Chaoyang District, where a small-scale folk song concert will be given by some floating musicians at 7 p.m. Around 6:50 p.m., the court is crowded with people—most of them are floating migrants. Lao Wu gets very excited, talking happily with other floating migrants, even though they have never met each other before. At 7:05 p.m., on an empty stage, without lighting or professional audio equipment, yet accompanied by a bamboo flute, a guitar, and an *erhu*, the migrant musicians sing regional folk songs of their hometowns. One after another, they perform songs, which they learned in their childhood from their parents or grandparents and cannot forget even when they are thousands of miles away from their home. The migrant audience applauds heartily and even joins the singers during the more familiar tunes. When a girl is singing a Shanxi folk song "Going to the Western Passes," Lao Wu's face is covered with tears: "My wife can sing this song, too. She always sang this song to me before I left home."

10 In 21st century mainland China, the term "red song" commonly refers to the songs produced as part of the communist propaganda works, particularly the patriotic pieces and those associate with communist ideology.

When Lao Wu returned to the railway station, the waiting room is almost empty. Lying on his "bed," Lao Wu softly sings the song "Going to the Western Passes:

> "My brother,[11] you are going to the Western Passes,
> I know you can't stay here for me."
> I have some intimate words,
> Please memorize them in your heart.
> You should take the roads, instead of lanes.
> Take this flower with you, you will not feel lonely.
> My brother you are going to the Western Passes,
> I can't stop my tears.
> I grab your hands,
> I can't stop my tears.

"I know she [his wife] wants me back home, but I can't … I miss her." Lao Wu sobs, covering his head with the quilt.

Ethical Consideration and Confrontations

This book is based on over two years of intensive on-the-ground research conducted from summer 2011 to September 2013, as well as intermittent revisits to the field and with research partners between 2016 and 2022. During the research and writing processes, I was confronted with ethical dilemmas. In *Writing Culture*, James Clifford uses the term "fiction" to suggest that even the best ethnographic texts are inherently constructed "partial" truths: "Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control" (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 7). However, when conducting research in an authoritarian country with individuals who are institutionally disadvantaged, and when the research findings challenge the governmental narratives and official explanations of their plight, the selective inclusion and omission of ethnographic data is not only about situated knowledge but also about political interferences and the protection of research partners.

In early 2012, seven months after I launched my fieldwork with floating migrant rockers in urban slums, I began trying to present my research findings to Chinese academia and the public. I soon received polite suggestions that I should not continue this kind of research. In mainland China, all print media, particularly newspapers, magazines, scholarly journals, and publishers, are

11 In China, especially in rural areas, young couples refer each other as "brother" and "sister."

owned and controlled by the state. These national and regional media produce streamlined descriptions and explanations of current events that align with statements from government reports. Under Article 105(2) of the *Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China*,

> whoever incites others by spreading rumors or slanders or any other means to subvert the regime or overthrow the socialist system shall be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment of not more than five years, criminal detention, public surveillance or deprivation of political rights.

In practice, the judges have considerable discretion in defining rumors and slanders,. so much so that the terms can encompass any artwork and academic outcome that challenges the government reports, or the decisions and actions made by the current leadership of the communist regime. From previous misfortunes of convicted offenders, professional artists living in mainland China have learned not to express doubt about the official representations. In the same vein, scholars do not study music that breaks this rule.

To counterbalance the dissenting elements of my observations, I began to pay attention to the more above-ground dimension of the floating migrants' musical lives. I conducted research on the art groups directed by the government branches and agencies and began serving as their representatives. I also took field trips to the hometowns of the floating migrants to meet with their partners and families. In these state-sponsored art troupes and rural areas, fieldwork demanded a different way of conducting ethnographic research.

Since the mid-twentieth-century revolutionary era, Chinese ethnomusicologists have habitually self-reported their presence to local communist authorities who provide official information about local culture and population and recommend musicians and musical activities they could visit. In the twenty-first century, in conservative rural villages, ethnographers, particularly foreign scholars, continue to follow this convention, whether voluntarily or not. My field visits to the migrants' hometowns and trips with state-sponsored art groups were "tour-guided" by such cadres. As an obvious stranger, I could hardly have escaped the attention and scrutiny of the village cadres or troupe directors. These "tour guides" soon regarded me with suspicion on the grounds of my politically sensitive research topic and overseas credentials, leaving me little choice but to accept the arrangements they made for me. The musical activities were recommended not only according to my research plan but also to local authorities' strategies for propaganda and cultural control. Indeed, I was only to be introduced to musicians who had submitted themselves to the bureaus' direction and regulations. The cadres and directors often showed up in the middle of my interviews without notice and without invitation. They

constantly referred to me as a "researcher from upstairs" to the musicians. Evidently, this was supposed to remind them that I was a person of higher social status and to dissuade them from speaking freely and frankly with me. Although these "guides" did help me collect a large amount of field data in a relatively short period, I only saw what they were willing to show me and only heard the sounds they wanted me to hear. The knowledge generated through these encounters is therefore partial, if not distorted.

The partialness also results from my choice to abstain from disclosing certain information in order to protect my research partners. Throughout the research and writing processes, I have been making my best efforts to adhere to the fundamental ethical principle of "Do No Harm" when collaborating with research partners. I have chosen to make this book openly accessible to readers worldwide, recognizing that it may also reach Chinese academic audiences and state authorities, who are increasingly attentive to scholarly discussions and representations of China.[12] After long conversations with my research partners, we have decided to omit songs or speeches that could potentially be used as evidence to incriminate them. This means that a substantial portion of migrants' rock songs—specifically, those that criticize or satirize government actions and decisions—will be excluded from the discussions in this book.

Throughout this book, I respect my research partners' own interpretations of their own music. At the same time, I endeavor to protect these migrants from the negative consequences that this book might bring. Some floating migrant musicians, particularly those who modified their musical expressions to obtain the government's permission to perform on concert stages, desire to be heard and want to be acknowledged in this book. Meanwhile, some migrant musicians worry that what they said in the interviews would cause them trouble. In respect of their request for anonymity, I therefore use pseudonyms whenever I describe them in ways that would bring them trouble. When a discussion about music, speeches, cultural phenomena or socio-political situations would potentially violate Article 105(2) of China's *Criminal Law*, I will paraphrase what I observed rather than quoting from research partners.

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12 Learning English is a part of the compulsory education and graduate programs in contemporary China. Consequently, many Chinese scholars are beginning to publish in and read English-language literature in their disciplines. There is growing evidence that the Chinese government pays increasing attention to English-language discourses about China and tries to manipulate the representations of China in other parts of the world (see, e.g., Su 2024; Manthorpe 2024).

Several Key Terms in the Socio-Cultural Lives of Floating Migrants

Over the past few decades, certain practices and tendencies have become established among floating migrants during their interactions with their host urban environments. These cultural and social practices and tendencies are embodied in several terms that the migrants used frequently in their daily communications in the 2010s. These terms also habitually appeared in the lyrics of the their vocal music pieces and in their accounts of their urban experiences and the meanings behind their music. These terms reflected the driving forces and power dynamics underlying the musical activities of the floating population. This section will discuss these terms, allowing to shed light on key factors and relationships in the socio-cultural lives of the floating population.

1) bendi'ren and waidi'ren

When I conducted research in urban China throughout the 2010s, *bendi'ren* (literally "people native to this region"), and *waidi'ren* (literally "people from another region") were two common terms in the public discourses. Whether as nouns or as adjectives, these two terms arbitrarily divided all people living in a city into two categories: people born in the city and/or holding a local urban hukou (i.e., *bendi'ren*) and people from other regions and/or without a local urban hukou (i.e., *waidi'ren*). Although, strictly speaking, urban-to-urban migrants should also belong to the second category, "waidiren" in practice mainly referred to people from underdeveloped rural areas. Along with "peasant workers," "waidiren" was employed by some urbanites pejoratively to refer to gauche manners, backwardness, and poverty. By means of these two opposed categories, urbanites effectively confirmed their privileged position as the host of the city and created a psychological barrier that excluded floating migrants from local communities.

The expression of "waidiren" was sometimes used in the migrants' songs that criticized or satirized the social prejudices against them. At the same time, they made efforts to erase the distinction between themselves and self-described *bendi'ren*. By imitating or adopting the behaviors, accents, and cultural practices of locals, they tried to emphasize that they were equal citizens and could be as refined and civilized as urban residents. Performing genres and instruments popular in city scenes or wearing fashionable slogan T-shirts were also part of their strategies to blend into urban society.

2) "Hometown fellows"

"Hometown fellow" was another important term in floating migrants' urban lives. "Hometown fellow gatherings" were significant venues where the migrants strengthened cultural ties to their rural origins. Although floating migrants were portrayed as rootless people in the urban narratives, they rarely cut off ties to their rural roots. Lore has it among those residing in Inner China that there is an invisible silk thread tying everybody's soul to their hometown, so that they would always find the way back to their ancestors. Moreover, because of the hukou restrictions, the migrants often left their families—children, spouse, and aging parents—in their rural homes. This was because, without a lawful resident permit, their children could not go to urban schools, their parents could not gain access to health insurance in the cities, and their female partners were often the ones who shouldered the burden of taking care of the children and seniors. Hometown was a term that evoked memories of their childhood and old friends. The subject and theme of many a song, migrant musicians often incorporated the traditional music of their hometowns into their compositions and performances.

As a term, "hometown fellows" (*laoxiang* or *tongxiang*), refers to people sharing a common place of origin and, as such, facilitates an understanding of the migrants' social organization. As sociologists and anthropologists point out, Chinese migrants from different birthplaces tend to have disparate cultural and linguistic backgrounds and social norms and values (Hu, Zhang, and Kong 2021; Christiansen 2013; Pieke 1998). This explains why they tend to search for and congregate with fellows from their hometowns once they have migrated to the cities to work (Zhao Xinyu 2024; Iredale and Guo 2015). Sharing meals, drinking alcohol, or playing music with hometown fellows in their free time was a routine form of entertainment for many floating migrants I worked with. Various "hometown-fellow gatherings" (*tongxiang hui*) were held on weekends or holidays in which the floating migrants shared memories, exchanged about their hometowns' latest developments, and performed musical pieces that all were familiar with. Through these gatherings, they, intentionally or subconsciously, reinforced their bond to their rural roots and became inspired to incorporate rural folk music into their contemporary music-making.

3) "Urban Village" and "Peasant-Worker Art Troupe"

In Chinese cities, public cultural activities take place in concert halls and community cultural centers. Funded by local governments, these activities are freely accessible only to people with a local hukou; anyone else, including floating

migrants, are forced to pay essentially unaffordable entry fees. In that context, "urban villages," along with after-work construction sites and factory gardens, became the spaces where the migrants could make music for members of their own communities. "Peasant-worker art troupes," by contrast, offered migrant musicians the chance to reach a wider public, albeit at the price of having to sacrifice their freedom of artistic expression.

"Urban village" (*chengzhong cun*) refers to overcrowded, squalid areas that, for some reason, fall outside the scope of routine inspections conducted by the local Public Security Bureau (*Gongan Ju*) and the Urban Management and Law Enforcement Bureau (*Chengguan Ju*). In the 2010s, these disorderly urban villages offered floating migrants not only cheap accommodations but also a respite from the contemptuous gaze of urbanites. In these urban villages, the floating migrants were able to live with their hometown fellows and to interact with other marginalized groups from the cities, including underground rockers. Between 2011 and 2013 as well as in 2018, I met some Chinese rockers native to Beijing or coming from other Chinese cities in urban villages in eastern Beijing. These rockers barely had income since their public performance licenses had been revoked by local authorities. Renting rooms in the urban villages, they continued making rock music to resist, criticize, and challenge the mainstream. As co-residents in those villages, floating migrants thus became audience members of these rock musicians. The shared experience of being marginalized in the cities made it easier for the migrants to understand the musical expressions of the rockers. Some interviewed migrants told me that the performances of these neighbors inspired them to become rock practitioners, while others said that they were fascinated by the story about Chinese rockers' successful rebellion as early as the late 1980s, when they were children.

In mainland China, "art troupes" (*yishu tuan*), directed by government departments or agencies, perform as authorized representatives of certain social groups deemed strategically important. The groups' past and present activities are covered by state-sponsored media. It was not until the mid-2000s that floating migrants came to be represented by these departments and agencies. Before that, the issue of the "peasant-worker problem" had been relegated to government publications and relevant academic projects (see, e.g., Zheng 2006; Zhu 2005). As part of their recognition as a social group, urban authorities also held mandatory classes to educate migrants on urban norms and socialist ideology (Feng and Xu 2004; Tao 2000). In the mid-2000s, the government of China needed more construction workers to build new stadiums for the Olympic Games within a short period of time, as well as factory workers to manufacture specialized sports gear and related general supplies. Cities thus loosened the restrictions on non-registered population inflows and

began to acknowledge the contributions of the floating migrants in the cities. This gave rise to a wave of novels, paintings, and songs for and about these migrant workers. As well, the government developed more gentle educational approaches to subtly influence migrants' thoughts and imperceptibly instill them with a set of behavioral norms. In that process, local authorities allowed migrant art troupes to perform and represent themselves on mainstream stages.

These frequent terms provide an overview of the multifaceted musical world of the floating migrants. Working and living in cities, they were subject to the pervasive influence of mainstream culture imposed by the authorities. Yet by maintaining ties to their hometowns, they also integrated elements of rural folk music into their practice. Fascinated by an aggrandized notion of rock rebellion, which had become mediatized as a trope, some Chinese citizens followed their path—albeit at the price of losing their public performance licenses. Attracted by the bold musical expressions of underground rockers confined to the same urban slums they themselves inhabited, some migrants thus began making rock music to voice complaints and criticisms that they were unable or unwilling to utter otherwise. By contrast, other migrants followed a different path: that of joining the state-sponsored peasant-worker art troupes to deliver state-sanctioned representations of their social group, in exchange for the opportunities to perform in public venues.

Music and Minorities: Representation, Public Perception, and Self-Empowerment

I completed the first stage of my research on floating migrants in the summer of 2014. Over the past decade, I have maintained friendships and close connections with the research partners for this study, particularly after joining the Sociology Department at Peking University in Beijing. In the meantime, the living conditions of these floating migrants have not improved. For better or for worse, some of the migrants were also forced to temporarily move out of their shelters after the state started retrofitting urban villages around 2018. The social discrimination against them and the institutionalized suppression of their musical expressions have not changed and may not change any time soon unless the state modifies its cultural and population management policies. After several failed attempts to publish my research findings in China, I began to work on this English-language monograph in late 2024. Although a large portion of the ethnographic data was collected about ten years ago, this book does not position itself as a historical study. The purpose of the book is not

to reconstruct the past, and the techniques and methodology of historians are not the primary methods. Neither does this book intend to revive the debate of what anthropologists would call "ethnographic present" (see, e.g., Hays 1992; Sanjek 1991). Instead, by examining the musical practices and representations of a unique population during a particular period, this book aims to advance ethnomusicological knowledge of the multilayered interactions between musical representations, collective consciousness, and social discrimination.

My experience as a member of the Music and Minorities Research Center at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna and of the ICTMD Study Group on Music and Minorities between 2022 and 2025 has motivated me to undertake this book project. In the book, I draw attention to the minority status of Chinese floating migrants and examine the power dynamics and efforts at empowerment manifested in various dimensions aspects of their musical lives. The term "minority" can have different meanings and implications depending on the culture and country. In mainland China, for example, *shaoshu*—the Mandarin equivalent of the English adjective "minority"—primarily refers to state-recognized ethnic minorities. This suggests that the group is smaller in number and not, at least not in official and media discourses, has less power.

However, this book adopts the more globally acknowledged working definition of "minority" from the International Council for Traditional Music and Dance (ICTMD)'s Study Group on Music and Minorities. According to the definition, minorities are "communities, groups and/or individuals, including indigenous, migrant and other vulnerable groups that are at higher risk of discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, race, religion, language, gender, sexual orientation, disability, political opinion, social or economic deprivation" (ICTMD Study Group on Music and Minorities n.d.). This definition is deeply rooted in long-term research traditions with marginalized migrant communities. Svanibor Pettan (2012, 2001, and 1996), a researcher with a wide range of applied efforts, demonstrates how music and music research can serve to combat social injustice against marginalized groups. Ursula Hemetek (2021, 2016, and 2015), for her part, looking back on long-term research with marginalized musicians in European contexts, calls attention to the roles of music in the processes of "othering" and self-empowerment: "After 40 years of researching music and minorities, I believe more than ever that music is powerful: it can serve identification as well as representation, it can be instrumentalized and thus it is an essential socio-political factor"[13] (see also Hemetek 2015).

13 See the website of the Music and Minorities Research Center: https://www.musicandminorities.org/about-us/ (accessed on August 11, 2026).

I will contribute to the study of music and minorities with this case study of Chinese floating migrants and by examining complex, multidimensional power imbalances and negotiations reflected in the musical representations of this disadvantaged, silenced community. "Minorities are in a position to look at a problem from more than one angle," as Elka Tschernokoshewa insightfully points out, "they know that there is more than one truth" (2008: 20, see also Reyes 2007). While avoiding the ambiguous, controversial term of "truth," this book will examine the multiple, contesting musical representations of the situation, thoughts, and feelings of floating migrants. It will show how certain representations spread misleading information, resulting in collective neglect and discrimination against this minority group, while other musical performances act as a form of self-empowerment to resist exclusion and discrimination.

The term "imaginary" has various meanings but generally refers to concepts that originate beyond actual circumstances and that influence reality by filling gaps in human life and social experience. In Lacan's tripartite model, the imaginary is a domain where infants, lacking physical coordination, identify with mirror images of their bodies as unified entities (see Lacan [1966] 2006). According to Cornelius Castoriadis ([1975] 1987), the imaginary involves the creation of meanings as well as the images or figures that support those meanings. It addresses questions like: Who are we collectively? What are our relationships? What do we desire? What matters and what does not? As Thompson (1984) notes, this imaginary represents the creative aspect of the social world, through which humans develop their ways of living together (6), shaping social institutions and motives.[14]

In his work widely quoted in ethnomusicological studies, Benedict Anderson (1991) draws attention to the imagined nature of social life. A modern nation-state, he argues, "is imagined political community, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet, in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). Influenced by these discussions, Charles Taylor (2004) defines social imaginary as the ways in which people imagine their social existence and surroundings, which he considers to be "expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (2004: 24). It is the "system of common sense" discussed by Geertz (1975) and Scheff (1997). Bourdieu (1977), for his part,

14 For a more elaborated discussion of Chinese imaginaries, please see my article "Social Imaginary and Musical Preservation: A Partial Ethnography of 'Floating' Migrant Music" (Tang 2020: 190).

would term it "doxa," understood as that which shapes how people perceive the world around them and allows them to coordinate their actions within shared practices. (See Tang 2020: 191)

In this book, where I discuss the term in the Chinese context, I initially use the singular "Chinese imaginary" because of how it is formed through the creation and maintenance of normative images in China's context. Md. Members of Chinese society, I argue, maintain their communal life based on a constantly updated set of common-sense understandings and normative expectations which explain what, why, and how things happened and are happening in their collective past and present and what one should do to ensure a prosperous shared destiny. Although these members may not have a chance to meet with one another, the common understandings and expectations are established through the images they receive in their everyday cultural life.

This book reveals how state-sponsored musical practices supply these emotionally appealing images, in this case of floating migrants, which interpret past or fictional outcomes according to the state's strategic needs and lead to "common-sense" knowledge about disadvantaged groups in Chinese society. Chapter 2 will focus on the state-sponsored musical representations of floating migrants which dominate the country's mainstream venues, reaching national audiences of millions. Ethnomusicologists have already pointed out that these types of stereotypical musical representations foster social bias against certain groups (see e.g., Hemetek 2024; Silverman 2012). In this Chinese case, the dominant musical representations of floating migrants do not reflect any negative behavior on their part and instead evoke images of them enjoying life in the cities and their willingness to selflessly dedicate themselves. The fact that many urbanites thus lack access to dissenting voices and counterevidence leads, in my opinion, to shared misconceptions, illusions and discrimination.

However, not all members of Chinese society are convinced by mainstream musical representations, and not all floating migrant musicians are willing to participate in the state-sponsored portrayals of their community. Chinese rock provided an alternative space to accommodate these non-conformists. Chapter 3 will examine the rock music performances of floating migrants which have been reported by the Chinese media as the rebellious voices of the silenced grassroots. The chapter will first dispel the romanticized reading of Chinese rock as a subversive genre resulting from the failures of authoritarian control. I will call for distinguishing between two dimensions of China's rock scene: the aboveground and underground scenes. In the aboveground domain, the state controls all Chinese publishers and media and every public concert and has been effective in preventing unwanted sounds from reaching the public, while, importantly, fabricating the veneer of a countercultural atmosphere that gives

people the illusion that they are breaking with conventions. These kinds of floating migrant rockers will generally not record or publicly perform music that blames the urban-biased policies as the main cause of their disadvantaged and marginalized status. Overall, they make rock within the parameters set by the state to attract public attention and support as a way to improve their living conditions. At the same time, some migrant workers operate in the underground rock scene, where they actually undertake to test the edges of safe musical expression to criticize and satirize through metaphors and ambivalent words.

Power relations constantly shift over time and across different settings of musical performances. People disadvantaged in one socio-cultural context might be the ones who maintain and impose unfair norms in another. The music used by a marginalized group in one setting as a means of empowerment can be borrowed by the privileged group to empower themselves once they become a marginalized minority in another setting. Floating migrant laborers also resist social discrimination in the cities through music while upholding and conforming with unjust rules in their hometowns. In rural villages of North and Middle China, where patriarchal norms have been prevalent, males are granted the dominant roles within their families and maintain a set of ethics and norms that disadvantage their spouses. Being excluded from decision-making processes, women sing folk songs to attract husbands' attention to their daily sufferings. When these rural laborers move to cities, they borrow musical expressions from their left-behind wives to convey what they are unable or unwilling to express in speech and to vent their anxiety and distress in host environments. Chapter 4 will explore how the intricate interplay between meanings and self-empowering attempts is embodied in a unique musical tradition that has been maintained across multiple generations of the Chinese floating population.