Chapter 5: Conclusion

> 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.
> *Ursula Hemetek*[1]

In reinterpreting the ethnographic materials for this book, the legacies in the field of music and minorities research helped me think beyond authoritarian censorship and perceive musical practices as (plat)forms of power negotiation rather than merely state-imposed or restricted expressions. If music is powerful in the lives of minorities, as I have argued in this book, its power relies mainly on its ability to influence through representation, expression, and identification. Who created the musical expressions of floating migrants? Who had the right to decide how to portray their urban experiences and thoughts musically? Who gets to be represented in these musical performances? Who delivered these musical representations as spokespeople for the floating population? Who had the right to identify others and to be identified? What did migrants do to gain opportunities to participate in musical representations and to be recognized? To answer these questions, I examined how power relations and negotiations manifest themselves.

If we see "minority" as individuals and groups at a higher risk of discrimination,[2] the stereotypical musical representations of minorities would be a source of such discrimination. In this Chinese case, mainstream musical representations influence public perception of floating migrants not through negative

1 Quoted from the official website of the Music and Minorities Research Center https://www.musicandminorities.org/about-us/ (accessed on August 7, 2026).

2 Here I adopt the definition of minority from the ICTMD Study Group on Music and Minorities.

portrayals of their behavior but through stereotyped images of their pleasant urban lives and willingness to be selfless. Various state-sponsored peasant worker art troupes have been the main supplier of such images. As their names suggest, these art groups were established to represent peasant workers, the manual laborers upon whom the state relied on to develop infrastructure and expand the manufacturing sector rapidly and at low cost.

To ensure nationally consistent musical representations, these troupes are located in different Chinese cities but receive a common set of directives from the central government. Wearing the work clothes of construction and factory workers, they perform songs written in the first person by professional musicians that depict the migrants' pleasant urban lives and their willingness to selflessly dedicate themselves to the country's economic growth. Directed by local government branches, troupe members sing and dance with well-rehearsed bodily movements and facial expressions to create unmistakable images of happiness and pride. These state-sponsored musical performances not only air on TV channels to reach national audiences in the millions but are also freely available to locals at public concerts. Alongside traditional and online state-owned news media, these state-sponsored performances have been the primary sources through which the urban public imagined the lives of the floating population.

When the urban public lacks access to dissenting voices and counterevidence, these official musical representations shape their perception of the floating migrants. These representations divert public attention away from social inequality and urban-biased policies that have led to the hardships suffered by the migrants. The migrant construction workers they pass by might then remind them of the proud smiles and lofty aspirations they saw in the performances, which makes them ignore the social injustices these migrants endure. The state-sponsored representations also include patriotic songs featuring images of the heroic deaths of communist martyrs during wartime or evoke collective sentiments about the "mother country," to create the normative expectation that migrants should sacrifice their personal interests for the greater good of the country without complaint. Those floating migrants who are not construction or factory workers are thus left out of the representations. And floating migrants who refuse to sacrifice quietly encounter misunderstanding and discrimination. However, for some interviewed troupe members, participating in these stereotypical musical representations is their way to restore social justice in their own lives. By joining these state-sponsored troupes, the members gain privileged performance opportunities, which enable them to realize their musical dreams, gain visibility, and improve their families' living conditions.

Not all members of Chinese society are convinced by government-sponsored representations, and not all migrant musicians are willing to take part in the fictional portrayals of their community. Alternative music scenes have been developed to accommodate these non-conformists in contemporary China. Chinese rock, which has been romantically (mis)understood as a subversive form of artistic expression in the existing body of scholarly literature, is one of them. At stadium concerts and televised programs, migrant rockers are promoted as grassroots stars, narrating spiritual pains with the accompaniment of aggressive, distorted electric music. Nonetheless, these rock performances do not challenge the official discourse or state-sponsored musical representations. Rather than revealing the sources of the pain, they portray those suffering as being relentlessly optimistic in the face of adversity. These rock pieces complement the state-sponsored musical representations by providing, in the words of their creators, "the healthy food for the mind" (Wang 2012).

Although they are reported by Chinese media as dissenting voices of the silenced underclass (see, e.g., Kun 2013; Wang Hongzhe 2015), their rock performances embody the compromises musicians have to make to be heard by the public. To pass the censorial inspection of local authorities, they avoid straightforward expressions of opposition and resistance. Their realistic narratives of the daily experiences in urban slums are embellished with propagandistic symbols borrowed from communist song classics. They do not complain about the biased government policies but attribute their troubles to the "capitalists," that is, the owners of the private and foreign-invested enterprises. Such compromises help them survive culturally in the cities and even raise funds for community projects, such as building a school for their children, who are excluded from the urban education system. Meanwhile, some migrant rock bands have been testing the boundaries of safe expression in their musical activities and refuse to give up their efforts to question the policymakers; however, these musicians remain confined to the true underground.

Moreover, power relations are always multi-tiered: A minority group disadvantaged in one environment can be the dominant group enjoying privileges in another; a group making music to resist social discrimination in one place may uphold unjust norms elsewhere. In the conservative rural communities from which most floating migrants originate, deeply entrenched Confucian patriarchal norms continue to position men as the primary authority figures within the family. After these male laborers leave their hometowns to float in the cities, they continue to uphold these norms to silence women in their musical performances and communal lives.

With a case study of "sour" songs, this book has explored how the portrayals of and voices borrowed from left-behind wives are utilized by these male, temporary migrants to express what they cannot or are not willing to express in speech. "Sour" song is a genre performed by couples and features intimate lyrics and expressions of love forbidden in conservative socio-cultural contexts. Like the peasant sour flavor in Chinese dishes, it is one of the few ways to violate the feminine ethics without incurring punishment. Being excluded from decision-making processes in male-dominated villages, women use sour songs to influence their male partners' choices. After the male laborers leave home to become floating migrants, these women shoulder their husbands' share of household responsibilities. The complaints prohibited by ethics are transformed into musical depictions of affectionate actions and distress caused by separation in their songs, to pull their husbands back home. This book has revealed how male floating migrants use these borrowed songs to construct symbolic boundaries and to express long-suppressed emotional desires after they themselves become a marginalized, disadvantaged minority.

Since the early 2010s, when I began conducting research with floating migrants, I have hoped that my work would empower them and advance social justice. This book was designed to achieve that aim by revealing the power imbalance reflected in the contesting musical representations of and about this segment of the Chinese population and how these representations led to discrimination against them. Being a minority in Chinese cities, floating migrants are confronted by state-sponsored representations of the truth about their urban experiences and thoughts. Yet they are eager to tell their own truths by combining the established and newly created musical elements. This book approaches the (self) representations, or truth-telling, in three ways: 1) by analyzing the constituents and functions of the official truth about floating migrants dominating the public sphere of urban culture; 2) by drawing more attention to the suppressed, restricted truths from these disadvantaged migrants; and 3) by documenting the efforts of migrant musicians to participate in the delivery of different truths as a way to culturally survive in their host environments. The book discloses the intricate interplay of forces and factors, the individual and collective choices embodied in the musical representations of these migrants, as well as the tensions, compromises, and agency behind each representation.

Through this case study of Chinese floating migrants, I contribute two new insights into the growing body of literature on music and minorities. First, minority denotes not only a specific group but also a fluid status of an individual or community living across multiple, overlapping social, cultural, and political contexts. Second, I rarely name the majority in this book because, in this Chi-

nese case in the domain of musical representations, political factors, economic considerations, and governmental strategies, rather than the urban public, constitute the driving forces in determining who and what can be heard.