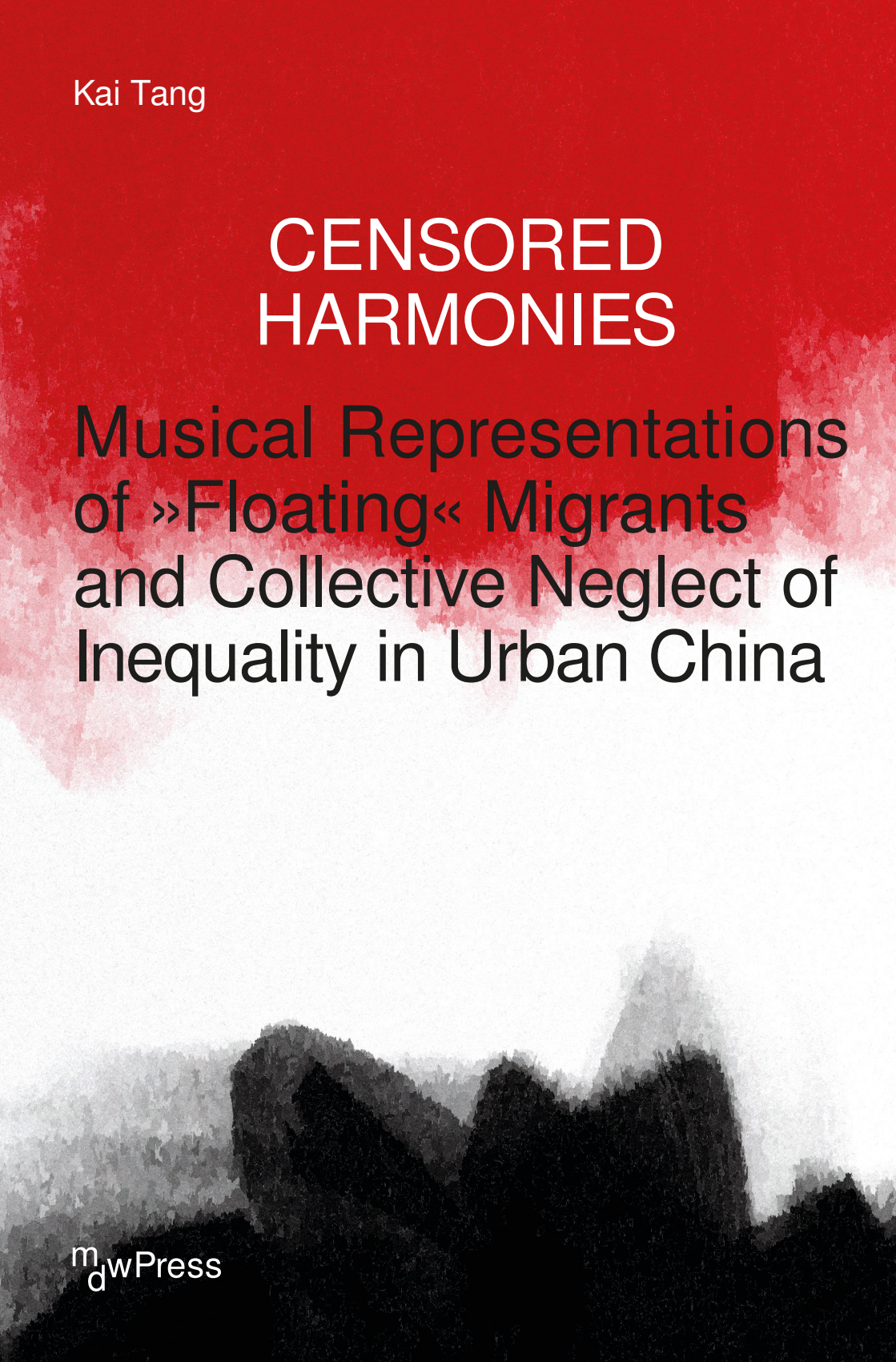
Kai Tang

CENSORED HARMONIES

Musical Representations of »Floating« Migrants and Collective Neglect of Inequality in Urban China



mdwPress

Kai Tang
Censored Harmonies

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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.

Chapter 2: The Official Representations of Floating Migrants

On August 3, 2013, I stepped into a rehearsal room located on the 6th floor of the Xi'an Children and Youth Palace.[1] The members of the Shaanxi Migrant-worker Dream Art Troupe" (*Shanxi Wailai Wugong Mengxing Yishutuan*) were standing neatly in two rows by a piano, practicing the song "My Mother Country Will Not Forget Me" (*Zuguo Buhui Wangji Wo*) under the guidance of Chen Hao, the artistic director of the troupe and the one who invited me to this weekly rehearsal. Several journalists with video cameras on their shoulders were busy walking around them. I tried to observe their performance up close but was constantly reminded by the cameramen to "not get in the way." I nodded in understanding and finally hid myself in a corner.

The singing of migrant musicians was occasionally interrupted by Chen, who attempted to correct their non-standard voices and gestures: "Wave your arm exactly at the word 'selfless dedication,' and clench your fist when you sing 'me' … Try it again and make your gestures right!" The journalists acted more like directors of this scene than people gathering information. "Be more sincere, and more enthusiastic," one of the journalists said. "No, no, no, not that fake smile" another added: "Let me see your sincere happy face! Let me hear your voice from a deep heart!"

Fifty minutes later, Chen shared a look of satisfaction with the journalists and announced that the choir had achieved the "spiritual essence" and the typical stage manner of the song. "We also need some scenes from daily life," a journalist suggested. The migrant musicians were then divided into several groups, each performing a designated "daily activity." Some young men were asked to sit together near the stage, pretending to chat amicably. Others were taken outside to walk, dance, and sing in front of the Provincial Government Hall. The journalists continued to give instructions

1 A Children and Youth Palace (*Shaonian Gong*) was a communist public cultural program introduced in the 1950s, when theaters, concert and dance halls were regarded as capitalistic and a relic of the past. It served as a place for Chinese people to learn music and to rehearse for various state-sponsored music performances.

and kept adjusting the performers' facial expressions until everyone wore big, enthusiastic smiles.[2]



Figure 1: *Members of the Shaanxi Dream Art Troupe dancing and singing under journalists' direction in front of the Provincial Government Hall. Photographed by the author on August 3, 2013, in Xian.*

This excerpt from my field journal documents what I observed at a rehearsal of a state-sponsored art troupe. It could serve as a good start for this chapter's discussion of the construction of the official representation of the floating migrants. Located in different Chinese cities, similar state-sponsored art troupes constantly reached local and national audiences through media and concert stages in the 2010s to disseminate streamlined representations of the migrants. Given that the urban public does not have access to counterevidence, these official musical representations have established widely shared knowledge about the floating migrants and led to the collective neglect of their suffering.

2 Quoted from the field journal of the author taken on August 3, 2013, in Xian, Shaanxi Province.

State-sponsored Art Troupes: Performing for and as Representatives of the Floating Migrants

Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the central government and its regional branches began to sponsor "art troupes" (*yishu tuan*) for various social groups, recognizing these as the primary forces behind the economic and social development of Chinese society. National and regional Railroad Worker Art troupes emerged as early as 1950 when the state began to develop railroads as the country's transportation backbone (see Editorial Board of *China Railroad Worker Art Troupe* 2010). After oil fields were discovered in Karamai and Daqing respectively in 1955 and 1959, a number of Oil Field Worker Art Troupes were founded in these regions, both to perform for and represent the oil field workers (Zhuo 2019). Similarly, after the state reformed the higher education system in 1977, college student art troupes began performing as their spokesmen and as part of an ideological campaign (see Chen Ming 2016; Li 1996).

It was only in the 2000s that the state began to sponsor art troupes for a portion of the floating population. At the time, the Beijing Olympic Games were being planned, which was regarded as a good occasion to portray the picture of a rapidly developing China to the outside world. There weren't enough stadiums and other facilities to accommodate the expected number of attendees and visitors, and other major Chinese cities were also expecting a wave of foreign tourists. These major cities, which proudly attract well-educated and high-income, state-permitted domestic migrants, suddenly found themselves with a critical shortage of laborers. The government thus relaxed the restrictions on rural-to-urban population inflow. The governmental documents and academic and public media began to acknowledge the contributions of a portion of the floating population, in particular the construction and factory workers (see, e.g., Zheng and Huang 2007; State Council 2016). In the official documents and the media discourse, this portion of the floating population was labeled as "peasant workers" (*nongmin gong*) or "workers from outside" (*wailai wugong renyuan*). Media and academic attention was paid to their mental health, and measures were taken "to foster good behavioral habits" among these migrants and their children (Ben 2014: 77, see also, e.g., Liu et al. 2007). In 2006, the first peasant worker art troupe was established, whose success soon inspired the emergence of similar troupes. These troupes were located in different major cities but commonly funded and directed by the central government, its local branches, and its agencies.

Between April 2012 and August 2013, I visited all state-sponsored migrant art troupes reported by Chinese media or government documents. I selected four of them for focused ethnographic research. The TEDA Worker Art Troupe

(*Taida Gongren Yishutuan*) was the first troupe I worked with and was located in Tianjin, the largest port city in North China and one of the four municipalities directly administered by China's central government. It was named after the Tianjin Economic Technological Development Area (TEDA), a free-market zone reserved for labor-intensive plants of multinational manufacturing corporations and inhabited by hundreds of thousands of migrant workers. The troupe's operation and performances have been directed and managed by the Floating Population Management Office (*Liudong Renkou Bangongshi*) of the TEDA area. As floating population management offices in other areas of the country, the TEDA office managed almost every aspect of migrant workers' urban lives—from housing rental to skill training, from birth control to off-work entertainment. In 2007, the TEDA Floating Population Management Office founded the troupe as a gentler means of education, supplementing mandatory classes and punitive detention-repatriation measures. Before the start of my research with the troupe, my citizen ID, student ID, and past academic diplomas were examined and filed by the management office, and staff members of the office accompanied, or rather monitored, me throughout the entire process of my research and interviews.

Established in the summer of 2006, the Yuhua Peasant Worker Art Troupe (*Yuhua Nongmingong Yishutuan*) claimed to be the first state-sponsored art troupe of and for the floating population. The troupe was funded and supervised by the Culture Bureau of the Yuhua District, a district located in southeastern Shijiazhuang, the provincial capital of Hebei Province. Although the troupe was named after the district, it performed on both local and regional concert and performance stages for national audiences. Due to conflicts between the state-appointed director and members of the troupe, the troupe had been disbanded by the time I visited, leaving only a few singers who stayed in close contact with the Yuhua District Culture Bureau and were on call whenever "representatives" of local migrant workers were needed. Several weeks after I submitted an application to the bureau expressing the intention to interview former troupe members, I was allowed to meet some of them at the Yuhua District Culture Bureau. "Accompanied" by bureau officers, I interviewed these migrant musicians to obtain information about the origins and historical activities of the troupes. To my recorders, the singers also performed songs for me which they used to perform as members of the troupes.

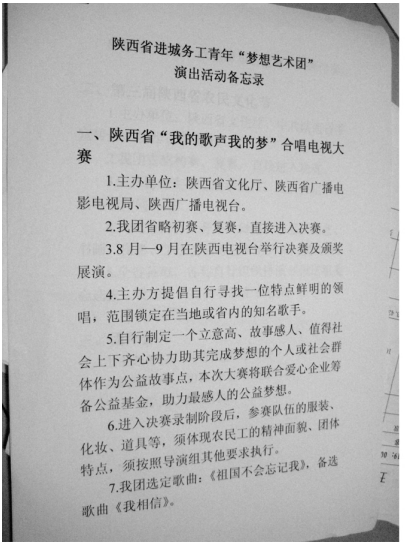
Mount Yangtai Young Worker Art Troupe (*Yangtaishan Qinggong Yishutuan*) is a troupe I ran into when I visited a migrant rock band in Shenzhen city, South China. The Mount Yangtai troupe was directed by the Dalang Street Administrative Office (*Dalang Jiedao Banshichu*). As a subdistrict division of the government, the office was in charge of managing the public cultural

and educational activities of over three thousand electronic factories situated around Mount Yangtai, after which the troupe was named. Aside from musically representing migrant workers at annual National Day festivals and International Workers' Day concerts, the Mount Yangtai troupe regularly gave free concerts to the workers of these factories. About ten days after I submitted my research plan to the office, I was received warmly by Zhong Huanhuan, a young migrant who was awarded a clerical position in the office for her active and devoted services as a leading dancer of the troupe. The musical activities have a remarkable, positive impact, according to Zhong. "Among dozens of suicides committed by migrant factory workers in this city during the past several years, none of them happened in our neighborhood. More importantly, crime has been going down" (interview with the author, Shenzhen, September 12, 2012).

The Shaanxi Dream Art Troupe (*Shanxi Mengxiang Yishutuan*), whose activities I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, was a new troupe when I visited. Soon after Xi Jinping was inaugurated in November 2012 as the supreme leader of China, he introduced a new national ethos, that of the "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo Meng*). A few months later, the Shaanxi Dream Art Troupe was founded jointly by the Communist Youth League Committee of Shanxi Province and the local Children and Youth Palace. The former provided material support and ideological instruction, while the latter supplied rehearsal venues and personnel as the director of the troupe and instructors for musical training. Chen Hao, a professional vocalist and artistic director of the Children and Youth Palace, was appointed as the director of the troupe and assigned to guide the troupe in alignment with the four constituent ideals of the Chinese Dream: a powerful and prosperous country; a rejuvenated nation; happy people; and a harmonious society (interview with the author, Xi'an, August 10, 2012). The members were recruited through several provincially televised competitions and attracted migrant musicians who sought public attention and privileged performance opportunities. As the only migrant worker art troupe of Shaanxi province, this troupe became a major resource for the local media when reporting about the peasant workers' urban lives and thoughts.

These four troupes shared some common characteristics: First, all of them were supervised by government branches and agencies and managed by government-appointed directors. The Yuhua Troupe was directed by Fan Xiuju, a subdistrict official. Chen Hao held a tenured position at a state-owned public institution. Zhong Huanhuan was formally trained to be an administrative staff member of the Dalang Street Administrative Office. At least twice a month, these directors reported to the local governments, from which they received instructions and plans for upcoming activities.

Second, although these troupes were situated in different parts of China and supervised by different government branches or agencies, they, or their directors to be more accurate, received the same instructions from the central government. Sometimes, the troupes received nothing other than the basic original versions of the directives from the ministries of the central government. More often, however, the directives had been fleshed out and reformulated into detailed instructions, or memorandums," on how the troupe should prepare and deliver an upcoming performance. At the time of my field research, in 2012/2013, all the migrant troupes I visited operated under the same directive from the central government. Entitled "Opinions on Further Strengthening the Work on the Peasant Worker Culture," this document confirmed that peasant workers are "an important target group for the public cultural service system" (Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and All-China Federation of Trade Unions 2011). It gave instructions on how to cater to and represent these migrant workers, which was rewritten into memoranda received by the state-sponsored art troupes (as shown in Figure 2) and implemented by their directors and media journalists, as documented in my field journal presented at the beginning of this chapter (see Tang 2020: 198).



陕西省进城务工青年"梦想艺术团"
演出活动备忘录

一、陕西省"我的歌声我的梦"合唱电视大赛

1.主办单位：陕西省文化厅、陕西省广播电影电视局、陕西广播电视台。

2.我团省略初赛、复赛，直接进入决赛。

3.8月—9月在陕西电视台举行决赛及颁奖展演。

4.主办方提倡自行寻找一位特点鲜明的领唱，范围锁定在当地或省内的知名歌手。

5.自行制定一个立意高、故事感人、值得社会上下齐心协力助其完成梦想的个人或社会群体作为公益故事点，本次大赛将联合爱心企业筹备公益基金，助力最感人的公益梦想。

6.进入决赛录制阶段后，参赛队伍的服装、化妆、道具等，须体现农民工的精神面貌、团体特点，须按照导演组其他要求执行。

7.我团选定歌曲：《祖国不会忘记我》，备选歌曲《我相信》。

Shaanxi Province Young Migrant Worker 'Dream Art Troupe' Memorandum for Performing Activities (Translation)

Activity One: TV Choral Competition 'My Song, My Dream' of Shaanxi Province

1. Sponsors and organizers: Shaanxi Province Culture Bureau, Shaanxi Province Bureau of Radio, Film and Television, Shaanxi TV Station.
2. Our troupe will skip the preliminaries and intermediary heats, and will enter directly into the final competition.
3. The final competition and award ceremony will be held between August and September at Shaanxi TV Station.
4. Organizers recommend finding a distinctive leading singer among the local and well-known.
5. Organizers recommend creating a public-spirited, touching story about an individual or group that has a lofty dream worth a united effort of the whole society. It will be the backstory of our performance. This competition will raise funds from corporate donors to help realize the most moving public-spirited dream.
6. In the final competition, which will be televised, the costumes, make-up, and props of the troupe must show the mental outlook and physical characteristics of peasant workers and must follow other instructions from the directing team.
7. The selected song for our troupe is 'Mother Country Will Not Forget'. The song 'I Believe' is an alternative.

Figure 2: *A memorandum received by the directors of the Dream Art Troupe in August 2013 for an upcoming choral competition. Photographed and translated by the author.*

Third, the migrant members of these state-sponsored troupes did not have the freedom to choose what to perform or how to perform. The main occasions where the troupes delivered their performances were music shows on broadcast media and public concerts sponsored by government branches and agencies . The production teams and organizers of these shows and concerts not only decided what the troupe members should sing but also what they should wear on stage, what stories they should tell, and even what "mental outlook" they should display on stage, as demonstrated by Figure 2. The appointed directors were in charge of designing the details and conducting rehearsals that aimed to ensure troupe members were able to realize the decisions and designs.

Fourth, the music of these troupes was largely limited to singing, namely because it lent itself to conveying straightforward messages and representations prescribed by the instructions. Another reason for restricting the ensemble to vocal music was that it was hard to recruit professionally trained migrant musicians and much easier to train singers than instrumentalists. The well-rehearsed repertoires of these troupes overlapped and contained many so-called mass songs. Of course, in China's government, media, and public discourses, the musical pieces and performances created and delivered as the state's propaganda work are not described as "propaganda" (*xuanchuan*). Instead, several terms were frequently used to refer to songs written and composed by musicians who work for government-owned institutions and to performances of these songs organized by government departments, agencies and state-owned media. These terms included: (1) *zhuxuanlv*, literally "leitmotiv songs," which summarized their assigned role in China's cultural life; (2) *qunzhong gequ*, literally "mass songs," which denoted the targeted audience of the songs (see also, e.g., Quan and An 2018; So 2003); (3) *hongse gequ*, "red songs," because they proudly carried the ideological markers and missions of the communist regime (see also, e.g., Li 2024; Hong 2011). This book will adopt the term "mass songs" to stress that these songs were composed and performed to persuade, influence, and educate the masses.

Before I proceed to a more elaborate discussion of the repertoires and performances of these migrant art troupes, I would like to clarify some basic guidelines implemented by China's state-sponsored musical domain that give rise to the main characteristic of their musical representations of the floating migrants.

Basic Guidelines in Generating Official Musical Representations

In twenty-first-century China, the country's supreme leaders convene national conferences every several years to announce an updated set of rules which state-sponsored musicians must abide by. Over the past decades, several principles were repeatedly confirmed at these conferences, among them the "Yan'an Talks." These guidelines were implemented in state-owned music institutions whose members composed mass songs, in government departments whose members were in charge of organizing concerts freely accessible to the public and of directing state-sponsored art troupes within their jurisdictions, and to the broadcast media whose production teams created shows hosting state-sponsored migrant art troupes. I will examine these guidelines that shape how songs are composed, selected, and performed, focusing on how these practices cultivate a distinctive imaginary of floating migrants' urban experiences, thoughts, and feelings among audiences.

The Yan'an Talks refers to the speeches given by Mao Zedong in 1943 and that defined the mission of communist regime's musical propaganda. At the time, the Kuomintang was still the ruling political party in most regions of China, and the communists were the opposition. After a series of military retreats in the mid-1930s, Mao and his army settled in Yan'an, a small town on the northern border of Shanxi Province, which served as a temporary capital of the Chinese regime until it took comprehensive control of mainland China (Sun Shuyun 2010; Yang 2021). Mao systematized his pragmatist views of art and convened a forum in the spring of 1943 to clarify "the important role of revolutionary literature and art in facilitating other revolutionary works" and what is "the correct development of revolutionary literature and art" (Mao [1942] 1991: 804, see also Yue 2025; Brown 2008). In front of the attendees who were professional or amateur artists and who later became the musical pioneers of communist China, Mao delivered the opening and concluding speeches widely known as the Yan'an Talks. He set out guidelines for cultural work, some of which are still upheld in twenty-first-century China.

The first guideline is that musical activities are an integral part of the organized, planned party work. "Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat," Vladimir Ilyich Lenin stated in 1905, "a cog and bolt" (quoted from Solomon 1979: 184) of the socialist mechanism. Mao not only borrowed the expression "cog and bolt" to describe literature and art but also granted the title "cultural soldiers" to writers and musicians. Arts, as Mao concluded in this inflammatory talk, are "a weapon to unify and educate the people" (see also Chung 1996: 7).

Second, musicians should compose and perform to represent the people and to be their spokesmen, in order to unify, influence, and educate. After demanding that musicians and other artists and writers pay special attention to mass songs, Mao claimed: "Only by linking their works to the masses of the people, by representing the masses, and by being a spokesman of the masses can the works [of writers and artists] be meaningful" (Mao [1942] 1991: 821).

The third guideline pronounced in the Yan'an Talks and implemented to this day is that artworks should encourage the people to have "same-heart, same-mind." "Everything that separates people into several groups, stirs the people to have different goals and opinions" should be eliminated (Mao [1942]1991: 825, see also Cui and Chen 2023; Wang et al. 2014).

Fourth, to reinforce the people's faith in the communist leadership, Mao demanded that "praise" (*zanmei*) should be the main theme of arts, particularly songs. The communist party, socialism, and the merits of "the people" should be passionately praised to "give people encouragement and confidence to struggle for victory" (Mao [1942]1991: 830).

Fifth, art works should not expose the mistakes of the people, including communist leaders who are members of the people. "The people make mistakes, but these mistakes should be corrected by the criticism within our group" (Mao [1942]1991: 830). By contrast, exposing the mistakes of foreigners and domestic exploiters is allowed for the purposes of unifying the people.

These basic guidelines are still in effect and influence the cultural life of contemporary China. During my research in the 2010s, people were free to choose among a wide range of legally available musical entertainment, spanning popular and classical genres, and featuring both domestic and international stars. Nonetheless, the freely accessible concerts organized by government departments and agencies and performed by state-sponsored art troupes comprised the main source of entertainment for the average citizen. Similarly, the songs of the most-watched broadcast music shows were primarily those written by members of state-owned institutions. These agencies and institutions received directives from different ministries of the central government and composed, produced, and performed with a view to accomplishing the tasks and goals prescribed in the directives. The standardized protocol for review and inspection ensured that the institutions fulfilled the directives.

Alongside the continual introduction of new tasks in the directives, supreme leaders periodically convened pan-Chinese conferences to announce and confirm the basic guidelines. Several months after I arrived in China to work with floating migrants, the Ninth National Congress of Chinese Literature and Art Workers was held on November 22, 2011, where President Hu Jintao (2011)

confirmed the "correct way on which artists must insist." In his keynote speech, Hu reiterated that artworks should seek to influence people by representing, strengthen their faith by praising, and foster their solidarity to motivate. He highlighted the three abilities of artworks to represent, to attract, and to evoke specific sentiments and emotions. New details were added according to the socio-economic situation of the country, and artists were requested to absorb elements from new styles and techniques to cultivate the lofty spirits of the people and to represent contemporary people's faith and pursuits and to motivate audiences to accelerate the country's social and economic development. In 2014, the newly inaugurated President Xi Jinping demanded that artists create "life-like, emotionally appealing images" of people's thoughts, feelings and living conditions and strive for social and economic development in order to motivate people and strengthen their faith in the future (Xi [2014] 2015).

Red Classics in Everyday Life: From Self-Advertisement to State-Sponsored Representation

The musical performances of the state-sponsored migrant art troupes, along with the mass songs occupying their repertoires, were created to influence public opinion and arouse certain sentiments. Musicians were expected to persuade their audiences through music and lyrics that reflected the government party line, evoking and generating emotionally captivating thoughts, feelings, and experiences The existing body of ethnomusicological literature has provided discussions on how Chinese communists instrumentalize music. Songs were composed as a patriotic rallying cry in the Korean War or to stir up zeal for the Great Cultural Revolution (Ouyang 2022; Cathcart 2010). Music was turned into a tool to support the actions and decisions of the communist regime (Perris 1983). Folk dances and operatic genres were manipulated to disseminate communist doctrine (Mittler 2010; Holm 1984). Folk and ethnic music traditions were reworked according to the state's political needs and then labeled as authentic (Harris 2005; Lau 1996; Yang Mu 1994).

Centering on the Chinese imaginary, this study extends the discussion by proposing a new perspective to understand these state-sponsored musical practices and their impact on Chinese cultural and social life. In Chinese society, I argue, members maintain their communal life based on a constantly updated set of common-sense understandings and normative expectations. The persuasive power of the official musical representations in China, I argue, is rooted in their ability to supply emotionally appealing, normative images that

underpin such common-sense understandings and normative expectations. With case studies around the repertoires and performances of the migrant art troupes, I will reveal how state-sponsored music-making influences public opinion about floating migrants by helping people imagine a collective past and the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of fellow citizens they do not generally encounter.

The repertoires of the state-sponsored migrant art troupes I visited were dominated by the songs written in different stages of the communist regime's development to fulfil its constantly shifting strategic needs. Only a few of these songs were written specifically for the floating migrants, or to be more specific, for migrant construction and factory workers after their social contributions were officially acknowledged in the 2000s. The rest of the songs can roughly fit into two categories: the first is the so-called "red song classics" (*hongse jingdian*) produced during the war before the communist regime took control of mainland China in 1949, or in Maoist China between 1949 and 1976. These red classics were produced as self-advertisement to attract the support of the Chinese public at the time. In contemporary China, as I will discuss in the following part of this chapter, they are repeated in state-sponsored or arranged music performances to remind people of past achievements and to strengthen their faith in the state's ongoing policy. The second category is comprised of more recent compositions produced in reformed China after the 1980s to portray specific groups acknowledged by the state as strategically important at certain periods. Although these songs were not composed to represent the floating migrants, migrant arts groups reworked them as musical expressions of migrants. Taking two red song classics as examples and combining both historical and ethnographic modes of analysis, this section will examine how state-sponsored musical activities generated and spread images to influence people's opinion of the past and how past musical compositions function to constitute the musical representations of floating migrants in the 2010s.

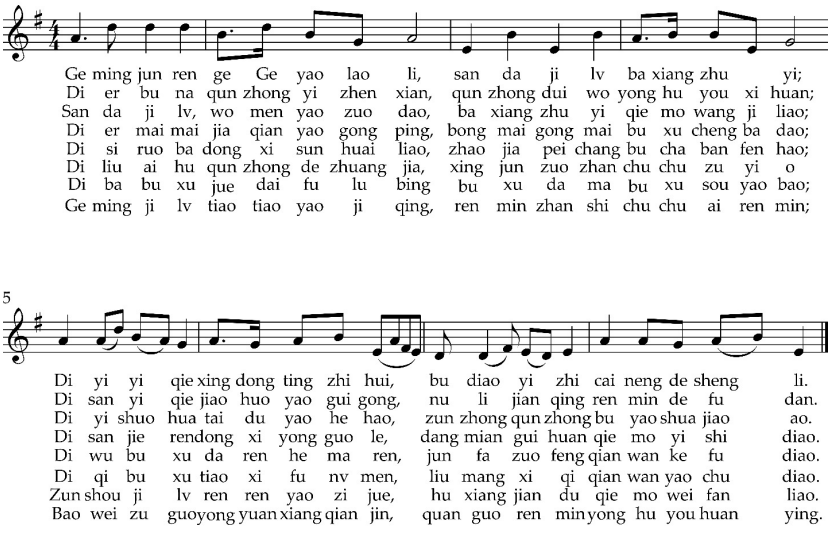
The Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921 and produced its first iteration of songs in the Land Revolution Period (1927–1937). Some of these songs were later promoted as red classics and became part of the musical persuasion concerning the floating migrants. With a case study of the song "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention," I will interrogate how these songs served as self-advertisement at the time and function in the twenty-first century. I begin with an overview of the historical and social context within which the song was born. At that time, the Chines Nationalist Party (KMT) was the ruling party in China and dominated almost all urban regions, whereas the

Communist Party was a newly founded opposition.[3] Around 1928, after successfully leading a series of armed uprisings, Mao Zedong became a major leader of the communist forces (Womack 2019; Schram 1964). Mao soon enacted the strategy of "besieging the city from the countryside" (*nongcun baowei chengshi*), turning some underdeveloped rural areas into the communist safe bases (Tsui 2018; Eastman 1991).[4] In the following years, the communists seized control of some rural areas located in the Jiangxi, Anhui, Hunan, and Hubei provinces (see also Mao [1938]1962).

Mao Zedong took two measures to win the support of the majority population of these areas, comprised of peasants living in poverty. The first measure was to launch a land revolution, which was summarized in communist reports as "to fight with rich landlords, redistribute their land, abolish the feudal system of exploitation, and to give peasants the land and property they want" (Communist Party Central Committee 2011[1931]: 527). As the second measure to win the support of local peasants, Mao Zedong began to advertise the communist army as a disciplined "army of the people." He notably proposed "Three Main Rules of Discipline" (*Sanda Jilv*) and several supplementary "Points for Attention" (*Zhuyi*) as behavioral codes for soldiers (Mao 2008: 42). In mid-1935, Liu Huaqing, the head of the Communist Fifteenth Field Army's propaganda department, set these rules and points to music using a borrowed melody from a German military march:

3 The Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT) was the ruling party in China from 1927 to 1946. It established the first republic regime after overthrowing the Qing Empire but retreated to Taiwan after losing mainland China in the civil war.

4 "Revolutionary base areas" (*geming genju di*) was a term that appeared in the 1930s and continued to be used after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. It refers specifically to the areas (usually rural regions) in which revolutionary armed forces (i.e., communist military), revolutionary regime, revolutionary mass organization, and revolutionary party (i.e., the Communist Party which controlled the first three), legally and publicly existed.



Music Example 1: *Red Army Song: "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention".*[5]

Translation of the lyrics:

1. As revolutionary soldiers we should remember
   The three main rules of discipline and the eight points for attention.
   First, obey orders in all your actions.
   Only by matching our steps together can victory be achieved.

2. Second, don't take everything, even a needle or thread, from the masses.
   The masses will like us and support us.
   Third, we should turn in everything captured to the party and collective.
   Make effort to lighten the burden of the people.

3. Don't forget the three rules of discipline.
   Don't forget the Eight Points for Attention.
   First, we talk in a polite way,
   Respect the masses, and arrogance is not allowed.

5 This music example is transcribed by the author from the vinyl record *East is Red* released by China Record Group in 1965.

4. Second, when buying and selling, do fair trades.
   The price should be reasonable, and bullying tactics are not allowed.
   Third, we should return the things we borrow in person.
   Don't forget them and don't lose them.

5. Fourth, if we break something of the people,
   we should pay exactly the price for it.
   Fifth, we should not beat people or swear at them.
   Get over the warlord manner of behavior.

6. Sixth, we should cherish of crops of the masses,
   Don't damage them when we march and in the midst of the battle.
   Seventh, we should not flirt with women.
   Get rid of the hooligan habit.

7. Eighth, we should not abuse prisoners.
   Don't beat them, insult them or frisk them.
   We should obey the rules of discipline conscientiously.
   We mutually supervise each other to not violate them.

8. Every rule of the revolutionary discipline should be remembered.
   We are the people's soldiers and we love the people.
   We defend our motherland, and we are always progressing.
   The people all over the country will support and welcome us.[6]

The "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention" (*Sanda Jilv Baxiang Zhuyi*) reflects characteristics shared by the earliest songs written by military propaganda officers in this period. They continue to circulate to this day and are preserved in publications and archives (see also Zhang Rong 2010). Their melodies were borrowed from European military marches in one-period or binary musical forms, or from local folk tunes familiar to the targeted audiences to attract attention. In the case of "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention," the melody originated from the German military march "Der Präsentiermarsch Friedrich Wilhelms III."

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6 The score and lyrics were translated from a flyer printed around 1942 and preserved in Shanxi Provincial Library. It can also be seen in *Guoji Ge Sanda Jilv Baxiang Zhuyi* [*Internationale* and Three Main Rules of Discipline and The Eight Points for Attention] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1971), 5.

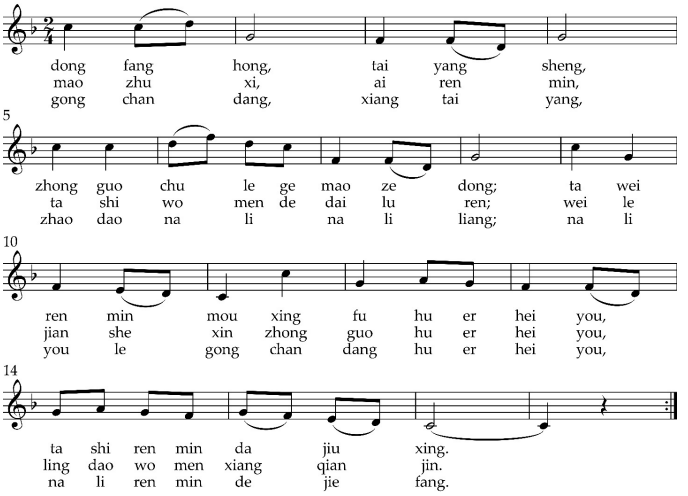
The transformation of the melody from musical parts of a German military march to a communist propaganda song was a long process. Right after China was defeated in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty government adopted the German mode of military training system to establish its first modernized ground force. They borrowed not only the drill routine but also marching songs. A German military instructor, whose name was not acknowledged in the historical records, introduced "Der Präsentiermarsch Friedrich Wilhelms III" to Chinese officials. Xu Shichang, a Han-Chinese literato-official who served as Chief of Staff at this newly founded army, replaced the original German lyrics with Chinese texts summarizing the drill routine to help the soldiers memorize the basic principles (Han 2021). The reworked songs were named "The Generalissimo's Training Song" (*Dashuai Lianbing Ge*). After the Han-led forces overthrew the Qing dynasty, they maintained the German training system in their armies and the melodies of some effective miliary songs. The lyrics of "Der Präsentiermarsch Friedrich Wilhelms III" were replaced with new words around the mid-1920s to propagate the slogans and miliary rules of the Fengtian Warlords (Sun 1996). The miliary officers of the communist Red Army once borrowed the melody of this German military march to disseminate the core ideas of the land revolution and, in 1935, reworked the tune to convey the "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention" (Cheng 2007). The melody is characterized by simple but steady rhythms, with emphasized downbeats to aid foot movements and short, memorable melodic contours. Repeatedly used by different Chinese military forces, this melody demonstrated its effectiveness for easy recognition and its accessibility to people without musical skills. Communist miliary officers condensed the rules and points for attention into straightforward, catchy lyrics that aligned with this melody.

"Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention" not only helped the communist soldiers to memorize the codes of conduct but also to showcase these soldiers' disciplined manners in their daily activities, from "don't flirt with people" to "don't damage crops." In addition to the lyrics, the visual imagery created by the coordinated marching of the soldiers also contributed to the success of this self-promotion. In summer 2016 in Jinzhai county, a region that served as the communist army's main military base in the 1930s, I visited some folk singers to talk about local music traditions. During the interviews, some of them recounted a shared memory that they witnessed with their own eyes and ears or that were passed down in their families. They told me that in the mid and late 1930s, communist army soldiers routinely marched and sang "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention" on the main streets of their town or villages. An elderly lady retained a vivid memory about it: "I saw them at least once or twice a week when I helped

my mother sell salted pork on the street market. Sometimes they were just a dozen of soldiers and sometimes it was the entire troop … they sang affably and marched in a neat way in one or two lines so as to not block the street" (interview conducted by the author, July 23, 2016, Jinzhai). For these locals, these reoccurring marches, always with the same song, gave them the first impression of these communist soldiers who had just begun to appear on their land and in their social lives. The performances of the song also reinforced their own observation that these army soldiers did not commit sexual harassment, occupy their homes, or beat the civilians. At the same time, the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party soldiers were accused in communist posters and slogans of committing all kinds of atrocities—allegations that were never substantiated, as the majority of the locals never claimed to have experienced these atrocities. The communist cause was thus advanced by combining fact and fiction.

"Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention" was promoted as a red classic after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. After 1949, government and media discourses attributed the surrender of Japanese invaders to the leadership of Mao and the communist army (Reilly 2011; Kushner 2007). After peace and prosperity were restored, the communist regime sponsored performances of this and other wartime songs to remind citizens of its role in liberating the country from domestic oppression and foreign aggression (Zuo 2013; Werner 2012). At the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, the Chinese delegation chose "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention" as its background music when they entered the opening ceremony. This song remains, to this day, frequently used as background music in China's military parades and sports events.

Composed in 1942 in Yan'an, "East is Red" (*Dongfang Hong*) exemplifies another sort of self-promotion. The melody was borrowed from a local folk song called "White Horse Tune" (*Bai Ma Diao*, see also Yuan 2008; Hung 1996). The familiar tune attracted local people's attention and carried the catchy lyrics:



Music Example 2: *Red Song Classics*: "*East Is Red*".[7]

The East is Red,
The sun rises,
Mao Zedong is rising in China.
He is working hard for the people's happiness,
He is our life saver …

Chairman Mao
Loves the people.
He is the guide in our life
To construct a brand-new China,
He leads us going forward.

The Communist Party is like our sun,
It shines everywhere and everywhere is bright.
Wherever the Communist Party is
Our people are liberated. [8]

Rather than listing reasons for how the Communist Party and its leader would accelerate China's social-cultural development, the song evokes a hope-inspiring image of dawn. The image became more convincing after listeners received the redistributed lands and properties confiscated from local landlords.

7 This music example was transcribed by the author from the vinyl record *East is Red* released by China Record Group in 1965.

8 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is_t3EjGL9k for a YouTube video of "East is Red" (accessed on August 11, 2026).

After 1949, state-sponsored performances of "East is Red" transformed from self-promotion to the portrayal of the people's gratitude. On post-1949 mainstream concert and broadcast media stages, lyrics, facial expressions and bodily movements of singers and dancers, props and costumes, scenic designs and backdrops, and sound effects collectively contribute to this kind of portrayal. To celebrate the 15th anniversary of the founding of communist China, "East is Red" was developed into an eponymous "music and dance epic" (*yinyue wudao shishi*) (Chen 2024; Yang 2016). In the opening of the epic, in front of the rising sun projected as the backdrop on the stage, dancers waved yellow fans to form several large sunflowers while the choir praised Mao as the people's savior. The performance of song was followed by a series of short dramatic episodes in which artists dressed as landlords or Japanese aggressors were defeated by dancers in communist army uniform and in which singers wearing standardized costumes of ethnic minorities sang about their happy new lives under a huge portrait of Mao.[9]

In the 2010s, these red song classics frequently reached the public at a wide range of state-sponsored musical activities, such as outdoor concerts at plazas and broadcast singing competitions. Some academic publications argue that the prevalence of these red classics in today's China indicates "revolutionary nostalgia" (Li and Yan 2020: 508; see also Xiao 2017) among people who are dissatisfied with income inequality and unbalanced social development (Steen 2013). That said, I rarely saw migrant musicians voluntarily choose to perform these songs; instead, I observed that troupe directors, production teams of media shows, and concert organizers arranged them to sing or dance with these songs.

These performances take several forms. For example, "East is Red" was often rearranged for choral singing. In the summer of 2012 in Tianjin, I attended a Military-Civilian Joint Gala (*Junmin Linhuan Wanhui*) in which some members of the TEDA Worker Art Troupe and stationed garrison sang the song in chorus. Such choral performances were combined with visual theatrics boasting the country's socio-economic developments and the people's admiration and gratitude. In addition to the singers, these performances had dancers, elaborate stage settings, and videos and images projected on the backdrop. Meanwhile, the recordings of the instrumental version of "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention" were also played as sonic background before an organizer or invited government official customarily gave their opening speech to inspire the audience members. Besides, in Shenzhen city, whenever I

9 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lG0hUNTlxPY for a video recording of the epic (accessed on August 11, 2026).

passed by a public square located at the foot of Yangtai Mountain after dinner, I encountered a group of migrant workers from electronic factories who were organized by the Dalang Street Administrative Office to perform social dance as a form of entertainment and physical exercise. Their dancing was accompanied by a portable speaker provided by the Administrative Office that played the same compilation of red classics.

My interviews with migrant members of the state-sponsored troupes were always accompanied by staff members of the government departments. Therefore, I did not bother asking the migrants whether performing these red song classics helped them express their discontent against income inequality and unbalanced social development. However, based on my observations, during their many grueling rehearsals, a crew of directors, media directors, and journalists had to belabor them in order to extract a semblance of happiness and gratitude with the correct facial expressions, bodily movements and gestures, and passionate voices. The glorified pictures projected on the stage backdrops, the sunflowers and the red fans and flags were all supposed to be tokens of positivity. These performances and the playing of red classics reminded the people of the past merits and accomplishments of the communist regime and strengthened their faith in its current leadership. The well-rehearsed smiles, energetic gestures, and enthusiastic singing in the glorified portrayals of communist soldiers and leaders were supposed to represent the floating migrants and create the notion among local and national audiences that these migrants are grateful and happy with their current living conditions.

Songs Written to Give a Voice to Peasant Workers and Performances Designed to Represent Floating Migrants

> They are a group of boys and girls in the prime of youth. Some of them just got off their shift from the assembly lines, and others just closed their working notebooks. Walking at a brisk pace, they gather at the base of Yangtai Mountain and embark on a long and hard artistic road.
>
> A song, a dance, an aspiration and a good wish, they convey a lot of information. There are no flowers, but there are smiling faces of peasant workers. There is no salary, but there is the sincere applause of people.
>
> In those evenings with a soft breeze, they are like spirits, sparkling with vigor and zest, active in industrial parks and residential enclaves. They are angels, giving people not only the artistic enjoyment but also the meditation on the meaning of life, social responsibility, and the seeds of civilization.

> Excerpt from the preamble of the Anniversary Album of *Yangtaishan Young Worker Art Ensemble*

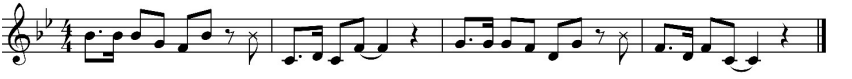
In modern China, the central government and its regional branches and agencies sponsor art troupes to serve as spokesmen for specific social groups recognized as important contributors to the country's socio-economic development. In the early 2000s, China began improving its infrastructure and has made efforts to secure its position as the world's top manufacturing economy. The state thus acknowledged the contribution of those floating migrants who worked on construction sites and in factories, referring to them as "peasant workers." The state-sponsored migrant art troupes created and disseminated representations of this portion of the floating population, and commonly used "workers" in their names to advertise that these construction and factory workers are both their represented group and target audience. Although located in different parts of China, they follow the same basic guidelines: to encourage migrant workers to have "same-heart, same mind" to make selfless dedication and to provide positive, optimistic representations of their urban experiences without exposing the social inequality caused by biased policies (as stated in the preamble excerpts cited above). The performances of these migrant art troupes, as well as the songs composed for the migrant workers, targeted not only migrant workers but also the urban public. The images they supplied not only suggested role models for migrants to imitate, but also helped urbanites imagine migrants' lives, thoughts, and feelings and form expectations about what migrants should do and how they should respond to the difficulties in their urban lives.

Professional composers affiliated with China's art institutions were also assigned to compose songs for peasant workers. These songs were put at the top of the repertoires of the migrant art troupes. Written by Lan Yu and Wang Li in early 2006 for a small male chorus, "The Buddies Who Build Buildings" (*Bailou De Gemener*) is the first documented song for peasant workers.

> I feel handsome as soon as I put on the safety helmet.
> I get energy as soon as I climb up the scaffold.
> Beads of sweat stand out on my face, from summer to winter.
> My chest is buffeted by the wind and exposed to the sun.
> Hey, our buddies who build buildings.
> Cement mixers whirl our beautiful dream.
> The arms of tower cranes wave the heroic ingredient in our body.
> We go south, we go north, and we go outside of our hometown.
> We gain knowledge, and we also gain skills.
> We carry the words of our parents in our hearts.
> And we have faith in the love of our wife.

Hey, our buddies who build buildings.
We are watching the cities getting more and more colorful and splendid.
And we hope that these buildings could also appear in our hometown.
Listen, the whistle is blown.
Look, the flag is waved,
The motor is sounding, and the electricity is sparkling
The buildings are built.[10]

Words such as "scaffold" or "tower cranes" were used to visualize the construction site, and "safety helmet" or "build buildings" captured the workers' profession and identity. Beads of sweat and their wind-blown appearance made their burdensome workload clear. But these fictional characters conveyed feelings of being handsome and energetic, suggesting that they enjoyed their hard work as they made the city more beautiful. Although they had left their hometowns, the support of their families comforted their hearts. They blew the whistle and waved the flag, filling themselves with a heroic, sacrificial spirit to accomplish a dream not only about their own lives and hometowns but also about the future of the state. The optimistic portrayal was carried by the melody with march-like rhythms (see Music Example 3).



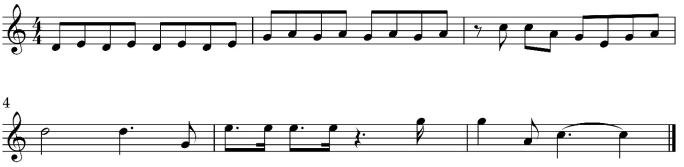
Music Example 3: *Excerpt from the opening measures of the song "The Buddies Who Build Buildings".*[11]

A mix of eighth notes, quarter notes, and occasional dotted rhythms creates a feeling of marching forward. Short motives are repeated and developed throughout the song, making it more memorable for the targeted groups. In the refrain part of this song, the key signature changes from B♭ major to C major. After two bars of continuous 16th notes that created a sense of dynamic,

10 The lyrics were transcribed by the author from the recording of the Yuhua troupe's performance of "The Buddies Who Build Buildings." See https://haokan.baidu.com/v?pd=wisenatural&vid=9284561564891288879 for the recorded and uploaded video (accessed on August 11, 2026).

11 This musical example was transcribed by the author from the recording of the Yuhua troupe's performance of "The Buddies Who Build Buildings." See https://haokan.baidu.com/v?pd=wisenatural&vid=9284561564891288879 for the recorded and uploaded video(accessed on August 11, 2026).

rapid movement and a short descending motion, the stepwise descending line carried the proud statement "the building is built" to end the song (see Music Example 4).



Music Example 4: *Excerpt from the ending measures of "The Buddies Who Build Buildings".*[12]

With its optimistic lyrics, upbeat melody, and performance by the peasant workers, this song provides normative images of "us" and exemplify the state-preferred way in which migrant workers should deal with hardships. The normative images are also designed to help urbanites, who generally do not have the occasion to get to know migrant workers, in understanding and forming expectations of their fellow citizens from this segment of the population.

"The Buddies who Build Buildings" premiered with the Yuhua troupe and became its first hit, drawing the troupe onto the mainstream stage. In the spring of 2012, I conducted a telephone interview with Fan Xiuju, a retired officer of the local Street Administrative Office and the founder of the Yuhua troupe, who kindly explained how the song attained its famous status. On September 18, 2007, Fan received a call from a director working for China Central TV Station. At that time, as Fan said, the Yuhua troupe was the first and only migrant art group in the country. The director told Fan that the television station was planning a concert gala dedicated to migrant construction workers on the Olympic stadium construction site, and that the gala would be broadcast to national audiences of millions. The director told Fan that they needed some migrant musicians to perform as representatives of the migrant musicians. Fan sent the director the existing repertoire and recordings of their previous performances. "The Buddies Who Build Buildings" was immediately selected, as Fan recalled (interview with the author, via telephone, April 12, 2012).

On a stage built on the construction site of an Olympic stadium, a number of male troupe members who were floating migrants (but not construction

12 Ibid.

workers) had been selected to wear red safety helmets and sing "The Buddies Who Build Buildings" in front of the scaffolds. Their choral singing was accompanied by professional dancers from state-owned Beijing art institutions, likewise wearing safety helmets and overalls. Big images hung from the scaffolds on which the migrant construction workers were working with happy smiles. Together, these performers delivered the official representation of the migrant workers.

This performance was broadcast on CCTV Channel 7 and was favorably received by local and national audiences. The troupe became nationally famous. Later the same year, the Ministry of Propaganda granted the Wugeyigongcheng Award to the song for its distinguishing ability to motivate and educate people to join the socialist project (see also Jin 2008). The official nomination statement summarized the song's merits as follows:

> This is a mass song about the life of peasant workers. It represents the working enthusiasm of modern peasant workers, who positively and actively devote themselves to the construction of the cities, and their pursuit and yearning for a great life. The lyrics are austere, natural, energetic, and vibrant, and the melody has absorbed the rhythm of folk work songs and popular music. Filled with vigor, vitality, and youthful spirit, it has a distinct scent and characteristics of the new era.[13]

This and later migrant worker songs commonly portray fictional characters from a first-person perspective to serve as the voices of the migrant workers. Nonetheless, as my research suggested, they were written by professional composers who were not and had never been migrant workers. Another similar example is "Song of Peasant Workers" (*Nongmingong Zhige*), which was widely circulated on China's televised Spring Festival Gala (celebrating the Chinese New Year) in 2008:[14]

> My body is messy, and my face is dripping with sweat.
> Chasing a dream, I venture into the urban world.
> I used to be a peasant, but now I'm a worker.
> I'm the new resident of this city, and I'm fired with tremendous enthusiasm.
> Brothers and sisters, raise your chest.
> Get through hardship and fearlessly face the wind and rain.
> Believe in your own strength and believe in our future
> Our life will finally be fabulous.

---

13 See https://www.cflac.org.cn/zt/2007-10/08/content_11338029.htm (accessed on August 6, 2026) for the nomination statement.

14 See http://tv.cctv.com/2012/12/16/VIDE1355603022270674.shtml (accessed August 6, 2026) for a broadcast version of the performance. For a discussion, see Tang 2020: 200–201.

> We polish the rainbow and twilight with our sweat.
> Believe in your own strength and believe in our future.
> Our life will finally be fabulous.[15]

Wang Xiaoling, a Major General in the Beijing Military Cultural Work Brigade, wrote the song lyrics. In the voice of a migrant representative, the general downplayed the migrants' difficult social standing and poor living conditions, instead presenting an optimistic outlook for the future. The song attributes the migrants' hardships to the natural environment and harsh weather rather than biased government policies or social systems. The heavy workload is depicted as a noble civic duty. Yin Qin, a military composer leading the Central Political Department Song and Dance Ensemble, composed the music with lively marching band rhythms to emphasize a dynamic and energetic image. On the stage of the Spring Festival Gala, the most-watched televised program in China, a Chinese movie star performed as the leading singer, and members of a migrant worker troupe constituted the chorus. Most of them were dressed as construction and factory workers, and a few wore other professional uniforms to acknowledge the social contributions of migrants working as security guards, chefs, and housemaids. With big smiles, passionate bodily movements, and the lyrics written in the style of self-expression, they delivered images of migrant workers' willingly performing duties, facing challenges, and striving to accomplish the glorious socialist future. These features were manifested in many other migrant worker songs widely circulated through mainstream broadcast media and public concert stages I witnese, such as in "A Ballad of Work" which had these lyrics:

> No matter who we are, no matter what we do,
> We work hard.
> No matter how cold the wind is and how hot the weather is,
> We are happy.
> It is hard to be away from hometowns, but a real man should venture out into a new world.
> We believe our future is ahead.
> I remember my father and mother, my good girl, and the new house in my dream.
> I want to earn a good life and make it better and better.[16]

---

15 The lyrics were transcribed by the author from the recording of her interviews with migrant singer Yin Dongjiang on March 23 and 24, 2013.

16 "A Ballad of Work" (*Dagong Yao*), composed by Xiaoming Song and Jiayi Wu in 2009.

Although the meticulous instructions and strict supervision hindered artistic freedom and discouraged many migrant musicians from joining the state-sponsored troupes, some floating migrants were attracted by the privileged performance opportunities and media attention. In spring 2013, I received permission from the Culture Bureau of the Yuhua District, Shijiazhuang city, to interview some members of the peasant worker art troupe under their direction. Among them was Yin Dongjiang, a rural-to-urban migrant cooking dumplings for a living at the time (see Tang 2020: 196). "I inherited only two things from my parents: the skill of making good dumplings and a nice singing voice," Yin said. "I use the former to earn money to feed my family, but becoming a singer, a star, is my life-long pursuit" (interview with the author, May 23, 2013). Meng Chao, an active member of the Shaanxi Dream Troupe, had a similar goal. "Since I was a little boy, I have been imagining myself standing on a beautiful stage with brilliant light, flowers, and loud applause," Meng recalled (interview with the author, Xi'an, August 7, 2013). However, born in a small, isolated village, Meng didn't have the chance to study music or perform until he moved to the city and was recruited by the Shaanxi Dream Troupe. Lu Meng, for his part, was a member of the TEDA Troupe and was from Henan Province. Several free public music classes held by the troupe convinced him to join them. He took two free vocal classes per week with a professional pop singer. "I never thought I could sing with such a charming voice," Lu said, "That's very cool" (interview with the author, Tianjin, December 18, 2012).

For some floating migrants, performing as members of state-sponsored art troupes eventually pays off. After successfully delivering the performance of "The Buddies Who Build Buildings" televised via the China Central Television Station, Yin Dongjiang was invited to sing on various television musical shows and national singing competitions to represent floating migrants. He was promoted as a grassroots star. Nonetheless, he continued to stay in close contact with the local culture bureau and remained on call whenever "representatives" for migrant workers were needed. He also continued to be required to follow the detailed instructions of production teams and concert organizers or risk being replaced by singers willing to comply in pursuit of stardom. Meng finally stood on his dream stage. In August 2013, I witnessed him delivering a speech at the beginning of a concert, in which he shared with the audience how he made his dream come true in the city. Lu Meng made rapid progress in his singing classes with tutor Guan and soon started singing solo songs at small-scale venues. He was commended as an "activist" (*jiji fenzi*) by his peer troupe members because he is usually very enthusiastic in the performances and talkative in troupe-arranged media interviews.



Figure 3: *Yin Dongjiang performing "The Buddies Who Build Buildings" after an interview with the author. Photographed by the author on May 23, 2013.*

However, not all members of these state-sponsored migrant art troupes were floating migrants. When there was a shortage of musicians with good musical skills, performing experience, and a desire to sing in a standard, positive voice, musicians outside of the migrant community were invited to join. Among these were He Haikuo of the Yuhua troupe and Huang Xianyu of the Shanxi Dream troupe, who were local urbanites born in the cities. They were professional singers who made money by performing at weddings and business openings and by hosting civilian ceremonial events in the cities. Although they performed for the troupes without monetary compensation, they gained visibility, which helped them attract clients for their other performances. At times, staffers of the government department supervising the migrant art troupes even took part in the performances, be it as backup dancers,

instrumental accompanists, or solo singers. They usually did this when they had failed to recruit and retain enough migrant musicians. "Skilled at playing musical instruments, dancing, or singing" was an essential qualification listed on the announcements of vacancies in the TEDA Floating Population Management Office and the Dalang Street Administrative Office.

Legitimizing the Musical Representations: Images of Heroic Sacrifices and Habitual Sentiments about the Mother Country

Since the mid-twentieth century, "emotionally appealing" (*ganren*) and "lifelike" (*shengdong*) have been frequent terms in the directives based on which state-sponsored musicians and other cultural workers produce musical representations. In the speeches in which China's supreme leaders pronounce the basic guidelines of music making or in the instructions from the ministries of the central government, we can always find these terms alongside the updated set of goal(s) that these artworks are supposed to achieve (e.g., Xi [2014] 2015; Hu 2006; Mao [1942] 1991). In the previous sections, I discussed how the performances of state-sponsored migrant art troupes generate lifelike images of migrant workers and their urban experiences and work attitudes. In this section, I will discuss how their performances evoked collective sentiments to justify the official representations and how they legitimatized the normative expectations that these disadvantaged migrants should remain grateful and contribute selflessly.

According to the central government's directives and the detailed memorandums sent to troupe directors, musical representations of the migrants are intended to evoke emotions. However, while migrant workers may feel uplifted by these performances, the feeling is only temporary and not strong enough to make them forget the social inequality they experience or accept their disadvantaged situation. By the same token, these performances also fail to convince the urban public that the migrants are happy, grateful, and without complaints when subjected to such hard working environments and heavy workloads. I argue that the power of state-sponsored musical performances stems from its ability to conjure the deeply rooted collective sentiment about the mother country. A set of historically accumulated images of heroic deaths played an important role in the formation of that sentiment. Once the collective sentiment is aroused, the official representations of selfless dedication become more persuasive and convincing.

To illustrate my point, I present an example of the power of the collective sentiment around "mother country" (*zuguo*) (see Tang 2020: 201–202). In De-

cember 2016, during a speech at the University of Hong Kong, the Taiwanese essayist Lung Ying-tai asked the audience to identify "the song of enlightenment" in their lives. She said the song should "bear witness to history, honestly preserve a collective sentiment, and transcend time to touch individual hearts." Albert Chau, the vice president of Hong Kong Baptist University sitting in the front row, responded, "It's 'My Mother Country'." Slightly embarrassed or perhaps surprised by the response or the laughter it caused from the back of the hall, Lung asked, "How does that song go? Just sing me the first phrase." Chau then sang the opening notes of "My Mother Country," and gradually, more voices joined in—initially a dozen, then a hundred, and eventually half of the audience—collectively expressing their sentiment through song. The participants have been identified as being from mainland China, evidenced by their distinctly mainland Mandarin accents. [17] My personal experience indicates that these kinds of occurrences around the topic of the mother country are not unique cases but widespread, especially in mainland China. Over the past years, I also witnessed that the same questions recur across Chinese social media, such as: "Why do I always feel moved when I hear 'I Love You China'?" "Why can I not hold back my tears whenever I hear 'My Mother Country and I'?."[18] Incidentally, these same questions recurred frequently during my discussions about mass songs with my students in Beijing.

Mass songs about the mother country also featured prominently in the repertoires of the migrant art troupes I met with, although, as noted earlier, many of these songs were originally written for other social groups and only subsequently adopted and performed by the troupes as representations of the migrants. "My Mother Country Will Not Forget," a song practiced by the Shaanxi Dream in the rehearsal described at the beginning of this chapter, was one of them. I witnessed how these songs brought out the habitual sentiments among the audience members, who may or may not have been migrant workers. Some interviewed migrants told me that these songs made it hard for them to complain about the difficulties they encountered in daily life. I argue that the state-sponsored musical practices translated patriotism into striking images of heroic sacrifices. Songs about the mother country and the performances of these songs evoked accumulated images and fused them with a deeply rooted sense of belonging to the ancestral land, nurturing the collective sentiments

17 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_8jfeQmTgI (accessed August 11, 2026) for an edited video of the speech.

18 See https://www.zhihu.com/question/319471422/answer/3079267940 (accessed August 11, 2026) for an example of how such questions are discussed on Chinese social media.

attached to the "mother country." In the following part of this section, I will provide an elaborated discussion of this process.

State-sponsored musical practices not only take place at events that Chinese people can choose to attend or not. They are also part of the cultural and educational activities legally imposed on Chinese citizens. In 1986, China enacted the *Compulsory Education Law* which not only requires Chinese parents to send their children to elementary, middle, and high schools (mostly owned by the state), but also requires these schools to adhere to the uniform curriculum and course contents stipulated by the Ministry of Education. Thus, from the late 1980s to this day, Chinese children study with nationally standardized textbooks, including music textbooks. These music textbooks contain songs selected to educate and to influence, which helps Chinese citizens build a shared repertoire of emotionally appealing images.[19]

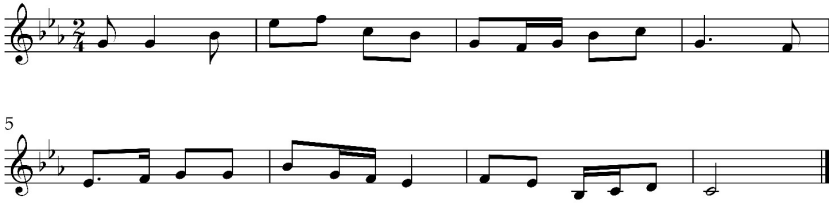
These songs translate patriotism into striking images of heroic sacrifice. In the music classes in China's elementary schools, for example, children learn a nursery rhyme called "Erxiao, the Cowherd" (*Gechang Erxiao Fangniulang*). This song portrays a thirteen-year-old cowherd boy who lured the Japanese invaders into the ambush of communist guerrillas, but:

> In rage, the enemy impales Erxiao on a bayonet.
> His life spills on that big rock…
> Our Wang Erxiao who was only thirteen years old,
> Bravely sacrificed his life in the valley.
> The communist officers and folks were kept safe,
> But he slept in the cold mountains.
> A smile was still on his face,
> His blood reddens the brilliant blue sky…

Fang Bing wrote the lyrics of this song in the 1940s during World War II, inspired by a fictional story about a cowboy (Sun 2011). Li Jiefu, a communist composer, repeated a simple melody six times to tell the story of "Erxiao, the Cowherd" (see Music example 5). Since the early 1980s, this song has been included in China's elementary school textbooks. In twenty-first-century China, third graders learn it from a textbook that not only provides the sheet music but also features illustrations depicting the scenes described in the song. In these drawings, the fictional cowherd boy stands bravely at the cliff's edge, whip in hand, facing armed Japanese soldiers. His eyes show a determined readiness to face death without fear. The textbook encourages students to sing the song in chorus and aims to teach them to use "speed, dynamics, and singing styles"

19 See Ho (2025) and Brand (2003) for a discussion concerning how a shared repertoire has been constructed in China's classroom.

to convey emotions (see Fei and Du 2014: 28–29). This approach helps students express the appropriate emotions while singing, allowing them to personally feel the sadness, anger, and heroic sacrifice portrayed. Although the story and the heroic figure are fictional, they evoke genuine emotions associated with the song. On a YouTube page of this song, the comments, written in simplified Chinese (the written language created by the communist regime and used in mainland China) echo this sentiment: "Every time I hear the song, I cannot help but burst into tears." "My childhood memory. Tears are in my eyes." "Salute to every martyr who dedicates their life. The mother country will never forget you!"[20]



Music Example 5: *The staff notation version of the nursery rhyme "Erxiao, the Cowherd," included on page 29 of the textbook* Music: Third Grade *(Fei and Du 2014).*

In communist China, these heroic sacrifices are portrayed not only in songs but also through diverse forms of musical drama. *Sister Jiang* (*Jiang Jie*) is an opera produced by a team led by Liu Yalou, a general of the Chinese Air Force, and was premiered in 1964. The opera depicted the experiences of communist activists imprisoned in a concentration camp operated by the Chinese Nationalist Party in early 1949, several months before the communist army defeated the Chinese Nationalist Party forces in the civil war. In 2007, China's National Center for Performing Arts opened with a renewed version of *Sister Jiang* (Music Life 2007). According to the migrant workers I spoke with, however, the 1964 film version of *Sister Jiang* is still repeatedly broadcast on China Central Television Station to national audiences of millions.[21]

20 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_NV4kaGBd0&list=RDs_NV4kaGBd0&start_radio=1 for the YouTube video and comments (accessed on August 11, 2026).

21 See https://tv.cctv.cn/2010/07/05/VIDEE88vgVPUUn3MmxqpwQcA100705.shtml for the broadcasted video of the opera (accessed on August 11, 2026).

For many floating migrants I worked with, this same opera went by the name of "Embroidering the Red Flag" (*Xiu Hongqi*). The name denotes both the opera's most celebrated aria, which is included in the textbook for seventh graders, and a ritualistic practice derived from that aria's scene. In the seventh act of the aria, after another day of interrogation, several female communists realized that they would soon be executed and might not get to see the founding of communist China. They then endeavored to create a Five-starred Red Flag with their own hands, which would soon become the national emblem of communist China. They embroidered golden stars on an enormous, bright red flag that was unfurled and brightened the dark cell. The *Sister Jiang* aria followed, completing the portrayal in rich lyrical detail with a grand Western-style orchestral accompaniment:

> The threads are long
> The stitches are dense
> Eyes are brimming with hot tears while embroidering the red flag
> Hot tears follow needles and threads, more of contentment than sorrow …

In the 2010s, this aria was a frequent feature in state-sponsored musical activities. In addition to the public concerts freely accessible to all villagers when they were young and music classes in the elementary and middle schools of their rural hometowns, floating migrants were shown representations of heroic sacrifice through a variety of musical performances arranged by urban authorities. In August 2012, to celebrate China's 18th National Congress, the propaganda bureau of Tianjin City coordinated a city-wide event where thousands of migrant workers, school children, and some urbanites gathered to embroider Five-starred Red Flags, with the aria from *Sister Jiang* playing in the background. This too allowed the migrants and urbanites to experience the fictional as their reality. The photographs of this activity, disseminated through print and media, also helped national and regional viewers and readers imagine the urban life, experience, and thoughts of the floating migrants.

While state-sponsored patriotic compositions generated images of courageous death, the songs about the "mother country" linked natural landscape to the heroic sacrifices and the regime's past achievements. "My Mother Country" (*Wode Zuguo*) is the song known for bearing the collective memory and that initiated the improvised chorus at Lung Ying-tai's Hong Kong lecture. It is also the theme song of *Triangle Hill* (*Shang Ganling*), a drama film about China's victory in the Battle of Triangle Hill during the Korean War. In the official, media, and public discourses of mainland China and in this movie, the Chinese army's intervention in the Korean War is explained as a noble, justified enterprise. Referred to as "*kangmei yuanchao*," the purported aim of the intervention was to

assist Korea resist American aggressors, which would ultimately serve to defend China (Zhang 1995: 298, see also Lee2013 and Stueck 2004). In *Triangle Hill* produced in 1956, this song appeared in a scene in which wounded and weary communist soldiers were trapped in a tunnel after the Chinese forces suffered heavy casualties. While taking care of these wounded soldiers, a young, female army nurse sang a solo verse to begin the song. Her soft voice carried the folk-like melody to depict a typical natural scenery of China:

> A wide river rolls its calm waves
> The wind blows through paddy flowers, bringing the fragrance to the shores
> My family lives by the river
> Boat songs flow into my ears and white sails delight my eyes

In the film, this soothing verse immediately galvanized the soldiers, who then chimed in with a dynamic, mixed chorus characterized by prolonged upward leaps:

> This is my powerful mother country, where I was born and raised
> On this warm land, peaceful sunshine fills every corner[22]

Born in China, I watched this song repeatedly televised on the central and regional channels. It was often synchronized with other selected scenes from the movie. I still remember one vividly: Under intense enemy fire, a Chinese army solider thrusts a Bangalore torpedo into the firing slit of a vessel held by American forces and blocks the opening with his chest until the wave of detonations turns everything into ashes. In the Yangtaishan Troupe's 2012 rendition of "My Mother Country," this scene was reconstructed by the background dancers.

In concert performances of songs about the "mother country," state-sponsored troupes nurture certain modes of thought and feelings by combining images of heroic sacrifices, the regime's past achievements, happy and grateful Chinese citizens, and landscapes of the mother country. The TEDA troupe's performances of "Ode to the Mother Country" (*gechang zuguo*) in an Evening Show in December 2012 serves as a typical example. While the members of the choir sang "This vast and beautiful land, is our beloved hometown," photos of natural scenery of mountains and wide rivers were projected on the backdrop behind them. The photos of armed soldiers standing on an aircraft carrier, the

22 Translation by the author.
See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB3abtW9qrc&list=RDRB3abtW9qrc&start_radio=1 for a video excerpt of the film (accessed on August 11, 2026). The scene starts at 55:33 in the movie.

successful testing of a nuclear weapon, and Olympic medalists were projected to illustrate the verse "We heroic people have stood up. We unite and fight as tough as steel." Wearing the standard attire of migrant workers, singers proudly repeated: "We sing about our dear mother country, and we are walking toward prosperity." At the same time, an image of an expansive city skyline emerged behind them, and backup dancers crouched down in front of them, waving red flags and yellow stars.

Months after the Hong Kong lecture and the "My Mother Country" incident, Lung Ying-tai's opinion piece appeared in Initium Media. She writes, "Sometimes, a wide river is just a wide river, and paddy fields are just paddy fields" (Lung 2016). Yet, after decades of compulsory education and both passive experiences and active participation in state-sponsored musical activities, the images of rivers, fields, and mountains in music have evolved. They no longer simply evoke a natural affection for the homeland. Instead, they serve as indexical signs that summon the collective memories of a thirteen-year-old cowherd skewered by Japanese bayonets, a soldier shielding a machine gun slit from enemy fire, the rapidly developing urban landscape, the Five-starred Flag rising behind Olympic medalists, grandiose National Day military parades, and more. The emotional responses—gratitude, pride, hope, and reverence—coalesce into a powerful, enduring collective sentiment that feels inherently undeniable. This collective feeling is closely tied to songs, rivers, and the phrase "mother country" (see Tang 2020: 204–205).

In the 2010s, the performances of state-sponsored migrant art troupes not only contributed to that collective sentiment but also evoked it to legitimize their representations of migrant workers. Mother country-themed songs in their repertoires were performed not only to encourage the selfless dedication of the migrant workers but also to justify the social exclusion of the floating migrants and the public ignorance of their sufferings:

> In the long river of the glorious cause,
> The one who strives restlessly is me.
> You don't need to recognize me,
> You don't need to know me.
> I melt my youth,
> Into mountains and rivers of the Mother Country
> Mountains recognize me
> Rivers know me.
> Mother country will not, will not forget me.

The above song, named "Mother Country Will Not Forget" (*Zuguo Buhui Wangji*), was written by Zhang Yuehan and Cao Jin in 1993 to represent the aerospace engineers and to praise their quiet dedication. This song was assigned to the

Shaanxi Dream Art Troupe to perform at a choral contest where they received the privilege to enter directly into the televised final competition (see Figure 2). The field journal excerpt that opened this chapter describes the troupe's rehearsal of this song for the competition. Following the instructions listed on the memorandum, these members appeared on the stage wearing the usual attire of construction and factory workers and sang the song with rehearsed smiles and energetic bodily movements and passionate voices. Their singing was preceded by a narrative of a fictional story about a migrant worker realizing his lofty dream in the city. On the LED video walls behind them, different urban groups were diligently fulfilling their assigned social roles, and rivers, mountains, and cityscapes were vibrant and majestic.

People typically accept as real the object that an indexical sign brings to mind, as Turino (2008: 9) points out, for it is part of their own experience. These official representations not only influenced the opinions of the urban majority but also some floating migrants. In the afternoon of August 3, 2025, I conducted group interviews with members of Shaanxi Dream Troupe after the rehearsal described at the beginning of this chapter. The troupe's director participated in the interviews, which might have affected the migrants' expressions of opinion. Some of them told me that they were touched by the song "My Mother Country Will Not Forget." Some of them said that they did not mind making selfless contributions without rewards, because they saw themselves as indebted to communist forerunners who sacrificed their lives to protect the country from foreign threats. "Our current life is much better than 60 years ago. Why should I complain?" Jiang Chao said. "The social development needs time and no country is perfect. I believe that our lives will be improved in the near future," added Meng Chao (interview with the author, Xi'an, August 3, 2013).

Chapter 3: State-Sanctioned Rebellion, Partial Reality, and Aboveground Rock of Floating Migrants

Music has long been at the forefront of social activism. Genres like rock and roll have built their global reputation as a weapon of resistance and empowerment. When *yaogun* (the Chinese literal translation for "rock and roll") gained considerable popularity in mainland China in the late 1980s, the Western world celebrated the decline of the authoritarian system, which it saw as a threat to its own ideological hegemony. In the 2000s, when the rock performances of floating migrant workers began to appear on the concert stages in major Chinese cities and on online video-sharing platforms, Chinese media defined them as the authentic voices through which the grassroots exposed their unpleasant life experiences and expressed their criticism and disagreement.

In this chapter, I will dispel the long-standing and widely embraced myths about Chinese rock. I argue that the country's centralized control system has been effective in ensuring that unwanted sounds cannot reach the public via concert stages, traditional publishers, broadcast media, and online platforms. I also argue that the rise of rock music scenes in economically reformed China, including the peasant worker rock that reached audiences of millions, does not point to the demise of authoritarian regulation. Instead, these rock songs and performances are promoted by the state as parts of alternative cultures to attract and influence those who are not persuaded by the state-sponsored musical representations. This chapter will explore how floating migrants shape rock music within the bounds of the regulations imposed on them and give it meaning. When being unable to overthrow or challenge the urban-biased policies that were the main cause of their hardship and marginalized status, some migrant rockers used these rock performances to attract public attention and support to improve their living conditions. This chapter also will also draw attention to a few migrant musicians who persistently explore the margins of

sanctioned musical expression, using metaphor and double meanings to articulate critique and satire.

Dispelling the Myths about Chinese Rock

Chinese rock has been a domain marked by fictional stories in which banned subversives win the public's support and become stars. Since the late 1980s, Chinese media have been spreading such stories of successful rebellion, attracting many Chinese non-conformists to become rock musicians.

The Fictional Stories of Successful Rock Rebellion

I was one of the Chinese youths captivated by media reports of Chinese rock's countercultural nature. The Chinese rock songs repeatedly broadcast by national and regional radio channels in the 1990s made me familiar with this form of music. From the newspapers my parents subscribed to and the popular music magazines I purchased at the newsstands, I learned how Cui Jian, globally renowned as "the Father of Chinese Rock," broke with established norms and defeated the authorities to win the support of the people. In high school, a dozen of my classmates and I became frequent rock concert goers, and some of them even formed a rock band named Yunxi, literally "sucking." At music festivals and fan clubs, I met young Chinese from different parts of the country who expressed their nonconformity by avoiding the mainstream and everything that was state-sponsored. The very act of listening to rock songs of our own choice and attending concerts of rockers reportedly being banned, as Huang Hao (2001) argues, suggested the power of individual agency.

At diverse rock concerts and festivals, I saw rockers from different social groups perform rock music to negotiate equality, express self-chosen identities, and resist the mainstream. In Chinese cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing, and Qingdao, these concerts and festivals attracted tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of young Chinese people and fostered a sense of autonomy among them. The most recent rock club gathering I attended was in April 2022 at a basketball court in Beijing's Chaoyang District, where the club members watched a live online rock concert by Cui Jian, the "Father of Chinese Rock," as a way to protest the government-imposed COVID-19 lockdowns. About 45 million people watched this live stream concert. Like the migrant rocker whose experience I described in the book's introduction, they made music to question the unfair rules they were forced to comply with and to criticize the ongoing situation that caused their suffering.

I began to question the credibility of these stories in 2011, the year when I started witnessing underground migrant rockers' failed efforts to be heard by the public. Although the term "underground" may have different meanings in different cultures, here it refers to music that cannot be published or publicly performed through publishers, traditional media, or online platforms. However, when I recounted their stories to fellow Chinese urbanites and non-Chinese audiences, many said they found them hard to believe. Influenced by the widespread myths of successful rock rebellions, they believed that musicians could always find ways to reach the public if they were "good enough," and cited examples such as Cui Jian and the Rising Sun, a nationally celebrated migrant rock band, as evidence.

Nimrod Baranovitch (2003) argues that Chinese rock is a nonconformist form of music that challenges the officially sanctioned discourse and mainstream ideology despite the state's attempts to ban and suppress it. Andrew Jones (1992), for his part, contends that Chinese rock music is "essentially a subversive form of expression" and an authentic voice of rebellion, produced and distributed outside the state-controlled mainstream of music. Jeroen de Kloet (2000, 2010) proposed the term "rock mythology" to draw attention to the worldwide romantic reading of China's rock culture as a countercultural movement overthrowing the established order. However, rather than questioning the supposed subversiveness of the well-known rock rebels portrayed in the myths, de Kloet attributes the success of China's rock rebellion to inconsistencies, in other words loopholes, in China's censorship system (de Kloet 2000: 243). This chapter extends the discussion of rock mythology by arguing that China's censorship is not internally contested and that successful rebels are not subversive but are sanctioned and promoted by the state to fulfill its agenda.

The Centralized Censorship System in China's Music Industry

To dispel the myth that a subversive musician can win the public's support in China, it is necessary to clarify the adjective "subversive." This book adopts the view, shared by floating migrant musicians, that a subversive song should be one that questions the communists' monopolistic control over the country, the legitimacy of the communist regime, the superiority of the socialist system over others, and the policies and decisions made by China's current leadership.

"There has not been one published or broadcast song that questions the legitimacy of the communist regime or the policies enacted by the current leadership of the party-state, even in this reformed China over the past forty years," I wrote on November 21, 2017, in an email response to an underground band who asked me for suggestions in revising their songs to circumvent the

censorial inspection of online sharing platforms. I had been trained to be careful not to over-generalize from field observation and experience. State Council Decree CLIV enacted in 1982, CLXV in 1994, and CCCXLIII in 2001 demand that copies of each published audio and video recording, including digital-online publications, be submitted to the archival centers of their respective administrative agencies. In the past years, I searched through these archives, private collections, flea markets, and catalogues preserved by record companies and broadcast stations in different parts of China. But I have not found one album, song, or other information to refute the statement I made on that day.[1]

Furthermore, my research in China over the past two decades suggests that centralized cultural control has permeated every corner of the country and has been effective enough to eliminate unwanted songs. The existing body of literature has contextualized state censorship to discuss the mechanism of suppression and exclusion in different cultures (see, e.g., Cloonan 2016; Hemetek 2007; Hernandez-Reguant 2002). The prevailing opinion, as Geoffrey Baker (2011) points out, is that even in authoritarian countries people can always find a way to dodge censorship in order to record, reproduce, and distribute their music independently and to give public performances regularly. Scholars discuss the rise of rock music in socialist contexts as indicators and factors of the transformations from monopolized control to a capitalist market economy (see, e.g., Szemere 2001; Ganev 2014).[2] Many sinologists contended that China's economic reforms after the 1980s had transformed it into a post-socialist country (see, e.g., Zhang Xudong 2008; Ho 2010; Bolesta 2015). However, as my research suggests, China's music industry has been centrally controlled and consists of state-owned television and radio stations, music companies that can only release songs via state-directed publishers, artists who must obtain government permission to give a public concert, and systematically manipulated online platforms.

First, although private and foreign-invested record labels are allowed to exist in mainland China after the 1990s, being sponsored and supervised by government departments and agencies has been a requirement for obtaining a publisher's license. Only licensed publishers are eligible to apply for a Standard Recording Code (*Biaozhun Yinxiang Zhipin Bianma*) that is issued by the Press and Publication Administration, a division of the Ministry of Propaganda, as both a unique identifier for a recording and legal permission to make the

1 Some parts of the discussion in this section also appear in my article that examine the rise of the Father of Chinese Rock in the 1980s, see Tang 2025.

2 At the same time, some scholarly works revealed how rock music was used as propaganda tools by socialist regimes (see, e.g., Ramet 2019; Pop 2016).

recording available to the public. Private companies and independent artists can only apply for a code through licensed publishers, which conduct the comprehensive, standard three-tiered censorial inspection on recordings before initiating the application process for a code.

Second, in every Chinese area, rural or urban, regional culture bureaus are in charge of reviewing and approving the proposal of each public concert within their jurisdictions, and they also supervise local concert venues, music troupes, cultural institutions, and artist agencies. Laws and decrees, such as the *Regulation on the Management of For-Profit Performance* (State Council Decree CDXXXIX enacted in 2005), granted these culture bureaus the duty to "direct, plan, coordinate, assist, and monitor" local performing activities as well as the rights to disband a group or to suspend or revoke a public performance permit of a performance venue, group, or individual. The decrees have also prescribed that performance venues, ranging from theaters, stadiums, and assembly halls to parks, clubs, and tea houses, are under the direction of local culture bureaus and do not provide space for unsanctioned performance (e.g., Ministry of Culture 1998). From the late twentieth century to this day, musicians must apply for approval to hold a public concert. The application includes the names of singers, as well as the titles, lyrics, and recordings of the pieces that will be played. Those found to perform unapproved changes will face a fine or the revocation of their permits. At the same time, the culture bureaus also formulate the goals and plans listed in the central government's directives into performance tasks for art troupes and musical institutions, arrange performance opportunities and venues for a song the state wants to promote, and organize singing contests and other activities to attract target groups' attention toward a form of music.

Third, the state owns all traditional broadcast channels. Central and regional stations, terrestrial, cable, and satellite channels are all operated by one single broadcast network. The NRTA, the command center of the network, formulates country-wide schemes based on the state's updated objectives, translates the schemes into directives periodically sent to the stations, and elaborates them at the meetings the heads and executive officers of the channels are required to attend. Regional Radio and Television Bureaus oversee the implementation of the directives that usually contain information on what kinds of music should be promoted or prevented. The stations create new programs or reserve primetime slots to ensure that those who are promoted reach mass audiences. Every program must go through multiple stages of review before being aired—a standard inspection procedure that has guaranteed the complete removal of unwanted sounds and images over the past forty years. Presenters, DJs, or guest musicians are unable to act against the state's regulations and instructions, especially in live programs which

are scripted, monitored, and broadcast with a delay under Article 15 of the Broadcast Security Administrative Regulation to prevent "mistakes."

Since January 2008, the Administrative Regulations on Online Audio and Video Services have prescribed that only state-controlled enterprises are qualified to provide streaming and sharing services or to produce programs broadcast on the internet. Like traditional broadcast media, streaming services operate with a standard internal censorship mechanism and carry out the state's directives under the coordination of NRTA. Video and audio sharing platforms require users to verify their biometrically registered cell phone numbers. The Internal Censorship Departments of these platforms not only eliminate harmful content but also compile the Delinquent Uploader Database that stores real-world identity information of those who attempt to upload and distribute the content. Individuals on that database are forbidden from sharing videos and audio on the platforms in China for one year, three years, or permanently.

During my research, I observed event organizers, venues, and platforms placing state regulations above artistic intentions and market interests, fearing the loss of their license. Operating as parts of the coherent whole, music publishers, broadcast channels, and government departments and agencies in charge of monitoring performance activities and venues have ensured that the state is capable of preventing a song or artist from reaching audiences of more than 200 and of eliminating a form of music from this country's above-ground musical life. A producer, editor, broadcast DJ, or inspector will be fired, or expected to resign, from their position for failing to detect and remove a song that attacks the communist regime or its policies in effect.

Aboveground Rock: State-Sanctioned Rock Rebellions and A Music Culture of the Communist Urban Elite

While the centralized censorship system has thoroughly erased subversive music, it was through state-owned publishers and state-organized concerts that the heroes of rock myths first reached large audiences. In other words, it was not until the state-controlled media reported these rock phenomena as being banned and suppressed that they began being sanctioned and promoted via this same authoritarian system. Rather than serving as a tool to overthrow the communist regime, rock music has been associated with the privileged identity of communist offspring and urban elite since it was introduced in mainland China.

The history of Chinese rock can be traced back to Lin Liguo (1948–1971), who was the son of China's Minister of Defense and was killed in a plane crash

with his parents after they lost a political struggle (see Teiwes and Sun 1996; Jin 2002). Different from ordinary people, communist officials and their families lived in the urban "family compounds" (*da yuan*) built for Chinese government and military institutions.[3] Their children were self-referred to as "red offspring" to emphasize their elite status over the rest of Chinese society and their inherited power to lead social and cultural trends (Jiang and Ashley 2000). According to the memoir of his fiancée Zhang Ning (1998), Lin was a fan of the Beatles and formed a rock band called United Armada (*lianhe jiandui*) in the family compound of the Beijing Air Force (see also Zhu 2006; Zhang 1999).

In 1986, fifteen years after Lin Liguo's death and ten years after the end of Mao's Cultural Revolution, Cui Jian, another "red offspring" from the family compound of the Beijing Air Force, received the privileged opportunity to promote rock music in China via state-controlled channels. In 1985, Cui and his band delivered their first rock performance at Zhengxie Assembly Hall (Lu and Yang 2003: 9,16), the workplace of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference's standing committee. In 1986, at a "100 Pop Star" concert held to celebrate the International Year of Peace, Cui Jian delivered a rock performance at the Capital Stadium, which has been discussed in the existing literature as a subversive action that marked the start of Chinese rock (Chen 2023; Liu 2016). However, these academic studies did not mention that the concert was organized by China's Ministry of Culture and broadcast by Beijing Television Station, and that copies of its video recording were distributed via China Audio-Video Publishing House, directly supervised by the Ministry of China (see, e.g., Zhou and Huang 2011; Zhao 2003). On July 18, 1988, *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, published the music score to introduce Cui Jian and his rock music to a national audience.

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3 The "family compound" (*da yuan*) is a form of community with Chinese communist characteristics. In the 1960s, borrowing the successful experiences of the Communist Soviet Union, the Chinese government invented several new administrative policies that divided urban society into many "systems" (*xitong*), (including "transportation system," "governmental system," "medical system," and "military system"), to cover and control every aspect of urban life. These systems could be further divided into many *danwei* (literally "units"), which were usually single institutions: a factory, a school, a hospital, a military camp, or a provincial or municipal government. Since the 1960s, people working in a certain "unit," along with their family members, have been assigned to live in residential complexes built near to the institution so that they could be more easily socially organized, politically controlled, and culturally manipulated. These complexes were named "family compounds" (*jiashu yuan or da yuan*) and contributed to the formation of social classification and hierarchy.

As later rock stars became active on China's mainstream stage, Cui Jian and his music helped get the public to embrace the state's new policy at the time. In 1989, for example, Cui Jian released his first rock album, *Rock on the New Long March*, and performed his eponymous concert at Beijing Exhibition Center Theatre.[4] This album has been discussed as "subversive nostalgia," that is, as a means of disrupting the present official order by exposing what the state wanted to suppress (see, e.g., Lee 1995; Baranovitch 2003). Nonetheless, these existing studies did not pay attention to the fact that the Chinese government convened a series of national and regional assemblies in the 1980s to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the victory of the Long March to remind people of the past historical achievement of the Communist Party (see, e.g., Cao 1987). Delivered by the red offspring, effectively the country's new generation of cultural leaders, the album and concerts conveyed a resolution to uphold the communist ideology and lead the Chinese people along the reformed socialist path of socio-economic development (see Tang 2025 for a more elaborate discussion). However, at the same time, Chinese media and chronicles written by the editors of Chinese media had been telling the public that Cui Jian and his rock music were banned by Chinese authorities but won the support of ordinary people to force the government to lift the ban (see, e.g., Jin 1989; Zhao 1992).

Although Chinese media portrayed Cui Jian as a subversive voice for the ordinary, he proudly highlighted his identity as a member of the social elite and emphasized the superiority of urban citizens over rural ones. Cui didn't even try to hide his condescending attitude towards musicians from ordinary families and his discrimination against musicians from the countryside. "People like us, who grew up in those kinds of places [the family compound of government and military institutes] are very rare [in the music sphere]," he said frankly in an interview with his friend Zhou Guoping. "In China, people's attitude towards arts is that they can bring them out of rural areas. Most musicians just want to become a rustic phoenix flying out of a chicken coop." "Everyone thinks that I'm intentionally using this kind of music to represent grassroots, but I'm not," he later added, "I just freely express myself, and at the same time, I'm having fun" (all of these quotes are from Jian and Zhou 2013: 87).

4 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Juld6fJt9Bg&list=RDJuld6fJt9Bg&start_radio=1 (accessed on August 11, 2025) for an audio recording of "Rock on the New Long March," after which the album was named.

Floating Migrant Rockers: Joining the Urban Music World

For many floating migrants I have worked with, making rock music is not only a means of self-empowerment or resistance but also a way of claiming a place in the globalized urban cultural life. Born between the 1970s and 1990s, they became familiar with rock music via CDs, cassettes, and broadcast media. The rock stars they encountered during this time came predominantly from the urban upper and middle classes and openly expressed their class identities. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the floating migrants followed national trends in rock music with portable CD and MP3 players. Today, they generally stay abreast of the latest trends in rock through short-form videos and streaming platforms, alongside a continual algorithm-generated feed of new clips. However, any of these new media platforms will only broadcast rock videos from state-sanctioned concerts and state-owned media.

Born in a small village located in the mountainous Guangdong Province, Ji Peng recalled his first encounter with rock music:

> I received a [rock] cassette as a birthday gift when I was 15 from my cousin living in Shenzhen city. He told me that it was the most cutting-edge, cool music in the world. The electronic sound was a little bit weird to me at the beginning. But I fell in love with it soon and felt that I was meant to leave my village to discover the outside world where this music was created. (Interview with the author, Shenzhen city, September 14, 2012)

Brought up in a rural region, Ji did not want to fall in the footsteps of his parents' lives: being confined to a small village, working in the fields or mushrooming in deep mountains, marrying a girl from the same village, and watching TV as entertainment. By contrast, the allure of urban life—people wearing weird but fashionable clothing and hairstyles, harsh yet beautiful neon lights, and loud, heart-racing electronic sounds—drew Ji to the city and led him to become a floating migrant in Shenzhen.

Other floating migrants used music to ease their status of inferiority in cities and blur the boundary with urbanites. When I first met Yang Xueliang in November 2011 in Beijing, I was impressed by the contrasting personalities he demonstrated in rock performances and in his daily life. As a bassist in his band, Yang performed rock music passionately and aggressively, yet was shy and quiet after he put down his instrument. According to his roommates and co-workers, he was once bullied at a downtown supermarket by several urban seniors and was very depressed during the first couple of years in Beijing. "Many things embarrassed me when I was new in this city. I didn't know how to buy subway tickets, and I didn't know how to use ATM machines," he opened

up to me after I spent several months serving as a back-up guitarist in his band. "They [urbanites] looked at me, and I knew they were thinking 'such a country bumpkin' (*xiangxia lao*)" (interview with the author, Beijing, December 14, 2011). When some of his migrant friends adopted the local dialect and dressed stylishly to assimilate with the local urbanites, Yang spent all his spare time learning electric bass guitar from one of his neighbors, a professionally trained but underground rocker, just to prove that he was not a bumpkin. He finally got the chance to become a bassist of a migrant rock band in 2010 and gave some informal concerts at public open spaces located in underdeveloped areas of Chaoyang District, South Beijing. "Some locals stopped to watch our performances. Sometimes they clapped their hands for us," he said proudly. "I told them I used to be a farmer. They said they couldn't believe it" (interview with the author, Beijing city, December 14, 2011). Today, Yang continues to learn instrumental and vocal skills through influencers' online videos.

The floating migrants' rock performances I have experienced and observed roughly fit into three kinds: 1) the ones that were confined within the underground and failed to pass the censorial inspection for reaching the public, 2) the ones that obtained the permission to appear at small-scale public concerts, published albums, or cultural events arranged by the state for migrant workers, and 3) the ones that were given the opportunities to appear on national media stages reaching audiences of millions. Performances in the first and second categories included mainly songs written by migrant rockers. But in the third category, performances were dominated by songs from China's mainstream rock stars. In the next section, I will examine the performances in the third category with a focus on a migrant-rock band the Rising Sun (*Xuri Yanggang*).

Peasant Worker Rockers on China's Mainstream Stage: "Grassroots Voices Moving China"

> Life is not full of heavenly sounds and beautiful flowers. There are also unsatisfactory, disappointing situations and unpleasant phenomena. I am not saying that these should not be represented in our arts. The point is how to represent them […] If our literary and artistic works simply describe the present situation and plainly reveal the darkness without praising light, showing aspiration or providing moral guidance, we cannot inspire the people to march forward. They should reflect real life in a combined realist and romanticist manner, to dispel the darkness with light, to overcome the ugly with virtues, and to help the people see the good, hopeful and a dream that will soon come true.

> President Xi Jinping, speech given at the Forum on Literature and Art (Xi [2014] 2015)

In mainland China, the characteristics of rock music on the mainstream stage were established as early as the state's promotion of the Father of Chinese Rock. On July 16, 1988, *People's Daily* released its first editorial on Chinese rock, not only introducing Cui's music to the national public but also asserting that Chinese rock serves as a cathartic outlet that encourages individuals to contemplate their lives. It states that the appeal of Chinese rock lies in its ability to transform experiences of hardship into moments of emotional release and renewed vitality. Rather than merely articulating despair, it can cultivate resilience, restore a sense of dignity and pride, and offer listeners a way of breaking through the confusion and disorientation of everyday life (Gu 1988). Soon after, numerous articles appeared in newspapers, professional magazines, and scholarly journals to spread this notion of Chinese rock among music practitioners and the public (see, e.g., Jin 1989; Zhao 1990). Indeed, it is this notion of Chinese rock that continues to prevail up to today.

These state-defined qualities of Chinese rock have been established jointly by state-owned broadcast media and cultural bureaus, which determine what can reach national audiences and who can perform on China's mainstream stages. Over the past decades, mainstream Chinese rock has been a legitimate space to articulate and share experiences of frustration and sadness, thus serving as a channel for listeners' negative feelings. Yet this expressive freedom has clear limits. While musicians may convey negative feelings, they are prohibited from mentioning the concrete sources behind these feelings, thus avoiding direct references to social or political conditions that might conflict with officially sanctioned narratives (see Tang 2020: 205–206). On the other hand, the release of negative feelings is always followed by an expression of confidence in a bright future and a determination to dedicate oneself quietly and selflessly. Thus, the notion that these public rock performances are subversive and rebellious is a myth, since the performers do not and are not allowed to elaborate on the sources of their confidence and the causes to which they dedicate themselves.

Combined, these factors engender the vagueness that characterizes the musical expression of floating migrants' rock performances on the mainstream stage. These performances employed a set of musical language, techniques, and styles that contrast sharply with the state-sponsored art troupes, providing alternative images and voices for those who had not been convinced by the official representations. However, rather than challenging the official truth or actually revealing social inequality and discrimination, they create alternate

images and voices that blend into and align with the official demands of musical representation, for example, by depicting floating migrants as optimistic and hopeful and inspiring them to quietly strive in suffering.

The most famous floating migrant rock performance took place in September 2010. In a 10-square-meter dorm room crammed with narrow bunk beds, messy tables, emptied beer bottles, two floating migrants, Liu Gang and Wang Xu, covered a rock song "In Spring" (*Chuntian Li*) from mainstream Chinese rock star Wang Feng. They presented themselves similar to construction workers in the summer: naked to the waist and wearing shabby shorts. They smoked and drank beer while singing to wooden guitars, an instrument that happened to be described in the lyrics:

> I remember a spring of many years ago
> I had not cut my long hair
> I didn't have a credit card
> I didn't have a girlfriend
> And I didn't have a home with 24-hour hot water
> But I was very happy then.
> Although I only had a ragged wood guitar,
> On the streets, under the bridges, and in the fields
> I sang those songs that no one wanted to listen to
> If ever there comes the day when I become old and helpless
> Please bury me in that spring …
> If ever there comes the day when I am ready part with this world
> Please bury me in that spring
> I'm staring at the spring at this moment
> It is still as warm as that time
> I have cut off my long hair and shaved my beard
> The pain is gone with the breeze
> But I still feel sad
> Time left me only deeper confusion
> My tears are pouring down
> On this sunny spring day
> If there is one day when I become old and helpless
> Please bury me in that spring
> If ever there comes the day when I am ready part with this world
> Please bury me in that spring

The performance was recorded by a low-resolution camera, uploaded to multiple Chinese social media websites and online sharing platforms, and promoted via their advertising platforms to attract over ten million viewers. As I write these sentences, the video recording is still globally accessible on YouTube, with

a title summarizing its content: "Peasant Worker Covered 'In Spring': Moving us to Tears." [5]

However, Liu Gang and Wang Xu were not peasant workers in its strict sense. Although they were born in rural areas and resided in Beijing as floating migrants, they made a living as street musicians rather than as state-promoted construction or factory workers. Nonetheless, to this day, Liu Gang and Wang Xu remain the most famous "peasant worker musicians." Unlike migrant rock bands confined to the underground or small-scale regional concerts, Liu and Wang appeared on China's most-watched television shows to perform selected songs from the repertoires of China's mainstream rock stars. "Mainstream rock stars" here refers to professional rock artists who consistently receive privileged opportunities to perform rock music on state-controlled media and at stadium concert stages.

"In Spring" is a song by Wang Feng, one of the mainstream rockers in contemporary China. Born in Beijing and professionally trained at the Central Conservatory of Music, Wang Feng proudly named his rock band Baojia Street No. 43, after the address of this elite music school. Wang Feng's rock music inherited some basic qualities from the pioneers of China's mainstream rock. In addition to embracing up-to-date musical elements from the global landscape of popular trends, Wang adhered to the conventional lyrical style established in Chinese rock as early as the 1980s. In his songs, ambiguous expressions open to multiple interpretations and complaints about difficulties and negative encounters are always followed by a conveyance of confidence in a bright future. A critic, quoted from a rock movie, commented on Wang's rock songs as follows: "I tend to see them more as plastic artificial flowers that were assigned to decorate a pop scene. They are rebellious outside but well-behaved inside" (Zhang Tianpan 2010: 92). The "rebellious outside" distinguishes his rock performances from state-sponsored propaganda music, while the "well-behaved inside" separates them from Chinese rockers who are genuinely marginalized or being confined underground.

In 2003, during the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Beijing and other major Chinese cities, Wang released the song "Forever and Ever" (*Zhidao YongYuan*) to comfort people being forced to quarantine: "Putting our hearts together will make us brave." Carrying forward the style of China's rock pioneer, this song portrays the role model of an optimistic "I": "I stand

5 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6solhayYFo&list=RDT6solhayYFo&start_radio=1 for the amateur video which was posted in YouTube in 2011 (accessed on August 11, 2026).

like a giant between life and death with a smile."[6] Frequently used by Central Television Station as both a theme song and background music for motivational stories, "Flying Higher" (*Feide Genggao*) is a rock song written by Wang Feng in 2004. With a more restrained musical mood, the male voice enters in a lower vocal register to convey a vague narrative of hardship to evoke emotional reactions among ordinary people who encounter diverse hardships in life:

> The reality is like shackles
> That is hard to break free
> They are mysterious and sharp like knives
> Hurting me again and again

After evoking shared sentiments among listeners, the held-back energy then bursts into full rock drive. The acceleration of tempo and the intensification of instrumental texture combine with a sudden surge in volume to carry the motivational words:

> I know the happiness I want
> Is in a higher sky
> I want to fly higher, fly higher
> Dancing with strong wind and breaking free from the shackles
> Stirring up the storm and howling with heart
> Flying higher[7]

In 2007, Wang spearheaded a rock movement named "Going Back to Nature" (*Huigui Benzhi*). He explained that natural music should be one that assumes social responsibility, embraces bright thoughts and ideas, and serves as "the healthy food for the mind" (Wang Jian 2012). He suggested that rock musicians must have a clear mind, a smiling heart, and the courage to give listeners positive energy (see also Ou 2021). As part of this movement, Wang wrote, or adapted, "In Spring," a song initially written by Liu Gang and Wang Xu and quoted at the beginning of this section.

According to Wang, "In Spring" is a song about the people's belief in and pursuit of "spring," despite their confusion, powerlessness, and adverse circumstances. "Life disappoints us and makes us sad. That is what real life always does. But this fact is not supposed to make us pessimistic." In this way, Wang's outlook is very similar to that of China's supreme leader quoted at the beginning

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6 An excerpt from "Forever and Ever."

7 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHSjoxiHz10&list=RDQHSjoxiHz10&start_radio=1 for Wang Feng's live performance of "Flying Higher" (accessed on August 11, 2026).

of this section. "Rather, you are supposed to be more positive to face your life because you know that only a positive life-attitude can rescue you and give you hope."[8] Traditional open chords, clear melodic contours, and steady drumming patterns were employed to carry the lyrical expression. In the above-mentioned video of September 2010 where Liu Gang and Wang Xu performed "In Spring," they had the stereotypical appearances of migrant workers and a stage setting that emulated migrants' substandard living conditions. They portrayed the "I" who had no money, lived below the standard, and whose voice could not be heard. That "I" was also willing to swallow tears and to work quietly.

In the several months following September 2010, state-owned central and regional channels collaborated to rapidly promote Liu Gang and Wang Xu's performance of "In Spring." After announcing themselves as a rock band named "The Rising Sun" (*Xu Ri Yang Gang*), a name containing both of their given names, they received an invitation from the production team of *Do You Remember* (*Wo Ai Ji Geci*), a music program on Zhejiang Provincial Television. The TV host introduced them as peasant workers and stirred the studio audience to give a standing ovation, not only for the musical performance but also for the musicians' social contribution as peasant workers. On November 13, 2010, in Shanghai, the two performers then appeared on the stage at Wang Feng's stadium rock concert, themed "Blooming! Rock Heroes," in front of an audience of 80,000, as reported by the China Central Television Station (Gao Lei 2011). In the same month, they won second place at the *Avenue of Stars*, a singing competition produced and televised by China Central Television Station, with a mission to discover musical talent from the grassroots. They also received the chance to sing "In Spring" at China Central Television Station's 2011 Spring Festival Gala, the most-watched television show in China, again portraying themselves as peasant workers.

At the same time, over a hundred Chinese news and academic media released articles to foster public opinion in three aspects: First, they highlighted Wang Xu and Liu Gang's identity as peasant workers and quoted from Liu that their rock performance deeply revealed the reality (see, e.g., Fan 2011; Li Renping 2011). Second, they portrayed how peasant workers' "Singing Moves China to Tears" (quoted from the title of a *Xinmin Evening News* report; see Liu Yu 2011). These news articles suggested that Wang and Liu's performances of "In Spring" reflected the experience of peasant workers pursuing their dreams in the city and quietly overcoming hardships one after another. Finally, in Wang and Liu's

8 Transcribed and translated by the author from the interview conducted by the Sina Entertainment at its Online Chat Room on August 3, 2009, from 13:30 to 14:30 Beijing time.

case, they achieved success. They further cited socially influential celebrities and higher-ranking government officials as saying that "this song made me well up" (see also, e.g., Wang Li 2011). The third aspect described their rock-making as voices from the silenced underclass. Journalists told the readers that peasant workers are a neglected social group in Chinese society and their social status and economic situation needed to be improved. Sociologists informed the pubic that rock music is a means of self-empowerment for Chinese grassroots groups and that underclass singers standing on the mainstream stages reflect the cultural freedom and open-mindedness of Chinese society (see, e.g., Su 2011; Wang and Yang 2011).

From 2011 to 2014, Wang Xu and Liu Gang gave over thirty performances as peasant workers at music shows and competitions televised by state-controlled media channels (Xue 2013). In addition to the existing pieces borrowed from mainstream rockers, they also performed rock versions of patriotic and propaganda songs. Although these songs were mostly written by professional musicians from the urban elite, they were presented on the mainstream stage as voices of the silenced grassroots. As representatives of peasant workers, Wang Xu was appointed in 2012 to the Standing Committee of the People's Political and Consultative Conference of Shangqiu, his hometown (see also Wei 2019; Zhao 2011).

At the same time, privately owned companies began collaborating with them to leverage their popularity for commercial purposes and commodify their grassroots expression. Record producers tailored new songs for Liu Gang and Wang Xu, in the same style as "In Spring," as exemplified in "Hope will be at Next Stop" (*Xiwang Yongzai Xia Yizhan*), written by producer Xiao Quan. Here, a moderate tempo is combined with steady rhythmic patterns to give space for lyrical expression. Motifs repeat with small variation and stepwise motions to prepare for highlighted inspirational words approaching the end of the song:

> Learn how to face disappointment with a smile
> There is nothing you can't get through.
> The important thing is not what you have now
> But the direction you choose
> Every heart admiring sunshine
> This is a song for you.
> Standing still facing the wind and rain
> My singing is getting louder …

We are walking in the journey of life
Hope will be realized at the next stop …[9]

In "Sparrow" (*Maque*), Wang Xu and Hu Xiaoou portrayed a peasant worker who feels like a sparrow without a nest in the city and "resists the dark with not-so-tough skin." But "I sing toward the sky, accompanied by a mild wind. That is the simplest and happiest moment in a day … I want to live in happiness, although I'm just a sparrow."

However, as soon as they began positioning themselves as professional musicians rather than as representative peasant workers, they stopped appearing on televised stages and at mainstream stadium concerts. Like other grassroots musicians who lost the support of the system and thus the privileged opportunities, their careers as professional musicians and their commercial albums were not successful. Although they were invited a few times as guest singers on televised programs to assist newly discovered musical talents from the grassroots, they were no longer the musical heroes in the spotlight. Nevertheless, the transient success as peasant worker rockers helped them move out of the urban village and become urban citizens.

Aboveground Floating Migrant Rock: Performing a Partial Reality

When the Rising Sun delivered the state-sanctioned "peasant worker rock" on media stages to reach national audiences of millions, some other migrant rockers received permission to perform at smaller-scale concerts and local music scenes. Unlike the Rising Sun, these migrant rockers performed mainly their own songs, occasionally conveying criticisms and satire. Different from state-sponsored migrant art troupes, these migrant rock groups were relatively independent and not directed by state-appointed directors. However, in order to pass the censorial inspection of publishers and cultural bureaus in charge of reviewing and approving all proposals for public performances, their music's complaints, criticism, and satire had to remain within the bounds of the imposed regulations. They maintained reciprocal relations with state agencies, which helped them secure a degree of official endorsement and media attention, thereby improving their living conditions in the cities.

9 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3pcFkcTHBc&list=RDi3pcFkcTHBc&start_radio=1 for a recording of the song on YouTube (accessed on August 11, 2026).

In the fall of 2011, I began working with a rock group called The New Worker Art Group (*Xingongren Yishutuan*). The group consisted of some rock musicians who resided in Picun, an urban village and slum located in the Chaoyang district of south-central Beijing. I still remember vividly my first visit to this group. At 7:30 a.m. that morning, I walked out of my home located in Xicheng district in the heart of Beijing. I first spent about 30 minutes on the crowded subway train and then changed to a bus that took 45 minutes to bring me to outer edge of the city, which was followed by a bumpy, suburban bus ride that ended 78 minutes later. For thousands of floating migrants living in Picun, this was a commuting journey that they had to experience twice per day, 5 to 7 days per week.

Upon stepping off the bus, I was right beside two lidless, huge garbage bins and felt confused and detached from these surroundings. The densely packed buildings of weak quality, the pitted, messy road, and the foul odor made it hard to believe that I was still in Beijing. The location of the New Worker Art Group was not marked on the official map of the city or digital map apps. I kept having to ask for directions from locals in order to find my way through substandard dwellings. Finally, I was directed to a dwelling and was told that the members of the group were renting the place to live there together with their families. The small courtyard of the building was filled with plastic bottles, cardboard boxes, and broken electronics—all of which were headed to recycling centers in exchange for money to cover everyday expenses (see Figure 4).

The members of the group were not at home, but I was welcomed by several children of these musicians and by other floating migrants who lived close by. Many floating migrants chose to live and work for a living on their own, usually sending money back to their children and elderly parents who lived relatively comfortable, stable lives in their hometowns. Yet others did not want to be separated from their beloved wife and kids. The problem they faced, however, in Beijing at least, was that they could not enroll their children in public school, given the lack of a legally registered hukou status. Foreigners and wealthy non-Beijingers, in the meantime, could send their children to private schools. Without a lawful residency or the capacity to pay for the expensive tuition of private schools, children of floating migrants were thus excluded from primary education.



Figure 4: *The rented dwelling of New Worker Art Group located in Picun, Beijing. Photographed by the author on November 24, 2011.*

In September 2004, the New Workers Art Group released their first CD, *All Migrant Workers Are A Family* and received royalties of about 75,000 yuan (about 10,000 US dollars). According to the interviewed group members, they spent the funds on building an elementary school for floating children in Picun. With permission from the local government, they used the money to renovate an abandoned village school built in the 1970s. They named the school Tongxin, which can be translated as "be of one mind" or "be united." The amount of money only allowed them to redo the roof, install heaters, and provide basics such as desks, chairs, and blackboards (see Figure 5). At the time of my visit, they were still using the building's handwashing sinks and faucets from the 1970s (see Figure 6). Starting in 2005, the New Worker Art Group began to attract support for Tongxin Elementary School through their rock music-making. Their small-scale concerts at local universities and community centers attracted not only donations but young volunteers who served as teachers for the school. The New Workers Art Groups also built a small Migrant Workers Art Museum in Picun, exhibiting items such as payroll slips, employment contracts, workwear, and mail between floating migrants and their families. Over the past years, the group has been using their music to generate income and to raise funds for the maintenance and operation of the school and the museum.



Figure 5: *A classroom of Tongxin Elementary School. Photographed by the author on November 24, 2011.*



Figure 6: *The handwashing area of Tongxin Elementary School. Photographed by the author on November 24, 2011.*

I met with some members of the New Workers Art Group later that day and began my research with them and other migrant rock bands in Beijing. I became a frequent visitor to Picun and immersed myself in their musical activities and lives in this urban slum. A year and a half later, in February 2013, I conducted a series of formal interviews with members of New Workers Art Group to summarize a general overview of the group's historical development and mission, as well as the personal desires, pursuits, and views of individual members. In 2002, Sun Heng, a musician born in rural Henan province and a graduate of the music education department at Anyang Normal University, founded the group. Sun arrived in Beijing in 1998 and became a resident singer at bars and pubs. He had never been a factory or construction worker. He identified himself as a *beipiao* (literally "one floating in Beijing") and believed that the term "worker" should also include musicians. In March 2002, Sun and a couple of other professional or semi-professional migrant musicians formed the group and began performing for migrant workers at construction sites and factories on weekends or on evenings of working days.

With the slogan "Sing Out Loud" (*Dasheng Chang*), the New Workers Art Group performed mainly rock music to, in Sun Heng's words, "defend the legitimate rights and interests" of migrant workers and "realistically represent the life of this community" (interview with the author, Beijing, February 24, 2013). Sun told me that the group collaborated with the legal aid association Son of Peasants (*Nongmin Zhizi*) of Beijing Normal University to disseminate legal knowledge among the floating migrant workers. By giving music performances as their peers, they not only informed migrant workers of the laws and decrees they must obey in the city but also of their "legitimate rights." Nonetheless,

"legitimate rights" primarily referred to the rights to recover unpaid wages, have safe working conditions in factories and on construction sites, and request work-injury compensation. Equal access to housing, healthcare, job opportunities, or educational opportunities was not part of the protected legitimate rights. The legal aid association helped migrant workers recover unpaid salaries and compensation from foreign and domestic factory owners and real estate companies, and to punish fraudulent recruitment agencies. However, they did not submit any report concerning the biased government policies or claim that migrant workers should have equal rights in the city as urbanites. Sun Heng told me that he was awarded the title of "ambassador of judicial justice" by China's Ministry of Justice in 2005.

Unlike underground migrant bands who still perform without a license in the slums on Beijing's outskirts, the New Workers Art Group received the honorary title of "Model Public-Spirited Art Group" by the Ministries of Culture and Propaganda as early as December 2005 (see also Yang 2017). Rather than using vague words to describe universal feelings of depression and sadness like the mainstream rockers, the New Workers Art Group made efforts to represent the real living conditions of the floating migrants. Their songs not only portrayed construction and factory workers but also acknowledged floating migrants in other occupations. For example, the song "All Migrant Workers Are a Family," after which their first album was named, started with such an inclusive acknowledgment:

> You come from Sichuan, I come from Henan
> You come from the Northeast, I come from Anhui
> No Matter Where We Come from,
> We work for a living
> You work at a construction site, I am in the house service industry
> You do small business, he is a waiter
> No matter how different our occupations are
> We come together in the same city to earn a living.

From May to July 2012, the group toured Hefei, Dongguan, Fanyu, and Shenzhen. At these small-scale concerts delivered at local social service centers or cultural centers, I interviewed some migrant audience members. Some of them told me that, compared to the Rising Sun's performances on the televised mainstream stages, they preferred the performance of the New Workers Art Group.

> "I could feel that these songs are written by our migrant workers, not written for us by those condescending great composers."

> "If they want to perform our voices, the voices should be from our own brains and hearts, not the words put into our mouths."
>
> "If they had never experienced what we experience, they don't know."
>
> "Wang Feng's rock songs are for urbanites. It is ridiculous that they want to empower us by using urbanites' songs for urbanites."
>
> "Their songs mentioned Sichuan, Henan, and Anhui. Do you know that a lot of us [migrant workers] are from Anhui, Sichuan, and Henan? Because these three provinces have the most economically backward rural regions. Either they did the research or they are themselves from these regions. I can tell that they care."
>
> Quoted from interviews conducted with the author in Hefei on May 19, 2012; in Dongguan on July 2, 2012; and in Shenzhen on July 4, 2012.

Nonetheless, "All Migrant Workers Are a Family" continued with a refrain that adopted the typical optimistic expression found in mainstream rock songs. Sun Heng, who wrote both the lyrics and the melody of this song, employed the long-established mainstream symbols of "wind" and "rain" to signify the migrant workers' resolve to overcome the hardships and suffering of their urban lives. He further borrowed signature musical characteristics from red classics—the marching-like rhythmic regularity, straightforward functional harmony, strong downbeats and cadences, and periodic lines—to create a sense of pride:

> We migrant-brothers hand in hand
> We won't be troubled in the journey of working
> We are not afraid of wind and rain,
> All migrant-worker brothers and sisters are a family.[10]

These mainstream elements helped the song pass the censorial inspections of the music publisher and the local cultural bureau. But they did not diminish the support among migrant audience members; some of them read between the lines and told me they believed these sentences were a call to unite and overthrow the unfair, unequal social and institutional system in mainland China.

Through songs written by its members, the New Workers Art Group crafted an identity that transcended the state-imposed framework of peasant workers and floating population. As their name suggests, they introduced themselves as "new workers." By replacing the label "peasant" with "new" and avoiding adjectives such as "outside" or "migrant," they claimed a more equal identity with

10 For the published recording of the song, see https://www.kugou.com/mixsong/jd3hv32.html (accessed on August 11, 2026).

urbanites. They used the term "new" to emphasize that they were a new generation of workers, born of the current needs of economic development and irresistible economic trends. Group members explained to me that they avoided the label of "peasant" or "outsider" not because they wanted to erase their rural past, but to get rid of the inferior status of a temporary passer-by. "We don't necessarily return to rural hometowns," said Xu Duo, a bassist of the group (interview with the author, Beijing, February 18, 2013). In my research conducted in other parts of China between 2012 and 2019, many migrant workers told me they planned to return to their rural roots once they had enough money in their savings accounts. But others made efforts to take root in the cities and raised their children as urbanites (see also Lv 2013: 6).

Their self-description as new workers was generally ignored by the majority of the organizers and hosts of their concerts, mostly government officials and staff members of state-owned organizations, who insisted on introducing them as peasant workers. In turn, such introductions did not bother the group members very much, some of whom chose to create their own meanings and statements by singing within the regulations. On November 25, 2011, the New Workers Art Group held a non-profit concert, coordinated by local government departments, at Beijing Language and Cultural University for about 500 college students and teachers. To open the concert, the organizer clarified its goal as drawing students' attention to the silent contribution and moving stories of peasant workers living around them in Beijing. After being introduced as representatives of peasant workers, the group members expressed their perspective on what their hometown is. As the leader of the New Workers Art Group, Sun Heng sang "Remember That Year" (*Xiangqi na Yinian*), a song he wrote to express his desires to return to the warm hometown where his parents were living. Whereas Xu Duo chose to sing his song "Beijing, Beijing," in which he combined power chords and increased volume and intensity to carry his statement repeated three times: "Beijing IS my home! Beijing IS my home! Beijing IS my home!"[11]

Like that of the Rising Sun, the music of the New Workers Art Group has been described by China's sole news media network as a rebellious voice from the silenced grassroots. Media articles and scholarly publications categorized them as "leftist rocker youngsters" (*zuo yaogun qingnian*), that is, the musicians and bands who perform to promote the ideas of freedom, equality, rights, reform, and fraternity (see, e.g., Kun 2013; Wang Hongzhe 2015). The New Workers Art Group is "different from regular bands," said Pu Wei (2021), a professor of

11 See https://www.kugou.com/mixsong/hi7cb9b.html for a recording of the song "Beijing, Beijing" (accessed on August 11, 2025).

the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in his article published in the official journal of the China Musicians' Association. He further argued that all members of the group shared the same ideals and values that glued them together "such as ecology, environmental protection, rural revitalization, the glory of laborers, the rights of workers, etc." (Wei 2021: 89) But, based on my observations of the group members, most of them care more about the welfare of their families, friends, and fellow members of the migrant communities than about the natural environment. For some of them, the state-promoted, unrealized concept of urban revitalization made less sense than the fact that their 70-year-old parents did not receive health insurance and retirement compensation as senior urbanites. They cared more about whether their children would have equal opportunities to attend the same public schools as children with registered local urban hukou. They hoped that the government could do something to improve their living conditions in the urban villages.

At concerts, the New Workers Art Group was introduced as a mouthpiece revealing the reality about floating migrants' urban life. But they had to convey the reality of the migrants' living conditions in carefully calibrated language in order to pass the censorship reviews, avoid punishment, and maintain a favorable record that would enable them to secure future performance opportunities and financial aid from the state and its agencies. "This Humble Village Is Our Home in the City" (*Zhe Aiai de Cunzhuang Shi Women zai Zhe Chengshi de Jia*), a song from the group's 2007 album *Singing for Laborers*, is a typical example of such carefully worded language. "The humble village" refers to Picun, and the group tried to represent their hard life in this urban village without violating established rules and regulations:

> At the side of modern apartment buildings of this city
> Some brick walls in disrepair constitute our humble village
> Brothers and sisters from all parts of China reside in the village
> We are here for better development
> In the rows of 10-square-meter rooms
> We all talk about the same topics with different dialects
> We squeeze ourselves into the crowed buses in the morning and we squeeze into the civilization of this city
> And then, we bravely face the hardships in our lives
> The winding lanes in the villages look dirty
> We all buy food in the lanes
> Henan-nese braised noodles, Shanxi-style langpi, Hangzhou-style steamed dumplings
> We can find food we had in our hometowns
> There is an unadorned migrant children's school in the village
> Children can study here, and happily play games
> At the construction site by the village, migrant folks wear safety helmets,

They industriously build beautiful buildings for others
We leave our hometowns only with hands and simple baggage
We work hard and we have not lost direction
We earn our rents to live in this humble village
Beside the beautiful townhouses and overpasses we construct
That battered radio is playing a folk opera from the Northwest
It resolutely and sonorously sings about the strength of life…

This song adopted elements from urban folk (*chengshi minyao*),[12] a genre that emerged in the 1980s in Chinese cities and was revived in 2006 as part of a "new folk movement" led by urban pop singers Zhou Yunpeng, Wan Xiaoli, and Li Zhi. The movement called for a return to the simple life in intensive, polluted urban life. The newer, revised style requested musicians to stay sensitive to what happens around them in daily life and to use simple tunes and instruments to carry the narrative of what they observed (see also Zheng 2015; Chen Zhi 2009). Written to take part in this ongoing urban popular trend, the song combined a simple tune and a relatively peaceful narrative with rock-like rhythmic patterns.

The song lyrics include symbolic items that frequently appear in songs written by state-sponsored composers and performed on mainstream stages, such as the safety helmet and the buddies who build the buildings. The lyrics were also adorned with stereotypical portrayals and expressions of optimism such as "work hard," "strength of life," and "bravely face the hardships in life." According to migrants I interviewed, they did so deliberately to feed the "radars" of the censors and authorities. "These great, busy men don't listen carefully to what we say and what we sing. But they have a kind of radar detecting good words and bad words. Therefore, we feed them with these good words, and they will be satisfied and stop paying attention to other parts of the song" (interview with the author, Beijing, December 25, 2012). The imposed restriction forbade them from exposing the darkness they encountered in the city. But they revealed the inequality by juxtaposing two contrasting images: the humble village where the migrant workers resided, and the beautiful townhouses and modern apartment buildings built by the migrants. Although they had to generate relatively positive images of their lives to pass the censorship reviews, they inserted the "dirty lanes" and "walls in disrepair" between optimistic self-expression and invited attention to the unadorned migrant child school.

12 See https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1av411i7bX/?vd_source=49b47812bc689e0063611633a3afe132 (accessed on August 7, 2025), which is a video of this song uploaded by Sun Heng. In this video, the audio recording of the song from the album was combined with pictures of Picun to visually represent the humble village.

By feeding the radars of concert hosts and censors, the New Workers Art Group once successfully published several songs that contained vague criticisms and calls for rebellion. Unfortunately, these songs have been eliminated from concert stages and even Chinese social media websites today. "The Future" (*Weilai Shidai*), for example, is a song written by Jiang Guoliang, the drummer of the band. Jiang used aggressive heavy metal sound to support a combination of metaphorical, angry satire with borrowed words from mainstream songs:

> We are living in an age like this
> People are being economically strangled into perverts
> The dead pile of power decays,
> Discharging pus and blood
> Flies and mosquitoes scream with bellies sticking out
> Avengers clench teeth…
> Let us shed sweat and youth,
> Strength and faith are in our hands
> Hand in hand, heart to heart
> To build the future of our own…
> To initiate a new age of justice

"Hand in Hand, heart to heart" has been a frequent phrase in communist propaganda songs written to persuade Chinese people to unite in fighting natural disasters or foreign enemies. "Shed sweat and youth," and "strength and faith" are terms constantly sung in the official musical representations of state-owned art troupes to portray model figures who selflessly dedicate themselves to the socialist construction. Bearing the accumulated connotations of propaganda, these terms deflected from the dark imagery and blurred the metaphorical satire. The group members clarified at concerts that the "flies" and "mosquitoes" stand for the capitalists, that is, the "bad" owners of factories and construction contractors who refused to pay fair wages and jury compensation. Nonetheless, some interviewed migrant audience members believed that the rockers used the metaphors of pests, perverts, and dead piles of power decay to criticize corrupted government officials and the current condition of Chinese society. Some of them thought that the amplified pounding beats and harshly distorted timbres of "The Future" are riotous (interviews, Beijing, December 27, 2012, and Chengdu, April 18, 2017). In the 2020s, songs like "The Future" were erased from Chinese social media and online sharing programs. As of the time I'm writing these sentences, the group is trying hard to keep the videos they uploaded on non-Chinese platforms. On July 20, 2025, I could still watch a recording of "The Future" on YouTube, which

does not provide any Chinese-language description or original lyrics but does provide Korean and English translations.[13]

Testing the Margins of Safe Musical Expression

With examples of China's mainstream rock stars and the floating migrants' performances in the media and public concert stages, the previous sections of this chapter disclosed how these allegedly rebellious phenomena were, in fact, state-sanctioned to give positive energy to those in adversity and to persuade them to assume assigned social responsibilities. This section will not discuss the subversive songs that challenged the legitimacy and policies of the communist regime, as that will bring not only attention but punishment to the underground musicians. Rather, I will present evidence that not all floating migrant musicians are willing to make their music "healthy food for minds," but are instead making efforts to test the boundaries of safe musical expression. I will briefly examine two songs that failed to pass the censorial inspection for public release but did not cause trouble for their creators, who are still active at public concerts today.

The first example is a song titled "These Fucking Days" (*Zhe Caodan De Rizi*), a song written by a migrant rocker whose name and information will not be disclosed. As a talented musician, he is very proud of his musical flexibility, as his compositions span a wide range of styles, sentiments, and themes, from romantic love in the hometown life to lavish praise of socialist achievements. On February 18, 2013, I revisited his small room located in Picun for our scheduled informal interview. After spending the whole afternoon talking about his musical pursuits and appeal, he decided to perform something for me that I could not hear in public performances. Accompanied by his wooden guitar, he sang:

> I was walking down the street in the city
> As a "temporary" person, and with my mashed youth.
> I was trying to find the happiness described in the legend
> But there are a lot of weird things in the city.
> There is something people can do, but they can't say
> There are some people who treat their pets better than people around them.
> So I came up with a dream
> I wanted to become a dignified pet.
> A pet that doesn't need to work over 10 hours on an assembly line.
> A pet that doesn't have to jump off a building to escape pressure.

13 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMMi1Jfal6M&list=RDYMMi1Jfal6M&start_radio=1 for the YouTube video (accessed on August 7, 2026).

A pet that doesn't need to worry about their fingers being eaten by the machines.
A pet that doesn't bear insults and abuse.
One day God heard my prayer and turned me into a Persian cat
Meow…

The boss of my factory bought me for his young mistress
I then learned his secret.
He usually said to his mistress:
"Sweetie, be good and don't cry
We can only earn money when society is stable
It is hard to be a boss now.
The young workers are more and more disobedient,
The American big bosses leave us less and less margins,
The 'leaders' are more and more hard to please now."
He said: "I'm a man supporting liberty and fraternity
So sweetie, don't play the fool like those workers,
You are an educated intellectual."
I failed to control my temper
I jumped on the boss, and I sank my teeth into his hand.

Meow…

I then escaped my boss's house.
It was midnight; I saw the workers from the night shift.
I decided to continue being a cat, which is much easier than being a man
I then went to the cat's domain.
An elderly cat was delivering a speech with arrogance
It said, "This is a new age.
No matter if the cat is black or white
It is a good cat if it can catch rats."
It said, "the floating cats are all over the city now
I tried to repatriate them, but it doesn't work well."
It said, "I have moved all my family members abroad
Only in this way can I feel safe to be an official here."
Then, he brought me to an expensive nightclub
The name of the club is "Heaven and Earth,"
There were very sexy lady cats there
They were students at Cat University.
It said we learned this from humans.
It means freedom,
I got very excited.

Suddenly the factory bell rang
It was just a beautiful dream.
Reality gives us nowhere to hide and run.
The only thing we can do is to fight bravely these fucking days.

Meow…
These fucking days.[14]

According to the musician, this song was composed based on the experiences of his migrant worker friends. It depicts a fictional dream of becoming a cat and comprises two parts: the first reveals the strategy of the "boss" who exploits migrant workers; the latter indirectly criticizes official corruption in current Chinese society through a confession by a cat leader in the "cat domain." The "boss" is greedy and only cares about how much money could be made. They disdain uneducated migrant workers, and even the mistresses they pick were "intellectuals." The musician explained that he used the intellectual mistresses to imply that the well-educated urbanites could abandon moral principles and were not more respectable than floating migrants. Although the "boss" and "intellectuals" claim that they support democracy and liberty, they expect the migrant workers to be obedient. Although they claim that they have good, gentle hearts and a sense of fraternity, they only want to please the "leaders" from whom they could make a profit and never treat migrant workers better than a cat. However, their power and privilege could only be realized in a stable society where migrant workers selflessly dedicate themselves without complaints.

The sarcasm in the second part of this song is pointed at the Chinese communist officials. The corruption and irresponsibility of these leaders were regarded by many floating migrants as the "source of sins and troubles" (*zuie yuantou*) in Chinese society in the 2010s. Some terms that frequently appeared in government reports and newspapers at the time were included by the musician in the "leader" cat's speech. "No matter if the cat is black or white. It is a good cat if it can catch a rat" is a famous dictum of Deng Xiaoping, who started the economic reform in the early 1980s. The decisions of this former leader of China accelerated urban development and modernization while casting rural residents and migrant workers as inferiors. Some corrupt officials sent their wives and children aboard, along with bribe money. "Heaven and Earth" (*Tianshang Renjian*) mentioned in the song was the name of a real nightclub at the time that was infamous for providing sexual services for the corrupt officials and rich businessmen.

In this song, the musician borrowed a rhetorical device from traditional Chinese folk songs—*jiewu yuren*—which means to implicitly comment on someone through a metaphorical portrayal of animals or natural phenomena. This

14 To respect the request of the musician, I did not record his performance during the interview but only documented the lyrics. Therefore, the musical analysis of this song will be missing here.

device was usually used in imperial China by folk singers to express veiled criticism of governors, especially when "speech crime laws" persecuted people for frank speech and artworks that depicted the truth. Through the eyes of a cat, he revealed the nature of the "bosses," and through a metaphorical description of the cat's domain, he mocked Chinese officials. Moreover, the comfortable dream of being a cat stood in sharp contrast to the migrant workers' difficult lives in reality. "I wanted to refute those who claim that China is a 'just and caring' society," he said. "This is a caring society for urban residents and for urban cats and dogs, but it is not for people like us. Those bosses' dogs eat meat every day, and their cats sleep all day. We work about 16 hours per day but can't afford a chicken leg. We are less important than pets" (interview, Beijing, February 18, 2013).

This song could not pass censorship because it contains sarcasm and criticism that exceed the state-allowed limits, and because the musicians refused to decorate it with mainstream, positive expressions to dilute the negative representations. At the same time, it did not cause trouble for the musician because it presented inequality as an individual case rather than exposing the biased government policies. Instead of blaming the socialist system or the leadership of the communists, it satirized only "corrupt" government officials and the "capitalists," that is, the private or foreign-owned factories and construction companies in Chinese contexts.

Likening humans to "lower creatures" (*diji dongwu*) such as rats, dogs, or chickens has been a deeply rooted form of sarcasm in China's grassroots culture for safely expressing contempt and loathing toward authorities. In an ancient folk song preserved in the *Book of Odes*, passed down from the 8th century B.C., the folk singer criticized the evil "big rat" to express anger at local officials: "Big rat, big rat, don't eat my grain. I have fed you for my whole life, but you never give anything back" (Zhou 2002: 156). However, the authorities usually can't find concrete evidence to prove who is being alluded to in the song and thus have no grounds to punish the singers. Such a metaphor was also employed by Dong Jun in a song titled "Bitten by a Dog" (*Bei Gou Yao*):

To get a job, it is not easy
So I am working hard.
I've never been late, and I've never left early
I'm not angry when I work overtime.

Boss Qian, has a dog
Who always looked at me these days.
He was angry, whatever I did,
Then I kicked his butt
Because he gave me a nasty bite.

The police then took me
But the dog wasn't willing to let me off.
I stayed in the police station for a whole night
They let me go the next morning.

In this song, Dong recounted an unhappy experience from his urban life and used the metaphor of "dog" to denote the foremen and factory guards hired by the "bosses" to watch and supervise migrant workers. "Bitten by a Dog" is a song that once successfully passed the inspection to be performed at small-scale concerts for migrant listeners. The "small-scale," as I've observed since 2012 in Chinese cities, conventionally means gatherings attended by fewer than 200 people. "Because the image of the policemen in this song is very positive," Dong explained. "I didn't even blame the boss. I said that it's the fault of his dog. But I think the buddies in the audience know that I'm not talking about dogs" (interview, Shenzhen, September 10, 2012).



Figure 7: *Dong and his band members rehearsing rock music. Photographed by the author in September 2012.*

Dong founded his own migrant rock band in Shenzhen, which he named Heavy D Sound (*Zhong D Yin*). He explained to me that the letter "D" sounds the same as the Chinese word "low," and he hoped his band would sing for the lower strata of society who carry heavy burdens. His band received fewer

public performance opportunities than the New Workers Art Group. However, by leveraging Shenzhen's location, Dong and his band were able to travel to Hong Kong to attend international music festivals and maintain connections with Taiwanese and foreign bands who also rocked for social justice.

In the spring of 2013 in Shenzhen, a migrant worker once shared his "survival wisdom" after a rock rehearsal:

> You can criticize [in the songs], but don't criticize the state and the party; you can complain, but don't complain about government policies; you can describe the bitterness of the life, but don't blame it on the communist social system; and finally, you are supposed to at least include one of the following ingredients in the songs: "hope/good future," "to work hard," and "to be good." (Interview, Shenzhen, April 24, 2013)

This code helped some floating migrant rockers survive in the country's aboveground but marginalized music scenes and also helped me recount my discussions in this chapter in a way that is safer for the migrant musicians I worked with.

Chapter 4: Sour Songs: Women's Voices in Patriarchal Contexts

A group that is silenced and disadvantaged in one social environment may enjoy privileges as the dominant group and manipulate the voices of those with less power in other contexts. As scholars point out, power imbalances shift in the migratory process and go beyond the hosts-migrants dichotomy (Glass and Peggy 2022; Avelino, Flor, and Rotmans 2009). In rural patriarchal societies, males are granted the dominant roles in their families and impose a set of feminine ethics upon their female partners. Being excluded from decision-making processes and silenced in many social spheres, their female partners use folk songs to complain and to persuade. Once these males become marginalized outsiders in the urban settings, they tend to borrow the songs of their silenced wives to vent emotional desires.

Females played peripheral roles in the music performances of floating migrants I participated in and observed in 2011–2013 and 2016–2018. The state-sponsored art groups represented mainly heavy manual workers—the very professions for which the cities are experiencing shortages, and which the state wanted migrants to take up in order to minimize infrastructure construction costs. Although female performers participated to ensure gender-balanced representation, they mostly performed in choirs or as backup dancers, supporting the male leads who sang as spokesmen for construction and factory laborers. Likewise, male migrant musicians dominated rock performances of migrant bands, whether on mainstream and televised stages or small-scale community concerts. Although the wives of these migrant rockers might have certain musical skills, they voluntarily or forcibly assumed the duties of caring for children, cooking for the band members, cleaning the performance and rehearsal venues, and preparing the equipment out of the spotlight.

In the introductory chapter of this book, where I present the second snapshot of the migrants' urban musical life, I documented a customary musical practice I observed among male floating migrants from Middle and North China. These migrants performed folk songs written in female voices to express and

vent in both private and collective life. "Walk through the Western Pass" (*Zou Xikou*), sung by Lao Wu in the snapshot, was one of these women's songs:

> My brother,[1] you are walking through the Western Pass,
> Anguish wrings my heart.
> When will you return?
> Please don't make me wait until my hair turns white.
>
> I grabbed your sleeves tightly with my hands,
> My tears are flowing into my heart.
> Although I have a thousand words,
> I know I can't persuade you to change your mind.
> I only hope you will come back soon.[2]

Lao Wu was not the first migrant to sing this song into my recorder. I still remember my first encounter with this song: on a rainy early summer afternoon in Beijing, accompanied by the sound of water dripping from the leaky roof onto an aluminum washbasin. This sweet, sad folk song, apparently meant to be sung by women, flowed from the mouth of a male migrant, who seemed introverted and even a little aloof, yet filled it with deep, honest emotion. "Walk through the Western Pass" was not an outlier, as my research found dozens of similar songs that were centuries-old or bearing twenty-first-century features, composed for women's voices but popular among the male-dominant migrant community. What qualities of these women's songs fascinated male floating migrants to accept and circulate them in a strange city? This is the question I was curious about at the time, attempted to explore throughout my research, and will discuss in this chapter.

Liumin: Floating Migrants in Pre-modern China

In the twenty-first century, the folk songs borrowed and circulating among floating migrants may have existed for centuries. The phenomenon of the floating population emerged after the 1980s, when biased policies and their attendant imbalanced modernization and economic growth drove rural residents to temporarily migrate to cities for work. Nonetheless, the history

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

2 This song is widely circulated among floating migrants and in some regions of Shanxi Province. The text and score of this song have been documented in detail by folk musician Yunde Han. According to Han, this song has a history of over two hundred fifty years.

of China, a country that has existed for thousands of years, is replete with waves of temporary domestic migrants. Before the twentieth century, these migrants were commonly called *liumin* (literally "floating people").[3] One of the main types of these liumin were male rural laborers from the Central China Plain who left their families behind to make a living in another social setting (Xu 2009; Jiang and Sun 2001). The left-behind wives of these migrants created folk songs, some of which have been handed down from generation to generation and were later borrowed by floating migrants in the twenty-first century. "Walk through the Western Pass" is one of these songs. To facilitate the understanding of this musical tradition, it is necessary to provide some historical and socio-cultural context that gave rise to these songs.

In *A History of Chinese Liumin*, Jiang Lihu and Sun Hongtao (2001) provide a widely accepted definition of the first wave of floating migrants: "A liumin is a type of migrant who, influenced by certain factors, spontaneously moves to another region but does not settle there" (3). In the existing body of literature about Chinese migration, scholars summarized three basic features of the liumin: voluntariness, randomness, and temporariness. These features distinguish them from the other two major categories in the history of Chinese domestic migrants: those who were forced by the government to move from one place to another, and those who picked their destination after careful deliberation and tended to settle down there permanently (see, e.g., Ding and Wang 1997; Ge, Cao, and Wu 1993). In his seminal work *A Theory of Migration*, Everett Lee (1966) conceptualizes migration as involving two main factors: pull factors, which are associated with the area of destination and act to attract people to it; and push factors, which are associated with the area of origin and tend to repel them (see Urbański 2022 and Parkins 2010 for recent applications of the terms in scholarly works). In the following section, I apply Lee's classical binary division as a way to locate the practitioners of the folk songs.

In the history of Chinese domestic migration, a liumin wave has always been caused by a combination of push and pull factors. However, push factors played a leading role in migratory decision-making in many cases, such as: when the revolutions or rebellions overthrew the old regime but failed to build a new one; when the state was invaded and lost its political and military control over the territory; when the country broke apart into smaller kingdoms, which kept

3 To avoid confusion in this chapter, I will use the original term *liumin* to refer specifically to the temporary domestic migrants before the establishment of PR China. And the term "floating migrants" will refer to all Chinese temporary domestic migrants, including both the ancient *liumin* and modern floating migrants.

fighting and absorbing each other; or when natural disasters struck (Zhang 1996). In these cases, thousands of families fled their hometowns, which were conquered, colonized, became battlefields, or were seriously damaged by floods and earthquakes, and started their floating journey to and among numerous other regions. Different from permanent migrants, who usually chose their destinations deliberately, the migration of these liumin families was primarily a response to emergencies; they often returned to their homeland as soon as it was restored to its former tranquility (see, e.g., Li Deyuan 2004; Liu Yajun 2002).

On the contrary, liumin populations driven by pull factors were dominated by male migrants and had commonalities with modern floating migrants. These liumin were attracted to the destination mainly by the economic opportunities it could provide. These pull factors were largely shaped by an imbalance in economic development across regions. When a certain area, rural or urban, achieved relatively rapid economic growth for some reason (such as abundant natural resources and favorable government policies), a large number of surplus laborers from other areas were attracted by better opportunities for jobs and wealth creation in general (Ge 1997). Unlike those liumin who usually uprooted their whole families to escape disasters, these young male laborers left their wives, children, and aged parents behind, with the intention to rejoin them in their hometowns as soon as they earned enough money.

Why were these male "floating migrants" reluctant to settle down? An idiom, *antu zhongqian*, frequently appears in the existing scholarly publications that try to answer this question. This idiom is from *Han History*, a work written during the East Han Dynasty (25–220 A.D.), and can be loosely translated as "to be content in one's homeland and be serious about moving." Scholars point out that ancient China was a self-sufficient agricultural society where the relationship between the people and their land was very intimate. They further argue that this intimate relationship has been cultivated into a pronounced homeland-loving sentiment that is widely spread among Chinese people, particularly the Han Chinese people living in the ancient territory of China (now the Shaanxi, Shanxi, Hebei, Henan and Shandong provinces; see e.g., Sun Wei 2009; Tu 1996). In *Street Criers*, Hanchao Lu (2005) further elucidates this sentiment of the Chinese people's "genuineness and belonging to their homeland" with a quote from Hermann Keyserling's *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher* (1925) as follows:

> Here the whole of life and the whole of death take place on the inherited ground. Man belongs to the soil, not the soil to man; it will never let its children go. However much they may increase in number, they remain upon it, wringing from nature her scanty gifts by ever more assiduous labour; and when they are dead, they return in childlike confidence to what is to them the real womb of their mother. (Lu 2005: 19)

The earliest musical activities of these liumin and their left-behind wives can be traced back to the Chunqiu period (770–476 B.C.). During that period, the government's land privatization policy led the ruling classes to encroach on cultivable land. As a result, waves of surplus laborers left their hometowns to become tenant-farmers in other rural regions (Liang and Sun 2001). These male floating laborers produced songs whose texts were documented in *The Book of Odes* (*Shi Jing*), an anthology of selected songs compiled in the 8th century B.C.:

> Yellow birds, listen to me
> Don't gather on my mulberry tree.
> Don't eat my corn.
> You are like the people of this land,
> Who are dishonest and hard to get along with.
> I miss my home.
> I want to return to my father and brothers…

Above is an excerpt from "Yellow Birds" (*Huang Niao*), a song whose lyrics have been preserved in the "Lesser Court Hymns" (*Xiao Ya*) section of *The Book of Odes* (see Heng 1980: 261). In this song, earliest liumin complained about the people they encountered in the host settings and expressed their eagerness to return to their hometowns and their families there.

The section "Airs of the States" (*Guo Feng*) of *The Book of Odes* (see Heng 1980: 18) features preserved texts of a few songs from women who were left behind by their migrating husbands. "Grass Insects" (*Cao Chong*) is a representative one:

> "*Yao! Yao!*" the grass insects are chirping.
> "*Ti! Ti!*" the crickets are hopping.
> While I do not see my husband,
> My anxious heart is filled with worries.
> Let me see him.
> Let me join him.
> My heart will soon be pleased.

Unfortunately, the melodies of these songs were drowned by the tides of history, such that these musical expressions survive only as texts.

A considerable portion of the surviving folk songs from ancient liumin and their left-behind wives were associated with the migration wave of "Walk Through the West Pass" (*Zou Xihou*)– one of the largest population movements in China's history, spanning from the 16th century up to the early 20th century. In the 16th century, after hundreds of years of efforts to extend the borders and to absorb neighboring small states, the Han-led Ming Dynasty finally took control of the Hetao region (now the Western part of Inner Mongolia), a region

that was rich in natural resources and farmland, scarcely populated, relatively economically developed, yet lacking manpower (Robinson 2020). These pull factors attracted many surplus laborers from the Central Plain, where economic development was slowing, the population was growing sharply, and the available cultivable land was declining (Dardess 2012).

Xikou, literally the "Western Pass," refers to one of the main passes of the Great Wall. As a series of fortifications constructed to protect the state against incursions by northern nomadic tribes, the Great Wall winds for over 6,000 miles along the northern border of the old Chinese empire, separating the Chinese Central Plain from the Ordos Plateau (today's Inner and Outer Mongolia) and Manchuria. A few passes (*kou*) were built into the Great Wall—the Western Pass, located in the northeast of Shanxi Province and connecting the Central Plain with the Hetao region of the Ordos Plateau, is one of them. These heavily guarded passes served as secure gates in ancient China and allowed passage only to troops, along with a small number of registered traders and travelers. After the government finally annexed the Hetao region and relaxed restrictions on population movement and access to the wall, numerous laborers and traders began to flow from China's heartland into Hetao. The Western Pass was a key pass that they had to traverse. This migration phenomenon is therefore referred to by Chinese people and scholars as "Walk through the Western Pass" (see, e.g., Wang Yi 2021).

Many of these migrants were from Shanxi Province, a region characterized by stony, infertile land, acute water shortage, and numerous hills, where agriculture was supplemented with commerce and the rearing of cattle and goats. However, since the late Ming Dynasty in the 16th century, Walk through the Western Pass became a new option for ambitious, energetic young men. This trend was documented by Dongyang Li in *Collected Statutes of the Great Ming Dynasty*:

> It was a densely populated region. Roughly 80 to 90 percent of the population was farmers, and 10 to 20 percent was traders [...] In recent years, a lot of laborers rush to the other side of the Great Wall. They go there with ploughs and plowshares in the spring, and often return after autumn harvests with bags filled with money and grain. When I first arrived in this region, I was afraid that these people would settle down there for good. But then I learned, through my investigation, that these laborers are mostly from large and poor families. These families send healthy, strong men outside the Pass to feed the unproductive children and the elderly back home. (Li [1576] 2007)

These liumin were called "wild geese" (*yanxing ke*) because they usually left their hometowns in the spring and returned at the end of the fall, similar to bird mi-

gration (Liu and Liu 2010; Shijie Bolan 2007). According to the local gazetteers[4] published by the home counties of these "wild geese," they "effectively improved the lives of their families" and "were the actual reason why the [home] county became rich." (Taigu County 1931: 868) Some liumin established themselves as traders after they reached Hetao, trading and peddling Han Chinese goods with Mongols, setting up stores, and "making a fortune hundreds of miles away from their hometown" (Wang 1780: 23). The success of these early "wild geese" encouraged more and more young men to cross the Western Pass to find better opportunities. According to *The Veritable Records of the Emperor Ren of Qing*, written around 1810, "the number of people who went through the Pass reached over ten million," and in some regions, "the people who were working or doing trade outside the wall accounted for half of the [county's total] population" (Shuo County Gazetteer 1988: 58).

Living in a patriarchal Chinese society where male supremacy ruled, wives of male liumin had no right to question the decisions made by their husbands and had no alternative but to respect and support their choices to "walk through the Western Pass." To comply with social norms and their domestic roles, they could not expose themselves to the outside world or leave their home communities to follow their husbands (Goldin 2002). The songs that documented the experiences and expressions of these left-behind women were then borrowed and performed by the male migrants who traversed through and worked out of the Western Pass. Handed down through generations in both their hometowns and the places where these male migrants stopped (Yan 2004), these songs are the backbone of the musical culture of modern floating migrants with similar experiences.

4 Local gazetteer (*Difangzhi*) is a type of official document that is published by Chinese counties (or villages) that records what goes on in a county politically, socially, and culturally. These gazetteers are updated regularly by local literati and were preserved in the "Official Archives" of each county. However, after 2000, the local gazetteers of some regions (such as Shanxi, Shaanxi, Hebei, Gansu, and Hunan provinces) were moved into the National Library of China.

Folk songs: A "Wild Zone" for Women in Patriarchal Contexts

For the left-behind wives of male floating migrants in ancient China or in twenty-first-century rural villages, folk songs were among the few means to voice their opinions and experiences. Gender division and hierarchical relations exist in almost every culture in the world and penetrate all aspects of social life. In civilizations where patriarchal ideology has been rooted for millennia, traditional norms and values granted the male members of society the privilege to direct symbolic cultural expressions and to marginalize females in the social discourse. As early as 1975, the anthropologist Shirley Ardener drew academic attention to the "deafness" of men and the "mutedness" of women in socio-cultural communication and narratives with her seminal work *Perceiving Women*. Her "muted-group theory" was later summarized by Cheris Kramarae (1981) as follows:

- Women perceive the world differently from men because of women's and men's different experiences and activities rooted in the division of labor.
- Because of their political dominance, the men's system of perception is dominant, impeding the free expression of women's alternative models of the world.
- In order to participate in society, women must transform their own models in terms of the received male system of expression.
- Females are likely to find ways to express themselves outside the dominant public modes of expression used by males in both their verbal conventions and their nonverbal behavior. (Kramarae 1981: 21–22)

Over the past decades, ethnomusicologists have revealed the vital yet often silent roles and hidden contributions of women in male-dominated musical practices and traditions (see, e.g., Shelemay 2009; Koskoff 1989).

In pre-modern China, feudal societies operated according to Confucian patriarchal values and male-centered social and family organization. Women did not receive equal education opportunities because it was considered to be "a virtue for a woman to have no knowledge and ability" (*nvzi wucai buanshi de*).[5] A set of male-imposed norms confined most women within the domestic sphere and excluded them from political activities and mainstream art fields such as poetry, painting, calligraphy, and sculpture. They were subjects and

5 This is a saying that first appeared in *An De Chang Zhe Yan*, a book of family instructions from the Ming Dynasty written by Chen Jiru (1558–1639).

topics portrayed in the arts but were seldom given opportunities to express themselves and create in artistic domains (see Attané 2013; Gao Xiongya 2003).

However, music is one of the few art forms where women's voices were not completely erased. In pre-modern China before the twentieth century, the boundaries of four main domains were clearly marked in the realm of music by the practitioners and audience members: intellectual music (*wenren yinyue*), religious music (*zongjiao yinyue*), court music (*gongting yinyue*), and folk music (*minjian yinyue*, see Zang 2022; Zheng 1998). Intellectual music was composed and performed mainly by upper-class, male literati and officials as tools to educate themselves and cultivate their manners and spirituality (see Cai 1995; Yuan 1981). Religious musical activities were regarded as holy and practiced by monks and high-ranking disciples, in accordance with Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist ethics and thought (Yuan 2011; Wang and Du 2004). Female practitioners were excluded from these two domains.

Women's participation in folk music and court music was conditional and limited. In the rigidly stratified imperial court, female musicians were little more than beautiful marionettes, controlled by their male masters and forced to cater to the tastes of emperors and nobles (Yi 2011; Xu Dayin 2003). In the terrain of folk instrumental and operatic music, where practitioners must devote considerable time to mastering essential skills, some women have gained access to resources and opportunities to perform as professionals on stage (yuan 2023; Jones 1998). But even today in rural regions, most women are heavily burdened with housework and family responsibilities, which prevents them from acquiring the necessary skills and participating in amateur folk instrumental and operatic performances as part of entertainment or local communal life.

However, folk song, a musical form reserved for genuinely underclass voices in Chinese traditional societies, became a "wild zone" (evoking Shirley Ardener's use of the term [1975: 24]) in which women could break certain norms without being punished. *Caifeng*, a tradition established by Confucius (551–479 B.C.), facilitated the formation of this wild zone. In the name of *caifeng*, various Chinese regimes sent teams of fieldworkers to collect folk songs from the people as a way to gauge their real opinions about the state's current social and political situation (see, e.g., Liao 2002). This tradition has been maintained to this day by the communist regime. Thus, the realm of folk songs has been an intentionally reserved zone where censorship is loosely applied, where rule-breaking ideas and ways of expression are tolerated, and where the voices of marginalized and disadvantaged people can be heard (see, e.g., Liu 2010; Shan 1998). Besides, folk song performance does not require sophisticated musical techniques or long-term practice and rehearsals and can be performed almost

anytime and anywhere. Folk song has thus been one of the very few forms of cultural expression accessible to ordinary women in traditional societies. In folk song, the female partners of liumin or twenty-first-century floating migrants could escape temporarily from male-imposed "women's virtues" and patriarchal social norms. This means they could express their love, hate, hope, and anger freely and contribute their own messages through musical compositions and lyrics.

Sour and Bitter Songs: The Musical Expressions of "Left-Behind Women" outside the Patriarchal Norms

Over the past two decades, I conducted intermittent ethnographic research on folk music traditions in the rural regions of China's Central Plain, where patriarchal ideology remained dominant and where relatively slow economic growth gave rise to a surplus of male labor. As observed in my research, folk songs by or about temporary migrants, be they the ancient liumin or the modern floating migrants, were mostly drawn from a genre that had existed for centuries. This genre had different names in different geographic areas: *shanqu* (literally "mountain tunes") in Shanxi Province, *xintianyou* (literally "roaming the sky," also translated as "causal singing") in Shaanxi Province, *huaer* ("flower song") in the Ningxia and Qinghai provinces, and *pashandiao* ("climbing-mountain tune") in Inner Mongolia. Although this genre varied from one region to the next, several of its features remained remarkably stable over space and time. These are a free rhythm; a half-improvised, high-pitched melody; a simple musical structure, and colloquial, emotional lyrics (see also Li 2004). In the following sections of this chapter, I will choose one of these names, "mountain tunes," to refer to this genre, namely because Shanxi Province was where I conducted most of my ethnographic and oral history research with and about the left-behind wives of floating migrants.

The still-existing mountain tunes about migrants and their families, whether from the past or present, can be divided into two types of songs. The first type are songs filled with bold expressions of love and customarily called *suanqu*. Suanqu is a compound word composed of *suan* and *qu*. The word *qu* means song or tune, and the word *suan*, when used as an adjective, means "sour." In this context, *suan* points to the "taste" of the songs. Like the pleasant sour flavor in Chinese dishes, the implicit or explicit affectionate expression of these songs adds savor and color to the rugged, tedious life. The second type of song is one that complains about unpleasant life experiences. It is commonly

called *sukuge*, which literally means "songs narrating the bitterness of life."[6] These songs were used by both floating migrants and their wives to describe their suffering and hardships. At times, both the sour and bitter expressions appeared in the same songs.

The earliest written record about these mountain tunes was preserved in *The Mountain Songs and the Life in Hequ*," a fieldwork report written collaboratively by a group of communist ethnographers. In the 1950s, eight members of the Central Conservatory of Music's Ethnic Music Research Institute arrived in Hequ County, Shanxi Province, to investigate and collect folk songs. These ethnographers brought recording devices, yet the majority of the local villages had no electricity. Despite this obstacle, these ethnographers managed to transcribe over 400 folk songs and collect the lyrics of more than 4,500 songs, which they archived at the Central Conservatory of Music (Sun Xiaohong 2009). These ethnographers interviewed some women whose husbands used to be floating migrants and who sang songs that documented their hard lives when their husbands were away and when they had to shoulder all family responsibilities:

> I invited several women and talked with them about their past experiences. One of them reminisced about what happened during those hard days. She couldn't help but gather tears in her eyes and sing out these songs. As she sang, she was getting more and more emotional, and her voice was choked with tears. All the women present started sobbing simultaneously, because they had similar experiences. I was moved by and soaked in the atmosphere created by these songs. I was surprised by how a short song, with only a few phrases, was brimmed with deep sentiment, in a soul-moving and charming way. (Xiao 1956: 46)

During my short research trip to Shanxi in 2012–2013 and 2015–2016, I also witnessed the power of these mountain tunes to bring tears. During the interviews or informal conversations about their previous or current experiences of being a left-behind wife, women paused occasionally, because they "couldn't find proper words" (*buzhidao shuoshenme hao*). Sometimes they sang songs as a replacement for words they could not find, usually accompanied by tears that sometimes turned into sobbing. Why something that is hard to put into words can easily be sung, and why people become emotional when they are singing these songs—these are issues that deserve attention and discussion.

In traditional Chinese societies, ranging from ancient monarchical empires to rural villages in the 2010s, the deeply rooted Confucian ideology promoted asymmetrical husband-wife relations, which gave rise to gender-biased ethics

6 I will describe these songs as "bitter songs" hereafter.

and norms to regulate the thoughts and behaviors of female members. Such unequal husband-wife relations were highlighted throughout the surviving works of ancient Chinese literati and politicians, such as in *A Collection of Ritual Observations*, written by Dai De in the late Western Han period (around the 1st century B.C.):

> Men are the ones who carry the principles of heaven and earth and nourish everything under the sun. This is the reason why they are called *zhang-fu* [husband]. […] They always know what they should do and should not do, and what they should say and should not say. Wisdom is one of their main attributes. […] Women are the ones who have to be educated by men to know the heavenly principles. They are called *fu-ren* [women, or wife] because they are less wise than men and have to submit to men. This is the reason why the rule of "Three Obediences" exists for women. A woman must obey her father before marriage, obey her husband during her marriage, and obey her son[s] in widowhood, and should not make decisions for herself. They should not step out of the gate of their chambers and should only do work relating to food and bed.[7]

While the "Three Obediences" (*Sancong*) requested a female to be submissive to her husband, "The Four Virtues" (*Si-de*) summarized the basic principles that guide a woman's conduct: (1) *fu-gong* ("efficiency in domestic work"), requiring women to be skillful in household duties and to be willing to do such chores; (2) *fu-rong* ("modest manner"), demanding that women maintain proper, gentle behavior and tranquil, calm temperament (see also Bailey 2007); (3) *fu-de* ("fidelity"), requesting women to be unconditionally faithful to their husband; and (4) *fu-yan* (literally "propriety in speech"), demanding women to be careful in words, to speak "properly" (Robin Wang 2003).[8]

These imposed virtues excluded wives of male migrants from decision-making processes within families and broader society. They were required to show absolute faith in, and blind obedience to, their husbands. In pre-modern China, a woman who failed to observe these rules would be socially marginalized, expelled from her family, and disowned by her family of origin (see Hinsch 2018). Even as late as the 2010s, female villagers in many rural villages in North and South China did not have the right to obtain a government-allotted piece of land, and thus have no place to live if they ever get a divorce. At the same time, these women suffered the agony of loneliness when their men were away

7 Quoted in Huaixin Huang, *Dadai Liji Huijiao Jizhu* [A Collection of Ritual Observations] (Shanxi: Sanqin Press, 2005: 37).

8 See also the Confucian classics, such as *Etiquette and Ceremonial* and *A Collection of Ritual Observations*.

and were forced to assume the husband's share of domestic work—raising children, taking care of parents, chopping firewood, repairing the house, arranging weddings and funerals for family members, and even engaging in agricultural work on the family lands (see also Jun 2008; Yang 2003).

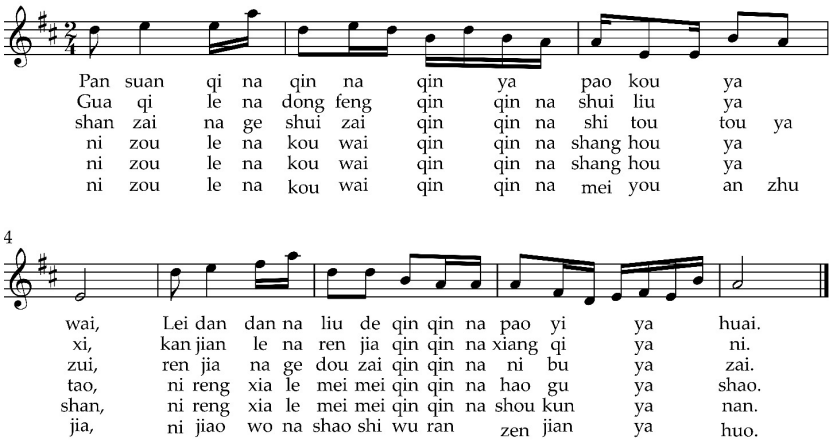
Therefore, for these left-behind women, folk songs became a "wild zone" where they could temporarily escape the male-imposed restrictions. Through the bitter songs, these left-behind wives depicted how they were run down from heavy, toilsome work and expressed unwillingness to shoulder their husbands' share of household duties: "Who pities me, a woman who cuts firewood in the mountain? […] I fetch water from the deep river but can't climb up the steep riverbank. In this world, no one is more miserable than me."[9] Although these women tended to swallow doubts and discontentment in the interviews and informal conversations, they pronounced complaints about marriage and the absence of a husband in these folk songs: "I'm a wild chrysanthemum blooming on the cliff. Why I married you and live like a widow."[10]

At the same time, the interviewed females realized that complaints and criticisms would not persuade the men to change their minds. Therefore, some women stopped openly expressing their negative feelings. Instead, they attempted to influence their husbands by breaking another sort of restriction, as recounted in the sour song "Everyone is Here Except You" (*Renjia Douzai Ni Buzai*): [11]

9 "No One Is More Miserable Than Me in This World" (*Chenshi Shang Kumingren Shaoyou Wo*), a song from pre-modern period but still widely circulated in Shanxi Province. The lyrics were provided by the folk singer Jia Deyi in August 2013 and translated by the author.

10 "Plowing Song" (*Tiange*), a song sung by Wang Aihong, a female who was residing in rural Xinzhou and whose husband was a floating migrant in Taiyuan City. The song was transcribed and translated by the author in December 2012.

11 "Everyone Is Here Except You" (*Renjia Douzai Ni Buzai*) is a song that has circulated for generations in Shanxi and still being performed by the female partners of floating migrants today. In Shanxi, different folk singers performed this song with melodies slightly different from one another. Here I show a version from Lin Yufen, which I transcribed in August 2013. See https://www.ximalaya.com/sound/104015114 (accessed on August 7, 2026) for another version of this song performed by a professional folk singer.



Music Example 6: *Mountain Song "Everyone Is Here Except You," as performed by Lin Yufen and transcribed by the author in Hequ, August 2013.*

Translation of the lyrics:

1. I'm thinking about you, my sweetheart,
   You went through the Pass.
   My tears flood my eyes,
   And wet my sleeves.

2. The east wind blows,
   And the water flows towards the West.
   When I see others, my sweetheart,
   I think of you.

3. The Mountain is here, the water is here,
   And the stones are also here.
   Everyone is here, my sweetheart,
   But you are not here.

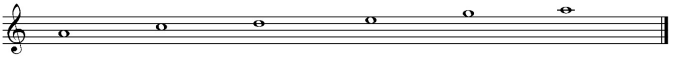
4. You went through the Pass,
   To the other side of the Wall
   When you left without your sister, my sweetheart,
   I feel lonely.

5. You went through the Pass,
   To the other side of the Wall.
   When you left without our sister, my sweetheart,
   I suffer hardships alone.

6. You went through the Pass,
   You cannot take care of the household.
   My sweetheart, without food and firewood,
   How could I live?

Passed down through generations in rural Shanxi and still frequently performed by local women in the twenty-first century, this song embodies characteristics shared by mountain songs. First, it is written in the first person and describes personal experiences and feelings. Second, the *bi-xing* ("analogical-association") mode, one of the basic structural and rhetorical modes (or principles) of traditional Chinese poetry and song lyrics, was employed: a line (or several lines) describing the surrounding natural scenes, everyday objects, or facts as they occur in a person's mind is followed by a line of emotional expression that is similar to, associated with, and aroused by these scenes, objects, and facts (see also Wang and Xiao 2009). Third, it embodies a melodic feature widely shared by mountain songs: high-pitched tones and leaps occur at the beginning of the song and are revisited in the singular measures throughout the simple, strophic musical form.

The melody of "Everyone is Here Except You" was written in the *Yu* scale, one of the five basic pentatonic scales in the traditional Chinese musical system. It consisted of five consecutive pitches derived from the circle of fifths, which were rearranged into a sequence of intervals: minor third, major second, major second, minor third, and major second.



Music Example 7: *The basic structure of the Yu scale, transcribed by the author.*

As early as ancient times, Chinese philosophers and music theorists connected these five basic scales to the different sentiments and their expressions. This tendency was initiated by the *Book of Documents* (*Shang Shu*, a Confucius

classic produced around 1,000 B.C.; see Gu and Gu 1996) as well as the *I Ching* (*Yi Jing*, also called *Zhou Yi*, a classic acknowledged by both Taoism and Confucianism; see Huang and Qi 2008), according to which all aspects of the natural world and social life are reduced to five basic parts that correspond to a framework of five elements, being gold, wood, water, fire, and earth. *The Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor* (*Huang Di Nei Jing*) (Huang and Qi 2008) continued to corroborate the links between the five basic musical scales and human voices and emotions. Below is my summary of these links in table form.

Five Elements	**Five Voices**	**Five internal Organs**	**Five Sentiments**	**Five Musical Scales**
Gold	Weeping	Lung	Sadness (You)	Shang
Wood	Roaring	Liver	Anger (Nu)	Jue
Water	Moaning	Kidney	Fear (Ju)	Yu
Fire	Laughing	Heart	Delight (Xi)	Zhi
Earth	Singing	Spleen	Anxiety (Si)	Gong

Table 1: *The Correlations between Five Elements, Five Voices, Five Internal Organs, Five Sentiments, and Five Musical Scales.*

Chinese scholarly publications have demonstrated that compositions written in certain scales can alleviate corresponding emotions (Wang 2009; Huang 2005; Sun 2004). Consciously or subconsciously, the writer chose the Yu scale, associated with human sounds of moaning and the emotion of fear, to describe her tears and pain and to express her worry about foreseeable hardships and suffering. The initial leaps to high-pitched tones were followed by descending motion to convey expressions of worry and pain.

However, this and other sour songs violated the imposed feminine ethics not only through complaints but also through bold expressions of love, which were regarded as inappropriate in their regular social contexts, albeit acceptable and attractive to their male partners. These songs were bold enough to subvert the stereotypical conservative images of Chinese women. Indeed, they even contrast with the everyday behavior of the more modern left-behind women who were singing these songs in the 2010s. In the villages I visited during my research, the terms and phrases relating to sexual and affectional desires and relations were regarded as "incompatible with the etiquette" (*shi li*); and even loving words between husband and wife were seen as "offensive to

public morals" (*youshang fenghua*) and avoided in public occasions. Therefore, it is surprising how these shy and abstinent women perform sour songs, in which "sweetheart" (*qinqin*) is nearly the most frequently used term (see Music Example 6).

Through these sour songs, left-behind women not only sang out loud, inappropriate, and loving words but also portrayed rule-breaking behaviors and blunders: "I miss you in the daytime, and I climb up the wall."[12] "I miss you so much my sweetheart that the flowers in my heart are disarranged."[13] Although these minor breaches of the rules violated the wifely principles established in social contexts, they were not offensive to their male partners, the target audience for these songs. I will discuss these songs in detail in the next section of this chapter.

"These [sour] songs are about love and hard life, but not just about love and hard life," said Fang Wang, a middle-aged female peasant whose husband was floating in Beijing and who was trying hard to draw him back from the colorful outside world:

> I think these [sour] songs are more about responsibility [...] the responsibility of a man and a husband [...] I sang these songs to my husband before he left and when he returned home last year during the Spring Festival break to remind him that money does not mean everything. I want him to know that his wife will always be waiting for him at home. He should not let his woman experience this hard life alone. (Interview, Shanxi, June 29, 2013).

"Sing a Song to Broaden the Heart": Male Migrants Borrowing Women's Songs, and Roundabout Ways of Musical Expression

In the urban slums of Beijing, Shenzhen, Tianjin, and Xian in 2011–2013, I met many male migrants who were brought up in patriarchal socio-cultural contexts in rural North and Middle China and still saw themselves as the "master of the family" (*yijia zhizhu*). Nonetheless, some of them maintained customary musical practices of singing women's songs, or to be more specific, the songs written as the narratives of females, when they were floating hundreds,

12 An excerpt from the song "I Miss You at Night, but I Can't Do Anything about It" (*Yeli Xiangni Mei Banfa*), documented by Jia Deyi (a Shanxi folk song singer) in his manuscript and translated by the author.

13 An excerpt from the song "Missing My Sweetheart" (*Xiang Qinqin*), a song sung by Gu Fengyuan in Beijing in December 2012; the lyrics were transcribed and translated by the author.

even thousands of miles away from their wives and hometowns. The obvious feminine qualities of these songs did not obstruct men from borrowing these songs to release their long-suppressed emotions in private occasions. Neither did these feminine qualities hinder them from becoming understandable and acceptable modes of expression among males and from being shared and circulated in collective gatherings. Why did these floating migrants select these female voices to express themselves? What are the main features that led to the selection of these songs? These are the questions that will be answered in the following section of this chapter.

Roundabout Ways of Affection Expression

To understand the male migrants' practices of singing women's songs, it is necessary to discuss a deeply rooted tendency to express affection in roundabout ways. In traditional societies where sets of behavioral codes are prevalent to control the speech and action of their members, people always find ways to circumvent the barriers (Åberg 2015; Stern and Hassid 2012). In the case of males in traditional Chinese societies, from ancient China to some rural villages in twenty-first-century China, what they needed to find a way around is the restrictions on expressing emotional connections to and affectional desires for their female partners.

According to Confucian norms, which were still prevailing in rural Middle and Central China during my research in the 2010s, men are forbidden from making their female partners an indispensable part of their lives. "Siblings are hands and feet; wives are just clothes" (*xiongdi ru shouzu, qizi ru yifu*) is a Chinese maxim that appeared in and circulated with *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and has been officially recognized as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature since the late twentieth century (see also Hsu 1985). *Six Virtues* (*Liu De*), a Confucian treatise written around the 4th century B.C., generalized basic social relations into "six positions" (*liu wei*)—husband, wife, father, child,[14] monarch, and (the monarch's) subject. This classic further divided these six positions into two categories: the more important "insider positions," including father, child, and husband; and the less important "outsider positions," comprising monarch, subject, and wife. In this sense, husband, father, and children should be equally important for a woman, whereas, for her husband, she is less important than blood relatives. Therefore: "One could kill his monarch for his father but is not supposed to kill his father for his monarch. One could abandon his wife for his brother but is

14 Here, "father" and "child" are used to signify the blood relations.

not supposed to abandon his brother for his wife" (Li 2001: 65). Influenced by this Confucian doctrine, men in traditional Chinese societies are brought up to respect their parents, love their siblings, be ready to sacrifice for their clan, but at the same time to treat their wives as accessories (see also Xie 2012).

In 2013–2014, I conducted archival research at Harvard-Yenching Library on the pre-modern songs and poems preserved in surviving publications. In these surviving works, I found several song lyrics and poems in which male migrants straightforwardly express emotional desires for blood relatives, such as the song lyrics preserved in *The Book of Odes*:

> The thread in the hands of my mother,
> Made the clothes on the body of her traveling son
> How should I requite the love of my mother,
> Which is like the sunshine in the spring?[15]

Or in a more recent poem:

> I have to part with my brothers,
> Just like ripping flesh off my bone.
> My heart is sad and sorrowful.
> But how can I send my words to them?[16]

At the same time, in these surviving works, males rarely expressed emotional desire for their (alive) wives in a direct manner. Instead, male migrants portrayed the distress, agony, and sadness of their female partners caused by separation and how the females wanted, needed, and missed them:

> I came to the Eastern Mountain.
> I haven't returned home for a long time,
> The birds are crying on the hill,
> My wife is sighing in our house.[17]

In the following excerpt, the poet began by quoting from his wife to suggest that she was the one who wanted his return, and then he portrayed a warm image of reunion with a tone of comforting an anxious wife:

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15 "Song of a Floating Son" [*Youzi Yin*] by Jiao Meng (751–814), documented in *A Collection of Selected 300 Poems of the Tong Dynasty*.

16 This is an excerpt from the folk song "Kudzu Vines" (*Ge Lei*), recorded in the section of "Airs of the States," *The Book of Odes*. See also the example of "Yellow Birds" (*Huang Niao*), mentioned at the beginning of this section.

17 "The Eastern Mountain" (*Dong Shan*), an ancient song whose lyrics were documented in *The Odes of Bin*.

> You asked me when I would be back, but I don't know.
> It is a rainy evening here in Ba Mountain, and the pools are filled with autumn streams.
> On the day when we reunite and trim wicks together by the window,
> I will tell you about the Ba Mountain and how beautiful today's rain is.[18]

In these songs and poems, males, who occupied the dominant, decision-maker position in a family, depicted their wives as having the more proactive position in the affectional relationship. Such portrayals not only highlighted the attraction of men but helped them escape from being accused of "indulging in women's beauty" (*chenmi nvse*, see also Li 2024).

Male-Selected Female Voices and the Idealized Images of Women

In patriarchal contexts since the pre-modern period, women used folk songs to attract their floating husbands back to the hometown. Their husbands established the tradition of borrowing these women's songs to express themselves in their host environments. The songs and the tradition were disseminated by these floating migrants to the places they stopped at and handed down from generation to generation by people with similar experiences (see also Xie 2011). In twenty-first-century Chinese cities, male floating migrants carried forward this customary musical practice. The women's songs they selected and borrowed reflected their idealized expectations concerning what constitutes a good wife. It is always hard to identify the creator of a folk song, particularly one that has circulated for generations and spread across multiple territories. Although some songs were written in the first-person narrative of women and were described by their transmitters as women's songs, it is still arbitrary to conclude that these songs were created by women. Therefore, I will avoid speculating about the intentions of the creators of the folk songs and will focus on how male floating migrants used these songs in the cities.

Although left-behind wives used mountain songs to voice grievances about their difficult lives in rural hometowns, songs containing such bitterness, along with women's opposition to their husbands' decisions, were excluded from the male-dominant world of floating migrants. As I observed in Chinese cities between 2011 and 2013, the songs written in women's voices and performed by male migrants were mostly sour songs filled with expressions of love and longing. Rather than criticizing men's choices to leave home and float in the cities,

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18 "Written on a Rainy Night" (*Yeyu Jibei*), a poem written in late Tang Dynasty by Shangyin Li (812–858).

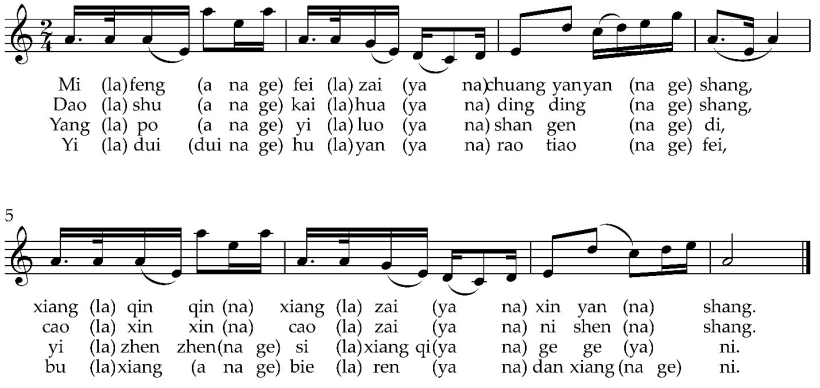
these songs depicted women's thoughtful understanding of their absence in a servile manner:

> I don't mind that you can't give me good food and good wine,
> All I hope is your safe return.[19]

as well as their solemn pledges of unshakable fidelity:

> The snowflakes melt when they hit the ground.
> But I will be waiting for you, my brother, unless I die.[20]

In reality, left behind women were forced to shoulder the heavy burden of household responsibilities and to engage in backbreaking labor in the fields. But in the idealized images constituted by the male-selected women's songs, loneliness seemed to be the only thing bothering these women, and waiting for their husbands was their primary task in daily life. "Longing in Heart for My Sweetheart" (*Xiang Qinqin Xiang zaina Xin Yanyan Shang*), a sour song widely embraced among male migrants, can serve as a typical example.



Music Example 8: *Mountain song: "Longing in Heart for My Sweetheart," sung by Fang Guizhi in rural Xinzhou in August 2012, transcribed by the author.*

19 "Thirty Miles Mountain and Twenty Miles Water" (*Sanshili Mingshan Ershili Shui*), sung by migrant Wang Fengyuan in Xian. The lyrics were transcribed and translated by the author.

20 "Missing My Sweetheart" (*Xiang Qinqin*), sung by Meng Xingguo in Xian. The lyrics were transcribed and translated by the author.

Translation of the lyrics:

Bees are flying upon windows,
I have longing in heart for my sweetheart.
Rice flowers are blooming on their tips,
I worry and only worry about you.
The sun is setting towards the roots of mountains,
I'm thinking and thinking of you.
A pair of swallows are flying around the sky,
I'm longing for no one but you.[21]

In rural Xinzhou in summer 2012, I worked with an amateur ensemble consisting of middle-aged females, some of whom were wives of floating migrants. With the mission of protecting mountain tunes as a collective legacy, these females made efforts to perform some folk songs in its traditional ways. They told me that "Longing in Heart for My Sweetheart" not only was performed by left-behind wives but also by ordinary females who broke the norms to boldly express love for their husbands. Like many other mountain songs, this piece features high-pitched tones, melodic leaps, and the "analogical-association mode" (*bi-xing*, for an explanation, see page 111). Although this song was also written in the Yu scale, it is livelier than the bitter songs and those that combine sour with bitter elements, such as "Everyone is Here Except You" (see Music Example 6). Rather than opening with wide leaps followed by stepwise descent, this song creates a more dynamic contour with bold jumps in both directions. Descriptions of natural scenes and emotional expressions are adorned with syllables such as "na," "na ge," and "ya na."

Although the women's songs selected by male migrants for performance in the cities contained some descriptions of norm-violating behaviors or minor breaches of the rules, these descriptions were attractive rather than offensive to males. This is because these improper but innocuous breaches manifested the women's distress and anxiety following separation from their husbands more so than they expressed disagreement or resistance.

21 Translated by the author. See https://www.kugou.com/mixsong/1r7xxcb1.html (accessed on August 11, 2026) for an audio recording of a local folksinger's performance of the song.



Figure 8: *Local women performing mountain songs at a renovated outdoor theater in Hequ, Shanxi Province. Photographed by the author in August 2012.*

> I miss you so much my sweetheart that I feel weak at my wrist,
> I cannot carry my chopsticks, and I can't hold the bowl.
> I miss you so much, my sweetheart, that the flowers in my heart are disarranged,
> I wanted to cook dumplings, but I put potato in the pot.[22]

More norm-violating behaviors occurred at the moments of parting, which was another frequent theme in the women's songs borrowed to perform in the cities when I conducted research in 2011–2013. "Walk Through the Western Pass," a song that I mentioned at the beginning of this section, depicts such a moment in which a left-behind woman was seeing her husband off. For interviewed male migrants, that was a familiar scene that they had experienced personally and had trouble forgetting. Huang Baogen, an eighty-seven-year-old man who was once a liumin, recalled how this song aroused sympathy among them:

> It reminded us of our wives and of the moment when we parted. It was a really hard moment, hard but warm and sweet, for all of us … It was warm and sweet because at that time you knew someone loved you and cared

22 An excerpt from the song "Missing My Sweetheart" (*Xiang Qinqin*), a song sung by migrant Liu Feng and the lyrics were transcribed and translated by the author.

> about you. But when that moment ended and you walked out of your village, you became a "wild goose." You could earn a lot of money, you could get sick, and you could die, but who cared? You are alone … I remember that on that day [I left home], my wife wore a red shirt. She smiled but I saw the tears in her eyes. Whenever I sang this song, her smiling face, tears, and red shirt appeared in my head … It made me feel warm inside, and less lonely. (Interview, Jinzhong, June 26, 2012)

For Lao Li, the floating migrant whose singing of "Walk Through the Western Pass" was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the moment of parting is painful: he ends his relatively comfortable life in his hometown and begins a tough, lonely floating journey. Although he spent over twenty minutes in an interview detailing his wife's flaws, he told me that he could not forget the moment he was sitting on a moving train, watching his wife cry on the platform. When singing the women's songs, which were borrowed not from his wife but from other female folk singers in his village, he attempted to relive such a moment. He in fact experienced more idealized scenes of that moment in which women's love and desire were demonstrated with inappropriate behaviors:

> You are walking through the Western Pass,
> I am climbing up to the roof.
> I grasp the chimney and tears flow down.[23]
>
> I hold your arm, and I grip your sleeves,
> I really want to follow you.[24]

During my research in 2011–2013, I met with male migrants who were from Shanxi, Shaanxi, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Ganxu, and other parts of China but practiced the same tradition of borrowing women's songs to express and to vent. The songs they performed had the same names and themes but different lyrics and melodies. For example, I found at least ten versions of "Walk Through the West Pass" from different provinces. People from Middle Shanxi performed a version of "Walk Through the West Pass" differently from those from Shaanxi and North Hebei. The lyrics of "Casual Singing," performed by Lao Li and quoted above, differed from those in North Shaanxi. Although Lao Li and migrant Chen Minghao are from the same region, they performed "I Really Want to Follow You" (whose lyrics are quoted above) with different melodies. This is the reason

23 A partial translation of the sour song "Casual Singing" (*Xintianyou*), sung by Lao Li in Beijing, the lyrics were transcribed by the author.

24 A partial translation of "I really want to follow you" (*Zhixiang Genzheni*), sung by Lao Li and Chen Minghao in Beijing, the lyrics were transcribed by the author.

why I chose to focus my discussion mainly on Shanxi and individual migrants in this chapter.

Nonetheless, interviewed male migrants rarely argued with each other about which version was the original and authentic one. Instead, they listened to and embraced different versions of sour songs, through which they constructed idealized mental images of home while floating in the cities. Different from their real home, which consisted of a shabby house, starving children, sick parents, and a woman burdened by poverty and arduous physical labor, this imaginary home contained only their pleasant recollections of family life and their hometown: warmth, love, understanding, closeness, and comfort. This utopian home gave hope, blissful anticipation, and energy to floating migrants who were striving to support their families and encountered various difficulties and discriminations in a strange city.

Imagining a Floating Community

Based on my observations in Beijing, Xian, and Tianjin in 2011–2013, 2016, and 2018, male floating migrants' singing of these borrowed women's songs can be broadly classified into two main patterns: singing in private spaces and singing in collective activities.

"Singing a song to broaden heart" (*changqu kuanxi*) and "drowning all unhappiness and sorrow in liquor" (*jiejiu jiaochou*) were two of the common things to do when floating migrants got together with close friends. They considered such close-friend gatherings as taking place in private spaces. After I obtained their permission to attend such private gatherings, some migrants told me that they also sang these songs to themselves when they were alone. In this way, I had the privilege to follow their everyday activities and witness their sentimental singing. "Broadening heart" is a Chinese expression and means "feeling relieved" or "feeling free from anxiety." Being marginalized and disadvantaged in urban societies, some floating migrants chose rock music to vent their anger and to motivate others to join a movement of resistance. But others, like Lao Wu and Lao Li, chose a safer way to express their negative emotions by singing borrowed sour songs that could help them temporarily escape urban reality and relive affectionate interactions with family members for whom they work hard (interview, Beijing, March 24, 2012). When singing these songs, restrictions are violated and negative emotions—the depression triggered by discrimination, worries about the future, and the distress of separation—are alleviated and calmed. And as positive emotions are aroused and restored by warm, bright melodies, and as the sweet words of love are sung aloud, hope is ignited in the heart, giving people the courage to carry on with a hard life.

The performances of these borrowed female songs at private occasions placed primary emphasis on the naturalness of the delivery and the sincerity and depth of emotional expression rather than on a beautiful voice or technical virtuosity. Audience members—if there were any—usually showed their approval and praise through nods, sighs, or clicking beer bottles instead of applause. They rarely made loud noises during the performances. The singing was typically done without accompaniment at these private events. All these elements combined to create a calm, peaceful, and even lonely atmosphere where everyone was absorbed in their own memories and emotional worlds.

Meanwhile, these borrowed songs were also performed at collective gatherings attended by male migrants who might or might not share the same geographical origin. In the hometown-fellow gatherings, floating migrants from the same village, county, or province performed these borrowed sour songs more to strengthen the existing social bonds than to cure their spiritual pain. Although the attendees of these gatherings might never have met one another before, they quickly formed bonds by speaking in hometown dialects, commenting on hometown foods, sharing news about their hometowns, or singing a nostalgic song together. The collective singing often began with the host, who chose a song that, in his opinion, would be familiar to the attendees. If the song was familiar, the attendees would join him in singing the song one after another, but if it was not familiar, he would finish the song himself and invite others, guests, to suggest another one. They would comment on the performances, tell anecdotes about the songs, and exchange toasts between songs until everyone got slightly drunk. These performances usually did not carry the same sentiments as those held in private spaces, and the comments sometimes included sex-related jokes. While these performances might have evoked a wide range of sentiments among individuals, they seemed to be mostly about creating a sense of hometown brotherhood and building a reciprocal network to make life easier in the city.

The performances of these borrowed songs also reinforced bonds among migrants from certain rural regions of North and Middle China. Chinese ethnomusicologists have demonstrated how some sour songs traveled via liumin into Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, and Gansu provinces, as well as other areas where they stopped and worked. Although local communities reworked these songs, some elements—such as topics, melodic themes, narrative styles, and names—remained consistent. In the twenty-first century, as surplus rural laborers from these regions moved into Chinese cities, these shared musical elements helped them transcend geographical boundaries and come together. In *Imagined Communities* (1991), Benedict Anderson discusses how shared cultural practices foster collective identities and create a sense of community.

Ethnomusicologists also note how musical activities contribute to group cohesion, articulate differences, and establish "social boundaries both within the group and with those outside of it" (Shelemay 2001: 367; see also Stokes 2020; Turino 1993). The performances of these borrowed women's songs served not only as collective expressions of existing social groups but also to generate and sustain new collectivities.

At the events attended by migrants from all parts of China, these songs helped attendees imagine a larger community, regardless of their age, occupation, and hometown. Unlike rock songs that signified an urbanized identity and state-sponsored musical representations, sour songs belonged only to floating migrants. Different from regional folk genres featuring dialects and symbolic expressions that could only be understood by people of the same origin, these borrowed sour songs aroused collective sentiments rooted in shared floating experiences. Therefore, these songs occupied a special position in the musical world of floating migrants, who believed that these songs could only be truly appreciated by their own people, as the only ones who knew what was happening in and behind the songs. To make the songs more accessible and enticing to all attendees, singers often performed them in standard Mandarin. By performing these songs, they marked the symbolic boundary of the imagined community, opening it up to all floating migrants and people with similar experiences. At the same time, they drew a boundary that excluded urbanites. Zhang Yuanchao, a floating musician and construction worker who often performed sour songs at dinner gatherings with his workmates, expressed this as follows:

> They [urbanities] call us *waidi'ren* [outsiders]. And they act like this [city] is their territory … But when we perform these songs, we shut them out of our territory … because they don't know what and why we are singing, and do not understand the meanings [of the singing] and our feelings. Then, it's their turn to become *waidi'ren* [outsiders]." (Interview, Beijing, October 2, 2012).

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.

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A Note on Translation and Transliteration

Unless otherwise indicated in a footnote, all song lyrics and quotations from Chinese sources in this book have been translated into English by the author. Transliterations of Chinese terms are based on the "Hanyu Pinyin" system, which is the standard, official, phonetic scheme in the People's Republic of China. For the sake of consistency, Chinese names for persons, places, and music troupes are represented in Pinyin throughout. The titles of Chinese books, articles, and songs are represented in literal English translations, followed by transliterated title in italic face.

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