# Voice, Timbre, and Politics in Chinese Popular Music, 1920–1980

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the political and cultural context informing the voices and timbres of Chinese popular music between 1920 and 1980. Drawing from scholarship by Jones (2001), Chen (2007), and Ouyang (2022), I survey shidaiqu or "songs of the times" from the 1920s through '40s and Chinese Communist Party populist music during the Cultural Revolution. I first analyze *shidaiqu*, often labeled "yellow music" due to its Western popular influence and bourgeois political leanings, through a case study of Japanese citizen Yamaguchi Yoshiko, who masqueraded as a Chinese songstress Li Xianglan in Japanese propaganda films during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). I show how her mixed identity encompassed both Chineseness *and* cosmopolitanism, which I term *zá*, a term meaning motley and variegated in both Chinese and Japanese. I conduct spectrographic case studies of five shidaiqu performers over the course of their careers, finding that some moved toward Western-modeled singing and others embraced traditional Chinese vocal aesthetics. My findings indicate that yellowness does not manifest itself as a timbral feature of the voice, but rather, as an ideological reaction to the *zá* (both/and) nature of shidaiqu vocal timbre. The *zá* sound implies that the politics of East and West could coexist and even complement one another, a reason for the CCP to ban shidaiqu in 1949 when they established the People's Republic of China. I then analyze populist music during the Cultural Revolution by surveying the soundscape, technological mediation of sound, Chairman Mao's strategic muteness, radio announcer's natural tone, sonic warfare, and repetition. I argue that Mao instituted what I term *ritualized sonic boredom* to mobilize the masses. Additionally, the label "yellow" reappears during the Cultural Revolution regarding quotation songs and during Deng Xiaoping's administration in response to Teresa Teng's music, confirming its perpetual usage as a political tool and an authorization of condemnation and censorship. Throughout, I demonstrate the cyclicity and persistence of political tensions concerning voice, timbre, and cosmopolitanism in popular and populist music.

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# DEDICATION

*This thesis is dedicated to my family.*

是因为你，为了你，我做这个.

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# CHAPTER I
# INTRODUCTION

Shanghai at night, Shanghai at night, you're the city that never sleeps

The bright lights go on, the cars roar, dance music leaps

—Zhou Xuan in "Shanghai Nights" (*Ye shanghai*), 1946 (trans. Andrew F. Jones)

In 2010, a World Expo was held on the banks of the Huangpu River in Shanghai, China, with the theme "Better City, Better Life." As host city, Shanghai joined the ranks of major world cities like London, New York, Paris, and Chicago, with the event serving as its $48 billion coronation. This Expo was riddled with scantily disguised political tensions, most notably China's enormous pavilion overshadowing the Hong Kong and Macau pavilions, North Korea's first ever Expo pavilion, and facetious legal restrictions on how the United States funded its pavilion.[1] On the heels of the 2008 Olympics held in Beijing, the 2010 World Expo marked yet another sign of the People's Republic of China (PRC) emerging from its twentieth-century birth pains to shine brightly on the international stage.

As a ten-year-old visiting this World Expo in Shanghai, I hardly understood the significance of international relations, global economy, coloniality, and national branding embedded in those 2.6 square kilometers. For years, my deepest impressions of the World Expo consisted of waiting in lines for hours, fighting a losing battle against Shanghai's high heat and humidity, enjoying numerous red bean popsicles, and wondering why the United States pavilion consisted of only three short videos (explained by the funding restrictions listed above). It was not until I first encountered "songs of the times" or *shidaiqu*, a genre of popular music from the 1920s through 1940s in Shanghai— or as it was known then, the "Paris of the East" and the

[1] Adam Minter, "China Rules the World at Expo 2010," *The Atlantic*, April 29, 2010.

"New York of the Orient"—that I wondered what had happened in the intervening decades to disrupt Shanghai's deep history of globalism.[2] Why was shidaiqu labeled "yellow music" and banned from 1949 onwards? If Shanghai was likened to Paris and New York in 1930, why were they seeking a "better city, better life" in 2010? And, perhaps most personally, what made my own parents leave Shanghai in the 1990s to pursue a life in North America?

These questions provided the initial impetus for this thesis, which examines voice, timbre, and politics in Chinese popular and populist music from 1920 to 1980. This inquiry threads together a range of disciplines, a synthesis necessary to study how sound and politics interacted during these periods of coloniality, occupation, and totalitarianism. In addition to my disciplinary orientation as a musicologist, I am informed by East Asian studies, film studies, women's studies, ethnomusicology, media studies, philosophy, sound studies, timbre analysis, and voice studies. Throughout the work, I interrogate how the cosmopolitanism of Shanghai was exhibited in the "yellow" voices and timbres of popular music while engaging with the burgeoning Chinese Communist Party and their subsequent rise to power in 1949. In this context, "yellow" refers to any association with bourgeois decadence antithetical to Chinese leftism, a label consistently and disdainfully applied to shidaiqu. Additionally, the term "popular music" refers to the music of bourgeois Shanghai that, as described in Middleton (1992), exists in the "terrain of contradiction between 'imposed' and 'authentic,' 'elite' and 'common'" within a class society.[3] My case studies focus on the Seven Great Singing Stars, female performers who dominated Chinese popular music in the 1930s and '40s. Using timbre analysis, I investigate how they positioned themselves vocally, using their vocal timbre to navigate the complex

[2] Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

[3] Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992), 7.

cultural political landscape. I then examine the soundscape of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) through its populist music (music created by and/or intended for the people) and the repetitive weaponization of sound to fit Mao Zedong's political ideologies and agendas. Spanning over fifty years of Chinese history and culture, my inquiries profile the simultaneous entanglement and antagonism between popular music and populist music within broader societal debates.

**A Brief Modern History of Shanghai**

Understanding the city of Shanghai's role in the development of shidaiqu begins with its history as an important Chinese port, one of five designated by the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 to open to the West.[4] The Treaty, the result of the First Opium War (1839–42) against the British, molded Shanghai into a thriving home for international commerce and foreign residents when previously, it was merely an unrefined market town on the bank of the Huangpu River near its confluence with the Yangtze River. After further commercialization, Shanghai became a site of cultural exchange between East and West and a cosmopolitan "pole of modernity."[5] As foreign trade and presence in Shanghai expanded, so did the city, though Westerners lived in a separate International Settlement. With the onset of rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth century, Shanghai began appearing to the naked eye like any major European or American city, gaining a population of over three million by 1932. Its reputation as an international hub of business, culture, and entertainment drew celebrities, politicians, artists, and tourists from around the world.

[4] Historical background sources include: Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Harriet Sergeant, *Shanghai: Collision Point of Cultures 1918/1939* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1990); Stella Dong, *Shanghai: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Global Shanghai, 1850–2010: A History in Fragments* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[5] Bergère, 5.

As a Westernized and relatively unrestricted city, Shanghai appealed to Chinese reformers and became the breeding ground for major Chinese political movements. This included the 1911 Revolution, which ended the Manchu-led Qing dynasty and, consequently, over three thousand years of monarchical rule. The Republic of China was then established in 1912 with President Sun Yat-sen at its helm, quickly supplanted by Yuan Shikai, who declared himself Emperor. Yuan died in 1916, leading to a decade of infighting, civil war, and chaos, during which Shanghai continued to thrive due to its reliance on foreign rather than domestic trade.

This period saw the solidification of two rival political parties which would struggle over the fate of China for the following decades: first, the Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1921 in Shanghai, and the Guomindang, or Nationalists, led by Sun's successor Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang established tenuous control of China, placing his capital in Nanjing and aligning himself with Westerners to maintain his position and eradicate the Communists. He briefly prevailed before Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931. Now fighting a war on two fronts, Chiang fled west, leaving much of northern and eastern China to the Japanese, whose army entered Shanghai in 1932, prompting many foreigners to flee. Subsequent bombing of Shanghai in 1937 at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) sobered the hedonic atmosphere of the city. By 1941, the Japanese took control of the International Settlement.

The war ended in 1945, followed by a period marked by extreme inflation, political instability, and violence between the Communist Party and the remaining Nationalists. Chiang received support from the United States to combat the Communist forces and preserve control over major Chinese cities. By 1948, the US had provided three billion dollars of aid, primarily in material goods, to China, but the majority of the supplies ended up sold at outrageous prices on

the black market or in public auctions. Rather than disburse American funds and goods to the needy Chinese, Nationalist higher-ups pocketed the money. This, coupled with rapid inflation, caused the Chinese people to view Nationalist officials with distrust and disgust, even as Chiang continued to print money to fund his war against the Communists. As the Nationalists lost the favor of public opinion, they also began to lose their hold on vital territory, and the Communists advanced slowly but surely toward Shanghai. Panicked, Chiang Kai-shek resigned in January of 1949 and fled to Taiwan, which he had been preparing as a stronghold. Unbeknownst to his Guomindang successor Li Tsung-jen, Chiang absconded with the gold remaining in the Bank of China's vaults, leaving Li with no leverage or resources. Many Shanghai residents, domestic and foreign, sought to flee the city despite severe Nationalist martial law to evade impending Communist control.

Between 1950 and 1975 Shanghai languished. Previously a cosmopolitan city heavily involved in international trade and cultural production, the CCP forcibly de-globalized the city and transformed it into a leading domestic "center of heavy industry."[6] These decades under Mao's rule featured several national pushes to increase agricultural production and bolster the PRC's economy, including the First Five-Year Plan (1953–57), the Great Leap Forward (called the Second Five-Year Plan, 1958–62), and lastly, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76). During this time, the Sino-Soviet split moved Chinese Communism away from Soviet economic and political models towards a new space and platform for Chinese nationalism amidst the global stage. The Cultural Revolution, which Mao initiated in 1966 with the aim of eliminating the "Four Olds" (old ideas, old culture, and old customs and habits), called upon the masses and student Red Guards to achieve what high-ranking government officials could not,

[6] Wasserstrom, *Global Shanghai*, 95.

and ferret out those who stood in the way.[7] During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's personality cult reached its peak; his likeness was reproduced in portraits and statues all over the country.[8]

Mao's death in 1976, which concluded the Cultural Revolution, signaled change and turnover to a weary and depleted People's Republic of China. The innumerable lives lost due to man-made famine, persecution, and massacres throughout the course of Mao's regime, not to mention the decline of innovation and progress, paved the way for the "thaw" of Premier Deng Xiaoping's administration (1978–89). Deng assumed the role of paramount leader of the PRC in 1978, initiating reforms such as restoring the National College Entrance Examination (*Gao Kao*), previously cancelled during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, and his "open door policy," which reinstated cultural exchange, though restricted, between the PRC and the world.[9] Though Shanghai was relatively slow to recover from the effects of Mao's regime and hesitantly adopted Deng's reforms, by the early 1990s, Deng named Shanghai as a major economic center and prioritized its development. By the late 1990s, Shanghai returned to its former, Golden Age glory, with a thriving nightlife scene and a renewed (or recycled) focus on materialism and individualism.

Throughout this turbulent and troubling history of the city and its nation, the thread of music, both popular and populist, exhibits deep political and cultural significance. From the jazz-infused music of 1920s Shanghai nightlife to Japanese propaganda film soundtracks in the 1940s to daily loudspeaker broadcasts of "East is Red" during the Cultural Revolution to the syrupy

[7] Bergère, *Shanghai*, 396–97.

[8] Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 278.

[9] Nimrod Baranovitch, *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978–1997* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10; Marc L. Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 20.

ballads of Taiwanese pop star Teresa Teng in the late 1970s, sound has served a distinct role in articulating and exposing the cultural politics of China. Furthermore, the increased accessibility of sound and music to Chinese citizens over the mid twentieth century, primarily via gramophone, radio, and then tapes, indicates that music played an important role in reaching and influencing the Chinese people. However, with the shifting political regimes and dominant ideologies between the 1930s and 1970s in China came shifting popularity, censorship, and intentions for popular (and subsequently, populist) music.

This time period's musical genres have been historically understudied in the field of musicology, as well as in voice and timbre studies. They also rarely receive the benefit of interdisciplinary methodologies, though scholars from a multitude of disciplines consider this music deserving of analytical discourse. Each chapter of my thesis will spotlight a different facet of sound and politics, creating a kaleidoscopic work that aims to fill these crucial gaps in scholarship. These spotlights will also illuminate the symbiosis between popular entertainment and populist politics in China, a relationship that demonstrates remarkable complexity and cyclicity throughout the past century.

**Review of Literature**

Much of my thesis is indebted to the work of literary theorist Andrew F. Jones, whose influential book *Yellow Music* (2001) foregrounds much of my investigation and provides a rich historical and theoretical foundation. This work provides a thorough cultural historical overview of the Chinese Jazz Age (1920–1940), offering a media studies and postcolonial perspective on yellow music which was considered ideologically tainted and decadent to Chinese nationalists at the time. Jones pays close attention to the role of technology, illustrating the technocratic work of

musicians adopting Western musical practices and the influence of the gramophone on hybridization. He also considers yellow music within a framework of globalized colonial modernity. With this positioning, he claims the relationship between yellow music and leftist mass music, historically viewed as completely oppositional, is instead mutual and intertwined. Leftist mass music composers drew from Hollywood, Tin Pan Alley, and Soviet Agitprop and mass music, deploying the same musical and cinematic strategies as yellow music composers but with an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist stance. He points out how both musical movements reflected cultural cosmopolitanism, hybridity, and coloniality, but with vastly differing receptions and treatments in Chinese contexts. Jones argues that the composers of yellow music, by participating in global culture while renegotiating it on their own terms, were the ones who truly realized the May 4th movement's goals. This movement, started in Beijing in 1919, sought to stoke Chinese nationalism, oppose Confucianism, and promote a new culture, including creating a modern and distinctly Chinese musical genre.

In my thesis, I will extend Jones's work by examining yellow music itself, and in particular, its timbral markers in the voice. He provides ample detail concerning the effects and critiques of yellow music, but the specific stylistic and acoustical features present within yellow music beyond jazz or Western influence remain understated or unexplored. I aim to tease out the sonic qualities of "yellowness" and the corresponding cultural implications of those qualities, which will further substantiate Chinese leftist reactions against yellow music.

Film scholar Poshek Fu's *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong* (2003) provides much of the historical material in the second chapter. Fu's work delves into cinema in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation (1937–45), tracking the prominent and active filmmakers and companies as well as their output. A key aspect of Chinese cinema at this time was the nexus

between Shanghai and Hong Kong. Hong Kong, stereotyped as a "cultural desert" compared to Shanghai at this time, had a thriving Cantonese-language film culture, and received many of the filmmakers and performers who were fleeing Shanghai in the 1930s and '40s. Furthermore, Fu seeks to overturn the prevailing notion that all films produced during the Japanese occupation were part of Japanese propaganda. Instead, Fu proposes that popular entertainment created a space for Chinese people to escape propaganda, and possibly even stoke resistance through subversive plotlines.

Most relevant to this thesis is Fu's section on Li Xianglan/Yamaguchi Yoshiko and her role in several Japanese propaganda films, including a collaborative film between Chinese and Japanese film companies in Shanghai, *Eternity (Wanshi liufang)* in 1943. The reception to her role and this film, contrary to Japanese producers' intents, was one of Chinese nationalism and anti-imperialism directed primarily at Japanese occupiers rather than at Westerners. Fu marks this response as a preservation of space within the "occupying power's propaganda apparatus" through romance and tragedy, a sign of the productive ambiguity found in popular entertainment.[10] In this chapter, I apply Fu's idea of ambiguity in film to Li Xianglan/Yamaguchi Yoshiko's songs, which communicated similar messages of resistance and often carried greater impact than her acting due to their accessibility on the radio or gramophone.

Chapter 2 also draws from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, a sociologist who rethinks racial hybridity and identity in the Bolivian context as *ch'ixi*, meaning "motley" or "stained" in Aymara. This decolonial shift in terminology reframes the concept of a mixed identity resultant

[10] Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 118.

from coloniality, allowing for a "both/and" orientation.[11] Rather than a homogenization that implies the two component parts are irrevocably merged, this concept allows for them to be coexist yet remain separate, like different-colored threads woven together as fabric. In this chapter, I adapt *ch'ixi* to the specific colonial and cosmopolitan context of twentieth-century China.

In the third chapter, Szu-Wei Chen's 2007 dissertation serves as a foundation for my *shidaiqu* vocal timbre analysis. Chen presents a systematic categorization of Shanghai pop as well as crucial historiography on its origins, mass entertainment in Shanghai, and production and consumption practices. He provides an overview of "Chineseness" in music prior to the 1930s, including descriptions of parameters such as texture, musical scales, tonality of syllables, and ornamentation practices. Chen then describes shidaiqu vocal techniques, singing styles (four major types: Chinese traditional, bel canto, mixed style, and untrained voice), instrumentation, melodic content, scale or mode, accompanying harmonies, and text. He considers Shanghai popular song as a "Westernized Chinese musical product," where the songs' bodies have "Chinese skeletons (lyrics and melodies) and Western flesh (accompaniment)," or an aural reflection of the city of Shanghai itself, with its Western presence in Chinese culture.[12] Though Chen mentions a common shift from a more nasal, high-pitched, melismatic singing style to a deeper, open-throated approach in many pop singers, he attributes this shift to maturation of voices or novel interpretations. Here, I will pick up where Chen left off and analytically show and theorize why performers may have consciously altered their vocal timbre.

[11] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (2012): 105.

[12] Szu-Wei Chen, "The Music Industry and Popular Song in 1930s and 1940s Shanghai: A Historical and Stylistic Analysis" (PhD diss., University of Stirling, 2007), 292.

Chapter 4 begins where yellow music seems to end—with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the censorship of shidaiqu in favor of populist genres like revolutionary song and mass music. Lei X. Ouyang's book *Music as Mao's Weapon* (2022) provides historical and musical insight into the Cultural Revolution, describing the soundscape and political forces involved in cultivating it.[13] She connects Mao's philosophy for cultural production as expressed in his "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" (1942) to the subsequent types of music permitted by the CCP, including Jiang Qing's model revolutionary operas and the handful of songs circulated on national broadcasts.[14] Additionally, she thoroughly analyzes the anthology *New Songs of the Battlefield,* a compilation of CCP-approved songs produced annually from 1972 to 1976, a product of Zhou Enlai and the Gang of Four.

To supplement Ouyang's work on this period, I also draw from Yu Wang's dissertation (2019) on radio and technopolitics in Mao's China.[15] Wang details the process of creating a national radio network across the PRC, including employing radio operators to ensure radio access in rural areas. Wang examines how loudspeakers and radio in workplaces reinforced cultures of labor and progress, and how the "natural tone" found in the voices of radio announcers and news broadcasters developed during Mao's regime. This mediation of sound by both humans and machines is key to understanding how Mao and the CCP constructed the PRC soundscape in a way that enabled total censorship, violent applications of sound, and mindless repetition. I then bring in Steve Goodman's concept of sonic warfare, a way of using machines

[13] Lei X. Ouyang, *Music as Mao's Weapon: Remembering the Cultural Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022).

[14] Zedong Mao, "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art," in *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (University of Michigan Press, 1980).

[15] Yu Wang, "Listening to the State: Radio and Technopolitics of Sound in Mao's China," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2019.

and force to control populations, exemplified in the way loudspeakers were applied during the Cultural Revolution to herald violence and induce action.[16] Jacques Attali's theory of how music is used strategically by entities in power also informs this chapter, since his second stage, where music as *representation* helps people to believe, and the third stage, *repetition*, where music is used to silence, are both relevant in this time period.[17] The only politically acceptable music in the PRC during this time paid tribute to the state, represented the masses, and exalted Mao. Music, then, as suggested by Attali, indoctrinated a belief in the order instituted by the CCP, and its relentless repetition censored all other noise in order to legitimize itself.

**Red and Yellow Threads**

Throughout this thesis, I argue that popular music and populist music constantly intertwine and inform one another, appearing as red and yellow threads through twentieth-century Chinese history.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the shidaiqu career of Li Xianglan (born Yamaguchi Yoshiko), a performer in the 1940s, and her complex identity as ethnically Japanese but disguised as Chinese in a Japanese-occupied China. She serves as an example of a "songstress," a term defined by scholar Jean Ma as female crossover stars in both motion pictures and music recordings in the 1930s and '40s. [18] Her singing and acting roles in Japanese propaganda films during the Second Sino-Japanese War exemplify the vexed boundaries between colonizer and colonized in

[16] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 10–11.

[17] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 19–20.

[18] Jean Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press), 5–6.

Shanghai at this time. I argue that the shidaiqu she performed in films served a subversive function: rather than encouraging anti-Western sentiment, they encouraged Chinese nationalism and resistance to the Japanese.[19] Rather than categorize her identity as hybrid, cross-cultural, or pan-Asian like previous scholars, I adapt decolonial scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's concept of *ch'ixi* to Li Xianglan's context. This chapter serves to explicate the convoluted colonial landscape of Shanghai and to illustrate the pervasive influence of shidaiqu songstresses in cultural and political spheres.

In Chapter 3, I aim to both empirically and conceptually locate yellowness within shidaiqu performers' voices, specifically in their vocal timbre. During this time, the term "yellow" pejoratively meant the pornographic and decadent quality attributed to the Western-influenced musical features of shidaiqu. Scholar Szu-Wei Chen observes a transformation in singing style within shidaiqu, describing the earlier timbre as "untrained" or "Chinese traditional" singing compared to a "bel canto" or "mixed" style of singing in later years.[20] To illustrate this transformation, I first provide case studies of a dramatic shift in the vocal timbre of famous performer Bai Hong. I then conduct spectrographic analyses of four other shidaiqu singers' vocal timbre from roughly 1935 to 1950, drawing from methodologies found in Nobile (2022) and Lavengood (2020) to determine whether these timbral features evolved significantly and ubiquitously over time.[21] Equipped with these observations, I discuss the cultural and political implications of yellow vocal timbre from the 1920s to '40s, and the impetus behind the censorship of yellow music from Communist China in 1949. I seek to explain, both

[19] Fu, *Between*, 118–132.

[20] Chen, "Music Industry," 231–236.

[21] Cannam, Chris, Christian Landone, and Mark Sandler, "Sonic Visualizer: An Open Source Application for Viewing, Analysing, and Annotating Music Audio Files," in *Proceedings of the ACM Multimedia 2010 International Conference, Firenze, Italy, 2010*, 1467–1468.

quantitatively and qualitatively, the perceptual and ideological characteristics of yellow music by analyzing vocal timbre, a salient and evocative feature with crucial political implications.

Chapter 4 focuses on the soundscape of the Cultural Revolution, including revolutionary song and mass music, genres of Chinese leftist or populist music that came into prominence alongside shidaiqu but rapidly rose to eclipse it after the total ban of shidaiqu by the CCP. I provide historical background on the 1949 establishment of the People's Republic of China and its musical practices for the following decades until Mao Zedong's death in 1976. I also provide examples of songs like "East is Red" (*Dongfang hong*) that incorporate Chinese and global Marxist musical features and exemplify the type of music Mao envisioned for the masses.[22] I then detail the technological mediation of sound in the PRC through radios and loudspeakers.[23] Lastly, I theorize the utility of sound imposed by the Chinese Communist Party and Mao during this time by examining its relation to traditional Confucian philosophies and Mao's own declarations concerning cultural production.

This chapter provides insight into the ideologies and musical aesthetics of the Chinese Communist Party, contextualizing both the backlash against shidaiqu in the 1930s and '40s and the turn towards Gang-Tai pop in the late 1970s following Mao's death. Additionally, I show how Mao's visual ubiquity coupled with strategic muteness during the Cultural Revolution culminated in what I term *ritualized sonic boredom*, giving Mao a near-sacred power over the masses.

[22] Hon-Lun Yang, "Unraveling *The East is Red* (1964): Socialist Music and Politics in the People's Republic of China," in *Composing for the State: Music in Twentieth-Century Dictatorships,* eds. Esteban Buch, Igor Contreras Zubillaga, and Manuel Deniz Silva (Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 60.

[23] Jie Li, "Revolutionary Echoes: Radios and Loudspeakers in the Mao Era." *Twentieth-Century China* 45, no. 1 (2020).

The brief epilogue observes the return of yellow vocal timbre, this time in Gang-Tai pop (Hong Kong and Taiwan) entering the PRC under Deng Xiaoping's administration in the late 1970s. This version of yellow vocal timbre, exemplified by famous Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng, differed vastly from that of shidaiqu. I show how changes in music production in the mid-twentieth century such as reverb and the intimacy evoked by her breathy vocal timbre allowed Chinese listeners to experience a sense of timelessness and individual emotions.[24] Lastly, I illustrate how this battle over censorship and yellowness in Chinese popular music has evolved yet persisted into the twenty-first century.

Due to the high number of audio/video files and spectrograms included in my thesis, I opted to house them on my public web resource about shidaiqu (shanghaisong.org) under a "Thesis" tab (password "drizzles") for those reading this document to access. Any figures or files referenced in-text in this manner [Figure #.#] should correspond with the figure within its respective chapter on the site. The URL is shanghaisong.org/thesis or bit.ly/liuthesis and is also accessible via the QR code below:

[24] Peter Doyle, *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900–1960* (Middletown:Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 217; Michael E. Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 384–387; Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, 190–191.

# CHAPTER II
# THE ZA IDENTITY OF SONGSTRESS LI XIANGLAN

> The two years I spent in China were the happiest two years of my life. My life seemed to begin in Shanghai. We were recognized for a change and treated with so much respect. However, later on we were to run into some southern prejudice, but that can never erase the really good times that we had in China… My biggest concern then was the Japanese Army. They were becoming more and more open in their contempt for the Chinese government… They would hold maneuvers early in the morning right in the middle of the main streets of Shanghai.[25]
>
> –American jazz trumpeter Buck Clayton

In the early twentieth century, China witnessed an influx of Westerners and their music, particularly in the port city of Shanghai. There, both local and foreign musicians performed a variety of big band, jazz, and American Tin-Pan Alley music in hotels, dance halls, and cabarets.[26] Nicknamed the "New York of the Orient," a "Paris of the East," and the "jazz mecca" of Asia, Shanghai became known as a convergence of West and East as well as a thriving home for jazz music.[27] These influences led to a genre of popular music developed in Shanghai called shidaiqu, or "songs of the times," a combination of Chinese folk music, jazz, Hollywood film music, and Tin-Pan Alley song that dominated the market, in part due to their presence in film, from the late 1920s until the late 1940s. Attributed primarily to Chinese composer Li Jinhui

[25] Buck Clayton and Nancy M. Elliot, *Buck Clayton's Jazz World* (London: Continuum, 1995), 70–77.

[26] Frederick Lau, *Music in China: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91–92.

[27] Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

(1891–1967) and influenced by the residency of jazz musicians like trumpeter Buck Clayton in Shanghai during the 1930s, shidaiqu was produced by a uniquely cosmopolitan city and time period.[28] As described by Clayton above, Shanghai provided a relative haven from American racism and a stimulating environment for making music. Shidaiqu developed and thrived through Western presence in Shanghai until Japanese occupation drove many foreign musicians away from China. However, in semi-occupied Shanghai, shidaiqu still flourished, even without foreign musicians, both during and after the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45).

Within its lifespan of roughly two decades in Shanghai, shidaiqu became not only a symbol of Western influence and dominance in China, but also a dangerous tool wielded by the invading Japanese during the Second World War. It served as popular entertainment, easily accessible to the masses, but also as a platform for political and ideological expression by foreign and domestic powers. The occupying Japanese used shidaiqu as a propaganda tool for spreading their own ideology and exerting their political power through popular culture, particularly by including it in films that promoted good will between China and Japan.

In the instability after the war, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gained power and momentum, eventually taking control of Shanghai in 1949. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, shidaiqu was banned. This genre was often referred to as "yellow" music, or *huangse yinyue*, by its critics in the CCP due to its association with jazz, nightlife, and Western colonial influence. Not only was the nature of the music itself contested, but those associated with it were constantly under suspicion. Chinese leftists transferred the traits of shidaiqu onto its composers, performers, and even audiences, seeing them as approving of Western culture, accepting of Anglo-American imperialism, and pursuing a hedonistic and

[28] To serve as an American pop culture reference point, the opening scene of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) is set in 1935 Shanghai and depicts the city's cosmopolitanism, entertainment, and nightlife.

decadent lifestyle.[29] By 1949, most performers and composers of shidaiqu fled to Hong Kong, which succeeded Shanghai as a thriving home for cosmopolitan film and entertainment.

How then did the performers of shidaiqu negotiate the various forces behind its popularity and ubiquity, particularly during the Japanese occupation and their control over the film and entertainment industries? Furthermore, how did the genre aurally reflect the struggle between "Chinese past and colonial present" in China, even as it was engineered for certain audience responses and cultural implications?[30]

To illustrate the complexities within shidaiqu and its performers from a postcolonial perspective, I investigate the life and influence of Yamaguchi Yoshiko, or Li Xianglan, a singer and actor who lived and worked in Shanghai from 1939 to 1945.[31] One of the "Seven Great Singing Stars" of the 1940s—a group of female singers who dominated the popular music industry—she acted in numerous films produced in Shanghai and continued her acting career in Japan and Hollywood before shifting to a career in journalism and politics in Japan.[32] Her stardom in China had deeper implications relating to her allegiances to both Japan and China, her role in Japanese wartime propaganda or "friendship" films, and her performance of a hybrid music. (Throughout this chapter, I refer to her by her last name "Yamaguchi" when describing her biographical information, and use "Li Xianglan" when discussing her career as an actress

[29] Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 124.

[30] Sue Tuohy, "Metropolitan Sounds: Music in Chinese Films of the 1930s," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 202.

[31] Shelley Stephenson, "A Star by Any Other Name: The (After) Lives of Li Xianglan," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 19 (2002): 1.

[32] Iris Roevens, "History of Chinese Popular Music (1920–1960)," *Psyche Music*, December 1, 2009.

under that name. I also adhere to the naming conventions in Chinese and Japanese of listing the last name before the first name.)

Focusing on Yamaguchi and her musical output provides insight into the political and cultural landscape of Shanghai during this time, and the profound political and ideological repercussions of popular song in films of this time. Feminist studies and history scholars Alison Luke and Shelley Stephenson have explored Yamaguchi's life and career, theorizing her as cross-cultural or fluid in relation to her role as the face of the Japanese Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.[33] Rather than view her through a feminist or historical lens, I examine her impact as a songstress through two of her most influential songs from films and their implications for wartime relations and audience reception. Furthermore, I claim the complexity of her identity in relation to both China and Japan cannot be easily explained by cosmopolitanism, hybridity, or cross-culturalism. I instead seek an explanation that better fits the history and context of these two nations and her upbringing. To do so, I adapt theory from decolonial scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, utilizing her concept of *ch'ixi* based on the Bolivian context.[34] Extending and adapting *ch'ixi* to relations between China and Japan allows for problematizing the notion of hybrid identity and presenting an alternative, anticolonial theory of Yamaguchi Yoshiko's identity.

[33] Alison Luke, "Resilience, Agency, and Activism: Viewing Yoshiko Yamaguchi Through the Feminist Life Course Perspective," *Women's Studies International Forum* 57 (2016): 13–14; Stephenson, "A Star," 10–12.

[34] Rivera Cusicanqui, "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa,"* 105.

**Shanghai: "A Decadent City"**

Shanghai, a prominent port city in China referred to as a "mongrel princess" by historian Stella Dong, carries a long history of turbulent interaction between the East and the West.[35] Under the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 and subsequent treaties establishing trade with foreign powers, Shanghai became increasingly industrialized, commercialized, and colonized. The 1920s saw the beginnings of Shanghai's world-renowned nightlife, where crowded nightclubs and dance halls performed jazz and cabarets for largely British, French, American, and Russian audiences, though Chinese people flocked to them as well.[36] Shanghai became an entry point for colonial extraction and export, a teeming confluence of West and East, a haven for expatriate pleasure-seekers, and a breeding ground for cultural hybrids such as shidaiqu. Domestic reactions to this foreign oppression escalated with the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai in 1921 and their growth following the May 30 Movement in 1925, a series of anti-foreign demonstrations after British police shot and killed thirteen labor demonstrators.[37] Literary scholar Leo Ou-fan Lee theorizes Shanghai during the 1920s and '30s as a site of cosmopolitanism born out of coloniality, though an incomplete sort of colonization. He refers to China as "victimized but never fully colonized by a Western power"; in some ways, that is, Shanghai residents welcomed modernity and embraced Western presence as a sign of their Chinese cosmopolitanism.[38]

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[35] Dong, *Shanghai*, 2.

[36] Dong, *Shanghai*, 140; Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 24.

[37] Baruch Boxer, "History of Shanghai," Britannica, last modified November 1, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/place/Shanghai/History.

[38] Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 307–314.

This Golden Age ended in 1937, when Japan's occupation, both commercially and imperially, in Shanghai produced a somber contrast to the city's previously pleasure-seeking atmosphere.[39] With the onset of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, foreigners fled the city; Shanghai became subject to Japan's control and its anticipated "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" until 1945.[40] Not long after American forces arrived in Shanghai at the close of the Second Sino-Japanese War, complete economic collapse threatened the city, already a shell of its previous urban glory. After Chiang Kai-Shek's resignation and subsequent disorder in China, Mao Zedong's armies occupied the city in 1949, establishing a "Red Shanghai" in its wake.[41] Mao's anti-urbanism and authoritarian control left Shanghai to decay for three decades while the capital, Beijing, flourished.[42]

**Shidaiqu: "Songs of the Times"**

Shidaiqu solidified as a genre in the 1930s, typically credited to Chinese composer Li Jinhui and his interest in the May 4th movement, which sought to modernize and westernize Chinese culture. As a prolific songwriter, he established the Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe to train and educate children in the performing arts, many of whom went on to successful careers as composers, singers, and actors.[43] Li Jinhui also collaborated with Buck Clayton, the American trumpeter who played at the Canidrome nightclub from 1934 to 1936.[44] Just as new technologies

[39] Dong, *Shanghai,* 211–29.

[40] Dong, 254–70.

[41] Dong, 281–93.

[42] Lee, *Shanghai Modern,* 322–23.

[43] Chen, "The Music Industry," 6–8.

[44] Eugene Marlow, *Jazz in China: From Dance Hall Music to Individual Freedom of Expression* (Jackson:

such as steam engines and cannons enabled Western colonial powers to defeat China during the Opium Wars, it also brought jazz to China via steamships holding sheet music, gramophone and phonograph records, and the jazz musicians themselves.[45] Some of the first shidaiqu songs reference new inventions like the locomotive, including "Express Train" (1928), composed by Li Jinhui and sung by Zhou Xuan; characteristic of modern popular music, both the origin and popularity of shidaiqu were mediated by twentieth-century technologies.[46]

Early shidaiqu songs such as "Drizzles" (*Maomao yü*) from 1927 reveal how Li initially combined Western instruments and jazz inflections with pentatonic melodies and Chinese operatic vocal styles to create this new *haipai* or "Shanghai style."[47] [Video 1.1] The song begins with an instrumental introduction, quoting the pentatonic melody in the saxophone and trumpet over a lively rhythm section. Li Minghui then enters, her nasal and child-like vocal timbre, swift vibrato, portamento or sliding motion between notes, and ornamental fluctuations in pitch and vibrato resembling that of traditional Peking opera performers. The musical interlude features a violin, showing that Li Jinhui utilized a range of Western instruments in his early songs.

The 1930s and '40s saw a rapid proliferation in shidaiqu and its usage in films, with actresses such as Zhou Xuan, a graduate of Li's Troupe, rising to widespread fame for her "golden voice."[48] Later songs such as Zhou Xuan's "Shanghai Nights" (*Ye Shanghai*) show the change in shidaiqu over a decade: rather than a Peking opera-influenced vocal timbre, she sings in a more Western, *bel canto* style. [Video 1.2] This shift softened the genre for Western ears,

University of Mississippi Press, 2018), 35.

[45] Marlow, 21.

[46] Marlow, 21–29.

[47] Chen, "The Music Industry," 2–3; Marlow, *Jazz in China,* 57.

[48] Lau, *Music in China,* 107.

moving away from nasality, portamento motion, and irregular vibrato towards a timbral cosmopolitanism characterized by open-throated, breathy phonation. (This shift will be the topic of Chapter 3.)

Shidaiqu's patchwork of musical styles exemplifies its hybridity, a sign of intercultural encounters and a reproduction of cultural artifacts.[49] According to critical theorist Homi Bhabha, cultural hybridity in colonial contexts provides opportunities for the colonized people to strategically subvert the balance of power.[50] Chinese musicians quickly adopted Western styles of music, seemingly speaking the colonizer's language. According to Bhabha, this process of mimicry occurs when colonized peoples imitate the colonizers in power in order to access their power; this can be seen as a subversive and empowering act, or possibly an act of suppressing one's own identity.[51] Performers of shidaiqu reserved the ability to communicate and invite resistance to colonial powers productively through the genre's ambiguity, taking advantage of its legibility to both colonizer and colonized.

This hybridity did not go uncontested: the genre faced extensive criticism from Chinese revolutionaries for its "decadent" nature as a sonic representation of Western influence and capitalism and its widespread popularity. Leftist Nie Er, originally a member of Li's Troupe and the composers of the People's Republic of China national anthem, generated a new genre of "mass songs" based on Soviet music and military marches to contest shidaiqu and raise up the Chinese people (this genre will be discussed further in Chapter 4).[52] After 1949, many composers

[49] Sumarsam, "Performing Colonialism," in *Javanese Gamelan and the West* (Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 1.

[50] Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 154–55.

[51] Bhabha, 154–55.

[52] Chen, "The Music Industry," 8–9.

and performers of shidaiqu fled from Communist Shanghai to cosmopolitan havens such as Hong Kong or Taiwan.[53] Remaining musicians faced suppression, persecution, and in the case of Li Jinhui, "progenitor of yellow music," eventual execution during the Cultural Revolution in 1967.[54]

**Yamaguchi Yoshiko as Li Xianglan**

Unlike most shidaiqu performers, Li Xianglan was born in 1920 to a Japanese family during the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, China, and named Yamaguchi Yoshiko [Figure 1.1]. Her father, who had previously studied in Beijing, ensured that she learned Chinese, even going as far as permitting a close Chinese friend to adopt her under the Chinese names "Li Xianglan" and "Pan Shuhua." As a young woman, she began singing to aid in her recovery from tuberculosis and studied with a Russian opera singer. Not long after, she attracted the attention of Manei, the Manchurian Motion Picture Company created in 1937 to disseminate Japanese nationalist propaganda, for which she starred in seventeen films under the name "Li Xianglan," pretending to be a native Chinese actress. Her parents signed her contract with Manei without her input, forcing her to act in these films as well as sing.[55] Her Japanese heritage coupled with her Chinese comportment, language skills, and name cast her as the perfect face and voice for Japan's cultural agenda.

A singer-actress like Yamaguchi during this time is often referred to in scholarship as a songstress, a term that scholar Jean Ma uses due to these female stars' presence in both cinema

[53] Lau, *Music in China,* 106–08.

[54] Jones, *Yellow Music,* 74.

[55] Luke, "Resilience," 13.

and popular music, moving fluidly between the screen, the recording studio, and the stage.[56] Ma theorizes that their performances of songs in films as a way for the female voice to occupy the foreground and a chance for the audience to relate to the singer intimately and affectively. These songs blurred the line between the songstress as a real-life star and as a representational trope; they also became separate commodities transmitted via radio broadcasts and printed sheet music. As a songstress, Yamaguchi's roles in films reveal a colonial power seeking to impose its hegemony surreptitiously through popular media, narrating a story of masculine Japanese forces demanding submission from the feminized Chinese.[57] Through her films, the Japanese hoped to groom Chinese audiences into accepting their place in the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, presenting Li Xianglan as a model Chinese citizen, a pan-Asian figurehead of Japanese ideology and their ultimate goal of an unified Asia.[58] However, her Chinese influenced upbringing invoked unprecedented ramifications for her performances of shidaiqu, which ultimately communicated a message of anti-imperialism and rejection of the Japanese. The reception to her songs from *China Nights* (1940) and *Eternity* (1943) illustrate how she transitioned from Japan's propaganda figurehead to a Chinese symbol of resistance.

[56] Jean Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press), 5–6.

[57] Luke, "Resilience," 14–15.

[58] Shelley Stephenson, "Her Traces are Found Everywhere": Shanghai, Li Xianglan, and the "Greater East Asia Film Sphere," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, edited by Yingjin Zhang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 234.

**China Nights (*Shina no yoru,* 1940)**

Two of Li Xianglan's films, *China Nights* (1940) and *Eternity* (1943), best illustrate the trajectory of her film career in Japan-occupied Shanghai. The reception to each film shows Chinese audiences' initial negative reaction to her role in Japanese-language propaganda films and their subsequent acceptance of Li Xianglan as anti-imperialist, resulting in her widespread popularity. This transformation in audience opinion occurred primarily through her influence as a songstress and the effect of her songs from *Eternity*; her work in Manei's propaganda films was relatively unknown to urban audiences until her success post-*Eternity*.[59]

In *China Nights* (a Chinese version with an alternate ending was released under the name *Shanghai Nights* in Chinese-inhabited areas), Li Xianglan plays a Chinese war orphan rescued by a sailor.[60] The film came second in a trilogy of "friendship films" released in 1940, part of a Japanese push to utilize film as an avenue for spreading its cultural and ideological agenda, though these films were also consumed by a domestic Japanese audience.[61] Yamaguchi recalls in her 2015 autobiography that *China Nights* put her under suspicion of being a *hanjian* or traitor to her country; she looks back upon the film with embarrassment.[62]

The film opens with Li Xianglan singing the title song, "China Nights," which features the silhouette of a woman dancing onscreen. The lyrics of the song romanticize a Japanese-occupied Shanghai, portraying the port city as a dreamy (perhaps due to an opium-induced haze) destination filled with ships, nightlife, and beautiful women (Table 1.1). The lyrics evoke an

[59] Stephenson, "Her Traces," 227.

[60] Yoshiko Yamaguchi and Fujiwara Sakyua, *Fragrant Orchid: The Story of My Early Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 98.

[61] Stephenson, "A Star," 4; Stephenson, "Her Traces," 225.

[62] Yamaguchi, *Fragrant Orchid*, 98.

orientalist and even paternalistic view of Shanghai—even the Japanese title of the film and this song, *Shina no yoru*, uses the derogatory name for China (*Shina*). Like other shidaiqu songs of its time, it features portamento-like slides in the vocals over a Western orchestra composed of both string and wind instruments. The song [Video 1.3], as both the opening and title track, exemplifies the Japanese agenda to colonize through cultural mediums through the saccharine, lilting melody coupled with sighs that invoke a sense of desire and longing, and references to Shanghai locations as well as Chinese instruments (*huqin*) and traditions (New Year lanterns). "China Nights" forewarns the not-so-hidden agenda of the Japanese government and filmmakers, as well as the role Yamaguchi would assume in it.

**Table 1.1** Translation of "China Nights" (Jp. *Shina no yoru*) in Chinese (Mandarin), Japanese, and English.

| Chinese (Simplified) | Japanese | English |
|---|---|---|
| 支那之夜, 支那之夜<br>哟 那港湾的灯光,<br>紫色的夜晚 那梦中的船儿, 摇呀摇荡,<br>啊, 忘不了那胡琴的弦音<br>支那之夜, 支那之夜<br><br>支那之夜, 支那之<br>也哟 那窗前的柳儿,<br>摇呀摇曳 年红色的灯笼,<br>支那的姑娘 ,<br>啊, 忘不了那可爱的容颜<br>支那之夜, 支那之夜<br><br>支那之夜, 支那之夜<br>哟 那等待郎的夜晚,<br>那栏杆外的细雨 花落, 红散了<br>啊, 永别了, 那忘不了的 | しな の よる 、 しな の よる よ<br>みなと の あかり 、 むらさ<br>き の よ に<br>のぼる じゃん - く の 、 ゆ<br>め の ふね ああ 、 あh 、 わす<br>ら - れ - ぬ ~ こ - きゅ の ね<br>しな の よる 、 ゆめ の よる 。<br><br>しな の よる 、 しな の よる よ<br>やなぎ の まど に らん - たん ゆ<br>れて 、<br>あか - い とりかご しな むすめ<br>ああ 、 あh やるせな - い 、 あ<br>い の うた<br>しな の よる 、 ゆめ の よる 。<br><br>しな の よる 、 しな の よる よ<br>きみ まつ よる わ おばし<br>ま の あめ に 、<br>はな も ちる ちる べに も ち | China nights, China nights,<br>the lights of the harbor,<br>In the purple night,<br>dreams of ships,<br>swaying and swaying,<br>Ah, I can't forget the sound of the huqin,<br>China nights, China nights<br><br>China nights, China nights,<br>the willow in front of the window,<br>Swaying and swaying, New Year red lanterns, a girl from China,<br>Ah, I can't forget her lovely face.<br>China nights, China nights<br><br>China nights, China nights,<br>the night that waits for youth,<br>The drizzle past the railing,<br>flowers fall, scattered red, |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 支那之夜, 支那之夜 | る ああ 、 あh 、 わかれて<br>も 、 わすらりょ か<br>しな の よる 、 ゆめ の よる 。 | Ah, a farewell that can't be forgotten.<br>China nights, China nights |

In the film, Li Xianglan plays a Chinese orphan on the streets, somewhat of a "fallen woman" trope, who is then rescued by a Japanese man.[63] Later in the film, they get married. The movie narrates the common Japanese metaphor of the time of viewing China as a "disreputable 'woman' in need of redemption," a "powerless country" that resembled a prostitute.[64] One particular scene that enraged Chinese audiences reveals this metaphor: Guilan, Li Xianglan's character, is slapped by the Japanese sailor Hase Tetsuo (played by Hasegawa Kazuo).[65] Directly following the slap [Figure 1.2], Hase asks for Guilan's forgiveness, presenting himself as a noble-minded Japanese seeking to alter Guilan's anti-Japanese sentiments and win her over romantically.[66] For Yamaguchi, this instance "was the first time in [her] life that somebody actually struck [her], and the experience was traumatic."[67] Despite her intense and unforgettable pain, she continued to act through the scene; afterwards, Hasegawa apologized for genuinely slapping her.

The film was originally made in Japanese but with alternate endings tailored to the country of release. In the Chinese version, when Hase goes missing and is presumed dead, Guilan nearly drowns but Hase saves her in the nick of time—in the Japanese version, she nobly commits suicide to be with him in death. Chinese audiences considered a Japanese man striking a

[63] Admin, "Osamu Fushimizu–Shina no yoru aka China Night (1940)," Cinema of the World, last updated January 3, 2021, https://worldscinema.org/2021/01/osamu-fushimizu-shina-no-yoru-aka-china-night-1940/.

[64] Admin.

[65] Yamaguchi, *Fragrant Orchid*, 99.

[66] Yamaguchi, xxxvii.

[67] Yamaguchi, 99.

Chinese woman and the Chinese woman subsequently falling in love with her abuser as doubly humiliating, perceiving its parallels to ongoing Sino-Japanese relations. Yamaguchi describes the film as "the colonizer's ultimate triumph at winning the heart of the colonized, the hero finally getting the girl."[68] Contrary to the film producers' intentions, *China Nights* incited greater hatred and resistance among Chinese audiences towards the Japanese, and toward Li Xianglan.[69]

### *Eternity* (*Wanshi liufang,* 1943)

Japanese filmmakers continued to release "friendship films" featuring Li Xianglan and other actors as the war dragged on, attempting to entice Chinese audiences toward accepting the Japanese occupation. These national policy films often contained love stories like *China Nights*, projecting the metaphor of a strong Japan and a weak China through the respective male and female love interests; they were unpopular among Chinese audiences and rarely shown in Shanghai past 1942, though they continued to play in Japan and in other areas of the Co-Prosperity Sphere.[70] The remaining film companies in China, including ones in Shanghai, produced apolitical, romantic films under Japan's heavy censorship and control. In order to more effectively bring Shanghai into the Japanese vision of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Japanese filmmakers eventually turned to other film topics meant to unify the Chinese and Japanese peoples, such as rejecting their common enemy, the West.

In early 1943, the Japanese requested for Zhonglian, a Shanghai film production company led by Kawakita Nagamasa and Zhang Shankun, to produce a film about the Opium

[68] Yamaguchi 100.

[69] Yamaguchi xxxvii–xxxix.

[70] Fu, *Between*, 106–107.

War in honor of the centenary of the Treaty of Nanjing. Frustrated with the negative and limited reception to propaganda films produced by companies like Manei, the Japanese government hoped to spread their anti-Anglo-American ideology and quash any remaining Chinese nationalism through this collaboration.[71] This film, *Wanshi liufang* (*Eternity*, sometimes called *Glory to Eternity*), centers around Qing Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu's 1839 campaign to ban the opium trade, which incited the First Opium War (1839–42) between China and Britain. This film's theme could be interpreted as anti-Anglo-American imperialism, however, the filmmakers essentially used the Opium War as a backdrop for a romantic tragedy with a love triangle between Lin Zexu and two women, downplaying the political propaganda in favor of popular entertainment.[72] Fu notes how the film could even be construed as anti-Japanese, since the Japanese facilitated opium trafficking while occupying China and the film contains a speech encouraging the Chinese to fight against "foreigners" rather than specifically naming the British.[73] Audiences found the film enjoyable, likely due to its unhistorical, romantic plotline and its avoidance of clear Japanese propaganda or Co-Prosperity Sphere ideology.

Zhonglian also collaborated with Manei, which provided Li Xianglan for the movie. Part of a compelling subplot, she plays a young woman trying to rescue her fiancé from the grips of opium addiction and financial ruin who becomes a patriotic, anti-opium songstress.[74] Her songs

[71] Fu, 108–109.

[72] Fu, *Between*, 111–114.

[73] Poshek Fu, "Resistance in Collaboration: Chinese Cinema in Occupied Shanghai, 1941–1945," in *Chinese Collaboration with Japan, 1932–1945: The Limits of Accommodation* eds. David P. Barrett and Larry N. Shuyu (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001), 191; Fu, *Between*, 116.

[74] Fu, "Resistance," 192.; Yamaguchi, *Fragrant Orchid*, xxii.

"Candy Peddling Song" (*Maitang ge*) and "Quit Smoking Song" (*Jieyan ge)* from *Eternity* became immensely popular and propelled her to celebrity status across China.[75]

The famous theme song "Candy Peddling Song" (*Maitangge)* occurs when Li's character enters an opium den and becomes interested in a young man there. Featuring an innocent mallet percussion introduction, the deceptively jaunty song describes her as a candy seller, a highly successful venture since opium smokers craved sweet foods.[76] However, as she sings, she begins to warn against opium, referring to the unhealthy physical changes caused by the drug, including a "misshapen back" and "protruding shoulders," likening the opium pipe to a lethal gun used for committing suicide (*zìshā de qiāng*).[77] Her song causes the addicts to reconsider, and they eventually leave the opium den. Later, she and the young man escape into the mountains, and she sings "Jieyan ge," imploring him to quit opium due to its destructive outcomes [Video 1.4].[78]

**Table 1.2** Translation of "Jieyan ge" or "Quit Smoking Song" in Chinese (Mandarin), Pinyin, and English.

| Chinese (Simplified) | Pinyin | English |
|---|---|---|
| 达呀达，你醒醒吧，你为什还想着它，<br>它耗尽了你的精神，<br>断送了你的年华，<br>你把一生事业作烟霞，<br>这牺牲未免可怕，<br>你把一生心血换泥沙，<br>这代价未免太大。 | Da ya da, ni xing xing ba, ni wei she hai xiangzhe ta?<br>Ta hao jin le ni de jingshen,<br>Duansongle ni de nianhua.<br>Ni ba yisheng shiye zuo yanxia,<br>Zhe xisheng weimian kepa,<br>Ni ba yisheng xinxue huan ni sha, zhe daijia weimian tai da.<br><br>Ta jiushi ni de qingren, | Dayada, wake up, why do you still think about it?<br><br>It exhausts your spirit,<br>it has ruined years of your life.<br>You made your career a haze,<br>this sacrifice is terrifying,<br>you have turned your blood into mud,<br>this price is far too high. |

[75] Fu, "Resistance," 191.; John M, "The History of Yamaguchi Yoshiko also known as Li Xiang Lan (Ri-Koran)," accessed November 27, 2022, https://yoshikoyamaguchi.blogspot.com/.

[76] Yamaguchi, *Fragrant Orchid*, 197.

[77] Yamaguchi, *Fragrant Orchid*, 198.

[78] Norman Smith, *Intoxicating Manchuria: Alcohol, Opium, and Culture in China's Northeast* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 1.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 它就是你的情人，你也该把它放下，<br>何况是你的冤家，也是我的冤家。<br><br>达呀达，达呀达，<br>你为什还想着它，<br>你要真爱我，<br>要听我的话，从今以后别再想着它。 | Ni ye gai ba ta fangxia,<br>Hekuang shi ni de yuanjia,<br>Yeshi wo de yuanjia.<br><br>Da ya da, da ya da,<br>Ni wei she hai xiangzhe ta.<br>Ni yao zhen ai wo, yao ting wo dehua, cong jin yihou bie zai xiangzhe ta. | It is your lover now, you should put it down,<br>not to mention it is your enemy, as it is my enemy.<br><br>Dayada, dayada.<br>Why do you still think about it?<br>If you really love me,<br>you must listen to me:<br>from now on don't think of it anymore. |

Here, Li Xianglan exercises her power as a songstress, pleading her case in song to her drug-addled fiancé. She openly confronts him concerning the negative impacts of his addiction, framing opium as their common enemy and likening it to a mistress. To Chinese audiences, opium, meant to be synonymous with Western imperial forces, also signified Japanese occupation and control. In his book *Intoxicating Manchuria,* Norman Smith describes "Quit Smoking Song" as a "space at the intersection of mid-twentieth-century Chinese national weakness, foreign imperialism, and the battle against the recreational consumption of intoxicants" in a film that meant to "incite anti-opium, anti-Western sentiment among Chinese audiences."[79] According to Yamaguchi, the film did extremely well, with an audience size "said to be unprecedented in the history of Chinese cinema."[80]

Though Japanese producers intended *Eternity* to denigrate Western influence, it instead reflected poorly on them and their own brutal colonialism.[81] Yamaguchi describes the movie as a

[79] Smith, *Intoxicating Manchuria*, 2.

[80] Yamaguchi, *Fragrant Orchid*, 197.

[81] Smith, *Intoxicating Manchuria*, 2.

"film of resistance against a foreign enemy—Japan" and a form of escapist, nationalist entertainment for Chinese audiences. Conversely, the Japanese thought it would rouse the "fighting spirit against the hated American and British devils."[82] The film's resultant ambiguity and fluidity in interpretation accommodated the ideological position of the audience member. Li Xianglan's plaintive role in the production led her to critical acclaim, marking her as not just Manei's propaganda film actress, but one involved in an anti-imperialist love story of Chinese nationalists which ended up encouraging China to fight against Japan rather than against Westerners.[83] Yamaguchi recalls when she signed on to the film that she "was glowing with anticipation with what I might be able to accomplish in this film" due to her previous negative reception for her friendship film roles and its potential impact on a wider Chinese audience.[84] Her interactions with the other actors, all Chinese citizens harboring anti-Japanese sentiments, led her to further doubt her profession and feel increasing guilt for her previous roles.[85]

At a press conference in 1943, a Chinese reporter asked Li Xianglan about her intentions for acting in "friendship films," pressing her to provide reasoning for abandoning her nation (China), to which she responded:

> It was a mistake I made before I was twenty years old, at a time when I was not able to comprehend anything to the fullest. I made such a mistake out of my ignorance, and I regret it today. I now apologize before you all that I appeared in those films. Please forgive me. I will not make the same mistake again.[86]

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[82] Yamaguchi, *Fragrant Orchid*, 194, xxii–xxiii.

[83] M, "The History."

[84] Yamaguchi, *Fragrant Orchid*, 194.

[85] Yamaguchi 197.

[86] Yamaguchi, 201.

After *Eternity*, Yamaguchi began to express a desire to reveal herself to the world as "a Japanese woman who was born in China and loves China."[87] She resigned from Manei in autumn of 1944 and continued her singing and acting career until the defeat of the Japanese in 1945.[88] Due to her career in Japanese propaganda films, she was arrested following the war by the Guomindang and nearly executed for her traitorous wartime actions. Serendipitously, she managed to prove her Japanese citizenship in time and she was instead deported to Japan, where she resumed her performing career as Yamaguchi Yoshiko rather than Li Xianglan.[89] After several years of struggle, she felt "reborn as a Japanese film actress," and even continued her career in Hollywood as Shirley Yamaguchi. Even years after her expulsion, her Shanghai fans remained fond of her and longed for her return to China, despite her propaganda roles and deception in pretending to be a Chinese actress.[90]

Yamaguchi later returned to Japan as Yoshiko Otaka after marrying Japanese ambassador Hiroshi Otaka, where she embarked on a career in journalism and then in politics, serving in Japan's parliament.[91] As sign of her agency and multifaceted identity, she openly acknowledged her cooperation with Japanese propaganda filmmakers during the war and publicly apologized for Japan's imperialism in China, one of the first Japanese public figures to do so.[92] She continued to critique Japan's wartime involvement and participated in activism on behalf of wartime "comfort women" until her death in 2014.

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[87] Yamaguchi 200.

[88] Stephenson, "A Star," 9.

[89] M, "The History."

[90] Stephenson, "A Star," 10.

[91] Luke, "Resilience," 15–18.

[92] Luke, 19.

## Hybridity and Identity

Scholar of Chinese literature and media studies Andrew F. Jones refers to this "yellow" music as a "musical, technological, financial, linguistic, and racial transaction conducted within the boundaries of the complex colonial hierarchies peculiar to that time and place," where both East and West were and continue to be "inextricably bound up in a larger and infinitely more complex process" of articulating national cultures within global colonial modernity.[93] Shidaiqu can neither be neatly defined as an unfortunate outcome of Western colonialism, nor as a simple mixture of East and West. Japanese invaders considered it a way to "construct the city as a peaceful place for song and dance instead of revealing the truth of war."[94] Its incredible popularity led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in their de-westernization efforts to eliminate "yellow music" as a symbol of Western values that threatened Chinese socialism.[95] As seen by multiple colonial and national powers seeking to exploit shidaiqu, its cosmopolitan nature and resultant ambiguity made it inherently dangerous as well as useful.

Japanese-produced films like *China Nights* and *Eternity* display a similar complexity. Fu defends "occupation cinema" as an ambiguous space for contesting meaning without legitimizing the occupying power's message. This ideological ambiguity and heterogeneity of reception allowed for friendship films like *Eternity* to create unseen and unintended consequences, an example of what he refers to as "the ideological fluidity of film arts."[96] Fu

[93] Jones, *Yellow Music*, 7–9.

[94] Qian Zhang, "Yellow Music Criticism During China's Anti-Rightist Campaign," in *Sound Alignments: Popular Music in Asia's Cold Wars* ed. by Michael K. Bourdaghs, Paola Iovene, and Kaley Mason (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 231.

[95] Zhang, "Yellow Music," 231–32.

[96] Poshek Fu, "The Ambiguity of Entertainment: Chinese Cinema in Japanese-Occupied Shanghai, 1941 to 1945," *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 1 (1997): 80.

argues against a binary and reductionist view of either resistance or collaboration during this time period, instead encouraging a both/and logic to approaching propagandistic products of occupied Shanghai, one that accounts for the multivalent and politically ambiguous context and reception. He views occupation cinema as a paradox, a cultural production existing "both within and outside" the occupying power that "captures … the human experience of occupied China."[97] This concept harbors greater ideological fluidity when applied to music due to its abstract nature and lack of visual input.

How should we then theorize Yamaguchi's volatile hybridity? Her internal conflict of viewing China as her "motherland" and Japan as her "fatherland" motivated her to take part in these films, believing somewhat naively that she was merely fostering goodwill between the two nations amidst ongoing warfare.[98] Scholars have conceived of Yamaguchi's unique identity as cross-cultural or pan-Asian instead of a hybrid identity. In this case, hybridity does not sufficiently explain Yoshiko's life and involvement in both nations and creates a distinctly colonial impression. However, interpreting her image as a film star and songstress as crossing or representing multiple cultures, images that were deeply shaped by her role as a figurehead of a broader East Asia, does not adequately capture her identity and experience either.

Yamaguchi's combination of Japanese and Chinese in her upbringing resembles what sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui refers to as a *ch'ixi* identity, which is the Aymara word meaning "motley."[99] Rivera Cusicanqui discusses racial hybridity in the Bolivian context, defining *chi'ixi* as an "imperceptible mixing of black and white … without ever being

[97] Fu, *Between,* 132.

[98] Luke, "Resilience," 14.

[99] Luke, 13; Stephenson, "A Star," 9; Cusicanqui, "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*," 105.

completely mixed" and the Aymara idea of "the included third."[100] *Ch'ixi* implies a "both/and" orientation toward culture and race, a combination without muddling, and an alternative to hybridity or multiculturalism. This decolonial concept has been employed by scholars working with musical traditions of Indigenous peoples that have been impacted by colonial presence and the presence of people of African heritage, such as work by ethnomusicologist Juan Eduardo Wolf and Mamadou Badiane on Afro-Chilean and Afro-Puerto Rican music-dance.[101]

Though *ch'ixi* has a wide range of applications, particularly in various realms of cultural production, it originates and functions in specific South and Central American contexts. Adapting this concept for the complex, vexed context of China and Japan, and echoing Fu's idea of "both/and" regarding occupation cinema, I propose using the term *zá* (in Chinese, 杂 and in Japanese, 雑) instead of *ch'ixi,* which in both Chinese and Japanese can mean "motley." This adaptation in terminology is essential when characterizing the colonial landscape of Shanghai, which requires a conceptualization tailored to its specific context, locality, and history. Furthermore, establishing a term tailored to this local context combats the colonial tendency to universalize and create master narratives while also clarifying the nexus between China, Japan, and the West within Shanghai.

In terms of Yamaguchi Yoshiko, she existed as both Japanese *and* Chinese in an era of enmity and warfare between the two nations. As Rivera Cusicanqui puts it, she exhibited a "parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not extinguish but instead

[100] Cusicanqui, "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*," 105.

[101] Juan Eduardo Wolf and Mamadou Badiane, "Dismantling Coloniality via the Vocabulary of Afro-Chilean and Afro-Puerto Rican Music-Dance," in *Améfrica in Letters: Literary Interventions from Mexico to the Southern Cone*, edited by Jennifer Carolina Gómez Menjívar (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2022), 150–69.

antagonize and complement each other."[102] This *zá* identity reveals itself in her propaganda films and her portrayal as the poster child for Co-Prosperity cultural politics, but also in the subversion of their reception. Yamaguchi was not merely a combination of colonizer and colonized, but something more, performing a Western-influenced genre of popular music and reflecting both Japanese and Chinese identities in an interwoven manner—distinct yet interlocking.

*Zá* also assists in understanding the broader relationship between Chinese and Japanese. Unlike the stark contrast evident between European colonizers and Indigenous populations around the world, someone growing up between these two cultures would not necessarily fit the description of "mixed-race" or visibly identify as a hybrid. Rather, like Yamaguchi, they could exist as both in parallel, a tapestry of interwoven threads that remained distinct from one another, yet blurry when viewed from far away. Similarly, shidaiqu as a genre, which combines *both* Western *and* Chinese musical features, could also be described as *zá* rather than hybrid due to its unique origins in Shanghai, which Lee (1999) theorizes as a city that was victimized but never colonized.

## Conclusion

Yamaguchi's disputed *zá* identity and her popularity as a performer place her in the middle of this cultural and political tumult, illuminating the interactions between colonial powers and popular media. As a Japanese settler, she enjoyed the comforts of her upper-class background and the cultural mobility afforded to her through her education and upbringing in China.[103] After the *China Nights* slap, Yamaguchi experienced Japanese oppression firsthand and could not

[102] Cusicanqui, "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*," 105.
[103] Luke, "Resilience," 12.

visibly fight back due to her assumed Chinese identity. Her *zá* identity permitted her to become the face of Japanese Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere propaganda while simultaneously appearing to the Chinese as a symbol of anti-imperialism.[104] She existed within the liminal space between being Japanese and Chinese, acting ethnically and linguistically as a chimera. Her *zá* identity allowed her to operate within Japanese colonial spaces but be read as Chinese and anti-colonial by Chinese audiences, especially as she performed a *zá* musical genre with subversive capabilities. As a genre, as I will discuss in the following chapter, shidaiqu prompted a mixed and politically valenced reception due to its *zá* nature.

[104] Luke, 13.

# CHAPTER III

## THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF YELLOW VOCAL TIMBRE

According to Andrew F. Jones (2001), shidaiqu ("songs of the times") received the moniker "yellow music" from Chinese nationalists and leftists due to its inherent coloniality, its association with the West and imperialism, and its cosmopolitan sound.[105] Denigration of popular music in Chinese culture and history dates to Confucius, who asserted that "proper music" (*yayue)* would aid with governance and social order, whereas overly sentimental "vernacular music" (*suyue*) used for entertainment would corrupt individuals and societies.[106] Especially in the early twentieth century, with the advent and adoption of listening technologies like radio, gramophone, and film, popular entertainment reached wider audiences than ever before. Correspondingly, suspicious treatment of popular music (in this case, an equivalent to "vernacular music") and increased perceptions of its inherent ideological danger led to increasing condemnation and censorship attempts. Jones provides a thorough discussion of coloniality, modernity, and media technology surrounding popular music in Shanghai during the early twentieth century, but as a musicologist, I am more intrigued by the sonic components of yellow music. Szu-Wei Chen's dissertation (2007) provides a thorough description of the origins of shidaiqu, its recording, production, and consumption process, and musical elements like instrumentation, harmony, and lyrics. Intriguingly, Chen offers a gloss of the four types of singing voices present in shidaiqu, primarily commenting on general aspects of the tone quality, physiology, resonance, and register, but does not further discuss the cultural politics of these singing styles.

[105] Jones, *Yellow Music,* 8.

[106] Lau, *Music in China,* 118.

To further probe the idea of a "yellow" or "decadent sound" (*mimi zhi yin*), I propose examining Chinese popular music of the twentieth century through vocal timbre.[107] Though difficult to define acoustically and perceptually, vocal timbre provides significant bases for affectual and conceptual meaning in popular song. Through the lens of vocal timbre, I can aurally investigate the political, cultural, and ideological circumstances as they were expressed or enforced in popular entertainment. Recently, heightened interest in the voice and vocal timbre, especially in popular music, has given rise to a host of novel methodologies and analytical tools to better quantify vocal timbre in addition to qualitative and embodied observations.[108] Most notably, between the 1930s and '40s, I observe that the bulk of shidaiqu singers' vocal timbres exhibit a marked shift from a brighter, nasal timbre toward a darker, *bel canto* sound. This shift reflects broader changes in aesthetic preference during increased colonial presence in Shanghai.

In order to visualize the transition between early and late shidaiqu vocal timbre, yet explore individual singers' timbral differences, I will conduct a series of spectrographic case studies across the course of five performers' careers. Utilizing spectrograms and binary parameters for describing timbre, I will show how acoustical and perceptual measures such as brightness signal varying degrees of cosmopolitanism present within their vocal timbres. My methodology draws upon several practical texts about vocal timbre analysis terminology and tools, including Heidemann (2016) and Nobile (2022). I apply these methods to describe the four major types of singing styles found in shidaiqu as categorized by Chen (2007) and then for

[107] Jones, *Yellow Music*, 8.

[108] Kate Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song," *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 1 (2016); Megan Lavengood, "The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis: A Case Study in 1980s Pop Music, Texture, and Narrative," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 3 (2020). Drew Nobile, "Alanis Morisettes' Voices," *Music Theory Online* 28, no. 4 (2022); Zachary Wallmark, "Analyzing Vocables in Rap: A Case Study of Megan Thee Stallion." *Music Theory Online* 28, no. 2 (2022)

analyzing individual case studies. For these, I have chosen five members of the "Seven Great Singing Stars," a group of female performers widely considered the most famous, successful, and influential shidaiqu vocalists. I selected representative excerpts of about five seconds in duration from songs at the beginning, middle, and end of their careers in Shanghai, typically spanning the mid-to-late 1930s until 1949. Using an AI stem splitter, I separated the vocal lines out of these songs and created spectrograms of those excerpts using the open-source program Sonic Visualizer.[109]

The two singers I excluded from this analysis are Li Xianglan, who I discussed in Chapter 2, and Bai Guang. Li Xianglan, beyond being a Japanese citizen, also received formal training from a Russian opera singer in her youth. Therefore, her singing style does not align with the majority of shidaiqu singers between 1930 and 1949. Bai Guang, nicknamed "Queen of the Low Voice," consistently sang with a remarkably deep and slightly raspy voice atypical of shidaiqu singers during her career, giving her the additional nickname of "Marlene Dietrich of the East."[110] Additionally, her shidaiqu output only spans 1942–49, a narrower temporal range than those of the singers I selected. The singers I analyze are Zhou Xuan, Bai Hong, Gong Qiuxia, Wu Yingyin, and Yao Li, since they display the wide range of vocal timbres present in shidaiqu over the course of their careers. Furthermore, they illustrate the pervasive influence of the fluctuations in politics, culture, and ideology present in 1930s and '40s China. Overall, these vocal timbres signal an increasing preference for Westernized sounds; however, some singers retained elements of Chinese traditional vocal timbre well into the 1940s. The global shift in

[109] Cannam et al., "Sonic Visualizer," 1467–1468. These spectrograms plot frequency in Hertz on the y-axis and time in seconds on the x-axis, with intensity (decibels) displayed through color (green as less intense, orange/red as more intense).

[110] Laszlo Montgomery, "The Seven Great Singing Stars of Shanghai (Part 2)," *The China History* Podcast, August 2019 (Podcast), 15:30.

timbre mirrors the growing proclivity for Chinese leftists to label these timbres as "yellow," marking them as ideologically promiscuous and, ultimately, too dangerous for popular consumption within a Communist society.

**Vocal Timbre Categories**

To illustrate Szu-Wei Chen's categories of singing styles in shidaiqu, I will use examples from singer Bai Hong [Figure 2.1], nicknamed "White Rainbow" (a literal translation of her stage name). Her singing style evolution throughout her career acts as a template or exemplar for the typical shidaiqu singer over the course of the 1930s and '40s. Below are two contrasting spectrograms of Bai Hong's vocal timbre, from 1932 ("Burying Jade") and 1948 ("Enchanting Lipstick"), respectively. (Fig. 2.0). These spectrograms are visually distinct in two main ways. First, the number of visible harmonic partial partials (horizontal lines) differ between examples: the 1932 example (left) contains many more partials throughout the frequency range, up to roughly the seventeenth partial, while the 1948 example (right) has fewer distinct upper partials. Second, a brighter white line indicates greater intensity or energy at that frequency. The 1932 example features relatively equal strength in each partial, resembling a comb. In contrast, the 1948 example shows two extremely strong partials at the fundamental frequency and the first overtone (the lowest two partials), with much weaker energy in the partials above them. The stronger and more numerous partials endow the 1932 timbre with a perceptually brighter sound: acoustically, it has a much higher average *spectral centroid*—the geometric mean of energy distribution in a spectrum, measured in Hertz—compared to the later recording.

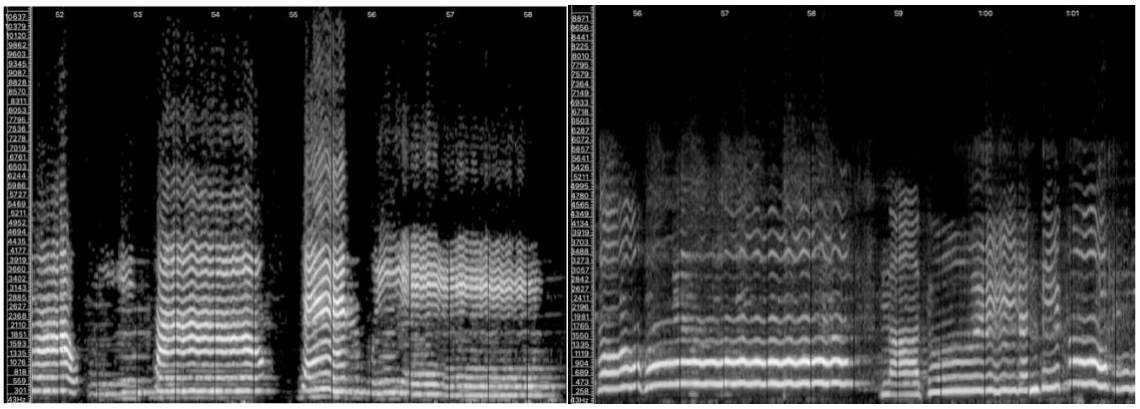

**Figure 2.0**: Spectrograms of Bai Hong's vocal timbre in songs "Burying Jade" (*Mai yu*), left, and "Enchanting Lipstick" (*Zuiren de kouhong*), right

To compare differences in vocal timbre within shidaiqu, I will first establish a baseline for typical vocal timbres in Peking opera (*jingju*), which would have informed early shidaiqu composers and performers (Liu & Wallmark, forthcoming).[111] Historically in Chinese culture, the timbre of the human voice took precedence over that of musical instruments (Zhou, 2019). These timbres tended toward brighter, more nasal sounds, which are exhibited on spectrograms as a higher spectral centroid, greater spectral energy in the higher harmonics, and characteristic irregular vibrato and portamento slides between notes [Figure 2.2, Audio 2.1]. Like in Fig. 2.0, there are many clear and strong partials throughout the frequency range, with the strongest partials above the fundamental frequency. Additionally, research on Peking opera singers show that singers tend to use slower vibrato, higher tongue positions, and a shorter vocal channel compared to Western singers.[112]

[111] Though I use Peking opera as a timbral reference point for shidaiqu, I recognize that southern styles of Chinese opera would serve as a better reference point since shidaiqu practitioners typically originated in the south. However, the vast majority of research (which I discuss below) has analyzed Peking opera voices and timbres.

[112] Wei Zhou, "A Study on Change of the Aesthetics of Timbre of Chinese Pop Music," in *The 2019 1st Asia International Symposium on Arts, Literature, Language and Culture,* Macau, China (2019): 105–10; Qichao Han and Ruifeng Zhang, "Acoustic Analyses of the Singing Vibrato in Traditional Peking Opera," *Journal of Voice*

This operatic vocal timbre overlaps with Chen's first category for shidaiqu singing styles, *Chinese traditional*. Chen describes this type as a "Chinese-style voice which features brighter head resonance," that sounds "sharp."[113] An example of a Chinese traditional voice in shidaiqu is Bai Hong's "Burying Jade" (*Mai yu*) from 1932, when she was only twelve years old [Figure 2.3]. The head resonance in her vocal timbre creates the distinct nasality in her sound, and she typically slides between pitches, creating a portamento-like motion. In this excerpt, her spectral centroid ranges between 1800 and 3000 Hz, consistently centering around 2500 Hz. Furthermore, her spectral peaks (orange) are in partials 4–6, contributing to the brightness in her vocal timbre. Additionally, though Bai Hong uses little vibrato in this song, this singing style would typically incorporate the fluttery, irregular vibrato heard in Peking opera.

Following the binary system outlined in Nobile (2022), this voice type utilizes primarily chest voice (with some instances of head voice), twang (a constricted vocal tract), and a wide range in pitch. To fit Nobile's model to this genre of music, I discard unrepresentative or irrelevant binary parameters and add several others, including presence of portamento motion (vocal slides) between pitches, vibrato type (irregular versus regular), and brightness, which I measure in two ways: spectral centroid and spectral peak (Table 2.1). Lavengood (2020) designates a frequency level of 1100 Hz to determine which spectral centroids were bright (above 1100 Hz) versus dark (below 1100 Hz). Considering the range and variability of spectral centroid throughout these five second excerpts, I have elected to use a range of spectral centroid frequencies rather than a single value. Based on these Bai Hong excerpts, I will consider a

31, no. 4 (2017): 511.e1-511.e9; Luwei Yang, Mi Tian, and Elaine Chew, "Vibrato Characteristics and Frequency Histogram Envelopes in Beijing Opera Singing," *5th International Workshop on Folk Music Analysis*, Paris, France (2015): 139–140.

[113] Chen, "The Music Industry," 233–34.

spectral centroid range between 1800 and 3000 Hz to be "bright," while a range between 500 and 1800 Hz to be "dark." To aid with visual identification on the spectrograms, I designate spectrograms with spectral peaks in partials 4 and above as "bright" and those with spectral peaks in partials 1–3 as "dark."

Following Lavengood (2020) and Nobile (2022), I apply Hatten's (1994) concept of markedness, since these timbral attributes do give rise to perceived cultural associations. In this context, the "yellowness" of the music may correspond to being timbrally different or "marked." I designate certain parameters as marked for Westernness based on their deviation away from or toward the Chinese traditional voice, including a darker timbre, resonance in the chest cavity, open vocal tract, lack of portamento motion, and regular, even vibrato on long notes. To a Chinese audience, these Western marked timbral attributes in the voice would likely instantly indicate a Western-influenced singing style rather than a traditional Chinese singing style. Furthermore, to critics, the "pornographic" and capitalist associations with these markers of Western influence in the voice indicated not only difference, but decadence deserving of denigration.

**Table 2.1** Vocal properties of the Chinese traditional and bel canto singing styles presented as binary parameters.

| **Singing Style** | **Bright/dark** | | **Head or chest resonance** | **Twang or open vocal tract** | **Portamento motion** | **Vibrato type** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Spectral centroid** | **Spectral peak** | | | | |
| **Chinese traditional** | Bright (1800–3000 Hz) | Bright (Partials 4+) | Head | Twang | Present | Irregular |
| **Bel canto** | Dark (500–1800 Hz) | Dark (Partials 1–3) | Chest | Open | Not present | Regular |

Chen's *bel canto* singing style displays few traditional Chinese attributes, instead incorporating many Western marked characteristics. Chen provides Bai Hong's "Enchanting Lipstick" (*Zuiren de kouhong*) from 1948 as an example of bel canto singing style, a vastly different vocal timbre than from sixteen years prior [Figure 2.4]. Instead of "nasal and sharp," Bai Hong sounds deep and full here, and Chen observes that shidaiqu singers resonate in both their head and chest cavities, utilize fast, wide vibrato on high notes, retain a similar timbre between low and high registers, and "produce a rich, round voice."[114] In this excerpt, Bai Hong's spectral centroid ranges between 1000 and 1500 Hz, primarily centering around 1200 Hz. When translating these and my own observations to our system of binary parameters, the bel canto singing style incorporates both chest and head voice with relatively seamless transitions between the two, a comparatively dark sound, an open vocal tract, resonance in the chest cavity, minimal portamento motion, and regular vibrato, especially on longer notes. As shown in Figure 2.4, compared to the Chinese traditional style, most of the energy is focused in the first few harmonic partials, with spectral peaks in the fundamental and first overtone, with only weak activation above around 2000 Hz. This singing style likely sounds most familiar to Western ears, and with differences in language and aspects of vocal performance beyond timbre notwithstanding, could potentially be perceived as a Western singer rather than a Chinese singer. Though I retain Chen's terminology of "bel canto" here, I would characterize this timbre as more akin to jazz or popular music (Tin Pan Alley) vocals rather than European operatic singing.

Chen's third category, *mixed style*, represents a style where a variety of vocal timbres are applied, typically a combination of the Chinese traditional and bel canto singing styles. Here, Bai Hong's "Goodbye Shasha" (*Shasha zaihui ba*) from 1942 illustrates this pairing of timbres

[114] Chen, "The Music Industry," 234.

through her low and high vocal registers [Figure 2.5]. In her lower register, she has what Chen describes as "more throat tension and a reedy texture," but in her higher register, he observes that "the muscle tension is much reduced and thus a mellow, unstrained voice is produced."[115] In this excerpt, her spectral centroid ranges from 1200 to 2000 Hz, and the spectral peak is in the first through fourth partials, seemingly establishing a sonic middle ground between the previous two examples. This aural snapshot of Bai Hong, ten years after "Burying Jade" and six years before "Enchanting Lipstick," perhaps depicts a singer midway between two singing styles. In her lower register, she likely sang in chest voice and found it more natural to use the Chinese traditional singing style. In her higher register, likely when singing in head voice, she could more easily switch to the bel canto singing style, which at the time would have been newer to her and shidaiqu more generally. Overall, the distribution of spectral energy remains below 5000 Hz, her vibrato is still rather wide and irregular, and she inserts portamento motion between pitches, casting her singing style as Chinese traditional but with heightened usage of head voice, chest resonance, and darker timbre in her higher register.

A contrasting example of mixed style Chen presents is "Meeting by Chance" (*Ping shui xiangfeng*) by Wu Yingyin from 1949, where she utilizes bel canto for her lower register and Chinese traditional in her higher register. However, Wu Yingyin, as I will discuss later, remains a special case among shidaiqu vocalists due to her status as the "Queen of the Nasal Voice" (*Biyin ge hou*).

The last category, *untrained voice*, refers to the singing style found in preadolescent females who had not yet received formal instruction or coaching, which Chen also refers to the "little sister style." Here, I will refer to this voice category as "little sister style," since many

[115] Chen, 235.

trained singers sang in this style. Interestingly, singers well past adolescence often sang in this style since it became quite fashionable. The best example of this, which Chen also refers to as "little sister style," is the earliest example of shidaiqu, "Drizzles" (*Maomao yü*), sung by Li Minghui, daughter of the composer Li Jinhui [Figure 2.6]. Composed in 1927, the singing style heard in "Drizzles" displays the nasality and portamento motion found in the Chinese traditional singing style, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, the level of vocal control heard in Bai Hong's "Burying Jade" is noticeably absent in Li Minghui's singing, and Chen observes "rasping when striking the highest note in the song."[116] She often starts pitches ambiguously, sliding up or down until settling on a frequency, and there is little resonance beyond the vocal tract, creating a "childlike yet flat, thin voice."[117] Her spectral centroid ranges widely, from 800 to 2000 Hz, and seems to center around 1500 Hz but is generally less defined. Her spectral peak typically lies in the second, third, and fourth partials, contributing to the brighter sound.

Chen's other examples include Zhou Xuan's "Express Train" (*Tebie kuaiche*) and Yao Li's "Lovesickness for Sale" (*Mai xiangsi*), which I will discuss later. The "little sister" singing style most resembles Chinese traditional in the binary parameter system. Additional aspects of this style that would complicate the binaries are the lack of resonance in either head or chest cavities, the frequent breaks in the sound, the dramatic range in spectral centroid, and the occasional rasp on higher, effortful notes.

At this point, I find it helpful to note that shidaiqu as a genre featured predominantly female vocalists, though some male vocalists were active. Curiously, these male vocalists all sing with a decidedly Western operatic, bel canto, dark timbre, ranging from Sheng Jialun's 1937

[116] Chen, 235.

[117] Chen, 236.

song “Singing at Midnight” (*Yeban gesheng*) to Huang Feiran’s 1948 song “Passionate Eyes” (*Reqing de yanjing*). Their voices display none of the youthful instability, alignment with traditional Chinese genres, or mixed qualities present in the female vocalists’ timbres. The dominance of female artists in this scene likely played a significant role in the perception of shidaiqu as feminine, decadent, frivolous, and pornographic, particularly when compared to mass music, which was revolutionary and coded male (as discussed in Chapter 4). The “sing-song girls” involved in shidaiqu performance were often conflated with prostitutes, a deplorable “betrayal of nationalistic ideals,” and their songs were deemed vulgar and obscene.[118] This not only reproduced Chinese societal views on gender at the time, but also provoked the leftists to pursue a new conceptualization of gender, one that prodded women to adopt the same revolutionary “hardness” as men in the early years of the PRC.[119] Furthermore, much of the mass music written in response to shidaiqu featured male vocalists and rejected the traditional and “untrained” styles, opting instead for the bel canto and Soviet mass music models.[120]

Though these four singing styles do not completely encompass the range of vocal timbres found in shidaiqu, they do illuminate a marked transition between a purely Chinese traditional singing style toward a bel canto, Western-influenced singing style. Between the 1930s and ‘40s Bai Hong and many other singers made the transition from Chinese traditional, or little sister style, to mixed, and then to bel canto. However, this shift was not universal, and some singers retained their own distinct singing style or vocal timbre, which in some cases became a type of

[118] Jones, *Yellow Music,* 113–115.

[119] Jones, 116–117.

[120] Jones, 126–127.

branding. In the next section, I present case studies of four vocalists who display these varying approaches to their vocal timbre across their shidaiqu careers.

## Case Studies: "The Seven Great Singing Stars"

### Zhou Xuan

In the 1930s, composer and folklorist Li Jinhui began composing what became the basis of Shanghai popular song, which appeared in films, on the radio, and on gramophone records. Li's Bright Moon Song-and-Dance Troupe produced many musicians and stars who went on to successful film careers in Shanghai, including Bai Hong, Gong Qiuxia, and Zhou Xuan.[121] Zhou Xuan (1918–57), nicknamed "Golden Voice" for her beautiful singing tone, sustained a prolific music and film career in both Shanghai and Hong Kong, rising to fame from her role in *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi*) in 1937 [Figure 2.7]. Most consider the most celebrated shidaiqu songstress to be Zhou Xuan, and here, she serves as the initial case study, mirroring Bai Hong's timbral trajectory.

A well-known song of hers called "Express Train" (*Tebie kuaiche)*, written and composed by Li Jinhui in 1936, features a lengthy piano and trumpet introduction complete with train sounds and whistles. In the song, she describes the fast-paced courtship of a couple who meet and within five minutes are engaged, married, and have two children, where the train acts as metaphor for swift societal changes.[122] Like most shidaiqu songs, the melody is pentatonic while the underlying harmonies follow typical Western chord progressions. When Zhou Xuan comes in, she uses "little sister style."

[121] Chen, "The Music Industry," 19, 110.

[122] Marlow, *Jazz in China,* 23.

In the spectrogram for “Express Train,” [Figure 8] each note has a direction rather than resting on a discrete pitch; her spectral centroid generally centers around 1500 Hz but dips down to 900 Hz or ranges up to 2000 Hz. The distribution of spectral energy extends up to 7000 Hz and her spectral peak is often in the second or third partial, which also contributes to her nasal sound. Her vocal timbre, atypically childlike for an eighteen-year-old trained singer, provides us with an excellent example of early little sister style shidaiqu vocal timbre: thin and youthful, which aligns itself more with vocal timbre Peking opera or folk music than it does of vocal jazz or American musical theater. Furthermore, her vocal slides, or portamento-like motion between notes, as shown in the spectrogram through frequent slides and inflection points, and her irregular, fluttery vibrato strongly resemble traditional Chinese vocal techniques.

Rather than completely adjust the way trained Chinese singers performed, singers like Zhou Xuan maintained much of their training and technique while singing over Western accompaniment and harmonies. Other songs she performed early in her career, like her 1937 “The Song of Four Seasons” (*Siji ge*) and “Full Moon and Blooming Flowers” (*Yueyuan huahao*) display the controlled Chinese traditional vocal style.

Zhou Xuan’s 1940 song “Where Can I Find My Soulmate?” (*Zhiyin he chu xun*) features a mixed singing style, where she switches between Chinese traditional and bel canto styles depending on her register and whether she is in chest or head voice [Figure 2.9]. Her timbre is rather inconsistent in this song, and she sometimes adopts a nasal edge to her voice when singing in chest voice. She typically begins phrases with a thinner, brighter sound and arrives at a forcibly rounder, darker sound on the final note of the phrase. Here, her spectral centroid ranges from 1000 to 1600 Hz with a downward trajectory on each note, and her spectral peak typically falls within the first through third partials.

Though less systematic or register-dependent than the mixed style of Bai Hong, this song displays a key process shidaiqu singers like Zhou Xuan underwent at the turn of the decade. Singers had to negotiate the competing singing styles and vocal timbres of the time, choosing to adhere to their traditional Chinese sounds of early shidaiqu or transition toward the Western sounds, particularly those found in American popular music and jazz. In this case, Zhou Xuan chose to perform both, and the irregularity of her approach perhaps indicates a sort of physiological slippage or a lack of complete comfort in the bel canto style.

By 1946, Zhou Xuan's singing style shifted toward bel canto, losing the little sister style or Chinese traditional sound exhibited in her songs from ten years earlier. This shift in vocal timbre appeared in her contemporaries like Bai Hong, who sought to imitate a European *bel canto* singer instead of the Chinese traditional style .[123] Though the melody of the 1946 song "Shanghai Nights" (*Ye shanghai*) is mostly pentatonic like "Express Train," Zhou Xuan's delivery of each pitch becomes much more discrete, clearly enunciated, and often on the beat, without the swift sliding portamento motion between each note—though, interestingly, she does add small slides as ornaments, usually at the starts or ends of phrases [Figure 2.10].

As shown in the spectrogram, there is significantly less spectral energy in the middle and upper frequencies, and most of the spectral energy falls below 4500 Hz. Her spectral centroid typically falls between 1000 and 1300 Hz, though in this excerpt, there is an outlier peak at 2200 Hz. Zhou Xuan's spectral peak is decidedly found in the fundamental or second partial, contributing to her rounder, less nasal sound. Additionally, her vibrato is even, consistent, and less wide than in the first example, typically occurring only on long notes rather than fluttering on each syllable. The vocal timbre itself clearly diverges from the childlike voice she rose to

[123] Chen, "The Music Industry," 19.

fame with ten years prior. Here, Zhou Xuan's vocal timbre clearly lives on the spectrum of bel canto. She produces a rounder sound through a more open throat and subsequent greater resonance in her chest cavity. This cosmopolitan timbre reflects the increased preference for Western vocal timbre in the mid-to-late 1940s.

**Yao Li**

Yao Li (1922–2019), also spelled Yao Lee, was the "Silver Voice" of the Seven Great Singing Stars [Figure 2.11]. Like Wu Yingyin, she was self-taught, and her career started through live radio performances when she was only thirteen. By 1936, she performed alongside her favorite singer Zhou Xuan on a radio show. She became quite popular in Shanghai, performing regularly at famed Ciro's Nightclub, recording songs with Pathé Records, and continuing to sing live on radio stations.[124] Her song "Rose, Rose I Love You" (*Meigui meigui wo ai ni*) topped the charts in 1940. After the Communist Party took over Shanghai in 1949, she fled with her family and reestablished her career in Hong Kong, where it continued to develop. There, her vocals became further Westernized and she often sang American songs with Mandarin lyrics instead of the classic shidaiqu repertory.

As previously mentioned, in her early career, Yao Li exhibited a little-sister style voice in her 1939 song "Lovesickness for Sale" (*Mai xiangsi*), recorded when she was seventeen years old [Figure 2.12]. Compared to the little sister style voices of Li Minghui or Zhou Xuan, Yao Li demonstrates greater control as she shifts relatively seamlessly between lower and higher registers. Her spectral centroid varies throughout, depending on the vibrato, but generally ranges from 1000 to 2500 Hz with most pitches centering at or above 1700 Hz. Her spectral peak spans

[124] Sandra Hong, "The Songbirds of China," *Glass Magazine*, June 7, 2013.

the fundamental through the fourth partial. As shown in the spectrogram, she sings with the bright timbre (as indicated by the intensity of the upper harmonics and the relatively high spectral centroid), portamento motion, irregular vibrato, and twang characteristic of the Chinese traditional or little sister style voice.

Yao Li's 1942 song "Dream of Spring" (*Chun de meng*), an adaptation of Li Xianglan's 1940 song "China Nights" (Jp. *Shina no yoru*), signals her shift away from her earlier little sister singing style toward the bel canto style, perhaps in an effort to imitate Li Xianglan's vocals, which were decidedly bel canto due to her Western operatic training [Figure 2.13]. In this spectrogram example, her vibrato, though faster, is much more even and narrow than before. Like Zhou Xuan in "Shanghai Nights," Yao Li does tend to use portamento motion as ornaments, often decorating the start or end of a pitch. Her spectral centroid ranges from 500 to 2000 Hz, though it hovers around 1400 Hz and 900 Hz on the long notes, rising to 1800–1900 Hz on her faster, portamento-infused notes. She sings with a noticeably darker timbre, also shown in the relative strength of the fundamental frequency (the clear spectral peak) compared to the higher harmonics.

The last example from Yao Li is her 1948 song "Love that I Can't Have" (*Debudao de aiqin*). This sultry, jazzy number exemplifies Chen's observation that Yao Li's vocals went from "immature and strident to … warm and elegant" over the course of her career.[125] Here, Li sounds similar to the smooth and dark vocals of American crooners in the 1930s and '40s [Figure 2.14]. In this excerpt, the spectrogram displays a clear concentration of spectral energy below 5000 Hz, compared to her previous spectrogram where her spectral energy continued until 7500 Hz, the spectral peak lies in the fundamental frequency, and the spectral centroid ranges from 600 to

[125] Chen, "The Music Industry," 19.

1800 Hz. Additionally, the portamento ornamentation she used in "Dream of Spring" is markedly absent, and she subtly includes vibrato exclusively on long pitches, particularly towards their releases. She rarely uses her chest voice during this song, staying within her head voice and resonating in her chest cavity to effortlessly achieve a smooth, dark, and round sound. Though a big band accompanies her in this song, she would certainly have used a microphone, thus allowing for a darker, more intimate timbre to remain audible to audiences.

**Wu Yingyin**

Wu Yingyin (1922–2009) received the nickname "Queen of the Nasal Voice"—in terms of vocal timbre, she serves as a foil to the other members of the Seven Great Singing Stars [Figure 2.15]. True to her nickname, her vocal timbre remains relatively nasal throughout her shidaiqu career, especially in comparison to her contemporaries Yao Li and Zhou Xuan.

However, as I will show through her spectrogram examples, her singing style and vocal timbre do not align with the categories defined by Chen, perhaps because she was self-taught.[126] By 1948, Wu Yingyin was a huge star in Shanghai, staying there until her departure to Hong Kong in 1957, where she continued her career as a singer for several decades. She remained musically active after her move to California in the 1980s, drawing global crowds and fundraising with her performances until her death in 2009.

Wu's 1940 song "I Have a Love" (*Wo you yiduan qing*) features her vocals along with an ensemble of traditional Chinese instruments, including *pipa, yangqing*, and *guzheng* [Figure 2.16]. Accordingly, her vocal timbre displays the characteristic nasality of the Chinese traditional singing style and of her own reputation as a songstress. As shown in the spectrogram above, the

[126] Montgomery, "The Seven," 23:00. Wu Yingyin's interest in singing and performing ran against her parents' wishes, as they expected her to follow their career paths and become a doctor or an engineer.

distribution of spectral energy extends up to and past 5000 Hz. The second and third harmonics match the intensity of the fundamental frequency, and her spectral centroid ranges widely, from 600 Hz to 2700 Hz. Typically, her higher notes' spectral centroid hovers around 2000 Hz, whereas the lower notes' spectral centroid center around 1000 Hz. Interestingly, the vibrato she injects into her singing matches that of the bel canto singing style and not the Chinese traditional.

By 1940, Wu Yingyin would have heard bel canto singers like Li Xianglan or Western performers, and without formal training in either a Chinese traditional style or a bel canto style, could have incorporated elements of both to create her own specific stylistic mélange. This blend differs from Chen's mixed style, as I defined previously, since she combines the two styles in both her low and high registers. Here, she uses portamento motion primarily as an ornament, sings mainly in her chest voice, adds even vibrato on long notes, and generally produces a bright vocal timbre with twang, though at times, in her lower register, she resonates in her chest cavity in addition to her head. The accompanying instruments tend toward brighter, more nasal timbres, and her vocal timbre contextually matches them.

Unlike "I Have a Love," Wu Yingyin's 1946 song "I Want to Forget You" (*Wo xiang wangle ni*) pairs her vocals with a jazz combo [Figure 2.17]. Her singing style in this song can be characterized as bel canto but with more nasality than her fellow shidaiqu singers. Once again, she displays a wide range in spectral centroid, from 600 to 2500 Hz, jumping from notes centering around 1200 Hz to a pitch centering around 2200 Hz. As shown in the spectrogram, she maintains her even and regular vibrato on long notes and rarely adds portamento motion between pitches. Unlike her contemporaries in 1946, she retains the brighter vocal timbre, with the spectral peak in the third partial, though somewhat darker than her 1940 song due to the spectral distribution only extending up to 5000 Hz. It is possible that for this song, she sought to

match the style and timbres of the accompanying jazz instruments, which were much darker in timbre than the Chinese instrumental ensemble.

The last example from Wu Yingyin is her famous 1949 song "Meeting by Chance" (*Ping shui xiangfeng*). Perhaps her best-known song, "Meeting by Chance" features a piano and winds accompaniment with plenty of syncopation [Figure 2.18]. Her vocal timbre in this song resembles her 1946 "I Want to Forget You" timbre, but she adds some portamento ornaments. This excerpt shows the narrowest range in spectral centroid thus far, from 1200 to 2500 Hz. As shown in the spectrogram, her spectral distribution of energy only extends up to 5000 Hz, but her spectral peak consistently lies in the second or third harmonic. Aurally and through timbral measurements, her level of nasality and brightness remains relatively constant throughout a nine-year span regardless of changing musical preferences or the darkening of her contemporaries' vocal timbres.

Wu Yingyin certainly lives up to her reputation as being the member of the Seven Great Singing Stars known for her nasal voice. Throughout her shidaiqu career, she retained the bright, nasal quality of her vocal timbre typically found in the Chinese traditional or little sister singing styles as defined by Szu-Wei Chen. However, she merged elements of the bel canto style with her vocal timbre to produce her own distinctive style, a nasal bel canto, that married the sounds of East and West without undue compromise.

**Gong Qiuxia**

Gong Qiuxia (1918–2004), affectionately nicknamed "Big Sister" within the Seven Great Singing Stars due to being the oldest member, began her career in 1936 with the film *Father Mother Son Daughter (Fumu zinu)* [Figure 19]. Her slightly elevated age routinely led her to be

typecast as a matronly figure in films, and her singing style did not begin with the "little sister" style like many other stars. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, she, like many others, fled to Hong Kong and then moved to Taiwan in 1967. Compared to the previous case studies, Gong Qiuxia presents a unique and puzzling timbral trajectory throughout her career.

Her well-known 1937 song "Roses Blooming Everywhere" (*Qianwei chuchu kai*) displays what Chen describes as Chinese traditional singing style [Figure 2.20]. Here, she resonates in her head cavity and has a relatively bright sound, with her spectral centroid ranging from 700 to 2000 Hz and spectral energy ranging up to 5000 Hz, but her spectral peak typically lies in the first or second partial. Unlike in Chinese traditional style, her vibrato tends to be narrower and more even, and she includes portamento motion primarily as an ornament. In this case, I would disagree with Chen's categorization and label "Roses Blooming Everywhere" an early adoption of a mix between Chinese traditional and bel canto by softening the brightness of the timbre and incorporating some Western stylistic elements before other shidaiqu singers did so.

"Dream Person" (*Mengzhong ren*), which Gong Qiuxia sang in 1942, fits poorly with Chen's categories as well [Figure 2.21]. The song features an orchestral tango accompaniment while Gong Qiuxia cries out sorrowfully for the absent person from her dreams. Gong's vocal timbre contains unmistakable twang and brightness, and she primarily uses chest voice and head resonance. Though her spectral peak is in the fundamental, in this excerpt, her spectral centroid centers around 1500 Hz, at times ranging up to 2000 Hz. Especially on higher notes, the distribution of her spectral energy extends to 10kHz, and she tends to slide between notes more consistently than when she used portamento ornamentally in "Roses Blooming Everywhere."

The vibrato she uses on longer notes remains quite even and narrow. Here, her mixed style is somewhat akin to Wu Yingyin's nasal bel canto singing style.

Interestingly, her 1948 song "Goddess" (*Nu shen*) displays even more brightness in her vocal timbre [Figure 2.22]. The distribution of spectral energy frequently extends up until 8000 Hz, and her spectral peak is often in the second or sometimes even the fifth or sixth partial, evoking the comb patterning in Bai Hong's "Burying Jade." Her spectral centroid ranges from 1200 to nearly 3000 Hz, with longer pitches hovering around 1800 Hz or even 2400 Hz. Additionally, her vibrato tends to be wider, though still relatively even. She maintains the same twang and head resonance as "Dream Person" with some portamento motion. Throughout her songs, and especially in "Goddess," Gong demonstrates her virtuosic ability to belt in her high register.

Gong Qiuxia presents a thought-provoking case of a shidaiqu songstress with progressively brighter timbre and increased alignment with the Chinese traditional style over time. In some ways, her 1948 vocal timbre and near-Chinese traditional singing style would have distinguished her from her contemporaries, who primarily performed the bel canto singing style. With her additional age and experience, she may have sought a way to aurally set herself apart from the younger, more Westernized singers, or to preserve a type of vocal timbre that was rapidly disappearing from shidaiqu.

By no means do these case studies represent the full spectrum of shidaiqu vocal timbres, but they do illustrate important trends. Singers like Bai Hong, Yao Li, and Zhou Xuan represent the typical transformation in vocal timbre that Chen observed, progressing from a Chinese traditional or little sister singing style to bel canto within the decade. This shift towards a darker sound, open vocal tract, minimal portamento motion, regular and narrow vibrato, and chest

resonance aligns shidaiqu vocal timbre closely with that of jazz and Western popular music. In contrast, Gong Qiuxia and Wu Yingyin resisted this turn toward bel canto. Wu Yingyin, as the "Queen of the Nasal Voice," maintains her bright, nasal timbre throughout her career, though other elements of her voice consistently fit with the bel canto singing style. Gong Qiuxia's career almost looks like a reversal of Yao Li or Zhou Xuan's, where she begins with a darker sound and a mix of Chinese traditional and bel canto singing style, but progressively gains greater brightness, twang, and nasality in her vocal timbre.

Table 2.2 summarizes each of the five case studies and the singing styles the vocalists use for each song example. Here, I have labeled singing styles "crooner" to describe Yao Li's 1948 "Love that I Can't Have" and "nasal bel canto" to describe the blended style found in excerpts from Wu Yingyin and Gong Qiuxia that differs from Chen's mixed style. In Table 2.3, I designate bel canto, mixed, and nasal bel canto styles as marked for Westernness (+) and Chinese traditional and little sister style as marked as Chinese (–). This shows the overall trend in singers from unmarked to marked vocal timbre, with the exception of Gong Qiuxia, who progresses from marked for Westernness to marked as Chinese.

**Table 2.2** Summary of case studies and their respective singing style.

| **Singer** | **Song Title** | **Year** | **Singing Style** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Bai Hong** | "Burying Jade" | 1932 | Chinese traditional |
| | "Goodbye Shasha" | 1942 | Mixed |
| | "Enchanting Lipstick" | 1948 | Bel canto |
| **Zhou Xuan** | "Express Train" | 1936 | Little sister style |
| | "Where Can I Find My Soulmate?" | 1940 | Mixed |
| | "Shanghai Nights" | 1946 | Bel canto |
| **Yao Li** | "Lovesickness for Sale" | 1939 | Little sister style |
| | "Dream of Spring" | 1942 | Bel canto |
| | "Love that I Can't Have" | 1948 | Crooner |
| | "I Have a Love" | 1940 | Chinese traditional |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Wu Yingyin** | "I Want to Forget You" | 1946 | Nasal bel canto |
| | "Meeting by Chance" | 1949 | Nasal bel canto |
| **Gong Qiuxia** | "Roses Blooming Everywhere" | 1937 | Mixed |
| | "Dream Person" | 1942 | Nasal bel canto |
| | "Goddess" | 1948 | Chinese traditional |

**Table 2.3** Summary of singer markedness throughout their career stages.

| | Bai Hong | Zhou Xuan | Yao Li | Wu Yingyin | Gong Qiuxia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Early | – | – | – | – | + |
| Middle | + | + | + | + | + |
| Late | + | + | + | + | – |

**Sounding "Yellow"**

By 1946, the Japanese occupation had ended, and the city of Shanghai began to recover from the aftereffects of the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, intense turmoil, including hyperinflation and a civil war, was still to come. With this instability and combat between the burgeoning Chinese Communist Party and the failing Guomindang came increased hostility toward shidaiqu, especially from those supporting the CCP and its quest against Western influence and bourgeois decadence.[127] Here, Jones argues that the label "yellow" carries a double meaning: firstly, it connotes pornographic decadence, but also color-codes shidaiqu as primitive and backward due to its pronounced Chineseness (e.g., pentatonic melodies and traditional singing styles) in an era where composers and musicians sought out modern European ideals of music, considering them more evolved.[128] The perception of this music as "tainted" and

[127] Jones, *Yellow Music,* 8.

[128] Jones, 78–79, 103.

ideologically promiscuous stimulated culture ministers in the CCP to promote a rival genre known as "mass music" (*qunzhong yinyue*) or red song. These populist songs were sung in Mandarin and influenced by Western military marches, aiming to stoke a spirit of patriotism and resistance to foreign influence. An example of "mass music" is the national anthem of the PRC, "March of the Volunteers," written in 1935 by composer Nie Er, who initially studied under Li Jinhui before rejecting yellow music.[129] Interestingly, mass music incorporated Western musical idioms just as much or even more so than shidaiqu, but as I will discuss in the next chapter, the political ideology and cultural values expressed through mass music vindicated the rampant usage of Western style.

I initially theorized that much of what leftists considered "tainted" or "decadent" rested in the vocal timbre of shidaiqu, which is both perceptually salient and acoustically saturated with Western influence. Shidaiqu, especially in the 1940s, features a female voice singing in an inviting bel canto, Western style about pleasure, romance, and nightlife. After the Japanese occupiers left Shanghai, many American soldiers entered the city, bringing their musical sensibilities with them. Accordingly, by the late 1940s, most shidaiqu performers navigating this tense political landscape likely catered to a Western audience by creating an increasingly Westernized sound. Here, the bel canto singing style implied a blended sound, one that evidenced the "sonic corollaries" of coloniality which sought to subjugate timbre, particularly the unruly, overpowering nasal quality of a Chinese traditional singing style.[130] However, those who did not adhere to this bel canto singing style, most notably Wu Yingyin and Gong Qiuxia, maintained or even exaggerated elements of Chinese traditional vocal timbre like brightness and

[129] Jones, 109–110.

[130] Zachary Wallmark, Forthcoming, "Blend," in *Name / Understand / Play: Reflecting on Metaphors in Music and Sound*, eds. Nina Sun Eidsheim, J. Martin Daughtery, Dylan Robinson, and Daniel K.S. Walden, 4.

wide vibrato. This diversity in vocal timbres throughout the 1930s and ‘40s suggests that what was yellow about shidaiqu did not necessarily lie entirely in the voice, particularly when early shidaiqu incorporated primarily a Chinese traditional or little sister style vocal timbre. In terms of instrumentation, shidaiqu often incorporated jazz combos or big bands (Wu Yingyin’s “I Want to Forget You”), but some songs employed traditional Chinese instrument ensembles (Wu Yingyin’s “I Have a Love”). As an interpretive lens onto this timbral dynamism, I adapt the concept of *zá* from Chapter 1 to describe shidaiqu’s alignment with both Western popular genres and Chinese traditional genres. Much like Li Xianglan was perceived as both Chinese and Japanese, *zá* allows for vocal timbre in shidaiqu to be a sonic blend encompassing being marked for both Chinese and Western (in place of specifically Japanese) styles, interlocking without compromise. In short, shidaiqu performers, through their refusal to relinquish tradition or completely hybridize due to colonization, performed a genre distinctly both/and, or *zá*.

In many sonic aspects, shidaiqu was a constantly moving target to which the charge of “yellowness” was strategically assigned, by competing agents, to serve shifting ideological and political needs. That is, the attribution of yellowness to the voice was not linked consistently or systematically to any one style of singing; indeed, it was deployed in opposing and often contradictory ways according to political usefulness. For some observers, the very association with Western popular music, particularly jazz or other perceived lowbrow genres, lent shidaiqu its marked yellowness. Leftists viewed the promulgation of Western capitalism through nightlife, entertainment, mass media, and the star-centric music industry as further proof of popular song submitting to Western capitalism and becoming markedly yellow. Increased alignment of its vocal timbre with Western popular styles, especially crooning, merely confirmed this linkage. Conversely, when shidaiqu vocal timbre aligned with traditional Chinese singing styles, it

implied a commitment to the past and a cross-fertilization of the old with the modern world. This markedness as Chinese was also rejected by the CCP, as demonstrated in Mao's "Smash the Four Olds" campaign.[131]

Yellowness, then, cannot explicitly be read on a spectrogram or heard in vocal timbre, but instead arises from a political reading of the voice, a strategic semiotic promiscuity allying both with Western popular entertainment and with Chinese tradition. Both of these values, in the case of the dynamic political landscape of the emergent People's Republic of China, represented ideological danger and bourgeois decadence, leading to the banning of shidaiqu in 1949 when Chiang Kai-shek fled and the CCP took power. Actors, composers, and musicians fled to Hong Kong and Taiwan to escape the inevitable crackdown on shidaiqu practitioners.[132] Popular music effectively ceased to exist in the People's Republic for the following three decades and "yellow" music could carry dire consequences: shidaiqu progenitor Li Jinhui was executed by Red Guards in 1968 during Cultural Revolution persecution.[133] Jiang Qing, the wife of Chairman Mao Zedong, was previously a relatively unsuccessful actress in Shanghai and consequently carried out a long-standing vendetta against Li Jinhui and the shidaiqu songstresses. She harassed those who stayed behind in Shanghai, such as Bai Hong and Zhou Xuan, and continued to wield the label "yellow" against any music she did not feel aligned with CCP agendas. Xuan did flee to Hong Kong after 1949 but returned to Shanghai several times, continuing her acting and singing career until her tragic and untimely death in 1957. Bai Hong survived the Cultural Revolution, reluctantly participating in government-approved plays until her retirement in 1979.[134] The other

[131] Ouyang, *Music*, 25.

[132] Jones, *Yellow Music*, 110–11.

[133] Jones, 168.

[134] Montgomery, "The Seven," 12:00.

stars sustained their acting and singing careers in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, the United States, and Singapore for many decades.

## Conclusion

These members of the Seven Great Singing Stars acted and sang during an exceptionally tumultuous and uncertain era of Chinese history. Their voices represent individual spotlights on the complex web of relationships between coloniality, modernity, political ideology, and popular entertainment in Shanghai during these fraught decades. As performers, they chose to articulate their adherence to or dissimilarity from Western styles, fashioning and re-fashioning their voices from year to year in an effort to navigate an ever-changing cultural and political climate and retain their unique, personal stardom. Through this analysis of their vocal timbres, I demonstrate the high degree of variance in their voices and their strategic modulations in response to local and global conflicts. Though I pinpoint certain aspects of their vocal timbres that would signal a yellow sound, I argue the simultaneous alignment of vocal timbres in shidaiqu with both Chinese traditional and Western popular music are in fact a sonic demonstration of the concept *zá*. With this diversity in shidaiqu vocal timbre, I find that yellowness instead acted as a convenient and politically charged label for a sonic moving target, a practice that continued during the Mao era and beyond.

# CHAPTER IV

## "RED" RESPONSES TO YELLOW MUSIC

> Repetition deadens our capacity to think, but leaves its sediment in the mind. It occupies a certain space there and sometimes surfaces unexpectedly and without being willed.
>
> – Marina Frolova-Walker[135]

> Not much effort is required to hear the repressive role of mass music.
>
> – Jacques Attali[136]

In 1963, a boy was born in the heat of summer in Yunnan province, a beautiful mountainous region tucked in the southwest of China bordering Myanmar, Laos, and Tibet. There, he was brought up by his grandmother in a small village, running wild in the forest. In 1966, a girl was born in the chill of winter in Beijing before abruptly being relocated to live with her extended family in rural Jiangxi province, in southeast China. Her parents, both well-educated and successful, were reassigned by the government to perform menial labor.

Both survived the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), too young to be Red Guards but old enough to know of their violent exploits. Both endured the pains of limited resources, subsisting on two sets of clothes and eating meat only once a month. Both were among the first in their generation to attend university; both ended up living in the city of Shanghai. By virtue of hard work, inexplicable opportunities, and sheer determination, they left China and sought out the American dream, part of which included having a second child: me. As a music scholar and the

[135] Marina Frolova-Walker, "Stalin and the Art of Boredom," *Twentieth-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (2004): 120.

[136] Attali, *Noise*, 111.

child of Chinese immigrants, the impact of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution exacts a heavy burden as the political situation in China today approaches yet another breaking point. However, it is with this positionality that I feel drawn to exploring that time in history, the twilight zone that leers out of reach yet looms large in my psyche.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established on October 1, 1949, a new country forged out of the shambles of a nation that had been colonized, occupied, and then divided by civil war.[137] Immediately after, the government began distributing land and production means to hundreds of millions of peasants to encourage agricultural economic productivity and stabilize the economy after years of uncontrolled inflation and the enormous costs (over 6 million RMB) of supporting the Korean War for over three years.[138] Taking inspiration from Soviet economic models, Mao introduced his First Five-Year Plan, which lasted from 1953 to 1957. By 1958, now disillusioned and distrustful of the Soviets and Khrushchev, Mao announced the "Great Leap Forward," a second five-year plan to increase industrial and agricultural production which lasted until 1962, causing unforeseen and catastrophic effects.[139] The planned increase in workers' hours to boost production and the economy instead triggered an economic depression and a man-made famine that killed nearly 30 million people.[140]

[137] Chen-Yi Yu, *China's Economy: Towards 2049 (*Xiamen University Press, 2020), 5.

[138] Yu, *China's Economy*, 7–9, 17; Shen, Zhihua and Yafeng Xia, "Mao Zedong's Erroneous Decision During the Korean War: China's Rejection of the UN Cease-fire Resolution in Early 1951," *Asian Perspective* 35, no. 2 (2011): 187–209, https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2011.0013. To this day, the Korean War is not fully resolved and remains an international security issue.

[139] Yu, 25.

[140] Walder, *China under Mao*, 4.

Only four years later, Mao launched the "Great Proletarian Revolution," commonly known as the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 until his death in 1976.[141] This attempt constituted a massive state-led purge of capitalists, not just removing leadership but destroying and restructuring China's bureaucratic system, which they originally copied from the Soviet Union.[142] Simultaneously, mass mobilizations via the Red Guard movement prompting regular citizens such as students and workers to remove individuals from office turned into uncontrollable chaos as violence erupted between opposing factions.[143] By the end of this bloody and turbulent decade, millions were executed or exiled from their homes, numerous sites of religious or historical value were destroyed, and institutions such as universities and schools were shuttered. Prominent intellectuals and creatives, particularly in Shanghai, experienced Red Guard home invasions and subsequent incarceration, including He Luting, a prolific composer.[144] Beyond the cruelty and suffering inflicted during the Cultural Revolution's deployment of martial law, the destruction of institutions like universities and the detainment of professors and scholars further stifled creativity, innovation, and cultural production in China. These consequences of Mao's regime, and especially the Cultural Revolution, lasted long after its conclusion, particularly due to its generational impact on education and trust in the government.

This sobering history paints primarily a temporal and economic picture of the PRC under Mao, but scholars have also recently theorized the soundscape of the Mao regime, and more specifically that of the Cultural Revolution. The dominance of the visual modality in cultural

[141] Chen, *China's Economy*, 35.

[142] Walder, *China under Mao*, 200–201.

[143] Walder, 211–212.

[144] Jiaqi Yan and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, trans. and ed. by D. W. Y. Kwok (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 79–80.

discourse as described by Jonathan Sterne's "audiovisual litany" may prompt us by default to chiefly examine the visual markers of the Cultural Revolution, such as the prevalence of Mao imagery, particularly portraits and statues, throughout China.[145] Instead, I suggest we examine the soundscape of the Cultural Revolution in conjunction with Mao's visual presence, censorship of music, and the mediation of sound, to better understand the audile experience of the 1960s and '70s. The soundscape of this time defies facile explanation. As ethnomusicologist Arnold Perris describes it: "Perhaps at no time in the history of music, East or West, has a society endured such an extreme censorship of the performing arts: for nearly ten years eight hundred million people were required to hear one of a group of eight compositions … on virtually every musical occasion."[146] Understanding the full extent of Mao's sonic and artistic agenda necessitates entering into the Cultural Revolution soundscape and its deployment of voice and sound as, alternatingly, boredom, ritual, and violence.

As I step into this vein of inquiry, I am guided by several questions. What roles did sound play during Mao's regime, particularly as a dedicated arm of his cultural agenda? What sounds, specifically voices (and vocal timbres), did Chinese people hear daily, and how were they technologically mediated? How did repetition function in this soundscape, particularly with heavy state censorship? How did the proliferation of high-volume loudspeakers enact sonic warfare during the Cultural Revolution? Why was Chairman Mao's voice rarely, if ever, heard?

Given the philosophical and transdisciplinary scope of these questions, I propose examining these questions through the lenses of voice studies and sound studies. To further

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[145] Jonathan Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations," in *The Sound Studies Reader,* ed. Jonathan Sterne (Routledge, 2012), 9; China Blog Staff, "Mao Zedong: Memorialised in 2,000 Statues," *BBC News*, December 26, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-25504854.

[146] Arnold Perris, "Music as Propaganda: Art at the Command of Doctrine in the People's Republic of China," *Ethnomusicology* 27, no. 1 (1983), 18.

elucidate the function and features of the voice during the Cultural Revolution, I survey genres like the model opera and quotation song, contrasting their timbres and styles with pre-Maoist genres like shidaiqu. These genres, and their implementation of the voice on behalf of the state, reflect Mao's philosophy regarding cultural production, which in turn harness ancient Confucian principles. Additionally, I discuss the "natural tone," an anonymizing and standardizing vocal technique used by radio hosts, which, coupled with widespread technology that disembodied and dematerialized the voice, allowed Mao to be sonically ubiquitous. Lastly, drawing from Jacques Attali (1985) and Steve Goodman (2010), I claim that the combination of forceful repetition of state-approved sound and ubiquitous visual iconography of Chairman Mao dissolved Chinese peasants' sense of self and created an irrevocable sonic linkage between the masses and an omnipresent, divine Mao Zedong through what I call *ritualized sonic boredom*. In sum, I argue in this chapter that censorship and repetition in the Cultural Revolution soundscape, alongside a strategically mute yet visually omnipresent Mao Zedong, numbed and subsequently mobilized the masses.

**Music in the Cultural Revolution**

Mao Zedong's spoken and written word set relentless political and cultural trajectories for music in the People's Republic of China; his intentions for Chinese cultural productions were most clearly articulated at a 1942 Chinese Communist Party conference in their base camp, Yan'an. In what is known as "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" (*Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua*), Mao emphasized how creative work should be based on the language of the masses and primarily serve peasants, workers, and soldiers.[147] He also planned to

[147] Mao, "Talks," 61.

"ensure that literature and art become a component part of the whole revolutionary machinery, so they can act as a powerful weapon in uniting and educating the people while attacking and annihilating the enemy."[148] Instead of allowing art abstract expressive powers, Mao insisted on literature and art "on a higher level" to educate the masses, and when necessary, using art to both simulate and herald violence.[149] In this speech, Mao outlined an agenda for cultural production that laid the groundwork for extreme sonic censorship and ruthless applications of sonic warfare.

In 1963, after a national ban on Hong Kong films, Mao announced that, "problems have been found in various types of art, such as drama, local operas, music, the fine arts, dancing, films, poems, and literature…. Society's economic base has already been changed, but the arts, a part of the superstructure to serve this base, remain the same."[150] This firm stance on the purposes of art translated into severe state censorship of existing types of art and a focus on producing new, ideologically correct productions, with potentially life-threatening consequences of non-compliance, especially at the whims of mercurial politicians or bloodthirsty campaigns.[151]

**Model Operas**

In light of this constant moving target, musicians hesitated to create anything new without explicit state approval. Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and previously a performing artist herself, began preparing model revolutionary operas (*yangbanxi*) in the mid-1960s. She modified existing Chinese operas and dramas to best serve the Cultural Revolution.[152] These operas, primarily

[148] Mao, 58.

[149] Mao, 69–72.

[150] Yan and Gao, *Turbulent Decade*, 400.

[151] Ouyang, *Music*, 4; Yan and Gao, 400.

[152] Ouyang, 33.

scored in Western notation, employed an orchestra composed of both Western and Chinese instruments, combining Beijing opera aesthetics with Western instrumentation.[153] *Yangbanxi* sounded quite similar to Peking opera (*jingju*), especially since they were accompanied by a Peking opera percussion consort. Performers utilized the same language of gestures and acrobatics found in *jingju* as well as bright, nasal vocal timbre, fitting with the previously discussed Chinese traditional singing style. Though a major focus of the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guards was attacking the "Four Olds" (*Si jiu*), curiously, elements of traditional opera like *jingju* vocal timbre remained, perhaps as an example of Mao's art "on a higher level."[154]

Jiang Qing completed eight model works by 1967, including five operas, two ballets, and one symphony, with elaborate sets (in comparison to traditional opera, which utilized few props or scenery). The *yangbanxi* circulated in many forms: radio and television broadcasts, posters, scores, and books.[155] Music theorist Nancy Yunhwa Rao notes that these model operas, often thought of as stilted productions created by puppets of the state, had a deeper impact on Chinese sonic memory than many recognize. Through the embodied musical experience of the *yangbanxi*, the mimetic participation and response of one's body to the music and movements, they created a sense of community within villages and provided opportunities for amateur troupes to reproduce them.[156] Students, workers, and residents were required to learn and sing

[153] Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Sonic Imaginary after the Cultural Revolution," in *Listening to China's Cultural Revolution: Music, Politics, and Cultural Continuities,* eds. Paul Clark, Laikwan Pang, and Tsan-Huang Tsai (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 222–24.

[154] Ouyang, *Music,* 25. Mao's call to "Smash the Four Olds" (*Po si jiu*) included old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking.

[155]Ouyang, 33–34.

[156] Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Sonic Imaginary," 217–219.

opera arias together.[157] Rhetorically, the *yangbanxi* encouraged devotion and loyalty from its audiences, and as an everyday cultural practice mediated through live performance, loudspeakers, radio, and film, Chinese audiences engaged daily with this compelling embodied experience. The *yangbanxi* display a remarkable and effective deployment of Mao's hope for high-level art that would reach and educate the masses. The lasting aesthetic legacy of *yangbanxi* in the work of post-Cultural Revolution composers like Chen Yi and Tan Dun displays that their sonic significance exceeded the boundaries of Mao's regime, perhaps evidence of the efficacy of propagandistic cultural production.[158]

**Mass Song: *The East is Red* (*Dongfang hong*)**

Premier Zhou Enlai initiated the production *The East is Red* in 1964, a "song and dance epic" depicting the history of the CCP.[159] It synthesized Chinese dance, ballet, folk song, and Western opera and orchestra, an astoundingly cosmopolitan production with the intent to educate the masses about CCP history and ideology as well as exalt Mao.[160] The longevity of this work, particularly the titular song "East is Red" [Video 3.1], shows how usage of Western musical idioms and instruments did not disqualify music as long as party leaders approved, much like the reception of Socialist Realist compositions in Stalinist Russia.[161] Additionally, the open, dark vocal timbre with heavy vibrato present in "East is Red" borrows directly from Russian

[157] Yan and Gao, *Turbulent,* 401.

[158] Rao, "Sonic Imaginary," 215.

[159] Hon-Lun Yang, "Unraveling *The East is Red* (1964): Socialist Music and Politics in the People's Republic of China," in *Composing for the State: Music in Twentieth-Century Dictatorships,* eds. Esteban Buch, Igor Contreras Zubillaga, and Manuel Deniz Silva (Ashgate, 2016), 52.

[160] Yang, 54–59.

[161] Yang, 60; Frolova-Walker, "Stalin," 105.

choruses, placing it on the bel canto spectrum rather than Chinese traditional. The aesthetics of socialist music in both the USSR and PRC did not adhere to a framework or guidelines, but rather had to represent certain principles or ideologies, like "revolutionary, "national," and "popular" (in this context, likely interpreted as populist or for the people).[162] In this case, unlike the traditional timbres of *yangbanxi*, songs meant for the masses could borrow Western idioms, as long as the voices represented global communism and collectivism. The lyrics of "East is Red" (Table 3.1) fully display these principles, with each strophe repetitively espousing a different positive trait about Chairman Mao or the CCP. They also orient the singer to accept Mao as a savior and guide and to conceptualize the CCP as the ever-present and life-giving sun.

**Table 3.1** Lyrics for "East is Red" (*Dongfang hong*) in Chinese (Mandarin), Pinyin and English.

| Chinese (Simplified) | Pinyin | English |
|---|---|---|
| 东方红，太阳升，<br>中国出了个毛泽东。<br>他为人民谋幸福，<br>呼尔嗨哟，<br>他是人民大救星！<br>他为人民谋幸福，<br>呼尔嗨哟，<br>他是人民大救星！<br><br>毛主席，爱人民，<br>他是我们的带路人， | Dongfang hong, taiyang sheng,<br>Zhongguo chu liao ge Mao Zedong,<br>Ta wei renmin mou xingfu,<br>huerhaiyo,<br>ta shi renmin da jiuxing!<br>Ta wei renmin mou xingfu,<br>huerhaiyo,<br>ta shi renmin da jiuxing!<br><br>Mao zhuxi, ai renmin,<br>ta shi women de dailuren | The east is red, the sun is rising,<br>from China comes Mao Zedong,<br>He strives for the people's happiness, hurrah, he is the people's great savior!<br>He strives for the people's happiness, hurrah,<br>he is the people's great savior!<br><br>Chairman Mao, loves the people,<br>he is our guide, |

[162] Yang, "Unraveling," 60.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 为了建设新中国，呼尔嗨哟，领导我们向前进！<br>为了建设新中国，呼尔嗨哟，<br>领导我们向前进！<br>共产党，像太阳，<br>照到哪里哪里亮。<br>哪里有了共产党，<br>呼尔嗨哟，<br>哪里人民得解放！<br>哪里有了共产党，<br>呼尔嗨哟，<br>哪里人民得解放！<br>东方红，太阳升，<br>中国出了个毛泽东。<br>他为人民谋幸福，<br>呼尔嗨哟，<br>他是人民大救星！<br>他为人民谋幸福，<br>呼尔嗨哟，<br>他是人民大救星！ | Wei liao jianshe xin Zhongguo, huerhaiyo, lingdao women xiang qian jin!<br>Wei liao jianshe xin Zhongguo, huerhaiyo, lingdao women xiang qian jin!<br><br>Gong chandang, xiang taiyang, zhaodao nali nali liang,<br>Nali you liao Gongchandang, huerhaiyo,<br>nali renmin de jiefang!<br>Nali you liao Gongchandang, huerhaiyo,<br>nali renmin de jiefang!<br><br>Dongfang hong, taiyang sheng, Zhongguo chu liao ge Mao Zedong,<br>Ta wei renmin mou xingfu, huerhaiyo,<br>ta shi renmin da jiuxing!<br>Ta wei renmin mou xingfu, huerhaiyo,<br>ta shi renmin da jiuxing! Da jiuxing! | In order to build a new China, hurrah,<br>lead us forward!<br>In order to build a new China, hurrah,<br>lead us forward!<br><br>The Communist Party, is like the sun, wherever it shines it is bright,<br>Wherever the Communist Party is, hurrah,<br>the people are liberated!<br>Wherever the Communist Party is, hurrah,<br>the people are liberated!<br><br>The east is red, the sun is rising, from China comes Mao Zedong,<br>He strives for the people’s happiness, hurrah, he is the people’s great savior!<br>He strives for the people’s happiness, hurrah, he is the people’s great savior! Great savior! |

Most music produced outside of official state control stopped by 1969, no doubt assisted by Jiang Qing’s ruthless criticism. She released a list called “Four Hundred Films to be

Criticized," bringing the film industry to a standstill in order to provide her eight model operas with a full mass media monopoly.[163] Only a select few songs were played from 1969 to 1972 on national broadcasts, including "East is Red,", "Internationale" (*Guojige*), adapted from the USSR, "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points of Attention" (*San da jilu ba xiang zhuyi*), and "Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman" (*Dahai hangxing kao duoshou*).[164] "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points of Attention," first popularized during the war against Japan and again in the late 1940s, sets Mao's 1929 directives of a similar title to music [Figure 3.1].

**Three Main Rules of Discipline**

1. Obey orders in all your actions.
2. Do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses.
3. Turn in everything captured.

**Eight Points of Attention**

1. Speak politely.
2. Pay fairly for what you buy.
3. Return everything you borrow.
4. Pay for anything you damage.
5. Do not hit or swear at people.
6. Do not damage crops.
7. Do not take liberties with women.
8. Do not ill-treat captives.[165]

[163] Yan and Gao, *Turbulent Decade*, 401.

[164] Ouyang, *Music*, 52.

[165] Olivier Bangerter, "Annexes," *Internal Control: Codes of Conduct within Insurgent Armed Groups* (Small Arms Survey, 2012) http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10727.12.

These rules and points, which prioritize justice and assisting the masses, served as a code of conduct for Red Army soldiers, particularly as they traveled through the countryside on long campaigns. This song presents a prime example of the Chinese Communist Party setting important party principles to music for easier dissemination and memorization, presenting both the Mao directive and compelling reasons for complying with them.[166] Its simple duple meter, frequent repetition, and limited vocal range (one octave) made this a likely candidate for soldiers without musical training to sing together while marching, and subsequently for the masses to sing together as well.

**Quotation Song**

Another common genre of music that incorporated Mao's instruction for didactic purposes was the "quotation song." Promoted by the CCP since 1966, these songs set quotations from Mao's Little Red Book (also known as *Quotations from Chairman Mao*; *Mao Zhuxi Yulu*) and his important speeches. The Little Red Book, as a compilation of "Mao Zedong Thought" first published in 1964, was pocket-size and meant to be portable, a likely candidate for dissemination through music. It acted as an exemplar of what Lin Biao, Mao's would-be successor, refers to as "live study and live application" of Mao's thoughts.[167] Biao considered repetition, memorization, and mastery of Mao Zedong Thought as the best way to mobilize and weaponize the nation's minds. These quotation songs focused on delivering political messages, thus containing simple and rigid melodies and rhythms. Red Guards believed the potency of the quotation song facilitated "the thought of Chairman Mao [to] penetrate ever deeper into people's hearts" and

[166] Bangerter, "Annexes."

[167] Andrew F. Jones, "Quotation Songs: Portable Media and the Maoist Pop Songs," in *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, ed. Alexander C. Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 45–47.

"resonate across the entire country."[168] The following is one of the most well-known quotation songs, "The Force at the Core Leading Our Cause Forward Is the Communist Party of China" (*Lingdao women shiye de hexin liliang shi Zhongguo Gongchandang)*.[169] Composed by Li Jiefu, who composed the majority of the quotation songs, and published in 1966, the song emphasizes Marxism and Leninism as well as exalts the CCP and Chairman Mao [Video 3.2].

**Table 3.2** Lyrics for "The Force at the Core Leading Our Cause Forward Is the Communist Party of China" (*Lingdao women shiye de hexin liliang shi Zhongguo Gongchandang)* in Chinese (Mandarin), Pinyin and English.[170]

| Chinese (Simplified) | Pinyin | English |
|---|---|---|
| 领导我们事业的核心力量是中国共产党。<br>指导我们思想的理论基础是马克思列宁主义<br>共产党万岁!<br>毛主席万岁!<br><br>共产党万岁!<br>毛主席万岁!<br><br>万岁，万岁！万万岁! | Lingdao women shiye de hexin liliang shi Zhongguo Gongchandang<br>Zhidao women sixiang de lilun jichu shi Makesi Lienin zhuyi Gongchandang wansui!<br>Maozhuxi wansui!<br><br>Gongchandang wansui!<br>Maozhuxi wansui!<br><br>Wansui, wansui! Wan wan sui! | The force at the core leading our cause forward is the Communist Party of China,<br>The theoretical basis guiding our thinking is Marxism-Leninism.<br>Long live the Communist Party! Long live Chairman Mao!<br>Long live the Communist Party! Long live Chairman Mao!<br>Long life, long life! Long, long life! |

[168] Jones, 45.

[169] Ouyang, *Music,* 36–38.

[170] Ouyang, 39.

Andrew Jones refers to the quotation song as "perfectly suited to unison singing, melding choral voices and orchestral accompaniment together into a monophonic wall of sound, one pitched high enough and with enough amplitude to penetrate the public space in which these songs were usually broadcast on monaural in-line loudspeaker systems," a quality substantiated by the brass fanfare and mass of voices singing, and finally shouting, in "The Force at the Core Leading Our Cause Forward Is the Communist Party of China."[171] The grainy, shrill, and overdriven, yet richly vibrato-inflected voices meld together with the march-like instrumental accompaniment, creating an energetic, inherently collective timbre designed to stimulate revolutionary sentiment. By 1969, however, Jiang Qing began to criticize this genre, labeling it—naturally—"yellow music" and calling for the removal of these "folk tunes" and "swing music."[172] Jones claims that Jiang Qing's disapproval of quotation songs came from the presence of a melodic hook and its resultant memorability, similar to Western mass-mediated pop songs.[173] Rather than an effective vehicle for mastery and mobilization, Jiang Qing viewed the quotation song as fatally resembling contemporaneous Western popular media. The portable quality of these songs contained the potential to mobilize listeners *away from* rather than toward the state and its values. Quotation songs illustrate the slippery boundary between popular and populist music and how "yellow," as a label, could immediately eradicate the revolutionary or "red" quality of a song. Furthermore, perceived "yellowness" receives no substantiation from the quotation song's collective of vocal timbres or even its lyrical content, merely its formal resemblance to Western popular music's portability.

[171] Jones, "Quotation Songs," 55.

[172] Jones, 43.

[173] Jones, 44.

### *New Songs of the Battlefield*

The musical monotony from 1969–72 was interrupted by the publishing of a revolutionary song anthology, *New Songs of the Battlefield* (*Zhandi xinge*), in 1972. Most of the songs in the songbook were newly composed, and the anthology marked the thirtieth anniversary of Mao's Yan'an talks.[174] Sequel songbooks were released annually until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. *New Songs* was spearheaded by CCP leaders Zhou Enlai and the Gang of Four: Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen.[175] One of the newly composed songs from the anthology, "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is Indeed Good," (*Wuchanjieji wenhua dageming jiu shi hao*) features a simple melody and rhythm [Figure 3.2] as well as an overwhelmingly positive and repetitive political message, suitable for large groups to learn and sing [Video 3.3]. This video features state-produced propaganda clips, including footage of rallies, workers, and countless citizens waving *The Little Red Book.* Interestingly, the lyrics do not mention Mao Zedong or the CCP, but they do provide commentary on the Cultural Revolution itself, including the dissemination of big-character posters, the goal to "eradicate the roots," and emphasis on returning to true Marxism-Leninism.

**Table 3.3** Lyrics for the first verse of "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is Indeed Good" (*Wuchanjieji wenhua dageming jiu shi hao*) in Chinese (Mandarin), Pinyin and English.[176]

| Chinese (Simplified) | Pinyin | English |
|---|---|---|
| 无产阶级文化大革命（嘿）就是好! | Wu chan jie ji wenhua dageming (hei) jiu shi hao! | The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (hey!) is indeed good! |

[174] Ouyang, *Music*, 4.

[175] Ouyang, 8.

[176] Ouyang, 55–57.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 就是好呀就是好呀就是好。<br>马列主义大普及，<br>上层建筑红旗飘。<br>革命大字报（嘿），<br>烈火遍地烧。<br>胜利凯歌冲云霄。<br><br>七亿人民团结战斗，<br>红色江山牢又牢。<br>无产阶级文化大革命就是好，<br>文化大革命好！<br>文化大革命好！<br>无产阶级文化大革命就是好! 就是好，就是好，就是好！ | Jiu shi hao ya jiu shi hao ya jui shi hao!<br>Ma Lie zhu yi da pu ji,<br>shang ceng jian zhu hong qi piao,<br>Ge ming da zi bao (hei),<br>lie huo bian di shao!<br>Sheng li kai ge chong yun xiao!<br>Qi yi renmin tuanjie zhandou!<br>Hong se jiang shan lao you lao!<br>Wenhua dageming hao!<br>Wenhua dageming hao!<br>Wu chan jie ji wenhua dageming jiu shi hao!<br>Jiu shi hao! Jiu shi hao! Jiu shi hao! | Indeed good yeah indeed good, and indeed good!<br>Marxism-Leninism is widely popularized, red flags flutter in the construction of a higher formation,<br>Revolutionary big-character posters, (hey!) spread like raging fires,<br>Vowing to eradicate the roots, seven hundred million people unite in the fight,<br>The red landscape grows more and more resolute.<br>The Cultural Revolution is good!<br>The Cultural Revolution is good!<br>The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is indeed good!<br>Indeed good! Indeed good! Indeed good! |

This reflection of socialist ideology in music or usage of music to facilitate political control in China is not typically attributed to Marxism, according to ethnomusicologist Arnold Perris.[177] Rather, it is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese history and philosophy, as well as ancient Greek philosophy. Confucius frequently discussed the effects of music and drew parallels between melodies and ethics as well as music and the character of the government. Confucius

[177] Perris, “Music as Propaganda,” 2.

states: “In the well-governed Confucianist state, music meant for pleasure does not exist.”[178] On this point, Mao and Confucius seem to agree: all music has a social function, and that function must be for the good of the state.[179] In 1956, Mao even cited Confucius’s ranking of music as “second among the ‘six courses’” and stated that “foreign principles and … foreign musical instruments” may be used as long as there were “national characteristics,” namely, suitable elements of ancient customs and art.[180] Mao saw value in retaining the legacies of traditional Chinese literature and art but struggled with the dilemma of providing the masses with high art that was still legible to them. Simultaneously, he identified the difficulty of producing distinctively Chinese art that was both political and of good quality, recognizing that some artistic quality was necessary to provide political impact. Eventually, he chose to prioritize politics over aesthetic criteria, specifically the musical tenets of Soviet-style musical populism, since “popular works are simple and plainer, and therefore more readily accepted by the broad mases of people,” advising musicians to adopt folk forms and songs of the masses rather than high-level art or bourgeois popular music.[181]

These reflective or mimetic properties of music, as described by Confucius and reiterated by Mao, bear resemblance to Platonic philosophy, where music educates and influences the soul and thus must be purified.[182] Aristotle claims music imparts character qualities such as ethical

[178] Robert H. van Gulik, *The Lore of the Chinese Lute* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1969), 27.

[179] Perris, “Music as Propaganda,” 2.

[180] Perris, 9. The six courses, or arts (*liuyi*), were part of ancient Chinese education and included rituals, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics.

[181] Perris, 7–8.

[182] Frédérique Woerther, “Music and the Education of the Soul in Plato and Aristotle: Homeopathy and the Formation of Character,” *The Classical Quarterly 58*(1), 2008: 91–93.

virtues and proper judgment, and habituation to music from a young age forms rationality.[183] These philosophers apply musical control primarily through acceptable harmonies and scales, but the underlying premise for doing so stands on similar philosophical ground as Confucius and Mao. Music, to them, cannot be innocuous or ideologically void, and therefore, it must be controlled.

In some respects, populist music in Maoist China had the stylistic freedom to cross national borders and incorporate Western instruments and genres, so long as it remained free of any sonic traces of capitalism and bourgeois decadence, inherent in popular music such as shidaiqu.[184] Integrating international styles, particularly Soviet styles, connected the PRC to global communism, and the tendency for voices to be heard in groups reinforced the idea of collectivism rather than individualism. Additionally, music listening and consumption remained wholly dependent on the state, whether through the production of the music itself, access to the means of listening, and the repertoire and repetition of approved music. *What* the Chinese people actually heard, and *how* they heard it, certainly influenced the way they interpreted the music they heard during the Mao regime and the Cultural Revolution. The way sound was mediated during this period amplified the physical and psychological effects of CCP music.

**Mass Mediation and Natural Tone**

Prior to 1949, China's one million radio sets belonged primarily to "bourgeois" or private homes, and by the 1970s, the CCP had created a "radio reception network" with over one hundred

[183] Woerther, 98–100.

[184] Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 6–7.

million loudspeakers and over 100,000 film projectors.[185] The CCP spent the 1950s and '60s destroying old radio stations and private radios while simultaneously deploying radio technicians to disable shortwave stations like Voice of America. The Central People's Broadcasting Station, or China National Radio, became the PRC's most effective propaganda tool given the vast expanse of territory and the illiteracy of the Chinese population, with targeted programs for youth, women, students, and soldiers.[186]

The China National Radio also relied on radio receptionists, or individuals who carried radio sets into rural areas without wired broadcasting; these workers transcribed major news for rooftop broadcasting, often braving harsh weather conditions to travel and communicate their messages, enabling thousands to hear news, music, and other sounds via a mass media network consisting of both humans operators and their portable machines.[187] In most cases, radio broadcasters or broadcast rallies targeted groups, sometimes a whole village, to maximize audience size and mobilize larger numbers of people. This meant that listening, particularly to music, was exclusively done in groups and via human and machine mediation, further disembodying the recorded voices and sounds while enforcing listening as a public group activity.

Voices heard on the radio during this time were typically female because radio jamming from foreign entities attempts earlier in the century left higher-frequency voices less distorted. Though female voices became the norm on the radio out of technological necessity, they played

[185] Jie Li, "Revolutionary Echoes: Radios and Loudspeakers in the Mao Era." *Twentieth-Century China* 45, no. 1 (2020): 25–26.

[186] Li, "Revolutionary Echoes," 28–30.

[187] Li, 32–33.

an important role in shaping how the state sounded during Mao's regime.[188] The "natural tone" (*yuqi ziran*) became the foundation of Chinese socialist radio broadcasting for both men and women, a manner of speaking that prioritized precision and expression, injecting the appropriate amount of exuberance and emotion into the voice so as to be effective while maintaining the clarity and diction necessary to be intelligible.[189]

By 1941, CCP regulations forced regional radio stations across the PRC to listen to the Yan'an New China Radio, where natural tone originated. Henceforth, natural tone became nationalized and standardized, providing the CCP with what scholar Yu Wang describes as "a distinctive vocal identity but … multiple sonic bodies."[190] The natural tone allowed announcers to impersonate or imitate each other without even the announcers themselves realizing it, blurring philosopher Adriana Cavarero's idea of the voice as an outflow of an individual's uniqueness.[191] Her theorization of the human condition of uniqueness, expressed through the voice, loses traction in this context: here, radio mediation blurs subtle differences between individual voices and the natural tone forces heightened similarity in speech delivery. Furthermore, the masses were prioritized above the individual and uniqueness was systematically devalued, even disparaged. The natural tone became a vocal model capable of eradicating uniqueness and effectually delivering information anonymously to the masses.

In 1961, a prominent leader in the Central People's Radio Station, Lin Tian, described the inherent power of the natural tone announcing style in poetic verse:

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[188] Wang, "Listening," 84–87.

[189] Wang, 87–89.

[190] Wang, 91.

[191] Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 7–9.

With emotions as deep as the ocean,
voice as beautiful as singing a song,
language pure and vivid,
the style of announcing rich and diverse as one hundred different flowers. It would penetrate people's heart,
fly around the earth, the moon and the song;
It will generate endless power like a nuclear explosion.[192]

Tian's extolling of the natural tone epitomizes the supposed skill and power invoked through its proper usage. Thus, the natural tone became fundamentally embedded within the CCP as the foremost way to communicate information and, to rural listeners, became the identity and voice of the CCP itself. The sound of radio announcers speaking in the natural tone emanated from wired or wireless radio loudspeakers all over China, signaling authenticity and authority through their compelling inflections as they delivered the latest state-approved communications. The identities of the announcers were subsumed by the overarching identity of the CCP, which assumed the corporeal form of Chairman Mao Zedong. Curiously, however, though portraits and statues of Mao appeared everywhere, his own voice was rarely heard on the national radio network, perhaps due to his thick Hunan accent. Instead, radio announcers acting as the "new voice of socialism" via the natural tone realized his messages and writings for audiences, leaving Mao a mysteriously mute figure compared to his visual omnipresence, a strategic muteness I will discuss later on.[193]

[192] Wang, "Listening," 110.

[193] Li, "Revolutionary Echoes," 41; Wang, 114.

Sound mediation and weaponization escalated during periods of Mao's regime like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. In particular, the usage and ubiquity of loudspeakers or wired broadcasting transformed dramatically: by 1973, there were 93 million loudspeakers in rural China, compared to just 8.5 million before 1966. High-volume loudspeakers became an "essential weapon" of Red Guards, who began utilizing loudspeakers in 1966 to occupy urban space and assault listeners incessantly with sounds to which they did not consent, a tactic previously used by Nazis in their acoustic domination of cities.[194] Scholar Jie Li argues that loudspeakers created "sacred acoustic spaces" across China, since the reverb produced by multiple loudspeakers invoked the acoustics of sacred spaces like temples and a disembodied voice invoked an omnipresent, sacred figure.[195] She notes how "loudspeakers became revolutionary crusaders' weapons that amplified and escalated conflict, such that acoustic battles often foreboded and fueled physical violence."[196] This method of intensifying a collective's affect reflects an attractive rather than repulsive deployment of sonic warfare, which Steve Goodman claims results in a mobilization of bodies through the mobilization of affect.[197] Chinese audiences, accustomed to listening en masse, were especially susceptible to the mobilizing power of high-volume loudspeakers and unrelenting sonic warfare, which further dissolved their sense of self. During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards wielding loudspeakers stimulated the masses with ruthless and repetitive sonic assaults, which laid the psychological and vibrational groundwork for physical violence.

[194] Li, 35–39.

[195] Li, 39–40.

[196] Li, 41.

[197] Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 11.

**Ritualized Sonic Boredom**

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, French economist Jacques Attali famously delineates the relationship between music and society, where he considers music to act as a sort of prophecy, a herald of future political and economic orders.[198] Though Attali comments primarily on Western music history and the changes brought about through technologies such as broadcasting and recording, his thoughts about representation and repetition of music helps to clarify developments in Mao-era China. Music as *representation*, he observes, makes people *believe* time and time again throughout history, particularly when musicians functioned on behalf of the state and their music reflected the religious and political hierarchy.[199] By way of contrast, in capitalism, music serves power through *repetition*: "musical consumption leads to a sameness of the individual consumers. One consumes in order to resemble and no longer, as in representation, to distinguish oneself."[200] Therefore, repetition of music, produced for and consumed by the masses, leads to "cultural homogenization" and "silencing."[201] In repetition, music makes people comply and cooperate.

Attali's idea of the masses refers to a capitalistic consumer audience, whereas Mao's masses refer to the entire proletariat Chinese population. Mao's opinion of the function of music aligns closely with that of Confucius, where music imposes, maintains, and reflects proper societal order, similar to Attali's observations of music as representation. Enemy music, like yellow music from the Chinese Jazz Age or broadcasts from Taiwanese radio, could encourage bourgeois, capitalist, individualistic behaviors. These illicit and potentially prophetic sounds

[198] Attali, *Noise,* 11.

[199] Attali, 13.

[200] Attali, 110.

[201] Attali, 111.

could even usher in a capitalist and hedonic social order. The CCP's near-total control over the soundscape of the Cultural Revolution allowed Mao to fuse representation (via censorship) and repetition (by brute force) in three ways: first, to make people believe in the values of international communism; second, to dissolve the sense of self in the listener; and third, to silence dissent.

Establishing a national radio network provided Mao and the CCP with the sonic control required to achieve those three tasks. The process of dissolving individuality in favor of the collective was catalyzed by the listening practices during Mao's regime, namely by facilitating reception exclusively in large assemblies. Through repetition of the same propagandistic songs, listeners experienced an aural tedium which, much like in the Soviet Union, facilitated a state of mindlessness to bore the people into submission and apathy.[202] During these decades, sound was directed aggressively at groups, projected forcefully onto the masses to indoctrinate, inform, and incite action.

Considering music's prophetic nature, as described by Attali, the power of music to be "in its essence a herald of times to come" and to "make audible the new world that will gradually become visible" explains its frequent regulation by totalitarian regimes.[203] Furthermore, such regimes often utilize technology both to emit state-regulated noise and to eavesdrop on its citizens.[204] Attali observes the constant surveillance and censorship of the musician, an unwitting revolutionary, as evidence of the inherent potential for music to reshape governments and political realities.[205] Once the CCP succeeded in silencing its citizens and controlling musicians

[202] Frolova-Walker, "Stalin," 118.

[203] Attali, *Noise,* 4, 11.

[204] Attali, 7.

[205] Attali, 11.

and music production, it sought to ensure music would only prophesize the CCP's longevity, and, as Confucius decreed, maintain the proper social order. Without the influence of music from outside of the People's Republic, how could music enact its subversive powers or herald freedom? Much like in Soviet Socialist Realism, this enforced musical boredom, or "mindlessness," left no room for revolutionary or resistant thought; rather, it encouraged apathy and compliance.[206] Here, boredom surreptitiously acts as a branch of sonic warfare, one that molded the masses' psyches and prepared them to be mobilized during periods of heightened violence like the Cultural Revolution, and sonic warfare conducted via high-volume loudspeakers further galvanized these effects. Unwitting audiences, captured in the sonic spaces governed by loudspeakers, became collectivized for the CCP as they were physically and aurally beaten into submission. What I term their *ritualized sonic boredom* turned group listening into compliance, which then morphed into action. As the masses assembled to remove any and all individuals considered unfit or resistant, the soundscape reverberated with prophetic pronouncements of the CCP's durability. The constant barrage of mass songs and model operas crystallized this divinatory message into collective memory.

**Strategic Muteness**

The sacred acoustic spaces created by loudspeakers and their wielders received further sanctification through Mao iconography, where his visual presence both condoned and induced sonic violence. During a major Cultural Revolution campaign in 1969 entitled "Cleansing of the Class Ranks" (*qingli jieji duiwu*), which claimed an estimated 600,000 to 800,000 lives, the cult

[206] Frolova-Walker, "Stalin," 120.

of Mao reached its peak.[207] At this point, Mao's image became ubiquitous: every home displayed a Chairman Mao bust, portrait, or other paraphernalia, and every public space contained a large statue of Mao.[208] In propaganda posters, he was often extolled as the Four Greats: Great Leader, Great Teacher, Great Marshal, and Great Helmsman, an honorific he received in 1966 [Figure 3.3].[209] Citizens who defaced these portraits or discarded any items displaying Mao's image or writings faced suspicion and investigation. This pervasive surveillance further discouraged the masses from speaking or expressing dissent, thus suppressing individual desire and emotions along with any sense of resistance. The Chinese people were entirely compliant to Mao and his wishes, a divine quality made possible through his ubiquitous muteness and state-sponsored rituals like parades and performances. Again, this practice reflected the Soviet Union decades prior with Lenin's portraits, to which Ilya Kabakov remarks: "it requires a determined rational effort to question them, to overcome the inertia of mindlessness."[210] Mao's visual omnipresence combined with his aural absence created a mindless inertia reinforced by ritualized sonic boredom.

Mao's strategic muteness resembles that of Japanese Emperor Hirohito, whose voice most Japanese citizens had never heard until his forced 1945 surrender speech on a phonograph broadcast. The emperor, considered a god by his subjects, deigned to speak in the unmistakable and frail voice of a mere man, proving his mortality and invalidating his divine authority.[211]

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[207] Walder, *China under Mao*, 273–276.

[208] Walder, 278.

[209] Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong, "Propaganda Posters from the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *The Historian* 59, no. 4 (1997): 785.

[210] Frolova-Walker, "Stalin," 120.

[211] Kenzaburo Oe, "The Day the Emperor Spoke in a Human Voice." *The New York Times Magazine*. May 7, 1995.

Undertaking this forced aural unmasking gave the Americans a clear authority over the emperor, whose symbolic power vanished along with his strategic muteness. Similarly, in China, without audile evidence of Mao's humanness, such as his heavily accented voice, the illusion of his omnipresence and God-like perfection could remain intact, as could the masses' faith in him.

Anyone performing or speaking with auditory amplification and a visual representation of Mao could invoke his authority over the masses, allowing him to take on the powers of an almighty deity. In fact, widespread stories of the power of "Mao Thought," where his writings could inspire successful surgical operations and rehabilitate deaf and mute patients enough to hear them sing "The East is Red," created a near-mystical aura around the Chairman.[212] Mao's omnipresence was felt so strongly in the soundscape of the People's Republic of China that, to his announce his death on September 9, 1976, radio stations nationwide simultaneously broadcasted this sober news accompanied by funeral music.[213] These high-volume loudspeakers playing funeral music "created a nationwide congregation to mourn the passing of the Great Helmsman." [214]

The strategic combination of incessant repetition, severe censorship, technologically mediated sonic warfare, and ritualized listening reached its zenith during the Cultural Revolution. A year later, those high-volume loudspeakers were dismantled in both urban and rural areas. However, without clear evidence of his voice during his regime, Mao's disembodied sonic omnipresence persisted alongside his visual omnipresence. To this day, Mao's portraits,

[212] Walder, *China under Mao,* 279.

[213] Yan and Gao, *Turbulent Decade,* 519.

[214] Li, "Revolutionary Echoes," 43.

teachings, and legacy persists in the PRC. Even his death could not curtail his sonic omnipresence and its divine and prophetic impact.

## Conclusion

The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) enacted what I term ritualized sonic boredom, an aurally mediated process that allowed the galvanization of Chinese people toward violent and ideologically motivated conflicts. Mao's visual omnipresence and strategic muteness combined with state censorship, unceasing repetition, and sonic warfare constructed a soundscape of extreme boredom, which led to numbness and subsequently compliance. Populist music of this decade, including *yangbanxi*, mass songs, and quotation songs, strategically featured collective, didactic, and standardized voices, unlike the individual, sentimental, and yellow voices of pre–PRC popular music.

# CHAPTER V

# EPILOGUE: IT WAS ALL YELLOW

Popular music returned to the People's Republic of China after the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s with the rise of Deng Xiaoping. Deng's 1978 "open door policy" reform allowed *gangtai* (a combination of Hong Kong and Taiwan, or *Xiang**gang*** and ***Tai**wan*) music to enter via cassette tapes. Though these tapes could be legally bought and copied, state-controlled TV and radio did not play gangtai music.[215] For Chinese citizens who had listened exclusively to model operas and revolutionary songs for the past decades, *gangtai* pop served as an aural breath of fresh air. Gangtai resembled shidaiqu, with its light-hearted lyrics describing romance and its mixture of Chinese pentatonic melodies with Western harmonies.[216]

In particular, the arrival of Taiwanese pop star Teresa Teng's music in China was like "a dry field in which a match had been thrown."[217] Her 1978 album *A Love Letter* (*Yi feng qingshu*) [Figure 4.1] contained numerous covers of shidaiqu songs, including Zhou Xuan's "When Will You Come Back Again" (*Heri jun zailai*) and Li Xianglan's "Evening Primrose" (*Yelaixiang*) [Audio 4.1]. Teng reinterpreted them in her own style, which was heavily influenced by Japanese *enka*, a genre of popular music that is mostly pentatonic, sentimental, and nostalgic and utilizes vocal effects like melisma and vibrato. Raised by parents who loved Chinese opera and shidaiqu, Teng infused her style with a plurality of musical influences.[218] She utilized her low register and chest voice far more than shidaiqu vocalists, slowed the tempo of songs, and added rubato and

[215] Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, 10; Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy,* 20.

[216] Baranovitch, 11.

[217] Baranovitch, 12.

[218] Meredith Schweig, "Legacy, Agency, and the Voice(s) of Teresa Teng," in *Resounding Taiwan: Musical Reverberations Across a Vibrant Island*, ed. Nancy Guy (London: Routledge, 2021), 215–20.

ornaments at the ends of phrases.[219] Her dark, breathy vocal timbre combined with production methods like additional reverb created a sense of sonic spatiality and intimacy.[220]

For post-Cultural Revolution listeners, her reverberant and syrupy voice also created a sense of timelessness, allowing them to escape to a different period and place. This effect has been observed in other popular genres such as Jamaican dub mixes, where Michael Veal perceives reverb and echo as ways to access an ancestral past from which listeners have been alienated.[221] In this case, by covering a popular '40s tune, Teng created a version of "Evening Primrose" liberated from the tumult and tension of the 1940s. After the brutal devastation of the Cultural Revolution, mainland Chinese found gangtai and specifically Teng's covers of shidaiqu tunes to be an aural solace and a chance for uninhibited introspection. Marc L. Moskowitz describes the reception to her songs as an opportunity to "express human emotion that had been purged from China's musical repertoire" when previously, during the Cultural Revolution, "personal emotions were to be subsumed to devotion to the state or to Mao."[222] A Chinese listener remarked that Teng's songs were "not only good music, [but] a whole new concept—a foreign idea … that love and individual desire were ok."[223] Those who remembered 1940s shidaiqu found in her music familiar themes, lyrics, and melodies, an artifact of the Golden Age. From there, the nostalgic effects of her reverberant, intimate timbre allowed listeners to experience introspection and emotional expression, a musical affordance prohibited in genres like mass music or revolutionary song. Her sentimental timbre provided a smooth acoustical

[219] Schweig, 221–23.

[220] Doyle, *Echo and Reverb*, 217.

[221] Veal, *Dub*, 384–87.

[222] Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy*, 20.

[223] Moskowitz, 20–21.

surface on which to romanticize pre-Mao China and process the effects of the Cultural Revolution.

Once again, the PRC immediately labeled this music as "pornographic," "imperialist and bourgeois ideology," "morally decadent and aesthetically empty" an "illness that was inherited from the 1930s," and, of course, "yellow." At first, listening to prohibited gangtai music was sufficient cause for arrest.[224] However, Teng's popularity on the mainland could not be stopped, to the point that even though her tapes were banned, people commented that "Old Deng [Xiaoping] rules by day, little Teng rules by night."[225] In the early 1980s, the CCP initiated campaigns against this decadent popular music, even publishing a booklet called "How to Recognize Yellow Songs" (*Zenyang jianbie huangse gezu*) [Figure 4.2] to combat the influx of gangtai pop.[226] In many ways, the opposition of the PRC to gangtai resembled and even reawakened the musical and ideological conflict of the 1930s and '40s between leftists and shidaiqu, though the PRC did eventually sanction gangtai pop due to its overwhelming popularity. In short, Deng Xiaoping acquiesced to yellowness, accepting her globalized popular music sound in a manner befitting of his overall accommodationist posture: Deng Xiaoping is most famous for introducing capitalist reforms, claiming that "a fundamental contradiction does not exist between socialism and a market economy."[227]

[224] Moskowitz, 21–22.

[225] Thomas B. Gold, "Go with Your Feelings: Hong Kong and Taiwan Popular Culture in Greater China," *The China Quarterly* 136 (1993): 909.

[226] Andreas Steen, "Tradition, Politics, and Meaning in 20th Century China's Popular Music. Zhou Xuan: 'When Will the Gentleman Come Back Again?'" *Chime* 14/15 (2000): 142–43.

[227] Xiaoping Deng, "There is no Fundamental Contradiction Between Socialism and a Market Economy," *Deng Xiaoping Works*, October 23, 1985.

The ideological and political struggle over popular music and censorship in the PRC has persisted into the twenty-first century, albeit in an opaquer manner. Taiwanese pop stars continue to be incredibly popular in the PRC, like "King of Mandopop" Jay Chou. Chou represents a "fusion between western capital and Chineseness" since his music integrates Chinese melody and lyrics with Western styles such as hip-hop and R&B, but his is a permissible apolitical fusion which garners PRC support.[228] In contrast to the total and often violent censorship of the Cultural Revolution, the modern-day PRC assumes a more flexible and possibly sinister approach to popular music, controlling rather than outright censoring, and amplifying certain artists to engineer a national popular music culture. Even with technological developments like the Internet and increasing globalization via social media platforms, the People's Republic maintains a strict censorship regime and limits press freedom, severely restricting citizens' access to information and media. Since prominent events like the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai where China positioned itself centrally in the global economy, the PRC has proceeded to commit atrocities such as reinstating National Security Law over Hong Kong in 2020, mass internment and human rights abuses of the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang, and imposing brutal Covid-19 lockdown measures under their "zero-Covid" strategy.[229] Today, the People's Republic of China poses a massive national and global security threat, leading to heated congressional debates in the United States over the presence of Chinese-owned app TikTok (*Douyin*) which could be spying on Americans or influencing future

[228] Anthony Y. H. Fung, "The Emerging (National) Popular Music Culture in China," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 3 (2007): 434–435.

[229] Linda Maizland and Clara Fong, "Hong Kong's Freedoms: What China Promised and How It's Cracking Down," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 19, 2024.; BBC News. "Who are the Uyghurs and Why is China Being Accused of Genocide?" *BBC News,* May 24, 2022. Stephen McDonell, "Shanghai Covid Lockdown Extended to Entire City," *BBC,* April 5, 2022.

elections. The Biden administration recently passed a bill that will ban TikTok nationally in 2025 unless its parent company ByteDance sells the app to a non-Chinese company.[230]

Throughout my thesis, I have shown how sonic and ideological "yellowness" constituted a moving target, and in the voices and identities of shidaiqu songstresses of the 1920s through '40s, displayed itself as a "motley" condition of being both Chinese *and* cosmopolitan, what I label *zá*. Songstresses strategically positioned their vocal timbre in an attempt to end up on the right side of the "yellow" debate, alternatively moving away from and embracing traditional Chinese vocal aesthetics and Western-modeled singing. I have argued that yellowness was not a timbral feature of the voice, but a projection of anxiety around *zá* and its implications that the values and politics of both China and the West could coexist in a manner opposed to official CCP doctrine. Yellowness resurfaces in Cultural Revolution quotation songs, a clear marker of its contextual dependence and its usage as a political tool, a label for authorizing denigration. Time and time again, yellowness is censured for its political and ideological implications in order to preserve the CCP's firm control over cultural production in the PRC. In light of recent increasing hostility, the events of the past century in China display a remarkable and dismaying cyclicity, spinning the wheel of time with red and yellow threads of sound.

[230] Bobby Allyn, "President Biden Signs Law to Ban TikTok Nationwide Unless It Is Sold," *NPR*, April 24, 2024.

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