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This paper studies foreign perceptions of Chinese music over the last several centuries and juxtaposes these with Chinese ideas on the aesthetics and the powers of music. It shows how these perceptions hover between pride and prejudice and how the ideal(s) and politics of music-making in China continue to play a role in the ways and manners in which China is seen and understood to sound even today. The paper argues that while it was once prejudiced ideas about the “unbearable” sounds of Chinese music, it is now the idea of the “abominations” of political music—which China’s governments are proud to advocate—that reign high among those reading and writing about the musical cultures coming out of China. Both attitudes are a reminder of the need for a more thorough engagement with China’s music.

The book tells the story of Luke, the engine driver and his little black friend, the orphan Jim Button, who was once “delivered” to the tiny little island of Morrowland (Lummerland) in a mysterious package by post. Morrowland is tiny indeed, it has just enough space for a small palace, a train station with tracks running all around the island, a grocery store, a small house, a king, two subjects, an engine by the name of Emma, and an engineer: Luke (Luks).

As Jim grows up, the King of Morrowland begins to worry that the island is too small and that there won’t be enough space for Jim once he is an adult. He announces to Luke that Emma has to be removed. Luke, upset about this decision, decides to leave the island with
Our two friends' first impressions are all charm and marvel. China's exceptional beauty, its exquisite parfum, is described in great detail. And it is not just the strange shape of its mountains, the tiny pagodas, the strangely bent bridges but it is also the surprising sounds and silences that they can make out that inform their fascination. This, interestingly, is consonant with Chinese philosophy, painting, and poetry in which the sounds of silence that Jim finds so intriguing are continually evoked. The Confucian sage Mencius describes an ideal world such that it is silent enough for one to be able to hear the dog barking in a neighboring village. Bo Juji (772-846), one of China's best-known poets picks up this common motif in one of his works: the sounds of the seven-stringed zither, guqin, of one of the oldest instruments in history, he says, are always lingering in the air. This is so in spite (or, in Chinese thinking, precisely because) of the fact that the guqin is an extremely soft-spoken, quiet instrument, one of which it is said that it actually produces the best music when it does not have any strings. Hence it cannot but produce the sounds of silence.

What I have begun to tell here is the story of Chinese music as it has been perceived by foreigners on the one hand, and as it has been envisaged by Chinese on the other. In this paper, I will try to show how this perception differs, between pride on the Chinese side and prejudice on the foreign side, and how the idea(1)s and politics of music-making in China continue to play a role in the ways and manners in which Chinese music is understood and interpreted here and there.

Prejudice

But let us return, if only briefly, to Jim and Luke: Their first impression of China and her sounds, then, is one of great admiration, yet this positive image of China will be tarnished very soon. After they decide to move to the capital of China, Ping, in order to offer themselves to the service of the emperor and help to free his daughter who has been abducted by a gruesome dragon, they encounter not only wonderfully small and intelligent Ping Pong, who immediately becomes their friend, but quite a few rather different characters as well. Their increasing disillusionment with China culminates in the encounter with notorious imperial minister, Pi Pa Po. Their first confrontation with this type of nasty, calculating, and hypocritical envoy of China takes place at the palace doors. Jim and Luke speak to one of the doorkeepers and this experience is quite tellingly translated into sound in the audio-play that Michael Ende created for his book, where the doorkeeper opens the shutters of his door, looks out, and asks, in very polite and servile manner, what they, Jim and Luke, want. They explain and he declines, extremely deferentially and smiling graciously (but slyly), speaking with an extremely high-pitched voice.

The shutter opened in the huge ebony door and a rather gross yellow head appeared who smiled at the two friends in an amiable manner ... The yellow head asked: "What is it you desire, honorable gentlemen?" "We are two foreign engine drivers," answers Luke. "And we would like to see the Emperor of China, if at all possible." "What is your particular business?" the smiling head demanded. "We will tell him this ourselves," Luke replied. "Well, unfortunately, it is entirely impossible, honored driver of a delicate gine-en," hissed the head above the invisible body and smiled even more graciously than before, "to speak to our august Emperor. Or do you happen to have an invitation?" "No," said Luke, quite taken aback, "why and what for?" The thick yellow head at the door replied: "Please forgive this undeserving insect, but then, he is not able to admit you. The Emperor has no time." "But at some point later during the day," replied Luke, "he is bound to have a minute that he could spare for us, I assume?" "Regrettfully, no!" replied the head and smiled in sugary-sweet manner ... "Our esteemed and august Emperor never has time. Please excuse myself!" And with this, the shutter in the door closed with a bang.

This description echoes some of the negative stereotypes regularly found about China and the Chinese in encyclopedias and travel literature throughout the 19th and into the 20th century: "The Chinese" is someone who will always wear a friendly, polite smile, but who will at the same time, always act in a sly and unjust fashion—sycophant, dishonest, unteachable and false, the Fu Manchu-type, symbolizing the Yellow Peril which becomes an important slogan around the turn to the 20th century. He is authoritarian, despotic, and unfair, but all of this with a sickly sweet smile on his face, and hidden behind an exaggerated layer of hyperbolic
politeness and self-deprecation. And all of this is translated into sound, in Ende’s description and the audio-play produced some years later: the sound of the doorkeeper’s voice. Shriek and high-pitched, it was probably inspired by descriptions of Chinese eunuchs.

Egon Erwin Kisch, for example, in his reportage novel *China geheim* (Secret China) which reflects his visit to China in the early 1930s, describes an afternoon stroll through the streets of Northern Beijing when he suddenly comes across what he thinks is a group of old women. Kisch is bewildered by the fact that these women are wearing blue trousers but no shirts, their breasts hanging shamelessly. He observes how shrieking and shriil their voices are and is finally much confused—yet at the same time enlightened—by a strange scene: one of the old “women” turns around and urinates, standing up. It is at this moment that Kisch understands that he is facing not women, but a group of eunuchs.4

Not surprisingly, with their voices so high-pitched, eunuchs who served the Imperial Palace and often were responsible for the emperor’s entertainments, were ideal candidates to play both female or male heroic roles in Chinese operatic performances which required a high-pitch voice (just as in baroque opera in Europe, which, for this purpose, also used castrati). Chinese opera is a very special world with hundreds of local opera forms, all characterized by a set of highly stylized and particular symbols, gestures, languages, and colors. It is not easy to understand Chinese opera at a first hearing. And thus it may not be all too surprising that Hector Berlioz when he first encountered Chinese opera at the World Fair in 1851, was quite disgruntled: what he heard were, in his words, “wild cat-howls, turkey cluckings, and death rattles.”5 And he continues: “And as concerns the voice of the Chinese, never have my ears been confronted with anything more peculiar. Imagine nasal, guttural, groaning, eerie sounds which can, without much exaggeration, be compared to the sounds that dogs make when they stretch and yawn forcefully after a long sleep.” Whether Michael Ende may have seen this similarly we do not know, but these kinds of vocal sounds may have inspired the voice of the imperial doorkeeper.

Why tell the story of Jim and Luke here? Because it presents, in a nutshell, quite a few of the ideas and preconceptions about China and the Chinese, including their music, which have been perpetuated in Europe and the West more generally for some centuries now. These hover between fascination and disgust, between admiration on the one hand and condescension on the other. August Wilhelm Ambros, in his authoritative *Geschichte der Musik* which first appeared in 1862 and was already in its third reprint by 1887 (Bd. 1, 3. Auflage 1887, first printing 1862, second 1880) is an obvious example for this rather schizophrenic viewpoint. In his article on Chinese music, he separates it into two areas: musicology and theory on the one hand, and performance practice on the other. Ambros writes: “As far as painstaking observation of music’s foundation in physical phenomena is concerned, Chinese music can generally be considered a well founded and well ordered teaching, quite accurate and true (a few flights into fantasy notwithstanding). Yet, wherever the performative, artistic part of it begins, Chinese music is raw, barbarian and crude. While Chinese musicology has understood for two millenia already, the intricacies of the cycle of Fifths, the twelve semitones in the octave, the two semitones to a scale etc., their musical practice is but a clamor with noisy cymbals, drums and other booming resonance and sound tools, not unlike the music of a wild tribe.”7

Listening to the musical rendering of a famous battle scene called *Ambush from All Around* one may decide for oneself whether this musical battle, which makes use of many an unusual technique to illustrate as realistically as possible, war and destruction, resembles the “Music of a wild tribe”. The music is delivered on the Chinese lute [*pipa*], which is used in a holistic manner in this piece, making use of the entire body of the instrument and producing snarling sounds, for example, by pulling several strings on top of each other and then plucking them all together, in order to recapture a myriad of battle-sound-effects.8 But how “crude”, “raw” or “barbarian” is this? Certainly to the 19th century audience unfamiliar with such sounds this is quite uncouth (but that is precisely the point, as it is supposed to imitate the rough texture of battle sounds). Indeed, Berlioz, in 1851, had reacted strongly, not just to opera, but also to some of the other performances of Chinese (instrumental) music and described them as follows:
The combination of vocal music and accompaniment was such that one could conclude that the Chinese don’t even have the faintest idea of harmony. The melody, so grotesque and abominable in every respect, concluded like the most ordinary of our songs, on the tonic, and did not even depart once from the assigned key mode. The accompaniment was a very lively, constantly repeated rhythmical figure on the mandolin, which does not really accord with the notes in the vocals ... in short, it was a song accompanied by a messy instrumental clutter.²

What Berlioz apprehends as an “instrumental clutter” is probably the unfamiliar heterophonic structure of the music he was listening to. His failure to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of this musical structure again reflects rather exactly the kind of judgment of Chinese music common throughout the 19th and into the 20th century. This culminated in depictions of Chinese music such as to be found in the *Encyclopädie der musikalischen Wissenschaften* (Encyclopedia of Musical Sciences) published in Stuttgart 1835, for example, in which Chinese music is defined as follows:

Our general conceptions of China and the Chinese cause us to expect when it comes to the category of “Chinese music” something quite strange, even ridiculous, something which could but be an object of curiosity, or one of the otiose but still essential articles in a history of music.¹⁰

While we do not know what the sonic basis for such judgments might have been, we can appreciate that to a 19th century audience, Chinese music with its entirely different approaches toward musical structure (unilinearity rather than polyphony) and instrumental techniques (holistic rather than purely tonal and melodious) may indeed have appeared rather “strange”, even “ridiculous” or “otiose.” But what we have been discussing here are foreign conceptions of (or rather preconceptions, better: prejudices against) Chinese music, and it may be important to remind ourselves that such bias can go both ways. This is what in 1910, Louis Laloy in his book *La musique Chinoise*, reminds his reader of when he says: “Si de ce tumulte, une oreille européenne est plus surprise que charmée, il faut se rappeler le mot de ce Chinois qui, sortant d’un de nos théâtres musicaux me disait: ‘Quand on ne comprend pas, on trouve qu’il y a trop de bruit.’”¹¹ Transcultural musical understanding is never all that easy and no matter what the musical structures are, music is not a universal language immediately understood by everyone.
member. He probably aimed to force anyone attacking him to portray themselves as critical of the Party’s history, thereby protecting himself against allegations of unfaithfulness. There are other examples that seem to support this interpretation of his political uses of music, such as a song of praise to himself. This was sung, accompanied in simple pop harmony, and embellished by repetitions of his “glorious name” several times on rising notes, while his image appeared from many different angles and perspectives in the video that accompanied the song, culminating in the lines “Bo Xilai, you are the hero of a peaceful age” and “This is an age which needs many a hero.” Both of these are typical rhetorical gestures in Chinese political music.15

During the boycotts and demonstrations against the treaty ports that spread throughout China in the first decades of the twentieth century, songs were used to teach and unify the masses against the imperialists, for example. These songs were based on so-called school songs (学堂歌 xuétáng’è), which were in turn based on Christian hymns or children’s songs that had become part of regular school teaching since the educational reforms of 1902.16 Song was considered an ideal medium through which to spread new ideas to the uneducated and illiterate masses and even to mobilize them to participate in the making of the revolution.17 All political groups made use of such songs based on foreign and, less often, Chinese folk melodies that were then fitted with new texts. A “Chinese” folksong based on Frère Jacques, for example, was created precisely for this purpose, and was accompanied by several different texts: anti-Japanese, anti-Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 (1887–1975), and even a version that served as the Chinese national anthem for a short while in the 1920s.18

After the foundation of the CCP in 1921, Soviet songs became more and more influential,19 as the singing of songs became part and parcel of Communist guerilla practice. In Yan’an, the idea was further developed at the Lu Xun Academy, founded in 1938, where it was decided that musicians and composers would go to the masses to collect folk songs and forms of folk theater. They would eradicate “feudal” and “bourgeois” remnants from these pieces of music and then, traveling music troupes would teach them again to the people in their now “purified” form.20

In 1942, when Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) formulated his famous Yan’an Talks, he prescribed the ultimate aim and form of all orthodox art and music. His dictate remains binding in revolutionary China to the present day. “Correct music” was expected to be both “modern” and “Chinese” at the same time. It was bound by politics to “serve the people” by combining the best of China’s national traditions with the most useful elements from foreign traditions. In short, the music of a proud China must be revolutionary (革命化, géngénhuà), have national style (民族化 mínzhúhuà), and serve the masses (大众化 dàzònghuà).

Mao himself soon became a dominant figure in this type of proud and spiteful Chinese music, too. The story begins some time in the 1940s in Yan’an when a poor peasant named Li Youyuan 李有源 (1903–55)21 recomposed a Shanbei melody (originally belonging to a rather cheeky and sexually explicit folk song entitled Sesame Oil, 芝麻油 Zhīmáoyóu), which had first been transformed into an anti-Japanese folk song Riding the White Horse (骑白马 Qi Baima), and set it to new words:

东方红，太阳升，

Chairman Mao loves the people, 
中国出了个毛泽东，
Chairman Mao, he is our guide.

他是人民的大救星，
For the people’s happiness he works, hu-er hei-yo

Red is the East, rises the sun.
China has brought forth a Mao Zedong.

他使人民得解放。
He’s the people’s great savior.

Red Is the East (or The East Is Red) praises Mao’s glorious deeds and his close relationship with the people. It was propagated in grand style in 1964, when a song and dance epic of the same title was performed in honor of the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC by some 3,000 workers, peasants, and soldiers in the Hall of the People, an event that was documented on film and quickly disseminated to every corner of the country (see illustration 5). This epic performance tells the story of the CCP’s great victory. It begins, in grand style, with Red Is the East, which is presented quite literally as the ode to the sun to which
all the sunflowers—China's workers, peasants, and soldiers—turn with great happiness and devotion: Mao the "savior of the people."23

A few years later, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Red Is the East was sung at every meeting, small or large in scale, official or unofficial in form. For many years, it was played every morning on a two-thousand-year old chime to start the day for China's National Radio Station (He 2003:25). It would even substitute the sound of church bells and it was sent into space, to bathe the universe in its sound, when China launched its first satellite named "Red Is the East No. 1" on April 24, 1970 (He 2003:25).24

It is this kind of music which has led, once more, to critical Western views. This time it is not the fact that Chinese instrumental sounds or musical structures lead to aesthetic misapprehensions. This time this was a music performed on Western instruments and primar­ily oriented along "Western" musical compositional structures. And still, musicologists and sinologists reacted rather negatively. A. C. Scott, for example, argues: "That China has noth­ing distinguished to show in the way of new creative music is due to both a lack of seasoned composers and the hindering hand of the Party."25 Politics, so it was contended, hindered the "advances" Chinese music could have made after its first encounters with Western musical traditions. Merchants, missionaries, and the military had brought Western instruments to China since the mid-19th century and playing these instrumen­ts had become a means of distinction among educated middle-class Chinese.

It was precisely these educated middle-class Chinese, and many more, who by the mid-1960s would be engaged as the most talented musicians of the nation to perform the so-called model works from the Cultural Revolution, grand hybrid pieces of revolutionary opera, ballet and instrumental music. In these model works, Western and Chinese instruments and musical forms are combined to create Chinese, but modern music of the kind expected to be approved by the masses (according to Mao's Yan'an Talks). Red Is the East is habitually cited at the most critical and pivotal points in these pieces, marking the habitual grand final apotheosis of victory. As such, Red Is the East appears in the Yellow River Piano Concerto, for example. In its final movement, called Defense of the Yellow River and appropriately subtitled Chairman Mao summons the people to fight, Red Is the East is quoted several times, first as an allusion to illuminate Mao's call to fight, and later in a final virtuoso apotheosis culminating in an ingenious modulation by way of a Chinese folk tune leading directly from Red Is the East into a short quotation from the Internationale. In the multimedia performance by Chinese star pianist Lang Lang in August 2007, four Chinese symphony orchestras join together to stage Red Is the East: one hundred female pianists all dressed in white wedding gowns join the soloist in playing the song. It is a roaring spectacle accompanied by a huge projection of a rising sun on all the screens in the auditorium (see http://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/continuousrevolution/main.php?part=1&chapter=2&media=13).26

It is this kind of music, an exuberant example of "pentatonic romanticism" as one could call it, in accomplished virtuoso style that China proudly and frequently selects to accompany summit meetings or international tours of their most famous orchestras and musicians. The grandiose incarnation performed by Lang Lang in 2007 was staged on the occasion of the decennial celebrations of Hong Kong's return to the People Republic of China. But, as we have seen, already, this kind of music finds a critical echo, not just among Westerners: Taiwanese musicologist Han Kuo-huang even speaks of "Chinese garbage" music, while others state: "The Chinese are not interested in adapting to contemporary European or American style, nor have they so far developed their own stamp. They still appear content to copy from the masters of the past."27

A lack of understanding is due not to the political content of this music alone, but to the fact that this music is perceived as "copying outdated styles." And yet, it does not do so exclus­ively: There have been many ingenious ways of composing Chinese music throughout the twentieth century and even a survey of the very different usages of this song in Mao's praise illustrates this quite clearly. There are versions for Chinese instruments as in We Will Always Follow the Golden Road Which Mao Once Showed Us, see illustration 6 for example, on an LP dating from Hua Guofeng's (1921-) interim government right after the official end of the Cultural Revolution (1976-78) which mentions in its second line that "songs praising Red Is the East can be heard everywhere." At the end, the melody of Red Is the East is invoked.28 Another LP from the same period entitled Morning Sun incorporates traditional instruments into one song after another praising the new "sun" on Chinese skies, Hua Guofeng, by alluding time and again to the familiar melody. In the final song entitled Morning Sun (旭日东升), see illustration 7, the music reaches its culmination when the well­known Mao song is repeated over and over again. The piece ends, in a climactic moment, being played on a glockenspiel.29

In the 1990s, on the other hand, during the "Red Sun Fever" (红太阳热 Hong Taiyang Re) around the centenary of Mao's day of birth in 1993, millions of tapes and CDs with pop, rap, jazz, and rock versions of the old songs in praise of Mao were being released almost daily. Already in 1991, and within the span of a few months' time, more than one million
copies were sold. The movement did not subside but continued to grow, with 14 million sold by 1993, 72 million by 2006, and 80 million by 2008.30 Some of these songs epitomize the romantic apotheosis that is part of earlier propaganda versions of Red Is the East. One remake of Mao quotation songs published in 1991 on a CD entitled Quotation Songs by Mao: A Medley of Rocksongs in Praise of a Great Man (Mao Zhuxi yuanren congqu weiren song yuan pinsong) for example begins with a kitsch version of Red Is the East played on a slightly out-of-tune Chinese glockenspiel backed by a choir reciting lines from the original text of the song: “The fact that China has brought forth a Mao Zedong is the greatest pride of her people (中国出了个毛泽东，这是中国人民的骄傲).”31

In another version, published on a CD entitled Remembering Mao Zedong (huainian Mao Zedong) in 199032 the constant harsh interjections in the percussion may at first suggest irony, even criticism; the mindless singing and the brutal percussion beats may be interpreted as reminiscences of the Cultural Revolution as a time of unthinking cruelty. But this ironic strand is immediately dissolved, as in many other songs of this kind, in the subsequent solo section, which is solemnly presented and harmonized as a canon. One can almost picture the singer with tears in his eyes and a burning heart—the identical musical gesture and idiom that were dominant during and before the Cultural Revolution in the service of Mao’s appraised “Revolutionary Romanticism.”

Indeed, there are other, very different takes, too, such as Zhao Dadi’s (1965–) remake of the song, mixing instrumental elements from Chinese folk songs, suona (喇叭, a rather ear-piercing Chinese reed-instrument) and Chinese gongs, with a Hammond organ, and pop strings (see Illustration 8).33 At the same time, rock musicians, Cui Jian perhaps most prominently among them, have made clever use of the old symbolic language of the sun, taking up the familiar melody and equating the sun with great hope for the future. In A Difficult Path (jin nan xing), one of his first songs originating in the mid-1980s, Cui Jian employed the rhetoric of the red sun in the East: he ends a long list of calls not to give up even in spite of difficulties with the phrase, “The radiance of the sun symbolizes our tomorrow! (太阳的万丈光辉象征着明天)”34

![Illustration 6. The Morning Sun LP Cover.](image6)

![Illustration 7. Red Sun Fever.](image7)

![Illustration 8. Zhao Dadi Red Praise; 2003.](image8)
Cui Jian has other, very different takes on the subject. This Space (这儿的空间 Zhe’er de kongjian) for example, released in 1991, describes a love relationship that has become stagnant; the singer’s faith in the sun has now turned malignant, even becoming a sexualized face. The last verse, describing the physical act of lovemaking, ends as follows:

Heaven is a cave, surrounded by a desert.
You are a dried well, but the better, the more beautiful,
Only the first sweat and the breath in the body.
Are the real sun and the real spring water?

This vocabulary is reminiscent of or perhaps even related to a Cui Jian song that was never officially released, but performed several times in the late 1980s. Later, in 1992, it was made into an MTV video entitled A Piece of Red Cloth (一块红布 yi kuai hongbu). The video openly juxtaposes propaganda scenes and the beautiful face of a woman washed in red.36

On March 12, 1989, Cui Jian sang this song at the Beijing Exhibition Hall to an audience of 18,000 fans. The text of the song runs as follows:

That day you used a piece of red cloth
To blindfold my eyes and cover up the sky
You asked me what I had seen
I said I saw happiness.

This feeling really made me comfortable
Made me forget I had no place to live
You asked where I wanted to go
I said I want to walk your road.

I couldn’t see you, and I couldn’t see the road
You grabbed my hands and wouldn’t let go
You asked what was I thinking
I said I want to let you be my master.

I have a feeling that you aren’t made of iron
But you seem to be as forceful as iron
I felt that you had blood in your body
Because your hands were so warm.

This feeling really made me comfortable
Made me forget I had no place to live
You asked where I wanted to go
I said I want to walk your road.

You asked me what I had seen
I said I saw happiness.37

In this song, the sun is not visible, but always implicitly there, with its withering and drying capacities, which are completely omitted in the original song of praise for Mao. Yet, not unlike in Red Is the East, the sun is the guide here, too. It shows the road and leads the way; it promises happiness and appears as a savior, at least at first, for someone who has no place to live. While Cui Jian openly describes the pain of oppression from a drying and withering master (the sun), he also admits his own complicity in the process of subjugation: isn’t he happiest in the blinding, “withering” embrace of his “master” after all, does he not like to feel the warmth of his hands, his kiss?

These ambiguities of the text are captured musically as well. In order to illustrate the dangerous qualities of this embrace with the sun, Cui uses his voice in a manner constricted to the point that he is producing a kind of quavering rasp.38 He had also used this mannerism in This Space where the “real sun” (真的太阳 zhengde taiyang), too, is presented in coarse, disgusted sounding, chopped-off articulation, in marked contrast with both Cui Jian’s own early efforts at rock (and sun) singing and with prevalent singing styles of Chinese pop music that began flooding the Chinese music market at around the same time.39

This is political music, to be sure, and it does borrow from masters of the past (as well as the present), but it is worse for being so? In addition to employing musical instruments and structures also to be found in the West, it engages Chinese musical instruments and structures as well as philosophical ideas. In the eyes of the contemporary Chinese audience, the message of such Mao Music is not outdated, to be sure. They see the contemporaneity, the relevance, the variety in this music, even if they would argue that its message is ambiguous. Some say that Mao comes down from his pedestal as God. One such voice argues, as in the words of one interviewee: ‘In the Cultural Revolution we used to stand when we sang. We listened to these songs like in church, with respect. Now it’s Rock’n’roll—a real mess (乱七八糟 luanshibaoya) … Rock’n’roll expresses some anti-social ideas, rather than respect. It’s a big反动 fandong thing, and you can’t understand it. A party song never can sing whatever way you want.’ As if addressing Mao directly, then, this interviewee says somewhat grumpily: “Now I can sing you this way (现在我可以这么唱了).”40

There appear to be numerous and ever more frivolous ways of “singing Mao this way” today. On the one hand, the song continues to serve as the identification signal for the PRC’s national radio station and many a cigarette lighter plays the familiar melody when opened. Red Is the East is sounded on the opening page of the CCP official news site (中国共产党新闻网 zhanw.mopa.org) too, and it can be heard at every hour from the clocks at Beijing’s main train station. None other than Bo Xilai, former Party Secretary in Chongqing, initiated the so-called Red Culture Movement which entailed the mass singing of Red Songs such as Red Is the East to improve public morale (see illustration 5).42 Yet, on the other hand, Red Is the East also appears at private karaoke parties, in university talent shows in public, sung by the Chinese women’s soccer team, or by foreigners at international banquets. The political contents as well as the stylistic multiplicity of Chinese music, which encompasses musical structures and approaches associated both with China and the West, do not make it immediately unattractive to Chinese audiences then, in spite of much foreign prejudice. Chinese music has been variously described in terms of its noise, chaos, and disorderliness, its political stiffness and ideological bias and its derivative nature, but looking more closely and with an open ear and eye, one may reconsider Chinese music for what it has to offer and pride itself on. It opens
many creative, innovative, investigative and explorative angles that one may overlook if one follows common and even age-old preconceptions and prejudices.

And this shift in perception seems to be taking place presently: Names like Qu Xiao song, Guo Wenjing and Tan Dun are becoming increasingly commonplace to European and North American musical and operatic stages. Some critics argue that Western audiences are “enchanted by the rhythmic speech, the haunting melodies, the percussion that violently interrupts the narrative,” in their works, it “identifies with the emotion, delights in the music and ultimately succumbs to the magic of the spectacle.”4 Works like Qu Xiao song’s Life on a String (performed at the Edinburgh Festival 1999) or The Test (at the Munich Biennale 2004), Guo Wenjing’s Wolf Cub Village (performed at the Holland Festival 1994) and his Night Banquet (at the Almeida Theatre in London 1998) or Tan Dun’s Marco Polo (performed at the Munich Biennale 1996) and his The First Emperor (performed with Placido Domingo in the Metropolitan Opera in New York 2006) are praised, and they fascinate their audiences by taking up elements from Chinese operatic art and music. They thus infiltrate and enrich the European operatic tradition with new gestures, masks, and, I would argue, new sounds as well.

“Why does everyone need Chinese opera?” This is the title of one chapter in Alexander C. Y. Huang’s study of Chinese Shakespeare, which deals with the foreign reception of Chinese style operatic versions of Shakespeare.44 The study speaks of an “inflation with Asian visuality.”45 According to the author, “Chinese opera Shakespeare seems to cross national boundaries in the global marketplace with ever greater facility and an unprecedented degree of translatability. If film has become the ‘lingua franca of the twentieth century,’ the success of Chinese opera in recent decades is testimony to the rise of Asian visibility in the global scene.” There may be more to it: reactions to Chinese-style operas both by Chinese and by non-Chinese composers recently show that we have come full circle from Hector Berlioz who thought Chinese opera “too much noise,” to Chinese-style operas and what is developing therefore is not just a globally accepted “visual language in stylized performance” as Alexander Huang observed, but a musical one. The types of changes introduced by Chinese as well as foreign composers to music old and new are no longer as distinctly demarcated “nationalist” soundbites, but instead as global resonances to be employed with increasing ease, competence, and understanding. This is true both in those parts of the world that I have called the West, throughout this paper, as well as those that are frequently called the East, Asia and China.

1 Michael Ende: Jim Knopf und Lukas der Lokomotivführer (Stuttgart: Thiemeann, 1960, 34f).

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9 Hector Berlioz 1912. The original reads: "Die Vereinigung von Gesang und Begleitung war derart­

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14 Barbara Mittler: "Chinese New Music as a Politicized Language: Orthodox Melodies and Danger­

15 All Internet resources included in this essay can be found in the Digital Archive of Chinese Stud­


17 Jizhao Zhou 1989. The original reads: "Die Überlieferung der guten Guß- und Begleitung war derartig, dass man zu dem Schlusse berechtigt, jene Chinesen wenigstens haben nicht die leiseste Begriff von Harmonie. Die Melodie, grotesk und abscheulich in jeder Beziehung, schloss wie das gewaltige tolerierende Tokio die von vornehmher bezeichnete Tonart überhaupt nicht. Die Begleitung bestand in einer sehr lebhaften und sich immer wiederholenden rhythmischen Figur auf der Mandoline, welche sich den Noten der Singstimme sehr wenig oder gar nicht anpasste ... Mit einem Wort, es war ein Lied, begleitet von einem kleinen instrumentalen Tour-de-force.")


22 Thanks to Michael Schönhals for pointing me to this original Cultural Revolution translation of the song (which has been adapted in spelling). It follows the text in *Wu qi (Han-Ying cihui Huibian• 53*
40 This Chinese voice is quoted in Sue Tuohy: Covering Mao in the 90s: Revolutions in Chinese Revolutionary Music (lecture held on 24 September 1999 for the exhibition Picturing Power: Posters of China’s Cultural Revolution at Indiana University).
28 This version is available in my database on Cultural Revolution culture: http://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/continuousrevolution/main.php?part=1&chapter=2&media=5.
29 This version is available in my database on Cultural Revolution culture: http://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/continuousrevolution/main.php?part=1&chapter=2&media=6.
31 This version is available in my database on Cultural Revolution culture: http://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/continuousrevolution/main.php?part=1&chapter=2&media=7.
32 This version is available in my database on Cultural Revolution culture: http://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/continuousrevolution/main.php?part=1&chapter=2&media=8.
33 This version appears on the CD Red Songs of Praise 1 (红色赞歌 1 Hongse zange 1) recorded from a 2003 Tianjin concert in memory of Mao’s 110th birthday: see: http://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/continuousrevolution/main.php?part=1&chapter=2&media=9.
34 Andreas Steen: Der Lange Marsch des Rock ‘n Roll. Pop- und Rockmusik in der Volksrepublik China (Hamburg: LIT, 1996, 79). Similarly positive associations with the sun are to be found in the song Sun (太阳 Taiyang) by the rock group Tang Dynasty. Their song keeps asking “Sun, where are you?” but it is asking for the sun to come out, after all (cf. Steen 1996:169).
35 A translation and interpretation is given in Steen 1996. The negative imagery now associated with the sun is continued in the morning sun rising but the evening sun setting that plays the decisive role (121–22).
36 see www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSAQQuJjF4&NR=1 or the DACHS entry www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/archive2/2011/10/langlang_c111020/www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSAQQuJjF4&NR=1.htm. The song has been released several times since the 1990s and can now be bought on CD.
37 This translation largely follows Andrew F. Jones: Like a Knife. Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia series, 57, Ithaca, NY, USA: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992, 136–40).
39 Jones 1992, 141–42.
40 This Chinese voice is quoted in Sue Tuohy: Covering Mao in the 90s: Revolutions in Chinese Revolutionary Music (lecture held on 24 September 1999 for the exhibition Picturing Power: Posters of China’s Cultural Revolution at Indiana University).