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The Negotiation of Minority Identities and Representation in the Independent Music Scene of Urban China

(Lei PENG, IETT, Université Jean-Moulin Lyon3)

This talk shows my efforts to trace a distinctive thread through the practices of two groups in the independent music sector concerning issues of minority identities, representation and new spheres of musical practice in a globalizing China.

I should emphasize in the first place that this talk is not a professional musical analysis of different groups, since I’m not specialized in music. What I attempt to do is to illustrate the negotiation of Minority identities and representation in the music of two distinct yet in some respects analogical groups, Hanggai and 3Steps by investigating the social, cultural and aesthetic aspects of their musical practice. The two groups have been ascribed to a newly emerged musical trend called “xinminyao” in China (xinminyao could be literally translated as neo-folk in English but it implies in fact different meanings in the context of contemporary China, so I would keep the original pinyin form “xinminyao” in this talk in order to distinguish it from the neo-folk movement in Europe).

Context and some questions

Before discussing the songs and performances of the two groups in detail, I shall first address the context of their musical practices in terms of the politics and music-culture of the past three decades. As you may know, since the late 1970s, there has been a significant transformation in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the shift to a free-market economy, and the opening of the country to outside influence' have led to the resurgence of a relevant social and cultural diversity.

The new ideologies, technologies, and mode of economy challenged not only the state, they equally challenged dominant social groups that traditionally have had more control over the means of cultural production and dissemination-dominant groups such as men, members of the Han majority, and the intellectual elite. As a matter of fact, remapping and renegotiating the ranking of social scales has become a sheer necessity nowadays in any metropolitan Chinese city, not only because hasty, large-scale urban development since the early 1990s has demolished much of the old cityscape and replaced it with similar high-rise buildings and commercial blocks, rendering printed maps inadequate, but also because of the mobility of people, the circulation of capital, ideas and images, technologies, and modes of communication. So today even when people stay in a local place, their subjectivities may be transformed by trans-local

1 Yingjin ZHANG talks about the concept of "remapping" and renegotiating the ranking of social scales in chapter one "Introduction: Cinema, Sphere, Polylocality" of his new book *Cinema, Sphere, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, Hawaii, University of Hawaii Press, 2010.
processes and Internet. The emerging independent music scene since the mid-1990s in China has participated in various projects of remapping the city, of producing urban imaginaries that negotiate changing urban values, and create new spheres where the negotiation between traditional dichotomies such as aboveground/underground, Majority/Minority or region/global become possible.

The Mongolian-based folk group Hanggai, who are at the forefront of the ongoing musical trend xinminyao 新民谣 in China that is taking traditional Mongolian folk elements and instrumentations and projects them into a loosely rock-based structure; the Yunnan/Guangzhou-based group 3Steps 三跺脚 combine the traditional music of minorities in Yunnan (the south-west Han-Ethnic mixed region of China) with the reggae rhythm of Caribbean. What I try to argue in this talk is that the two groups have participated in the process of establishing an imagined sphere within a new generation of urban youth. I shall call this sphere Minjian 民间 here, (the term minjian could be translated as "among the people", "non-official", or "non-governmental" according to the different contexts), it is actually a third sphere which is based in the city, but "integrates" (not just "puts in") some "rural", "folkloric" or "minority" elements.

Here come some questions I’d like to raise : What is the nature of the so-called xinminyao movement in contemporary China exactly, and how do we practise it? Could this new sphere minjian be employed by the minority people to narrate or negotiate their own life experience instead of assuming an orthodox representation from "above" or the majority culture? Could this "third sphere" created both by the musicians and their audiences not merely negotiate or resist, but also "shape the society" in terms of "composition" argued by Jacque Attali in his inspiring work Noise? The consideration of these points remains a task still to be undertaken, apparently there are more questions to formulate than answers to give, but let’s keep these questions in mind for the moment, and I’m going to give you some illustrations of music of the two groups.

**Hanggai : at home in the world**

Hanggai is a Beijing-based group of Mongolian musicians established in 2003, a few of whom are originally from China’s Inner Mongolia province while the other members are original Han, two of the members play the morin khuur (the traditional mongolia horse-hair string instrument), while another plays the tobshuur, another two-stringed traditional lute, they comprise the foundation of their sound’ together with some typical rock-based instruments like guitar, base and drum set. The bandleader Ilchi was born in the inner Mongolia but went to settle in Beijing with his family at the age of 12, he was formerly in a Beijing hardcore punk group T9 and put this band together after hearing

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the traditional khoomei throat-singing technics. Fascinated by the sound of this centuries-old singing style, he went to Inner Mongolia to learn it and finally built-up his new band Hanggai (in Mongolian it means a beautiful place with blue sky and spreading grassland). They combine the deep throat singing with a Western compositional sense of tension and they sing in Mongolian.

Here are some extracts of their live performances in different cities of the world.

**Illustrations**

1. In the MIDI music festival (30’’) - Beijing
   [http://xiyou.cntv.cn/video/c03f0c54-4475-11df-be82-001e0bbb2454](http://xiyou.cntv.cn/video/c03f0c54-4475-11df-be82-001e0bbb2454)

2. Festival of Sine (1’30’’) - Portugal
   [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z15Fck3KeH4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z15Fck3KeH4)

In this extract, we can easily identify three important elements comprising the music of Hanggai - the deep throat singing technique, the use of tradional Mongolian instruments (the morin khuur) and the rock-based, often rapid and regular rhythm. The throat singing and the traitional instrumentation have been subtly projected into the accelerated rhythm built by the drumbeat in the background, which distinguish their music from the original or "primitive" local music practice in the region of Mongolia. This ambiguity between the folk and rock give their music a "fresh touch". The regional, traditional folk forms put in the modern (read: westernized) structure has actually created a relatively new listening experience that can be recognised by the urban people with their familiar code.

3. Europalia performance (2'03'’) - Belgium
   [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suBQh4IatkF](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suBQh4IatkF)

This extract shows clearly how the musicians of Hanggai deliberately use progressive sonic tactics in order to penetrate their music into the heart of their audience. The first "riff" is composed by a simple round singing in Mongolian accompanied by a three stringed banjo-like instrument, then the drumbeat joined in to provide a regular rhythm structure; later come the electronic guitar as well as the moring ghruu, we can see that they carefully use the Mongolien symbolic instrumentation with addition of some lelectronic textural elements' established step by step, as a consequence, the music of Hanggai can easily remind the audience about the symbolic elements of a general "Mongolien culture" and get the sympathy of them.

**3Steps : sphere of transculturality**

3Steps takes its name from a popular local song and dance practice in the southern part of Yunnan province, and brings the traditional elements of minority cultures in Yunnan into a Reggae-based structure. Three members are originally from
the minority regions of Yunnan (two are original Bulang 布朗 and one of them is original Dai 傣), together with two other members of Han 汉, Thomas-French and Adam- American, they tried to use the European dub music technique of incorporating electronic sounds and live digital manipulation to intensify their sound. Lyrics in Mandarin, Yunnan dialect, minority dialects, English, and French go further to create a lively dialogue with the audience. 3Steps could be considered as one of the "hybrid communities" or "transcultural sound makers" argued by many scholars recently, they are not national cultural communities, but then, as Tzvetan Todorov has demonstrated, a common culture is not necessarily national and is generally "of a smaller size" and more ever "it can also be transnational."3

Some illustrations:

1. 《三跺脚》("3 Steps") 1’20”

This is the beginning of the song which has the same name as the group, we can almost find the same sonic strategy with the music of Hanggai. The song begins with a simple riff performed by the traditional instrument sheng 笙 (which is broadly used in the local musical practice in the region of Yunnan), then the electronic guitar and drumbeat joined in to establish a reggae-based structure, the latter subtly melted in with the sound of sheng, then the vocal in Mandarin entered, which was based on a local Minority song’s melody.

2. 《撒伊阿卡》("Sayiaka") 50” 《珠江啤酒》("Zhujiang Beer") 58”

The first extract is sung in the dialect of the Bulang Minority, and the chord in the background was an extract of the typical sound in the local practice in some region of Yunnan, while the second was sung both in Mandarin and English.

3. 《花头⼱巾》("Colorful Headscarf") 45”

This extract shows the utilization of Dub music techniques and the digital manipulation of sound effect of 3Steps. The original vocal sample recorded by 3Steps in the Minority village of Yunnan has been subtly treated by the modern electronic techniques and was well integrated in the whole Reggae-based song.

Hanggai and 3Steps : negotiating minority identities and the sphere of minjian 民间

To sum up, both the musical practices of Hanggai and 3Steps have demonstrated some vivid local and Minority culture characteristics, and their music was generally referred to as the music trend “xinminyao” in China by some urban music amateurs or musical critiques. So what is the nature of this so-called xinminyao music in China

exactly? As far as I know, half of the musicians of *xinminyao* started out playing in punk or rock bands and they moved onto this sort of music later on. The major vocal/drum of *3Steps* Xiaodao for example, who is originally from a *Dai* village of Yunnan initially "went out" to the city in order to learn about western percussion in a music school. In this sense, the musical explorations of those musicians seem to be a manifestation of "refinding the culture identity", their musical practices appear not only to a regional/Minority diversity including the different dialects and costumes, the different way of life, but also to the cultural invasion of the Han Chinese Majority. Nowadays, less than 20 percent of the population of Inner Mongolia is Mongolian; most are Han Chinese, as the bandleader Ulchi once said in an interview, "Most of our people have moved away from the old way of life, after moving to the cities, many of us have gradually been subjected to a very strong cultural invasion by an oppressive culture. So this traditional music has completely lost its space.” That is the same thing for most of the Minority people living in the mountains of Yunnan, or other parts of mainland China. Their own languages, habits and everyday life experiences have been more or less neutralized and centralised by the orthodox representation of the State or the Han major culture. All sort of diversities and autonomies are disappearing quickly with rapid urbanization and the modernization of China.

Meanwhile, the frequent audience of the *xinminyao* performance are basically the urban youth generation, they are living in a globalised, rapidly urbanized China, and are surrounded by the double cultural oppressions. On the one hand, there is the state or "international" sanctioned "cultural heritage" (like the often-mentioned term *chuantong wenhua* 传统 文化 "traditional culture" or *shijie wenhua yichan* 世界 文化 遗产 "world cultural heritage"). On another hand, there is the trend of the modern popular music coming from "outside" in terms of modernization and globalization (including rock music, world music, etc). As a matter of fact, neither of the two dominant mainstream popular cultures is directly connected to the everyday life experience of those urban youths. So the trend *xinminyao* emerged from this "fracture", it is actually a "third sphere" in-between that promoted the utopia of a distant "non-official sphere of China", an utopia which I name with the term "minjian 民间", an utopia could encompass the everyday experiences of Chinese urban youth with their longings, desires, hopes, frustrations and leisure needs, make them able to feel an undefined nostalgic longing for something "real" which had to exist somewhere.

However, the audience of *xinminyao* is not looking for a so-called "authentic regional/Minority folklore" as such neither, they are longing for this "ambiguous third sphere" in-between that promoted the utopia of a distant "non-official sphere of China", an utopia which I name with the term "minjian 民间", an utopia could encompass the everyday experiences of Chinese urban youth with their longings, desires, hopes, frustrations and leisure needs, make them able to feel an undefined nostalgic longing for something "real" which had to exist somewhere.

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1 Wei Xiaoshi 魏小石 discussed the notion of *minjian 民间* as a production of imaginary, as well as the two dominated mainstream cultures (the official sanctioned and the globalized popular music trend) nowadays in urban China in his article "Xinminyao zai Zhongguo, shei de huanxiang?" 新民谣在中国，谁的幻想?, published in the Chinese journal *Shucheng 书城*, 2010, 4.
sphere namely minjian" where the boundary of "urban and rural" is no more clear, where they can "return to innocence" with their own familiar urban code. Therefore, we can define the "xinminyao" as a production of imaginary by re-coding the "traditional elements" in a modernized way.

**Conclusion or some more questions**

The success key of Hanggai and 3Steps is their well-balanced deployment between the ethnical/regional uniqueness and the cosmopolitism. Again, like the bandleader of Hanggai announced in the media: "deep inside our music is still Mongolian, but we want to deliver to the audience the message that we are not a traditional band. We play modern music."

Then comes the question, Hanggai's first album *Introducing Hanggai* is recorded by two western producers, they resumed their working principle with Hanggai as below:

"Beijing is in northern China, and the grasslands are just outside Beijing, and within the Chinese psyche, that's the wild west, where the cowboys and horsemen are; it's dangerous and exotic. And that whole culture plays a big part in the Chinese psyche, so what we wanted to do was make an album based in the city, thinking about the grasslands — imagining this culture and these songs, from the city."

- Matteo Scumaci & Robin Haller
  "Chinese Crisis: Recording Hanggai's Folk Music"

These words demonstrate that the two western producers are clearly conscious of their "re-coding" role as well as their mission to "create an otherness" within the "the great China" ideology. Their efforts in musical terms have not weakened or alienated the power of Hanggai's distinctive sound, but rather give the album enough diversity and structure to appeal more especially to Western audiences up to now. Once entered in the global market of music industry, they have been placed within a capitalist ideology and could hardly escape the commodification which always function in the interests of capital, both economically and ideologically. As market activity intensified, there was an increasing demand for minority otherness, which in the cosmopolitan and consumerist environment was transformed into an exotic commodity. So how far can Hanggai's negotiation between a somehow distinct Mongolian identity and the ideology of a "Great China" go? We still need some time and observation to find the right answers.

Nevertheless, another characteristic of xinminyao is the very dynamic interaction between the musicians and their audience en Live. Hanggai play frequently all over the world while 3Steps travelled every year in the mountain areas of Yunnan, they have the constant contact with the local people, and they play, communicate with the local Minority people as well as learn from them in the villages. Through such a mobility of
musicians, different information, local practices, values, ideas, ways of life have been
circulated simultaneously while the music was being made. At the same time, the
dissemination of their music through Internet has provided a wider sphere of
communications and possibilities of "transculturality". All of these factors make every
single "live performance" a Temporary Autonomous Moment in terms of Hakim Bey,
that could hardly "control" or "centralize" by the nationalist or any other "center".
During the "Live show", the marginals, minorities, people with different cultural
backgrounds are united, then, in their embracing of a local/regional inclusive culture,
they share a marginal sphere.·

That brings me to my conclusion : the undergoing xinminyao movement in urban
China reminds us to direct our attention not just to the dominant official sphere, but to
an array of dominated yet alternative, interstitial, and contingent spheres that have been
opened up since the mid-1990s. Hanggai and 3Steps' success both in China and outside
provides one example of the significant shift that took place recently in the role that
minority people play in the general culture in the PRC, and particularly in the
representation of their ethnic identity in this sphere.

We realize that live performance and the new way of dissemination though
internet (a typical translocal and transcultural net) have opened up a new sphere of
identity and subjectivity for the Chinese independent musicians especially for these who
have an regional/minority background, for during these Temporary Autonomous
Moments, they are no more a "gazed-up" object but could participate, negotiate,
possibly re-ranking the social scale. The newly created, although still marginal and
unstable sphere of unofficial musical communities like Hanggai and 3Seps have attracted
considerable attention and facilitate the sincere dialogue between different voices from
different age groups in different localities on different geographic/subjective/imagined
scales. Thus, the term minjian could be considered as a "collective imaginary sphere"
constructed both by the musicians and the audience, where they could temporarily
escape the aggressive assertion of control by State or Capital. At the same time, some
individual subjectivities and cultural diversities could hopefully be forged.

· To know more about the TAZ theory, see Hakim Bey, T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone:
Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism (Brooklyn, NY : Autonomedia, 1991,p100, quoted by Gregory Lee
in Troubadours, Trumpeter, Troubled Makers : Lyricism, Nationalism and Hybridity in China and its Others,
· See comment on Zebda and the Fabulous Trobadors by Gregory Lee, in Troubadours, Trumpeter, Troubled
Makers, 1996.p236