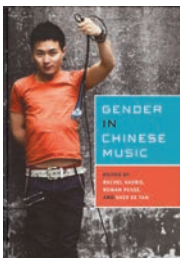


China



Rachel Harris, Rowan Pease, and Shzr Ee Tan, eds., *Gender in Chinese Music*

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THE ESSAYS COLLECTED in this volume display a holistically panoramic yet individually illuminating view of how gender and music are manifested and integrated not just in the Chinese context, but beyond. Of course, given the longevity and diversity of Chinese culture, there is more than enough material to confine discussions of the music scene solely to the situation in Mainland China, but that would take away a lot of the exciting and artistic innovations in this fast globalizing world.

Indeed, two of the editors, Harris and Pease, take great pains in their brilliant introduction to illustrate that the links between local formations and elsewhere underpin their volume, showing the current state of the field of gender and music in China studies. To do this, they also provide a good summary of approaches to gender and music in the West. The book also has ample discussion of the consequences of the interaction between the Chinese and Western musical worlds. As China globalizes at a rapid rate, both artists and audiences are becoming more international in their outlook. For example, in an enlightening chapter on the masculinities found in pianists Lang Lang and Li Yundi, Shzr Ee Tan demonstrates that not only do the pianists encompass transnational talents, but just as importantly, “the same can be said of their audiences” (148).

While the piano is clearly a Western instrument, the book does not simplistically use the East-West divide to explain all in discussions of the dichotomies and contrasts in which Chinese music is being contextualized. The focus is clearly on Chinese music. But within this rubric, “local” is not simply “Chinese.” All contributors are acutely aware that Chinese music is an amalgam of many different genres emanating from different regional cultures. Almost all chapters in the book carefully stake their geographical terrain before exploring their subject matter. Most of the studies dwell on music produced in “ethnic minority” areas such as the border regions in the west, the northeast, and the southeast. The first chapter by Stephen Jones that the editors refer to as a “subintroduction to this volume” (16) is mostly about the music of the Han majority, yet Jones skillfully and convincingly uses this approach as “a reminder of the enduring values of local communities” (26). Jones’s aim, however, is not just to promote research into local music, as his voice is also an indignant protest of the dominance of patriarchal practice and ideology over the Chinese music scene. The focus on music produced by local people is necessary because “as long as we remain mesmerized by urban stage performances and by Confucian and Communist propaganda, we will never comprehend gender roles in the expressive cultures of the myriad local communities” (36). Ethnomusicology is therefore essential to understand how gender is manifested in Chinese music.

True to his word, Jones’s other chapter in this book examines the various facets of masculinity experienced by shawm (the *suona*) bands in Shanxi and Shaanbei. These are groups of poor men who are hired for ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals. They were traditionally associated with drugs, violence, and crimes associated with the underclass, from where these bands originate. Jones states that their music is loud, intrusive, combative, and, until recently, almost always performed by bands of men who were judged outcasts from society. Nevertheless, Jones shows that their music had traditionally served the Confucian hierarchy. He concludes that “Even if it is hard to relate precisely to gender issues, their music—in which *wen* [cultural, literary] virtues are well concealed beneath a thick patina of male folk bravado—shows immense artistry” (124). While the seemingly softer *wen* attributes are hidden in the macho performances of masculinity in the shawm bands, in the more refined and stylized *kunqu*—a regional operatic form that has been approved by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—both *wen* and *wu* [martial, physical] features are prominent. By focusing on the performances

of two *kunqu* masters, Joseph Lam insightfully reveals why these performers are considered masters of their art. Lam points to the way that complex emotions and sometimes downright contradictory demands made on the heroes on stage need supreme acrobatic and expressive skills in order to carry their audiences. Because of its iconic significance, Lam rightfully concludes that Chinese masculinity may undergo all manners of transformations in finding its place in the modern world, but looking at the case of *kunqu*, it is clear that traditional masculinity ideals will always serve as reference points from which Chinese men will negotiate their manhood in the global setting.

Although Chinese music has traditionally been associated as a male activity and there is a scarcity of studies of music related to women, the essays collected in this book explore both men's and women's involvement in music. I have given more space to the study of men and music because of my own interest. More than half of the essays examine the interpretations of particular genres made by women and their performances of these genres. All these essays are well researched and are mostly based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out over lengthy periods. For example, in the chapter "I prefer a Man Who Is Fresh like a Jumping Fish," Frank Kouwenhoven and Antoinet Schimmelpenninck conduct an ethnographic study of how *shan'ge* (mountain songs) are practiced in the rural areas. While these folk songs are popular with both men and women, the authors concentrate on the role of women, from the common folklore that they were the founders of the genre, to their use of the singing of these songs outdoor as taking the initiative in courtship rituals.

As indicated above, "Chinese music" in this book is defined quite loosely. Like many other anthropology scholars, the contributors of most of the essays here in fact choose to highlight music on the periphery of, rather than mainstream, Chinese culture. Thus, Rowen Pease reveals how professional Korean singers in north-east China attempt to appear "masculine" by training hard to develop a "broken" huskiness in their voices. Olivia Kraef's chapter looks at the Nuosu-Yi people of southwest Sichuan. Kraef argues that women are increasingly taking more active roles in the traditionally male-dominated Nuosu music. In doing so, they have broken more and more taboos, and their voices and what they represent have become more translocal and transmedial. In the chapter on negotiating gender in the music of Xinjiang, Rachel Harris gives a personal and fascinating account explaining why after ten years of studying the masculine in Uyghur music, she ventured into the realm of Uyghur women: the relationships between their rituals, self-presentations, and music.

In the final two chapters, Xiao Mei and Hwee-San Tan investigate the gendered nature of religious rituals. The former argues that through the performances of the female ritualists and male Daoist priests, both Han and Zhuang traditions have managed a sort of coexistence in the Guangxi minority area. Tan discusses the rituals practiced by the Buddhist lay women (the *caigu*) in Fujian, thereby ending the volume with one aspect of Han culture. This is not just a gesture to mainstream Han elements in Chinese music. In fact, after the first two introductory chapters, the next two chapters take literary-historical approaches. Judith T. Zeitlin's essay gives an account of lyrics favored by courtesans and their clients in the Ming

dynasty. And Tiantian Zheng follows with a “modern” version of this phenomenon by showing how entrepreneurial masculinity is played out in contemporary karaoke bars. It is interesting to note that even when mainstream Han music culture is analyzed, the chosen topics are not “normal” elite culture. This is perhaps why the book is so readable and enjoyable.

To add to its attractiveness, the book is also amply illustrated with music scores, photos from exotic places, and fine drawings from traditional literary texts. Furthermore, “to provide a sense of immediacy for the readers” (21), interviews with composers, a karaoke bar host, an amateur opera singer, a jazz singer, fans, a songwriter, and even an ethnomusicologist are interspersed among the scholarly chapters. I strongly recommend this book for both specialists and lay people alike.

Kam Louie

University of Hong Kong and University of New South Wales