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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* 杭盖 and *3Steps* 三跺脚 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* 新民谣" in a changing 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* 汉 majority, and the intellectual elite. As a matter of fact, remapping¹ 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* 杭盖, 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 Jacques Attali in his inspiring work *Noise*?² 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

² Jacques Attali, *Bruits : Essai sur l'économie politique de la musique (nouvelle édition)*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France et Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2001. It has been translated into English and published by University of Minnesota Press in 1985.

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

In the MIDI music festival (30'') - Beijing

<http://xiyou.cntv.cn/video/c03f0c54-4475-11df-be82-001e0bbb2454>

2. Festival of Sine (1'30'') - Portugal

<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 traditional Mongolian instruments (the morin khuur) and the rock-based, often rapid and regular rhythm. The throat singing and the traditional instrumentation have been subtly projected into the accelerated rhythm built by the drumbeat in the background, which distinguishes their music from the original or "primitive" local music practice in the region of Mongolia. This ambiguity between the folk and rock gives 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=suBQh4IEKFM>

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 morin khuur, we can see that they carefully use the Mongolian symbolic instrumentation with addition of some 'electronic 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 "Mongolian 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. 《三踩脚》 ("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》 ("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

³ Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres. La reflexion française sur la diversité humaine*, Paris, seuil, 1989 p 241, quoted in the work of Gregory Lee, *Troubadours, Trumpeter, Troubled Makers*, 1996.

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 neutralised 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).⁴ 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

⁴ 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 cosmopolitanism. 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 Moment⁵ 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.⁶

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 through internet (a typical translocal and transcultural net) have opened up a new sphere of identity and subjectivity for the Chinese independent musicians especially for those who have a 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 *3Steps* 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.

⁵ 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*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1996, p247.

⁶ See comment on Zebda and the Fabulous Trobadors by Gregory Lee, in *Troubadours, Trumpeter, Troubled Makers*, 1996.p236