

Music in Maoist China: Political Mobilization, Ideological Control, and Collective Memory

Introduction

“Our literature and art are for the people, first and foremost for the workers, peasants, and soldiers, created for them and put to use by them.” Thus declared Chairman Mao Zedong in his 1942 Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art.¹ This seemingly simple directive would go on to profoundly reshape the cultural landscape of China for the next three decades. That literature and art play key roles in modern state and nation-building is hardly surprising, but the degree to which they were deliberately and systematically conscripted in Maoist China is perhaps unparalleled. Mao was explicit about his aims: literature and art were to be the cogs of the revolutionary machine, without which the revolution could not advance and victory could not be achieved.²

Within this category of literature and art, music stands as one of the most revealing examples of how culture and propaganda operated in modern Chinese history: although music in Maoist China was designed as a political weapon directed at the masses, decades later it continues to evoke deep passion and gratitude among generations of Chinese people. From Mao’s Yan’an Talks in 1942 until his death in 1976, Chinese art, and music in particular, was systematically stripped of its artistic autonomy and reforged into an instrument of ideology.

Central to my analysis are a wide range of primary sources, many of which are held at the National Library of China in Beijing, in particular its microfilm archives and Chinese Core Collection Room. These holdings include manuscripts of Mao Zedong’s *Talks at the Yan’an Conference*, the anthology *New Songs of the Battlefield*, and the essay collection *On the Revolutionization, Nationalization, and Popularization of Music*, among others.³ These published sources are further enriched by oral history interviews I conducted with individuals who lived through that era. These interviewees include Mr. You Yongqing, who worked as a peasant during the 1960s; Mrs. Yan Fenghua, a factory worker at a fireworks manufacturing plant in the 1950s; and Mr. Lu Xiao, who served as a navy soldier in the 1970s.⁴

This primary source analysis is supplemented by engagement with existing secondary scholarship. Taken together, these methods allow this paper to investigate the nuanced

relationship between politics and music in China between the years 1942 and 1976. It argues that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under the leadership of Mao Zedong systematically steered music away from its artistic foundations, repurposing it as an instrument of political mobilization. In fact, this repurposing was carried out so thoroughly that its ideological influence endures in China to this day. The paper opens with a historical overview that traces the transformation of Chinese art from the Yan'an Talks of 1942 through the height of Mao's cultural campaigns to his death in 1976. The following section zooms in to examine Maoist ideology and its attention to the proletariat, establishing the political framework within which all artistic production was required to operate. The third section offers a step-by-step analysis of the three-stage process—revolutionization, nationalization, and popularization—through which the CCP deliberately transformed music into a propaganda instrument. The closing section shifts to consider the enduring legacy of revolutionary music. Positioning these songs within a broader web of emotional resonance, collective memory, and nostalgia, this final section draws on original interviews conducted in Beijing to illuminate why an entire generation continues to hold onto these songs with such conviction.

Historical Context

The Lu Xun Academy of Art (*Luyi*) was founded on April 10, 1938, in Yan'an. Its function was to train artists, musicians, and writers in service of the CCP and its revolutionary cause. The CCP had arrived in Yan'an, a minor city in northwestern China after the Long March, a grueling 6,000-mile military retreat undertaken by the Red Army between 1934 and 1935.⁵ Having survived near annihilation by the Nationalist forces, the CCP went about consolidating their base in Yan'an. One of their priorities was to build cultural institutions that could strengthen their ideological grip. *Luyi* was central to this effort, serving as the primary venue for developing revolutionary art and music under Party guidance.

Mao and his associates viewed music as possessing little intrinsic artistic value, existing primarily as a vehicle subordinate to political ends. Indeed, the establishment of a music department at *Luyi* signaled the CCP's commitment to legitimizing music within their ideological orthodoxy and placing it at the center stage of their rural socialist revolution. *Luyi*'s inaugural statement pronounced music, drama, art, and literature—the four disciplines at *Luyi*—as being “the most effective weapons in inciting and organizing the people.”⁶ Mao understood

that popular art forms were crucial in the socialist revolution. He believed that there were extraordinary political and social benefits to be gained from properly conceived, party-directed art forms, of which music was to be a key component.

The Communists, of course, were not alone in using music for propaganda purposes. The modern history of mass songs in China started in the 1860s during the Taiping Rebellion, when its leader, Hong Xiuquan, discovered the power of Protestant hymn singing, which was incorporated into the rebels' singing rituals.⁷ The use of music by the Taiping rebels in many ways foreshadowed the instrumentalization of 20th-century China. The power of such music is premised on the assumption that songs are written to be sung aloud, which enables their circulation among the illiterate. Moreover, songs appeal to emotions; they have little need for reason or argument. Through rhythm and rhyme rather than reasoning and understanding, the ideological messaging can be implanted more easily in the mind. Furthermore, singing as a collective exercise helps to forge a sense of belonging, providing a cohesive force that glues individuals into a community.

The benefits were magnified further during times of war. Singing was an invaluable tool that could uplift the spirits of demoralized soldiers or provide temporary relief from the suffering of war. Indeed, this is what we see during the early 1930s, when Japan intensified its military aggression in Manchuria in the early 1930s. Following the Manchurian Incident of September 1931, scores of choral groups appeared in major cities like Shanghai, calling on their countrymen to resist Japanese invasion. Among them, the People's Singing Society (*Minzhong geyonghui*) was perhaps the most famous. Founded in February 1935 in Shanghai by Liu Liangmu, a member of the Young Men's Christian Association, the society recruited hundreds of patriotic youths, organized rallies, sang at the factories and schools, and established branches in Guangzhou and Hong Kong to inspire the populace with emotionally charged melodies.⁸ "We are not singing for the sake of singing," Liu reminded his fellow singers. "We are singing for the sake of national liberation."⁹ In 1935, Liu gathered a number of patriotic songs and turned them into a popular book, *Collected Songs of Youth* (*Qingnian geji*), which went through seven printings in the short period of one year.¹⁰

But the Communist songwriters were more than patriots; after all, they were revolutionary dreamers that sought to cultivate a spirit of socialism through their lyrics and melodies. In fact, the idea of creating a new, socialist music had already been proposed. In an

influential 1936 article, Lü Ji, a left-wing musician from Hunan, appealed for the creation of what he called “new music” (*xin yinyue*). “Yes, music was critical in uniting the people in their fight against the enemy,” said Lü, “but in the midst of the struggle against foreign incursion, China must also seize this unique opportunity to initiate fundamental social and political changes.” New music, according to Lü, should go beyond the narrow nationalistic aim of boosting troop morale in order to reach and merge with the suffering masses. If music cannot enter the lives of the workers and peasants, then it can never become a tool to liberate them, nor can it become the principal force in the national liberation movement.¹¹

In the historiography on Chinese socialism, it is well known that the CCP’s cultural policy took a decisive turn after Mao Zedong’s 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum of Art.” In this canonical pronouncement, Mao raised two issues central to the CCP: relations between intellectuals and the peasants they claimed to serve, and the primacy of politics over literature and art in party-directed activities. Scholar Perry Link points out that the 1942 Talks laid down some basic rules about literary and artistic production in communist China: “From then until the 1980s, when their influence gradually waned, Mao’s ‘Yan’an Talks’ were the foundation of China’s literary control system.”¹² Art and culture, in short, existed to support politics and ideology.

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the cultural policies first articulated in Yan’an were now enforced at a national scale. Major political campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s made clear that no artistic form was exempt from ideological scrutiny. The Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, launched after the brief liberalization of the Hundred Flowers Movement, saw musicians and composers punished for expressing views deemed insufficiently revolutionary. “Yellow music”—a term the Party used to condemn popular, romantic, or Western-influenced music as decadent and morally corrupting—became a particular target of suppression, as the state sought to replace it with a politically approved repertoire of operas and plays celebrating the Communist revolution and the working masses. Art was simultaneously pressed into the service of politics and policed for any deviation from it; this dynamic extended across all cultural forms, from literature to theater to music, and the consequences for those who transgressed, even inadvertently, could be severe.

This tension played out most dramatically in November 1965, when a literary critique appeared in a prominent Shanghai newspaper. The critique accused *Hai Rui Dismissed from*

Office, a previously praised historical drama, of implicitly attacking Mao Zedong.¹³ The plot of this play was based on the biography of Ming Dynasty magistrate Hai Rui, who voiced his concerns for the well-being of the people in front of the emperor at the expense of his career and freedom, as the emperor subsequently sent him to prison. What author Wu Han intended was to applaud the integrity of a civil servant and denounce a dictatorial ruler, but the literary critique claimed to “expose” a far more dangerous subtext, namely that Wu Han was in fact criticizing Mao and his treatment of General Peng Dehuai, with whom he had major policy disagreements. Wu Han was swiftly denounced as a counter-revolutionary; subjected to public struggle sessions and imprisoned by Red Guards, he died in detention in 1969, likely from mistreatment and the brutal conditions of his captivity.¹⁴

These various trends—namely, the suppression of individual expression, subordination of art to political ideology, and ever-tightening restrictions on cultural production—culminated in 1966 with the outbreak of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The Revolution would persist for the next decade or so, representing the most radical phase of the CCP’s campaign to subordinate culture to political ends. Mao mobilized the Red Guards, which were composed largely of young students and zealous party faithful, to purge Chinese society of old customs, culture, habits, and ideas, which were collectively deemed the “Four Olds.”¹⁵ This spelled disaster for music. Conservatories were shuttered, traditional culture destroyed, and artists and musicians who had spent their careers serving the party found themselves denounced and humiliated at public struggle sessions. Any and all music that did not align with the Communist ideology was banned and eliminated; all that remained was a narrow set of approved forms, including revolutionary songs, red orchestral arrangements, and modern revolutionary Peking Opera (*geming jingju*).¹⁶ By the time Mao died in September 1976, music in China had been almost completely severed from its artistic roots and transformed into a political weapon.

The Proletariat and Maoist Ideology

Before examining the specific relationship between CCP ideology and revolutionary music, it is necessary to first establish the broader ideological foundation that Mao laid for cultural production under Socialist China. This foundation traces its origins to Mao’s 1942 Yan’an Talks, which set the terms for all artistic and literary production under Communist rule. This radical premise would only intensify over the following decades, culminating in the

Cultural Revolution. In fact, 1967 witnessed the publication of the volume *Mao Zedong on Literature and Art*, which reiterates the same principles laid out in the Yan'an Talks while offering a clearer and more systematically organized articulation of those principles.¹⁷

Central to Mao's political framework was the question of class. He insisted that all culture in any society belongs to a definite class and serves a definite political line; conversely, there is no such thing as art that transcends class. Art that served the landlord class was feudal art; art that served the bourgeoisie was capitalist art. By contrast, the task of revolutionary artists was to produce art that served the proletariat and the masses. Past artistic traditions and foreign forms could be inherited and borrowed, but only after being transformed and infused with new, revolutionary content could they truly serve the people. Mao's 1967 text outlined three groups in particular that revolutionary art was to serve: workers as the leading revolutionary class, peasants as the revolution's broadest allies, and soldiers as the revolution's main military force.¹⁸ Cultural production that catered to the tastes of the petty bourgeoisie or reflected individual expression had no place in Mao's framework.

Having laid out the function of revolutionary art, Mao proceeded to explain the specifics of its production. Mao argued that intellectuals and artists who had grown up removed from the lives of workers and peasants were fundamentally estranged from the people they were supposed to serve. They were unfamiliar with their language, their concerns, and their struggles. Mao claimed that artists must first go among the people and know them intimately:

Revolutionary writers and artists of China [...] must go among the masses unconditionally and wholeheartedly, going among the workers, peasants, and soldiers [...] of all classes, all the masses [...] and only then may they proceed to creative work.¹⁹

Mao's language is absolute: "must" and "unconditionally" make clear that there is no room for negotiation or exception. Artists were required to subordinate themselves entirely to that experience with the masses before they could create anything at all. Thus, the Party ensured that artistic production would remain accessible and ideologically straightforward rather than complex or pretentious in its expression.

Once produced, art had to be disseminated among the masses. Here, Mao addressed the tension between dissemination (*puji*) and elevation (*tigao*), two tasks he insisted were inseparable. Art first had to meet the masses at their current cultural level,

emphasizing accessibility and immediate comprehensibility, before it could gradually elevate their consciousness over time. To produce work that was too refined or sophisticated for the masses was not a mark of artistic achievement but a failure of revolutionary mandate. At the same time, remaining forever at the lowest common denominator was equally insufficient; the goal was a continuous upward spiral in which dissemination laid the groundwork for elevation, and elevation in turn set the standard for the next round of dissemination.²⁰ This framework gave the Party both a justification for mass cultural campaigns that prioritized simple, accessible forms and a long-term mandate to continuously reshape the cultural tastes and consciousness of the population in a direction aligned with Communist ideology.

Revolutionize, Nationalize, and Popularize

Having established the broader ideological framework governing art and cultural production under Mao, this section turns to examine how those principles were applied specifically to music. In August 1963, Premier Zhou Enlai presented an audience of musicians and artists with a new policy to be applied to all socialist music, dance, and art. This policy combined the Yan'an Talks with Mao's 1954 text *On New Democracy*, which emphasized how culture should be scientific, national, and popular.²¹ Zhou applied Mao's policy directly to the arts and presented "Three Processes of Transformation" (*Sanhua*). The processes may be translated as revolutionized (*geminghua*), nationalized (*minzuhua*), and popularized (*qunzhonghua*).²² Because the policy so clearly encapsulates the transformative demands placed on music throughout the entire period from 1942 to 1976, it serves as a useful framework for understanding how Maoist ideology reshaped musical production across this era. Drawing on a range of primary documents, concrete historical examples, personal interviews, and close analysis, this section traces how music was first ideologically purified, then culturally reengineered, and ultimately transformed and blended into daily life.

Revolutionization

The first process of revolutionization is reminiscent of Mao's Yan'an Talks, in which he stated, "What we demand, therefore, is a unity of politics and art, a unity of content and form, a unity of revolutionary political content and the highest artistic form possible."²³ Inherent in the

drive to “revolutionize” was an attempt to change both the function and content of music such that it served the revolution.²⁴ The focus here will be the three principal methods of musical revolutionization under the PRC: the composition and mass dissemination of quotation songs; the reformation of traditional Peking opera (*jingju*) under the supervision of Jiang Qing; and the systematic suppression of so-called “yellow music” (*huangse yinyue*).

Most straightforward are revolutionary songs, many of which sought to embed Mao’s personality cult and ideological directives directly into their lyrics. This gave rise to so-called “quotation songs,” which lifted Mao’s words verbatim from his writings and set them directly to music.²⁵ A series of incendiary editorials published in the *People’s Daily* illustrates the simplicity of the quotation process. The headlines read: “Sweep Away All the Cow Ghosts Snake Spirits,”²⁶ “Large Character Poster in Peking University,”²⁷ and “Tear Down Capitalists’ Fig Leaves of ‘Freedom, Equality, Fraternity.’”²⁸ Soon after, revolutionary songs were published embedding quotations from these editorials: “Chairman Mao’s Works Shine a Golden Light,” “Chairman Mao’s Books Are the Treasure of the Revolution,” and “Father Is Dear, Mother Is Dear, but Neither Is as Dear as Chairman Mao.”

Another example would be “The Force at the Core Leading Our Cause Forward is the Chinese Communist Party,” a quotation song composed by Li Jiefu that was published in the *People’s Daily* on September 30, 1966.²⁹ The composition directly incorporates lines from Mao’s 1954 opening address at the First National People’s Congress.³⁰ The first two lines refer to Mao’s opening address at the First Session of the First National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China on September 15, 1954; the final line consists of popular slogans chanted at rallies and other public events.³¹ Its lyrics read:

The force at the core leading our cause forward is the Chinese Communist Party.
The theoretical basis guiding our thinking is Marxism-Leninism.
Long Live the Communist Party! Long Live Chairman Mao!³²

Musicologist Liang Maochun interprets quotation songs as a reflection of the social atmosphere: the music itself is coarse and rigid with simple and rudimentary forms so as to foreground the political slogans that the song promotes.³³ This example is typical for the early Cultural Revolution. Designed to promote political slogans and quotations, the song form is extremely simple and short to aid in memorization, and the lyrics are largely limited to direct quotations.

The results are rather speech-like songs with little poetic or musical phrasing. Quoting Mao had the added bonus of offering artists protection from ideological misinterpretation while simultaneously transforming his language into endlessly repeatable musical propaganda.

The musical elements of these songs, much like their lyrics, were kept deliberately simple. Complexity was to be limited, dynamics restrained, and articulation clear.³⁴ This simplicity reflected their intended use in schools and political campaigns, ensuring that the music could be easily understood and performed by workers, peasants, and soldiers, most of whom lacked formal musical training.³⁵ An illustrative example would be *The New Songs of the Battlefield*, a revolutionary song anthology published in 1972 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Mao's Yan'an Talks.³⁶ To maximize ease of learning, it employed "cipher notation," a system in which the numbers one through seven represent the seven scale degrees.³⁷ Compared to Western five-line staff notation, cipher notation appears to be more accessible and familiar to general readers.³⁸ The simplicity enabled widespread participation without formal musical training, prioritizing ideological representation and accessibility over artistic complexity. As Andrew F. Jones has argued, the songs' power came precisely from their promiscuous form; with catchy hooks, they were portable and replicable across media, a structure not dissimilar to Western pop music.³⁹

Another avenue for revolutionizing music was the reform of Peking opera (*jingju*), a composite art form combining music, dance, dialogue, acrobatics, and theatrical storytelling that had long held a prestigious place in Chinese cultural life. Spearheading this transformation was Mao's fourth wife, Jiang Qing, who was a Shanghai actress turned radical revolutionary. Recognizing its vast popular reach, she began systematically reworking traditional Peking Opera productions, stripping them of feudal and bourgeois content and refashioning them as vehicles for communist ideology. The result was a new genre of politically charged theatrical works known as the Model Operas (*yangbanxi*), which became the centerpiece of Jiang Qing's revolutionized Peking Opera project.

In her landmark 1964 speech "On the Revolutionizing of Peking Opera," delivered at a symposium for modern Peking Opera performers, Jiang explicitly criticized traditional forms and declared her ambition to revolutionize the entire theatrical landscape:

We must be steadfast in our conviction that Peking Opera can and should perform revolutionary modern plays [...] I will offer two statistics here for everyone's consideration. These two figures are, to me, deeply alarming.

The first figure: According to rough estimates, there are three thousand theatrical troupes across the country... Of these, around ninety are professional spoken drama troupes, over eighty are performing arts ensembles, and the remaining two thousand eight hundred or so are traditional opera troupes [...] As for those ninety-odd spoken drama troupes, they do not necessarily portray workers, peasants, and soldiers either [...] This state of affairs cannot protect our economic base; on the contrary, it will undermine and corrode it.

The second figure: Our nation's workers, peasants, and soldiers [...] Beyond them, a small handful consists of landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, rightists, and bourgeois elements [...] I ask you: on which class does the artist stand? Where is that "conscience of the artist" you so often speak of!⁴⁰

This speech reveals the extent to which cultural production was reframed as a matter of class loyalty rather than artistic merit. Jiang's first statistic emphasizes the sheer numerical dominance of traditional opera troupes over revolutionary ones. By framing the preponderance of traditional opera as a structural threat to the socialist economic base, she transforms what might otherwise be a question of cultural preference into an urgent political crisis demanding immediate correction. Equally revealing is her second figure, in which she contrasts the vast majority of workers, peasants, and soldiers against the tiny minority of class enemies and then pointedly asks artists on which side they stand. The rhetorical force of this question positions any artist who continues to produce traditional, non-revolutionary content as complicit with landlords, counter-revolutionaries, and bourgeois elements.

Jiang's eight designated Model Operas included both Peking operas such as *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *The Red Lantern*, and *On the Docks*, as well as ballets like *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl*; each of these works was reimagined to foreground revolutionary heroes, class struggle, and Communist triumph. This impulse to subordinate art to political function is nowhere more visible than in the musical transformation of the opera *Shajiabang*. In its earliest form, *Shajiabang* drew directly from the conventions of traditional Peking Opera. Its protagonist was a *dan* role—that is, a female character portrayed by a male actor—characterized by graceful movements, delicate gestures, and emotive expression, with the vocal style primarily featuring *xipi* and *erhuang* melodies. Most concerning, no

particular emphasis was placed on the positive or negative moral standing of characters.⁴¹ This relatively balanced treatment of character reflected the aesthetic priorities of traditional opera rather than the ideological demands of the revolution.

However, as the opera underwent successive revisions between 1964 and 1970, the transformation of its musical and dramatic structure became increasingly radical. By the fourth and final version of 1970, the opera fully adhered to the “three prominences” (*santuchu*) principle: positive characters were to be given prominence over all others, heroic figures among them elevated still further, and the central hero elevated above all.⁴² In practice, this meant increasing the singing segments of positive characters while reducing those of negative ones and inserting explicitly ideological lyrics directly praising Mao Zedong. For instance, the line “Chairman Mao guides the direction forward” was added to character Guo Jianguang’s segment and “Chairman Mao, you give me wisdom and courage” to Sister A Ching’s. The revision also incorporated revolutionary tunes such as “The Three Major Disciplines and Eight Points for Attention” and “The East is Red” directly into the musical fabric.⁴³ Ultimately, *Shajiabang* demonstrates that the revolutionization of Peking Opera under Jiang Qing's direction entailed a comprehensive restructuring of the medium. This included determining who could sing the most, who could be heroic, and what instruments could speak for the revolution. The result was an art form that became inseparable from the ideology it was designed to serve.

The third and final avenue for revolutionizing music was the suppression of so-called “yellow music” (*huangse yinyue*). “Yellow” was and is a deliberately elastic ideological label applied to any music deemed morally decadent or politically suspect. As scholar Liu Siyue argues, yellow music “was not a static or CCP-invented concept, but one that expanded and contracted in response to shifting political climates and ideological campaigns.”⁴⁴ In the early PRC, the category initially targeted the vestiges of pre-revolutionary Shanghai popular culture, especially sentimental love ballads and the “modern songs” (*shidai qu*), which melded Chinese folk melodies, Hollywood film music, and American jazz in potentially subversive ways.⁴⁵ Most older lyrical songs (*shuqing gequ*) composed before 1949 were swept into this category almost by default, condemned for foregrounding individual emotion over collective revolutionary spirit.⁴⁶

As political pressures intensified through the anti-rightist campaign in the late 1950s, the definition of “yellow music” expanded dramatically. If early criticism focused on eroticism and moral obscenity, yellow was now used to condemn anything that embodied hedonism, anti-patriotism, and contempt for the working class.⁴⁷ Music scholar Zhang Qian has noted that ideological divide between socialism and capitalism that characterized the Cold War era contributed to a structural binary that shaped musical aesthetics and institutional practices in China, which she terms the “two-line struggle,” where yellow and red music represent the capitalist and proletarian lines, respectively.⁴⁸ Indeed, CCP cultural authorities routinely described yellow music as “poisonous weeds,” “opium,” and ideological narcotics, framing popular listening as not private preference but a form of class betrayal.⁴⁹

Yet despite official prohibitions, yellow songs never fully disappeared from daily life. According to reports published in the *People’s Daily*, yellow songs were openly played on loudspeakers at construction sites, government offices, and workers’ clubs “from morning to night,” and local radio stations aired them under the guise of “replayed old songs” (*jiuge chongfang*) concerts.⁵⁰ A 1954 directive from the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Cultural Affairs documented that the Baisheng Records Company held approximately 3,000 yellow music discs in stock, actively marketing them under false labels to evade detection.⁵¹

However, after discovering the widespread persistence of yellow music consumption, the CCP escalated its suppressive measures considerably. The state moved beyond mere prohibition to active enforcement, confiscating yellow music records from vendors and imposing bans on their public sale and distribution. During the Great Leap Forward, the Party launched a coordinated mass campaign to eliminate yellow music entirely, mobilizing musicians to compose and disseminate red songs through radio and other state-controlled channels as ideological substitutes.⁵² At the local level, the response was equally aggressive. In Zhejiang Province, county governments organized compulsory music training sessions for youth, specifically targeting the perceived corrupting influence of yellow music. Meanwhile, weekly red song singing programs were held consistently for years, carried out regardless of weather conditions.⁵³ The Tianjin Broadcasting Station’s “Old Songs Replayed” program, which had garnered overwhelming listener support, was similarly subjected to official scrutiny.⁵⁴

Nationalization

As quotation songs, model operas, and the suppression of yellow music worked in concert to revolutionize China's musical landscape, Mao also insisted that music be "nationalized" (*minzuhua*), an idea that called back to Mao's emphasis on making music for the people. In his 1942 Yan'an Talks, Mao encouraged the use of existing forms that were already familiar to the masses: "We must use what belongs to workers, peasants, and soldiers themselves."⁵⁵ Mao favored a return to "Chinese"—as opposed to foreign or individualistic—musical styles. This way, music would more easily remain within the CCP's ideological framework, shaping a socialist cultural identity while keeping outside influences at bay. Two issues illustrate this dynamic particularly clearly: the criticism of Western music and the standardization of ethnic regional music into a unified national sound.

When it came to performing or composing music, Chinese artists and composers were pressured to abandon Western styles and techniques entirely. In their contribution to the 1964 anthology *On the Revolutionization, Nationalization, and Popularization of Music*, Shi Mingxin and Zong Jiang authored an article titled "Aspiring to Build a Socialist National Choral Art," which takes the form of a self-criticism, a Maoist practice in which individuals publicly confessed their ideological errors and pledged to correct them. In the article, the authors reflect on what they characterize as their own past failures of political consciousness. They describe how the Guangzhou Ensemble, in its 1957 inaugural concert and again during the 1962 Yangcheng Music Festival, had programmed predominantly Western European works, including excerpts from Bizet's *Carmen* and unaccompanied choral pieces, prompting audience members to remark that the ensemble performed foreign songs better than Chinese ones, lyrical songs better than militant ones.⁵⁶ For Shi and Zong, this was not merely an artistic misstep but an ideological one, rooted in what they called "blind worship of the West" and "bourgeois artistic dogmatism." As they concluded, "Everything in foreign culture must be approached with an independent and critical attitude [...] it must undergo transformation before it can serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers and serve socialism."⁵⁷

Though the Party maintained that learning from and observing Western art was nominally permissible, the reality was far more treacherous. The line between legitimate engagement and condemned imitation was vanishingly thin, and in practice, any performance retaining overtly Western elements risked immediate condemnation as "foreign formalism" (*yangbagu*).⁵⁸ Wang

Shouren's 1964 article "Music Should Also Have a Chinese Style and Flavor" captures this tension directly. Observing that professional musicians were exhausting themselves studying Sposobin's harmony, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration, Debussy's color, and Bach's counterpoint, Wang did not merely criticize slavish copying but cast suspicion on the very act of deep engagement with Western music itself. The sheer breadth of composers he cited, spanning harmony, orchestration, color, and counterpoint, suggests that almost any serious study of Western technique could be reframed as ideological contamination, crossing the line from legitimate reference into outright "prostration and worship." Yet this charge was so elastic that it could be applied to virtually any musician who had internalized Western musical training. For Wang, rather than approaching composition through the trappings of Western European classical polyphonic music, Chinese musicians ought instead to "enter through the door of our own national music, the music of the proletariat."⁵⁹

The fate of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra vividly illustrates the CCP's systematic rejection of Western music. Originally founded in the 1920s when the city was administered by Western colonial powers, the orchestra was gradually "Sinicized" after 1949, with foreign players steadily pushed out and replaced by Chinese musicians. Its Italian conductor Arrigo Foa was expelled in 1952 on fabricated charges of imperialism, and by 1953 the ensemble was helmed by its first Chinese conductor, Huang Yijun.⁶⁰ Yet when the Cultural Revolution broke out, Huang himself became a target of persecution. Seemingly innocuous statements he made—that a conductor should take artistic responsibility and that players should be faithful to every note on the score—were reframed as bourgeois and counterrevolutionary.⁶¹ He was publicly humiliated, removed from his position, and demoted to guarding bicycles outside the very theater in which his orchestra performed. The Party framed this as an act of mercy, presenting it under the logic of giving rightists a chance to reform.⁶²

His replacement, Cao Peng, was chosen for not musical distinction but ideological reliability. In a 1975 article in *Liberation Daily*, Cao publicly condemned the tendency to treat Western music as the ultimate standard of artistic achievement, warning that "there is a capitalist art kingdom in most of the players' heads, which has to be destroyed in order to better reflect the rich life of our great times."⁶³ Yet, in a striking reversal after the Cultural Revolution ended, the same Cao Peng told reporters in 1986 that due to the Cultural Revolution, "there were many music illiterates" and that the orchestra therefore had a responsibility to bring the knowledge of

Western symphonic music back to the people.⁶⁴ Scholar Luo Mengyu notes that this shift is less a reflection of Cao's personal convictions than of the system itself: there was simply no room for individuals to disagree with the Party, and the safest strategy for self-preservation was to position oneself firmly within the majority, with enough flexibility to change direction whenever the Party did.⁶⁵ Cao's trajectory, in this light, is not so much a story of hypocrisy as it is a portrait of survival within a system that made genuine individual conviction all but impossible.

Beyond criticizing Western influence, nationalization also entailed the creation of a unified national sound. This was particularly important on the ethnic front, as the territory of China includes a staggering level of ethnic diversity that the state struggled to manage.⁶⁶ The CCP's solution was to contain that diversity within just 56 officially recognized "nationalities" (*minzu*). By fixing the number of recognized minorities, the state could more easily define, regulate, and ultimately absorb their cultural identities into a single national narrative. Part of this project was the instrumentalizing of ethnic music. Rather than allowing minority musical traditions to exist on their own terms, the Party systematically collected, reworked, and redeployed them so that ethnic music could be made to serve the socialist state's vision of a harmonious, unified China. This approach enabled the Party to co-opt ethnic minorities into the state's conception of the Chinese nation.⁶⁷ By reforming familiar minority musical forms into revolutionary compositions, the CCP projected an image of ethnic unity while simultaneously reinforcing centralized political authority.

The song anthology *New Songs of the Battlefield* exemplifies this strategy, as it includes numerous reworked songs that blend ethnic elements with revolutionary ideology.⁶⁸ Such reworkings were not accidents and creations with explicit ideological intentions. Based on interviews conducted during her fieldwork, ethnomusicologist Lei Ouyang Bryant discovered that composers and editors in Beijing frequently revised or entirely reshaped songs without consulting the original musicians, revealing the highly centralized and supervised nature of ethnic musical representation.⁶⁹ One such song from the anthology is "Red Guards on the Grasslands Have Met Chairman Mao," which illustrates how reformed songs employed ethnic imagery while firmly centering Maoist ideology.⁷⁰ Its lyrics, instrumentation, and performance draw upon symbols widely associated with the Mongols. References to the "grasslands" function as a cultural and geographic marker, as heard in the opening line: "We are the Red Guards of Chairman Mao, / we come to Tiananmen from the grasslands."⁷¹ Imagery of vast open spaces

and collective enthusiasm reinforces a romanticized vision of ethnic identity while also aligning with revolutionary devotion. The lyrics repeatedly reinforce this loyalty, describing Mao as “the red sun that will never set” and proclaiming that “the people of the grasslands are loyal to you.” Recorded versions of the song include the *erhu*, a two-stringed instrument historically linked to northern ethnic groups.⁷² They also feature percussive effects that imitate galloping horse hooves, an image commonly used to represent Mongolian culture.⁷³ These familiar ethnic symbols allowed listeners to immediately associate the song with Mongolian identity, a calculated incorporation that reveals the limits of Mao’s reform: ethnic diversity was acknowledged only when tightly controlled, and even then, it remained subordinate to the political demand for loyalty to Mao and the socialist state.

The nationalization of music could also entail the mixing of multiple regional musical traditions. Consider, for example, the transformation of the Jinan Military Region Vanguard Song and Dance Ensemble. As Liu Fengjin recounts in a 1961 *Guangming Daily* article, the ensemble spent three years deliberating before undertaking in 1956 a wholesale transformation from a Western-style Han orchestra into a “Chinese folk orchestra” (*minzu guanxian yuedui*).⁷⁴ Liu lists the instruments incorporated into the reformed ensemble: a reformed *liuqin* from Shandong, a *yunluo*, a *suona*, Miao ceremonial drums from Guizhou, a *da guan suona* from the Northeast, and percussion and plucked instruments from Sichuan, Yunnan, and Xinjiang. Liu also records that musicians who had trained on Western instruments were reassigned to ethnic equivalents: violinists were retrained to play the *erhu*, wind players were redirected to the *dizi*, *sheng*, and *suona*. Similarly, the repertoire programmed for the new orchestra ranged from Shandong folk tunes and Shanxi pieces to Inner Mongolian melodies and Shanbei revolutionary songs.⁷⁵ The joining together of instruments and repertoire from across China symbolized the unity of a diverse nation bound together under a single socialist identity. Thus, “nationalization” (*minzuhua*) as a process encompassed not only the standardization of ethnic music but also the absorption and transformation of regional variation into a cohesive whole. The goal was to construct a unitary national identity through musical production.⁷⁶

It is worth noting that this process of nationalization did not end with the Mao era; instead, it has become increasingly embedded in Chinese institutional life in the decades since. As Zhang Wenzhuo has argued, the logic of music standardization persisted well into the post-Mao period through the national school curriculum. Analyzing 18 government-designed K-9

music textbooks published by the People's Education Press, Zhang found that of the 67 ethnic music pieces included, a striking 75% were adapted or newly composed rather than drawn from authentic traditional sources; 85% of the ethnic pieces carried political themes emphasizing national unity, praise for the CCP, and patriotism rather than genuine ethnic cultural values.⁷⁷ What began under Mao as a project of conscripting ethnic musical traditions into a socialist nationalist framework had ossified in the post-Mao era into institutionalized curriculum.

Popularization

Once music had been revolutionized and nationalized, the final step was to popularize. What this entailed was embedding music into the proletariat's daily life through the integration of red songs into schools and frequent performances at public places.

Political music was embedded into citizens' lives from an early age. The afterword of a 1972 elementary school music textbook from Zhejiang Province lays bare the political purpose of music education. As written in the textbook's stated pedagogical objectives:

1. Recognize that Chairman Mao is the great savior of the revolutionary people and that the Chinese Communist Party [...] Cultivate feelings of love and devotion toward Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party.
2. Understand that the question of whom one serves is a fundamental and principled question. Establish the conviction to serve [...] love [...] and learn from the workers, peasants, and soldiers.
3. Understand that class, class contradictions, and class struggle still exist in socialist society [...] distinguish clearly between enemy, ally, and friend; and heighten awareness of class struggle, line struggle, and continuous revolution.
4. See clearly the aggressive nature of imperialism and social-imperialism; strengthen the concept of war preparedness; remain vigilant; defend the motherland; oppose imperialism and revisionism; and dedicate oneself to world revolution.⁷⁸

What the afterword reveals is a calculated effort to inculcate a complete ideological identity in children before they are old enough to question it. The four mandates follow a calculated arc: from personal devotion to Mao as an emotional reflex, to identity defined entirely through service to the revolutionary class, to the cultivation of perpetual class hatred as a psychological state, and finally to self-identification as a soldier in a global revolutionary struggle. None of these four requirements ask children to think. But they ask them to serve, to

remember, and to fight. In short, the classroom was, first and foremost, a site of ideological indoctrination for the next generation of socialist citizens.

This emphasis on the pedagogical also finds expression in the publication of children's music. An illustrative example would be the song "Mao Zedong Is the Great Savior of the People," prescribed in the national school curriculum. Its lyrics read: "The stars in the sky shine bright, / Each one points to Chairman Mao. / Each one points to the North Star, / Our beloved leader Chairman Mao. / You are the great savior of the people."⁷⁹ Calling back to the first pedagogical objective from above, this song cultivates feelings of love and devotion toward Chairman Mao by rendering that devotion as not political obligation but natural, cosmic truth. The comparison of Mao to the North Star positions him as the singular, unwavering guide of the socialist future, while the repetitive structure of the lyrics mirrors the rote quality of religious incantation, designed to be absorbed rather than analyzed. Significantly, such songs were not confined to the classroom alone. The same song also appeared in mass circulation anthologies such as the *Collection of Children's Songs* published in 1972.⁸⁰ This suggests that the ideological conditioning initiated in school was deliberately reinforced in the domestic sphere as well. By embedding his personality cult into children's music, the CCP ensured that reverence for Mao was not simply taught but internalized subconsciously from the earliest age.

Anthems and patriotic songs permeated daily life through loudspeakers on streets and in schools. They were sung during work. Sheet music was even printed on postage stamps. The goal was to make music omnipresent, embedding political values and revolutionary consciousness directly into the national psyche.⁸¹ Each song taught to the public was standardized in performance, ensuring that every rendition was a replica rather than an interpretation of the original, keeping both the message clear and the government in a position of cultural authority.⁸² The process of "massification," as Elena Meyer-Clement terms it, was thus not simply about reaching a wide audience but about actively creating a unified mass subject through collective sonic experience.⁸³ Musician Mao Yurun recalls the atmosphere of enforced ideological conformity that pervaded daily life, describing how they held "two sessions of studying Mao's works every day," one in the morning called "receiving instructions" and one in the evening called "submitting reports," all conducted beneath a huge portrait of Mao. Sessions were led not by musicians or intellectuals but by a worker, with the ideological premise being that his or her proletarian origins meant his reading would yield better results in understanding

the essence of Mao's works, even though he or she could not understand more than half of what was printed.⁸⁴

The most expansive institutional expression of this strategy was the New Folksong Movement (1958-1959), launched in conjunction with the Great Leap Forward. As Mark McConaghy demonstrates, the movement constructed an elaborate media network through which folksongs were collected from laborers across the country; subjected to editorial "polishing" by party cadres at every administrative level; and then disseminated through newspapers, literary journals, and radio.⁸⁵ A 1959 monograph by Tian Ying, published by the Shanghai Literary Arts Publishing House, vividly captures the scale of the campaign: folksong performances took place in cooperative canteens, on roadsides, and at factory floors, while poems and songs were written on walls, bamboo strips, and blackboards at the intersections of village thoroughfares, creating what Tian Ying called "poetry steles" (*shibei*), "folksong steles" (*minggebei*), "bamboo slip poetry" (*zhuqianshi*), and "wall poetry" (*qiangtoushi*).⁸⁶ Crucially, however, this process was never truly spontaneous: the *People's Daily* framed the outpouring of song as a grassroots eruption of socialist enthusiasm, yet cadres in provinces like Yunnan were explicitly instructed to distribute paper to workers and peasants and mobilize them to write songs, a top-down orchestration concealed beneath the rhetoric of organic mass creativity.⁸⁷

In an original interview conducted with Mr. You Yongqing, a former peasant who later worked in a mining factory in the 1960s, he recalled the pervasiveness of organized musical performance in his workplace:

Back then in the factory, there were often performance gatherings. Those who liked to sing would go up. At that time there was none of the Western music you have today, only red songs. Not everyone was forced to perform, but we were all required to attend. There were many of these red song performances.⁸⁸

You's recollection captures the precise mechanism by which massification operated in practice. The distinction he draws is revealing: not everyone was forced to perform, but attendance was mandatory. This asymmetry was a mechanism of control, ensuring universal exposure while maintaining the appearance of individual choice. No one could opt out of the revolutionary soundscape; they could only choose the degree of their visible enthusiasm within it. Popularization had succeeded not merely in distributing

revolutionary music but in eliminating the very horizon against which it might have been questioned or resisted.

Together, these mechanisms reveal that the popularization of revolutionary music was, to borrow McConaghy's words, engineered to move "bodies in specific ways," unifying consciousness while saturating every corner of daily life, ensuring that the revolutionary soundscape became not merely omnipresent but, for many, the only world they had ever known.⁸⁹

Legacy and Strategic Success

Having examined the CCP's motivations and methods in reshaping Chinese music in the preceding paragraphs, this final section turns to consider the enduring impact and significance of this process. Many of those who lived through this history remain alive today, and their testimony offers a rare ground-level portrait of how deeply revolutionary music penetrated the lives of ordinary people.

An oral history interview conducted by the University of Pittsburgh's East Asian Library reminds us that different people can have strikingly different experiences of the same history, in this case the Cultural Revolution. The interviewee recounted:

My mom told me that although she went 'down to the countryside,' when she looks back on that time period now, she has good memories. These days, she and the classmates with whom she went down to the countryside often get on WeChat and sing songs from the Cultural Revolution era. During holidays, they take turns singing songs from those times. So, she really misses it. My teacher and my mom were born in the same year, but my teacher went to college later on. He said that in 1976, he was in a collective household, and when they heard the news that Mao had died, they went out and bought meat and wine to celebrate, saying 'our future is taking a turn for the better.'⁹⁰

The two contrasting responses captured in this single interview reveal the deeply uneven legacy of revolutionary music. Among those who embraced it, the songs were never questioned or criticized. They were sung, performed, taught to younger generations, and genuinely loved. This is perhaps the most telling measure of the CCP's success in reforming music. After all, the most effective form of ideological control is one in which those being controlled never recognize the mechanism as a form of control but instead embrace it with affection, nostalgia, and gratitude.

This lasting emotional attachment is further substantiated by the empirical research of ethnomusicologist Lei Ouyang Bryant. Her survey of five hundred Chinese respondents across four generational cohorts offers compelling statistical evidence of revolutionary music's enduring hold. Bryant divided her respondents into four groups based on their relationship to the Cultural Revolution: the reform generation, the Cultural Revolution generation, the socialist generation, and the pre-socialist generation. In terms of recognition, the Cultural Revolution generation and the socialist generation demonstrated the highest rates of familiarity, with 35% and 39%, respectively, reporting that they "know" the songs, and 34% and 27% being able to "know well / can sing" them. These figures are significantly higher than those of the reform generation, who came of age after the revolution and had little direct exposure.⁹¹ When asked how the music and lyrics made them feel, the dominant responses across all generations were "nostalgic" and "encouraging." For music specifically, the pre-socialist generation reported the highest nostalgia at 57%, while the Cultural Revolution generation and socialist generation clustered around 42–45%. Crucially, negative responses like "sad," "angry," or "bitter" were minimal across all groups. In Bryant's general attitudes survey, positive responses were overwhelming: 60% of the Cultural Revolution generation and 57% of the reform generation reported positive feelings, compared to only 2% and 7% negative, respectively.⁹²

The enduring emotional power of revolutionary music also finds vivid expression in qualitative sources, here the testimony of Mr. Lu Xiao, a soldier in the navy in Hebei province in the 1960s, whom I interviewed in Beijing during fieldwork conducted for this paper. His account makes clear that within the military, revolutionary music was a structural feature of daily life. Lu recalls that singing was woven into virtually every part of the soldier's routine: "We sang during morning exercises, before and after meals, and especially during political study sessions. Some songs were repeated several times a day, like 'The East is Red' and 'Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman.' It was not really voluntary; it was kind of part of the system, and everyone had to participate." Beyond mere performance, the songs functioned as a form of political declaration. During political study sessions, soldiers were required to not only sing but memorize the lyrics and demonstrate comprehension of their meaning. It is a process Lu describes as inseparable from expressing loyalty to Mao and the Party, where the act of singing itself constituted a form of ideological affirmation.⁹³

Music also served a powerful social function within the unit. Lu notes that collective singing generated a strong sense of cohesion and shared identity, particularly during grueling periods of training when songs served to lift morale and reinforce collective consciousness. Units held regular artistic performances and inter-company singing competitions, and soldiers who excelled as performers earned recognition and were sometimes selected for larger productions. Lu recalls that passages from Mao's *Little Red Book* were set to music for soldiers to sing. As he puts it, "the songs are like reciting the quotations." This offers a striking firsthand confirmation of the quotation song genre analyzed earlier in this paper, demonstrating how thoroughly that form had penetrated even military life. Reflecting on these songs today, Lu acknowledges their lasting melodic power while situating them within their broader context. For his generation, singing was never merely a musical act but an expression of the collective life that defined existence under Communism.⁹⁴

If Mr. You Yongqing and Mr. Lu Xiao offer the perspectives of a peasant and a soldier, respectively, Mrs. Yan Fenghua furnishes the voice of a factory worker at a fireworks manufacturing plant in 1950s Beijing. Together, they complete a triptych of the Maoist proletariat—peasant, soldier, and worker—the three classes Mao designated as the primary carriers of revolutionary culture. Yan's relationship with revolutionary songs was never passive; rather, she was an enthusiastic amateur performer who not only sang these songs at home and in daily life but regularly took to the stage during her factory's artistic performances. Her account offers a rare ground-level portrait of how deeply the CCP's musical campaigns inspire genuine enthusiasm.⁹⁵

When asked what songs she sang during that era, Yan recalled that political songs were ubiquitous and collectively beloved: "Everyone loved to sing these songs back then. I often performed on stage, and I knew every one of Chairman Mao's songs by heart. Every time I sang them, I thought of Chairman Mao and remembered my time at the factory." She further noted that certain songs achieved near-universal reach, with songs such as "China Has a Red Sun Chairman Mao" known by virtually everyone. Crucially, she emphasized that this was not mere compliance but rooted in genuine reverence: "We sang these songs because we truly admired Mao Zedong. In our view, only he could liberate New China and liberate the people." The factory itself actively encouraged this participation, and performing in artistic productions was considered an honor. The emotional depth behind this participation becomes even clearer when

Yan explains why these songs resonated so strongly: “People loved these songs because Mao Zedong founded New China and made sure everyone had food to eat and clothes to wear. Songs like “Socialism Is Good and Resist America” and “Aid Korea”—we all knew them, and singing them brought a sense of comfort and steadiness.” For her generation, songs were inseparable from Mao’s material legacy. This testimony reveals the mechanism by which the CCP’s music campaigns achieved their ideological aim: the songs were not experienced as propaganda but as expressions of sincere gratitude, binding political loyalty to personal memory and material well-being.⁹⁶

Equally telling is Yan’s discussion of how these songs were transmitted and how they persist today. Yan described a systematic process of cultural education that began in childhood: teachers introduced revolutionary songs in school from a young age, and public performance reinforced what was learned in the classroom. Decades later, this early imprinting has proven remarkably durable. While she acknowledges that the songs are sung somewhat less frequently now, she notes that those over age fifty continue to gather voluntarily in parks to sing them and take to the streets during holidays to perform the melodies of that era. For Yan herself, the songs remain a living memorial: “Whenever I hear these songs, I think of Chairman Mao. These songs are the deepest remembrance our generation has of that era.” What began as a state-directed campaign has, in the memories of those who lived it, become something far more personal. That it became the soundtrack to their lives is proof of just how completely music has fulfilled its intended purpose.⁹⁷

None of the interviewees experienced revolutionary songs as an imposition from above. They experienced them as the natural soundtrack of their lives, as expressions of genuine feeling, as the medium through which they understood their place in history. This is precisely what made music so uniquely powerful as a form of ideological control. A recent wave of scholarship has emphasized how the CCP constructed an elaborate infrastructure of mass communication to spread its ideology beyond music alone. For example, historian John Alekna demonstrates that radio was indispensable to the early PRC’s project of governance and ideological control, serving not merely as a tool of propaganda but also as a tool of governance. Through mandatory mass radio meetings at factories, schools, and neighborhood stations, enforced communal listening sessions overseen by cadres, and loudspeakers strung across streets and public spaces, the Party ensured that its messages reached virtually every corner of society.⁹⁸ These

mechanisms reveal that the popularization of revolutionary music was engineered to move bodies, unify consciousness, and, as historian Li Jie has shown in her study of revolutionary echoes, physically interrupt daily life through the ubiquitous loudspeaker systems installed at work units across the country.⁹⁹

Yet for all its reach, radio remained dependent on infrastructure, it required receivers, loudspeakers, cadre-overseers, and institutional enforcement to function. Music required none of these. A song needed no device to transmit and no official to supervise its reception; it moved through the human voice, through children learning from teachers, through workers singing together on the factory floor. Unlike a newspaper editorial or a radio broadcast, which announce themselves as information and can therefore be received with some degree of critical distance, a song enters through a different register entirely. It works through melody, repetition, and collective performance; it binds ideology to emotion, to memory, to the body itself. By the time a person has sung the same song hundreds of times, in school, at work, during exercises, at political study sessions, the line between the song's message and one's own feelings has dissolved entirely. It is this seamlessness and insidiousness that made revolutionary music not merely an instrument of the CCP's propaganda apparatus but its most enduring one.

Conclusion

From the 1940s until the present, music and artistic expression in China have remained subject to varying degrees of political control. This paper has argued that revolutionary music under Maoist China was transformed into a carefully engineered instrument of political mobilization and ideological indoctrination, one that, over time, left little room for genuine artistic autonomy. Yet the full picture is more complicated than a simple story of top-down control and mass compliance. As this paper has shown, the CCP's campaign to eliminate yellow music and other forms of politically undesirable expression was, at the operational level, markedly incomplete. People continued to listen to yellow music in private spaces, markets quietly sustained demand for banned recordings, and audiences sometimes openly resisted revolutionary performances. The machinery of cultural control was powerful, but it was never total.

And yet the interviews conducted for this paper reveal something that mere operational metrics cannot capture: the most remarkable measure of the CCP's success was not behavioral

compliance but affective internalization. Those who lived through the musical campaigns of the Mao era do not remember them as coercion. They remember them with warmth, gratitude, and pride. This seeming contradiction between the failure to eliminate dissent in everyday life and the success of binding revolutionary ideology to emotional identity is perhaps the central finding of this paper. The CCP did not need to eradicate yellow music entirely to win the deeper battle. It needed only to ensure that revolutionary songs became inseparable from people's sense of self, their understanding of history, and their experience of collective life. That it achieved this even among those who, in quieter moments, continued to hum a banned melody or enjoy Western classical music, speaks to the remarkable sophistication of music as an ideological instrument.

Though the landscape is shifting, Chinese music today is no longer as overtly restrictive as it was during the Mao era, yet this legacy of this control did not end. In China today, red songs continue to feature prominently in school singing competitions, art entrance examinations, and public workplaces. The author has experienced this firsthand: from elementary school through secondary school, revolutionary songs were sung at official functions, performed without full understanding of their political origins or purpose. That these songs can simultaneously carry genuine personal meaning and serve as instruments of state ideology is perhaps the most enduring testament to how completely the CCP's musical campaigns succeeded.

This aesthetic conservatism has arguably left Chinese popular music comparatively underdeveloped relative to that of other Asian countries or to the West. The decades-long interruption of organic artistic development left a gap that has proven difficult to close. At the same time, there is reason for cautious optimism. The younger generation of Chinese artists, shaped by internet culture and international education, is beginning to reclaim both foreign musical influences and China's own pre-revolutionary indigenous traditions, in this case not the politically manufactured folk tunes of the Maoist era, but the genuine richness of ancient China's musical heritage. Whether this creative awakening can be sustained within a political system that continues to regulate artistic expression remains to be seen. The relationship between music and politics in China is far from resolved, and as a new generation of Chinese artists pushes against its boundaries, one question lingers: will the music of the future finally belong to the people who sing it, or will it continue to serve those who govern them?

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⁶⁷ Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Arts in China: The New Politics of Culture*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

⁶⁸ Bryant, "Music, Memory, and Nostalgia," 165.

⁶⁹ Bryant, "Flowers on the Battlefield," 108.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷² "Red Guards From the Grassland See Chairman Mao," YouTube video, posted by Hwasong, June 3, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgNuBu2wef8>.

⁷³ Bryant, "Flowers on the Battlefield," 101.

⁷⁴ Fengjin Liu, "The Path Taken by an Ethnic Orchestra in the Process of Nationalization," *Guangming Ribao*, March 18, 1961, 67.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁶ The term *Minzuhua* is notably slippery in its meaning. *Minzu* can refer simultaneously to the Chinese nation as a whole, to ethnic nationality, and to "the people" in a more general sense, making it difficult to pin down a single stable translation. In practice, the policy operated on all of these registers at once—asserting a distinctly Chinese national character in music while also incorporating and standardizing the folk and ethnic traditions of various regional and minority groups, all in service of a unified revolutionary culture.

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- ⁷⁷ Wenzhuo Zhang, "Multicultural Ethnic Music Education in Communist China," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 19, no. 3 (2017): 65–84.
- ⁷⁸ *The Musical Component of Revolutionary Literature and Art: Zhejiang Province Elementary School Textbook* (Zhejiang: May 1972), 301.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 296.
- ⁸⁰ Hunan Revolutionary Songs Collection Group, *A Collection of Children's Songs* (Hunan People's Publishing House, 1972), 1.
- ⁸¹ Wing-Wah Law and Wai-Chung Ho, "Values, Music and Education in China," *Music Education Research* 6, no. 2 (2004): 153; Margaret Dunleavy, "Critically Examine Chinese Patriotic Music During the Cultural Revolution," 3.
- ⁸² Dunleavy, "Critically Examine Chinese Patriotic Music," 3; Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Arty in China: The New Politics of Culture* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 161.
- ⁸³ Elena Meyer-Clement, *Party Hegemony and Entrepreneurial Power in China: Institutional Change in the Film and Music Industries* (2016), 48.
- ⁸⁴ Yurun Mao, "Music under Mao, Its Background and Aftermath," *Asian Music* 22, no. 2 (1991): 114.
- ⁸⁵ Mark McConaghy, "Where You Labor Is Where You Sing: The New Folksong Movement of 1958 and the Fissured Mediascape of Maoist China," *Modern China* 47, no. 5 (2021): 488–489.
- ⁸⁶ Ying Tian, *The Chinese Folksong Movement of 1958* (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1978 [1959]), 16.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 485–486.
- ⁸⁸ Yongqing You, interview by author, Beijing, March 2026.
- ⁸⁹ McConaghy, "Where You Labor Is Where You Sing," 482.
- ⁹⁰ Haihui Zhang, "Two People Born in the Same Year Have Completely Opposite Feelings about the Cultural Revolution," interview, University of Pittsburgh East Asian Library, January 15, 2016.
- ⁹¹ Bryant, "Music, Memory, and Nostalgia," 156–160.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, 158.
- ⁹³ Xiao Lu, interview by author. Beijing, March 2026.
- ⁹⁴ Lu, interview by author.
- ⁹⁵ Fenghua Yan, interview by author, Beijing, March 2026.
- ⁹⁶ Yan, interview by author.
- ⁹⁷ Yan, interview by author.
- ⁹⁸ John Alekna, *Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024), 194.
- ⁹⁹ Jie Li, "Revolutionary Echoes: Radios and Loudspeakers in the Mao Era," *Twentieth Century China* (2020).

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