Chapter 4
Popular Songs and Social Change: East Meets West in Shanghai, China

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ABSTRACT

This Chapter aims to present a review of the research literature on music information seeking and its application to popular songs and social change, with particular reference to Shanghai. Owing to its history as an immigrant city with strong foreign influence, it has developed a unique culture that combines West and East. The chapter aims to present how the history of popular songs in Shanghai shows how individual and collective identities have been constructed in interaction with contending local, national and international forces and influences. In a historical analysis, four areas are discussed in regard to music information needs: (1) a literature review on the East-West cultural exchange, (2) an examination of the expression of China’s national humiliations, (3) an exploration of how cultural hegemony is exercised through the use of the Shanghainese dialect to promote Shanghai’s popular songs in the local context, and (4) how Western and Asian popular songs have been promoted by and incorporated into Shanghai’s contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

Even though music can be seen as a universal language and a basic human function, popular music and songs are not created in a vacuum but, rather, in the contexts of their time. Anthropologists, cultural theorists, and sociologists, from entirely different academic disciplines, have regarded recorded music as sites of shared experience within our collective cultural memory and identity (Connell & Gibson, 2003; Leonard, 2007). The propositions that humans are innately social beings and that music is an essential part of life (Blacking, 1976; Dissanayake, 2006) underpin this chapter. As Nettl (2005) remarked, songs, and music in general, reflect culture. Music is a powerful tool that often foreshadows future cultural shifts. This chapter will add to current knowledge about songs as a form of meaning-making,

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communication, and culture, building on the precept that music is understood more fully if seen as a cultural and social practice (Eyerman, 2002; Middleton, 2003). The work of Lawrence Grossberg (1996) on meaning, production, and consumption, particularly in the treatment of affect in popular music, has argued that individuals and audiences interact with texts according to their particular sensibilities. Texts are seen as a type of “contested terrain” (Grossberg, 1986, pp. 67–68), and the nexus between the concepts of culture, in general, as text and of culture grounded in political ideology (Grossberg, 1996). In such a view, “culture is the struggle over meaning, a struggle that takes place over and within the sign” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 157). As Storey (1996) also explained, culture in this sense is “a terrain of conflict and contestation” and is “a key site for the production and reproduction of the social relations of everyday life” (p. 2).

Popular music is thus understood as a field in which different social forces are active in the production of cultural goods. Numerous cultural and sociological studies on music in Western (particularly Anglo-American) societies have shown, as Norris (1989) has pointed out, that cultural politics can affect musical compositions, which in turn can reflect their political and social contexts. Popular music, as Adorno (1973) has contended, can operate as a mixed metaphor of “social cement” in the human world (also see Storey, 2009, p. 67). For Frith (1996), popular music can be understood not only through the lens of political economy but also through technological developments and sociocultural changes. One of the most challenging questions that has resulted from the application of Bourdieu’s (1983) theory of cultural capital is whether cultural goods are evaluated differently in different national contexts (Holt, 1997; Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Thevenot, 2000).

Popular songs are central to modern culture, and they can facilitate social change. A song like “We Shall Overcome” can help promote social movements and cultural change (Eyerman, 2002; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). In Western countries, many popular singers and artists (such as Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and James Brown) have claimed to be agents of social change through music and have raised awareness of particular situations and causes. Bob Marley was reggae’s foremost practitioner and he used reggae as a medium to bring social and political change to the world stage. The movie “Selma” (2014) recalls how songs were important to American civil rights marches. The song “Glory” on the Selma soundtrack instantly became a rallying anthem for social justice. On February 22, 2015, rapper Common and John Legend, who wrote (with Che Smith) and performed the song, won the Oscar for Original Song at the 87th Annual Academy Awards. During their acceptance speech, Common explained how words, music, and protest came together during the Civil Rights Movement, and Legend compared the number of black men incarcerated in the U.S. today with the number of men in slavery in the mid-1800s. Songs serve to unify groups of people and to help them express common emotions when defining a group’s identity and solidarity. Certain songs become “anthems” for generations, such as Bob Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind” (1962) and John Lennon’s “Imagine” (1971). Existing studies on popular music and social change, however, draw mainly on realities and perspectives from Western societies. How this relationship between popular music and social changes differs in non-Western social contexts and cultures, such as China, is under-researched and warrants attention.

**MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER**

As a historical analysis, this chapter will trace the development of popular songs in Shanghai in response to socio-political changes since the nineteenth century (How popular songs have served as a cause of