The 12 Girls Band: Traditions, Gender, Globalization, and (Inter)national Identity

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Chinese music has gone through dramatic changes in the past century in connection with modernization. Not only has the West influenced the nation’s overall art-music soundscape, but traditional Chinese music has also undergone significant transformations. Yet, although westernization and professionalization proved themselves especially important during much of the 20th century, it has been commercialization, commodification, and globalization that have exerted increasing influence since 2001. One example of the stylistic hybridity inspired by these last forces is a group known as the 12 Girls Band—a techno/rock/ethnic fusion Chinese instrumental music ensemble. With 12 Girls the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC) has entered the global music scene of the 21st century.

Consider these facts: the Band’s album *Eastern Energy*, released on August 17, 2004, in the United States, was ranked 62nd on *Billboard*’s 200 chart 2 weeks later (on September 3), the highest debut ranking achieved by an Asian artist or ensemble in the history of that poll. On the World Music chart, the album lingered for more than 15 weeks, during which it ranked No. 1 most of the time. Released in June 2007, *Shanghai* ranked 50th on *Billboard*’s Top Heatseekers chart; on the World Music chart it stayed for 10 weeks, ranking 7th at the highest and 15th at the lowest. It is in Japan, however, that the group has claimed its greatest successes to date. *Beautiful Energy*, released in that country in July 2003, remained at the top of the Nipponese chart for 30 weeks and sold more than 2 million copies; on August 18, 2004, it also reached first place on the Japanese *Oricon* music chart and stayed there for more than 10 weeks (Momphard 2004). As a consequence the 12 Girls Band was named “International Artist of the Year” at Japan’s 2004 Golden Disc Award ceremonies; past recipients of this last honor include Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, and Madonna (Lam 2004).

At the same time, the group’s reception in the PRC has been mixed (Chen 2004; Zhang 2005). Recognizing its commercial success, some Mainland critics have proclaimed the Band the messiah of Chinese instrumental ensembles (e.g., Cheng 2004; Yao 2004), whereas others have questioned its authenticity, condemning the ensemble for damaging China’s complex and often explicitly politicized musical traditions (e.g., Li 2005; Sun 2004; Yu 2005).
The 12 Girls Band’s earnings, the music it plays, and its mixed reception at home (and, to a lesser extent, abroad) exemplify important aspects of the globalization of popular music as well as the commercialization and popularization of ethnic music in Western and non-Western societies alike. Above all, the Band’s reception within the PRC illuminates what is—or is not—perceived to be Chinese about the ensemble itself and others like it. Why has the 12 Girls Band been perceived so differently at home and abroad in terms of authenticity? What roles have nationality (which, in this case, is often linked with tradition as well as politics) and gender played in the reception to date of the Band’s local and global identities? Finally, how has globalization acted both as a homogenous and as a heterogeneous force in the marketization and commodification of an ethnic/national ensemble?

The present article attempts to provide a reading of an ethnic ensemble’s emergence into the international pop-music scene,6 evaluating its origin, commodification, and performance style as well as examining the influence and reception of national musical traditions and innovations insofar as they involve the globalization of Chineseness within today’s increasingly internationalized pop-music marketplace. In our opinion, the 12 Girls Band successfully projects an image of gendered otherness that panders particularly to the global audience’s cravings for exotic entertainment, even as it creates controversial new and interactive forms of traditional, national, and popular Chinese music within the PRC. As an international commodity, the Band represents an alternative form of manufactured musical colonialism within a global late-capitalist economy. As a musical ensemble, the Band’s style and look strengthen certain notions of Chineseness even as it challenges these notions by imposing upon them a variety of local and global stereotypes and paradigms. In many ways, the Band embodies virtually every issue associated with female ethnic instrumental ensembles inside China, as well as a great many issues associated with the commodification of popular music characteristic of the 21st-century’s increasingly globalized marketplace. Its reception also exemplifies ways of understanding musical preferences in terms of ideological constructs and the purposes to which they are put (Sorce Keller 2001, 2007). Above all, we argue for the importance of examining groups such as 12 Girls from multiple perspectives. We consider tradition, gender, commodification, and national/international identities important, and we seek to unravel the various ways in which these forces participate in the formation, perception, reception, development, and transformation of ethnic music in traditional societies as well as within the hegemony of the global popular music market.

Before we begin, however, a word of caution: throughout the present article we often speak of local and global in contradistinction to each other. These terms, especially when considered culturally rather than economically, have
sometimes been used to suggest a false dichotomy. As Anne-Marie Broudehoux has explained, they are often understood to stand for “inalienable parts of the same [cultural] process” (2004, 7). In a great many places throughout the present article, however, we construe these terms narrowly and economically rather than more broadly and politically or culturally. Although economic globalization undoubtedly contributes to the reconstruction of local cultural identities, multinational corporations nevertheless continue to create ever more uniform—and uniformly profitable—markets and marketing strategies. In part because the most successfully commodified popular music (in the form of digital recordings) is especially easy to move internationally, today’s entertainment industry strives ever more energetically—and successfully—toward an increasingly global dissemination of increasingly homogenized musical products which nonetheless result in a more heterogeneous market in terms of consumer choices.

At the same time, those individuals who receive the 12 Girls Band primarily as an ethnic instrumental ensemble rather than yet another vehicle for Westernized entertainment (whether within the PRC or outside that nation’s borders), are confronted—perhaps unpleasantly—by what Marcello Sorce Keller calls “creative misunderstanding.” By “making [local] music functional to forms of behavior which it was not originally intended,” the Band and its organizers have introduced (and thereby enforced) a Westernized brand of cultural recontextualization to Asian audiences (Sorce Keller 2007, 98). Whether the Band and other globalized Chinese ensembles will triumph over ethnically local objections or continue to stimulate them remains to be seen (see Featherstone 1993). During 2007–2008, the Band was acknowledged by PRC officials through its use in commercials for CCTV, the PRC’s multichannel television network, and for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Selling 12 Girls Worldwide: Creation and Commodification

The 12 Girls Band began as the brainchild of Wang Xiaojing, who has also promoted Cui Jian and other Asian pop stars (Chen 2004). During the 1990s, Wang looked for a way to market Chinese instrumental music internationally. Because of the language barrier separating China from the West, Wang considered it unlikely that Chinese rock or folk performers would ever take their seats, unaided, “on stage at the Grammy awards.” Only a blend of Chinese and Western instrumental music might provide “that kind of opportunity” (Wang 2004, 81), primarily because few Westerners would be able to understand Mandarin lyrics. In effect, Wang accepted the axiom, postulated at the very end of the 20th century by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, that an “age of globalization is”—must be—one of “universal contagion” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 136; italics added). And accessibility.
In June 2001, Wang auditioned some 4,000 female instrumentalists at major music schools throughout the PRC. The finalists consisted of 13 young, conventionally attractive, Chinese performers, each of them specializing in one or more of the following instruments: the *erhu* (a two-stringed fiddle), the *pipa* (a four-stringed lute with a pear-shaped body), the *dizi* (a bamboo flute), the *guzheng* (a zither with movable bridges), and the *yangqin* (a hammered dulcimer).\(^8\) A few Band members also play less familiar instruments associated with China’s minority peoples and autonomous regions. The 12 Girls’ repertory includes music—some of it written for the ensemble, some of it arranged from preexisting works, and all of it supported by Western bass, drum, and rhythm tracks—that foregrounds its Chinese (and perhaps, especially for Western audiences, its more exotic) instruments. Throughout July, August, and September 2001, Band members not only rehearsed as conventional musicians, but were trained by Wang to perform as a group and while standing up, in contradistinction to classical solo and seated modes of Chinese instrumental performance.

On October 5, 2001, the Band’s “Fascinating Concert” debut took place in Beijing. Instead of creating a sensation (Zhang 2005), the ensemble was initially received as yet another *xinminyue* (new national music) group: one in a series of similar organizations that began to emerge as early as 1999 and continue to perform pastiches of pop sounds and Chinese folk songs (Yao 2004). Outside the PRC, and especially in Japan, the Band quickly achieved stardom—thanks largely to Wang’s global vision of syncretism: one that created a musically accessible and globally marketable Chinese entertainment for the popular music industry.

As soon as the Band was organized, in fact, Wang began looking for ways to tap into international and especially Western markets. Although the Band also signed a contract with Warner China in February 2002, it was Platia Entertainment, a Japanese company that put the ensemble on the global pop-music map—and, perhaps, encouraged Wang and his performers to accommodate Japanese musical preferences. Founded by Kazuma Tomoto, who left Warner China to establish his own company, Platia chose 12 Girls as its first product (Li 2004, 82). Tomoto decided to spend a considerable amount of money on advance advertising, a familiar but risky tactic practiced throughout the pop-music industry.\(^9\) The money Platia spent in 2003 on promoting 12 Girls—3 billion yen (out of the company’s 3.5 billion initial annual operating budget)—was ten times the average amount spent at the time on advertising Japanese pop albums (Zhang 2005), and the investment paid off. Released on July 24, 2003, *Beautiful Energy* sold 10,000 copies within 24 hours and more than 2 million copies in less than a year (Chen 2004): success unprecedented for any Chinese ensemble.

The 12 Girls Band represents a new and important, perhaps even an inevitable “next” phase in the evolution of sinified commodification within the realm of
global popular culture. In several of its aspects and features, the Band reifies the notion of syncretism suggested by Richard A. Waterman and Alan P. Merriam. As a vehicle for (inter)cultural contact, the Band has helped create and popularize new and mixed musical forms based on the confluence of similar or compatible traits in the cultures involved—those of China and the West (Nettl 1985). The Band is an all-female ensemble that performs both Chinese and Western musical materials on Chinese instruments. At the same time, it is a traditional Chinese instrumental ensemble that also relies both on rock grooves for much of its popularity, and on its members performing standing up and even moving around.

The opening minute or so of “Freedom,” the opening track on the “free” DVD that accompanies the band’s Eastern Energy CD (as marketed in Canada and the United States), exemplifies all of these traits. It introduces the Band as a folk ensemble lost somewhere in the steppes of Central Asia, then magically transported indoors and transformed into a classical orchestra that stands while playing an ethnic tune accompanied by an indiscriminately international pop rhythm track. Initially dressed in emphatic Chinese red, the girls are magically re-costumed in green as soon as they leave the steppes and enter the concert hall. As a whole, the track makes it clear that no single girl is a star; instead, the Band is a star ensemble—and, as such, it seems to shift before our eyes, back and forth, between Chinese ethnicity and globalized homogeneity. However thoroughly grounded in localized Chinese musical and cultural history, 12 Girls has been harshly criticized within China on behalf of both its local and global characteristics (Zhang 2005; Yin 2005; Yu 2005). Ignoring such criticism, Tomoto and Wang have continued to maintain that “all this” is precisely “what Chinese music must become today, and throughout the world,” at least if ensembles like 12 Girls are going to be able to “tap into global mainstream music markets” (Lü 2004, 47).

To facilitate the Chinese portion of what, in effect, is a bifurcated local/global commercial objective, Wang took steps to validate the Band’s credibility through allusions to localized authenticity. Even the ensemble’s name in Chinese—Nüzi shier yuefang—has explicitly Chinese as well as broader East Asian appeal. The number 12 (shier), for example, suggests the 12 symbols of the Chinese Zodiac, themselves associated with good fortune and perfection (Li 2004, 82). Furthermore, Wang’s word for Band (yuefang) is borrowed from the Tang dynasty word for workplace (fang) as well as from the traditional Mandarin word for music (yue). As one writer has observed, the ensemble’s name and especially the word band within it are not only acceptable to many Chinese listeners, but represent an attempt to capitalize especially on Japan’s yearning for a particular kind of sinicized authenticity—specifically, the lost culture of the Tang dynasty (Yao 2004). In this context, too, deep-rooted Japanese cultural issues are addressed.
as or even more explicitly than Western appetites for world music as a form of entertainment.

At the same time, Wang has done much to consolidate the Band’s mainstream worldwide appeal. Among other things, he has replaced the Girls’ traditional national costumes with vaguely Western ones (see Figures 1 and 2). Gone, too, is the seated, concert-hall performance style borrowed by Chinese instrumentalists from the West. Instead, the Girls are presented as quasi-rockers, more active on stage than most Chinese musicians and, in this respect, more familiar to Western audiences. Also commercially successful has been the ensemble’s overall musical style: a fusion of Chinese melodies with rhythmic features borrowed from jazz, rock, and other pop styles, and a collection of sinified Western melodies performed on authentic Asian instruments.
Especially well planned for the global market have been the individual items comprising the Band’s repertory. As Keith Negus has explained, the ultimate goal of the global music industry involves “the most profitable categories of music within the industry itself” (1999; italics added). Each Band album provides something for almost every listener. Consider its first album, which in its several regional iterations (Beautiful Energy for Japan, Eastern Energy for North America) features combinations of classical and popular melodies with both Asian and Western timbres and rhythms. The iteration released in Japan, for instance, opens with arrangements of three Japanese songs. The American iteration, however, features Coldplay’s “Clocks,” Riverdance’s “Reel around the Sun,” and Enya’s “Only Time.” This iteration appeals even to Western classical music lovers by means of “New Classicism”: a medley of well-known classical music themes—Mozart’s Symphony No. 40 and Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5. The more recently released album Shanghai, on the other hand, features arrangements of instrumental works by Bach and Handel as well as the theme song from the 1997 blockbuster movie Titanic.

The global marketing strategy associated with the Band’s recordings is perhaps even better exemplified in Dunhuang (marketed in the West as Romantic Energy). First released on February 1, 2005, in Japan, this album—named for a locality in China especially well known for its Tang dynasty cave paintings—capitalizes on the exotic appeal associated with oriental antiquity and artistic refinement. More to the point, Dunhuang caters specifically to Japanese audiences by incorporating a handful of Japanese tunes. “Youkan Kodou,” for example, is based on the theme song of TV Tokyo’s program World Business Satellite. “Ruten” was specifically composed by Takuro, the leader and songwriter of the Japanese rock group Glay, while “Whispering Earth” was composed by the New Age guru Kitaro of Silk Road fame. Finally, “Ihoujin” was adapted from Saki Kubota’s 1979 Japanese hit song of the same name. Korea and the United States are also catered to. The Dunhuang iteration includes “From the Beginning till Now,” arranged by O Suk Joon and You He Joon, which was adapted from the theme song of a popular South Korean television series The Love Story of Winter—a melody that had its origin in the Japanese hit song “Flower.” The Romantic Energy iteration includes Simon & Garfunkel’s 1970 hit “El Condor Pasa.”

As a deliberately commodified musical product, the several iterations of Dunhuang not only conflate past and present, but also bridge East and West; their diversity appeals simultaneously to Japanese, Korean, Western, and (presumably) Chinese audiences. Every track on every 12 Girls Band CD is driven by the market: a force that both engulfs and contributes to an ever-increasing economic, social, and technological homogeneity in the international distribution of music (Featherstone 1993; Comeliau 1997). At the same time, the success of Dunhuang and other 12 Girls’ albums depends to a considerable extent upon the
increasing willingness of local markets to adopt and approve of global trends. As Roger Wallis and Krister Malm observed more than 2 decades ago, globalized musical practices inevitably inundate local markets as soon as those markets begin to accept them (Wallis and Malm 1984). In the case of the 12 Girls Band, localized musical practices—ethnic instruments, tunes, and look—have mostly been aimed from the beginning, like a rifle, at global markets. Except in China, these markets have accepted them with almost unqualified enthusiasm.

The Global Market, 12 Girls, and Gender Politics

An important component of Wang Xiaojing’s global music-marketing strategy has been the role played by gender in the commodification of Chineseness. Although Western critics have dubbed the 12 Girls Band a “folk techno-acoustic fusion” ensemble (Coonan 2004, 7), Wang is said to prefer the phrase “visual folk music”—which is to say, local music played by attractive, youthful Chinese women (Coonan 2004, 7). Not merely one or two women, either, but a dozen beautiful exotics, splendidly packaged and meticulously coordinated: an ensemble with ethnic as well as international visual appeal. As journalist Karmel Kingan has pointed out, “Asia’s pop-music industry is one arena where girl power has had a greater international impact” since the 1990s than has boy power (2006). Fans around the world have regularly been as or more impressed by the Girls themselves than by the music they play.

To a limited extent the 12 Girls Band resembles other 21st-century female pop groups. Consider Bond, the all-female string quartet featured on Classified and other albums of quasi-classical, quasi-popular music. Both Bond and 12 Girls are composed of conservatory-trained musicians. Both groups are packaged as pop ensembles that foreground crossover repertories and performing styles. Both groups have also become standing rather than seated performers. In still other respects the Band resembles the girl groups of 1950s and 1960s North America. Band members don’t sing songs about teen love or wear sequins and lace, but they project an attractive imagined femininity without appearing vulgar or passive. They also achieve a successful pop sound without simply playing Western rock; in this they resemble such female ensembles as Enya, the Buena Vista Social Club, Riverdance, and other crossover performers.

According to Wang Xiaojing, the word “yuefang” originated with the Tang dynasty’s court organization known as “jiaofang,” which trained female performers to play instruments, sing, and dance (Anon. 2004c). Historical documents suggest that of these female performers, though some of them may have been virtuoso performers (see Figures 3 and 4), every one of them was also a geisha, serving as an emperor’s or nobleman’s concubine (Xiu and Jian [1993] 2003). Because yuefang resembles jiaofang, the Band’s Chinese name calls to
mind the geishas of the Tang dynasty. Perhaps with these cultural associations in mind, a few Chinese critics have ridiculed the Band as a feminine (and therefore trivial) entertainment, a group of pretty girls who depend more on looks than musical skill or national values to reap foreign monetary rewards (Bu 2005). It is impossible to dismiss associations between Band members and geishas outright—especially since, like other girl groups, the Band invites the gaze of others, men and women alike (Mulvey 1989). This is reinforced by Wang
Xiaojing’s emphasis on the group’s look and youthfulness (Anon. 2004c). From the perspectives of global postmodern popular culture, in which image—itself a mode of submission to patriarchal authority\(^{17}\)—is often more important than repertory or musical skill, 12 Girls strikes even some of its most enthusiastic fans as more beautiful to look at than listen to.\(^{18}\) In fact, the Band has endorsed a number of products besides the Olympics, posing in front of various products, cars, shoes, lingerie, and so on.\(^{19}\)

**The 12 Girls Band and Chinese National Music**

In China, music has always been an ideological issue—which is to say, a political issue. Prior to the 20th century, many types of music were state-sponsored and supervised. During the reign of Emperor Wu (140–87 BCE) of the Han dynasty, for example, a governmental office of music (\textit{yuefu}) was established to oversee not only ceremonial performances but also the collection of regional popular and folk songs (He 2003). In China, periods of foreign influence have also alternated with decades and centuries of national purism. Toward the end of the Western Han dynasty, during the Jin and Northern and Southern dynasties, and particularly during the high Tang dynasty, for example, music of the West (in today’s sense, the Middle East), then known as \textit{wuyue}, became very popular in China (Feng 1998). Even Chinese instruments such as the \textit{erhu} and \textit{pipa} were imported from abroad, then sinified through centuries of use.

The 12 Girls Band may have been the first Chinese instrumental ensemble to succeed commercially on an international scale, but global commodification began to wrap its tentacles around Chinese culture a century or so ago. Even before the outbreak of World War I, as Andrew Jones has pointed out, China had become part of a “rigorously transnational” world, one in which its culture and economy were increasingly required to respond both to “the irreducible specificity of the local and the immense complexity of the global” (2001, 9). Since the end of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Nationalist government in 1911, global and local forces have striven with each other for mastery. In musical circles this striving is often reduced to such binary oppositions as Western versus Chinese, cultivated versus vernacular, pop versus classical and folk, and even socialist versus capitalist. But the situation is considerably more complex than that.

What today is often called \textit{minyue} (national music)—or, in full, \textit{minzuyinyue}—is associated historically with the modernization of early and mid-20th-century musical attitudes and practices in China (Wong 2002). The student-led May Fourth Movement set in motion new political and intellectual currents that affected almost every aspect of 1920s Chinese culture, including music (Schwarcz 1986). Many modern individuals, most of them associated with urban areas and
especially with China’s pre-PRC trading ports, felt that traditional Chinese music, a product of outmoded social values, should be replaced with an altogether new form of national music. As a result, Western music began to be cultivated in the nation’s leading universities and private music schools during the 1920s and 1930s, the most prestigious and successful example being the National Conservatory of Music founded in 1927 by the German-trained Xiao Youmei on the model of the Leipzig Conservatory. European compositional practices were understood as improving upon the inadequacies of Chinese composition.20

For those modernists who sought to introduce Western harmonies and instruments into China, European musical classicism was considered scientific, that is, modern (Kraus 1989). As Bruno Nettl has pointed out, Western influences like these, when properly perceived by insiders, can be understood both in terms of the perpetuation of traditions as well as of modernization (Nettl 1985). Other individuals, however, have sought instead to modernize traditional music and bring it up to date (Wong 2002). As a result, amateur musical organizations devoted to studying, performing, and improving upon so-called Chinese folk-musical sources were also established in the 1920s and 1930s, again mostly in urban areas (Wong 1991). The music created by these latter organizations was dubbed guoyue (another term for national music). As Jonathan Stock has explained, during the 1920s, guoyue “was nationalistic in the sense that it did not entirely reject past traditions; rather, it sought to harness existing elements to progressive ends.” Guoyue, in other words, was “Chinese,” but in a way that was “open to modification, professionalization, and development in a way that the specific traditions of individual regions were not” (Stock 1996, 144).

Two men, Liu Tianhua and (Abing) Hua Yanjun, played especially important roles in defining a new, so-called standard of professional performing style for traditional Chinese instrumental music (Gao 1981). In 1927, Liu in particular was responsible for organizing the Guoyue Gaijinshe (Society for Improving National Music) at Beijing University. This organization offered classes in Chinese solo-instrumental and ensemble performance (Wang 2002). The new performing organizations that emerged as a result were modeled on traditional sizhu (silk and bamboo) ensembles but permitted instrumental doublings, thereby sowing the seeds of the modern Chinese folk orchestra (Tsui 2002), known as minzu yuetuan in the PRC.

After the PRC was established in 1949, the term minzu yinyue (which means national music) emerged in conjunction with those ensembles, large or small, that were officially sanctioned by the new regime as representative of a multi-ethnic Communist Chinese nation.21 But the term minyue, aside from its relationship to minzu yinyue (national music), has two other connotations: music
of the folk traditions, and music of the masses. When the Chinese word *min* is combined with *jian*, the resulting term (*minjian*) suggests folk traditions. When *min* is combined with *cong*, the resulting term (*mincong*) suggests the masses or people. Today, however, the term *minyue* is mostly used denotatively—and with reference specifically to the political and social world of the PRC—in order to identify new forms of instrumental music created by the Han people, China’s largest ethnic group. These musical forms and instruments occasionally include adaptations of minority musical traditions and styles.

Whatever the Band’s acceptance abroad, issues of local and national acceptance—which is to say, of ideology and politics—remain to be resolved. Some Chinese listeners have embraced the Band as an authentic national ensemble. Others, however, have rejected the ensemble as an inauthentic example of Chinese musical nationalism. In fact, despite (or, perhaps, because of) record-breaking album sales in Japan and other parts of the West, the 12 Girls Band continues to raise eyebrows among PRC academics and musicians, especially those who strive to preserve authentic Chinese musical culture.

Chinese opposition to the Band seems mostly to be ideological. The president of the Shanghai No. 1 Chinese Traditional Musical Instrument Factory, for example, has criticized the Band for its heavy reliance on synthesizers—which, he claims, overpowers the music. Here the ideological issue seems to be sound production; music is produced by the ensemble only insofar as it is performed on traditional Chinese instruments, rather than electronic Western ones. Another example involves the director of the National Music Ensemble at the Youth Palace of Shanghai’s Huangpu District, who recently complained that “the charm of *minzuyinyue* is the music itself, not those who handle the instruments.” This time the issue seems to be one of gender: because the Band is an ensemble of attractive young women, it is incapable of dealing with the essence of Chinese musical nationalism—and this no matter how many foreigners it may divert or entertain. Still another example involves a professor at the Shanghai Conservatory who proclaimed in 2005, “No matter how [well] the 12 Girls Band plays, its music is not mainstream *minzuyinyue*” (Anon. 2006). Innovation may sometimes be valid, but not where authentic Chinese instrumental, national, and/or folk music is concerned.

The most severe criticism leveled to date against the ensemble originated with the renowned *erhu* master Min Huifen, who has several times spoken about the Band to members of the press. On one occasion she declared that “art is not a packaged product of pretty girls who wear sexy costumes, bat their flirtatious eyes, and jump up and down on stage. The performing format of the 12 Girls Band is not worthy of my critical attention. These players should not be even mentioned in the same breath as *minyue* performers. . . .” [The 12 Girls] are not
representative of high-standard minyue; they are mere laughing stocks in the eyes of connoisseurs” (Anon. 2004a).23 At first glance, Min’s argument would seem to invoke something like 19th-century notions of absolute Musik. Although not altogether self-referential, both the authentic minyue musicians imagined by Min and the music one imagines them performing in some sense transcend the “time and circumstances” that link the Band with emerging forms of globalized entertainment (Sorce Keller 2007, 93–4).

These critics and others like them have raised concerns about the same interrelated issues: those of nationality, authenticity, and Chineseness. Presumably, the 12 Girls Band is an offshoot of the modern minyue tradition. Certainly its players were trained in such a tradition, and Westerners at least can imagine them becoming members of traditional minyue organizations. But the ensemble’s critics, including erhu master Min, rejected both the ensemble and the music it makes as inauthentic—and, this, in spite of the Girls’ training at classical conservatories. Perhaps for this reason the Band is presented only as itself rather than part of a tradition. Even Wang Xiaojing has been careful not to burden the Band with a single label:

Our group does not claim to represent [any kind] of new national music (xin minyue), avant-garde music, or world music. We simply are what we are. What people hear is what they get. By combining Western music with Chinese instruments, I have provided a new venue for players of minyue. At the same time, I have provided an opportunity for foreign audiences to appreciate Chinese music. (Anon. 2005)

Confronted with accusations that the Band has too little or even nothing to do with either the minyue tradition or China’s emerging musical mainstream—and, moreover, with accusations that the ensemble in no way strove to be authentically Chinese—Wang replied,

We have never claimed to represent the mainstream, the traditional, or the authentic. We have created a brand name. We do not even regard ourselves as minyue. . . . Besides, what do authentic and mainstream mean? Please have someone explain these concepts to us. Our world is changing, and so is our country. Why can’t we introduce changes to different forms of music? Are we going to regard only the music of the 1950s and 1960s as authentic[ally Chinese]? Change is the source of creativity and vitality. A few days ago, I attended a performance of the Central Instrumental Ensemble. Their erhu players also perform standing up and their costumes were far more forward-looking and sexually explicit than those of our ensemble. (Anon. 2005)

At the same time, the authenticity or traditional character of minyue is rarely questioned in PRC musical circles. To some extent, this situation has to do with ideological censorship. To cast doubt upon minyue, itself an artificial symbol of national identity, can be politically incorrect and even dangerous. Another prob-
lem involves ideological differences between tradition and China’s new emerging national identity. At the Second Durham Oriental Music Festival (held in England during August 1979), performances by the Ensemble of the Central Conservatory of Music were challenged by Western attendees, who argued that recently created works of minyue were anything but traditional, if only because many of them incorporated unmistakable Western stylistic gestures. These issues proved less interesting to Chinese attendees, who were more concerned with defining contemporary nationalism and the performance practices that embody it. At the same time—and almost as if further to complicate things—traditional music has been defined officially within the PRC and since the end of the Cultural Revolution as music that (1) has come down from past centuries and peoples, (2) is of outstanding quality, and (3) has influenced and continues to influence later music (Fang 1981). In other words, traditional music, although in some sense archaic, necessarily possesses contemporary aesthetic appeal and continues to exert its own influence on emerging musical practices. Hence Mao’s slogan: “Make the past serve the present” (Fang 1981, 6).

Within 21st-century China, therefore, boundaries between traditional music, folk music, and certain kinds of recently developed Chinese instrumental music remain blurry. In fact, any kind of Chinese instrumental music might today be accepted as minzu qiyue. A monograph with that title, written by Yuan Jingfang, one of the PRC’s most prominent musicologists, examines several kinds of pre-20th-century Chinese instrumental music (1987). Most Westerners would probably call these kinds of music traditional or folk (see Jones 1995), but Yuan uses the term minzuqiyue for everything she examines. This apparent carelessness reflects a widespread conviction that everything national, no matter how new, is a continuation of the old. For this reason, almost everything written by Chinese scholars about their nation’s instrumental music begins with a sentence attributing the origins of contemporary genres to those of the past (Gao 1981, Ye 1983, Yuan 1987). In comparison with Yuan’s position, that of Min Huifen seems antiquated and increasingly untenable. Wang Xiaojing’s position, on the other hand, reflects attitudes characteristic of today’s progressive and increasingly globalized China.

Somewhat (but not entirely different) attitudes are reflected in the history of Chinese instrumental music—which includes the adaptability of certain comparatively recent ensembles to social challenges, foreign influences, and fashionable trends. From this perspective the 12 Girls Band can be understood as a contemporary manifestation of its nation’s extraordinary and complex musical past. Not everyone, however, is willing today to accept the Band as is—at least not as part of Chinese musical tradition. In his study of Cantonese opera, Kevin Latham points out that there have always been “different ways of traditionalizing” the variegated manifestations of China’s rich and long-lived musical cultures
Shareholders in slightly older forms of authentic and national instrumental music continue to invoke tradition as they attempt to marginalize the accomplishments of later arrivals, the 12 Girls Band among them. For Min Huifen and others like her, the Band threatens an ideological position often overlooked or ignored by Western, especially American, consumers of popular culture (Sorce Keller 2007, 99). For Wang Xiaojing and 12 Girls’ enthusiastic supporters, on the other hand, the Band embodies an ideology more global than local, more commodified than traditionalized, and more musically Western than Asian. This last point is crucial to any understanding of the ensemble’s success. Those who like the Band’s music are more likely to hear it in terms of pop tunes and back beat. Those who dislike the Band are more likely to hear its music in terms of its Chinese instruments—no matter what melodies happen to be played on them—and, therefore, in terms of the traditions associated with the instruments themselves as well as with the instrumentalists.

Globalization and the 12 Girls Band

The emergence of the 12 Girls Band exemplifies what globalization creates: tension between cultural homogenization and heterogenization (Appadurai 1996). At the same time, globalization strives to reconcile cultural differences through the establishment of a single worldwide economy. In spite of some critics’ opposition, the Band has achieved widespread popularity in China. Some of the ensemble’s fans even consider the Band the savior of traditional Chinese music, the model for minyue’s further development. (The very existence of such ensembles has been threatened since the 1980s when the PRC began to move decisively toward a market economy and government began to commodify most of its state-run institutions.25) These fans understand that the future development of Chinese music, be it minyue or Western-style classical music, will be guided by market forces. As nations everywhere become more and more industrialized, more and more modern, local and traditional cultures become increasingly remote, antiquated, perhaps inauthentic. In the future, groups such as the 12 Girls Band may well play an increasingly important role in bringing a hybrid style of Chinese music—one fused with Chinese and Western, traditional and contemporary, serious and popular music elements—to modernized, globalized, and largely urban audiences.

In large part, of course, the ensemble’s popularity reflects the emerging hegemony of consumer culture throughout the world even as it contributes to that culture.26 At the same time, the introduction of a group like the 12 Girls Band into the international music market enlarges both Chinese and Western audience choices, giving consumers everywhere the opportunity to experience musical and especially instrumental sounds they might otherwise never have
heard. Worth pondering is an Internet description that accompanies the sale of *Eastern Energy*, the Band’s first North America album:

If you want to WOW your friends and give them something different, create a backyard party with a [sic] Asian yet modern twist, Twelve Girls Band will form the undercurrent for a classy, sophisticated yet fun party your friends will love. . . . Not only are these women talented, they are gorgeous. They do what even Beethoven couldn’t, combining 1,500 years of Chinese musical tradition, infusing it with contemporary Western beats and rhythm[,] traditional instruments with modern harmonies and vibrant performances, their sound crosses all cultural barriers. You will seriously love it. It’s different, it’s addictive and your friends will be begging you to know who the heck it is! This is not just music, it’s art and America is about to discover it.27

Clearly, the Band’s difference—its local flavor—has won it Western acceptance. In the PRC, and within the present context, Western is tantamount to global. This difference also defines the ensemble and the music it makes as orientalized commodities, examples of what Edward Said epitomized as part of “a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary” that have made the oriental a “presence in and for the West” (Said 1978, 4–5). At the same time, the Band’s financial strategies and successes have always been more global than local, even in Said’s conception of those terms: more about product, purchasing power, and easy listening than about (post)colonial stereotypes or marginalization. In an utterly globalized world, there would be no East or West; instead, there would be only those who sell (multinational corporations and other complex late-capitalist enterprises) and those who buy (whether in Asia, Europe, or the New World). Inevitably, as an increasing number of cultures and peoples move toward the global, the local is transformed from tradition into product. As one Chinese writer has pointed out: “Before the 12 Girls Band invaded Japan, many famous Chinese performers attempted to show that nation the depth and breadth of Chinese instrumental music. But the Japanese pop-music market does not care about the depth and breadth of Chinese music. What it wants is an appealing product. The success of the 12 Girls Band is a case in point” (Yao 2004, 15).

“Fashion demands innovation” (Leshkowich and Jones 2003, 282), and the Band’s principal contribution to musical fashion has been the commodification of minyue—of the local, or aspects of it—on a global scale. To some extent, the homogenizing force of global marketing seems to be transforming our multicultural world into an increasingly mono-economic entity (Wallerstein 1989). Those who fear globalization and the loss of the local understand this all too well. “If our nation’s music continues to be promoted by entertainment-oriented ensembles such as the 12 Girls Band,” PRC critic Yu Wenbo recently lamented,
“I am afraid China’s traditional musical aesthetic is going to be lost entirely, homogenized by trendy, contemporary pop styles only to disappear into the popular culture of the outside world” (Yu 2005, 47). If individuals like Yu were to accept the inevitability of globalization and the immanent emergence of a single worldwide culture (Giddens 1999), they would also accept the commodification of traditional Chinese music. The 12 Girls Band and other hybrid ensembles, crossover performing groups that fuse Chinese and Western elements in terms of instrumentation, compositional style, performing practice, and even publicity strategies, are but one result of an overwhelmingly powerful historical process: the next phase in the development of Chinese instrumental music, now known as xinminyue (new national music) in the PRC.28

Conclusion

For centuries the West has commodified the East. At the very least it has sold itself images of a largely imagined Orient. Today, and quite successfully, the 12 Girls Band delivers fetching images of Chineseness, but with a twist: that of a poised, musically powerful, yet playfully feminine orchestra of talent. In doing this, the Band also exemplifies a still-unbalanced pattern of colonialized cultural and especially economic exchange between China and the West. The West continues to exert a stronger cultural influence over the East, even though we may understand less about them than they do about us. When a subservient culture wants to export its artistic products to a dominant culture, it has to adjust its products to meet dominant value systems and aesthetic preferences. In the process, the products themselves inevitably lose some of their original cultural identity; they become objects gazed upon, others in the eyes of those individuals with greater purchasing power and international influence. From an historical perspective, the success of the 12 Girls Band represents yet another triumph of colonizing money over colonized entertainers. On the other hand, China continues to experience tumultuous changes that began more than a century ago. Its influence, cultural and economic, is expanding with breathtaking speed. The triumph of the 12 Girls Band is part of that journey and that expanding influence.

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Notes

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5 Reshaping traditional music for commercial purpose is characteristic not only of the 21st-century PRC, but of other emerging societies. See Schramm (1995), Rees (1998), and Magowan (2005).

6 According to Agawu (2003), musical works are a form of text, of which the meaning is something woven by performer-composers who conceive and produce the music, by listener-viewers who consume it, and by critics who constitute it as text for the purposes of analysis and interpretation. In the same vein, musical groups can also be treated as a form of text, of which the meaning is constructed intricately just as a musical work.

7 Throughout the present article, Chinese names, terms, and titles are transliterated using Pinyin. Chinese names are presented surname first according to Chinese practice. English translations of titles by the present authors appear in parentheses. Unless otherwise specified, quotations from Chinese sources were translated by the present authors.

8 As of May 7, 2009, the 13 members of the Band were Zhang Kun (張崑), Lei Ying (雷瀛), Liao Binqi (廖彬曲), Zhou Jiannan (周健楠), Ma Jingjing (馬菁菁), Zhan Lijun (詹麗君), Zhong Bao (仲寶), Zhang Shuang (張爽), Yang Songmei (楊松梅), Sun Yuan (孫媛), Jiang Jin (蔣瑾), Sun Ting (孫婷), and Yin Yan (殷焱). Only 12 girls perform on stage at any one time; the 13th member of the ensemble serves as backup (Xiao and Ye 2005). Significantly, the Band is always promoted as an ensemble instead of a collection of stars, in keeping with the socialist musical tradition of the PRC. In one interview, Wang explained that each Band member willingly accepts her subordination to the ensemble as a whole, especially since hundreds of young women are eager to join the “12 Girls” (Lü 2004, 46).

9 At the time such tactics were unheard of in China, and the overnight success of the 12 Girls Band in Japan shocked the Chinese music industry. See Bu (2005), Chen (2004), and Cheng (2004).

10 For more about Sino-Japanese relationships, see Wang (2005).

11 Glay was organized in 1988 by two high school students, Takuro and Teru; later the band was expanded to include Hisashi and Nobumasa as well as a handful of other performers. The group had its first break in 1993 when the famous drummer and producer Yoshikii, who owns Extasy Records, offered Glay a contract; Rain, the band’s debut album, appeared in 1994 and marked the beginning of the group’s prominent position in the Japanese pop-music scene. Beat Out, the group’s third CD topped the Oricon chart in 1996, one of the many successes the group was to enjoy in the 10 years that followed. In 2002, Glay performed in Beijing to mark the 30th anniversary of renewed Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations.


On other occasions, however, Wang has denied any attempt to capitalize on folk or local issues. See Wang (2004), also cited in the text of the present article.

Our impressions are based on fan websites. See, for example, http://launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/12girlsband/ and http://blog.sina.com.cn/12girlsband (accessed 11 February 2010).

In other respects, however, the 12 Girls Band is unusual, even unique. Bond is small, flashy, and explicitly sexy. Bond girls wear slutish, crotch-high outfits and grapple with each other in publicity photos; the upper curves in the lower-case letters that spell out “bond” are often superimposed on publicity stills on top of ensemble members’ breasts. In contrast, the 12 Girls Band is a larger organization; its members wear comparatively modest costumes, including full-length, vaguely oriental dresses or knee-length skirts and loosely cut blouses.

For more information on patriarchal submission, see Keri McClean (2005).

The appeal of the 12 Girls’ look can be documented through fans’ Internet postings. One Internet fan club (go to http://post.baidu.com/f?kz=83683831), for example, maintains a blog that includes phrases such as “how beautiful you are,” “you are so pretty, particularly when you are playing,” and “you are all like flowers.”

In 2005, the Band was selected as spokesman for the Brand China Industry Alliance. See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c5f0504010008hd.html (accessed 11 February 2010).

A great many early 20th-century Chinese writings deal with the need to improve Chinese music. See, for example, Zhang (2004).

Issues pertinent to the notion of “minzuyinyue” are addressed in Yang’s article about the characteristics of Ethnomusicology in the PRC. See Yang (2003).

The repertory of the 12 Girls Band includes one so-called minority number: “Alamuhan,” available on both Beautiful Energy and Eastern Energy. Since 1949, the appropriation of minority music by mostly Han composers and performers has flourished throughout the PRC. See Li (2005).

Widely accepted as the most prominent erhu performer in the PRC today, Min Huifen studied at the Shanghai Conservatory in the late 1950s. In her opinion, the 12 Girls Band uses Chinese instruments as mere props. See Anonymous (2005).

The answers provided by Fang Kun, the leader of the Chinese delegation at Durham, were published in the January 1980 issue of Renmin Yinyue (People’s Music), the PRC’s leading music magazine; later they were translated into English by Keith Pratt and published in Asian Music. See Fang (1981).
An article published on August 6, 2004, in *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily) compared the National Instrumental Music Orchestras to heavy objects “held up by little more than a piece of string.” Of some 80 performances presented in 2005 by the National Music Ensemble of the Song and Dance Troupe of Jiejiang Province, the article explains, more than half were promotional (i.e., appearances at trade fairs and other commercial activities) rather than professional. Private engagements, in fact, now account for 50 percent or more of most state-supported performing organizations’ activities throughout the PRC. Nor has commodification made most Chinese musicians wealthy. The 80-member *Shanghai Minzuyuetuan* (or National Music Ensemble of Shanghai), one of China’s most prestigious classical ensembles, scrapes by on an annual budget of 5–6 million RMB (less than US$1 million). Hong Kong’s Chinese Orchestra, on the other hand, enjoys an annual budget of HK$50 million, ten times that of its Shanghai counterpart. To survive, the Shanghai ensemble has been forced to hire itself out for fees as low as 10,000 RMB: a pitiful 125 RMB (or US$15), after expenses, for each ensemble member. See Anonymous (2004b). Adding insult to injury, a recent study of musical preferences among PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong students has revealed that traditional Chinese music today is less well-respected than Western music among young people and receives less attention in school curricula; furthermore, an overwhelming majority of young Chinese men and women prefer popular music to traditional music. See Ho (2006).

For a discussion of music as a force that at once reflects as well as creates culture, see Born (2000).

In recent writings on the 12 Girls Band published in the PRC, the nomenclature *xinminyue* (new national music) is often used. See for instance, Qin (2006) and (Yao) 2006.

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