

Female heroes and moonish lovers: women's paradoxical identities in modern Chinese songs.

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## Female Heroes and Moonish Lovers: Women's Paradoxical Identities in Modern Chinese Songs

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Female Heroes and Moonish Lovers: Women's Paradoxical Identities in Modern Chinese Songs Su Zheng  
Music, ah, music! Is it only sound of bells and drums? Confucius Studies of gender, women, and their representations in Chinese culture greatly flourished during the first half of the 1990s, resulting in a series of groundbreaking anthologies which gathered together works by both Chinese and Western scholars from a wide range of fields and disciplines.<sup>1</sup> As a Chinese music historian and an ethnomusicologist, I am, on the one hand, greatly excited and encouraged by these rereadings of various Chinese cultural forms and

expressions in light of contemporary critical theories and methods; on the other hand, I am somewhat disappointed that music, considered by both traditional Confucianists and contemporary communists as one of the essential constituents of governing power, has been omitted from this feminist reinterpretation and revisioning of Chinese culture. This situation is not an isolated one, of course. In the field of musicology, a field that historically has taken much pride in its positivist approach to "great men" (male European composers) and their works, feminist criticism and studies of women's music traditions have only emerged in full force since the late 1980s, more than a decade later than feminist studies in literature and art.<sup>2</sup> One important reason for this delay in the "reclaiming of Cecilia,"<sup>3</sup> proposes musicologist Marcia Citron, lies in the challenge the aesthetic nature of music (especially the "absolute music"—textless music with no apparent content) has posed to both music and non-music scholars as to how to "locate content, especially narrative content, in sounds—mere acoustical phenomena."<sup>4</sup> Though a similar challenge can be identified in the field of Chinese music study, it certainly cannot justify the nearly total absence of feminist studies of Chinese music both in and outside China.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the particular traditions of Chinese music as a combination of literary and acoustical aesthetics can provide alternative opportunities for feminist criticism. Music, with its prominent position in Chinese society and intimate relationship to issues of women and sexuality, is an especially intriguing site for examining the gender politics of social and political movements in China. In many ways, this article is a preliminary exploration in the fields

© 1997 Journal of Women's History, Vol. 8 No. 4 (Winter) 92 Journal of Women's History Winter of women's studies and Chinese music history. My goal is twofold: to discuss women's paradoxical images constructed textually and musically in modern Chinese songs from the early 1900s to the end of the 1930s, and to address their broader implications in the context of the radical social and cultural changes. In addition, I consider how an analysis of women's identities in the modern songs relates to other analyses of women/gender in twentieth-century Chinese history. After a general introduction on the background of modern Chinese songs and some theoretical contemplation on the problems of the concept of "women" in modern China, this article is divided into three sections slightly overlapping in historical times but distinguished by their topical focuses. The first section covers the early 1900s to the early 1920s, a period in which the earliest modern songs—the school songs—were composed and published, and when the new image of woman—the pre-May Fourth Movement of 1919 *niizi* (young female)<sup>6</sup>—began to emerge. In the following decades, this very first modern identity of Chinese women lost its attraction for encountering the heroic women in the songs of incitement and praise of women to become heroines in the national salvation struggle and in the romantic love songs of the moonish, dreamy, or sexy, dissolute women from the post-May Fourth period. The second section of the article focuses on heroic women mostly portrayed in the mass songs from the early 1910s to the late 1930s, and the last section analyzes the romantic and erotic images of women in art songs and popular entertaining songs from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s. Modern Chinese songs are perhaps the most important music repositories for studying women's images and identities in contemporary China because of their pioneering position in modern music...

## FEMALE HEROES AND MOONISH LOVERS:

### *Women's Paradoxical Identities in Modern Chinese Songs*

Su Zheng

Music, oh, music! Is it only sound of bells and drums?

Confucius

Studies of gender, women, and their representations in Chinese culture greatly flourished during the first half of the 1990s, resulting in a series of groundbreaking anthologies which gathered together works by both Chinese and Western scholars from a wide range of fields and disciplines.<sup>1</sup> As a Chinese music historian and an ethnomusicologist, I am, on the one hand, greatly excited and encouraged by these rereadings of various Chinese cultural forms and expressions in light of contemporary critical theories and methods; on the other hand, I am somewhat disappointed that music, considered by both traditional Confucianists and contemporary communists as one of the essential constituents of governing power, has been omitted from this feminist reinterpretation and revisioning of Chinese culture. This situation is not an isolated one, of course. In the field of musicology, a field that historically has taken much pride in its positivist approach to "great men" (male European composers) and their works, feminist criticism and studies of women's music traditions have only emerged in full force since the late 1980s, more than a decade later than feminist studies in literature and art.<sup>2</sup> One important reason for this delay in the "reclaiming of Cecilia,"<sup>3</sup> proposes musicologist Marcia Citron, lies in the challenge the aesthetic nature of music (especially the "absolute music"—textless music with no apparent content) has posed to both music and non-music scholars as to how to "locate content, especially narrative content, in sound"—mere acoustical phenomena.<sup>4</sup>

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