

**ORIAS: Sonic Histories: Chinese Popular Music in the Twentieth Century**  
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**LISTENING GUIDE and LYRICS**

**1. Mei Lanfang, “Spring in the Jade Palace”**

**Note:** This recording, made in Beijing in 1929, features the vocals of the legendary Mei Lanfang, who was unquestionably the most famous Beijing opera star of the 20th century.

A substantial portion of early recording activities in China were devoted to various regional operas and folk music, and Mei (who was later signed to an exclusive contract by Pathé Records) not only dominated this segment of the record market, but was also a celebrated media figure, an ambassador of Chinese musical culture (he undertook tours of the United States, Japan, and the Soviet Union in the 1930's), and a nationalist hero (for his refusal to perform during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945).

**2. Li Minghui, “Drizzle”**

music and lyrics: Li Jinhui

[Pathé Records presents Miss Li Minghui singing “Drizzle”...] (spoken)

Drizzle keeps falling  
The breeze keeps blowing  
In the breeze and the light rain, the willows turn green  
Aiyoyo! The willows are green...

Little darling, I don't want your gold  
Little darling, I don't want your silver  
All this little girl wants is your heart  
Aiyoyo! All I want is your heart..

Drizzle and rain, don't be such a pain  
Light breeze, don't be such a tease  
It's so much harder to walk through the wind and rain  
Aiyoyo! Harder to walk in the rain...

Young man, the sun has just risen over the hills  
Young girl, the lotus flowers are starting to show their petals  
Don't wait 'til the flowers are dead and the sun has set behind the hills  
Aiyoyo! The sun has set behind the hills...

**Note:** Written by the ‘father of Chinese popular music,’ Li Jinhui, this 1929 song is among the earliest and most famous examples of the fusion of jazz, Chinese folk melody, and Hollywood film music known as ‘modern song’ (*shidai qu*), and derided by its many vociferous critics as “yellow” or ‘pornographic’ music. Li Jinhui’s career as a musician began in the early 1920s, when he began to compose a series of song and dance operas for children as a means of popularizing the use of Mandarin in national schools. These roots are perhaps evident in the exaggeratedly childish vocal style in evidence here, a style which was made famous by Li’s teenage daughter Li Minghui and other graduates of Li’s Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe. From the ranks of this group emerged many, if not most, of the musical and cinematic stars of the 1930s, including luminaries such as Zhou Xuan, Bai Hong, and Nie Er.

Musically, the instrumentation of the piece (piano, saxophone, violin, clarinet) is similar to that of an American jazz orchestra, but the distinct vocal approach, pentatonicism of the melody, and loping rhythms signal to the listener that this is in fact a hybrid form nurtured by the polyglot colonial culture of modern Shanghai.

### 3. Zhou Xuan, "Shanghai at Night"

music: Chen Gexin  
lyrics: Fan Yanqiao

Shanghai at night, Shanghai at night, you're the city that never sleeps  
The bright lights go on, the cars roar, dance music leaps  
There she is, greeting you with a smiling face  
But who can see the anguish underneath?  
Her night life is all about clothing, food, car fare, and a place to sleep

If the wine doesn't get them drunk they'll find another way  
Recklessly wasting their youth away  
The sky at dawn is indistinct and blurry  
Their eyes from lack of sleep are bleary

To their homes they return  
Heads spinning like the car wheels  
Try moving to a new world, a different environment  
Thinking back on night life  
It will all seem like waking up from a dream

**Note:** Now seen as a classic commentary on the frenetic, decadent night life of prerevolutionary Shanghai, this famous song derives from a 1947 Great China Film Studio musical called "An All-Consuming Love" that was actually shot in Hong Kong. It relates the story of a housewife in wartime Shanghai (played by Zhou Xuan) who is forced to become a sing-song girl/lounge singer after her husband (a secret agent for the KMT) is killed in the line of duty. Once again, the lyrics reflect something of the original plotline (and indeed, they were penned by the film's scenarist, Fan Yanqiao), while the jazzy rhythms and orchestral effects mirror the milieu of the modern metropolis and its seamy dancehalls and cabarets. That milieu, of course, and its myriad of social discontents, was about to be swept away by the victory of the Chinese Communist Party, and its official proclamation of the new People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

### 4. Chairman Mao Zedong, "October 1, 1949"

"Comrades, the People's Republic of China and the Central People's Government are today established!"

**Note:** A truly epochal moment caught on audio tape: Chairman Mao announces the establishment of the new socialist China from the rostrum at Tiananmen Square to a cast of millions. Interestingly (and ironically, for a government that would soon mandate the use of standard northern Chinese in all media broadcasts), his Hunanese accent is almost impenetrable.

## 5. The East is Red

music: traditional Shaanbei folksong  
lyrics: Li Youyuan

The East is red, the sun has risen  
China has given rise to a Mao Zedong  
He's seeking happiness for the people, huer hei yo!  
He's the star of salvation for the people

Mao Zedong loves the people, he's our guide along the road  
To construct a new China, hu'er hei yo!  
He guides us forward

The Communist party is like the sun  
Where ever it shines, things are bright  
Where ever there's the Communist Party, hu'er hei yo!  
The people are liberated

**Note:** First composed in during the anti-Japanese war in 1943 by a peasant named Li Youyuan, this song went on to become a classic of Maoist revolutionary music. It is almost a perfect embodiment of CCP cultural policy (which stressed filling old popular bottles with new revolutionary wine) in that it derived from a well-known northwestern folk song from around the CCP's revolutionary base in Yan'an ('Riding a White Horse' 骑白马), to which Li appended an easily assimilable and stirring paean to the leadership of the CCP, framed in solar imagery that was to become typical of the era, and central to the cult of personality that surrounded Chairman Mao. In this version, which was broadcast nearly incessantly during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), all of the characteristics of mass music are given full play: sweeping orchestral fanfares reminiscent of both Soviet martial music and Hollywood epics, and a huge choral sound evocative of the unitary voice of the masses. The melody of the song became a ubiquitous aspect of the revolutionary soundscape when it was adapted for media as diverse as public clock chimes and train announcements.

## 6. Cui Jian, "I Have Nothing"

music and lyrics: Cui Jian

I've asked tirelessly, when will you go with me?  
But you just always laugh at my having nothing  
I want to give you my pursuit, give you my freedom  
But you always just laugh at my having nothing  
Oh! When will you go with me?

The earth under my feet is on the move  
The water by my side is flowing on  
But you always just laugh at my having nothing

Why don't you ever laugh your fill?  
Why do I always continue to try?  
Could it be that before you I will always have nothing?

[repeat chorus]

I'm telling you that I've waited a long time  
I'm telling you my very last demand  
I need to take hold of your hands  
Only then will you go with me  
That's when your hands will tremble  
That's when your tears will flow

Can it be that you're telling me you love my having nothing?

Only then will you go with me...

Only then will you go with me...

**Note:** Cui Jian's "I Have Nothing" heralded the entrance of a new popular music genre into the public consciousness: rock music. Chinese rock music was distinguished as much by its musical style (which is indebted to Anglo-American rock music as well as the Northwest Wind) as its oppositional ideology. Largely barred from the mass media, rock music developed outside of the mainstream, state-run popular music industry. "I Have Nothing" was first publicly performed in the late 1980's, and went on to become a sort of unofficial rallying anthem of the 1989 Tiananmen movement after the release of Cui's first record that spring. The song's title, of course, is a sly reference to the lyrics of the "Internationale," and the subversive political force of its lyrics once again depends on interpretative traditions whereby the depiction of a love relationship is read in terms of politics.

## 7. He Yong, "Bell and Drum Towers"

[live performance in Hong Kong]

music and lyrics: He Yong

My home is inside the Second Ring Road  
The people around here have so much time on their hands  
They're gossiping about other folks  
They're watching to see what brand of cigarettes you smoke  
The people working in the restaurants are outsiders from the country  
Their faces look the same as mine

My bike rolls over fallen leaves I look but can't see the sunset  
The Silver Coin Bridge will never see the Western Hills again  
The lotus leaves in the water are already few and far between  
The moon's reflection in the water is negotiating with the streetlamp  
They're saying tomorrow morning who'll make a fire and cook the rice  
They're saying tomorrow morning we'll eat fritter and crackers

*Today's Bell and Drum Towers aren't the same as they used to be in the past  
La, la, la, la, la, la, hey!*

The Bell and Drum Towers are sucking in dust and smoke  
Letting all of you paint its face  
I can't hear your voice  
Nowadays it's too loud and there's too much chaos  
You've borne witness for so very long  
Why haven't you said your peace?  
Who was it that assigned such a difficult question?  
The correct answer is all around  
Who was it that assigned such a difficult question?  
The correct answer is all around

*On the flute, Dou Wei  
I'm going to greet you in Beijing dialect now: Eaten yet?  
La, la, la, la, la, la, hey!*

My home is inside the Second Ring Road  
My home is by the Bell and Drum Towers  
My home is inside this great big courtyard  
My home my home my home is  
On this globe

**Note:** He Yong began his career as an uncompromising punk rebel in Beijing's underground rock scene. This song, performed at HungHom Coliseum in Hong Kong as part of a showcase of mainland rock music sponsored by Taiwan's Rock Records, is a poetic evocation of local identity, culture, and history in He Yong's native Beijing. The Bell and Drum towers are ancient buildings (and symbols of the imperial order) that not only used to dominate the soundscape of the city, but also still serve as important landmarks in He's neighborhood on the north side of Beijing's old city, even if their traditional function as time-keepers has long been defunct. Several years ago, the song itself became a ubiquitous part of Beijing's soundscape when it was adopted as the jingle for the city's radio traffic reports.

## 8. Blacklist Studio, "Taipei Empire"

music and lyrics: Wang Minghui

Long ago, long ago  
Our family lived on what is now Chung-hsiao Road East\*  
We ate *anmeiya* and boiled sweet potato pieces  
We wore shorts made of old flour sacks  
Wherever we went we had to walk step by step

The road from Sanzhangli to the train station  
would take all day to walk too

From Chung-hsiao Road East, go just a little further  
A little further, a little further, and you get to the graveyard

Life back then was really pretty hard  
At twelve or thirteen I had to hit the road and work  
Everyday I'd have to wash the boss' underwear  
Thinking all the time that there's no future  
Thinking thinking thinking thinking there's no future

Step by step by step by step by step, our society's moving on up

For technology, we were dependent on Americans coming to help  
Incense in hand, everybody prayed to Jesus at home  
"Big nose whiteys, big nose whiteys, Arigato, Arigato"\*\*\*  
Five NT dollars for a "Patriotic Lottery Ticket"  
If you want car parts, go to Sanchong Pu  
North Zhongshan Road is full of strange girls:  
"Say yes my boy, say yes my boy, say yes my boy"  
US dollars are worth a lot more than our Taiwan money after all  
After all, dollars dollars dollars dollars are worth a lot more

Step by step by step by step by step, our society's moving on up

The young kids like to show off on their Hondas  
The middle-aged rid to work on their Vespas  
For transporting chickens and ducks there's always Yamaha  
The wealthy gradually started to ride in Toyotas  
Taiwan was knee deep in money

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\*Chung-hsiao Road East is a central shopping district in Taipei, known for its department stores and boutiques.

\*\*\*The irony here is that the imagined Taiwanese speaker is thanking the Americans (a recent colonizer) in the language of their former colonial masters, the Japanese.

And the Japanese never stopped earning  
They would go out together to Beitou to go whoring  
Poor 'flowers'...flowers flowers flowers flowers "flowers good-bye"\*\*\*

Chung-hsiao Road East is already three to four hundred thousand a square meter  
Our family is already as rich as could be  
To the front and left we own fifty units  
Forty nine of which we rent out  
Forty nine are rented out  
To collect the rents each month  
we need to hire an accountant  
If the government would let us  
We'd buy a tank to protect us too  
But that's "Impossible"  
If we need to hire a new bodyguard we'll hire Jackie Chan and Rambo  
If we need to hire hire hire hire hire hire hire Jackie Chan and Rambo

Step by step by step by step by step, our society's moving on up

From Chung-hsiao Road East, go just a little further  
A little further, a little further, and you get to the graveyard

**Note:** Blacklist Studio burst onto the Taiwanese pop music scene in the heady days of rapid social and political change following the Nationalist Party's lifting of forty years of martial law in 1987. Harnessing new wave, rock, and native Taiwanese musical styles, their 1989 album "Crazy Songs" was a controversial and boundary-breaking effort that challenged many of the political and social taboos of the period, and helped to define a new nativist Taiwanese ethos for a new generation of intellectuals, students, and others. Even the name of the band was something of a challenge to the powers that be, suggesting to audiences the black lists kept by government officials in order to suppress and kill tens of thousands of leftists and Taiwanese nationalists during the martial law years.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Black List's music is the innovative use of multiple languages. In utilizing Taiwanese dialect for the first time in a modern pop context, the band struck out against the hegemony of standard Mandarin Chinese, which had been imposed as a standard language on the island by the Nationalists following their move to Taiwan. In drawing upon fractured bits of official Mandarin, Japanese, American English, and finally, global brand names such as Vespa and Toyota, the band also attempts to suggest the many-layered complexity of Taiwan's colonial experience, as seen and understood by the colonized. "Taipei Empire," then, is a moving and sometimes sardonic record of that sometime ignominious history as it moves from Japanese to American domination, and from underdevelopment to a player in the transnational economic order, as seen from the perspective of one street, and one family.

## 9. Jay Chou, "Terraced Fields"

music and lyrics: Jay Chou

Hey Wenshan, by the time you've written the lyrics  
I'll put out the next album  
No problem, take it easy  
This song's by me  
Talking about when I was in middle school  
the terraced fields of my hometown, stacked one atop another  
were the most beautiful green earth I'd ever seen  
and that's also why they allowed me to get the first prize picture

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\*\*\* This is a reference to an older Taiwanese song about courtesans/ prostitutes (who are referred to as 'flowers').

So strange that the me in the image  
who couldn't write lyrics seemed like a poet still  
For the me riding on the bus to school  
looking out the window at the water buffalo chewing grass  
was a freedom and comfort so great I can't express

[Taiwanese folk refrain] Hei ya hei ya na lu wan na yi na ya hei!  
Oh, my dear water buffalo  
[Repeat refrain]  
Oh, where have you all gone?

The little gully stream by the noodle shop  
Flows with our grown-up dreams  
Bypassing innocence and skipping forward to harvest time  
Everyone's sweat mixed up with satisfactions and smiles  
is the image that I now find hardest to part with  
And it was also an image of mine in an exhibition  
Based on memory, made into an oil painting  
It won a prize certificate, but what's the use of that?  
To inspire you to remember even more?  
I really feel like tearing it into shreds  
Returning to nature, how is it that the terraced fields are gone?  
There's a few more hotels  
The people inside are watching foreign films  
Those water buffalo have become pictures hanging on a wall  
symbols of the people who become more prosperous by the day

if some of the tourists should happen to want to see the outside scenery  
all they see is that the hotel next door is higher by one story

[Taiwanese folk refrain] Hei ya hei ya na lu wan na yi na ya hei!  
Oh, my dear water buffalo  
[Repeat refrain]  
Oh, where have you all gone?

'Taking advantage of the lay of the land'  
'Comprehensive utilization'  
Is 'utilization' right or wrong?  
Selfish human beings — are we in a sorry state?  
Will we tire of destroying the ecology?  
You say to cut down a single tree for the sake of art, is that right or wrong?

You say it's all just decorative anyway, what does that have to do with me?  
So now has it got so that we can only use the camera to record nature  
in a photograph for the next generation to remember and see?  
How pitiful, how sad that forests and plains have become documentaries  
And we can never again smell the green scent of trees  
We can only enjoy the dark miasma of smog we breathe  
I can't educate you all, I'm not your teacher or your principal  
And I can't slap you in the face or bore you with a long long lecture  
you don't want to hear but what else can I do  
I want to write this anyway, maybe you'll never get to experience what I mean  
Under a microscope we'll be even more practical, more selfish  
This kind of art is truly difficult to understand

**Note:** Since the release of his first album in 2000, the Taiwanese singer-songwriter/ rapper Jay Chou has developed one of the largest and most devoted fanbases in the greater Chinese music world. A

young and creative multi-instrumentalist, Chou has cross-fertilized Mandarin idol pop with hip hop and RnB balladry, creating a 'flow' that evinces a strikingly new approach to Chinese pronunciation and prosody. He is also skilled at weaving samples from pop culture and everyday life into the mix, constructing rhythms from martial arts sound effects, bouncing ping pong balls, and the like. Interestingly, he also draws freely and unselfconsciously on local Taiwanese dialect and folk melody in a way that would have been impossible just one decade ago (as in this nostalgic, moodily minor-keyed, and self-reflexive piece about the conjunction of economic development and environmental destruction in rural Taiwan), and this 'exotic' quality seems to have only augmented his huge popularity in mainland China.

## 10. Faye Wong, "Sky"

music: Yang Minghuang

lyrics: Huang Guilan

Why is my sky dripping wet tears  
Why is the face of my sky always grey?  
Floating toward the other side of the world  
Letting loneliness invade its every corner  
The sky is painted over by long yearning

Is your sky hung with clouds of thought?  
Might your sky have a cold moon?  
Exiled to the other side of the world  
Letting loneliness invade night after night  
The sky conceals deep yearning

When will our two skies become one?  
When will our two skies connect?  
Waiting on opposite sides of the world  
Letting loneliness laugh off year after year  
The sky is piled with layer after layer of yearning

I hope the sky never again drips with wet tears  
I hope the sky is never again covered by a grey face

**Note:** Faye Wong, known in the US primarily for her role in Hong Kong film-maker Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express*, emerged as perhaps the most popular female vocalist in the Chinese-speaking world in the 1990's. Born in Beijing and (until recently) based in Hong Kong, fluent in Cantonese and Mandarin, as well as Euro-American pop cultural currents, she is eminently well-positioned to thrive in the transnational marketplace. Accused of being both quirkily individualistic and overly imitative of foreign musical and stylistic models (e.g. Bjork, the Cranberries, the Cocteau Twins) in Hong Kong, Wong has turned increasingly to collaboration with alternative rock musicians from her native Beijing, at the same time as her pop efforts have come to define the sonic landscape of mainland China in the 1990's. The second selection, "Sky" has been particularly popular in the PRC, where karaoke has become the primary means through which pop music is promoted and enjoyed. Indeed, we might well wonder if that new medium has begun to shape popular musical style, instrumentation, lyrical content, and melodic range.