

***Musica Practica*: The Sound of the Beijing New Worker Band**

Yurou Zhong

Introduction

On International Workers' Day 2022, the Beijing-based New Worker Band announced on its social media accounts its third name change in twenty years. The new name, Gucang 谷仓 (Barn), takes effect after the release of its fourteenth album, which is its last under the name of Xin gongren 新工人 (New Worker).¹ Since its inception in 2002, the group, first called the Migrant Worker and Youth Art Troupe, then the New Worker Art Troupe (2010), and later the New Worker Band (2019), has become one of the most recognizable cultural hubs for China's three hundred million migrant workers. Wading through uncertain political tides, the group has remained agile in its capacity to embrace change and has demonstrated how culture and art exploring a new working-class consciousness could survive and even thrive in postsocialist China.

Consisting of migrant workers from across the country, the group has been producing art works about the workers, for the workers, and by the workers. Hosting a workers' art festival and touring around the country, the group has made close contacts with other workers' groups in and outside mainland China.² Its numerous forms of cultural production—literature, music, theater, film, Spring Festival galas—have earned the group an international reputation and attracted many foreign visitors, such as the Japanese dramatist Daizō Sakurai and the then Brazilian Minister of Culture Marta Suplicy. “Going to Picun” (the place where the band was based before the 2017 eviction and where the Migrant Workers Home and the Tongxin Experimental School are still located)³ has become a slogan among a coterie of international intellectuals, artists, and cultural activists as a trope for general progressivism. The group has also cultivated amicable relations with domestic and international newspapers and agencies such as the *China Youth Daily*, the Associated Press (US), Agence France-Presse, and the *Lianhe Morning Post* (Singapore). During the last few rounds of evictions, news coverage of Picun may have contributed to the temporary survival of the Migrant Workers Home and the Tongxin Experimental School, but it was hardly enough to exempt them from future evictions.

A rich array of artistic output and social engagements often overshadows the group's musical productions. Sun Heng, one of the group's founders, remarked, “Many people forget that we started with music” (Liu 2019: 119). The group has come a long way since its debut album, *Tianxia dagong shi yijia* 天下打工是一家 (*Workers of the World Are One Family*, 2004), the royalties from which provided the initial funds to set up the group's headquarters and afforded the members opportunities to explore various art forms. Among these, two stand out. One is the group's Spring Festival galas, which were held annually from 2012 to 2018. An instant media sensation, these galas, featuring parodies of the state-sponsored Spring Festival extravaganzas, were held as celebrations for workers who could not make the long trip home. The former CCTV host of the state-sponsored galas and investigative journalist, Cui Yongyuan, served as emcee for several consecutive years, crediting them as the smallest, warmest galas that he had ever hosted, instantly putting them into the limelight of the national stage.⁴ The other equally visible form of output is that of the Picun Literature Group,⁵ churn-

ing out star members such as Fan Yusu, a talented domestic-worker-cum-writer whose sharp and yet humane portrayal of urban life garnered critical acclaim and earned her international coverage through the *Guardian* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. In contrast, far less glamorously but more steadily, the band has produced fourteen albums, and staged more than seven hundred live performances across the country without producing any individual star worker-musician or hit songs.⁶ In spite of being overshadowed by other more successful art forms, music was noticeably prioritized, as the group's name change from the more inclusive "art troupe" to the narrower "band" indicates.

That decision took place on New Year's Day 2019, when touring members of the then art troupe convened for a postperformance meeting in Zunyi, Guizhou Province, in southwestern China. Since Zunyi was where the Chinese Communist Party redefined its leadership during the historic Long March, the band deemed it an auspicious time and place to rename and reinvent itself on its own "Long March" following the mass eviction. The band's New Year's resolution was its renewed pledge to a sharpened focus on music. Of particular interest in this article is the unique status music has enjoyed in this group. Why is music so important to China's new worker-artists, and what does their music sound like? How has their fixation on music and their musical practice influenced the formation and development of the new working class? If music is inevitably social and political, then what does the sound of the new workers tell us about the new political economy of postsocialist China?

Musica Practica

When asked about reasons for the group's name change from troupe to band, both Sun Heng and Xu Duo, two founding members and leaders of the group, referred to its early origins and their own self-identification as musicians.⁷ Sun was a music teacher in Kaifeng, Henan, before becoming a migrant worker in Beijing in 1998. He found his calling when playing for fellow workers at a construction site. Teamed up with four other musicians, Sun launched the group with a debut performance on International Workers' Day 2002. One of the four musicians was Xu Duo, a self-identified rocker and rebel. Upon joining the group, Xu experienced an awakening of

“class consciousness,” identifying no longer as an individual “I” but a collective “we.” A similar metamorphosis happened to the group, evidenced by the first name change from “migrant worker” to “new worker” in 2010. The second name change from “troupe” to “band” in 2019 doubled down on the importance of music as a special medium for representing the new workers.

To understand the significance, I borrow Roland Barthes’s term *musica practica*, which refers to the amateur musical practices in the nineteenth century that valorized “the music one plays” over “the music one listens to” (Barthes [1977] 1988: 149–54). The term denotes both the music compositions and the act of playing music. While Barthes laments the rise of passive music consumption—aided by the music industry—over active music playing, other critics disagree and are more sanguine about the prospects of *musica practica*. Michael Chanan (1994: 30) calls it “an authentic object of popular pleasure, an embodiment of the human need for community,” and Jacques Attali ([1977] 1985: 10–11, 20) foresees the advent of “composition” in the age of electronic music, thus ending the reign of “repetition” as an unsustainable motor for the profit-seeking record industry. In Barthes’s defense, the potential for rediscovering *musica practica* beyond nineteenth-century bourgeois culture was not completely ruled out, for he imagines the music player less as an “actor,” “interpreter,” or “technician” of music and more as someone who could “operate” the music and “draw it into an unknown praxis,” thus discovering the true value of “composing” (Barthes [1977] 1988: 153). In this sense, the concept resonates with what ethnomusicologist Christopher Small (1998: 50) has termed as “musicking”—approaching music as “an activity” and “a way of knowing our world.”

For the New Worker Band, *musica practica* consists of three related aspects—music production, live performances, and the musical communities and social relationships the band cultivates and explores. It places a premium on “*practica*” with temporal and spatial connotations. Being practice-oriented rather than production-bound or profit-driven, the band members understand their *musica practica* as a continuous, never-ending process. This no-limits approach is simultaneously temporal, artistic, spatial, and social. It is temporal and artistic, insofar as it integrates all three aspects of musical activities into one continuous whole, while maximizing the autonomy with which the workers can experiment with their own art. It is spatial and

social, in that it takes the band and its music on tours all over China, helps it reach an estimated half-million in live audiences, and forms friendships and relationships beyond album making and live performances. The band's *musica practica* creates, in effect, what Dai Jinhua (1999) calls a "shared space," in which different and sometimes surprising players meet to ponder the future of a new class in formation, a point to which the article will return. It bears pointing out that recognizing the special position of music among the new workers does not evince the uniqueness of their musical practice, for all bands engage in these three activities with different emphases and degrees of success. Rather, the recognition of uniqueness indicates their own take on music as an unusual medium through which they explore their own voices as main stakeholders in the making of the new working class and probe the unknown praxis of postsocialism in China. If Barthes was interested in reviving *musica practica*, then the new workers are players who can rejuvenate, and are rejuvenating, the old bourgeois music culture to include a consideration of what cultures of labor in the twenty-first century could sound like. Pivoting the band's practice on Barthes's original concept, we listen closely to the band's thirteenth album, *Cong tou yue* 从头越 (*From the Top*, 2019), for musical clues to the making of a new working class and its evolving *musica practica*.

The Making of the New Working Class

Immediately upon its release, *From the Top* (2019), the band's most expensive and technologically sophisticated album to date, was warmly embraced by the group's supporters. It received critical attention from both music critics and cultural studies scholars, culminating in much discussion in two issues of the journal *Refeng* 热风 (*Router*) (Liu 2019; Zhang 2019; Cui 2019; Xu 2019). Some critics hail this "professional-sounding" new album as hugely "important" and "idealistic" (Zhang 2019: 15, 18), acknowledging it as a solid step toward "heightening the band's musicality and expressiveness" (Cui 2019: 27). Others raise pointed questions, given the fact that the ten tracks traverse such different genres as rock, pop, and folk, and are composed and sung by five different members with three additional lyricists: Is there any collectively recognizable musical profile of new workers beyond

their shared labeling? And do such diverse musical productions signal “a lack of subjectivity” (Xu 2019: 30)?⁸

Among all ten tracks, the cross-pollination of musical genres and elements is so consistent that it is audible within each song. Xu Duo contributes two of the most rock and roll-sounding songs—“Dongtian li de youji duiyuan” 冬天里的游击队员 (“Guerrilla Fighters of the Winter”) and “Xin shiyue” 新十月 (“New October”)—weaving into the former an interesting reference to the Italian folksong “Bella Ciao” and grafting onto the latter a segment of 3/4 waltz time. Lu Liang, a former miner, offers a musical ethnography through three pop-sounding songs “Kuanggong xiongdi” 矿工兄弟 (“Miner Brothers”), “Zhege dongtian” 这个冬天 (“This Winter”), and “Qifeng de ye” 起风的夜 (“Windy Night”), all veering heavily toward glam metal. Jiang Guoliang continues the journey of the new workers along the “Xizang nanlu” 西藏南路 (“Southern Tibet Road”) in straightforward pop-rock, while Jiang Jie sings a folksy pop tune in “Bao chunhui” 报春晖 (“Repaying the Spring Sun”) that fuses classical and vernacular poetry. Finally, Sun Heng, the lead folk singer in the band, maintains his folk profile in “Juli” 距离 (“Distance”) but experiments with jazz and funk in “Wo congwei jiang ziji zhaodao” 我从未将自己找到 (“I’ve Never Found Myself”) while rearranging the album’s concluding track—the twentieth anniversary version of his “Xiangqi na yinian” 想起那一年 (“Remembering That Year”)—with a reggae beat.

When asked to respond to the critical doubts cast upon the band’s musical language, creative subjectivity, and ability to represent all Chinese new workers, both Xu Duo and Sun Heng conceded that the band has a long way to go in developing its musical profile since, after all, the whole point of its name change in 2019 was to focus on music. In describing the band’s eclectic palette in *From the Top*, Xu Duo used the word *pinpan* 拼盘 (*mélange*) and Sun Heng emphasized diversity as the tenet holding together such an unusual band with multiple potential lead singers and composers (interviews, Feb. 21, March 5). The two band leaders also acknowledged that although allowing everyone their due artistic expression was the only way that the band could exist, the members had agreed to experiment with a more “collective composition” for their forthcoming work. However, both agreed that there could be no doubt about their status as new workers or their repre-

sentational legitimacy. Sun Heng objected to the critics' assumption that new workers' art should assume a certain musical profile—specifically, “folksy” and “grassroots”—retorting that any attempt to fit the band into a certain acoustic stereotype would be “discriminatory” (interview, March 5). The diversity of musical genres embraced by the band, in fact, reflects the changing demographics of the three hundred million new workers. Many of the second-generation workers grew up or have lived most of their lives in cities and have musical tastes similar to their urban counterparts. Therefore, to question the musical predilection of the band as being too similar to the music made in the city is to circumscribe—or worse, deny—musical tastes and cultural needs of the changing breed of new workers. More importantly, the group's self-referential and self-reflexive name change from “migrant workers” to “new workers” articulates its will to embrace a more class-conscious self-representation—a rationale best illustrated by the slogan painted at the entrance of the group's own museum in Picun, “Without our own culture, we have no history. Without our own history, we have no future.”

What the band members and their critics disagree on is, in fact, not so much the representability, subjectivity, or class consciousness of the group but the merit of their musical productions. While the critics remain unconvinced that these amateur worker-musicians have produced first-rate artwork representing the best the new working class has to offer, the band members have the strong conviction that the fruition of new working class art demands that they take all the time they need and experiment with all genres, recording technologies, and arrangement methods available. In fact, both the band leaders and critics agree that the group's renewed focus on its music was a sensible move in order to hone its craft, and necessary “for music to go back to music” (Xu 2019: 33). What this creative and critical disagreement crystallizes is precisely the band members' faith in their music. Far more than an expression of self-confidence, it raises again the question of “Why music?” for new workers in a theoretically significant way while heightening the polemics of the perennial question “Can the subaltern speak?”

On the one hand, this latter question has lost steam, since the new workers—unlike the small-holding peasants in mid-nineteenth-century France

described by Marx ([1869] 1975: 124) as those who “cannot represent themselves” and “must be represented”—are fully capable of *Selbstdarstellung* (self-representation). On the other hand, that question takes on new urgency insofar as it highlights the real problem of recognition. In Marx’s formulation, the true stake of “enforcing” one’s class interest (124) marks the difference between the act of speaking and the ability to make what one says count—that is, the difference between representation and recognition. In this sense, the worker-musicians run the risk of becoming the old-style subalterns who can speak or sing but may never be heard. The question of the new workers’ preference of and loyalty to music thus gains new political poignancy when we update the old question and ask “Why do subalterns sing?” and “Why do they have to sing?”

The new workers’ conviction about their music allows them a capacious, sustainable realm in which they can be, in E. P. Thompson’s (1966: 9) words, “present at [their] own making.” More specifically, this conviction carries with it two critiques that are arguably best articulated musically. First, a critique of neoliberalism is visible in the band’s distance from the record industry and audible through its eclectic genre choices. Aside from its initial record deal with Jingwen Records and recent collaboration with Taiwanese Rock Records in distribution, the band has refrained from commercial signing, preferring independent distribution, and deliberately made its work available for free on Bilibili, YouTube, and Youku. The band members, increasingly active on social media such as Weibo, TikTok, and WeChat, choose to earn their own money through GoFundMe-type online fundraisers while seeking to translate their online following into offline partnerships. Granted that the band’s distance from the record industry might well be a testament to the industry’s decline, its position on rock voices a strong criticism on its own terms. As the most visible rocker in the band, Xu Duo has gone on record to brand mainstream Chinese rock as “neoliberal.”⁹ Ethnomusicologist Cynthia Wong (2005) arrives at a similar conclusion in her study of the establishment of the Chinese rock industry as part and parcel of the post-1989 neoliberal reform. Converting from a liberal-minded, individualist rocker to a collectively minded worker-musician, Xu Duo’s personal transformation is indicative of the crucial step that must be taken in search of a musical language that befits the self-representation of the new

working class and their rightful dissent from the socioeconomic status quo. The antiestablishment rock spirit could only be authentic insofar as the new worker-musicians heed its neoliberal trappings. In this regard, both the collaborative nature of musicking and the fact that there are no superstars among them bode well for the worker-musicians. At the same time, to find the sound of the new workers, the band has to reach beyond rock and roll and experiment with a more diversified range of musical genres. More than an organizing principle or a stylistic choice, the band's pride in its indie status and its insistence on the plurality of music genres despite certain critical disapproval is itself an anti-neoliberal act.

The second critique delivered through the band members' convictions about their music is a critical historical overview of the working-class culture that grappled with its success, its hollowing out and self-negation, as well as a future of hope and uncertainties. While the band in its early years exhibited unmistakable ambivalence or even aversion toward the socialist legacy of the working-class culture (demonstrated by the members' resistance to self-identify as "new workers" for the first eight years), with its name change it is coming to terms with its own emerging class consciousness. It bears pointing out that scholarly opinions vary on the feasibility of classifying this new group of three hundred million migrant laborers—roughly a quarter of the world's total mobile labor force—into any single category (Rofel 2015: 832). While some agree that a Marxist class definition of "new workers" is fitting (Carrillo and Goodman 2012), others argue that this group is too large and too diverse to share common economic and political interests and is better loosely described as "subalterns" at the bottom rung of society (Q. Li 2004; Sun 2014), or as going through "an incomplete process of proletarianization" (Pun 2016). The band's evolving position signals a similar struggle—although more experiential than theoretical—which is as wary of nostalgia for the return of the socialist past as it is uncertain of euphoria over a new working class.

The decision to embrace the collective classification is, therefore, more of an attempt to be continuously present in the making of the new working class. The making, naming, and representation of that group would likely yield better results in the workers' search for economic and social justice if they themselves become the main stakeholders in the process rather than

conceding the right to other players such as the state, cultural elites, or forces of capital. If postsocialist China—which David Harvey (2005: 120–51) dubs “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics”—has enabled the coexistence and prosperity of such contradictory forces as the authoritarian state and market economy, one wonders if it would allow disillusionment with the socialist working-class culture to inform attempts to revive its legacies. The proliferation of mass literacy and the discourse of socialist egalitarianism has theoretically prepared the average migrant worker with the basic language to make sense of the value of their own labor for postsocialist China in a globalized world. Although the formation of the new workers’ self-representation takes effort, as sociologist and activist Lü Tu (2013, 2015, 2017) vividly documents in her serial research, postsocialist new workers are better prepared for this, literacy-wise, than their predecessors. Although working-class leadership was one of the glories of yesteryear whose contemporary resurrection is hardly within sight, the fact remains, as Sun Heng reminds his band members, that “the status of the working class is still in our Constitution.”¹⁰ The group takes education seriously and since its founding has been working on educational initiatives including the Tongxin Experimental School for the children of migrant workers, as well as the Workers’ University based in Pinggu, Beijing. Both schools notably feature a music program. The group’s increasing emphasis on the musical and artistic activities of an emerging new working class echoes Mao Zedong’s seminal *Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art* (1942) that certified the leadership of the workers, soldiers, and peasants by assigning art and literature to their service with the corollary of the proletarianization of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals and the intellectualization of the workers, peasants, and soldiers—whom Mao identified as 90 percent of the population. *Musica practica* surfaces as the workers’ best bet for creating a legible, audible culture and a future of their own. On the one hand, the sonic abstractness allows both militant messaging of class consciousness and interpretive ambiguity if needed. On the other hand, the temporal and artistic capaciousness that comes with practice, repetition, adjustment, and in-person communication nurtures the continuous self-exploration and expression of an emerging new working class—a class that bears a resemblance to its revolutionary predecessors but faces unique postsocialist challenges. In short, the workers’ *musica practica*—a uniquely

sustainable, malleable model of cultural production—is at once a criticism of the neoliberal status quo, an investment in their own formation and transformation, as well as a critical, ongoing negotiation and exploration of the future of both the workers and their culture in postsocialist China.

The Political Economy of *Musica Practica*

Despite the band's confidence in its *musica practica*, the actual practice of its music does come with doubts. During our interview in March 2020, Sun Heng confessed to an increasing sense of “uncertainty.” This is rather unexpected, coming from the group's founding leader who has gone on record to profess his belief in and approach to music—specifically folk music—as an important instrument of social work and activism, citing personal heroes such as Zheng Zhi-hua, Lin Sheng-xiang, Woody Guthrie, and Víctor Jara. My surprise surprised Sun, who offered a musical example from the band's recent album of what he meant by uncertainty.

The song was “I've Never Found Myself,” composed and sung by Sun with lyrics by worker-poet Xiao Hai.¹¹ The poem, collected in the new workers' annual literary anthology, resonated strongly with Sun upon first reading. Sun posed a rhetorical question: “Isn't life an unending process of trying to find oneself?” The jazzy tune is set at a leisurely ninety-six beats per minute and delivered in Sun's signature Shaanxi dialect. Slightly shy of seven minutes long, the song weaves together all seven stanzas of the original poem, with three major bridges featuring gripping electric guitar solos built between every two stanzas, and an added eighth segment that is a nearly one-minute coda that repeats the title line sixteen times: “I've never found myself.” The first two stanzas set up the basic structure of a Sisyphean search for self, inevitably starting with “I thought I could find myself” and ending with “I've never really found myself.” The third and fourth stanzas depict the bittersweet “temptation” of the search along with its transient comforts, such as a “warm embrace” and “dependence of a soul,” but “somehow I don't know how the final story changed.” The fifth and sixth stanzas contrast “my belief that I could live so proudly” and “my” reality of having tried “tens and thousands of ways of fighting for a living” without anyone paying the slightest attention. The seventh stanza concludes, “I have

found the furtive sun / I have found the lonesome moon / But I have never really found myself / Just like some wild grass.” It is unclear if Xiao Hai has in mind Lu Xun’s classic prose poem collection *Wild Grass* (1927) in concluding the doomed existential quest, but the trope of insignificant yet interminable wild grass is a powerful antinomy to the frustration “I” consistently experiences. Musically, the ennui and disappointment of the lost self is balanced by a surprisingly bright and flavorful sonic persona embodied in Sun’s tenor voice with a Shaanxi inflection. Poetic sentimentality is interrupted and countered by funky beats. Each round of thwarted search in verse is answered by a charging trumpet bugling for the next call to arms. Although there are altogether twenty repetitions—with slight variants—of “I’ve never found myself” throughout the song and the last minute is dedicated to a soliloquy of the same verse, the song sounds unexpectedly upbeat and ends on a high note in a trumpet solo.

Sun explained that the inventive approach stemmed from his long-term observation that the Shaanxi local opera *qinqiang* 秦腔 had similarities with certain African musical traditions. Through consultation with the album producer Jiang Jie, Sun treated this song as an opportunity to venture a comparative study of *qinqiang* and funk, putting in practice the band’s credo of genre diversity. Although confident of the need to conduct musical experiments, Sun is less certain on other fronts. For one, neither critics nor band members can assert that the band has found its sound. For another, the existential doubt is as much personal as collective, especially as the band embarks on its new phase of focusing on its *musica practica*. The underlying perseverance notwithstanding, the sense of uncertainty points to something much larger than an individual new worker’s struggle in the city. What can a single new worker do when the city becomes increasingly uninhabitable and the countryside unreturnable? As one of the biggest migrant labor forces that has ever walked the earth, where do one hundred million second-generation new workers who have no urban *hukou* 户口 (household registration) and little rural experience really belong? Will China direct its new working class toward urbanization or rural revitalization? Last but not least, in Sun’s own words, “Shouldn’t we understand who will play the leading role in rural reform?” (interview, March 5). These unanswerable questions—or, unknown praxis—are the unsounded background of Sun’s

personal and the band's collective existential uncertainty. Therefore, the new workers' search for the best musical language for self-representation functions as a trope for the search for their own future, for the solution to the Three Rural Issues (agriculture, rural areas, and peasants), and for an environmentally friendly model of urbanization and rural reconstruction.

Despite a general sense of uncertainty, the band has found itself increasingly relying on two modes of *musica practica* in recent years: the "Earth Folk" concert tour and the "Village Song" projects. The organic culmination of the spatial and social dimensions of *musica practica*, the concert tour was initiated in 2014 and has taken the band all over China—to villages and counties in provinces like Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou. The Village Song project, originally a by-product of the concert tours, became more prominent in 2018 as the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China announced in October 2017 a new state policy that shifted gears from urbanization of the countryside to strategies for "Rural Revitalization" *xiangcun zhenxing* 乡村振兴. Following on the heels of the new state policy, the band's outreach saw a spike after the 2017 winter eviction. As village or town level governments received funding for cultural and artistic activities that would in turn empower Rural Revitalization, they sought the band's service in creating their individual village songs. As a result, the band has produced a total of twenty-six village songs in the past four years and recently decided to adopt the less class-contentious and more agrarian-sounding name of Gucang (Barn). By leaning in on Rural Revitalization, the band has demonstrated its agility in embracing changes—an agility that has aided it in navigating uncertain waters when exploring the sound of labor in postsocialist China. Specifically, two developments can be observed in the band's negotiation with political uncertainties.

First, through music the band has reinvented itself as an NGO and a certain type of *gongyi jijinhui* 公益基金会 (pro-public benefit foundation). The band's own language defining the "Earth Folk" initiative states that it is dedicated to "nonprofit performances and communications" in collaboration with "NGOs, agricultural co-ops, universities, and businesses across China," promoting "cultural ideals in support of environmental protection, rural-urban mutual aid, and dignified labor." In a GoFundMe-like appeal, the band broke down its budget for one tour that consisted of ten perfor-

mances and ten music workshops, and cost a total of RMB 187,860 (table 1).¹² It is noteworthy that almost one-third of the total budget is dedicated to “project management,” which is further broken down to “personnel salary and social securities,” “management fee for publicly raised charity,” and “administrative and executive costs.” This particular approach redefines the value of the band’s music. If its use value lies in self-representation, both an expression of workers’ art and a cultural event to be consumed as it occurs, then the exchange value is defined by the survival of the group. Ostensibly a hireable service, the real exchange value of the band’s music is, in the long run, not measured by a monetary abstraction of its use value but by the continuous, sustained connectivity between the band and its audiences, city and countryside, different NGOs, and interested parties with same cultural ideals. The band disrupts the linear development of what Attali designated as the four-stage development of music—sacrifice, representation, repetition, composition¹³—by downplaying the third stage, repetition, which accumulates surplus value through the reproduction of records, and accentuating the second (representation) and the fourth (composition). The band’s loyalty to composition and representation effectively circumvents the capital-oriented mode of repetition and actively redefines the purpose of music making.

Second, the band acknowledges the fraught presence of the state in the negotiation of the future of the rural, the urban, and the emerging new working class. In the same budget breakdown for the band’s two major projects, “Music Workshop for Migrant and Left-behind Children” and “Earth Folk Concert Tour,” both meals and lodging as well as fees incurred by arranging for equipment are marked as covered by the “host”—more often than not, local authorities at the level of town or village. The band establishes connections with these local hosts through social media, word of mouth, and inner networks among new workers. Two examples of these hosts are the village authorities that the band encountered on its 2018 tour at Zhongguan village in Guizhou Province and Yulintan village in Sichuan Province; in both villages, the band drew huge crowds of previously unseen numbers.¹⁴ In addition, these local governments have solicited the service of the band in creating the aforementioned village song, which usually costs RMB 20,000 per song and takes about a month to complete.¹⁵

The state-sponsored Rural Revitalization indicated for the workers a

Table 1. Budget for the band’s GoFundMe-like fundraiser (September 7–9, 2018)

| <i>Project</i> | <i>Budget (RMB)</i> |
|---|--|
| 1. Music Workshop for Migrant and Left-Behind Children | 36,000 |
| 1.1 Transportation | $1,000 \times 2 \text{ people} \times 10 \text{ workshops} = 20,000$ |
| 1.2 Labor | $800 \times 2 \text{ people} \times 10 \text{ workshops} = 16,000$ |
| 1.3 Meals and lodging | 0 (covered by hosts) |
| 1.4 Equipment | 0 (covered by hosts) |
| 2. Earth Folk Concert Tour | 90,000 |
| 2.1 Transportation | $1,000 \times 5 \text{ people} \times 10 \text{ concerts} = 50,000$ |
| 2.2 Labor | $800 \times 5 \text{ people} \times 10 \text{ concerts} = 40,000$ |
| 2.3 Meals and lodging | 0 (covered by hosts) |
| 2.4 Equipment | 0 (covered by hosts) |
| 3. Project Management | 61,860 |
| 3.1 Personnel salaries and social security | $5,000 \times 1 \text{ person} \times 12 \text{ mos} = 60,000$ |
| 3.2 Management fee for publicly raised charity funds 1% | $186,000 \times 1\% = 1860$ |
| 3.3 Administrative and executive costs | 0 (covered by the project executive team) |
| Total | 187,860 |

potential alignment between the official, macro policies and their own class position. Insofar as the shifted state policy aims to make the impoverished, environmentally challenged, aging countryside more prosperous, habitable, and populous, there is hope for realizing at least part of the new workers’ dream—“an inhabitable city and returnable countryside.” The abstract state intervention takes concrete shape as various levels of local authorities extend land contracting practices for another thirty years, increasing financial lending and technological aid to attract the nonagricultural population and promoting cultural initiatives such as “Love Your Hometown,” under which the village song project is funded. More importantly, local sponsorship denotes personal relations and connections that have the potential to align with what the band’s music activities aims to cultivate in the first place. As Lü Tu’s musical ethnography of the band’s tour in Yulintan illustrates, a

budding friendship between the band members and their village hosts—a local scholar named Fu Haihong whom they met at a workshop on rural art and culture, as well as the village party secretary—started from an appreciation of the band’s albums then took a personal and embodied form as the band traveled to the village, bringing about a live event that was far more than a simple representation of the band’s own music; it became a celebration of the village community and its local culture.¹⁶ Adapting with the times, the band’s *musica practica* steps into the “unknown praxis” of larger social, cultural, and political forces in the age of Rural Revitalization.

It bears pointing out that this particular unknown praxis regarding the rural has long occupied a central place in twentieth-century China, from the rural reconstruction movements to the modern Chinese mass education movements; from Mao Zedong’s ([1927] 1968) early study of the Hunan peasant movement to the series of rural reforms that largely determined the political landscape of the Chinese Revolution.¹⁷ The Three Rural Issues are gaining new urgency as an unevenly industrialized China, having mobilized its migrant labor on an unprecedented scale to become the world’s second largest economy, now faces overcapacity, industrial transformation, and environmental challenges. Rural Revitalization is but the newest development in this century-long negotiation between national industrialization and rural reform. Albeit progressive in its proposal, this new vision of the Chinese countryside, and by extension the future of postsocialist China, is uncertain. The only certain thing is that the tall order of reviving the socialist legacy of working-class culture while at the same time rejuvenating the old bourgeois culture of *musica practica* cannot be accomplished without the group’s agility and perseverance in constantly recognizing and consistently working with all kinds of uncertainties. By staying open to state institutions at all levels that seek and accept alliances with new workers—either because of or in spite of their class identification and socialist aspirations—the band keeps alive the prospect of a “shared space” in which the members can expand and consolidate their *musica practica* as both their livelihood and activism (Dai 1999; Yin 2020; Bu 2021).

The band’s other headquarters in Pinggu District, Beijing, northeast of Picun, serves as a case in point. The headquarters has been the location of the Workers’ University and the place where the group cultivates its

farm. After the mass eviction, the band relocated its studio to Pinggu. The Pinggu base has grown into a shared space, where the group, the Pinggu local government, and the China New Rural Planning and Design Institute coexist and collaborate. Accordingly, the new workers' *musica practica* has become a shared realm where the new working class in formation can develop in conjunction with different parties, forces, and interests, grow beyond an event and into a constant force contributing to the realization of a sharable future.

However confident the New Worker Band is in having found an artistic and cultural medium to approximate this future, the actual conclusion of the Sisyphean search for the inhabitable city and returnable countryside remains uncertain. Suspended between the band members' adopted urban life on the outskirts of Beijing and the left-behind rural hometowns to which they struggle to return, Sun Heng sings the concluding track of *From the Top*, "Recall That Year," pondering the answer to their own *musica practica*:

The river at home is now rising
The wanderer afar has to wander further away
The peach blossoms are blooming at the front door
When can the kids come home?

Notes

I thank Paola Iovene, Ling Zhang, Gal Gvili, Xing Fan, Farzaneh Hemmasi, and the anonymous reviewers for their insights. Special thanks to Xu Duo and Sun Heng for granting me long interviews and for continuing to answer many questions afterward.

- 1 According to Xu Duo (pers. comm., December 19, 2022), although the name of the band has now changed, the status of the new workers and the history of the New Worker Band remain unchanged. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.
- 2 Among the group's numerous partners are the Power Bass D Workers Band from Shenzhen, Black Hand Nakasi (BHN) Workers Band from Taiwan, the Women's Community Flourishing Art Group from Hong Kong, the International Migrants Alliance (IMA), and Paradon from Thailand.
- 3 The eviction took place in these suburban villages in preparation for the change in land ownership from collective ownership to city property to be sold for development. See *Paper* 2017.
- 4 The gala started encountering censorship in 2016 and has downsized ever since. Cui hosted the gala in 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2017 and helped publicize it in 2018.

- 5 See articles by Maghiel van Crevel, Chun Chun Ting, and Zhang Huiyu in this issue.
- 6 The full discography of the thirteen albums that the New Workers Band produced between 2004 and late 2019: *Workers of the World Are One Family* (2004), *Wei laodongzhe gechang* 为劳动者歌唱 (*Singing for the Laborers*, 2007), *Women de shijie women de mengxiang* 我们的世界我们的梦想 (*Our World, Our Dream*, 2009), *Fangjin women de shouzhang* 放进我们的手掌 (*Into Our Hands*, 2010), *Jiu zheme ban* 就这么办 (*Let's Do It*, 2011), *Fan guai* 反拐 (*Protesting Child Abduction*, 2012), *Jia zai nali* 家在哪里 (*Where Is Home?*, 2012), *Laodong yu zunyan* 劳动与尊严 (*Work and Dignity*, 2013), *Yu jiqi tiaowu de ren* 与机器跳舞的人 (*Dancing with Machines*, 2014), *Wo yao dasheng chang* 我要大声唱 (*I Want to Sing Loudly*, 2016), *Hong wuyue* 红五月 (*Red May*, 2017), *Xin gongren* 新工人 (*New Workers*, 2019), and *Cong tou yue* 从超越 (*From the Top*, 2019).
- 7 I interviewed Xu Duo 许多 and Sun Heng 孙恒 on February 21 and March 5, 2020, respectively (cited in the text as “interviews” with the month and day).
- 8 The five composers are Xu Duo, Sun Heng, Jiang Guoliang, Lu Liang, and Pang Jie. Singers include Xu Duo, Sun Heng, Jiang Guoliang, Lu Liang, and Jiang Jie. The three additional lyricists are Cai Qijiao, Hou Liqi, and Xiao Hai.
- 9 See “Zuoyi yaogun qingnian zhi xin gongren yishutuan” 左翼摇滚青年之新工人艺术团 (The Leftist Rock Youth’s New Worker Art Troupe), <http://m.wywxwk.com/content.php?classid=23&id=356779> (accessed February 12, 2023).
- 10 “Zuoyi yaogun qingnian zhi xin gongren yishutuan” 左翼摇滚青年之新工人艺术团 (The Leftist Rock Youth’s New Worker Art Troupe), <http://m.wywxwk.com/content.php?classid=23&id=356779> (accessed February 12, 2023).
- 11 See van Crevel’s article in this issue.
- 12 The band has several WeChat public platforms, including “Earth Folk” and “New Workers.” For Table 1, see Dadi minyao 大地民谣 (Earth Folk), “99 Gongyi ri” 99公益日 (September 9 Public Interest Day), September 5, 2018, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/FsNtqqA7raPjPE5sg2LMhQ>.
- 13 Attali ([1977] 1985: 20) believes that “beyond repetition, lies freedom. . . . Music is becoming *composition*.”
- 14 For two detailed accounts of the band’s touring experiences, see Lü Tu, “Bieyoudongtian de Mocang” 别有洞天的墨仓 (Mocang as A Place of Hidden Charms), November 20, 2018, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/NYk_liMlxhwtzOQFLVfzuQ; Lü Tu, “Yulintan de nü’er” 鱼鳞滩的女儿 (The Daughter of Yulintan), November 24, 2018, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/GGSZ9Eas_z5_ATiXX6IDjw.
- 15 See Lü Tu’s talk in this issue.
- 16 Lü Tu, “Yulintan de nü’er” 鱼鳞滩的女儿 (The Daughter of Yulintan), November 24, 2018, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/GGSZ9Eas_z5_ATiXX6IDjw.
- 17 James Yen (1931) led early stages of the Rural Reconstruction Movement in conjunction with mass education movements that bifurcated into the “old” versus “new” mass education

movements (Tao [1936] 1991). Recent decades have seen the resurgence of the tradition in the “New Rural Reconstruction Movement” championed by Wen Tiejun (2005) and Li Changping (2013).

References

- Attali, Jacques. (1977) 1985. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barthes, Roland. (1977) 1988. *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday.
- Bu, Wei 卜卫. 2021. “Yinyue yu ‘gongtong chuangzao shenghuo—Xin gongren yuetuan 19 nian” 音乐与“共同创造生活”——新工人乐团19年 (“Music and ‘Creating Life Together’—Nineteen Years of the New Worker Band”). *Renmin yinyue* 人民音乐 (*People's Music*), no. 9: 88–91.
- Carrillo, Beatriz, and David S. G. Goodman. 2012. “Introduction: The Sociopolitical Challenge of Economic Change—Peasants and Workers in Transformation.” In *China's Peasants and Workers: Changing Class Identities*, edited by Beatriz Carrillo and David S. G. Goodman, 1–14. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Chanan, Michael. 1994. *Musica Practica: The Social Practice of Western Music from Gregorian Chant to Postmodernism*. New York: Verso.
- Cui, Ke 崔柯. 2019. “Manman xiong guan manman ge: Xin gongren yuetuan zhuanji *Cong tou yue ting hou gan*” 漫漫雄关漫漫歌——新工人乐团专辑 “从头越” 听后感 (“Long Journey and Overflowing Songs: Post-listening Notes of the New Workers Band's *From the Top*”). *Refeng* 热风 (*Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies*), no. 15: 19–28. http://www.cul-studies.com/Uploads/image/20191215/20191215201151_18148.pdf.
- Dai, Jinhua 戴锦华. 1999. *Yinxing shuxie: Jiushi niandai Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* 隐形书写: 九十年代中国文化研究 (*Invisible Writing: Studies on Chinese Culture in the 1990s*). Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Li, Changping 李昌平. 2013. “Yong ziji de huayu jieshi ‘sannong’ wenti” 用自己的话语解释“三农”问题 (“Using My Own Words to Explain the ‘Three Rural Issues’”). *Shehui kexue luntan* 社会科学论坛 (*Tribune of Social Sciences*), no. 5: 123–35.
- Li, Qiang 李强. 2004. *Nongmingong yu zhongguo shehui fenceng* 农民工与中国社会分层 (*Rural Migrant Workers and Social Stratification in China*). Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe.

- Liu, Yafang 刘雅芳. 2019. "Chao jiefang zhi ge maijin de tingjue biji" 朝解放之歌迈进的听觉笔记——听新工人乐团和“从头越” ("Auditory Notes on Songs Marching toward Liberation: Listening to the New Workers Band and *From the Top*"). *Refeng* 热风 (*Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies*), no. 14: 115–128. http://www.cul-studies.com/Uploads/image/20190917/20190917123639_78601.pdf.
- Lü, Tu 吕途. 2013. *Zhongguo xin gongren: Mishi yu jueqi* 中国新工人: 迷失与崛起 (*Chinese New Workers: Lost and Rising Up*). Beijing: Falü chubanshe.
- Lü, Tu 吕途. 2015. *Zhongguo xin gongren: Wenhua yu mingyun* 中国新工人: 文化与命运 (*China's New Workers: Culture and Fate*). Beijing: Sanlian shudian.
- Lü, Tu 吕途. 2017. *Zhongguo xin gongren: Nügong zhuanji* 中国新工人: 女工传记 (*China's New Workers: Biographies of Women Workers*). Beijing: Sanlian shudian.
- Mao Zedong. (1927) 1968. *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Marx, Karl. (1869) 1975. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International.
- Paper. 2017. "Beijing tugai shidian" 北京土改试点 ("Land Reform Experiment in Beijing"). December 3. https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1890346?from=timeline&isappin stalled=0.
- Pun, Ngai. 2006. *Migrant Labor in China: Post-socialist Transformation*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Rofel, Lisa. 2015. Review of *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*, by Wanning Sun. *China Quarterly*, no. 233: 832–33.
- Small, Christopher. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Snow, Edgar. (1938) 1968. *Red Star over China*. New York: Grove.
- Sun, Wanning. 2014. *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tao, Xingzhi 陶行知. (1936) 1991. "Jiaoyu taozou" 教育逃走 ("Education Fled.") In *Tao Xingzhi quanji* 陶行知全集 (*The Complete Works of Tao Xingzhi*), vol. 3, 722–24. Chengdu: Sichuan jiaoyu chubanshe.
- Thompson, E. P. 1966. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage.
- Wen, Tiejun 温铁军. 2005. *Sannong wenti yu shiji fansi* 三农问题与世纪反思 (*Reflections on the Three Rural Issues at the Turn of the Century*). Beijing: Sanlian shudian.
- Wong, Cynthia. 2005. "Lost Lambs": Rock, Gender, Authenticity, and a Generational Response to Modernity in the People's Republic of China." PhD diss., Columbia University.

- Xu, Jinjing 许晶晶. 2019. “Xin gongren yinyue ‘xin’ zai hechu—Zhuanji *Cong tou yue* lingting biji” 新工人音乐“新”在何处? ——专辑 “从头越” 聆听笔记 (“What Is ‘New’ in the Music of the New Workers Band?”). *Refeng* 热风 (*Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies*), no. 15: 29–37. http://www.cul-studies.com/Uploads/image/20191215/20191215201151_18148.pdf.
- Yen, James. 1931. *Ting Hsien Experiment, 1930–1931*. Peking: National Association of the Mass Education Movement.
- Yin, Siyuan. 2020. “Cultural Production in the Working-class Resistance: Labour Activism, Gender Politics, and Solidarities.” *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 3: 418–41.
- Zhang, Mingtao 张明涛. 2019. “Xin shengyin, xin zhanchang, xin zhengcheng—Zhi xin gongren yuetuan de xin zhuanji *Cong tou yue*” 新声音、新战场、新征程——致新工人乐团的新专辑 “从头越” (“New Sound, New Battle, New Journey: To the New Worker Band’s New Album *From the Top*”). *Refeng* 热风 (*Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies*), no. 15: 14–18. http://www.cul-studies.com/Uploads/image/20191215/20191215201151_18148.pdf.