

Decentering the Feminist Self

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1. Introduction

Many of the ideological assumptions of feminist criticism—as the academic arm of the women's movement in the United States—automatically problematize the study of gender outside the mainstream of white America and in the Third World.¹ Although feminist scholars in most academic disciplines are currently debating how to broaden the perspective of feminist criticism to include the experiences of a wide spectrum of women from different classes, races, and cultures, feminist music critics seem unaware of what feminist ethnographer Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, 23) has referred to as the “crisis of difference” in feminism. I shall focus on some of the issues raised by this crisis in the context of my own work on gender ideology

1. Some of the critical issues that concern contemporary feminist scholars are raised in Harding 1986 and Haraway 1985.

among a group of musicians in China; however, I want to stress that this problem is not simply restricted to my research as an ethnomusicologist.² The need to evaluate the purposes and methodologies of feminist music criticism in general is one of the most crucial problems faced by all scholars interested in the study of music, gender, and sexuality.

2. The Problem

The degree to which music scholars seem to ignore the "crisis of difference" in feminist circles became apparent at the conference titled "Feminist Theory and Music: Toward a Common Language," held in Minneapolis in June of 1991. While the apparent premise of the conference was to bring together divergent perspectives and develop a "common language" for feminist music criticism, some of the participants were concerned about the poor representation of women of color and the absence of their potential contributions to the emerging discourse. In her written evaluation of the conference, Alice Cash (1991) states:

Although there were some complaints about the lack of papers about and by women of color and non-Western women it was explained that very few had answered the call for abstracts and even when actively so-

2. My interest in the area of music and gender began while conducting research on women in the narrative-arts community in Tianjin from August 1985 to August 1986, in February 1987, and again in December 1990 and January 1991. My first two trips to Tianjin were supported generously by the Fulbright-Hays Foundation and the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China of the National Academy of Sciences; the last trip was funded by the University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program. I also gratefully acknowledge Nankai University and the members of the Tianjin Municipal Narrative Arts Troupe for their invaluable assistance in my research. In addition, special thanks are due to Judith Peraino, Bonnie Wade, Marcia Herndon, and the U.C. Berkeley Discussion Group on Music and Sexuality for help in re-thinking some of the issues in this paper.

licited, few responded—a situation that requires more attention in the future. (p. 532)

The fact that women of color and non-Western women did not participate in significant numbers in a conference on feminist music criticism is not surprising, however, given the prevailing essentialist ideology that characterizes modern feminist inquiry. As Abu-Lughod (1990) explains:

Put simply, what happened was that women began speaking up and saying to whatever definition of womanhood was put forth by feminists, “That doesn’t include me and my experience. You can’t speak for all women.” (p. 23)

Indeed, such objections against feminist criticism are magnified tenfold when feminist scholars examine the experiences of women outside of the United States through the filter of American-style feminism.³

As an American feminist and as an ethnomusicologist studying gender ideology in China, I have myself become aware of the “crisis of difference” and the incongruities of an American feminist approach to the experiences of Chinese women, and yet I feel caught in the midst of a crisis of identities. On the one hand, I applaud the work of feminist music critics. By exploring the reasons behind the historical and social conditions that have excluded or trivialized the participation of women in Western music, feminist musicologists are raising many important and relevant issues. In addition, the field of ethnomusicology, a marginalized subdiscipline of musicology, stands to gain much politically within music departments as feminist critics deconstruct the discipline and consequently

3. For more information about the imperialist implications of feminist scholarship, see Lugones and Spelman 1983, Mohanty 1984, and Spivak 1987. See Shapiro 1991 for a discussion of ethnocentrism in some of the ethnomusicological research on music and gender.

shake the very foundations upon which traditional academic hierarchies are built.

On the other hand, as an ethnographer studying Chinese women, I recognize that the prevailing ideology underlying feminist criticism is sometimes incompatible with women's issues in a non-Western cultural setting. While this is certainly not a new revelation, the fact that feminist scholarship has by and large ignored this dilemma demands our attention. As outlined in the next section, the two extreme positions taken by American feminists with regard to their perception of the status of women in contemporary China demonstrate the incompatibility of Western and Chinese notions of gender—an incompatibility that has undermined our capacity to conduct meaningful research on gender ideology in the Chinese context.

The following paper retraces my steps as I made my way through the web of conflicting feminist and socialist ideologies in studying gender issues among Chinese women. During the course of my journey I discovered a way in which I could negotiate the apparent conflict between my identity as an American feminist and as an ethnographer of women's issues in a culture outside of mainstream white America. I begin with a brief look at the incongruities of the current social science literature on modern Chinese women that inspired me to address the "crisis of difference" within music scholarship.

3. The First Position: The Idealization of Chinese "Feminism"

With the advent of the May Fourth Incident in 1919, Chinese intellectuals singled out gender inequality as one of the obstacles for developing a united and democratic nation. They invoked "the unequal status of women in the Confucian family as a symbol of everything in Chinese culture that kept the nation weak" (Honig and Hershatter 1988, 2). The liberation of wom-

en became an important focal point not only for the May Fourth Movement, but also for the Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1921.

By the early 1970s, the emerging feminist movement in the United States was itself looking for alternatives to Western democracy and capitalism. Consequently, American feminists welcomed claims about the successful liberation of women in the People's Republic of China, and Chinese women were viewed as champions of the global feminist revolution. Accepting Chinese government rhetoric wholesale, American feminist scholars went on to construct their own idealized Chinese "feminism" according to Western ideals of self-determination by interpreting the early twentieth-century movements to abolish foot-binding and arranged marriage as feminist issues (Barlow 1985, 23).⁴

The idealization of the alleged liberated status of Chinese women came, not surprisingly, during a period when the United States was experiencing what Mosher (1990) describes as an "age of infatuation" with China:

It was perhaps only natural that as the Vietnam War dimmed America's faith in her own character and virtue, Communist China would begin to arouse brighter and kindlier emotions. China had, after all, come to be seen as the totalitarian antithesis of the democratic United States, a position that now seesawed into China's favor.... Those who went on to reject America's individualistic ethic and free market economy—as many did—found China an inspiring model of communal endeavor, and in the Cultural Revolution a noble experiment to purify an already selfless people. (p. 119)

This American image of the selfless and liberated Chinese masses was short-lived. Only a few months after Zhou Enlai's death in January of 1976, demonstrations in Beijing disrupted

4. One should point out that Barlow's criticism that Chinese "feminism" was invented in part through ideas from the West and did not necessarily serve the needs of Chinese women may be leveled at the Party as well as at American feminists.

the image of an orderly Chinese populace. After Mao's death in September of that same year, an increasingly virulent outpouring of anger against the excesses of the Cultural Revolution proved to be especially disorienting to those in the West who had glorified China's modern revolutionary heritage (Mosher 1990, 166-67).

Among feminist scholars, the realization that Chinese women had not enjoyed the status indicated by the government rhetoric was also a cause of discomfiture. For example, in 1981, shortly after arriving in China to conduct fieldwork, Ann Anagnosk attended a film that proclaimed the alleged progress in the lives of Chinese women. She describes her initial reaction to the film as "a feeling of euphoria to think how radically the lives of women had changed in China since the revolution." Her disillusionment, however, came quickly:

As I recounted my emotional response to a male colleague who had been in China longer, he responded with a tale of his own. He had been walking down one of the main avenues of the city to find himself startled by the sight of a woman being beaten by two men. Several dozen observers had gathered to watch the scene but no one appeared likely to intervene. My friend ran off to find a police officer. The officer arrived, made inquiries, and then laughed. This was no affair of his. It was a family matter. The woman had been disobedient. This account, needless to say, instantly deflated my euphoric assumption that things had really changed for women. How could such a public display of male authority go unquestioned? What happened to the new socialist institutions that were supposed to come to the support of women? Where were the public-spirited mediators from the resident's committee or the women's association? (1989, 313-14)

Most non-Chinese researchers have come to agree that the status of women in China is far from equal to that of men (Anagnosk 1989, 314). Andors (1981) explains:

Even though women were held up as "the other half of the sky," with important contributions to socialist construction, their release from "backbreaking manual labor and tedious housework" was to be *gradual*. In the meantime, a double burden was clearly stated. "Women

workers, commune members and women scientists and technicians need to work hard and study, but they have to spend a considerable portion of their time tending to housework and children." The clear identification of women with familial responsibilities and the lack of discussion concerning male participation in these matters and a redefinition of the sexual division of labor contrasted sharply with publicity given to precisely these kinds of innovations a scant two years ago [before 1976]. (p. 45)

Although he does not specifically address the disillusionment experienced by American feminists in China, Mosher's writings do offer a possible explanation for their dilemma. He claims that many American scholars and observers have been blinded to the discrepancy between government rhetoric and the reality of life in China by American political opportunism and Chinese government propaganda. The Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 finally forced the American public to acknowledge its misperceptions about Chinese socialism (Mosher 1990, 214-16). Thus, many feminist scholars writing about the status of Chinese women were dismayed by the unfulfilled promises made to women by the government.

4. The Second Position: The Victimization of Chinese Women

One of the immediate consequences of the idealization/disillusionment phase was that American feminist scholars fell prey to the other extreme: they assumed the overly critical position that Chinese women invariably occupy a low social status and refuse to do anything to ameliorate the situation. One of the greatest concerns expressed by feminist scholars regarding the future of a Chinese women's movement is the lack of unity among Chinese women. Honig and Hershatter (1988) state:

The authors of feminist outcries, and the women involved in the establishment of women's studies groups, shared neither an analysis of women's problems nor a vision of solutions. They did not constitute an

organized women's movement. Indeed, little if any dialogue took place among these critics of women's unequal social status. In some cases they did not even know of one another's existence. (p. 325)

While it is recognized that the Chinese government would never have allowed Chinese feminists to organize their own revolution, since any grass-roots movement would have been automatically suppressed and pronounced unnecessary to the overall scheme of socialist reconstruction (Wolf 1985, 272), one senses from the foregoing passage taken from Honig and Hershatter that Chinese women are still held at least partly responsible for their lack of unity.

In addition, because feminism connotes for many Chinese women a kind of militance reminiscent of the political excesses of the Cultural Revolution, many of the educated women who know something about American feminism are not anxious to espouse what they perceive as yet another militant ideology.⁵ The following statement by a Chinese female computer scientist suggests the reasons for this reticence in embracing feminism.

Eastern women have a tradition of gentleness, capacity for deep love, and dignity. I feel this is not a shortcoming, but a kind of beauty. I do not hope that women will all bare their fangs, brandish their claws, and become short-tempered "Iron Girls." Marx once said that the feminine virtue he most liked was gentleness. People with a strong sense of dedication to their work should also be good wives and mothers at home. (Honig and Hershatter 1988, 25)

Although this position may seem disconcerting to feminists in the United States, it suggests one of the reasons why Chinese "feminism" has never become a unified movement. Perhaps, as Barlow has implied, the goals of gender equality proposed by the Party and championed by American feminists

5. Although Honig and Hershatter acknowledge this sentiment felt by many Chinese women, they do so only after voicing their disapproval (p. ii).

have not been culturally appropriate for most Chinese women—at least in the way those goals have been articulated.

One must also remember that because the printed and verbal expression of opinions is subject to government censorship in China, both male and female consultants fear that what they say in an interview could be held against them at some point. As a result, when they do express criticism, the target of their criticism is often an issue or a person to which the government has encouraged a negative response. Government support of the public expression of anger towards the Cultural Revolution after the deaths of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong is a case in point; a new faction was in power and, in order to purge the society of the old order, it encouraged a violent outpouring of emotion against the old regime in order to help legitimize the new government. Seen in this light, the previously quoted opinion of the female computer scientist could possibly be interpreted as an expression of an ideologically correct viewpoint according to the current government. Thus, it is often difficult to determine the actual feelings of Chinese consultants since they have not had the opportunity to speak freely without fear of government reprisal.

Hence, much of what has been discussed about women in China in the recent social science literature has maintained as its primary touchstones both the prevailing ideology of the Chinese Communist Party and the American feminist responses to that ideology. The major challenge of studying gender issues in China is trying to sort through the confusion caused by the irreconcilability of Chinese government rhetoric and American feminist biases about the interpretation of gender relations in China. From my experience in the field among a group of Chinese female performers in Tianjin, I find that neither the assumption that women enjoy a liberated status nor the position that women are helpless victims is an accurate or fair evaluation of the lives of women in China. In addition, because ethnic, regional, and generational gaps are so large among Chinese women as to make generalizations ludicrous,

one must decide about *whom* one is speaking when discussing Chinese women. Once the cacophony of conflicting biases is toned down, the ideological baggage is stripped away, and the multiplicity of female experiences is acknowledged, one is still left with the problem of re-evaluating the role of the Ethnographer Self (compounded by her identity as an American feminist) with respect to Ethnographic Other—the heart of what many believe to be the current crisis in anthropology.

5. The Self/Other Problem

This crisis has been brewing for the past two decades, as anthropologists question the whole enterprise of conducting ethnographic field research.⁶ Abu-Lughod (1990, 10) explains that if ethnographers "know what we know through emotionally complicated and communicatively ambiguous social encounters in the field, then certainly objectivity is out of the question and anthropology is not a science."

Related to this disciplinary introspection is the recent attention given to the political and sociological implications of written representations of ethnographic research. The work of James Clifford (1986, 6) has emphasized that all ethnographies are situated and none are simply objective representations of reality. In his introduction to *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, he offers a critical interpretation of ethnographic representation:

The essays collected here...assume that the poetic and the political are inseparable, that science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes. They assume that academic and literary genres interpenetrate and that the writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental

6. For selected examples concerning reflexivity in fieldwork and cultural "invention" see Crapanzano 1977 and 1980; Rabinow 1977; and J. P. Dumont 1978 and 1986.

and ethical. Their focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts.... (p. 2)

After achieving a critical perspective of ethnographic field-work and its written representation, however, researchers must then face the problem of *how* to "disentangle" our identities in communicating with and eventually *about* the Other (Abu-Lughod 1990, 24). I shall address this issue within the context of feminist research by highlighting what I see as problems in conceptualizing the Other, in communicating between Self and Other, and finally in conceptualizing the feminist Self.

6. The Idiosyncracies of the Other

One of the criticisms of feminist scholarship is that in the process of constructing female Others as objects of research, the differences among women are obscured. This has been the cause for much of the tension between American feminists and women of color, as is implied in Honig and Hershatter's research on contemporary Chinese women and their resistance to American feminist ideas. I also suggest that this may be the reason why women of color and non-Western women did not participate in the conference on feminist music criticism.

Rice's comment (1987, 475) that "emphasis on the individual is probably the most recent and as yet weakest area of development in ethnomusicology" underscores this point. The widely held assumption that ethnomusicological research must focus on the general over the specific is stated by Nettl (1983) in his "credo" for the field of ethnomusicology:

We endeavor to study total musical systems and, in order to comprehend them, follow a comparative approach, believing that comparative study, properly carried out, provides important insights. Our area of concentration is music that is accepted by an entire society as its own, and we reserve a lesser role for the personal, the idiosyncratic, the ex-

ceptional, in this way differing from the historian of music. We are most interested in what is typical of a culture. (p. 9)

If, however, one recognizes that all cultural accounts, whether they focus on general or specific phenomena, are biased and partial representations, then a study of the "idiosyncratic" should no longer be a lesser priority simply because it precludes representing the "entire" society. All ethnographies are, of course, "idiosyncratic" in that they are written by a particular individual about her particular experiences. The challenge for the researcher involves interpreting her idiosyncratic counternarrative in relation to other narrative discourses in a society.⁷ *In my view, the most severe distortion arises when the researcher obscures the idiosyncratic in attempting "objectivity" and does not recognize the inevitable partiality.*

An example of the unacknowledged biases inherent in traditional ethnographic discourse is Clifford's discussion (1986, 17-18) of Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, published in 1961. Despite the fact that this work is generally accepted as a great piece of ethnographic research, Clifford notes that Lienhardt's portrayals of the religion of the Dinka are, in fact, limited to the experience of men only. Although the partiality of gender was not an issue when the book was published, recent critical perspectives—feminism included—have exposed the assumption that a predominantly male perspective represents the entire tradition. This acknowledgement of bias in anthropological representation has, however, opened a Pandora's box, threatening the credibility and the very existence of the discipline.

Indeed, the crisis in feminism is no less problematic. Feminist scholars must also recognize and then reckon with the *partiality* inherent in feminist inquiry. Ironically, American

7. The work of Bakhtin (1981, 1984) is particularly relevant with regard to the relationships between force and counterforce in discussing marginalized elements of culture.

feminists have decried the position of women as the devalued side of the male/female dualism while imposing similar reductionist assumptions in conceptualizing the female Other, thus overlooking the need for establishing *culturally appropriate connections* in Self/Other communication.⁸

7. Chinese and Western Systems of Difference

I believe that the root of the problem between American feminist ethnographers and the women they study is the assumption that gender is the single most important (some would argue the only) manifestation of the Self/Other paradigm in American feminist scholarship. McClary's recent commentary (1991) on the notion of "masculine and feminine cadences" in Western music—as described by Willi Apel in the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*—provides an eloquent statement regarding the nature of the male/female dualism in Western thought. By extension, this dualism may be considered an example of the fundamental Self/Other formulation in feminist criticism:

The two are differentiated on the basis of relative strength, with the binary opposition masculine/feminine mapped onto strong/weak. Moreover, this particular definition betrays other important mappings: if the masculine version is ("must be considered") normal, then the implication is that the feminine is abnormal. This is so self-evident that the author, Willi Apel, does not think it worthy of explicit mention. Instead, he engages yet another binary: if the feminine is preferred in "more romantic styles," then the masculine must be (and, of course, *is*) identified with the more objective, more rational of music discourses. In two brief sentences focused ostensibly upon a technical feature of musical rhythm, Apel has managed to engage some of the most prominent of Western beliefs concerning sexual difference. The "feminine" is weak,

8. For a discussion of the construction of the Western Self, see Said 1989; L. Dumont 1970, 9; and Mauss 1985, 14. Refer to Kimberlin 1991 for a discussion of some of the kinds of problems encountered by Western ethnographers in communicating with the Other.

abnormal, and subjective; the "masculine" strong, normal, and objective. And this whole metaphysical apparatus is brought to bear and re-inscribed in the conventional terminology used to distinguish mere cadence types. (p. 10)

However, the Chinese "metaphysical apparatus" underlying the conception of the relationship between Self and Other is significantly different because it is not gender-centered. Anagnos (1989) explains the basis of the distinction between Western and Chinese conceptualizations in her discussion of the dualistic relationship of *yin* and *yang*:

These identifications (of male and female) make *yin* and *yang* the obvious signifiers of gender difference. However, the pair has much wider cosmological significance as one of the central principles of the regular operation of the universe: the bipolarity of nature. The natural world operates as a ceaseless flow of change. Everything exists in a state of constant flux with its opposite which is not only its complement but is necessary to its identity....Even the most polarized expression of one contains the germ of the other, so that everything is constantly in process, transforming into its opposite....

...The dynamism of this principle of bipolarity would lead us to predict that the Chinese construction of gender is more fluid than the Western concept of gender as opposed and discretely defined essences, and so it is. Both men and women as physical beings contain a measure of both *yin* and *yang*, and indeed, the correct balance between them define well-being and good health.... (p. 320)

The most important point about the Chinese dualism is that the two forces are constantly recreating themselves in terms of each other. Thus, in philosophy as well as in social practice *gender by itself does not necessarily define a Self/Other system of difference*. The flexibility inherent in the Chinese model and the importance placed upon complementarity distinguish this conceptual framework from the Western one, in which the female side is usually devalued and considered hierarchically inferior to the male.

As one might expect, the *yinyang* dualism gives rise to a very different set of dynamics in interpersonal relationships in the Chinese context. Mayfair Yang (1989) explains that:

Rather than creating discrete and unified ontological categories of persons...the Chinese subscribe to a relational construction of persons. That is to say, the autonomy and rights of persons and the sense of personal identity are based on differential moral and social statuses and the moral claims and judgements of others. Chinese personhood and personal identity are not given in the abstract as something intrinsic to and fixed in human nature, but are constantly being created, altered, and dismantled in particular and social relationships. Furthermore, the boundaries of personhood are permeable and can easily be enlarged to encompass a scope beyond that of the biological individual. As a result, Chinese culture presents a frequent lack of clear-cut boundaries between self and other. (p. 39)

Although the systems of difference in the Chinese context are much more fluid, implying that gender is not as much a determining factor in social relations as in the United States, I do not mean to suggest that women do not occupy positions of subservience in many social situations. By the same token, I have also seen that women frequently occupy positions of dominance as well. During the course of my associations with women in the narrative arts community in Tianjin, I discovered a clear and compelling vision of women as powerful actors in their social circles, not merely beleaguered victims of inequitable political and social policies. In several instances I saw how women were able to capitalize upon their successes in the realm of musical performance and rise to positions of power and influence within the community at large, creating and redefining their social relationships as their personal and professional statuses changed.

As mentioned previously, an equally important datum in studying gender ideology in China is the fact that there is no single socio-political agenda for women. After accepting the inherent fluidity within the Chinese social apparatus, one must also accept the fact that there are as many different possibilities

for interaction as there are kinds of women. The following case study illustrates only one example of creating Self/Other relationships in China, based upon my own experiences in the narrative-arts community in Tianjin.⁹ By focusing on the art of cultivating personal relationships in the context of music-making, I hope to offer a new perspective on Chinese women with regard to the current ethnographic literature; in addition, I hope to address the need to re-evaluate one's own identity as a feminist ethnographer when feminist values are not necessarily appropriate or useful in ethnographic research.

8. Becoming Part of the Other: Establishing Connections in a Chinese Musical Community

While conducting field research in China, I soon realized the folly of trying to assume the role of an objective Western observer standing outside the community as a distinct Self (a "fly on the wall") and began to incorporate the Chinese notions of the relational construction of persons. As mentioned, although contemporary ethnographic literature *recognizes* the impossibility of achieving "objectivity," the question of *how* to situate oneself with regard to the Ethnographic Other remains unclear (Abu-Lughod 1990, 24). It was only through trial-and-error that I was able to discover the way in which I needed to situate myself in the field: I had to deliberately and publicly proclaim a connection with a particular group in the community through a culturally prescribed ritual in order to get anywhere at all. Indeed, the community did not know how to react to my

9. While the patterns of the relationships involve women, I have discovered that the underlying procedures are the same for relationships in mixed gender settings as well. More information about relationships in female and mixed gender settings will appear in my forthcoming book, *The Women of Quyi*.

presence as a foreigner until I had created an identity within the group.

This became clear to me not long after arriving in Tianjin in 1985. One of my first ambitions in approaching the study of the relationship between language and music in the narrative genres known as *quyi* was to interview some of the older performers who had been influential in shaping the workings of the community over the past several decades. I was especially anxious to meet the greatly respected Master Lin, the most influential *quyi* performer in North China, but I was told that she was virtually inaccessible.¹⁰ Much to my surprise, several weeks after my initial inquiry, I received a call one morning that she would be coming to see me that afternoon. When she arrived, however, I was surprised and dismayed to find that she would not answer any of my questions. Whenever I brought up an issue, she chose to circumvent it.

After that encounter, I expressed concern to a professor with whom I was working at Nankai University (my official unit or *danwei*) about my failed interview attempt. He suggested that I would probably do much better if I spoke to her senior disciple, Master Zhang, a middle-aged woman who was both highly intelligent and articulate. As it turned out, the disciple was so genuinely helpful that, at the suggestion of my unit, I decided to become the disciple of this disciple.

Many members of my institution recommended this course of action because I would be establishing a formal relationship with this woman in the eyes of the entire community

10. I have changed the names of all of my teachers and altered some of the superficial details regarding my encounters with them in order to protect these people from possible social and/or governmental disapproval, which is still an unfortunate reality in contemporary Tianjin. Even if a reader were in a position to guess the identity of the people about whom I speak, my consultants have assured me that the fact that their names had been changed would be sufficient to protect them. This assurance has since been corroborated by other people with whom I have worked both in and outside of China.

in a way that would radically change the way I was treated. Becoming a disciple meant that I would, in essence, belong to Zhang and to her artistic tradition, thus addressing the critical Self/Other issue; and, by virtue of that relationship, people would know how to respond to me.¹¹

The only problem with my request was that I would be sidestepping the authority of Master Lin by not selecting her, and thereby not going through the proper channels of authority. My unit downplayed the issue, however, and I agreed because I felt strongly that Zhang would clearly be the preferable teacher. Besides, I had no guarantee that Lin would be any more willing to help me as her disciple than she had been at our first meeting, whereas Zhang had been approachable from the outset.

Several months went by before I received any news from the Troupe. Apparently, Lin was angrier than anyone had anticipated: she was not about to allow her disciple to be the first Tianjinese to have a foreign disciple without putting up some resistance. Finally, one month before I was scheduled to leave Tianjin, Lin gave in to pressure from the university that had agreed to sponsor my research and she consented; I was given permission to hold a ceremony in which I would become the disciple of both Zhang and another performer, Master Bai. All the time I had been waiting for word from the Troupe, I had been able to study unofficially with Bai because she was free of any relational entanglements, but I had not been allowed to have any contact with Zhang. Lin may have given in to my request to establish this tie with Zhang, but she stalled on giving her final permission as a deliberate move to try to curtail my research and punish me for not selecting her as a master.

During the ceremony in which I became disciple of Zhang and Bai, Lin delivered a speech that reflected her displeasure

11. A precedent for foreigners studying *quyi* had already been established by the Canadian scholar Catherine Stevens, who studied with Zhang Cuifeng in Taiwan in the 1960s and with Sun Shujun in Beijing in the 1980s.

towards me in a way that was calculated to make me lose face in front of all those present that day. While on the most superficial level her speech both extolled my decision to honor the older members of the community and chided some of the other younger performers of the Troupe for not following my "filial" example, it was also a rather trenchant criticism of me for going counter to principles of Confucian etiquette by favoring the disciple over the master.

My last month in Tianjin in 1986 was spent in intensive study of narrative performance with Zhang. Not only did I learn about the genre, but I also gained insight into many aspects of the discipleship process by being associated with Zhang on an almost daily basis. After the ceremony she told me that, as her disciple, I was now considered part of her family and she would provide all of the help that I needed for my research. This particular relationship allowed me entrance into the community that would have been impossible for me to obtain otherwise.

I hasten to add that I did not delude myself into thinking that I was a disciple on a par with a native-born female performer. Yet, at the same time, an individual's identity as a Tianjinse or as a narrative performer also does not automatically guarantee entrance into Zhang's artistic network. In the relational construction of persons, gender, ethnicity, perceived skill, and position within the community are not absolute determinants of social identity. Rather, they are variable elements that factor into the complex, constantly changing phenomenon of relational politics. *Most important for me, as a foreigner, was to create an identity in the field by recognizing the need to initiate a connection and to show loyalty to the group with which I had established the connection.*

Although it would have been enlightening to have worked with Lin as well, the nature of my relationship with Zhang precluded any contact with Lin. In fact, *there would have been no way that one researcher could have interviewed both women and gotten reliable information from either one, since an outsider must*

establish allegiance to only one of two conflicting parties. Even though Western ethnographers have traditionally been encouraged to establish as broad a base of consultants as possible in the interest of producing "objective" research, in the Chinese context this is both impractical and undesirable. As I quickly discovered, one of the most critical qualities a person must possess in working among the Chinese is unflinching loyalty to the group with which one is affiliated. Once one becomes part of that unit, she not only enjoys the privileges of membership, but she also inherits the group's animosities towards competitors outside the group. If a researcher were foolish enough to jeopardize her standing in the community by cultivating relationships with people who are perceived as outsiders, she would not only anger the members of her group, but would also lose the respect of the outsiders, since they would decry her disloyalty to her inner circle of friends and associates.¹² This experience underscores the nature of the commitment between Self and Other in a Chinese context—a relationship that is not necessarily determined by gender.

Hence, in the process of discovering the importance of becoming part of the Other and participating in the Self/Other distinctions of the culture, I had to come face to face with the fact that my chosen associations would automatically preclude contacts with those who were rivals of the people with whom I had established relationships. One of the consequences of situating myself in the field was acknowledging that my research would be "partial," not only by virtue of my role as a foreign ethnographer, but also because of my status as a member of a particular artistic tradition within the community.

12. While my decision to select two teachers may appear to contradict this point, I was careful to choose two women whose association was genial rather than antagonistic. All of the principal informants with whom I worked represented complementary rather than competitive interests within the group. Those perceived as outsiders were either rival counterparts performing the same genres or people outside the Troupe.

If, however, it is now generally accepted that partiality is inevitable in ethnographic representation, then it would appear that I am contradicting myself when I decry the partiality of American feminist research on Chinese women. The point I would like to stress is that *acknowledged partiality as a result of consciously situating oneself with regard to the Other is fundamentally different from inadvertent partiality (which is often presumed "objectivity") caused by homogenizing the idiosyncrasies of the Other*. However, the fact that one has acknowledged partiality still does not absolve the scholar of professional responsibility. In voicing one of his concerns about self-reflexive anthropology, Steven Feld (1990) comments:

I worry that the enterprise not devolve into an invention of the cult of the author. First person narrative may be the fashionable way to write and critique ethnography these days, but that alone doesn't guarantee that the work is ethnographically insightful, self-conscious, or revelatory. (p. 240)

Despite the fact that the traditional notion of objectivity is no longer tenable, Feld implies that there still must be a standard according to which the relative worth of ethnographic research should be judged. Yet how can there be a standard, given the inevitable partiality of all ethnographic interpretations and the particular partiality of feminism? How can a scholar who is an ethnographer in one context and a feminist in another context negotiate multiple identities and produce research that is ethnographically insightful and revelatory?

9. The Feminist Self

I believe that the solution to the epistemological problem of negotiating multiple identities lies in the ability to function the way a bilingual does when called upon to translate. A true bilingual can render or transfer information from one linguistic setting to another and back again with equal ease. In the same

way, under ideal circumstances, a truly "bicultural" researcher who is equally conversant as a feminist in an American context and as an ethnographer in the field can "switch gears" from one set of experiences to the other.¹³

One final example from my field experience among northern Chinese narrative performers illustrates this point. One of the popular types of northern Chinese comic routines is known as *qunhuor xiangsheng*, which is a comic skit involving three or more performers. In the most common three-man variety, performer A is the comedian, B is the "straight man," and C is the mediator (Tsau 1979-80, 56). The main focus in performance is the comedic interaction between performers A and B, but when they come to an impasse in communication, performer C intervenes in order to try and bring the two back together again. The name of performer C, the *nifengde*, is significant because it means the one who "stitches together" the other two performers after they have been figuratively ripped apart by their differences.

By extension, we can assume a role as our own *nifengde* by mediating between our conflicting identities in the process of producing a situated ethnographic account. Functioning as one's own broker between the feminist Self and the ethnographer Self, the "bilingual" feminist researcher can decenter herself and move from one set of experiences to another without having to negate her identity as a feminist or as an adopted member of the community with which she works. Because of its mediatory role as a "translating mechanism," the research produced by the decentered *nifengde* Self would be as ethnographically significant and revelatory as possible, given the inevitable imperfections of an enterprise involving the limitations of being a foreigner in the field. An ethnographic work could then be evaluated in terms of the researcher's relative

13. For a discussion about a related point concerning the ability to move back and forth between different identities, see Abu-Lughod's discussion (1990, 26) of "halfie" ethnographers.

“fluency” in the discourses employed in her research and in terms of her ability to translate back and forth between those discourses.

In conclusion, I return to the original problem raised at the beginning of this paper. I suggest that the main reason why women of color and non-Western women did not participate in the conference on feminist theory and music is because of the perception that American feminist criticism is laden with ideological assumptions that render it too culture-specific to have crosscultural value. In addition, feminist scholars have been criticized because they have not sufficiently recognized or taken into account the crucial differences among women—the variability and complexity of female experiences worldwide. If feminist music critics want to travel beyond white mainstream America, they must contextualize themselves with regard to Others for whom feminism is highly problematic and then “translate” the data for other American feminists in producing a written representation. For example, the analytical questions that must be addressed in connection with female disciples performing ideologically correct narrative songs in post-Cultural Revolution Tianjin emerge from the social, cultural, and historical circumstances that are peculiar to the society in which the performers were raised. Becoming “fluent” in a greater number of female discourses will enable feminist music critics to communicate more meaningfully with women of color and other feminist scholars.

However, in pointing out the need to contextualize and decenter the American feminist Self in the process of moving out of white America and even further beyond the borders of the United States, I also want to stress my belief that feminist music criticism is a vital and necessary area of research in Western European art music, with important implications for restructuring the way music is taught and researched within the American academic community. Unfortunately, feminist music criticism has already been under fire by those within Western musicology who wish to discredit the movement,

demanding that feminist voices be quelled before they have even had a chance to be heard (McClary 1991, 5).¹⁴ I believe that this is especially disastrous, not only because of the sense of "unfinished business" within the field of musicology itself, but also because feminist music criticism could play a key role in initiating a connection that has long been overdue between musicology and ethnomusicology in an area of common interest—the study of music and gender.

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14. One could argue that musicology has simply minimized the contribution of female musicians and musicologists all along, and feminism has never seriously even entered the picture.

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