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# Ouyang, Lei X. 2022. Music as Mao's Weapon: Remembering the Cultural Revolution

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[See table of contents](#)

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## BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

Ouyang, Lei X. 2022. *Music as Mao's Weapon: Remembering the Cultural Revolution*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 220pp.

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*Music as Mao's Weapon* is the culmination of nearly two decades of fieldwork by ethnomusicologist Lei X. Ouyang. This book synthesizes Ouyang's previous work connecting the Chinese Cultural Revolution to music, memory, politics, and trauma. This book is guided by three questions: Among different aspects of culture, why was music used to serve the Mao regime? Why does our understanding of music and the Chinese Cultural Revolution matter today? What can we learn from the weaponization of music during the Chinese Cultural Revolution? Ouyang answers these questions through a seamless weaving of musical analysis and vignettes of her collaborators' lives, sharing individual stories that are too often missed when considering historical events. By doing so, she challenges existing views of the revolution as a monolithically bad or good event and calls attention to the people who lived through and continue to be impacted by it.

While Ouyang's work may appear to resemble that of other scholars who have explored the Cultural Revolution's propagandic arts, such as Bonnie S. McDougall's *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979* (1984) and Paul Clark, Laikwan Pang, and Tsan-huang Tsai's *Listening*

*to China's Cultural Revolution: Music, Politics, and Cultural Continuities* (2016), Ouyang's focus on revolutionary songs, as opposed to revolutionary operas, sets her work apart. Moreover, the author's ethnographic method resembles more closely that of Martin Daughtry in *Listening to War* (2015) and Lisa Gilman in *My Music, My War* (2016) in her consideration of music and human experience in tandem. Ouyang's interdisciplinary approach positions her work at an intersection of anthropology, communication, comparative literature, dance, ethnomusicology, and rhetoric. In this way, she balances both the tangible evidence and lived experiences of the Cultural Revolution.

Ouyang's field site cannot be reduced to one single locale. Rather, in her expressive words, "going 'to the field' is the privilege of accompanying an individual down memory lane" (10). Therefore, her field sites are many, including the Music Research Institute of the Chinese National Academy of Arts in Beijing, where she met with professors and explored music materials of the revolution, and different boroughs of New York City, where she interviewed Chinese musicians and students who lived through the revolution and eventually left China. Ultimately, Ouyang's close attention to both the music and people of the revolution reveal how "music was to serve as a weapon in the ideological endeavor of transforming China into a socialist society" (1).

Between the book's introduction and conclusion are three chapters organized by topic: Music and Politics, Music and Childhood, and Music and Memory.

Inspired by Martin Daughtry's framework in *Listening to War* (2015), Ouyang includes interviews after each chapter to "capture life during the Cultural Revolution in the individuals' own words" (21). Interviewees range from those who lived through the revolution as children to those who experienced it in their adult life, and the variety of narratives presented by Ouyang provides a multifaceted and rare view of the revolution's impact on an individual level. The introductory chapter provides not only an overview of the book and its main arguments but also the researcher's academic and personal background. Ouyang's reflexive approach is at once welcoming and welcome: It beautifully humanizes her work while giving the reader a glimpse into her own, rich journey.

In chapter 2, Ouyang analyzes the politicization of music during the revolution, examining how the cultural policies of the time were used to realize Mao's political visions. Specifically, through the examination of an anthology of revolutionary songs, titled *New Songs of the Battlefield*, Ouyang shows how "the transformation of the function of music was the transformation of the content of music; by 'revolutionizing' music, all music was to contain a revolutionary message presented in a revolutionary spirit" (31). Chapter 3 offers an examination of children's songs from the anthology to see how they were specifically politicized to indoctrinate children with revolutionary ideologies. Ouyang discusses how the everyday lives of children were impacted by the revolution. Both chapters 2 and 3 include musical transcriptions of different songs from the anthology, including original lyrics in Chinese and the author's English

translations. The author includes discussions of songs' keys, melodic contours, and overall themes. Chapter 4 assesses how memories of the revolution continue to resonate in modern China and diasporic Chinese communities. Specifically, for some of Ouyang's interlocutors, the rapid changes and emphasis on individualism in contemporary China is a source of anxiety, and they "look back [to the revolution] to recover a sense of solidarity, camaraderie, and simplicity" (127).

In her conclusion, Ouyang answers the guiding questions of the book in three parts. First, she examines a fundamental cultural policy of the revolution known as the "Three Processes of Transformation," whereby music was revolutionized, nationalized, and popularized in accordance with Mao's agenda. Second, she explores elements of modern China, such as some contemporary societal values, to show how the contrast between life during the revolution and life today makes many individuals nostalgic for the revolution. Despite the hardships that countless people experienced during the revolution, there remains a yearning for it. Lastly, the author threads music together with the senses, memory, violence, and trauma, as a reminder that "propaganda arts and propaganda culture deserve our full and critical attention because of the humanity embedded within them" (151). Combined, these three parts trace the cultural policies from the inception to the continued and lasting impact on individuals. In doing so, Ouyang shows that music was indeed weaponized during the revolution, for the function and content of music were deliberately designed to promote revolutionary ideals. Music served as an effective tool in the Mao regime for numerous reasons. For

instance, revolutionary music could be disseminated relatively quickly and easily to large and wide audiences through community and school music programs and simple loudspeaker setups. Song lyrics with revolutionary ideas, especially those set to catchy music, became deeply ingrained in its listeners. Understanding the music of the revolution and its impact on the people who lived through it is crucial because music is still used in exploitative processes today. A stronger understanding of music in the Chinese Cultural Revolution contributes to a better understanding of the manipulation of music today.

Overall, this book is a remarkable addition to scholarship pertaining to music, memory, and trauma. The richness of detail in the presentation and discussion of musical details and musical transcriptions is one small detraction. For example, following a written summary of different song arrangements with the same information displayed in table form feels unnecessary; the prose discussion could be better explicated by sharing additional lived experiences of interlocutors, or more details on the many intriguing topics that she brought up, such as action songs (84), the distinction between aural and textual content of songs (110), and the reminiscence bump phenomenon (130). The many musical transcriptions, while helpful in illustrating the musical elements described in prose, could potentially be shortened to create space for other discussions.

Without a doubt, the book's greatest strength is its ability to humanize the Chinese Cultural Revolution. While the revolution is often viewed as a single historic event, there are in fact many lives and stories beneath the surface. It is criti-

cal to listen to these individual voices to gain a fuller understanding of the revolution and the lives that were and continue to be impacted today. Ouyang effectively ties together these stories with her musical analysis to show how music was weaponized by socialist political leaders during the Cultural Revolution, and how its impacts are felt to this day. This book is an invaluable resource to anyone interested in how the cultural policies of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, especially those related to music, played a role in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. 🌸

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