WOMEN ON THIS PLANET

Globalisation and girl rock in Taiwan

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Pop music culture in Taiwan has undergone a striking metamorphosis over the past decade. Industrial reorganisation in the second half of the 1990s following the advent of the ‘Big Five’ global music corporations has occurred alongside a series of cultural shifts resulting from the localisation of global flows of musical styles and movements. In this paper I analyse some of the local effects of a particular cluster of globalising movements: those of musical ‘girl cultures’. I discuss Taiwanese manifestations of globally mobile configurations of ‘girl rock’ and ‘girl power’ through analysis of two examples with which I became familiar following extended periods living and researching in Taipei in the mid to late 1990s: all-girl punk band Ladybug and independent folk-rock singer-songwriter and producer Sandee Chan. These examples were not chosen with the aim of offering a representative overview of women in Taiwanese popular music, but rather as a pair of case studies interesting to consider together in the light of the way in which they each draw upon globalising musical and cultural trends. By considering these case studies I aim to explore three sets of interrelated questions. First, I consider how to conceptualise the complex cultural interchanges between globalising musical girl cultures and their local instances in Taiwan. Through what channels are movements like Riot Grrrl or the ‘girl power’ of the Spice Girls translated into Taiwan’s local contexts, and what effects do they produce for Taiwanese women musicians? Second, I reflect on how best to figure the relations between a musical ‘mainstream’ and its ‘alternative’ in the context of the changing configurations of Taiwan’s music industry today. Finally, I ask how we might account for the emergent pop-feminist discourse that is increasingly evident in Taiwan’s commercial pop music in relation to the disputed yet still common presumption that commercialisation is inherently antithetical to feminist politics. The paper begins by providing some historical and industrial background for Taiwan’s contemporary pop music cultures before moving on to consider in detail the cultural production and audience reception of Ladybug and Sandee Chan.
TAIWAN MUSIC INDUSTRY BACKGROUND (1970s–2000)

By the end of the twentieth century Taiwan was both the world’s biggest producer of Chinese pop music and by far its most valuable market. Mandarin pop had decisively surpassed Cantopop in global popularity and enabled Taiwan to take Hong Kong’s place as the world centre of the Chinese music industry⁴. Yet just a few decades ago, Taiwan was neither a significant producer of Chinese pop music nor a major market for it (Zhang, 1991). In the 1970s, under the influence of the US military presence, Taiwan’s domestic music market was dominated by American pop (Wang, 1997: 211). But in the wake of the severing by Washington of diplomatic ties with Taipei in 1979, a student-led movement arose criticising the Kuomintang (KMT) government’s reliance on the USA, in the realms of popular culture and music as much as in politics and economics. What came to be known as the campus folksong movement (xiaoyuan gequ yundong) saw university students composing and performing folksongs as a means both of elaborating a local and specific form of Taiwanese cultural identity, and of indirectly protesting the KMT’s pandering to the US government (Wang, 1997: 211-212; Yang, 1994). The commercialisation of the campus folksong movement provided the basis for the development of Taiwan’s popular music industry over the following decade. The ‘soft’, ballad style of campus folksongs exerted a strong influence on the Chinese-language pop music that was to become the new musical mainstream (Yang, 1994: 57-58; Zhang, 1991: 130-131; Lin, 2003).

The basis of the popular music industry in Taiwan today consolidated in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The island’s major independent labels were founded in this period; most significantly, Rock Records and Tapes was set up in 1979 with a view to releasing music from the campus folksong movement, and the UFO Group was established in 1983 (Wang, 1999). By the early 1990s these two companies had emerged as the lead players in the local music industry, with the larger UFO concentrating on commercial Mandarin pop while Rock earned a reputation as the risk-taker of the pair (Wang, 1997: 215; Smith, 1992). As well as being the year in which martial law was lifted – a milestone in the gradual decline of KMT cultural and political hegemony – 1987 was significant for local musicians as the year of the inaugural Taipei New Music Festival. This annual event provided an important forum for local musical innovation and the cultivation of a live music scene, and the movement that grew out of this scene came to be known as Taiwan New Music (Taiwan xin yinyue) (Yi, 1991). New Music artists who participated in the festival in the early days and rose to fame over the following decade include eclectic punk’n’funk artist Jutoupi, Minnan electronica/hip-hop artist Lim Giong, and Minnan/Mandarin rock superstar Wu Bai, among others (Lee, 1998)⁴. The emergence of these artists at this juncture also exemplifies the late-1980s rise of socially critical Minnan music – an integral part of the New Music movement – which can be seen as one facet of the Taiwanese nativist cultural politics then ascendant in the context of the wane of old-style, autocratic, Mandarin-centric KMT power (Hsu and Lin, 1992; Wang, 1997: 213-214; Lin, 2001; Yang, 1994). In 1988-89, for the first time in several decades, Chinese pop releases in Taiwan outnumbered Western ones (Wang, 1997: 212).
The 1980s mark the beginning of a presence by the Big Five transnationals in Taiwan’s music market (now BMG, EMI, Sony, Warner, and Universal). Apart from Sony, which had a subsidiary (Synco) in Taiwan since the 1970s, the transnationals initially operated by appointing local licensees to distribute their lists to Taiwan’s domestic market (Himalaya Records Corporation website; Smith, 1992; Billboard, 2000). After Sony, PolyGram was the second of the transnationals to set up its own local subsidiary, doing so in 1989 (Smith, 1992). By late 1995, all five of the major music corporations had subsidiaries in Taiwan, in part with a view to using the island as a stepping-stone to the developing markets of the Chinese mainland (Wang, 1999, 104; Chen, n.d.: 4-5). Aside from distributing foreign lists in Taiwan the transnationals also followed the market’s lead and cultivated local acts, including both Mandarin and, increasingly, also Minnan musicians (Smith, 1992; Hsu and Lin, 1992). By 2000, sales of domestically produced music in Taiwan accounted for 66% of overall recorded music sales, international releases making up just 28% (IFPI, 2001: 107).

The presence of the transnationals in Taiwan’s domestic market put pressure on the local independents, with many forced to become incorporated into the transnational companies (for example, UFO was acquired by Warner in the late 1990s) (Wang, 1999: 104-105). Rock Records, however, responded by emulating the expansionist strategies of the global corporations: between 1992 and 1997 Rock opened subsidiaries, branches, and sales offices in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Korea, Shanghai, Beijing, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand (Billboard, 2000; Wang, 1999: 106-107). Its major aim in doing this was to develop regional markets through flexible specialisation, marketing local music in local markets while also cultivating transnational, ‘Pan-Asian’ cross-over successes (McClure, 1996; Wang, 1999). By the mid-decade, the ‘alternative’ Rock Records was being touted as a likely candidate to become Asia’s sixth major label, and commanded a 9% market share across the region (Music News Asia 1995, cited in Wang, 1999: 107).

Taiwan’s other independent labels also continued to expand in the domestic arena up to the mid-1990s (Fuji, 1995). However, as Wang Ying-yu demonstrates, when the transnationals’ local marketing strategies became more finely honed after about 1995, the independents – with the notable exception of Rock – found it increasingly difficult to compete (1999: 105). Meanwhile, Mandarin pop continued to gain in regional popularity while Cantopop’s popularity correspondingly declined, as musicians and record companies increasingly eyed mainland Chinese markets. However, for the present (since 1992) it is Taiwan that constitutes the world’s most lucrative market for Mandarin recordings.

**THE RISE AND RISE OF ‘ALTERNATIVE MUSIC’**

Taiwan’s music industry over the past decade has thus been characterised by intensifying competition between transnationals and local independent labels. In terms of content, this period is marked by an increasing diversification of music
styles – encompassing identifiable markets for rock, dance, hip-hop and R&B music – and the concomitant expansion of niche-marketing strategies by both local and transnational companies. It has long been standard, among both Euro-American commentators and disaffected local music buffs, to write off Taiwanese pop as cloyingly sentimental, musically unsophisticated, and culturally meaningless. As late as 1996 Sony executive Dylan White felt licensed to call Taiwan’s music tastes “the blandest in Asia”: “Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore – even Thailand – all have a good variety of music. But Taiwan has only love songs” (White quoted in Underwood, 1996). Yet as my brief discussion of the rise of the diverse New Music movement shows, such a view is somewhat disingenuous, or at least under-informed. While forms of popular music other than studio-produced Mandarin love ballads have not yet decisively displaced that ‘bland’ form in terms of overall popularity, different styles – including punk, R&B, jazz, electronica and the new, socially conscious Minnan folk music – have maintained an increasingly significant presence since the second half of the 1980s, extending out of a growing underground bands scene (Zhang, 1991; Yi, 1991).

Back in 1986, local independent Crystal Records was bought by a group of music professionals who began distributing overseas independent music to Taiwan’s domestic market, and in 1989 Crystal expanded its selection to include the diverse sounds of the Taiwan New Music described above (Lee, 1998: 3). Over the years that followed Crystal cultivated a range of local artists through a strategy of low-budget production that enabled profit to be realised even on recordings with relatively low sales (Yi, 1991: 95-96). In 1991, Friendly Dogs – originally a production house for Rock – went solo and established a series called “Taiwan’s Underground Music Fire,” concentrating on local new and unrecorded artists of diverse musical styles (Fuji, 1995). In the same year, Rock Records established Magic Stone Culture: a daughter label with the purpose, initially, of developing a Taiwan market for mainland Chinese rock through its “China Fire” series: Magic Stone released albums by Dou Wei, He Yong, Zhang Chu, and mainland heavy metal band Tang Dynasty (Smith, 1994). In addition to these initial forays by the local independents into marketing alternative music styles, the early 1990s also saw the establishment of a series of new live music venues in Taipei, fostering the emergent live music culture. Meanwhile, media liberalisation resulted in a spate of new FM radio stations and the growth of cable TV, including MTV and Channel [V] (Lee, 1998: 4; Smith, 1995; Yeh, 1992; Wang, 1999: 102-103.)

By the mid-1990s Taiwan’s domestic music market had been notably transformed by its embrace of a new diversity of styles (Lee, 1998: 6). The pub and live music scene in the major cities continued to flourish and expand, and the taste of audiences for live ‘band sound’ – as opposed to the highly produced studio sound of yore – was decisively demonstrated in the massive success of rocker Wu Bai’s third album, Wu Bai Live (Magic Stone, 1995), which sold 600,000 copies (Wong, 1998). In the same year, Rock merged its two daughter labels, Magic Stone Culture and Mandala Records, into Magic Stone Music, which focused on
alternative music from Taiwan as well as mainland Chinese rock, and distributed independent music from overseas under licence (*Billboard*, 1995). 1995 was also the first year of the local bands festival, Spring Scream – now an annual institution – held over four days in Kenting in Taiwan’s south, and providing another important forum for the nurturing of local song-writing and live performance talents (Parmalee, 2002; Spring Scream website

The late 1990s were marked by the consolidation and wider popularisation of the ‘alternative’ music that had risen to prominence in the first half of the decade. 1997 was the year of the (awkwardly named) First Taiwan Music People Exchange Association Top Ten Best Albums and Songs Award Ceremony, and winning songs came from Taiwanese aboriginal pop/R&B star A-Mei (a.k.a. Chang Huei-mei, signed with Taiwan independent label Forward), Hong Kong-based pop diva Faye Wong, Taiwan rock star Wu Bai, local ‘slacker’ icon and rocker, Chang Chen-yueh, British post-punk influenced Faith Yang, and Taiwan-based R&B chanteuse Shunza (Lee, 1998). This heralded for some commentators a fundamental sea-change in Taiwan’s pop scene: a mainstreaming of the ‘alternative’ and the emergence of a new, more fragmented and variegated musical mainstream (Wong, 1998). Illustrating the remarkable effects of the diversification of Taiwan’s domestic music market in this period, in 1997 Magic Stone experienced revenue gains of close to 800% over 1996, due largely to the sale of albums by artists like Shunza, Faith Yang, and Wu Bai (Wong, 1998). In 1998 Rock divided into two autonomous companies – Taiwan Rock Records and Magic Stone – and four production companies – Cyclone, Electric Star, Tidal Wave, and Volcano Music – in order more effectively to target niche-markets (Wong, 1998; Wang, 1999: 107). By the end of the decade Rock was South-east Asia’s largest independent music company by a wide margin and held a 30% share of Taiwan’s domestic market (Rock Records Korea website

**TAIWAN FEMINISM**

In addition to being a time of structural transformation in the music industry, the 1990s in Taiwan was a decade of rapid social change, demonstrated by the rise of a series of social movements after the lifting of martial law in 1987. These movements include the trade union movement, the environmental protection movement, the Indigenous people’s movement, consumer rights groups, the lesbian and gay movement, and most importantly for this discussion, the feminist movement. One of the oldest and most influential feminist organisations is the Women’s Awakening Foundation (*Funü Xinzhi Jiinhui*), founded in the early 1980s and expanding rapidly to become Taiwan’s largest women’s activist organisation by 1988 (Lee, 1999). Women’s Awakening has been active over the past two decades in producing a regular newsletter and journal; establishing Taipei’s feminist bookstore, Fembooks (*Nûshudian*) in 1994; and liaising with the Legislative Yuan (Taiwan’s lawmaking body) to negotiate far-reaching reforms to the highly patriarchal Family Law code, among its many other achievements. But the cultural effect of Women’s Awakening and other feminist NGOs cannot easily be quantified by reference to such concrete projects, vital though these are.
Since the late 1980s a basic shift has taken place in relation to the question of gender in Taiwan’s society: that is to say, gender and gendered power relations have become a salient question referenced regularly at different levels of Taiwan’s public culture, from the rarefied realms of legal reform; to discussions in popular media of gender ‘issues’ like the status of career-women, sexual harassment, sex education, and feminism itself; to the emergence of questions about gender and feminism in popular cultural forms like music, women’s magazines, talk-back radio, and local free-to-air TV. The popularisation of debates about patriarchy, sexism, women’s status and feminism over the past fifteen years provides the crucial, enabling background against which oppositional forms of feminist popular culture, like the feminist music cultures discussed below, were able to emerge. In an important sense the rise of institutional and popular feminisms in Taiwan provided the space of possibility for girls and women – particularly those most exposed to feminist discourses: young, educated, middle-class women – to begin imagining and practicing alternative forms of feminine subjectivity (Yang, 1999). A key question in the remainder of this paper concerns the nature of the intersection of transforming versions of feminine subjecthood compelled by feminist discourses, on the one hand, with the novel modes of femininity – new ways of ‘being a girl’ – that are suggested in the performances and star personae of some of Taiwan’s ‘alternative’ women musicians, on the other. Yet things are not really as simple as the crossroads metaphor implies: what we find is something more akin to one of Taiwan’s baroque cloverleaf junctions, where the inward-bound flyover of globalising ‘girl culture’ meets the local routes of Taiwan’s feminist debates and the local-regional-global intersections of its popular music scenes.

GLOBALISING GIRL ROCK

An interesting corollary of the fragmentation of music markets and the concomitant diversification of Taiwan’s popular music styles has been the rise, since the mid- to late-1990s, of varieties of ‘girl rock’ as a musical phenomenon and a topic of public discussion. As I will discuss in detail below, this may be readable, in part, as a localised manifestation of a globalising tendency identified by Gayle Wald (1998) in Euro-American rock whereby “the performance of girlhood ... can now be said to constitute a new cultural dominant within the musical practice of women in rock” (587-588).

The rise to popularity of musical ‘girl cultures’ in Euro-American contexts in the 1990s has been analysed in detail by feminist scholars of popular and music cultures. Particular attention has been paid to Riot Grrrl: a musical and subcultural movement in underground women’s rock that grew out of the punk moment, originating in the north-western United States in the early 1990s (Bayton, 1998; Driscoll, 1999 and 2002; Gottlieb and Wald, 1994; Kearney, 1997; Leonard, 1997 and 1998; Nehring, 1997; Reynolds and Press, 1995; Wald, 1998). Bands generally taken to be representative of the Riot Grrrl movement
include Bikini Kill, Hole, L7, Bratmobile, and 7 Year Bitch. As many of these band names and the term ‘Riot Grrrl’ itself suggest, as a youth culture and music style Riot Grrrl was characterised by its angrily oppositional gender politics. Riot Grrrld expressed their critique of hegemonic femininity and resistance to masculinist ‘boy rock’ culture through their own independently produced post-punk rock music. As both Driscoll and Gottlieb and Wald demonstrate, the Riot Grrrl culture often relied on the ideological opposition of the ‘mainstream’ to the ‘underground’, privileging the latter and devaluing the former.

Catherine Driscoll’s work raises some particularly pertinent questions for my discussion here. Resisting the common position that denigrates the populist ‘girl power’ of British band the Spice Girls to champion the ‘radical’ character of Riot Grrrl (cf. Wald, 1998: 608), Driscoll addresses a major question raised by the Spice Girls’ popularity: “Can feminism be a mass-produced, globally distributed product, and can merchandised relations to girls be authentic?” (2002: 272). Driscoll does not venture definitive answers to these questions, but she does argue persuasively that the Spice Girls phenomenon and the associated populist discourse of ‘girl power’ warrant serious attention from feminist researchers. Significantly for my discussion in what follows, Driscoll also makes the point that the rise of music-based girl cultures of fandom and consumption – as seen in relation to both the Spice Girls and Riot Grrrl – tends to militate against the usefulness of maintaining a conceptual division between the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘alternative’ (2002: 275-76). In what follows, by discussing two examples from Taiwan, I further explore how the globalising pop-feminist phenomenon instructively complicates any clear-cut division between oppositional and dominant forms both of music and of gender politics, and indeed confounds the persistent presumptive distinction between the commercial and the political in the field of popular music cultures.

In addition, consideration of how musical ‘girl culture’ is indigenised in Taiwan allows us to gain a detailed view of the ground-level workings of this local music culture. When the question of how ‘Asian’ musicians are viewed in the West has been tackled, the conclusion has usually been that they are framed through an orientalising gaze (Wald, 1998; Driscoll, 2002: 294-301; Bourdaghs, 2005). But my project here is a different one. I ask how women musicians who are working within Asia, generally both unknown to and largely unconcerned with Anglophone western audiences, pick up and make use of elements of globally mobile gender discourses to create locally meaningful forms of music culture. In other words, my concern is not with how ‘Asian-ness’ in general is represented in the West, but instead with how elements of western-inflected global culture function within a specific Asian context. Instead of assuming that ‘Asia’ is meaningful mainly in terms of its presumed marginalisation vis-à-vis ‘the West’, this approach recognises that in today’s world, Asia-based cultural production – in this case, Mandarin popular music – functions as a centre in its own right.
LADYBUG

One band whose public performance and self-representation relates in interesting ways to globalising girl rock is the Taipei punk outfit, Ladybug, formed in 1995, which the government-run periodical Sinorama characterises – very probably to the band members’ delight – as “noisy, foul-mouthed, impulsive and wild” (Lee, 1998; Frazier, 2001). Ladybug represents one of the earliest and most prominent faces of Taiwan’s ‘alternative’ girl rock, and the performance of renegade renditions of ‘girlhood’ is a key facet of the band’s public image. While the band is prominent locally on Taipei’s ‘underground’ bands scene, and has toured in the USA, it has never gained sustained popularity outside the island. This is probably due to a combination of its predominantly Mandarin lyrics (excluding Anglophone markets) and its determinedly anti-‘mainstream’ sound (excluding the large overseas Mandarin markets). Ladybug’s sound is characterised by fast, high-energy beats with dominant drums and bass and abrasive, ‘screamy’ vocals (as in their classic anti-sexual harassment anthem, Fuck off, sex maniac [Selang gun kai] with its memorable English refrain: “I don’t need no FUCKING ASSHOLES!”), alternating with sections dominated by melodically simple guitar and softer, childishly ‘cute’-sounding vocals (as in Ghost child [Gui xiaohai]). Among American bands, Ladybug’s instrumental and vocal approach and its overall sound might be compared in a general sense with that of Bikini Kill or Babes in Toyland. The initial peak of Ladybug’s fame was in the mid- to late-1990s, when the band played regularly at Taipei’s live venues, toured the USA and achieved good airplay on college radio, and released two CDs: Ladybug (self-produced, 1997) and the re-mixed instrumental album Let the spaceship dance (Crystal, 1998). But it is the band’s live performances for which it is best known on the local music scene. Ladybug’s unrestrained performance style – particularly singer/guitarist Mei-mei’s impassioned vocals – and their songs’ out-there lyrics (a crowd favorite, “STOP,” features the intriguingly ambivalent refrain, belted out in English, “STOP – Give me sex!”) led to the band being much commented on in local media. The vast majority of Taipei’s bands were either all-male or mixed male-female, and Ladybug’s ferocious challenge to polite femininity was unequalled by any local women musicians at the time.

In February 2000 I conducted an interview with Ellie Zhang, then drummer with Ladybug, to explore her opinions on feminism and global girl culture in relation to her own musical practice. As emerges clearly from the extracts below, our discussion showed up unpredictable slipperiness and complexity of such local–global relations rather than suggesting any strong theory to account for these relations. One interesting way to view this conversation, between two good friends of about the same age and both interpellated in different ways by late-1990s musical girl cultures, might be as an interchange between two subjects positioned at different points on the map of globalising girl cultures – points simultaneously connected (by shared cultural knowledges and tastes) and disconnected (by distinct local contexts).

F: Do you feel like you have any relationship not only to girl bands but to girl culture in the United States, like Riot Grrrl, Tank Girl?
E: Well, western influence, absolutely. I mean, of course we got western influence. But for those [other girls in the band], I don't think the American culture about Riot Grrrl is so important to them.

F: But if you watched [the band's] performance, you could easily think: "Oh right, that's relating to Riot Grrrl," that kind of moment. It seems like part of a global girl culture.

E: Maybe it has some things in common. But even me, I'm not so familiar with the Riot Grrrl scene at all. I'm the most, you know, involved [of the members] in this band, but I still don't know them, enough - well, I heard about the Breeders, L7 and ... it's interesting, but we're not so into it. It's weird, huh?

F: So who are your musical or stylistic influences, if it's not so much Riot Grrrl?

E: Well, I used to like Ani Difranco ... I think her ideas are pretty great. Because she just does whatever she wants to do, yeah that's what I always wanted to be ...

F: But Ani Difranco is much more acoustic [than your sound].

E: I know. Mmm. No, because I like the idea - like she has her own label, and she pretty much does everything by herself, that kind of thing, because that's all I want to do! But I cannot do it in Taiwan, it's like if you want to have your own label you have to pay so much. It's impossible.

F: You say you admire her because she does what she wants to do; she's got her own label; she writes her own songs; she performs how she wants to perform, and let's face it: she's a girl! So it's kind of like this ideal of women's independence and autonomy in music.

E: Yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm.

F: So, do you think that idea relates in any way, in your mind, to this thing called feminism?

E: I think it's absolutely a feminist thing. It's just I don't like the word. I don't know why. Maybe because they give me so many bad impressions ... But definitely I am a feminist.

F: So you like the ideas, but you don't like the word?

E: Yeah. They should invent a new word to make me feel strong and proud! ... Yeah, feminism is so ... old. I just think we need a new name for this kind of thing. ... I don't know, someone should invent something new.

F: Well, I feel like they maybe did. In America, anyway, there's Riot Grrrl, there's all kinds of young feminisms. Only you feel a bit distant from them as well, because they're in America. So maybe you wish you could have some local thing, that would be ...
E: No. I think the distance doesn’t matter. It’s just like, if I really felt that way, if I really believed in what they say, the distance wouldn’t matter ... It’s kind of, like, Riot Grrrl is a little bit too much, for me. It’s like they’re too tough [laughter]. Like, maybe that’s just the image I got – it could be wrong. [Maybe] I just got the wrong idea, because the newspapers and the media always make them like, “violent girls,” or something.

F: I see. But you like the idea, just if it was done differently?

E: Yeah. I’m too picky. Not everyone is like me, so it’s not true [laughter]. [Leans in toward the tape recorder; says with mock gravity]: Taiwan’s women maybe don’t think this way. (i/v with author, 3 Feb 2000)

In this conversation Ellie and I grapple with some of the infamously thorny questions raised by globalising culture. Both my own questions about the (to me, seemingly clear) relationship between Ellie’s musical practice in Taiwan and north American Riot Grrrl culture, and her equivocal responses to these questions illustrate again the unpredictable complexities of transnationally mobile cultural forms (Appadurai, 1990). For Ellie, westernisation is the self-evident condition of Ladybug’s musical practice, and the first influence she cites is no local musician but American folk-rock singer Ani DiFranco. Adding to the initial impression of an identification with a global girl culture, Ellie would seem to share with the Riot Grrrl movement a desire for women’s increased agency in the music industry, a defining musical relationship to the punk moment, and a broadly feminist cultural politics tempered by the third-wave-ish idea that second-wave feminism is ‘too serious’ and ought to be re-invented to increase its relevance for a new generation of young women. Yet despite all this, Ellie’s reluctance to identify with Riot Grrrl as such indicates, as Wald (1998) argues in relation to the self-representation of Japanese female bands in the USA, that one cannot necessarily assume the universal cross-cultural portability of US-based discourses of critical girlhood (606). In offering her own dis-identificatory response to Riot Grrrl on the grounds of it being “kind of ... too tough”, Ellie emphasises some important factors to be considered in evaluating her response: the possibility of a kind of static interference produced by inaccurate media representations of the movement, and the fact that her personal thoughts cannot be taken as representative of any monolithic group designated “Taiwan’s women”. I want to take Ellie very seriously on this final point, resisting the lure of one conceivable argument that would assert an inherent mis-match between the confrontational femininity of Riot Grrrl and some fantasy object called ‘Taiwanese culture’. Instead, I think Ellie’s heavily qualified statement that “Riot Grrrl is a little bit too much, for me” points toward the almost indefinable yet stubbornly inassimilable particularity of certain cultural forms; a particularity that acts as a kind of cultural drag-force holding back their otherwise slick mobility across geo-cultural borders. This cultural drag-force is felt in this instance as associated with north American Riot Grrrl culture and, for some reason that Ellie struggles to put her finger on, renders that culture not-quite-
digestible in the context of her own everyday life world in Taiwan. That “little bit too much” – enigmatic even to Ellie herself, who ultimately does not seem quite to trust her own tentative assessment that it’s about Riot Grrrl being “too tough” – is readable, more allegorically than literally, as designating a persistent grain of difference that prevents globalising cultural forms from being smoothly translatable into every context. Ellie’s elusive “little bit too much”, constraining her full identification with globalising girl culture, also represents her own situated resistance to her musical practice becoming fully explicable in terms of Riot Grrrl as a global form.

Such an interpretation is lent weight by Ellie’s discussion of the way ‘Taiwaneness’ signifies in relation to Ladybug’s music. Below, we discuss the representation of Ladybug on the band’s US tour, where it was generally written up – partly to Ellie’s annoyance – as a “girl band from Taiwan”:

E: How I feel is like, we want to stand on the same level as other bands, no matter whether male bands, girl bands, or mixed bands. We want to stand in the same level. So I don’t wanna be called ‘girl band’. But if people say we’re from Taiwan, that’s ... good, because we have a different culture. So we have different things to offer ... Because culture is really important, for your work. So you have a certain idea: OK, where are they from? And so this kind of music, it’s from their culture.

F: So do you feel like that kind of ‘cultural identity’ comes out in your music?

E: Uuuh ... well, I think it’s very subtle. Because I can’t tell, myself. We’re not really, like, really ‘Chinese style’, or ... But I think it’s subtle. And definitely it will have some kind of ... appearance ... [But] if it doesn’t come out, it doesn’t matter. It just means, OK, this band from Taiwan doesn’t show anything, they don’t have personality. Well that’s probably true, you know, because Taiwan is such a mixed-culture kind of country. ... I think maybe if people heard more Taiwanese bands, they would find out the common things between us. But with only one it’s hard to compare. (i/v 3 Feb 2000)

Ellie’s discussion of culture suggests that while Ladybug’s cultural specificity is an elusive – as yet undefined or even inaudible – quality, it nonetheless remains a very meaningful idea, for her, in allowing the notional differentiation of Ladybug’s music within a global frame. Interestingly, for Ellie this notional Taiwanese ‘cultural identity’ has less to do with ‘Chinese style’ than with a ‘mixed culture’ that leads to a stylistic hybridity which, paradoxically, at once functions as the marker of the local particularity of Taiwanese bands and also renders this particularity inaudible – though not, for Ellie, insignificant – in the audioscapes of contemporary world music culture. In this situation locality seems meaningful less as cultural content – some set of recognisable cultural characteristics to which one could point as encapsulating ‘Taiwaneness’ – than as an imagined relation that enables the affirmation of the particularity of lived
experience and cultural production in a given place. Thus the notion of locality retains a strong affective purchase even when the ‘Taiwanese culture’ that forms the everyday context for musicians and audiences and for the music they produce and consume is characterised, precisely, by its ceaseless traffic in global forms.

Yet Ellie’s naming of Ani Difranco as a key influence suggests that what inspires and motivates her as a young Taiwanese feminist musician is not necessarily local musicians; nor musicians working in her own musical genre – since Difranco’s folk-rock is quite different from Ladybug’s punk sound (and from Ellie’s own solo work on her self-produced Glow album). Neither is it overtly feminist ‘messages’ at the level of lyrical content or performance style that inspire her (though the citation of Difranco as a key influence certainly doesn’t preclude a preference for these). Rather, Ellie refers to Difranco’s feminist music practice: the ability and determination for a female performer to operate autonomously and effectively within the tough, male-dominated world of the music industry. Despite Ellie’s accurate assessment of the difficulty of working as an independent woman musician in Taiwan’s industry, one musician in Taiwan has emerged over recent years as a preeminent example of someone who has managed to do just that: feminist ‘alternative’ singer-songwriter and producer Sandee Chan.

**SANDEE CHAN**

Of Shanghainese descent, Sandee Chan lives and works in Taiwan. She has to date produced nine albums as well as a book of prose, numerous works of poetry, and several musical scores for theatre. She has collaborated in arranging scores for recent Hong Kong films including Wong Kar-wai’s In the mood for love (2000) and Tsui Hark’s Time and tide (2000), and in recent years has become well-known through writing and producing music for other Mandarin singers. In 2005, she won the Golden Melody Award for Best Mandarin Pop Album, as well as Best Producer, with her latest album, When we all wept in silence (2005). Sandee’s early CDs were dominated by an acoustic, folk-rock sound with simple instrumentation; strong, rich vocals (then as now purely in Mandarin); unpredictable but catchy melodies; and a thematic preoccupation with both women’s everyday experience and feminist cultural politics. Comparing her with American singers, her sound might perhaps be placed somewhere between Suzanne Vega and Ani Difranco. The cheerful Café Inn (Kafeiyin) for example, on her 1994 Four Seasons album features Sandee’s voice accompanied by a single acoustic guitar. On the same album, Recycling (Dao lese), a slow, dark, minor-key environmentalist ballad is dominated by the brooding bass, while Speed (Chaosu), with its fast beat and insistent guitar, is more self-consciously grungy. Sandee’s later albums arguably tend at times toward a more straightforward pop style; the song Perfect from Perfect moan (2000), for example, is a highly polished electronic number quite far removed from the acoustic folk sound Sandee cultivates elsewhere.

In 2000-2001, as part of a related research project investigating (married,
straight) Sandee’s remarkable popularity among young, urban Taiwanese lesbians, I posted calls at a number of Chinese-language lesbian Internet and BBS sites for volunteer Sandee fans to fill out questionnaires on their fandom. Resulting from these calls, I received fully completed questionnaires from ten of Sandee’s Taiwanese lesbian fans. The quotes from fans reproduced below are taken from these fans’ questionnaire responses. Clearly, this sample both is too small and represents too specific a demographic to constitute a representative sample of Sandee’s Taiwanese women fans. My aim in what follows is not to produce a representative or quantitative account of this fan-base, but instead to offer a qualitative analysis of some of the available discourses through which these particular fans interpret Sandee’s significance to them, especially in relation to feminism and ‘alternativeness’, which emerged as strong themes in these fans’ responses.

Sandee’s star text is frequently constructed by fans, music media, and Sandee’s own public statements alike as marked by a defining relationship to the ‘alternative’ or the ‘non-mainstream’ (linglei; fei zhuiliu). This relates as much to the conditions of production of Sandee’s music as to its content: Sandee’s first albums came out on the local independent label Friendly Dogs; in 2000 she signed with Magic Stone for her most successful album to date, *Perfect moan* – only to bypass recording companies altogether with her later release, the live double-album *Happy birthday* (2002), which along with her guitarist Xu Qian-xiu she recorded and produced independently and marketed via the Internet at Taiwan’s http://music543.com (*Angry women in rock* website). Perhaps related in a sense to Sandee’s image as an ‘alternative’ musician is her advocacy of Taiwan’s local music in the face of incursions from regional and global pop. A favorite maxim that appears on the sleeve notes of her CDs and Internet fan sites is “I believe Taiwan has irrepresibly good music” (*Wo xiangxin Taiwan you dabuside hao yin Yue*; literally, “I believe Taiwan has good music that can’t be killed off, no matter how hard it’s beaten”).

Responses by fans to the question of what about Sandee’s music they find most attractive demonstrate that for some fans, the differentiation of Sandee’s music from mainstream pop, at the level of both its musical style and the ideological content of its lyrics, is a key determining factor in their fandom. One woman writes: “I like the views [Sandee] expresses in her lyrics; she very much has her own opinion. And her melodies are different from ‘canned music’ (guantou yin Yue)”. Others opined: “I like her non-sickly melodies and unsentimental lyrics, which are enormously different from Taiwan’s pop music”; “[I like her because] the direction she takes is different from standard pop music. Without falling into the vulgarly commercial, she’s able to describe certain things very directly. To listen to her you feel she very much has her own style. That’s why I personally like her”. In January 2001, Sandee made a strong public statement of her personal distaste for Taiwan’s commercial pop music in the now-infamous list of the “10 All-time Crappiest Singers” (*Shi da lan geshou*) that she and producer Lin Wei-zhe announced at a press conference (nominees included pop artists Jolin [Cai Yi-lin], MC Hotdog, Huang Zhuwen and others) (Rock Records Sandee
General public outrage followed this incident, and Sandee was vehemently criticised as arrogant, mean-spirited, and generally undeserving of the public’s sympathies.

Interestingly, however, while in one sense the Sandee phenomenon relies upon and shores up the distinction between the mainstream and the alternative, in another sense Sandee’s star persona also problematises cultural, ideological and industrial distinctions between the underground and the popular. One commentator intimates this paradox when he refers to Sandee as “that most mainstream of non-mainstream musicians” (He Ying-tai, qtd at Angry women in rock website). In addition to the fact that Sandee’s own music – particularly on the Perfect moan album – treads an increasingly fine line between electronic pop and her former sub-grunge folk-rock style, Sandee’s muddying of the alternative/mainstream divide is effected, too, by her recent work as a songwriter and producer for some highly successful pop singers, including Faith Yang and Sammi Cheng.

Fan responses to the question of whether Sandee should be considered a mainstream musician support the idea that rather than always falling neatly or obviously to one side of the ‘mainstream/alternative’ divide, the Sandee phenomenon can in fact work to complicate its terms. Consider the following range of responses:

I guess you could call her mainstream.

In Taiwan Sandee’s music is minority music (xiaozhong yinyue).

A mainstream Mandarin singer ... yes, you could call her that. In Taiwan she’s fairly well-known.

I don’t think you could call her a mainstream musician. I think she’s quite well-known, but that doesn’t mean she’s popular.

She’s an un-popular musician (lengmende geshou); not well-known.

In Taiwan I’d say she’s pretty famous! But not in the capacity of a musician; it’s in the capacity of a producer or songwriter that she’s well-known.

I think she can’t yet be counted as a mainstream musician, [although] lately her achievements in creating success for other musicians by producing their albums have earned her a degree of fame.

I think she’s still on the side of the non-mainstream! [Though] she’s also quite well-known.

Judging by the current situation, she’s not really mainstream, but her musical talent is obviously gradually receiving recognition.

As well as demonstrating Sandee’s fans’ respect for her work as a producer as much as a musician, this apparently contradictory range of responses in itself
illustrates the ambiguity of the idea of ‘popularity’ in Taiwanese music culture at the time of the survey. Perhaps going some way toward explaining the fans’ wide range of different interpretations of Sandee’s public image, a 2000 article on Sandee in Taiwan’s music press raises pertinent points in relation to her ambiguous position vis-à-vis the mainstream/alternative divide:

_In the world of popular music it seems there have always existed two categories – if it’s not mainstream (zhuliu) then it must be alternative (linglei). At different times, different kinds of alternative [music] become mainstream: two or three years ago it was Wu Bai and Chang Chen-yueh, but the representative of the next wave may well be Sandee Chan._

“On this album [Perfect moan], some of the melodies are softer and more balanced, not as jagged and rough as before,” [says Sandee] “so the production people felt I was approaching the mainstream. But in the past couple of years the whole context of the musical mainstream has changed—now it’s the mainstream that’s approaching the alternative. More and more people like music that no-one wanted to listen to two or three years ago. What’s changed is the context, not the music itself”. (Cashbox magazine (Qiangu Zhi) (2000), quoted by Procell Wu at http://www.netvigator.com.tw/~brianjim/news/news3.htm, accessed 24 March 2001, author’s translation)

Despite her trashing of commercial pop in the ‘10 All-time Crappiest Singers’ incident, Sandee’s comments here and elsewhere in fact indicate a complex understanding of the cultural and industrial construction of the categories ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’, and of the ways in which these definitions shift, morph, and blur with historical transformations in music fashions and marketing.

Sandee has been instrumental since the mid-1990s in both the popularisation of feminist topics in pop songs and the increasing public discussion of women in the music industry. Her public statements frequently foreground a feminist cultural politics: she has spoken out against the pressure on female singers to conform to oppressive social standards of feminine bodily perfection, and denounced the music industry’s exploitation of women singers’ bodies for commercial gain (Chan, 2000; Angry women in rock website). Sandee chooses Taipei’s Witches’ Pub (Nüwudian) as a venue for her live performances, a bar housed on the ground floor of the Fembooks building: a choice that signals her deliberate alignment with Taiwan’s local feminist movement. She has also collaborated with contemporary feminist poet Hsia Yu, setting some of her poems to music.

Sandee’s lyrics, too, frequently highlight issues around feminism and gendered power relations. The song Surveillance/Violating vision (a pun on homophonetic Mandarin terms jianshi/jianshi), for example, uses the scenario of a woman in an elevator being observed by a security camera as the basis for a meditation on the objectification of women’s bodies in patriarchal culture:
You look at my eyes: what color are they, anyway?
You ardently love my body, yet can move no closer to me.

I am cruelly sliced open, the blood that flows is not free to have its own color.
You do what you love to do, with your eye.
In your eye I am as simple as black and white,
My head so big you can look right through it,
My body so small it can’t run fast enough.

Everything depends on your love. (Chan, Surveillance/Violating vision, from Humor?, 1999, author’s translation from the original Mandarin)

The abstract, allusive quality of these lyrics, together with their mixing of ruminations on everyday urban life with a feminist commentary on contemporary society and gendered power relations, makes them typical of much of Sandee’s work. Particularly characteristic is the paralleling of the personal — the address to someone who seems to be a lover in the lines “you ardently love my body” and “everything depends upon your love” — and the more broadly social, in the metaphor of patriarchal culture as a visual surveillance technology that objectifies, reduces, attacks and renders powerless women’s bodies. The final line in particular exemplifies this suggestive ambiguity. At once a fairly conventional pop lyric lamenting the woman singer’s masochistic attachment to a heartless lover, and an ironic critique of the masochism required of feminine subjects by a patriarchal culture that both denigrates them and demands their devotion, the lyric exemplifies Sandee’s proficiency in integrating incisive feminist critique into the pop-song form.

Fan responses to the question of why they like Sandee indicate that much of the singer’s attraction for these young women lies in their perception of her self-assurance and uncompromising adherence to her own opinions, including the feminist social critique that fans read in her songs and public statements:

Now she’s a famous musician, but in her music and her thinking she still holds to her own opinions. Maybe that’s the reason I liked her as soon as I heard her music. Many of her lyrics are concerned with social critique and feminism, and they give you lots of different points of view to consider ...

I think she does have a connection with feminism, because what the opinions expressed in her lyrics criticise is masculinist power.

My favorite is her album that’s a best-of plus live recordings, because on that album the musical expression is the most spirited, and the lyrics contain the most social criticism. I like the way her music shakes you up, plus the directness of her lyrics.
I like her true boldness in writing her own feelings into her lyrics – it’s very real, just great. I like her languorous voice that nevertheless shows she has her own opinions and beliefs. I like so much, so much [about her] …

As this final response in particular suggests, for these fans the perception of Sandee’s independent-mindedness articulates to strong affective responses as much as – perhaps inextricable from – the fans’ intellectual commitment to a shared feminist politics. Perhaps these fans’ construction of Sandee as a boldly self-defining woman artist activates such powerful affective responses due partly to the parallel relation one can infer with the fans’ own activity of identification. It could be argued that Sandee’s star image speaks so forcefully to these young, feminist women precisely because her public performance as self-assured young feminist expressing “her own opinions,” “her own beliefs” and “her own feelings” offers a model and a mirror of the very self-fashioning processes in which the young fans engage through their fandom.

Sandee’s female fans’ attraction to her star image’s signification of female independence echoes statements made by fans of Hong Kong-based Cantonese-/Mandarin-/Japanese-/English-singing pop superstar Faye Wong, as analysed by Anthony Fung and Michael Curtin (2002). Through a discussion of Faye’s constantly metamorphosing star persona, Fung and Curtin demonstrate the new profitability in regional Chinese markets of female star images associated with non-conformity and challenges to conservative gender ideologies (see also Witzleben, 1999). The authors show that Faye’s super stardom is, paradoxically, centrally reliant on the idea of her ‘alternativeness’, in a twist that complicates the dialectics of the mainstream versus the alternative as well as the presumptive opposition between the politics of feminism and the commercialism of the music industry (274). Sandee’s music is of course far less commercially successful than Faye’s, and her challenge to conservative gender ideologies is significantly more overt – particularly insofar as Sandee openly avows a feminist position. Nevertheless, both these star phenomena attest to the increasing salience, and indeed remarkable salability, of critical gender politics in Chinese popular music since the mid-1990s.

THE GLOBAL PEREGRINATIONS OF 女力

In 2001, Yang Jiu-ying’s book Grrrl rock (Nü yaogun) was published with a foreword by Sandee in which she reviews her experiences attending live performances by Patti Smith, Laurie Anderson, Kristin Hersh, Ani Difranco, Kim Gordon and others. Sandee ends with the sassy, girl power-style challenge: “We girls aren’t going to simply don pretty bathing suits and appear for a single summer – we’re going to keep on stirring things up, and we’re going to do it in a very girl way (yong yizhong hen nüshengde fangshi)” (Chan, quoted at Grrrl rock website”). The following year, Yang published a translation of Andrea Juno’s Angry women in rock (Yaogun nunü), at whose launch Sandee also spoke (Angry
Women on this planet

women in rock website). Both of these books explore the history of women in rock and the music industry in Europe and the USA from the 1960s to the 1990s. Notwithstanding Ellie Zhang and Sandee’s championing of the Taiwan local, the publication in Taiwan of these books tracing genealogies of women in western rock shows that the rise of girl rock in Taiwan is inherently linked to transnational cultural flows and the globalisation of musical ‘girl cultures’. One particularly interesting way in which this happens is in the local reworking of globalising discourses of pop-feminism and ‘girl power’.

In May 2000 Friendly Dogs released a collaborative Mandarin double-album entitled Girls going forward (Niusheng xiang qian zou) by a diverse group of local women musicians, including Sandee. The poppy, upbeat title track, co-written and co-performed by Huang Yun-ling, Lin Shao-pei, Tang Na, Sandee Chan, Meng Ting-wei, Ding Xiao-qin, Huang Xiao-zhen, Hong Yun-hui, Wang Songen, and Wu Pei-wen was organised around a refrain written by Sandee urging solidarity among girls (níusheng):

Girls going forward: if girls want to go forward, go together
Girls going forward: if someone has to criticise, let it be boys
Girls, don’t criticise each other, don’t be jealous, and cut each other some slack once in a while.

[Repeat]

Girls shouldn’t put other girls down: appreciate their good points and every day you’ll be free. (‘Girls Going Forward,’ various artists, author’s translation)²⁰

In a 2000 interview at music543.com, Sandee gives a telling response to a pointed question about “Girls going forward” e-mailed in by a fan:

Fan: Recently the collaborative work “Girls going forward” has been criticised because it is felt that in itself, the idea that “girls shouldn’t criticise girls” is not necessarily terribly “forward-looking.” What does Sandee think about such criticism? In future will she intentionally try to include more feminisi ideology in her songs, and become a more active spokesperson for girl-power rock (nuhli yaogun)?

Sandee: I know a lot of people criticised [this song], but I still feel it’s quite forward-looking, and I don’t really understand the criticism. Look [at the question]: “will she intentionally try to include more feminist ideology in her songs?” [The fan] has a set idea of what she wants – of what feminist ideology should be like; [and feels] that it’s not as simple [as the song implies]. But the most difficult things to put into practice are often the simplest ones. ... Of course it isn’t necessarily such a great song, but criticisms like that are too superficial.
In the past few years I’ve realised very clearly — especially in the last two years — that I have a great liking for popular things (tongsude dongxi) ... But many people have a very bad impression of the popular, and feel that populism is always a negative thing. This opinion influences their musical taste, and I think that’s a really serious problem. Many people use this as a means of evaluation. For example with “Girls going forward” I wanted to make it popular, although in reality it’s not as popular as all that. Yet there are some who feel it’s still too popular, and they end up making really weird demands of [such a song]. (Chan, 2000, author’s translation)

Sandee’s response indicates a self-conscious engagement in the project of creating a locally situated, avowedly populist, pop-music feminism. Her conceptualisation of her own pop-feminist project in Girls going forward is explicitly differentiated from what she characterises, later in the same interview, as the views of those who “go on so earnestly about feminism and whatever” yet fail to understand the potential of “too-simple” popular cultural forms like pop songs effectively to disseminate feminist meanings. Sandee’s linkage of her feminist politics to the popular proposes that the ideological challenge of feminism can — and should — be encoded effectively in commercial pop music; in Driscoll’s (1999) words, Sandee argues precisely for “girl culture as a form of feminism as popular culture” (173-174).

Similarly to the Faye Wong phenomenon discussed by Fung and Curtin, the appearance of the Taiwan Mandopop album Girls going forward — and especially Sandee’s defence of it in these terms — perhaps indicates the global reach of what Driscoll identifies as “a shift in the dominant paradigms of cultural production directed to girls which ... is ... newly inflected by an embracing of popular rather than avant-garde cultural production” (1999: 186). Lending weight to this idea of a globalising pop-musical feminism is the use of an intriguing neologism by the fan who emailed in to question Sandee about the efficacy of her populist strategy. In asking whether Sandee plans to become a spokesperson for “girl power rock” the fan uses the phrase nüli yaogun, the first two characters of which — nüli — stand out as at once linguistically awkward and weirdly familiar. This pair of simple characters would in fact be recognisable to audiences around the world as none other than the tattoo on Sporty Spice Mel C’s right shoulder — her own freeform Japanese translation of ‘girl power’. Appearing now in Taiwan Mandarin, the term has come full circle: invented on an orientalist whim by Mel C or her tattooist out of Japanese kanji meaning ‘female’ and ‘strength’, the sign inscribed on the Spice Girl’s skin makes the return journey from the UK to East Asia via countless mediatised images of the pop singer’s body, and in the wake of Spice Girl fever across the East Asian region, Sporty Spice’s invented Japanese word is now read in Mandarin by audiences in Taiwan as nüli. A clumsy Japanese term invented by a British pop star re-emerges as a Mandarin neologism: the whole process exemplifies the integrative effects of the transnational circulation of musical girl culture. But also and perhaps more interestingly, it demonstrates the unpredictable ‘feedback-effect’ these circuits can also precipitate, whereby
decreasing distance between a transmitted signal’s source and its projection leads to the emission of strange and unanticipated new sounds – in this case, a global pop star’s exoticist appropriation of kanji is re-appropriated as feminist vernacular among young Taiwanese fans of a local musician”. Given all this, the fan’s use of the term nüli might well be read as reinforcing the point that Sandee makes in response to her critique: criticizing Sandee’s lyrics in pop-feminist slang derived from a Spice Girl’s shoulder illustrates rather well the potential productiveness of populist feminism in facilitating feminist discussion throughout the global body politic.

The lyrics of Sandee’s 1996 song, Women on this planet, thematise the idea of global feminism quite directly:

I come from Earth

without divine assistance.

I’m not praying for peace and prosperity in some future incarnation

But I do hope that in the future women’s lives

can be free from fear and anxiety.

I come from one planet

And yearn for a kind of freedom. (Sandee Chan, “Women on this Planet,” from Four seasons, 1996, author’s translation from the original Mandarin)

The refrain “I come from one planet/one Earth” (wo lai zi yige diqu) – which is reiterated at the end of the song and manages, with its comfortably familiar chord resolution and drawn out final syllables to sound at once triumphant, cathartic, and poignantly melancholy – defines the frame for the song’s feminist yearning as a global one. In this sense, the song’s lyrics project an image of the worldwide collectivity of feminine subjects that globalising musical girl cultures work to produce and consolidate as audiences, markets and, to varying degrees, feminists. Yet the second and third lines (Meiyou shenming biyou/Bu qiqiu laishi ping’an fuyou), with their explicit invocation of Buddhist and Chinese syncretic religious discourses of “divine assistance” and “peace and prosperity in a future incarnation,” situate the singer just as clearly within a local and particular context (the lines might be read as the song’s own obstinate grain of difference, resisting full cultural translation – it’s hard to imagine any popular song in English referring to prayers for peaceful, prosperous future incarnations in quite such an offhand manner). The following line, defining the focus of the singer’s concern as the quotidian micro-level of “women’s lives” (nürende shenghuo) suggests that the global feminist imaginary that the song both yearns for and produces is most pertinent within situated, local contexts. While on the one hand producing feminism as a movement with the capacity to galvanise women on a planetary scale, then, the song equally indexes the everyday local as the most vital arena for feminism to make a difference.
As well as interpellating its listener as a locally situated member of a global collectivity of women, this song, like many of the others Sandee has written and sings, enables its listener to see herself as someone for whom the commitment to some degree of feminist politics is part and parcel of her consumption of local popular music. I have argued that the material conditions of Sandee’s participation in Taiwan’s music industry – as singer, composer, songwriter and producer for herself and a wide range of other musicians – instantiate the fatigue of the division between ‘popular’ and ‘alternative’ music in the context of the fragmentation and diversification of Taiwan’s commercial music cultures. Similarly, the populist feminism of much of Sandee’s work demonstrates the need to rethink habitual conceptual oppositions between ‘dominant’ and ‘subversive’; ‘commercial’ and ‘political’ cultural forms in the context of contemporary Chinese popular music cultures, where feminist politics circulate in commodity form, and which as a result are increasingly shaped by their volatile engagements with questions of gender and power.

CONCLUSION

I began by framing Ladybug and Sandee Chan as examples to guide an exploration of three questions: the relation between globalising music and gender cultures and their local instances in Taiwan; the relation between the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘alternative’ in Taiwan’s music culture today; and the relation between feminism and commercialism in that culture. Taking the latter two issues first, while Ladybug’s resolutely ‘underground’ style and status perhaps shore up familiar distinctions between mainstream and underground and between radical gender politics and commercialisation, I have tried to show how the popularity and wider success of Sandee Chan’s feminist singer-songwriting problematises both of these oppositions. Further, as both examples demonstrate, while musical girl cultures that emerged initially in western Europe and the USA have indeed become transnationally mobile to make an observable impact on Taiwan’s local music cultures, this does not imply their direct translation or precise replication in this new context. The local continues to matter very much in each case. For Ellie, ‘Taiwaneseness’ functions as an imaginative resource enabling her situated resistance to any straightforward equation of her music with American forms, despite stylistic similarities. For Sandee, located at one end of the complex feedback loop that brings the globalising idea of ‘girl power’ into Taiwan, the grain of the local shows up both in the general sense of the immediate social context to which her work is addressed and in the specific content of her lyrics. If, as Sandee’s song suggests, these women, like women everywhere, “come from one planet”, it nevertheless still matters where on that planet they sing from.

ENDNOTES

1. I am indebted to Catherine Driscoll for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper which enabled me to refine and further develop the argument presented here. Many grateful thanks also to Ellie Zhang, for letting me interview
her and agreeing to the publication of sections of our conversation. Thanks too to Amie Parry for asking me the question about Sandee’s feminist self-representation that precipitated this paper.

2. By the time of publication Ladybug had changed in gender composition, with the addition of a male drummer and guitarist. Ellie Zhang left the band when she emigrated to Australia in 2004.

3. For a recent example of a popular feminist denunciation of commercial culture as not just inauthentic but non- or anti-feminist, see Ariel Levy’s chapter “Shopping for sex” (2005, 170-96).

4. The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry found that in 2000, Taiwan constituted Asia’s second-largest market for CDs and singles after Japan (2001: 87). In the same year the retail value of Taiwan’s recorded music industry, at US$243.8 million (for 27 million units), was the region’s third greatest following Japan (US$6,535.3 million; 332.5 million units) and South Korea (US$299.7 million; 45 million units) (IFPI 2001: 107; 96; 105). This represents a very significant lead over both mainland China, where recorded music sales were worth just US$79.5 million (for 61.3 million units), and Hong Kong, at US$108.2 million (11.4 million units) (IFPI 2001: 88; 90).

5. Recent Taiwanese and Hong Kong films provide one way to get to know some of these musicians and their music: Lim Giong both starred in and provided the outstanding soundtrack for Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Goodbye south goodbye (1996) and his later film Millennium mambo (2001); Wu Bai starred in and provided music for Tsui Hark’s Time and tide (2000).


8. Classical music made up the remaining 6%.

9. In the early 1990s Hong Kong Cantopop artists began to release Mandarin versions of their albums for the much larger Taiwan market, leading to substantial increases in sales (Levin, 1993; Smith, 1992; Taipei Review, 2000).


12. The band went into suspended animation in 2000 with the departure of its guitarist, Wan-ting, for the USA; later the band re-formed with Ellie playing guitar and the addition of a male drummer from Sweden. In the interim, Ellie played guitar in the punk band Catfight, which released a self-produced CD, Cut out, in 1999; and she released a self-produced solo CD, Glow (Ellie Jung), in 2001. From 2004, Ladybug morphed again, now minus both Ellie and Wan-ting and including a new male Taiwanese drummer and Sandee Chan’s guitarist, Xiu-xiu (Xu Qian-xiu). See Ladybug official website, which also contains an archive of photographs of the band in its various incarnations – http://www.ladybug-tw.net, (accessed Nov 8 2005).
The book is titled *Hai hao* (Just okay), and came out in 2000.

I am again indebted to the generous assistance of Josette Thong in refining my translation of the questionnaire and posting it at local Taiwan BBS sites. Many, many thanks, too, to all the questionnaire respondents. The results of my research into Sandee’s lesbian significance are found in my 2003 article “The perfect lie.”


For a selection of Hsia Yū’s poetry in English, see Steve Bradbury’s translations in *Hsia Yū, 2001*.

Although information on age was not solicited, I assume the women to have been “young” (under 40) at the time they completed the survey since the survey was administered online, and Taiwan’s Internet cultures were at that time (and remain) dominated by middle-class youth. See Martin, 2003.


The feedback metaphor was suggested to me by Audrey Yue’s article, “Paging ‘New Asia’,” in which she develops a framework for interpreting the relations between diasporic and homeland cultures among Singaporean lesbians through the trope of “sambal as a feedback loop.”

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—— dir. *Millennium mambo* [Qianxi maobo] Taiwan 2001

Tsui Hark dir. *Time and Tide* [Shunliu Niliu] Hong Kong 2000

Wong Kar-wai dir. *In the mood for love* [Hua yang nian hua] Hong Kong 2000

**SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY**


Perfect Beat 30 v7n4 January 2006
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Album Title</th>
<th>Label</th>
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<td>—</td>
<td>Happy birthday! [Chen Shanni erlinglingyi xianchang zuopin]</td>
<td>Taipei: music543 2002</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>When we all wept in silence</td>
<td>Taipei: music543 2005</td>
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<td>Chang Huei-mei</td>
<td>Bad boy</td>
<td>Taipei: Forward 1997</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>Let the spaceman dance</td>
<td>Taipei: Crystal Records 1998</td>
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<td>[Rang taikongren tiaowu]</td>
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<td>Various artists</td>
<td>Girls going forward</td>
<td>Taipei: Friendly Dogs 2000</td>
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<td>[Nūsheng xiang qian zou]</td>
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<td>Faith Yang</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Taipei: Magic Stone 1997</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>Silence</td>
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Martin, F.

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