Ali Baba, Genghis Khan, and Jimmy, who are they!? The transnational and trans-regional production of modernity in 1980s’ Chinese disco

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Abstract
This article aims to examine the significance of modernity in Chinese disco back to the 1980s. The open-door policy allowed disco to quickly become a remarkable symbol of modernity related to the United States, where the popular culture and modern lifestyle appealed to millions of Chinese people. The Disco Fever 1985–1989 demonstrated their enthusiasm to reintegrate into the global society by consuming the “same” popular music and culture. Being drawn into the debates between tradition and fashion, communism and capitalism, and arts and commerce, the modernity of Chinese disco was not a forward or sideways or backward process theorized by Liang Shuming, but an attitude toward all directions to cope with the dilemma of materialism, exoticism, and desire triggered by the economic reform. This modernity was an imagination coproduced by global agents, each offering distinctive capitals to transform China’s society throughout the 1980s.

Keywords
Chinese disco, modernity, popular music, sexuality, transnational, trans-regional

Introduction
Nowadays, the general public knows about the Alibaba Group in China since its business divisions, such as Taobao and Alipay, have penetrated into people’s daily life; however, the younger generation is unlikely to know that Ali Baba was a cultural symbol of the disco fever wave of 1985–1989 across China, which massively changed the cultural landscape in terms of music, lifestyle, and sexuality. Legally, there is no relevance between Ali Baba and Alibaba, but culturally, it is hard to...
tell how much *Ali Baba* unconsciously influenced music lover Jack Ma, who experienced the disco fever himself to name his company Alibaba. Young people sang “Ali, Ali Baba, Ali Baba is such a happy young man” loud in the streets, schools, and ballrooms 30 years ago, but among millions of the *Ali Baba* youth, only Jack Ma found the magic spell, and opened the door to fortune.

It was not a simple linguistic translation from *Ali Baba* to Alibaba, but the cultural variation of significance from the German band Pappy’ion’s exoticism of the Arabic to Chinese singers’ exoticism of the West. The German band Dschinghis Khan expressed its exotic romanticization of the Mongol Empire in *Genghis Khan*, which unexpectedly became a national pride among Chinese singers. The Bollywood film *Disco Dancer* demonstrated the fusion of Western disco and the Indian tradition, which created a rare modern image of India in the exotic song *Jimmy Aaja*. Disco symbolized Western modernity, and the United States was its primary representative, but these three big hits raised questions to rethink the migration path of disco from the global to China.¹

According to *Guangming Daily*, when university students related to the Tianjin Communist Youth League argued about the image of Chinese youth in the 1980s, a student offered his bold answer thus: “[youth league] party member = progress + disco” in his imagination of life, politics, and modernity (Schell, 1988, p. 356). Focusing on the disco scene in 1990s’ Shanghai, Farrer (1999) believes that disco was a superculture rather than a subculture, while its significance was constructed on cosmopolitanism and consuming foreign sex in dance cultures and sexual activities. Politics and sexuality present a part of disco’s modernity, but what else? Was the disco fever a participatory process of modernizing socialism with Chinese characteristics? This article is to re-examine how the modernity of the Chinese disco was transnationally, trans-regionally, and trans-culturally produced, and rearticulate its relation to China’s transformation in the 1980s.

**Popular music and modernity in China’s context**

The fascinating relation between (popular) music and modernity has been studied well from various disciplinary approaches. A chronological delineation of musical history can display the development of music and culture when the definition of modernity is historicized from the late 16th to the late 20th century in Europe. This setup of time and space has produced the multiple hierarchies of genre, race, and class, for example, the tradition and invention of Jewish music (Bohlman, 2008), the intersection of modernity and nationality in Bartók’s case in Hungary (Schneider, 2006), and the imagination of modernity between South Africa and the West in music (Erlmann, 1999). A problem in this approach is that the progress of worldwide modernity is never synchronized. Even if theories can be divided into modernity, late-modernity, or post-modernity, it is still easy to fall into the trap of occidentalism. Foucault (1984) suggests that modernity might be better understood as an attitude rather than as a period of history, but this attitude changes at different localities and historical periods as Johnson (2015) explains the importance of understanding the relation between music and modernity:

> Music is better understood in relation to the long view of modernity, but that modernity itself is better understood if heard in relation to its music, an art form intimately bound up with the material conditions of social history yet radically counterfactual at the same time. (p. 3)

The historical length of time can be overstretched. Tomlinson (2015) exaggerates it to a million years in his argument about the emergence of human modernity in music, but some scholars (e.g. Bowie, 2007; Fuente, 2011) have regarded the 20th century as the key period of understanding modernity and music, and highlighted the influence of Adorno, whose studies on popular music
and the culture industry are the foundation of many disciplines. Chinese popular music was born in the 1920s. It marked the earliest experiment of modernizing traditional music by learning styles, skills, and techniques from Western classic and popular music. Han and Mark (1983) identify two features of the newly developed genre:

> Immediately noticeable in modern arrangements of traditional Chinese music: the incorporation of western instrument into traditional ensembles and the employment of western compositional techniques such as counterpoint, bass lines, triadic arpeggios, and sequential motifs. (p. 17)

Regardless of whether this modern arrangement should be interpreted as a pursuit of modernity or a betrayal of tradition, it displayed the will of Westernization since the late Qing Dynasty. Liang (1999) argued about the problems of Westernization, and his arguments revealed the dilemma of modernity—which way should China head to under the tremendous pressure of military invasion, political reform, and cultural colonization from the “uncivilized” West and the modernized Japan? Liang believed that Western civilization is driven by science and democracy, which might be inapplicable to China for the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western civilizations, which are contextualized with their own tradition, politics, philosophy, ethics, and lifestyle. Liang explained that culture is a way of life of an ethnic group, and life is about the endless will. It is the will driving cultures and civilizations to three different directions related to the environment. First, the Western method—the will goes in a forward direction to conquer the environment and satisfy these primal desires. Second, the will goes in a sideways direction to harmonize itself with the environment to achieve a balance between the demands of the will itself and the environment, which is the peaceful and emotional satisfaction of the Chinese lifestyle. Third, the will turns backwards into itself seeking its own negation, which regards the world as an illusion and seeks ultimate enlightenment; this is the Indian experience (Alitto, 1979). Liang (1999) identified three devices for the constitution of knowledge: sensation, intellect, and intuition, which might help to clarify the philosophical conflicts between China, India, and the West in the past and the present.

Liang’s discussion on rites and music (Liyue) actually shows a critical understanding of music in China’s context from the approach of music-sociology. Liang thought that rites and music can help to create an emotional and spiritual stability for human life, and function as societal methods for putting Confucius’ way of life into effect. Liang believed, “the rites and music have not flourished, and so the philosophy of Confucius had no way of being institutionalized” (quoted in Alitto, 1979, p. 128). Liang dreamed that Confucian rites and music would replace law in Western social life, and Confucian philosophy of life would replace Western religion in spiritual life, but his emphasis on the suitability of music and songs for the peasants’ environment and sentiments was opposite to the social progress in the 1920s when cosmopolitan Shanghai represented the will of China to be modernized in terms of urbanization and commercialization. The newly born Chinese popular music was not produced to increase the vitality of the peasants, but for the metropolitan audiences as entertainment and business.

Liang worried about the influence of Westernization and Western civilization on Chinese tradition and culture. Lee (2000) debates that modernity is not necessarily focused on knowledge, reflection, or understanding, but the influence of commerce and commercialization on people’s daily life needs to be studied. Lee rejects the dualism between tradition and modernity, and stresses the relation of tradition within modernity. Cochran (2000) criticizes an interpretive tradition that privileges the political over the economic, the ideological over the imagined, and investigates the marketing and advertising practices in business to suggest who the agents of Chinese modernity
were between the 1900s and 1950s. The political ideologies of four modernizations announced in 1964 emphasized the importance of industry, agriculture, national defense, science, and technology, which neglects the relation between modernity and commercialized daily life.

The interpretation of modernity in China’s context varies through the 20th century. H. Wang (2003, 2009) disputes the intellectual movements and its limits of modernity. As a participant of the movement, Wang regards the late 1980s as a setback of ideological and cultural movements, and questions the applicability of how theories learned from the West can solve China’s problems. Wang may be trapped in a dilemma as many scholars of his generation are, wherein he senses the presence of tradition everywhere in social life and as a thinking model, but he has been de-traditionalized in terms of the knowledge structure. Wang does not negate the progress and achievement of the 1980s, but raises questions about how to find a suitable solution for China’s modernity, rather than radical revolutions that have left more problems. Wang makes a comparison between the May Fourth Movement and the 1980s’ social events, and lists common aspects such as lively, desiring, confusing, and disordered. Wang labels himself as a member of the cultural rootless generation, and his research on Chinese tradition and culture is a personal process of root-seeking. Nanshui reviews Wang’s works, and argues that the self-recognition of Chinese people is a paradoxical structure—lack of inner nobility and external superiority in the 1980s, which is why ordinary people were eager for Western knowledge, politics, popular culture, and lifestyle. The modernity of the Chinese disco was partially built on the (un)real imagination of the Western and modern lifestyle with the will of reintegrating into the global societies by consuming the “same” popular culture.

This sameness of Western popular culture in China, however, is not identical to its Western origin. Globalization is accompanied by localization as Holton (2005) suggests that “globalization is an ongoing set to process shaped by human agency, and far too complex to be encompassed within a single master process” (p. 15), which generates the result of glocalization—the hybridity of simultaneously being similar to and different from each other. But the combination of global and local elements within human activities cannot be treated equally, which is tightly linked to various forms of power, and glocalization is stretched from positive cultural avant-gardism to negative cultural imperialism. This hybridity can challenge the authority of purity in relation to tradition and identity, but whether it is regarded as modernity and avant-gardism or anti-tradition and absurdity is manipulated by politics and business, which change flexibly in order to produce favored results.

From Liang Shuming to Wang Hui, the dilemma of Chinese scholars remains, and the similarity of the social environment and intellectual thoughts between the 1920s and the 1980s offers a theoretical logic to analyze how disco was actively involved with the constitution of modernity in China. The disco fever presents “the historicity of forms of experience” as termed by Foucault (2002: xxiv), who also suggested that modernity is about an attitude. Disco was indeed an attitude toward experiences of private pleasure in terms of sonic ecstasy, bodily excitement, and sexual arousal, which challenge the doctrine of confucianism and the rule of socialism at the historical and geographical intersections of culture and politics.

**Historical narrative of Chinese disco in the 1980s**

Beijing and Guangzhou are credited as the hotbed of Chinese disco, but the term disco first appeared in Xie’s (1981) short story, *The Person Who can Dance Disco*, published in Fuzhou. Was it a cultural influence from another side of the Taiwan Strait? Maybe. Disco rapidly became a national phenomenon. *Hangzhou Daily* (1985) compared disco and Yangko to claim a cultural similarity, and suggested that disco was not suitable for children. H. Zhang (1985) discussed the
dance fever of the young generations in Beijing. In 1988, disco performances and contests were commonly organized in many provinces, such as Guangdong, Heilongjiang, Henan, Hubei, Jiangsu, and Qinhai. A local drama troupe produced a rock and disco program in rather remote Panzhihua, Sichuan province.4 “Everybody loves disco madly” performed by Jing Gangshan was like a good wish in 1986, which was soon verified as an absolutely correct prophecy, because the disco fever truly heated up across the whole of China.

Although not a complete picture, data from Xiami Music and the national library of China narrate the history of Chinese disco. According to Xiami Music,5 87 Chinese disco albums were released in the 1980s. Gangtai (Hong Kong and Taiwan) disco albums had illegally spread into the mainland before 1984, but the domestic production was the key progress of making disco generate an impact on society. Table 1 shows the explosion in 1985 and the deadly decline in 1989. Table 2 displays that Chinese disco had been produced nationwide.

Publications on and related to Chinese disco, such as books, academic papers, newspapers, videos, and cultural advertising,6 re-verify the formation of the disco fever. The total number of publications is 3978 from 1981 to 2019, but the 523 publications between 1981 and 1989 sketch the contours of its social history, and picture the buildup and the decline, as shown in Table 3.7 The percentage of publications from 1985 to 1989 is 95.3%, which convincingly evidences the disco fever during that period. In all, 170 academic papers praised or criticized Chinese disco, 249 news reports covered the cultural activities of disco, and 64 advertising campaigns tried promoting and selling this modern and Western popular culture. The progress and the decline coincided with the social changes in China. The number of publications is separately 97, 83, 51, 86, 99, and 170 from 1990 to 1995, which also coincided with the historical progress due to Deng Xiaoping’s south tour which reaccelerated the growth of market economy and the reform of China as well as Chinese disco in the 1990s.

Deconstruction of modernity in Chinese disco

Modernity and China have been analyzed from different perspectives, such as literature and cinema (Lu, 2002; Laughlin, 2008), gender and identity (Chow, 1991; X. Lin, 2013), and religion and tradition (Chen, 2009; Yang, 2008). Few scholars noticed the rebellious sound of Chinese popular music, for example, Jones (1992) thought that Chinese rock music represented the forces of modernity, which was against the powers of tradition possessed by the government. Schell (1988) and Farrer (1999) regarded disco as a social-cultural text to speak for Western modernity in terms of democracy and sexuality, but how Chinese disco, as a glocalized music, produced the sensation, intellect, and intuition of imaginary modernity has not been convincingly examined. As a Western-rooted music, sensation, intellect, and intuition were tightened to desire, exoticism, and materialism permitted by the open-door policy, but this development was simultaneously praised and criticized by scholars and reporters in the 1980s. Z. Lin (1985) was proud of the modern lifestyle in Guangzhou where disco ballrooms provided advanced cultural consumption in daily life. Shen (1985) felt that disco and blue jeans should not be regarded as signs of decadency from the West,

| Year | 1984 | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 | Total |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| Quantity | 3 | 31 | 23 | 15 | 13 | 2 | 87 |
| Percentage | 3.5 | 35.7 | 26.4 | 17.2 | 14.9 | 2.3 | 100 |
Table 2. Production of Chinese disco by city.

| City                | Quantity | Percentage |
|---------------------|----------|------------|
| Guangzhou, Guangdong| 17       | 19.5       |
| Beijing             | 13       | 14.8       |
| Shanghai            | 12       | 13.7       |
| Hohhot, Inner Mongolia| 7       | 8.1        |
| Kunming, Yunnan     | 5        | 5.7        |
| Jinan, Shandong     | 5        | 5.7        |
| Shenyang, Liaoning  | 4        | 4.6        |
| Nanjing, Jiangsu    | 4        | 4.6        |
| Chengdu, Sichuan    | 4        | 4.6        |
| Wuhan, Hubei        | 3        | 3.5        |
| Taiyuan, Shanxi     | 3        | 3.5        |
| Jilin, Jilin        | 2        | 2.3        |
| Nanning, Guangxi    | 2        | 2.3        |
| Tianjin             | 2        | 2.3        |
| Xiamen, Fujian      | 1        | 1.2        |
| Haikou, Hainan      | 1        | 1.2        |
| Hefei, Anhui        | 1        | 1.2        |
| Hangzhou, Zhejiang  | 1        | 1.2        |

Table 3. Publications on Chinese disco 1981–1989.

| Year | Books | Academic papers | Newspapers | Videos | Cultural advertising | Total | Percentage |
|------|-------|-----------------|------------|--------|----------------------|-------|------------|
| 1981 | 1     | 1               |            |        |                      | 2     | 0.4        |
| 1982 | 4     | 4               | 8          |        |                      | 18    | 1.5        |
| 1983 | 7     | 2               | 9          |        |                      | 18    | 1.7        |
| 1984 | 2     | 4               | 6          |        |                      | 12    | 1.1        |
| 1985 | 5     | 35              | 27         | 9      |                      | 66    | 14.6       |
| 1986 | 2     | 38              | 25         | 10     |                      | 67    | 14.3       |
| 1987 | 3     | 22              | 54         | 15     |                      | 88    | 18.0       |
| 1988 | 19    | 30              | 65         | 1      | 24                   | 139   | 26.6       |
| 1989 | 9     | 31              | 68         | 6      | 114                  | 214   | 21.8       |
| Total | 39    | 170             | 249        | 1      | 64                   | 523   | 100        |
| Percentage | 7.5 | 32.5            | 47.6       | 0.2    | 12.2                 | 100   |            |

the government and the society should understand the change in lifestyle. Chen (1990) tried forging Chinese ethnic music as Oriental disco (Dongfang Disike) for a modern image, but other people such as E (1986) condemned the experiment of Peking Opera disco (Jingju Disike) as the contamination of artistic tradition and aesthetics. Some scholars (e.g. Yu, 1983; X. Zhou, 1981) also labeled disco as a lowbrow music harming arts and culture. Disco was blamed to damage health (Song, 1983). Being drawn into the debates between modernity and tradition, communism and capitalism, and arts and commerce, the modernity of Chinese disco was not a forward or sideway or backward process, but an attitude toward all the three directions to cope with the dilemma.
Materialism

Johnson (2015) stresses the material condition of social history in order to read the relation between music and modernity. The disco fever was about cultural consumption based on the improvement of the material condition. Schell (1988) sensed the relation between disco and modernity, but his politics-oriented viewpoint guided him to tighten disco with democracy. The bodily expression of desire and freedom became an attitude toward politics and democracy. Schell’s opinion is understandable but questionable. It was correct that the consumption of Western cultures and commodities displayed a will of driving forward to the rich West, but how much could ordinary people comprehend the thoughts of Western thinkers, and conduct intellectual and social movements to modernize China? Did the emphasis on a few Chinese intellectuals and scholars represent a risk of (Western) elitism? Who would he expect to respond to the call of Don’t Be Afraid of Democracy? Schell had learned about the dream of Chinese people from friends, informants, and acquaintances, whose will was an attitude toward the improvement of the living condition, material prosperity, and modern lifestyle, for example, to wear their best dresses to dance at Nicole’s—the world-class disco ballroom at Huating hotel in Shanghai, and a Chinese movie actress admired the hotel bathroom of Schell’s friend “with such rapture,” and when his friend finally asked “if she would not like to take a bath,” the actress accepted the invitation without hesitation. “When she left, it was with great reluctance, as if she were being banished from paradise” (Schell, 1988, p. 352). This paradise is not a fairy land, but a rich place of material prosperity. The stories were against his argument about disco and democracy, and confirmed that materialism was an essential part of cultural modernity at large.

Disco fashion confirmed the necessity of materialism. Bell-bottom trousers, blue jeans, batwing-sleeved blouse, wide lapel shirt, shoulder pad, rhythmic exercise outfits, fingerless gloves, wild-curl up, lipsticks, aviator sunglasses, and roller skates were compulsory costumes and paraphernalia for anyone to be fashionable in Western style. Their attitude toward modernity was an enthusiasm for materialism in the consumption of disco music, dance, and fashion, which contributed to the growth of the market economy, and enabled consumers to form communities and networks to develop a consumer revolution that challenged official discourse and conventions through millions of daily commercial transactions (David, 2000). Farrer (2000) wrote on the dance hall sociality of disco and the market transition in 1990s’ Shanghai, but the consumption of disco fashion had displayed the reemergence of materialism and the re-experience of music, dance, body, sexuality, and sociality in the public and private spheres, which was under the umbrella of modern lifestyle approved by the open-door policy, and reflected the utopian historicity of the 1980s.

Exoticism

Said (1978) revealed the Western attitude toward the East through his argument on orientalism. Americanism was an exoticism for the third world in the 20th century where people dreamed of wealth and health. Although exoticism is no longer equal to colonialism or imperialism, the other—source of fear and fascination, emblem of difference demonized and romanticized, and the power of exoticism is nothing other than the ability to conceive otherwise (Segalen, 2002). Exoticism is not a natural product of social-cultural practices, it is invented indeed for the sake of modernity. The concept of exoticism and globalism is rooted in the ambition of global imperialism in early
modern Europe, where cultures and cultural products serve business and economy while mediating the relationship between producers and consumers (Schmidt, 2015).

Who are Ali Baba, Genghis Khan, and Jimmy? The general public obviously knew that they were the Arab, the Mongolian, and the Indian, but the modernity of disco symbolized by the figures was an attitude toward the United States. Modernity and exoticism were mixed in Chinese disco as an outward imagination. German orientalism, Indian nationalism, and Gangtai globalism produced the cultural hybridity of Chinese disco, but lack of cultural capital made the aesthetics and identity of Chinese disco a hotchpotch. Influential disco films (e.g. *Saturday Night Fever*) were not screened in China in the 1980s. It was Bollywood film *Disco Rider* and Hollywood film *Breakin* that generated massive influence on Chinese disco. It was incorrect to define the authenticity of disco as one fixed style, but the ethnic flavor of *Disco Rider* and the street style of *Breakin* still displayed the distinctions between disco and the others. The Chinese film *The Rock Youth (Yaogun Qingnian)* had the rebellious rock spirit with no rock music. The dancing style was breakdancing while disco was also performed. Regardless of which genre the music and dance of *The Rock Youth* could be categorized, the exotic image of modern dance, black leather jacket, motorbike, Western fashion, designer, freelancer, premarital sex, and the name of Rodin illustrated an attractive picture of modern lifestyle mirrored (by) the West.

Other forms of Chinese cultures produced their local imagination of disco and modernity. *The Person Who Can Dance Disco* written by Xie (1981) implied a linkage between economic reform and Western modernity in disco. Zhu’s (1987) novel—*Love of the Disco Princess* was decorated by Western symbols, such as disco, ballroom singer, Western cuisine, Marlboro, cafe, wine, oil painting, arts, exhibition, Roman Rolland, Michelangelo, museum, and New York. This local reproduction and imagination diversified the definition of disco, and served governmental incorporation. To call a commando captain as the disco prince was unusual, but the fusion of two identities portrayed the unique image of a valiant and modernized soldier (H. Wang, 1986). L. Zhou (1988) invented terms in poetic language, such as *Disco of fighting for life and death (Pinming Disike)* and *Pistol disco (Shouqiang Disike)*, which created an unimaginable symbolism of exotic modernity, and remade the modernity of Western popular culture into masculine patriotism and nationalism in China’s context.

The localization of Chinese disco was a sideway and backward process to deconstruct its Western modernity. Disco in the Western context was an inducement to pursue a modern lifestyle, but disco in the Indian context offered a solution to undo the political threat of individualism and sexual desire while reserving the excitement of sound and atmosphere. *Peking Opera disco* and *Oriental disco* were the experiments claiming the privilege of traditional cultures over its Western value. *Fitness disco (Jianshen Disike)* and *Exercise disco (Yundong Disike)* were other experiments of maintaining its exotic sense while desexualizing the politics of desire (Y. Wang, 1988; Zhao & Deng, 1987). The exoticism of disco had been imaginarily reproduced in China.

**Desire**

Rofel (2007) depicts a picture of China with desires of sex and relationship in the 1990s, but the pheromone of China’s society was much stronger in the 1980s when the magical power of disco and dance made the Chinese people feeling sensual. *Hangzhou Daily* (1983), for example, reported that a young man’s life was ruined by the disco—a sensual culture linked to hooligan, gangsters, gambling, and crime from the West. Although not as the only object, Soren Kierkegaard believed that “sensual geniality is therefore the absolute object of music,” and “erotic sensuality” is what music most intrinsically expresses. Richard Wagner felt that “I cannot grasp the spirit of music otherwise than in terms of love” (quoted in Floros, 2012, p. 93). Floros (2012) thinks that
the spirit of music is principally about sensuality and love, which echoes with Lawrence (2003)—it was love saving the day in the history of American dance music culture in the 1970s. Disco offered the pleasure of listening and the ecstasy of bodily seduction and public foreplay. Disco re-freed the desire and sensuality of music in China, which contributed to a sexual revolution in the 1980s identified by Pan and Huang (2013). Wu (2006) also notices this sexual revolution, and summarizes four surges of divorce from 1949 to 1989. It was uncommon that Chinese people engaged in foreign sex in the 1980s as Farrer (1999) portrayed the disco scene in 1990s’ Shanghai, but ordinary people started pursuing their love and relationship as the rights of freedom, disco, and ballroom romances made their desire uncontrollably burning. The sensuality of Chinese disco, however, was the historicity of experience from sexualization to desexualization, which exemplified the modernity of disco with Chinese characteristics.

Chinese disco is basically in the form of Western disco music with Chinese lyrics. Hence, a lyrical analysis can prove this desexualization progress. Goddess (Nüsheng) was a disco album with a strong sense of desire and lust made in Beijing in 1987, which differed it from the Fever series made in Guangzhou. Goddess exemplified the sensuality of Chinese disco by combining modern music with explicit ideologies of love, sex, and imagined Western modernity by lyricist Wang Jifu. Eight songs—Dream, Witch, Love to live and die, Goddess, Lust, Alain Delon, The rights of love and beauty, and The mindset of love—narrated an exotic romance in the sense of ancient, renaissance, and modern Europe. Goddess—the title track was a bold expression:

Night, enchanted night
Moonlight is like the flowing spring
I am reading misty poetry in front of bed
When you slowly take off your thin clothes
Goddess, my Goddess
You look like a white jade sculpture . . .
Snow mountains stand tall and erect, glittering and bright
The land is fertile, flat, and soothing . . .

The romantic picture of making love, and metaphors about breast and private parts did not intend to hide the desire in Goddess. Liu Huan surprisingly covered Modern Talking’s “Atlantis is calling (S.O.S. for love)” as Lust with Fan Linlin, which appealed to the emancipation and legitimation of sex in the sense of modernity:

. . . Primitive adolescence awake
It hits the heart of human beings
It brings eternal hunger from the uncivilised age
Oh lust
It had been condemned long long time ago
It had been judged as an original sin
Oh lust
It had been depressed long long time ago
It had been defined as a principal sin
Poor human beings struggle in depression
And want to be freed from all restrictions . . .

The Goddess album mysteriously vanished from the market in 2 months. The campaign against porn related to Western cultures since 1983 could explain the desexualization demand for modernity in popular cultures. Covers of Brother Louie could confirm this demand. Sandy Lamb’s Cantonese cover Chain Reaction showed a feminist attitude toward love and desire, Li Yong’s mandarin cover Witch told a fairytale-style romance, but it was Deng Jieyi’s A little girl under the streetlight singing about an unmatched care between a kind stranger and a little girl, love and responsibility, which made this song become a classic of Chinese disco.

Besides the pleasure of listening, more importantly, disco is a desire dance swinging the hips, crotch, and chest. The government announced a prohibition on dancing parties in June 1980 and May 1983 (Li & Zhu, 2009), but the popularity of the disco made the prohibition impossible. The tight control only transferred parties from the public sphere to the private sphere, where erotic dances, such as Dance in the dark (Heidengwu: dancers grope each other in the dark), lost control, and hastened the growth of extramarital affairs and sexual freedom. The policy finally changed from prohibition to limitation in 1984, which allowed the disco fever to form since 1985. Disco music, dance, parties, and fashions functioned as a sexual drive to sexualize people’s daily life, which presented the transformation of China directing outwards, but the desexualization of disco as an exercise for the middle-aged and elderly women displayed the Chinese characteristics of modernity directing inwards. Nevertheless, the process was transnationally and trans-regionally produced with global agents.

The transnational and trans-regional production of modernity

Cochran (2000) has stressed the importance of understanding who the agents of Chinese modernity were from 1900 to 1950, and so is the analysis of Chinese disco and its modernity in the 1980s when the majority of disco music and cultures were copied and imported from abroad. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, India, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States made their own contributions to produce the modernity of Chinese disco.

Industrially, the technique of covering has been practiced in the mainland for decades, such as Moscow Nights, but the Gangtai music industries taught mainland musicians how to play unfamiliar electronic musical instruments and devices to produce the modern, exotic, and sensual sound. Badai—a productive model by mechanically copying each musical instrument of a song and reperforming it with Chinese lyrics was a common industrial practice. Gangtai disco covers, for example, George Lam’s Genghis Khan, Chen Bide’s Ali Baba, and Gao Lingfeng’s Annoying Autumn Wind, which became the learning materials of mainland musicians.

The Hong Kong music industry—particularly two DJs, Alex (Yang Zhenlong) and Patrick Delay (Tan Guozheng) hosting at a disco ballroom “Hollywood East” and a local label, Face Record—is arguably the powerhouse of Chinese disco. Alex and Patrick remixed Western disco music into two major series “Hollywood East Star Trax” (Hedong) and “Master Mix” (Mengshi) with others, such as “House Party” (Jiating Wuwang), “East Beat” (Dongfang Jiezou), “Face Super Disco Collection” (Feishi Huangpai Disike), and “Top of the Town Disco Collection” (Xinpai Feishi Wuwang). Face Record was in charge of industrial production. China Record Guangzhou signed contracts with Face Record, and imported over 30 albums into the mainland since 1986.

Because it was produced under the circumstance of illegal copying, Chinese disco was a lucrative business. The disco queen Zhang Qiang earned RMB1400 for her debut album “Tokyo Night”
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(Dongjing zhi ye), which sold more than 2.5 million copies, and generated massive profits for Yunnan Audio & Video Publishing House in 1985. Zhang Qiang recorded 18 albums which sold over 20 million copies in 2 years, and earned over RMB200,000 before she left for Australia in 1987. The Guangdong music industry produced influential disco series Fever of 1987 I/II, Fever of 1988 I/II/III, and Fever of 1989, and first experimented producing original disco music, such as “Platform” (Zhantai).

Musically, Italy and Germany were influential but invisible agents. Eurobeat music, especially Italo disco, was the primary raw material which Alex and Patrick remixed and sold to the mainland market, but under the situation when international communication and cultural exchange between China and the Western countries was limited, the Chinese fans would not know that their favorite disco hits were not from the imagined United States. Decades later, some of them learned about the origin of those disco hits, and wrote about how much Italo disco impressed and pleased them. One fan felt that Italo disco was passionate, pleasing, soft, and sexy which made dancers sense the atmosphere of disco ballrooms, and the musical arrangement was carefully designed to create a unique rhythm and melody as its signature. Italo disco hits, such as Sabrina Salerno’s Boys (Summertime Love), Paul Lekakis’ Boom Boom (Let’s Go Back to My Room), Linda Jo Rizzo’s You’re My First, You’re My Last, Ryan Paris’ Dolce Vita, and Mr. Zivago’s Little Russian, were frequently played in disco ballrooms and at private parties. German disco hits, including Dschinghis Khan’s Genghis Khan, Pappy’ion’s Ali Baba, Sandra Ann Lauer’s In the Heat of the Night, and Boney M’s Rasputin also left cultural marks. Disco hits from other European countries, such as Swedish ABBA’s Dancing Queen, British Eruption’s One Way Ticket, the Bee Gee’s Night Fever, Wham!’s Careless Whisper, and Danish Laban’s Love in Siberia, were a part of the collective memories of the disco fever in China.

There were Chinese covers for many Eurobeat hits, for example, Leslie Cheung’s Grease Fever (Youzhi Rechao) for One Way Ticket, Anita Mui’s Cleave the Iceberg (Jiang Binshan Pikai) for In the Heat of the Night, Gao Lingfeng’s Winter Fire (Dongtian li de Yiba Huo) for the Nolans’ Sexy Music, Fei Xiang’s Midnight Galaxy (Wuye Xinghe) for Arabesque’s Midnight Dancer, and Zhang Qiang’s Ride the Spring Breeze and Jump (Cheng Chunfeng Tiaoyitiao) for Snoopy’s No Time for a Tango. The sound of Chinese disco was very European indeed.

Except for a few indigenous genres (e.g. Enka), Japanese popular music is glocalized Western popular music. Japanese disco did not influence Chinese disco, but Japanese popular music influenced the development of sinophone popular music since the 1980s. Chinese covers of Japanese pop songs were (un)intentionally mixed with disco music, for example, Erimo Misaki (Jinchangjia)—a folk-style pop song performed by Teresa Teng in 1976, which Zhang Qiang covered in “Tokyo Night.” To sing a Japanese song in Japanese produced her the attractiveness and salability of a modern image. Miyuki Nakajima (Zhongdaomeixue), Koji Tamaki (Yuzhihaoer), Mayumi Itsuwa (Wulunzhengong), and many Japanese musicians’ songs were covered by Gangtai pop stars. It was a procedure that Japanese musicians were copying the West, and Gangtai stars were copying them. The domination of Gangtai popular music in the mainland in the 1980s and 1990s was thus also the domination of Japanese popular music.

Culturally, Eurobeat influenced Chinese disco musically and the Gangtai music industries played the gatekeeper role in localizing the exotic sound, but the United States represented the modernity of disco for the Chinese people. This result was due to the comprehensive national power and soft power of the United States, which was/is selling the American dream to other countries and regions through the exportation of popular cultures. That the United States was the premier destination of the Chinese during the fever of going abroad (Chuguore) in the 1980s could prove how attractive the United States was. The will of Chinese people reaching out to Western
modernity was too strong to resist symbolic and realistic exoticism, which was not made by the United States solely, but was the transnational and trans-regional mixup of modernity coproduced by all agents for the sake of business and economy.

**Conclusion: coproduction of imagination**

In the cultural context, Ali Baba, Genghis Khan, and Jimmy represent the third world, and the three big hits were made in Germany and India, but all were unexpectedly utilized to construct the modernity of the Chinese disco which was directed toward the United States in the 1980s. The misinterpretation reveals that this modernity was an imagination coproduced by transnational, trans-regional, and domestic agents. In reference to Bourdieu’s (1997) theory, besides cultural capital, the great advantage of Hong Kong and Taiwan was the possession of social and economic capitals to develop business with mainland China. The remixes and covers of Western disco music did not essentially dilute its authenticity, and the productive practices educated the mainland music industries on how to produce Western popular music and create a lucrative market. Europe, particularly Italy and Germany, offered vital cultural capitals to Chinese disco for the creation of exotic sound as unsung heroes. The United States provided the enchanted symbolic capital of disco and modernity to entertain the general public in China.

The modernity of Chinese disco was an imagination with effect in reality. The bodily experience of burning desire was real and historicized in individual and collective lives. How much the disco fever contributed to the sexual revolution in the 1980s was difficult to quantify, but the change in attitude toward relationship, marriage, and sexuality could not be denied. Exoticism was the drive of quickening the formation of disco fever, materialism related to disco products and commodities was the practice of cultural activism in daily life, and desire was arguably the most important characteristic of Chinese disco’s modernity, which stimulated ordinary Chinese people to free their bodies, dance their desire, and express their attitudes during that historical period of Utopia.

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**Notes**

1. No official statistics, such as charts and sales, can be used to verify the popularity of the three hits. I thus conducted an informal survey with 30 people above the age of 40 who experienced the disco fever; 100% of them replied that these three hits are absolutely classic of the Chinese disco in the 1980s. A number of articles on the disco fever can also prove its significance. Articles are retrieved from http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_49323d0b010005ak.html, http://www.sohu.com/a/203609746_730694, http://book.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2011_04/11/5662801_0.shtml, http://group.mtime.com/italodisco80s/discussion/392123/.

2. Nanshui (2000) is the pen name of an anonymous scholar when he publishes papers online: “The Paradoxical Structure of Self-Recognition of Contemporary Chinese—Wang Hui and his Rethinking on the 1980s” paper is from the WeChat group the Goddess Reading Club (Nüshen Dushuhui), 16 November 2018.

3. Information is retrieved from http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-357735494397083972&dataSource=fzbcmml&query=迪斯科%20杭州; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=6183961456643810442&dataSource=fzbcmml&query=迪斯科%20杭州
4. Information is retrieved from http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7684226629699396363 &dataSource=cjfd&query=迪斯科%20广州; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-1356469591579072091&dataSource=cjfd&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-2280136135864009448&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=-7632082278429223504&dataSource=fzbcnml&query=迪斯科; http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=8031377539182011184&dataSource=cjfd&query=迪斯科%20攀枝花

5. After several rounds of mergers and acquisitions, Xiami Music as a part of the Alibaba group has possessed a massive amount of music copyright in China, and offers extensive but, of course, incomplete resources to their customers. Data are retrieved from https://www.xiami.com/search?key=

6. Cultural advertising appeared in newspapers. Cultural organizations advertised their programs that people could learn how to dance disco, breakdancing, and rumba.

7. Data are retrieved from the national digital library of China: http://find.nlc.cn/search/doSearch?query=迪斯科&secQuery=&actualQuery=迪斯科&searchType=2&docType=全部&isGroup=isGroup&targerFieldLog=全部字段&fromHome=true#query–迪斯科%7C%7CsecQuery–%7C%7CactualQuery–迪斯科%20%7C%7COrderBy–RELATIVE%7C%7CfldText–%0A%20%0A全部检索字段%7C%7CcurArea–mediatype%7C%7Cshowcount–0%7C%7CdocType–全部%7C%7CtargetFieldLog–全部字段%7C%7CorginQuery–迪斯科%7C%7CisGroup–isGroup

8. Information is retrieved from http://find.nlc.cn/search/showDocDetails?docId=7000873948631398172 &dataSource=fzhcnml&query=迪斯科%20流氓

9. Unless otherwise stated all translations are the author’s.

10. Information is retrieved from http://group.mtime.com/italodisco80s/discussion/409550/

11. In consideration of the piracy rate of today’s China, copyright and infringement of copyright were unheard of for the Chinese music industry in the 1980s. The majority of Chinese disco were produced by remixing the music and performing with Chinese lyrics by local singers.

12. Information is from Zhang Qiang’s interview, “I am a person who really enjoyed the 1980s.” The 1980s is the time when “Wanyuanhu” (RMB10,000 annual income for a family) was an ambitious or even unrealistic goal for most ordinary Chinese families, the money Zhang Qiang earned just shows how profitable the disco market was. The article is retrieved from https://culture.ifeng.com/yiwen/detail_2014_01/26/33378148_0.shtml

13. Anonymous articles on Chinese disco and Italo disco are retrieved from http://www.360doc.com/content/11/0622/08/2153789_128618872.shtml; http://tieba.baidu.com/p/929725000; http://i.mtime.com/1513343/blog/7445090/

14. Information is retrieved from http://www.360doc.com/content/11/0622/08/2153789_128618872.shtml

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