

Liu Sola: A Belated Introduction

by Ackbar Abbas

“She is one of China’s most controversial and mysterious authors-composers-singers...” (China Daily 2015)

Early Life and Work.

Liu Sola (aka Liu Suola) has been an important part of the Chinese cultural scene since the 80’s as composer, vocalist, writer, occasional actress, and public figure. She is widely acknowledged to be one of China’s greatest contemporary artists, and possibly the most multi-talented. Yet as the recent China Daily article on her suggests, though her work is very well known, the exact nature of her major contributions to music, literature, and contemporary Chinese culture is not very well understood. There has been much praise but little critical analysis of her substantial and diverse body of work.

She was born in Beijing to a political family, the niece of Liu Zhidan, a Huang Pu Military Academy trained Red Army general whom Edgar Snow in *Red Star Over China* called the “Chinese Robin Hood”. A legendary figure in the Chinese Revolution, Liu died under mysterious circumstances during the Chinese civil war. Liu Sola’s father Liu Jingfan remained in a high official position in the newly established Communist government until 1954, when Liu Zhidan’s former comrade Gao Gang was purged. From that moment, Liu Jingfan’s career began to decline. In 1955, Liu Sola was born. Her mother Li Jiantong started her on the piano when she was 3 years old. However, after Li Jiantong’s controversial historical novel *Liu Zhidan* was denounced by Mao Zedong in 1962, both Liu Sola’s parents were suspended from their positions and made to undergo ‘self criticism’. Liu Sola’s music study was no longer under her mother’s direct supervision. Then in 1968 during the Cultural Revolution, Liu Jingfan was jailed, Li Jiantong was sent away to a labor camp, and Liu Sola’s piano was taken away by the Red Guards. During this period, her music study was seriously hampered. Nevertheless, in 1971, she passed the composition examination for the Central “5.7” Academy of Art (a Cultural Revolution art school), but was not admitted because of her family’s political position. But encouraged by her mother’s artist friends, she started a period of self-training in music composition during those Cultural Revolution years, when all western information was forbidden. In 1977, after the Cultural Revolution, Liu Sola passed the entrance examination for the Central Conservatory of Music, where she studied composition, and attained a master’s degree studying under the famous composer Professor Du Mingxin. After graduation, she taught fugue at the Central Minority Institution and also started to compose music for film soundtracks, TV, and theatre.

In the 1980’s, Liu Sola astonished the Chinese cultural world with her debut novella *You Have No Choice* (*Ni Bie Wu Xuan Ze*). It is a work that not only comes out of a post ‘Cultural Revolution’ moment; it also comes out of what might be called a postcultural moment when ‘culture’ itself, both ‘traditional’ and ‘revolutionary’, has been largely discredited. Yet even though culture in Liu’s time seemed to provide little more than ‘a receipt for deceit’, you have no choice but to continue being a part of it (which is why critics have compared Liu’s novella to Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*). The novella deals with a group of highly gifted and individualistic music conservatory students, part of that 80’s generation in China that produced so many brilliant writers, filmmakers, and composers. What is truly remarkable about the work is that it captured a tone of voice that spoke out of the ambivalences of the period, and in doing so spoke for a whole new generation of Chinese artists, who refused to accept clichés of identity as easy substitutes for identity. It is a voice that is irreverent and honest, blasé and innocent, light and serious, negative and positive all at once; a voice marked by a characteristic humor that manages to be dark and yet not cynical. The work won the National Best Novella Award for 1985, and has remained an essential and exemplary text, the unofficial

manifesto of culture in the 80's; a text that successive generations of young Chinese readers continue to rediscover. That same year (1985) Liu published two other novellas: *Blue Sky, Green Sea*, about the lives of pop/rock musicians, and the complex *In Search of the King of Singers* which moves between urban and rural settings and focuses on a musician obsessed with trying to understand the power of Chinese folk music. These novellas, ranging in subject matter from classical to pop to folk music, constitute Liu's 'music' trilogy and established her place in the history of contemporary Chinese literature as a writer with a unique voice and sensibility.

In spite of her natural talent for writing, Liu Sola thinks of herself as first and foremost a musician. Even her literary texts are consciously structured along 'musical' lines. It is surprising therefore that upon graduation from Beijing Conservatory, she chose to become a pop musician, partly out of a kind of postcultural rebellion against established culture -- which was what, at the time, she thought contemporary classical music represented. She recorded 3 popular song albums, performed in pop concerts, and wrote many film soundtracks, which received major awards from the film industry. But Liu was a pop musician of a special kind. For example, she wrote a catchy pop song 'Silver Dreams' as the theme song for an animation film, but she wrote it using the 12-tone method of composition. Her gift for melody, so essential for success in pop music, was always built on complex music foundations. In early 1988, Liu completed China's first rock opera with a libretto based on her novella *Blue Sky, Green Sea*. Soon after, at the height of her fame and success, she left China because she felt she had much more to learn. Over the next 15 years she lived first in London and then in New York, opening herself to new ideas and influences. Like the protagonist of her novella, she too went in search of the king of singers. One unforgettable event that preceded and precipitated her departure took place in 1997 in Chicago when she first heard Junior Wells sing the Blues.

The Blues and London

In 1987, a year before arriving in London, Liu Sola was invited by the United States News Agency to visit the US as an international visitor. She was taken on a tour of 7 cities, and her hosts found her an unusual guest. Here was a conservatory-trained musician from a socialist country who was interested in American blues music! She had listened to blues recordings in China and was fascinated by them, but it was only when she was taken to meet Junior Wells and his musicians and heard their performance live that the music really took hold. About the experience, she wrote: 'Even God would choke up if he listened...it wraps itself around your throat like a noose.' (Liu Sola, 1987) She realized that it was not the easy rebelliousness of pop/rock but the blues that would point the way to the kind of music she was trying to create. In 1989, one year after arriving in London, Liu went on a trip to Memphis. It was like going on a pilgrimage to one of the sources of blues music to learn its secrets. She spent 21 intense days in Memphis, working with and learning from local blues musicians, who for their part were much taken by this unusual and talented Chinese woman. Incidentally, she was in Memphis when the tragic events of June 4 erupted in Beijing, and it was around that momentous time that she composed and recorded the first ever blues-influenced Mainland Chinese song entitled 'Reborn'. She wrote about her life-changing Memphis experience a few years later in her award-winning essay 'Memphis Diary'. (1993) 'What is the blues?' she asked. 'Only when I can run, stand still, laugh, and cry all at the same time can I really understand it.' The essay remains one of the best accounts of the blues as an art that connects us to experience.

Liu Sola remained in London until 1993, working as a writer, singer, composer, and dramatist, ready to start over again without the celebrity status she had enjoyed in China. It was a challenging and precarious time, but also a time that enabled her to develop into the artist she would become. In 90's London, unlike in 80's Beijing, rock 'n roll was more easily associated with conformity and commercialism than with rebellion and liberation. After the blues, Liu was already beginning to rethink the kind of music she wanted to make, and in this regard, the London years proved to be very valuable not only for her musical development, but also for her understanding of how music, culture, and politics are inextricably intertwined. When she represented China in the Seoul Song Festival '88 held in conjunction with the Seoul Olympics, she was still a pop diva; but since then, she had many opportunities to work with different kinds

of artists in London, including British 'alternative' musicians like Justin Adams, John Collins, and Clive Bill, and the theater duo Martin Coles and Martin Gent with whom she collaborated on the music drama *Memories From the Middle Kingdom*. This drama premiered at the ICA and toured the UK in 1990. The next year, Peter Gabriel invited her to take part in the Womad Festival, and she performed with 'world music' artists like Pól Brennan and Mari Boine. However, though Liu had a gratifying measure of professional success in her new milieu, she also felt, like other Asian immigrant artists before her working in the West (especially women artists), that the surreptitious pressure on her to present herself as exotic—i.e., to fit into clichés of otherness—was very limiting on creativity. A case in point is the very notion of 'world music' itself. Intended to be inclusive, 'world music' could nevertheless serve to keep culturally diverse sounds and tonalities from being heard on their own terms, by bunching them all together in a single category. Interestingly, the song she recorded for the Womad Festival was entitled 'No Name, No Meaning'.

Though based in London, Liu never lost touch with art and music in China. In 1991, she went to Hong Kong to collaborate with director Danny Yung, who gave her a free hand to compose music for his avant-garde Zuni Theater. Another project was the music she wrote for a modern dance drama *June Snow* created by choreographer Chiang Ching. This was a particularly important project for a number of reasons. The formal score Liu wrote marked a return in her work to the use of full orchestration and to her conservatory training. At the same time, the piece was recorded and performed in an electronic studio. The heavy pulsating base line and the use of loops and repetition suggest strong links with 'house music'. The composition 'sampled' motifs in traditional Chinese kunqu opera, but used them as the basis for improvisation. And while *June Snow* draws on Chinese legends and traditional Chinese music, it demonstrates that listening to 'tradition' is something we have to learn all over again. This is music that is neither 'western' nor 'Chinese'; it is simply contemporary music that draws on diverse and sometimes even contradictory sources from everywhere, and in the process necessarily transforms them. Here is another reason why 'world music' cannot be a meaningful category: all innovative music today is world music.

Like her work in music, the novel that Liu wrote in London *Chaos and All That* both acknowledges cultural diversity and provides a darkly comic critique of it. (The English version by Richard King that appeared in 1991 won the British Comparative Literature Association prize for best translation.) The novel, about a Chinese woman living in London with her English boyfriend, is at one level a deliciously funny comedy of manners, Jane Austen gone transnational. In spite of being in love, the two main characters seem incapable of overcoming their cultural differences. The scenario however is not that of 'East is East, and West is West' and how impossible it is to close the distance between them. Rather, it is the very opposite scenario; one produced by increased mobility and easy access to information, of how the closer we are, the greater the misunderstanding. In this respect, it seems, erotic and geo-cultural relations echo each other. In both cases, misunderstanding can come not just from distance but also from proximity; the solution can turn out to be the problem. The chaos in the novel and all that accompany it result from such strange reversals that take place without the characters' knowledge, as they sleepwalk through the 'obscenario' of the hyperreal. This is one reason why in spite of its comic tone, the heroine feels like an exile: not for nothing has the novel been called 'the first great work of Chinese fiction written in exile'. But it is exile not just in the sense of spatial separation from one's native land; it is also exile in the sense of losing one's historical bearings. The heroine tries to recover some of her bearings by invoking memories of her past (even though she thought when she left China for England that she was opting for a better and freer way of life); but only to find that the past too eventually becomes, in L.P. Hartley's famous phrase, 'a foreign country'. In this novel, memory plays a major role, but it follows a perverse dialectic: the harder you try to remember, the more the past recedes from you. In the end, memory turns out to be not so much a salve against the pain of exile as it is a symptom of exile.

Liu wrote several other important texts during this period, including 'A Superfluous Story' and 'The Spider'. Perhaps the darkest of her fictions set in London was 'A Pile of People'. This short story was published in *Today*, the journal of contemporary Chinese literature that comes out of Sweden. Liu's comic voice is still very much in play, but the dark mood seems to endorse Sartre's dictum that 'hell is other

people'. In 1992, towards the end of her stay in London, Liu Sola was invited by Iowa University to join their famous Writers' Program. She gave writing workshops in Iowa, and also lectured at other American Universities like Harvard, Cornell, Berkeley, Portland, and Minneapolis.

Throughout this London period, the blues was the aesthetic ground bass of Liu Sola's music and literature. In a later essay, she spoke about what she thought the blues and traditional Chinese music have in common: 'At first, you have to get into a kind of blackness, to feel the blackness, then to think about what you've got. Suddenly, everything is clear. After all, the old generation of Chinese musicians before 1949 were in a similar state of mind as blues musicians... (it) is a philosophy, a life outlook, a matter of how to live, how to speak... it is not only about music'. In these words, we see Liu discovering on her own terms what the modern Spanish poet Lorca called *duende*: 'All that has dark sounds has *duende*... A mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained.'

Free Jazz and New York

In 1993, Liu Sola left London for New York, a move greatly facilitated and enabled by her new manager Verna Gillis who had heard her perform in London. Gillis was a knowledgeable and canny manager, a true insider of the New York avant-garde music scene, and she immediately arranged a series of important collaborations between Liu and some of New York's best jazz and blues musicians like Bill Laswell, Amina C. Myers, and Fernando Saunders. This creative association would last throughout her stay in New York. The first happy result of these collaborations was *Blues in the East* (Axiom Records/Polygram, 1995), her New York debut album. It was an auspicious new start: she had Verna Gillis as her manager, Bill Laswell as her producer, and—crucially important for her artistic development—the jazz great Ornette Coleman as her mentor.

Laswell's importance as producer cannot be overstated. He gave Liu his complete support. If the music required a shakuhachi player or a rapper, Laswell would find the best. In the end, twelve superb jazz and blues musicians including Henry Threadgill, James Blood Ulmer, and Umar Bin Hassan, as well as Amina Myers and Fernando Saunders, performed on the album. Perhaps even more important, he allowed Liu to take her music ideas wherever they might lead, renewing her sense of the freedom and responsibility that being an 'independent artist' entails. Shortly before the studio recordings, Liu had a private session with Ornette Coleman, and what she learnt from the session was as decisive for her music as what she learnt from the blues. Coleman's 'free jazz' might initially appear antithetical to blues music: Coleman breaks up rhythm, melody, and chords, while the blues retains melody, strong rhythms, and repetitive structures. However, if for Liu 'free jazz' and the blues could complement each other, it is because what they have in common outweighs their obvious differences: both de-arrange or derange the established aesthetic forms and structures of music, in order to access a whole range of other sounds such music structures have left out. Derangement, or better still, derangement-as-form, is the closest thing we have to an ethics in cultural modernity. We find such an ethics in Rimbaud's call for 'a systematic derangement of all the senses' and in Lorca's notion of *duende* as 'dark sounds'. The alternative--to exclude completely what is dissonant or not 'beautiful', to go after what Blake sardonically calls 'a joy without pain'—inevitably ends up as kitsch. For Liu, the blues and free jazz were like a kind of initiation into the secrets of form. In *Blues in the East*, in the way she deploys and deranges classical music, rock, blues, free jazz, and the half-forgotten music resources of China, we see her taking the first steps towards realizing this sense of form in her own work.

Liu's next few albums produced in New York were a radicalization of the direction she had taken in *Blues in the East*. Her next album *China Collage* (Avant Records, 1996) quite deliberately distanced itself from blues and free jazz, but only to demonstrate how thoroughly their influences have been absorbed. It is a work written for pipa and voice; but what appears to be a return to traditional Chinese music is in fact an uncompromisingly contemporary composition, as unfamiliar-sounding to Chinese as to Western ears. It is characterized by the singing, to a pipa accompaniment, of almost impossibly high-pitched notes and other

strange sounds. In a track like 'Festival' (later renamed 'Chicken at a Country Fair'), we hear her mimicking the non-human 'noise' that animals make, a 'becoming-animal'. Other tracks incorporate 'noise' like screaming, crying, moaning, and chanting. However, what sounds like a merely bravura performance has important theoretical implications. In the first place, Liu is not just using her voice as an instrument; by taking singing to extremes, she is pushing the limits of voice as an instrument. An equally important implication has to do with music structure. Including 'alien sounds' in her music is closely related to her idea of music as made up first and foremost of individual cells or motifs, which we might initially hear as alien. Structure is not what gives the sound-cells a form; rather it is the ever-changing interrelations between cells or motifs that create structure as open form, a 'becoming-music'.

The following album *Haunts* (1998) would take the next step in this line of musical thinking, towards what she calls object-music. The scores she produced for tracks in this album like 'Daddy's Chair' and 'Witch's Beads' are visually striking, a radical departure from standard music scores. They can stand as examples of visual art in their own right. These scores take on the shapes of ordinary objects: a chair, a string of beads. However, it is important to understand that the aim here is the exact opposite of trying to bring music closer to representational art or to make it 'less abstract'. Notating music as 'object' rather than on a standard grid formed of lines and chords already defamiliarises the way we can write music or follow a score. Notes can jump lines and are not constrained to follow one another in standard ways. In *Haunts*, we see what would become Liu's central idea of structure in music: as something at once precise and unpredictable. Music has form, but it is a delirious form, akin to a haunting. As the ambiguous title of the album suggests, a haunt is a place we are familiar with and return to, but it can turn into a haunted space where ghostly and inexplicable events occur.

As for the literature she produced in New York, Liu Sola finished in 2000 what she herself regards for good reason as her best work, the historical/mythological novel *Little Stories of the Great Ji Family*. It was published in Hong Kong by Ming Bao Publishers, and it has been selected for the Twentieth Century Contemporary Chinese Literature Collection. It was translated into Italian as *La Piccola Storia Della Famiglia Ji* (published by Einaudi), and into French as *La Grande Ile Des Tortues-Cochons* (published by Seuil). It still awaits its English translation. She had worked on the novel since the death in 1990 of her father Liu Jingfan. He was a high official in the Party, a loyal communist, and brother of Liu Zhidan; yet in spite of all this, his career suffered many vicissitudes. Liu's novel is in some ways an attempt to understand modern China through the fate of political figures like her father and uncle. However, what is astonishing about the work is that she has created a stunningly original literary form to probe the complex and often contradictory culture and politics that contemporary China has inherited. The novel displays a linguistic complexity and playfulness that is worthy of Joyce. Each of the many scenes that make up the work is written in a different style, simulating the language of different dynasties, while the prolific use of images and allusions drawn from the vast archive of Chinese literature and philosophy effectively turns the world of history into a book. Like an epic, the novel tells a story about the origins of a nation and the genealogy of the great Ji Family. But if it is an epic, it is an ironic epic—part Virgil, part Monty Python; and the story is multi-layered, full of strange juxtapositions and deliberate anachronisms. It unfolds not as a 'grand narrative' about heroes and great events, but as 'little stories' where word play constitutes a series of micro-events. Here we see Liu doing in literature what she had done in music: putting the emphasis on 'cells and motifs', and allowing twists in language and strange anomalous details to bring out the unpredictable structure of the artwork or of history itself.

Unlike propaganda, history cannot be just a celebration of the birth of a nation. This is why the novel's major provocation is to couple everywhere history and mythology, thus quietly suggesting that 'history' is in some respects mythology that has been canonized—a 'history written by the victors'; while 'mythology' is history that has not been admitted into the canon—like the gnostic gospels. One illustrious precedent that Liu's novel draws on is the great Han Dynasty compilation known as *Shan Hai Jing* or *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Its descriptions of geographies and animals hover between history and mythology. Are these geographies it describes real or imaginary? Are the animals it invokes with such vividness factual or fabulous? In Liu's novel, we also find monstrous creatures and mutants, like the pig-turtle we encounter

near the beginning. These monstrous figures are part of the history that the novel is narrating, but at the same time, they give to history a delirious and deranged quality. Here we find again what we already caught a glimpse of in *Blues in the East* and *Haunts*: the aesthetics of derangement-as-form. And exactly because the novel is not overtly political, the political implications of such an aesthetic are almost impossible to miss. What, we might ask, is the antithesis to derangement-as-form? And the answer would have to be ideology, which is a form of thought control. In the little stories of foreign priests and Han ‘intellectuals’ who settle in and eventually take dominion over ‘Big Island’, once populated only by native islanders, we find an allegory of colonialism by means of ideology as the ‘civilizing’ control of minds and bodies. The section of the novel that describes a mythological ‘eighteen levels of Hell’ can also be read as actual political history, in so far as it suggests that such a place is designed by intellectuals, charismatic leaders, and ideologues, who promise Heaven and deliver Hell.

The (Re-)Turn to China

The direction of Liu Sola’s work now took her back to China, after 15 years abroad; but it was not just a simple return, a closing of the circle. Unlike what the country was for her when she left in 1988, China now represented the way forward; the return was also a new turn. It is important to understand how this is so if we want to understand why her recent work is of such major significance: the 2 full-length chamber operas *Fantasy of the Red Queen*(2006) and *The Afterlife of Li Jiantong*(2009); and the formation of the Liu Sola and Friends Ensemble, which Liu considers a crucial part of her work, and on which she has lavished so much thought, time, and energy. What then does this new turn or re-turn to China signify?

Liu Sola cannot be associated with the many *hai gui*’s or ‘sea-faring turtles’ who return after working or studying abroad to flaunt their ‘international credentials’. Nor is working in China with Chinese music a form of cultural nationalism; such nationalism is especially easy to profess at a moment when Chinese music will sound less marginal now that China has become a dominant world power. Rather, as exemplified in her operas and the formation of her ensemble, her work in China undertakes the almost Sisyphean task of overcoming clichéd ideas of Chinese music and the use of such clichés for propaganda. Chinese music cannot just be ‘music with Chinese characteristics’: a particular set of sounds played on particular instruments that we listen to in a particular way. If music is to have any real relevance, it has to find itself equal to the historical moment, and capable of grasping and conveying in its artistic form the momentous changes taking place. The China that Liu returned to in 2003 is unrecognizable from the one she left in 1988; it is a China changing in such unpredictable ways that it has trouble keeping up with itself. The contradictory self-descriptions it is forced to come up with, such as ‘capitalism with Chinese characteristics’ or ‘a socialist market economy’, point to a system that oscillates between permissiveness and authoritarianism: on the one hand, the emergence of a consumer society where ‘netizens’ are free to make daily purchases on Taobao, the Chinese equivalent of Ebay; on the other, the existence of a command-and-control political system that stubbornly remains in place like some relic from the past. Consumerism threatens to turn Chinese music into mindless entertainment, while Power uses it as propaganda to control minds. Liu’s music offers the creative alternative to both.

One key example is the opera *Fantasy of the Red Queen*(2006). The work was commissioned by Berlin’s House of World Cultures and the Ensemble Modern, who in collaboration with the Liu Sola and Friends Ensemble gave in Berlin the premier performance. Besides being the lead singer, Liu was also the dramaturge(a talent she did not know she had), the librettist, and the composer. The story is based on the life of Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s wife. She lived for many years in his shadow and only came into the political limelight when she modernized Peking Opera changing it into Revolutionary Opera, and when she became the leader of the ‘Gang of Four’. However, the opera is more than just her biography. In its formal complexity--seen in the way the libretto, the dramaturgy, and the music all work together and against one another—we find a highly original re-examination not only of her life, but also of Chinese music as a potent but unpredictable cultural force.

The libretto unfolds in 6 scenes with a prologue and an epilogue. Scene 1 is set in the Special Ward of a military hospital whose most prominent inmate is an old woman who has outlived her time. She plays with a rag doll and lives on memories (which seem like mad fantasies to those attending her) of her glorious days as the Red Queen. The new age and its very different values are represented by the young nurse whom we heard in the prologue chatting flirtatiously on her cell phone. Her dream is to become a pop celebrity, and her illicit affair with her married boss is the means toward achieving this end. Over the following scenes, and with the help of film images projected on a screen, the story moves back and forth in time, tracing the Red Queen's rise and fall, culminating in her suicide. The nurse's story also ends unhappily, as her boss jilts her; but instead of suicide she threatens to create a scandal by taking her story to the gutter press.

The libretto tells a complex story about two women and two cultural eras: one changed history; the other represents a change in history. However, the libretto is only one part of the opera's formal complexity, and it has to be considered in relation to the music and the dramaturgy. The music draws on Berg and Schoenberg; on Peking, Kunqu, Revolutionary, and Folk opera; and on Shanghai pop music of the 30's, with snatches of jazz, tango, and hip hop in between. This juxtapositioning of different musical styles inflects and ironizes the meaning of individual scenes. Then there is the opera's dramaturgy. In Liu's production, all the musicians, whether singer or instrumentalist, are on stage. Instrumentalists are not hidden as is usually the case by the proscenium arc; at various points, they even double as actors. The suggestion is that music and musicians are active participants in history, and not just accompanists on the sidelines.

Certain aspects of *Fantasy of the Red Queen* may remind opera aficionados of Peter Sellers' 'postmodern' production (1990) of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, but even a quick comparison will show up fundamental differences and bring out more clearly the structure of Liu's opera. Sellers shocks the audience by setting an 18th century opera in some of the roughest quarters of 20th century New York City and making Mozart's characters appear in modern dress. Juxtaposing two historical periods may serve to revitalize a classic work, and show its relevance for the present. But in Sellers' production, past and present remain separate entities and juxtaposing them serves mainly to update the past by giving us a Mozart in modern dress; or better still, a Mozart in drag. By contrast, in Liu's production, we find not the juxtaposition of a separate past and present, but rather a present that constitutes itself through jarring juxtapositions; it is not a question of updating but of the kind of twisted temporalities that allow 'socialism' and 'market economy' to occupy the same frame. The difference between the two productions is clarified further when we turn to the music. Sellers may initially shock by presenting a Mozart in drag; but if we closed our eyes and just listened to the music and the singing in Italian, we would not hear anything strange in the performance. Liu's music on the other hand does sound both familiar and strange. Drawing on the many musical styles available today, including crude noise, an original composition emerges: a 'Chinese' music structured unlike anything heard before; a music we listen to always in tension with other sounds and traditions, and no longer in pure, isolated, 'traditional' form. The history of contemporary Chinese music is also a history of the changing conditions of listening.

The boldest and most provocative stroke in the opera is undoubtedly to allow music itself to be associated with the Devil. Liu's Devil is one of the great imaginative creations in contemporary opera. He loves the gu qin or ancient zither, and in almost every scene we hear the quiet sound of zither music floating gently above the babel of sounds. The Devil is played by the late Zhen Jianhua, one of the best exponents of the Peking Opera style of singing. The duets between him and Jiang Qing as he expounds on the power of ancient music while the two dance on stage are the dramatic nerve centers of the work. In Scene 2, we move backward in time to Shanghai in the 30's with a young and confused Jiang Qing already ambitious for power. The Devil appears and reminds her of the resources at her disposal as an actress and above all as a student of Peking Opera. The ancient art contains much secret knowledge about seduction and power. He points out to her that Peking Opera understood a long time ago that femininity is not a biological fact, but a performance (an insight the philosopher Judith Butler has rediscovered). No woman can be as seductively feminine as Mei Lanfang, exactly because he is not female and understands femininity as performance. In

Scene 3, Jiang Qing is in Yan'an, the revolutionary base. There is a dramatic duet between her and the Devil in the course of which she comes to realize that the power of seduction, the secret to which lies hidden in ancient opera, can become an instrument for the seduction of power. Her knowledge of Peking Opera attracts Mao's attention. She becomes his wife, winning out over the many women in Yan'an who are more 'modern', better educated, and prettier than she is. Scene 4 takes place 24 years later. Mao's wife finds she has no power of her own. The Devil appears once again to her, and in another great duet seems to suggest to her that even Revolution is a performance, of heroic sounds and gestures. Codifying and regulating voice and gesture became the basis for Jiang Qing's Revolutionary Opera, which supplanted Peking Opera and turned opera into an ideological instrument of control. 'Guide them into ignorance, blind them with faith,' the Devil advises. Scene 6 shows the collapse of all Jiang Qing's schemes. Completely isolated, she commits suicide. Has even the Devil abandoned her? Or a more interesting possibility, is it the case that she has misunderstood the Devil's advice all along, hearing from him (like Macbeth listening to the Three Witches) only what she wanted to hear, namely, that ancient music can still persuade, seduce, and be a weapon in the quest for power? The Devil's ambiguity is also music's ambiguity: we simplify it at our peril. As the musicians/actors say to her: 'Even the Devil dare not change the sound of the zither, but you thought you could change spring and summer!' Jiang Qing's attempt to use music as a form of political control brings out, by negative example, the 'mysterious' power of music. Fantasy of the Red Queen is the positive example. From the juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements, it creates a form of music that is precise but open and unpredictable, and hence useless for purposes of propaganda.

Her next chamber opera *The Afterlife of Li Jiantong* (2009) is not her most well understood piece but it is in her own estimation the most important. It is both a deeply personal work and one where she develops further her understanding of Chinese music. The opera came about because the Barbican Centre in London, the Paul Hillier Theatre of Voice, and the Copenhagen Royal Opera House jointly commissioned a piece from her. She felt that writing for Hillier's group, which comprises singers and instrumentalists who specialize in the performance of baroque music, was a technical challenge. The group sing in baroque style and perform on old musical instruments like the medieval harp, the recorder, and the psaltery, and have given concerts renowned for subtlety and attention to fine nuances. The piece that she writes will have to be quite different from *Fantasy of the Red Queen* with its political drama. In the end, she came up with a libretto with only three characters, and that speaks with the intimacy of Hillier's Theatre of Voice. The story deals with the visitation of a dead mother on her daughter whom she brings to the spirit world where she also meets her dead father. Liu drew partly on her own experience of the pain of loss when her parents died, but these experiences are very private, almost incommunicable, and easily sentimentalized. The interest of the opera lies not in the presentation of private and personal experience; it lies in the creation of a musical form which attempts to communicate the incommunicable. *Afterlife* is a challenging work, not only for the composer but also for the performers and the audience. All the important 'action' happens not on stage but invisibly in the music; as if music were being used to conjure up an unknown spirit world. In this unusual opera, music is the event.

To arrive at her music structure, Liu returns to one aspect of ancient Chinese music that is not generally known, the fact that it uses a 12-tone scale which we tend to think of as a 20th century invention. We can imagine the 12 tones to be arranged on a circle. Such an arrangement allows Liu to write her music with reference not to major and minor keys but to movement of the notes themselves on a circle. Each of the opera's 3 Acts is composed with 4 notes from the circle. Furthermore, on this circle, a movement in a clockwise direction can be thought of as a movement from Yin to Yang notes, and such a movement is associated with the spirit world, the afterlife, the parents. A counter-clockwise movement accordingly is a movement from Yang to Yin, and is associated with the living, the Daughter, and the human. As an example, consider one of the early duets between mother and daughter. It begins with the psaltery playing an A note. Then the mother comes in, and her voice moves from A to E to B to F in a clockwise direction, from Yin to Yang. The daughter's singing on the other hand moves from A to D to G to C, in a counter-clockwise direction, from Yang to Yin.

In Act 1, when the Mother first appears she sings using the very special Chinese theater technique of *ku qiang* or ‘crying tone’, a form that strikes the Daughter as strange and alien. As the opera progresses, the forms keep changing. We see the circle as structure transformed into a double triangle. In the Daughter’s triangle, the base (Yang) is on top, and it narrows to an apex (Yin); in the Mother’s triangle, the apex (Yin) is on top, and it widens towards its base (Yang). These two triangles are inverted images of each other, like life and afterlife, but they touch at one point, the apex, allowing dialogue to begin. In Act 2, the structure transforms itself again. In this Act, the Mother takes the Daughter to the spirit world, and the form now is a ladder, suggested by layers of notes played rapidly on the medieval harp, accompanied by percussion. In the duet between Mother and Daughter, both the melody and the singing have an uncanny simplicity, as if an initiate were taking the first cautious steps into the unknown.

Before we turn to Act 3, we might ask: why are there so many different forms in this opera : circle, Yin Yang, double triangle, ladder? One answer perhaps is that these forms are to Liu’s music what propositions are to Wittgenstein’s philosophy. For the philosopher, propositions serve as elucidations; they are like a ladder that we can throw away after we have climbed up on it (Tractatus, 6.54). Liu’s structures too are like a ladder to the spirit world; an attempt, impossible from the start, to reach the unreachable. This prepares us for the enigmatic Act 3. We realize that the opera has never been a ‘ghost story’ about the incompatibility of the natural and the supernatural world. The Daughter learns in this Act that her parents have not simply been deprived of life; rather, they have found their own space where the oppositions the rest of us live by—like heaven and hell, truth and falsehood, life and death—disappear. The problems of life that weigh so heavily on the Daughter are not so much solved as dissolved, and what remains is what the Mother calls ‘vibration’. Human beings die; great traditions die or degenerate; everything changes, including music itself; but because ‘human frequencies leave traces’, we inherit their vibrations. Liu’s words and music in this final Act are also like vibrations: repetitive, rhythmic, and puzzling; at the same time, they promise to take us to other meanings, other musics. What we need to do—the opera’s final word—is to listen.

The Liu Sola and Friends Ensemble is also about listening. Besides the two operas, the project most important to Liu since her return to China has been the formation of this Ensemble (though remarkably she has not stopped writing, and her publications during this period include a bestselling collection of essays *Lipstick Talk* and a sophisticated novel *Lost in Fascination* set in New York about social/sexual relations; she even acted in and wrote the music for Ning Ying’s film *Perpetual Motion*). The Ensemble is made up of some of China’s best musicians, but it is not just an attempt to form another impressive professional group. More importantly, it is a far-reaching experiment in music education that Liu has been mulling over for more than 10 years: education, she proposes, is not a matter of teachers passing on what they know, but a matter of fostering under Chinese conditions a culture of creativity. In China, professional musicians, especially those who have passed through the conservatory system (like Liu herself) are in fact very highly trained. So the problem is not inadequate training, but how to overcome one’s training; or, to put it more positively, how to think of music education as being more than simply about acquiring music knowledge and technical skill.

Liu’s ideas on music education come from her long practice as composer, performer, and bandleader. Part of her process of thinking has been documented in a ‘photo book’ now in press called *The Nomadic Life of Sounds*. The book, which also includes commentary and essays, reflects on her work with Chinese musicians and on how she gradually came up with guidelines for forming the Ensemble. One central guideline is the importance of live performance. Compared to a studio recording where conditions can be more or less controlled, a live performance is much more unpredictable and much more a dialogue with the unknown, where knowledge and skill can take you only so far. A live performance is a reminder at least to some extent of the sacred origins of music in ritual, and what is ritual if not a way of dealing with the unknown? Like ritual, performance is a collaborative enterprise. When the Ensemble performs on stage, the members form a magic circle; their sound comes from the energy of the group. And it is in order to develop this energy that Liu establishes the protocol that musicians should look at one another when they perform. It may seem like a minor detail, but it is as basic as, say, learning how to breathe when we practice qigong. Looking at one another not only builds trust; it also encourages dialogue.

Liu's scores too are designed to encourage dialogue. As the composer, she provides her musicians with full scores usually ahead of time; but there are places deliberately left blank, so that musicians can make their own individual contributions to a dialogue that is partly unscripted. In short, they are encouraged to improvise. The aim though is not to turn Chinese musicians into jazz musicians, but to reconnect them to existent but older traditions of Chinese music-making where improvisation was a common practice. However, in the music culture of China today, there is more at stake in improvisation than trying to be individual and spontaneous. When Chinese musicians are improvising or playing without a score, they may be unconsciously following a score they have internalized, namely, the huge amount of propaganda music that has colonized their subconscious; and in improvisation, every bit of false consciousness results in a false note. Hence the paradoxical teaching principle: individuality in music can only be achieved by getting away from yourself, by overcoming your training both academic and ideological, by becoming in Liu's words 'more crazy'. Propaganda music is not crazy. Even if its use can be justified under certain historical circumstances, it cannot be the basis of a music education.

Above all, Liu's education project affirms that music is a vocation, and not just a profession. To be a musician, Liu seems to be saying with Rilke, 'you must change your life'. True musicians seem to outsiders to belong to a monastic order or even a secret society. There is an order of music that the non-musician just does not perceive or understand. Liu's notion of what it means to be a musician today is extreme but perhaps necessary, at a time when music threatens to disappear from our lives. Music disappears not when it is not heard or not played, but when it serves propaganda, or becomes 'muzak', or equally disastrously, when only the established classics are 'appreciated' but not the groundbreaking work of our own time. Going against the grain of sham music, Liu chooses to be a music shaman or a medium: someone with no power of her own and no interest in power; just a musician determined to keep alive an ancient mystery, the secret and unpredictable power of music.