ROCZNIKI HUMANISTYCZNE
Tom LXXIV, zeszyt 3 – 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18290/rh26743.7

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JM17088

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CONTEMPORARY CHINESE REALIST FICTION AND MUSIC: HE DUN'S *WE ARE LIKE SUNFLOWERS* AND MURONG XUECUN'S *HEAVEN TO THE LEFT, SHENZHEN TO THE RIGHT*

Abstract. Taking the intersection of literature, music, and society as its point of departure, this article analyzes two Chinese novels: He Dun's *We Are Like Sunflowers* (1995) and *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right* (2003) by Murong Xuecun. Employing a realist mode of writing, the authors depict, from the perspective of male protagonists, the shared problems experienced by two generations of Chinese people born in the 1950s and the 1970s. Music is an intrinsic component of the novels. "Red songs" from the time of the Cultural Revolution and popular music of the 1990s are closely connected to collective and social experiences, which cannot be fully expressed through language alone. Therefore, the writers chose to evoke time-specific meanings through references to music.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese literature; He Dun; Murong Xuecun; popular music; red songs

WSPÓŁCZESNA CHIŃSKA PROZA REALISTYCZNA I MUZYKA: *JESTEŚMY JAK SŁONECZNIKI* HE DUNA I *DO NIEBA NA LEWO, DO SHENZHEN NA PRAWO* MURONGA XUECUNA

Abstrakt. Artykuł stanowi analizę wzajemnego przenikania się literatury i muzyki w powieściach *Jesteśmy jak słoneczniki* (1995) He Duna i *Do nieba na lewo, do Shenzhen na prawo* (2003) Muronga Xuecuna. W swojej realistycznej prozie autorzy przedstawiają problemy doświadczane przez pokolenia urodzone w latach 50. i 70. XX wieku z perspektywy męskich bohaterów, dla których muzyka stanowi kluczowy element identyfikacyjny. „Czerwone pieśni" z okresu Rewolucji Kulturalnej oraz popularne utwory z lat 90. ściśle łączą się z doświadczeniami zbiorowymi i społecznymi, których nie można opisać samym językiem. Odniesienia do muzyki pozwalają autorom poszerzyć jego zakres znaczeniowy i bardziej sugestywnie powiązać go z określonym czasem.

Słowa kluczowe: współczesna literatura chińska; He Dun; Murong Xuecun; muzyka popularna; czerwone pieśni

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In Eastern and Western cultures music and literature have always been closely intertwined. Although many scholars consider it impossible to express music through language, literary works nevertheless continue to attempt to depict sound, evoke musical experience, and even imitate musical forms and structures. As the expressive capacity of linguistic signifiers is limited, writers often seek to borrow the expressive power of music in order to enhance the communicative effectiveness of their works. To date, research in the interdisciplinary field at the juncture of literary and musical studies has primarily focused on the following issues: the processes through which literature and music are integrated; the efficacy of literature in expressing (or "translating") music; and interpretations of musical compositions that draw on literary texts. This paper seeks to explore a question that remains relatively underresearched, yet is highly significant in the study of contemporary Chinese literature – namely, the social dimension of music in fiction. Like music, literature creates and employs symbolic elements shaped within specific sociocultural contexts. These elements serve as the building blocks of both individual and collective (for example, national) identities.

We analyze two Chinese novels: He Dun's (何頓) *We Are Like Sunflowers* (我們像葵花) and Murong Xuecun's (慕容雪村) *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right* (天堂向左，深圳往右). They were published in 1995 and 2003, respectively. Employing realist narrative techniques, the authors portray – from the perspective of male protagonists – the common experiences of two generations of Chinese people born in the 1950s and 1970s. The music of the Cultural Revolution and of the post-reform period pervades both novels. So-called "red songs" (紅色歌曲) and the pop music of the 1990s are closely tied to social experiences.

Recognizing the shared social and collective qualities of music and literature is especially useful for studying contemporary realist fiction. One of the most influential thinkers to address this phenomenon was Theodor Adorno. As the sociologist Tia DeNora explains, "for Adorno, music was linked to cognitive habits, modes of consciousness and historical developments."[1] We should discern in music a simulacrum of the social order.[2] According to DeNora's research, "music is active within social life, it has 'effects' then, because it offers specific materials to which actors may turn when they engage in the work of organizing social life."[3] Similarly to literature, music shapes the social

[1] Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

[2] DeNora, 2.

[3] DeNora, 44.

space, so a semantic exchange between the two domains is possible. The supposedly private nature of musical experience is merely an illusion.[4]

This article focuses on the identities that literature and music simultaneously reflect and produce. In contemporary contexts, identity is multilayered and mutable – a composite shaped by numerous discourses, practices, and objects that undergo constant changes.[5] Within this unstable cultural space, music generates a sense of belonging by grounding itself in locality, historical memory, and taste. The notion of "locality" here is not limited to countries or cities; everyday spaces such as homes, cafés, and squares also carry a great deal of meaning.[6] The temporal dimensions invoked by music encompass not only the eras embedded in collective memory, but also seemingly insignificant fragments of life: childhood moments, summer holidays, and so on. For Westerners who grew up during the second half of the twentieth century, personal memories are closely tied to popular music.[7] A similar phenomenon can be observed in the cultural context of the People's Republic of China. However, during the Maoist period, it was revolutionary "red songs" that anchored personal recollections**.** "Personal memory is typically situated within broader memoryscapes."[8] Through cultural consumption, society generates shared experiences, which in turn become resources for individual memory.[9]

Like literature, music also constitutes a narrative that allows listeners to imagine themselves within a fictional world that mirrors reality.[10] The two media exhibit an interactive relationship.[11] Stephen Benson proposes the concept of "literary music": "the central point about such music is not the success

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[4] Jeanette Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), viii–ix; Rachel Carroll and Adam Hansen, "Writing and Popular Music: Litpop in / and / as the World," in *Litpop: Writing and Popular Music*, ed. Rachel Carroll and Adam Hansen (London: Routledge, 2016), 6.

[5] Norbert Bachleitner and Juliane Werner, "Popular Music and the Poetics of Self in Fiction," in *Popular Music and the Poetics of Self in Fiction*, ed. Norbert Bachleitner and Juliane Werner (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 9–10; Stuart Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 2003), 4; David Chaney, *Lifestyles* (London: Routledge, 1996), 113.

[6] Bachleitner and Werner, "Popular Music," 11–13.

[7] Erich Hertz and Jeffrey Roessner, introduction to *Write in Tune: Contemporary Music in Fiction*, ed. Erich Hertz and Jeffrey Roessner (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3.

[8] Bachleitner and Werner, "Popular Music," 13.

[9] Bachleitner and Werner, 13; Andy Bennett and Ian Rogers, *Popular Music Scenes and Cultural Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 39.

[10] Bachleitner and Werner, "Popular Music," 14, 20; Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 2003), 124.

[11] Carroll and Hansen, "Writing and Popular Music," 18.

or otherwise of the evocation, but the nature of the performance: the question of how and why music is staged, and to what desired end."[12]

To address Benson's question regarding the reasons and purposes for the presence of music in literature, it is necessary to examine closely both the textual content of the two novels and the socio-cultural contexts of their creation. *We Are Like Sunflowers* is a work that combines features of new realism (新寫實) and the *xin shimin xiaoshuo* 新市民小說 (new urban fiction). Its author, He Dun, was born in 1958 in Changsha, Hunan.[13] During the Cultural Revolution, he participated in the Down to the Countryside Campaign, and later worked as a teacher and businessman.[14]

Although He Dun is considered a foundational figure of *xin shimin xiaoshuo*,[15] *We Are Like Sunflowers* is not a typical work of this genre. Here, the depiction of the city reveals a strong enchantment with the process of modernization. The narrator enthusiastically praises the rapidly changing landscape of Changsha, especially the skyscrapers lining the streets. Yet the characters in *We Are Like Sunflowers* are not representatives of the consumeristic, individualistic urban middle class commonly featured in new urbanite fiction. Rather, they are a bunch of ordinary people who grew up in the dormitory compound of the Changsha Machinery Factory H. The narrator, He Bin (何斌), is a university graduate who first works as a minor government official and later gets a job at a friend's private company. The protagonist, Feng Jianjun (馮建軍), is He Bin's former middle-school classmate, whose educational background is far inferior to his. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, he starts his own business, gradually earning more but repeatedly breaking the law, cycling in and out of prison, and ultimately falling into poverty and unemployment. He Bin, Feng Jianjun, and their classmates can all be seen as typical figures of new realist fiction.

Murong Xuecun is likewise a realist writer, and his novel *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right* also portrays the fate of a group of male classmates. Born in 1974, Murong Xuecun worked as a manager at a company in Chengdu

[12] Stephen Benson, *Literary Music. Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2016), 4.

[13] "He Dun," Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture, accessed January 3, 2026, https://contemporary_chinese_culture.en-academic.com/308/He_Dun.

[14] He Dun, "Shifu," *Hunan wenxue*, no. 9 (September 21, 2023), https://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2023/0918/c419156-40080360.html.

[15] Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 300–301.

when he began to write.[16] His published works include novels depicting life in Chinese metropolises as well as nonfiction pieces that address contemporary social problems. Due to censorship and pressure from the Chinese government, Murong Xuecun chose to relocate to Australia several years ago.[17] He belongs to the generation of Chinese writers known as 70 *hou* (70 後, i.e. authors born in the 1970s).

When Murong Xuecun started to publish fiction, no clearly defined literary trends existed in Chinese literature anymore. Nonetheless, the 70 *hou* writers often drew on the techniques of new realism and *xin shimin* fiction. They no longer shared the new urbanite writers' admiration for modernization, but they retained their individualistic orientation. The 70 *hou* writers also inherited new realism's sensitivity to detail, an interest in ordinary, minor characters, and a desire to restore the texture of everyday life.[18]

Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right depicts the life experiences of three friends, who meet while studying in Beijing and later decide to move to Shenzhen. The protagonist, Xiao Ran (肖然), gradually establishes his position in Shenzhen's business world, rising from a migrant wage laborer (打工仔) to a millionaire—a trajectory that bears strong resemblance to typical characters in new urbanite fiction. His two classmates, Chen Qiming (陳啟明) and Liu Yuan (劉元), also attempt to establish themselves in Shenzhen. Chen Qiming, aware of his limited professional abilities, decides to marry a wealthy woman, while Liu Yuan is exploited at a Japanese company and repeatedly violates the law in order to please his superiors, ultimately losing his job. Xiao Ran meets a tragic end, dying in a car accident.

In both novels, two types of music feature prominently: music from the Maoist era, especially "red songs", and popular music, particularly from Hong Kong and Taiwan. In *We Are Like Sunflowers*, music from the Maoist period appears frequently, most notably the red song "Chairman Mao, We Will Forever Sing Your Praise" (毛主席我們永遠歌唱您) and the model opera *The Red Lantern* (紅燈記). The title of the novel is drawn from the lyrics of

[16] Lara Farrar, "For Many Chinese, Literary Dreams Go Online," *CNN*, accessed January 4, 2026, https://edition.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/books/02/15/china.publishing/index.html?iref=werecommend.

[17] "Zhongguo liuwang zuojia: Gongdang shencha zhidu shide mei ren gan jiang zhenhua," Zhongyang tongxunshe, accessed January 4, 2026, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aopl/202210140323.aspx.

[18] Hong Zhigang, "Daiji shiye zhong de '70 hou' zuojia qun," *Wenxue pinglun* 4 (2011): 156–63.

"Chairman Mao, We Will Forever Sing Your Praise": "Chairman Mao / You are the brilliant sun, we are like sunflowers."[19]

Music in the text serves multiple functions. First, it constitutes an important element of generational identity. Studying the memories of Cultural Revolution survivors regarding *New Songs of the Battlefield* (戰地新歌), Lei X. Ouyang finds that emotional responses to listening to red songs are directly correlated with age.[20] The most pronounced responses could be found among those born between 1950 and 1969 – the "Cultural Revolution generation." This cohort retains vivid memories of the melodies and lyrics of red songs, and the emotions evoked by them are largely positive. When listening to red songs, members of this generation often recall scenes of group singing and experience strong nostalgia. Such emotional reactions are familiar to the characters in He Dun's novel as well. The protagonist, Feng Jianjun, and his classmates were all born in 1958.

In *We Are Like Sunflowers*, the protagonist frequently listens to and performs red songs during his childhood, and even as an adult, he still sings them in various situations: when he starts his first job, during an argument with a friend, or when he rides a bus. For the group of youth depicted in the novel, the music of their formative years also provides a system of values and reference points. Particularly influential is their childhood engagement with the model opera *The Red Lantern*, which leaves a deep imprint in their minds. They often imagine themselves as characters in the play; for instance, Wang Xiangyang (王向陽) is jokingly called "Wang Lianju" (王連舉) by his classmates, after the traitor character in the opera.

For younger generations, such associations become blurred. Wang Xiangyang's girlfriend does not know who Wang Lianju is. Feng Jianjun's daughter no longer listens to red songs but prefers popular music. The older generation does not exhibit nostalgia for red songs either: Feng Qingming (馮清明, Feng Jianjun's father), who suffered persecution during the Cultural Revolution, prefers singing Peking opera in his leisure time.

Ouyang argues that memories and emotions evoked by music from the Maoist era are often unrelated to politics.[21] The nostalgic feelings in the novel do not preclude criticism of the Cultural Revolution. The narrator regards it

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[19] "Mao zhuxi women yongyuan gechang nin," Baidu Baike, accessed January 5, 2026, https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%AF%9B%E4%B8%BB%E5%B8%AD%E6%88%91%E4%BB%AC%E6%B0%B8%E8%BF%9C%E6%AD%8C%E5%94%B1%E6%82%A8/17535440.

[20] Lei X. Ouyang, *Music as Mao's Weapon: Remembering the Cultural Revolution* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2022), 110–12.

[21] Ouyang, 1.

as "the era of the lunatics."[22] He recalls, with a sense of grievance, the propaganda-driven education he received at the time. Red song becomes the dominant theme of a class reunion organized by He Bin's classmates in 1993. However, the narrator insists that they sing "Chairman Mao, We Will Forever Sing Your Praise" not out of reverence for Mao Zedong, but to "mourn the years already gone and recall the lost time."[23] The classmates mock Maoist slogans and ask their former teacher whether she has ever realized the harmfulness of Maoist education.

The novel is permeated with a sense of loss and frustration. He Bin emphasizes his past naive belief in Maoist propaganda: "At that time, everyone thought the world belonged to us, because the great leader Chairman Mao said, 'The world is yours'."[24] However, a close reading of the novel reveals that traces of idealism are, in fact, difficult to discern. Individualism and pursuit of desire characteristic of China in the 1990s are particularly evident. The boys' primary motivation for participating in performances of *The Red Lantern* is the presence of their beautiful classmate, Zhang Xiaoying (張小英). Later, when recalling her performance in *The White-Haired Girl* (白毛女), their memories consistently focus on her alluring appearance. Such attitudes contrast sharply with the functions ascribed to music by Maoists, who stipulated that it should promote gender equality and quasi-puritanical moral principles.[25] However, Liu Jianguo and Feng Jianjun become rivals, focusing their attention on their stage performance, interactions with Zhang Xiaoying, and mutual jealousy: concerns that stand in contradiction to the communist ideals their teachers sought to convey.

The two emotional extremes: nostalgia and a critical, bitter assessment of the Maoist era coexist in the text. The narrator and his friends are fully aware of the hollowness of the past political propaganda. Nevertheless, at the class reunion, someone laments: "The sun has died, and we, the sunflowers on the ground, don't know which way to face."[26] This passage suggests that after Mao Zedong's death, the generation that grew up under his rule lost their anchor and the sense of purpose. On the day Feng Jianjun is released from prison in 1992, as he walks through the rapidly modernizing streets of Changsha, he hears a record store playing red songs such as "Missing Our Benefactor Chair-

[22] He Dun, *Women xiang kuihua* (Taipei: Songye wenhua, 2018), chap. 1, sec. 5, Kindle.
[23] He Dun, chap. 7, sec. 4.
[24] He Dun, chap. 8, sec. 1.
[25] Nimrod Baranovitch, *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978 –1997* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 108.
[26] He Dun, *Women xiang kuihua*, chap. 7, sec. 4.

man Mao" (想念恩人毛主席) and "The Sun is the Reddest, Chairman Mao is the Dearest" (太陽最紅，毛主席最親). His reaction is intense: "His muscles twitched. The sounds coming from the store invoked a sense of familiarity, and he could feel blood rushing to his head."[27] Yet the warm feelings are contradicted by memories of his childhood: "a drab, colorless period."[28] Feng Jianjun perceives the newly constructed skyscrapers and the brightly dressed pedestrians as dazzling, but his own life in the new era is filled with misfortune. The four emotions: nostalgia for his childhood, resentment toward the Maoist system, admiration for modernization, and the sense of having been "left behind by this era"[29] coexist in Feng Jianjun's mind, generating deep psychological tension and at times erupting into anger.

Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right depicts the fate of a younger generation, and thus music from the Maoist era appears only rarely. However, the novel does feature a song, "Ode to Junda" (君達讚歌), which imitates the style of red songs. Junda is the company owned by the protagonist Xiao Ran, specializing in the sale of low-quality cosmetics. The employees sing "Ode to Junda" in 1999, during the annual awards ceremony:

> We carry our ideals on our shoulders
> The future is in our traveling bags
> When the sweat sinks into the tired earth
> My friend, my comrade
> Through the sweat, you will surely see the heaven.[30]

The song draws on the teleological conception of time characteristic of communism: the idea that human action inevitably leads to a glorious future or "heaven." To achieve this goal, employees of the Junda company must engage in arduous labor. The reference to sweat sinking into the earth evokes the association with physical labor that nearly everyone was required to perform during the Cultural Revolution. This stands in stark contrast to the reality of Junda's employees, who do not normally engage in this type of work. In today's offices, there is no need to carry traveling bags, whereas twenty years earlier, sent-down youths were forced to traverse the country burdened with their belongings. Moreover, the term "comrade" is a form of address used

[27] He Dun, chap. 7, sec. 1.
[28] He Dun, chap. 7, sec. 1.
[29] He Dun, chap. 8, sec. 7.
[30] Murong Xuecun, *Tiantang xiang zuo, Shenzhen wang you* (Beijing: Zhongguo heping chubanshe, 2010), 146.

widely only within a socialist context. Accompanying the song is a speech by one of Junda's saleswomen, who tearfully expresses gratitude for Xiao Ran's benevolence and pledges to "follow him her whole life."[31] The scene functions as a satire of post-communist cultural practices and habits. On the one hand, the ideology of the Cultural Revolution has been eroded by marketization; on the other, its remnants persist in people's minds, e.g. the worship of authority figures. In Shenzhen's brutal labor market, Xiao Ran's employees treat their boss, a businessman lacking in both culture and morality, like a deity. The absurd coexistence of modernization and communist heritage is also evident in Liu Yuan's experience. When he goes to Lychee Park, a gathering place for sex workers, he discovers that among the people who dance, play cards and ice-skate, someone is singing the red song "Oh Party, Dear Mother" (黨啊, 親愛的媽媽).

The sonic landscape of *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right* is primarily composed of popular music, particularly songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The arrival of Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop music in China after the introduction of reform and opening up policy represents a significant cultural phenomenon. Marc L. Moskowitz claims that "it has introduced new gender roles to China, created a vocabulary to express individualism in direct contrast to state and Confucian prioritization of the group, and has introduced transnational culture to a country that had closed its doors to the world for twenty years."[32] Pop music replaced the collective values of the communist era with individualism and consumerism. Audiences, who had once focused on collective tasks, now began to place the self at the center. The lyrics of pop songs often depict love, along with the heartbreak, loneliness, and melancholy that accompany it: emotions belonging entirely to the realm of personal life, reflecting aesthetic and moral orientations directly opposed to the Maoist tendency to marginalize private feelings.[33] Unhappy relationships frequently leave the characters in the lyrics in a state of "*meiyou ziji, wuwo*"[34] (losing their selves). In the Maoist society, such a state was considered praiseworthy, but in the contemporary context it became a source of tragedy.

Hong Kong and Taiwanese style pop music occupies a space at the intersection between Taiwanese, Hong Kong, Chinese, and Western cultures. It

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[31] Murong Xuecun, 146.

[32] Marc L. Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 1.

[33] Moskowitz, 3.

[34] Moskowitz, 21.

combines the cultural characteristics of Taiwan and Hong Kong, the pop music traditions originating in 1920s Shanghai, and Western musical elements imbued with sexuality and consumerist values, forming a cross-cultural phenomenon highly appealing to Chinese audiences.[35]

The gender roles present in pop music differ markedly from those of the Maoist era. Female characters are often depicted as passive, compliant, and highly emotional, often mistreated and hurting in troubled romantic relationships.[36] Male characters usually appear gentle and refined, reflecting a return to pre-revolutionary aesthetic ideals. This image simultaneously negates Maoist-era models of manhood and contrasts with the bold, assertive style of the 1980s *xibei* rock (西北搖滾).[37] Moskowitz emphasizes the passivity and submissiveness of female characters, while Baranovitch notes that in love songs written from a male perspective, male characters similarly display passivity, often lamenting the fate of being abandoned by women.[38] Their avoidance of overt sexuality and traits such as "refinement, restraint, and, concealment"[39] can be seen as manifestations of Confucian values. Baranovitch interprets this conservative tendency as a form of cultural self-preservation. After 1989, Chinese intellectuals lost hope in changing the regime, and their admiration for the West waned. Consequently, they rejected the masculine, rebellious energy of *xibei* rock and returned to a more traditional model of masculinity.[40]

When analyzing the function of popular music in the two novels, it is essential to consider both the time of the texts' creation and the periods depicted in the narratives. *We Are Like Sunflowers* was published in 1995, and the popular songs it features primarily originate from the 1980s to the early 1990s. *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right*, published in 2003, depicts the social reality and musical culture from around the turn of the millennium.

In He Dun's novel, popular music appears with the wave of Western modernization and consumerism. Feng Jianjun's daughter "spent her free evenings reading biographies of Margaret Thatcher, Napoleon, Lincoln, and Zhou Enlai, and listening to popular songs."[41] Popular music is frequently referenced in the depiction of the extramarital affair between Li Yuejin (李躍進) and his friend's wife, Pan Dongmei (潘冬梅). Although he is a minor businessman, he

[35] Moskowitz, 1–2, 21.
[36] Moskowitz, 3.
[37] Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, 114–42.
[38] Baranovitch, 134.
[39] Baranovitch, 136.
[40] Baranovitch, 138–42.
[41] He Dun, *Women xiang kuihua*, chap. 2, sec. 10.

dresses like a white-collar employee of an international corporation, sporting a white shirt, tie, and leather shoes. Li and Pan listen to a local singer performing Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop songs at a local nightclub. During these expensive outings, Li hopes that "the melodies soaring in the air could elevate their love and make him feel the excitement of entering a fantasy world similar to a heroin high.… He was the master of the night because he had purchased joy with his money."[42] In this context, popular music functions as a consumer commodity, eliciting ecstasy and sexual desire.

The novel also references the social dance craze that erupted in China in the late 1970s. The narrator describes an evening when Feng Jianjun and his friends go to May 1 Square in Changsha – a gathering place where young people like to dance. During the chaotic party, the participants' arguments precipitate into a fight, and some men are arrested by the police. Music and dance incite intense and transgressive passions. Sexual desire and jealousy ultimately transform into violence, becoming the target of suppression by the established order, represented by the police. For He Dun, the forces released by political reform, associated with Western influence, are simultaneously alluring and fearsome.

In Murong Xuecun's novel, popular music reflects tendencies closer to those described by Baranovitch. Shenzhen residents in *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right* have grown weary of the consumer culture brought by modernization. Male characters encounter numerous setbacks in both professional and private sphere, and their attitudes toward life gradually shift toward passivity. When Chen Qiming experiences his first romantic disappointment, he sits alone in an empty room: "in the clear moonlight … a certain man named Chen was all alone, feeling it was too late for regrets. At that moment, his heart was in knots. He nearly bit his own lips until they bled, and slumped despondently into his chair, hearing the voice singing through the speaker: 'The stars of last night, the stars of last night, mm mm mm, have fallen'."[43] The narrator quotes the lyrics of the Taiwanese singer Lin Shurong's (林淑容) song *Stars of Last Night* (昨夜星辰, lyrics by Wu Huan 吴桓). The song emphasizes Chen's passive attitude, along with feelings of melancholy. Referring to the character as "a certain man named Chen" reflects the "selfless" state identified by Moskowitz.

Years later, another character listens to a pop song alone: "On June 17, it was Liu Yuan's twenty-sixth birthday. He requested a song from the radio for

[42] He Dun, chap. 8, sec. 3.
[43] Murong Xuecun, *Tiantang xiang zuo*, 49–50.

himself, spent twenty yuan on a small cake, then kept the lights off, hiding in the shadows to listen quietly, while the city lights outside faintly shone in, making the entire room feel empty and desolate."[44] This scene contrasts with He Dun's depiction of the nightclub. Here, a young man in a big city spends his birthday in an extraordinarily quiet and solitary milieu, in a dim room, which the city lights cannot penetrate. Liu Yuan has lost interest in the consumerist culture driven by desires and attempts to distance himself from the city. He recognizes that "in Shenzhen, love is inherently shallow,"[45] "merely an illusion."[46]

Relativism, even nihilism, permeates Murong Xuecun's novel. Characters occasionally mock the lyrics of romantic songs. For example, Xiao Ran's lover Wei Yuan (衛媛) receives a "lewd text message, maliciously altering Xin Xiaoqi's (辛曉琪) 'Scent' (味道)."[47] When Xiao Ran watches television, a romantic song by Yi Nengjing (伊能靜), "Sad Juliet" (悲傷朱麗葉), is immediately followed by an advertisement for a gynecological hygiene product and a talk show segment featuring "two scholars with rat-like faces educating the entire nation to respect social morality."[48] In this interplay of multiple symbols, both visual and auditory, no coherent meaning can be deciphered, creating a semantic confusion that leaves the viewer disoriented and irritated. Xiao Ran eventually "throws the remote onto the table."[49]

When analyzing the music in *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right*, it is also necessary to briefly consider a phenomenon that extends beyond the previously discussed categories of red songs and pop music – namely, the music Xiao Ran encounters among foreigners. On one occasion, Xiao Ran dines with Wei Yuan at a restaurant in Hong Kong, where a pianist is performing a piece titled *Colour/Dance*. During the meal, Xiao Ran receives a phone call and speaks loudly. An English patron looks at him with disdain, leading Wei Yuan to think of Xiao Ran as a "nouveau riche."[50] A similar situation occurs in France. When "meeting a true aristocrat,"[51] Xiao Ran experiences his lifestyle: dining, drinking, admiring artworks, and listening to "a few piano pieces

[44] Murong Xuecun, 69–70.
[45] Murong Xuecun, 69.
[46] Murong Xuecun, 70.
[47] Murong Xuecun, 151.
[48] Murong Xuecun, 57.
[49] Murong Xuecun, 57.
[50] Murong Xuecun, 118.
[51] Murong Xuecun, 186.

he wasn't able to name."[52] Interacting with the French evokes a sense of "inferiority"[53] in Xiao Ran. In *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right*, the West is represented as a repository of cultural and lifestyle models. However, each encounter with foreign culture is accompanied by a profound sense of shame.

This paper highlights how the two novels, written in different decades, reference red songs and pop music to encode different, time-specific meanings. Both *We Are Like Sunflowers* and *Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right* depict social realities in which Maoist memories coexist with Western-style modernization. Music enables the authors to convey the atmosphere and emotions of their respective eras and to recreate the symbolic spaces of those times. A chaotic combination of semantic elements evokes confusion and disorientation in the characters, and stable identities are difficult to construct within the described cultural context.

He Dun's novel is suffused with intense, ambivalent feelings toward the Maoist era: red songs, heard or sung in various contexts, simultaneously express nostalgia and resentment. Murong Xuecun, born in the 1970s, recognizes that remnants of Maoist spirit persist in Chinese society at the turn of the millennium. However, nostalgia is largely absent from his novel. When depicting music associated with Maoism, he employs irony to reveal the absurdity of the Maoist cultural legacy.

In both novels, popular music functions as a symbol of modernization. *We Are Like Sunflowers*, which focuses on China in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizes the enthusiasm and longing for Western-style modernization characteristic of that period. Hong Kong and Taiwanese style pop songs and the social dance craze help release energy long suppressed under Maoist ideology. In He Dun's writing, this energy is described in a positive light, although a fear of its dangerous potential is also discernible in the text.

Heaven to the Left, Shenzhen to the Right portrays a generation profoundly affected by the modernization processes. The melancholy pervasive in Hong Kong and Taiwanese style pop music reflects the psychological state of these characters, who also tend to adopt the passive models of masculinity typical of popular songs. Encounters with Western culture evoke a strong sense of estrangement and discomfort, even deep inferiority, in Murong Xuecun's characters. This response can be interpreted as a representation of disillusionment with the capitalist world. The inferiority felt in the face of the West may also be understood as indicative of disappointment with China's modernization.

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[52] Murong Xuecun, 186.

[53] Murong Xuecun, 186.

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