

# Whose Environmental Sustainability?

From “Green” Olympics to “Original Ecology” Folk Song

*Ho Chak Law*



The Olympic Games in the past two decades have been notably associated with their environmental sustainability in response to climate change (Müller et al. 2021). In this regard, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has been indisputably the most active player. Beijing, the capital of the PRC, is the only city that hosted two Olympic Games in the 21st century. It is also the only city in history that hosted both the summer and winter Olympics. In 2008, the state government led a massive environmental cleanup that preceded the summer Olympics; hundreds of factories were temporarily closed while over a million cars were removed from city roads (Watts 2008). In 2022, it promoted carbon neutrality “with Chinese characteristics” through the winter Olympics, boasting the use of green technology while reiterating the success of afforestation projects near the competition venues in Beijing and Zhangjiakou (Mallapaty 2022).

In fact, climate change posed significant challenges to the smooth running of the two Beijing Olympics. Desertification and water scarcity were among the manifestations of climate change that

directly affected some Olympic sports being staged in Beijing (Ni 2006; Yang et al. 2015:455; Zhong 2022). Accordingly, the Beijing Olympics organizing committee emphasized how such challenges were overcome triumphantly by scientific and technological means (Shapiro 2012:48–49; *Global Times* 2022a). They were confident about their ambitious intention to leave “a sustainable Olympic legacy for future generations” (*Global Times* 2022b) despite receiving well-publicized criticisms from Western media outlets (*xifang meiti*) (Bloomberg News 2022; Cyranoski 2015; Majtenyi 2022; Orr et al. 2022). Knowing that PRC government officials since the 1990s have been keen to deal with desertification and water scarcity through massive campaigns that “tend to be highly politically charged with significant investment up front but little follow-through past the stated target of completion” (Economy 2004:121), it was conceivable that the two Beijing Olympics would follow the same line (Chappell 2022; Prewitt 2022). In fact, “ecological environment” (*shengtai huanjing*) and “environmental protection” (*huanbao*) were mentioned only once when “development” (*fazhan*) appeared 20 times as a keyword in “Zai Beijing Dongaohui Dongchan’aoahui zongjie biao Zhang dahui shang de jianghua” (the Talk at the Convocation on the Achievement of the Beijing Winter Olympics and Winter Paralympics), a 46-minute speech delivered by Xi Jinping, the President of the PRC, at the Great Hall of the People on 8 April 2022.

The two Beijing Olympics offer snapshots of how, through media and publicity as well as policies and procedures that concern environmental sustainability (Luo 2018:90–91; Tang 2021:21), bureaucrats and institutions maneuver messages regarding environmentalism for national interest (*guojia liyi*). The two Beijing Olympics also shed light on the relationship between performance and climate change within a specific context of sustainability (*ke chixu xing*): the conservation and vitalization of natural and cultural heritage in the PRC correlate with the social and economic development of the country (*guojia*) and the nation (*minzu*) (Luo 2018:74; Tang 2021:10). Such problematics of environmental sustainability (Moore 2011) are invoked in the *yuanshengtai min’ge* (original-ecology folk song; *yuanshengtai* refers to the untainted environment as it existed before human contact). In the PRC in the 21st century, this popular eco-themed cultural form has been invested with excessive anthropocentric values that might, aside from “exposing and decrying environmental abuse” (Thorner 2014:989), divert attention away from issues critical to planetary wellness.

In 2003, UNESCO declared the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas as a World Heritage Site. Located in the mountainous northwest of Yunnan Province, this site is regarded as “an epicenter of Chinese biodiversity” as well as “one of the richest temperate regions of the world in terms of biodiversity” (UNESCO 2003). In the same year, *Yunnan yingxiang* (Dynamic Yunnan), a stage production created by dancer and choreographer Yang Liping (1958–), made its debut and “has since seen over four thousand performances in China, with dozens more overseas” (Rees 2016:60). Featuring singers and dancers from the Bai, Dai, Hani, Miao, Tibetan, Wa, and Yi ethnic minority groups, this commercially successful production claimed to have followed the aesthetic principle of original ecology. Not only did it highlight the so-called original-ecology origins of the performers — performers whose forebears lived in the time of the original ecology — the production also referred to original ecology as an inspiration for celebrating the beauty of the earth. The national and international attention driven by both the UNESCO World Heritage Site declaration and the popularity of *Yunnan yingxiang* encouraged not only environmentalists

*Figure 1. (previous page) Big Air Shougang, the venue hosting the big air events of the Beijing Olympics in 2022. (Photo by N509FZ; courtesy of Creative Commons)*

*Ho Chak Law (The New School) is Assistant Professor and Mellon Postdoctoral Research Fellow of Race and Musicology in the College of Performing Arts. He received a PhD in musicology from the University of Michigan, and his main research interests include postcolonial cultural politics, transpacific Sinophone culture, and ecological approaches to music studies. He has published in TDR, and his recent essays appear in Analytical Approaches to World Music (2023) and At the Crossroads of Music and Social Justice (2023). hclaw@newschool.edu*



Figure 2. The cover of *Songs of the Naxi of Southwest China*, a CD featuring He Jinhua (1971–), a Naxi original-ecology folk singer. (Photo courtesy of Helen Rees)

and performance artists but also government officials and the business community to promote “original ecology” as a brand that is desirable, both globally and domestically (Luo 2018:69). Since then, original ecology has been primarily associated with a kind of consumption that targets those who worry about environmental degradation and cultural loss, as it promises an authentic representation of rural communities and ethnic minority groups living in a beautiful and well-protected natural environment (Wong 2019:209–10; Tang 2021:11).

The original-ecology folk-song is probably the cultural form that has most effectively attracted the PRC populace to the concept of original ecology. In 2004, state-owned broadcaster China Central Television

(CCTV) organized the *Xibu min’ge dianshi dasai* (Western-region Folk Song Television Competition), during which almost a thousand contestants from different parts of the country performed folk songs that were deemed to be indigenous and/or original (*yuansheng*). The contestants were mostly amateurs from rural areas and/or ethnic minority groups, around one-tenth of whom were brought to Beijing for the final rounds of the competition. Their singing, which was broadcast live and nationwide on the *Xibu pindao* (Western-region channel) during the lunar new year, excited the nationwide audience. Their distinctive sonic signatures distinguished their singing from *minzu changfa*, the ethno-national singing style adopted by esteemed folk singers such as Tseten Dolma (1937–) and Song Zuying (1966–), which synthesizes various Han and non-Han styles of folk singing with *bel canto* and *xiqu changqiang*, the so-called Chinese operatic singing.

Alluding to a sense of pure and unspoiled natural origins, the concept of original ecology celebrates detachment from modernity and industrialization (Rees 2016:78; Wong 2019:209). It soon evolved into a multipurpose descriptor with remarkable semantic capacity (Luo 2018:69). In 2006, the 12th biennial *Quanguo qingnian geshou dianshi dajiang sai* (National Young Singers Television Competition) introduced original ecology as a new category alongside the longstanding categories of *tongsu changfa* (popular style), *bel canto*, and the ethno-national singing style. This decision by CCTV intrigued many commentators; they wondered what original ecology would mean to the country as it entered the mainstream discourse.

Following an ongoing debate on how original-ecology folk songs differ from traditional folk songs—the former emphasizing the environment in which the singing naturally occurs (Rees 2016:58)—a rising concern about intangible cultural heritage preservation led scholars such as Qiao Jianzhong and Wu Jing to think more deeply about the relationship between original-ecology folk songs and their originating environment. These scholars were aware that their understanding of this relationship is dependent not only on their experience of original-ecology folk songs at particular venues under specific performance conditions, but also on their perception of environmental degradation in the PRC since the 1980s (Qiao 2006:26–27; Wu 2007:62–64; see also Rees 2016:56,

62; Tang 2021:12–14). Some professional pop and folk singers were attracted to the rapidly growing performance opportunities, which incentivized their presence as original-ecology folk singers through such strategies as apprenticing to *gewang* (song kings), studying the so-called elements of the original-ecology folk song, and performing traditional and dialectal songs that originated in their homeplace (Tang 2021:14). State documents indicated another priority for the original-ecology movement; mentions of original ecology in official documents such as “Quanguo shengtai lüyou fazhan gangyao” (the Outline of National Eco-Tourism Development) demonstrated an inclination to treat natural and cultural heritage as national resources for the development of the tourism industry. On top of that, policies such as “Shengtai wenming tizhi gaige zongti fang’an” (the General Scheme of a Systematic Reform for an Ecological Civilization) were translated not only into action plans for reducing rural poverty (Luo 2018:63–64), but also into dictums for projecting a self-proclaimed utopian vision alternative to Western industrial civilization (*gongye wenming*) (Hansen et al. 2018:196).

Although the original-ecology folk song has obviously raised awareness of the negative impact of urbanization and industrialization, its environmental sustainability has been unclear, if not problematic. Looking within and beyond policies and procedures that expand on what original ecology might offer the PRC populace, we might still wonder how the original-ecology folk song could survive climate change. How could those practitioners of original-ecology folk songs deal with extreme weather (heat waves, tropical cyclones, etc.) and the increasing number of meteorological disasters (droughts, torrential rain, etc.) without sacrificing their cultural practices and sonic signatures? How could they maintain their spirit and good health while facing rapid and unfavorable changes in their surrounding landscape and soundscape? And how could we appreciate the original-ecology folk song without unnecessary travel causal to massive carbon dioxide emissions? How could we celebrate its indigeneity and authenticity without fetishizing it as a replicable and dispensable consumer product?

I ask questions as such with an aim to advance a mode of thinking that, aside from affirming how cultural actions impact the natural environment and how environmental conditions impact human culture, “call out environmental exploitation and identify strategies for confronting neoliberalism and other destructive forms of domination” (Allen 2020:306). Although these questions are grounded in the assumption that original-ecology folk songs refer to indigenous folk songs in their unmediated form, I hope these questions will make us more alert to the danger of craving for nature in ways that confuse conservationist actions and narratives with either romanticized imagery of the uncontaminated or representational needs that are politically or economically driven (Wong 2019:212, 219). I also hope these questions will push us to confront environmental injustice that “occurs when there is an unequal distribution of environmental risk and an imbalance between policy-makers, national goals, social hierarchy, and local communities struggling both economically and ecologically” (Post 2020:325).

While some might argue that having both summer and winter Olympics hosted in the same city within less than two decades is a result of magnificent efforts by 21st-century humans, some others might consider the whole project an abuse of modern knowledge and technology on a grand scale (Chakrabarty 2009:206–07). Similarly, while some might applaud promoters of the original-ecology folk song for their efforts to conserve and vitalize natural and cultural heritage, others might ask whether such pursuit of anthropocentric interests sidetracks or even hinders the maintenance of planetary wellness. What humans must do to compensate for overdevelopment will remain one of the biggest questions on earth in the foreseeable future, and we should bear this question in mind even when indulging ourselves in aesthetic and nonaesthetic performances of great magnitude.

## References

- Allen, Aaron S. 2020. “From Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism.” *Ethnomusicology* 64, 2:304–07. doi.org/10.5406/ethnomusicology.64.2.0301
- Bloomberg News. 2022. “Winter Olympics to Test China’s Commitments to Climate Change.” *Bloomberg Green*, 25 January. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-25/winter-olympics-to-test-china-s-commitments-to-climate-change?leadSource=verify%20wall

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35, 2:197–222. doi.org/10.1086/596640
- Chappell, Bill. 2022. "China Puts Coal Plants at Full Capacity, Even as It Touts Hosting a 'Green' Olympics." *NPR*, 16 February. www.npr.org/2022/02/16/1081141189/china-coal-olympics-environment/
- Cyranoski, David. 2015. "Chinese Biologists Lead Olympics Outcry." *Nature* 524:278–79.
- Economy, Elizabeth C. 2004. *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Global Times*. 2022a. "High-tech, Green and Safe Beijing Winter Olympics Guaranteed by 212 Technologies." *Global Times*, 16 February. www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1252381.shtml
- Global Times*. 2022b. "China Fulfills Commitment to Host Green Olympics Through Action; Leaves 'Sustainable Olympic Legacy.'" *Global Times*, 18 February. www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1252596.shtml
- Hansen, Mette Halskov, Hongtao Li, and Rune Svarverud. 2018. "Ecological Civilization: Interpreting the Chinese Past, Projecting the Global Future." *Global Environmental Change* 53:195–203. doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.09.014
- Luo, Yu. 2018. "An Alternative to the 'Indigenous' in Early Twenty-First-Century China: Guizhou's Branding of *Yuanshengtai*." *Modern China* 44, 1:68–102. doi.org/10.1177/0097700417696830
- Majtenyi, Cathy. 2022. "Fake Snow and Downed Trees: Evidence of Beijing Olympics' Unsustainability." *The Brock News*, 15 February. brocku.ca/brock-news/2022/02/fake-snow-and-downed-trees-evidence-of-beijing-olympics-unsustainability/
- Mallapaty, Smriti. 2022. "China's Winter Olympics are Carbon-neutral – How?" *Nature*, 4 February. doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00321-1
- Moore, Frances C. 2011. "Toppling the Tripod: Sustainable Development, Constructive Ambiguity, and the Environmental Challenge." *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development* 5:141–50. doi.org/10.7916/consilience.v0i5.4434
- Müller, Martin, Sven Daniel Wolfe, Christopher Gaffney, David Gogishvili, Miriam Hug, and Annick Leick. 2021. "An Evaluation of the Sustainability of the Olympic Games." *Nature Sustainability* 4:340–48. doi.org/10.1038/s41893-021-00696-5
- Ni, Ching-Ching. 2006. "In Beijing, Sandstorms Stir Concerns Over 2008 Olympics." *Los Angeles Times*, 21 April. www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-apr-21-fg-sand21-story.html/
- Orr, Madeleine, Greg Dingle, Timothy Kellison, and Walker J. Ross. 2022. *Slippery Slopes: How Climate Change Is Threatening the 2022 Winter Olympics*. Loughborough: The Sport Ecology Group.
- Post, Jennifer C. 2020. "Problem Solving Ecomusicology." *Ethnomusicology* 64, 2:322–26.
- Prewitt, Alex. 2022. "Beijing's Opening Ceremony Overlooked a Major Threat to Future Olympics." *Sports Illustrated*, 4 February. www.si.com/olympics/2022/02/04/opening-ceremony-beijing-olympics-china-climate-change-sustainability/
- Qiao Jianzhong. 2006. "'Yuanshengtai min'ge' suoyi." *Renmin yinyue* 1:26–27.
- Rees, Helen. 2016. "Environmental Crisis, Culture Loss, and a New Musical Aesthetic: China's 'Original Ecology Folksongs' in Theory and Practice." *Ethnomusicology* 60, 1:53–88. doi.org/10.5406/ethnomusicology.60.1.0053
- Shapiro, Judith. 2012. *China's Environmental Challenges*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Tang, Kai. 2021. "Singing a Chinese Nation: Heritage Preservation, the Yuanshengtai Movement, and New Trends in Chinese Folk Music in the Twenty-First Century." *Ethnomusicology* 65, 1:1–31. doi.org/10.5406/ethnomusicology.65.1.0001
- Thorner, Karen L. 2014. "Literature, Asia, and the Anthropocene: Possibilities for Asian Studies and the Environmental Humanities." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, 4:989–1000. www.jstor.org/stable/43553464
- UNESCO. 2003. "Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas." *UNESCO World Heritage Convention*. Accessed 20 April 2022. whc.unesco.org/en/list/1083/
- Watts, Jonathan. 2008. "Beijing Goes for Green with Olympic Clean-up." *The Guardian*, 18 July. www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/jul/19/pollution.china/

- Wong, Chuen-Fung. 2019. “‘Original Ecology’ Style of China’s Minority Performing Arts: Examples from Uyghur Music.” In *Chinese Shock of the Anthropocene: Image, Music and Text in the Age of Climate Change*, ed. Kwai-Cheung Lo and Jessica Yeung, 203–24. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wu Jing. 2007. “Likai yuansheng huanjing de yuanshengtai min’ge shi bu shi zhenzheng de yuanshengtai?” *Renmin yinyue* 3:62–64.
- Xi Jinping. 2022. “Zai Beijing Donggaohui Dongchan’aohui zongjie biao Zhang dahui shang de jianghua.” *Renmin wang*, 9 April. Accessed 20 April 2022. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0409/c64094-32395043.html>
- Yang, Hong, Julian R. Thompson, and Roger J. Flower. 2015. “Olympics Will Make Water Scarcity Worse.” *Nature* 525:455. doi.org/10.1038/525455e
- Zhong, Raymond. 2022. “The Environmentally Unfriendly Secret of the Beijing Olympics.” *New York Times*, 9 February. [www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/climate/china-water-climate-olympics.html/](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/climate/china-water-climate-olympics.html/)