

Liminal States: Life as an Indie Musician on Taiwan

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the liminal states of Taiwanese guitarist/composer Huang Wan-ting, particularly as these states articulate with similar liminal states of "indie music" and the island of Taiwan. I use the term 'liminal' in a non-ritual sense to refer to a structural position on the interstices of recognized roles and identities. In addition, I propose a second type of liminality: a position of choice assumed by subjects for some advantage—in Wan-ting's case, artistic. As an indie musician, Wan-ting attempts to maintain a position on the edge of the music mainstream, bringing new sounds into popular music. While she has tried to find a Taiwanese political identity through her song lyrics, Wan-ting does not consider herself to be a "Taiwanese musician" and creates music for a transnational indie audience. Wan-ting claims her music is more popular with foreigners than Taiwanese. Like an independent Taiwanese state, her career may need foreign recognition to exist.

Introduction

In 1993, while working as an English teacher in Taipei, I decided to take up the harmonica. I lived in a typical, rather thin-walled Taiwanese apartment building and, unfortunately, a baby living upstairs greeted my efforts with screams. Not wanting to torture the infant, I decided to practice in a downtown pedestrian underpass not far from the school where I taught. The long, tiled subterranean tunnel had excellent acoustics for my purposes and was not as busy as most. I quickly mastered a couple of tunes and would have been having a very good time were it not for the disturbed glances and wide berth I received from Taipei pedestrians. After a couple of days of this, on a whim, I took off the hat I was wearing and set it on the floor in front of me. Magically, troubled glances became smiles and aversion gave way to cash donations. Thus my career as a busker in Taipei was born, one I found as profitable as teaching English, at least until the police took an interest in me.

What gave that hat its magic power? When it was on my head, I was a liminal being, an ill-defined person (a white foreigner) doing something ill-defined (tooting without reason) in an ill-defined place (a corridor). This scene calls to mind Mary Douglas' summary of Arnold van Gennep, who "saw society as a house with rooms and corridors in which passage from one to another is dangerous. Danger lies in transitional states merely because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others" (1966:66). Douglas describes such liminal beings as "impure" in the eyes of others. No wonder, then, that I was avoided like the plague.

When the hat hit the ground, however, I was instantly perceived as someone making (or begging) money through music—a clearly defined, non-threatening identity. Likewise, my tooting became a performance, and the tunnel, a performance space. Even my foreignness took on new meanings with my hat on the floor. I was often surprised at the elaborate story some of my more cosmopolitan contributors "knew" about me: "You're a student taking a year off and traveling the world playing music, right?" We could all be comfortable with this identity. "Sure," I'd reply. "That's me."

Building upon the work of van Gennep, Douglas, and Victor Turner, Liisa Malkki writes that "species, type, race and nation can all be seen... as forms of categorical thought which center upon the purity of the categories in question" (1995:257). These categories are elevated in importance above the humans that they encompass and describe. Much attention is paid to the dehumanizing effects of such typecasting, but Malkki's innovation is to show that individuals lose their humanity when they do not fit neatly into a socially constructed typology. With my hat on my head, I was a subterranean ghost; with my hat on the floor, I was a traveling student—a humanizing, if empirically false, identity.

In this paper, I will examine the liminal status of another musician, a Taiwanese¹ guitarist, composer and audio engineer named Wan-ting. In 1995, as a 21-year-old law undergraduate, she co-founded Ladybug, a band with several "firsts" to its credits. Ladybug was one of Taiwan's first punk rock bands, the first all-female local group of the genre, and the first Taiwanese rock band to tour the United States. After parting ways with the group, Wan-ting studied audio engineering at Columbia College in Chicago, later returning to Taiwan to start her own independent recording label and two bands. For all of her drive, talent, and accomplishments, however, she is virtually unknown in Taiwan outside its tiny "indie" (independent from the mainstream music industry) rock scene. She is unable to make a living income from her music—thus, her "purity" as a professional musician is shadowed in doubt.

This is not Wan-ting's only liminal state of being. As a 32-year-old unmarried woman in a society for which marriage is the expected rite of passage into full adulthood, she may hold an unclear adult status.² She is a member of a local music subculture focused on music made outside of Taiwan, a subculture that finds it difficult to define itself in performance and to create a local audience. Like many indie musicians in Taipei, Wan-ting lives in Wenjiaoshi, an area I conceive as a particularly transitional and transnational space within the city—a culturally liminal, university neighborhood where foreign ideas, music, books, and people are in heightened circulation. Finally, there is her homeland—the island of Taiwan—a liminal state itself, a nation-in-waiting that longs to exist in the eyes of the world.

I draw my ideas on Taiwan and its indie music scene from three and a half years spent living in and around Taipei between 1991 and 1995. As the new owner of an American bachelor's degree, I had all the qualifications then needed to teach English in Taiwan and earn money for frequent backpacking trips in Southeast Asia. Young and with few responsibilities, I spent much of my time in the new pubs, discos, and rock clubs that were emerging in a post-martial-law Taipei. Both as a fan and a musician, I interacted with the DJs and musicians of Taipei's nascent indie scene; I also slowly learned about the complexities of Taiwan's history and politics and began to wonder how these young performers fit into the larger picture. I was not friends with Wan-ting during my years in Taiwan but had been to some Ladybug shows, so I was happily surprised to learn she was studying and performing in the U.S. when two bands we were in shared a bill in Chicago years later. The two of us remained in contact via email after she left the U.S., and I contacted her when, ten years after leaving, I returned to Taiwan to see old friends and do some journalistic writing on Taiwanese music. I conducted a particularly interesting interview with Wan-ting, in which she reflected on her music and homeland—a conversation that inspired the present investigation of liminality on Taiwan.

After further defining the concept of liminality, I will work from the outside in, examining the concentric circles of ambiguity in which Wan-ting strives to find and assert her identities as a Taiwanese, musician, and person. I will begin at the level of state identity and move inward to Wan-ting's generation, neighborhood, and indie rock subculture, drawing from the two 2005 interviews I conducted with her—one done in a Taipei café in May and the other done by phone in November.³ My hope is that her story will cast light on the instability of identities in Taiwan, revealing some of its transnational causes. The situation of identity in Taiwan is a model of what Stuart Hall calls "the fragmentation of social identity, [which] goes local and global at one and the same time, while the great stable identities in the middle [such as the nation-state] do not seem to hold" (1991:13). Nation-states face pressures from above, in the form of

international interdependence and identities, and from below, as regional and ethnic identities once banded together under a single flag (re)discover and (re)assert themselves. Wan-ting and the island on which she lives seem to be in a liminal phase of transition, as identities such as "Taiwanese" and "indie musician" struggle to assert themselves over identities such as "Chinese" and "citizen of the Republic of China." The concept of liminality focuses attention on the risks and opportunities of individual and state agency in the global era.

Liminality

When I refer to liminal status, I am applying the work of Liisa Malkki, who in turn applied the work of Victor Turner, in order to elucidate the structural invisibility of refugees. The concept of liminality made its initial impact on anthropological scholarship with Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, in which he assembles a model of such rites that "includes preliminary rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (1960:11). The liminal phase is the second stage of an initiate's ritual passage from one state of being to another, during which s/he is neither here nor there and is often dispossessed of all property, status, or distinguishing characteristics: "It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers" (Turner 1969:95). Malkki seizes upon Turner's concept of structural invisibility, which is applicable beyond the ritual setting: "The structural 'invisibility' of liminal personae has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified" (Turner 1967:95-96, cited in Malkki 1995:6).⁴

Once unbound from the realm of ritual, the concept of liminality might be applied not only to those in transition, but to others who are ill-defined or who define themselves as marginal, fringe, or ever-changing personae. Writing in 1969, Victor Turner presents the hippie subculture as an example of a liminal community bound together by their rejection of the prevailing social order and characterized by *communitas*, a way of being in which "individuals are not segmentalized into roles and statuses" (1969:132). Turner eventually (1974b, 1982) came to characterize rock concerts, games, and other loci of *communitas* as "liminoid"—ludic spaces/moments within the structure of the modern state—to distinguish them from the ritual liminal phase found in "tribal" societies.

In this paper, I use the term "liminal," as Malkki does, to refer to a structural position on the interstices of recognized roles and identities; in particular, the people of Taiwan are in a liminal position when the Taiwanese state identity which they wish to

assert is not recognized by the world at large. In addition, I see another type of liminal position, one of choice assumed by subjects for some advantage—in Wan-ting's case, artistic. It is not easy (and is perhaps impossible) to maintain a position on the edge, avoiding assimilation into the music mainstream on the one hand and complete irrelevance on the other—but this, I believe, is what indie musicians attempt to do. I will use this dualistic, imposed/asserted, non-ritual sense of liminality, then, as a lens on the nascent Taiwanese state, the Wenjiao area, and its indie music subculture.

Taiwan: Ghost or Dragon?

The island of Taiwan is an excellent laboratory for “the study of the ways in which order and liminality are constituted in the national order of things” (Malkki 1995:6). Taiwan's place in this order is so undermined and fragmented that generic terms and adjectives such as “nation” and “Taiwanese” are fraught with confusion and political danger. Its population of nearly 23 million people has identified variously as aborigine, Hoklo, Hakka, Han, and even Japanese, but in 1949 it was officially (and brutally) made Chinese when the Nationalist Party (KMT), having retreated from the mainland, declared Taipei the capital of the Republic of China (ROC). No longer was Taiwan an island on China's periphery—in the political rhetoric of the KMT, Taiwan was China's political center. From then until the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Mandarin dialect held hegemony in the schools and on the airwaves, and the official ROC history of Taiwanese people was that of the Han Chinese. Melissa J. Brown asserts that this interpellation of Chinese identity catalyzed the formation of a Taiwanese counter-identity, creating a Mainlander-Taiwanese dichotomy that holds sway to this day. In *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, Brown challenges the “misunderstanding” that identity is based on common ancestry and culture rooted in antiquity:

When we realize that identity is really a matter of politics, and that it is no less authentic or “real” as a result—real in the sense of being meaningful and motivating to people—then we must examine identities and their implications very differently. We must untangle the social grounding of identities from the meanings claimed for those identities in the political sphere. We must also reveal where claimed meanings run roughshod over the very personal, experienced-based meanings of individual members of identity groups. (2004:3)

Brown's "unfolding" of identity in a political present articulates smoothly with Malkki's "mythico-history," "a process of world making" that is "constructed in opposition to other versions of... the same world" (1995:55). Brown uses the term "narratives of unfolding" to describe the stories of the past that groups use to define their ethnicities in the present (2004:5). At the core of both Malkki's and Brown's models of self- and world-making is the awareness that identities are constructed in opposition to other identities. To use an aphorism from Stuart Hall: "Only when there is an Other can you know who you are" (1991:16). These opposed versions of identity and worldview compete within the local, national, and transnational spheres, with the odds in favor of those with the greatest financial, political, and military power.

On the international level, the clash of interpellation and agency in identity manifests as an existential crisis for the would-be nation of Taiwan. Although the lifting of martial law and the establishment of democracy has led to an emergence of Taiwanese nationalism, the threat of a Chinese takeover or even nuclear annihilation prevents an overt assertion of political independence by the government. Likewise, the political and economic power of China keeps other nations from recognizing Taiwan as an independent political entity. Taiwan's liminal status in the order of nations makes it impure—untouchable in international politics. Though it is considered an economic "dragon," it is a ghost among nations, lacking a seat at the United Nations, an Olympic team in its name,⁵ and official recognition from states with which it does millions of dollars in trade. As of October 2005, the island had official diplomatic relations with only 25 states, mostly small, poor African, Central American, and Caribbean nations enticed by "dollar diplomacy" (Pravda 2005). Even these relations do not undermine the "One China" policy, however, as these nations recognize only the Republic of China, but not a state called Taiwan. The leaders of the People's Republic of China would much prefer a Taiwan run by Han pretenders to their throne to one run by ethnic Taiwanese inclined to assert a nationalist Taiwanese identity.

The effects of Taiwan's structural invisibility are not limited to a loss of face on the international stage; it profoundly affects identities of groups and individuals on the island. An example of this invisibility emerged when I asked Wan-ting if she ever thought about the difference between the waisheng ren (Mainlanders) and the (ethnic) Taiwanese. Although I was asking about ethnicities, she answered in terms of political identities:

Yeah, I thought about that a lot when I was a kid, but not anymore, because now, most people in Taiwan, we know we are Taiwanese, not Chinese. But when I was a kid, our teachers told us we were Chinese and I was so confused. So, I even wrote my first song about Taiwanese and

Chinese because I was so confused. Am I a Taiwanese or a Chinese? I was so confused. But most people aren't very confused anymore.

--How old were you when you wrote that song?

It was when I was in university, so maybe ten, twelve years ago. I'm not very sure. Third year or fourth year of university.

--Do you remember the lyrics?

I didn't talk about Chinese and Taiwanese—I just wrote my feeling. The feeling is, I don't know what my identity is. It's called "Ghost Child," because I didn't know who I was. It's in English.

The song appeared on Ladybug's first album, which was released by record labels in Taiwan and Australia. The first-person lyrics personify Taiwan as the fictive "I"—a young woman who doesn't know her own name. Wan-ting sent me the lyrics in an email:

GHOST CHILD⁶

names always confuse me
which is the real one
I never know
daddy says Judy, my little girl
mommy says Janis, my sweet heart
when can I have my own name?
so I can tell everyone
why do I have to pay to get men's love?

She added the following at the bottom of the email:

ps. the last sentence means Taiwan always has to pay lots of money to buy the "national relationship"!! and most of them are very small unknown African countries----

In the song, Taiwan is a girl called two similar but different names by her parents. The language used is that of the international political stage (English), in which a single

word ("People's") marks the difference between the two governments that lay claim to the island. Although "Ghost Child" expresses an inner, domestic crisis, the song is outward-looking in a number of ways. Besides being sung in English, it features a protagonist torn between two English names, and its punk/indie musical style was known abroad, but structurally invisible as a genre in Taiwan at the time the song was written. In addition, the CD on which it appears was released not only in Taiwan, but also by an Australian label, through which it found limited international distribution. In "Ghost Child," Wan-ting seems to be looking outward and westward for a solution to her instability of identity. Perhaps, like anthropologist Karen Kelsky's (2001) Japanese "women on the verge," she views an imagined west as the site where she can become fully human in the eyes of others. However, Wan-ting does not merely represent a gendered phenomenon—Taiwan would not exist as a de facto independent political entity were it not viewed as important in the eyes of the United States. The western gaze is an existential matter for Taiwan, which must look outward to resolve its liminal, ghost child status and become a nation among nations. The song was released in 1997, but Taiwan is still waiting to "have its own name."

A Generation "Trapped In Between"

Although Wan-ting's frustration is shared by many Taiwanese, her confusion may be particular to her generation. A comparison of her generation to the two that preceded it reveals the dynamism of identity and world-making on the national and local levels. The generational divide can be illustrated by a 2005 conversation I had with a 24-year-old Indiana University graduate student, an ethnic Taiwanese who is, like Wan-ting, from the Hoklo-dominated south of the island. When I showed her a copy of *Is Taiwan Chinese?* the student was very interested and began to talk about identity in her family. Her grandfather, she said, identifies with the Japanese (who occupied Taiwan from 1895 until 1945), while her father is fiercely ethnic Taiwanese: "When we go to a restaurant, the first thing he wants to know is, 'Who owns this place—is it a Taiwanese or a Mainlander?'" When asked how she identifies herself, she replied, "I'm trapped in between" a Chinese and Taiwanese identity, adding, "The KMT, they kind of brainwashed me, but when the DPP⁷ won eight years ago, I had to rethink my identity."

Stories such as these are not uncommon and reinforce Brown's assertion that while groups "discuss identity in terms of purported common descent and/or purported common culture," it is really "common sociopolitical experience which binds group identity" (1995:5). Take for example the oppositional identity maintained by members of the older generation, many of whom speak only Taiwanese and Japanese and who

express nostalgia for the days of the Japanese occupation. It is highly unlikely that they identified with the Japanese before they encountered the sociopolitical reality of the oppressive KMT regime.

The reality within which Wan-ting's generation has had to negotiate its identity is complex. While they were indoctrinated with a Han Chinese narrative of identity, they came of age within a context of new political freedom and communications technologies. As Brown points out, in 1998 President Lee Teng-hui (KMT) advocated a Taiwanese identity that included both Mainlanders and ethnic Taiwanese, a position adopted by his DPP successor, Chen Shui-bian, and one that had been developing during the previous decade (12). Meanwhile, satellite television, which appeared almost concurrently with the end of martial law, brought the multivalent global imaginary into Taiwanese living rooms and visualized the possibilities of pan-Asian and transnational Chinese identities, as Hong Kong and Japanese pop stars danced across the screen. Finally, the internet offers a playground for flexible identity, as wired youth plug into a cyberscape of political chat rooms, music fan sites, online role playing games, and blogs.

Still, all of these changes must be understood in relation to a single constant—the threat of PRC aggression. Wan-ting and her generation have lived their entire lives in its shadow. When I lived in Taiwan in the early 1990s, an air raid drill clearing the busy Taipei streets for an hour was not uncommon. Young men face mandatory military service, often on small outpost islands in the Taiwan Strait. When I asked Wan-ting why she was so preoccupied with the status of Taiwan, she brought up the mainland Chinese threat:

It was in our lives all the time—almost every day. Even now, it's still around. The relationship is tense between Taiwan and China—you can feel it every day. I think it's kind of horrible.

--*Why?*

Because China always says they want to use force against Taiwan. It's been like this since I was born. We can hear it on the news every month—all the time. I just think it's really bad. My teachers, they always said, "OK, we are Chinese—we have to learn everything about China." Everything—history, geography, everything. But I was thinking, "Why? I'm a Taiwanese, not a Chinese." After I went to university, then I knew I was Taiwanese. I'm not Chinese. And fuck China because they want to use force against Taiwan. Actually, I hate them. They think Taiwan is part of China, but it's not true at all. I think Taiwan is like America. Lots of Europeans went to America

and after that they became American. It's kind of like that for me. After we came to Taiwan, we became Taiwanese, so we're not Chinese anymore.

In Brown's analysis, identity formation involves negotiating one's own classification within the available set of socio-culturally generated classifications of people (15). Wan-ting began her studies at the Chinese Culture University in 1992, the year after opposition parties were legalized and the year of the first democratic election of the Legislative Yuan. She had spent her entire life in the shadow of the mainland Chinese threat and suddenly had the political option of defining herself as other than Chinese. As she was already an ethnic Taiwanese, defining herself as a Taiwanese national required only a rejection of the schooling she had received—schooling which taught her to identify herself with the Han Chinese who threatened her safety. In terms of the binary opposition between Taiwanese and Chinese identity, Wan-ting and the other ethnic Taiwanese of her generation had been forced into a liminal status. With her passage into university—coincidental with the island's passage into democracy—Wan-ting found incorporation into a fully Taiwanese identity.

Two things demarcate her arrival, the first being a complete rejection of the Chinese state and Han identity, as demonstrated above. The second is the creation of a mythico-history or narrative of unfolding: "After we came to Taiwan, we became Taiwanese, so we're not Chinese anymore." Interestingly, this narrative actually implies a deep connection to the Chinese identity it rejects while it also historicizes and spatializes Wan-ting's personal move from Chinese to Taiwanese identity. "True" or not, this mythico-history is a story of agency that tells how, instead of being "trapped in the middle," the Taiwanese created their own identity when they crossed the Taiwan Strait.

A Transitional and Transnational Neighborhood

With liminality as our lens, we have filtered out much of the demographic spectrum in order to better see Wan-ting's generation. Now let us zoom in dramatically and focus on the neighborhood in which she lives and works. Wenjiaoshi (literally, "the culture and teaching area") is a vaguely demarcated area that lies between two of Taiwan's best known universities, National Taiwan University (Tai Da) and Taiwan Normal University (Shi Da). As it houses and caters to thousands of university students—who usually leave upon graduation—the neighborhood is a space for transition. As it houses and caters to foreign students and the study of foreign ideas, while selling an unusual amount of foreign books and music, the neighborhood is also transnational in character. Foreign goods for every taste are readily available across the island, of course, but those in

Wenjiaoshi are of the variety preferred by an emergent transnational intellectual class. There are no massive Japanese department stores or office towers here; fashions run toward the plain, hippie or casual—not conspicuous consumption. Here, taste in books and music can be a particularly important indicator of social status.

Although these are generalizations based on three and a half years of casual observation and my conversations with Wan-ting, I am fairly confident in this rough sketch and think it is important. Without a neighborhood such as Wenjiaoshi, the indie rock subculture which I will soon discuss would be much less likely to evolve.

Areas such as Wenjiaoshi are found internationally and are often important loci of political, artistic, and social change. Although the position of “college student” is a socially acknowledged identity and, as such, not liminal in the ritual sense, undergraduates often possess expendable time and money as well as an openness to new ideas that facilitates personal, artistic, and social change. Such leisure time and openness to new ideas is central to Turner’s (1982) concept of the liminoid, which creates a break in the normative social structure (working equilibrium) through which anti-structure (the latent system of potential alternatives) can emerge as novelty. After being separated from their families but before being incorporated into the workforce, university students often undergo years of changeability and transformation as they experiment with intellectual, political, ethnic, sexual, artistic, and other identities. These young, transformative personae are expected to proceed through commencement and emerge on the other side as professionals of one sort or another. However, there are those who—either seduced by its freedoms or fearful/disdainful of the society that would incorporate them—choose to remain in the liminoid space of a university area.

Indie musicians, who pride themselves on and define themselves by their refusal of artistic assimilation into (their idea of) the mainstream, often rely upon these transitional areas. In places like Wenjiaoshi, they often find cheap housing, a service economy job or other employment, likeminded musicians, and performance venues. Perhaps most importantly, they find a potential audience in university students, whose openness and privilege make them an ideal fan base for new and experimental music. Wan-ting says of Wenjiaoshi: “Most of my friends live around this area and work around this area. I think it’s a really important area of indie rock. Most indie rock shows happen here.” In the international indie rock scene, such spaces serve as nodes on a network that supports bands through record stores and performance venues for tours, though the latter is complicated in Taiwan by the island’s spatial isolation.

Liminal Sounds

At the level of Wan-ting's indie subculture and the music that fuels it, I would like to propose several ideas 1) Indie music is not a genre but a transnational subculture/structural position that defines itself through self-imposed liminality and sustains itself through local, national, and transnational networking. 2) Musically, indie converts what Jacques Attali (1985) calls "noise" (undefined sound) into new orders of music that can be incorporated into the musical and social discourses of mainstream culture. 3) Taiwanese indie is outward facing and takes its cues from outside the island, a fact which, when combined with its physical isolation, prevents the scene from achieving a critical mass of cultural influence and economic viability. 4) Gender plays a particular role in Taiwanese indie music, as patriarchy ironically gives women room to play, leading to their greater representation in music.

"Indie music" and "indie rock" are labels used to describe a collection of genres and subgenres with names such as post-punk, insurgent country, post-rock, electro-pop, shoegaze, and noise. The current indie scene is based on a politics, ethics, and aesthetics of marginality established by punk in the 1970s and 1980s and nurtured by its own networked infrastructure of "fanzines, underground and college radio stations, local cable access shows, mom-and-pop record stores, independent distributors and record labels, tip sheets, nightclubs and alternative venues, booking agents, bands, and fans" (Azerrad 2001:1).

While early punk and indie rock participants were primarily concerned with authenticity, the mainstream success of former indie groups such as Nirvana and the infiltration of irony into the subculture have arguably made taste and innovation more important. Indie is not so much a musical genre as a sort of self-positioning to the margins of popular culture—popular music at odds with popularity. The popular website All Music characterizes the American indie bands of the 90s, who did not pursue major-label deals like Nirvana, as "dedicated to their own independent status, either for musical or hipness reasons" (All Media Guide). Nothing is more threatening to indie credibility than too much success, as mainstream popularity can undermine a group/artist's position "ahead of the curve" of popular tastes.

Perhaps most importantly, indie subculture must be understood as a reaction to the mediated, commoditized, and professionalized state of modern music—its "D.I.Y." ("do it yourself") musicians, booking agents, club owners, and writers have appropriated the methods and technologies of the corporate music industry for use on a smaller scale. In the United States, the relationship between indie labels and "the majors" is complex—though the former often serve as the gateway to new musical styles and ideas for the

mainstream, their structure seems better adapted for the use of the internet and, currently, indie labels proliferate while major labels implode.

Since the 1980s, the indie subculture has become increasingly global, facilitated by Appadurai's (1996) twin muses of modernity—media (especially the internet) and mobility (in the form of cheaper airfares and CD/LP/MP3 distribution). Local and regional networks have connected internationally, and bands whose record sales number from the low thousands to the low hundreds of thousands are able to tour internationally as North Americans, Europeans, Australians, and Japanese use one another's tour circuits and support structures. Wan-ting's case provides many examples of indie transnationalism, such as Ladybug's US tour, the Australian distribution of its record, reports about her more recent releases on BBC Radio as well as in the UK experimental music magazine *The Wire*, and her own use of the internet to find information on new bands in the US, Europe, and Japan.

The dual liminal/global position of indie music takes on greater significance in light of the ideas of Jacques Attali. Steve Waksman discusses Attali's theory of "the role of music as a prophetic social force" as it applies to modern popular music (1999:10). He begins by quoting Attali's Marxist conception of music in modern capitalism:

Fetishized as a commodity, music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning. (1985:5, cited in Waksman 1999)

In such a society, music is at a mediated remove from the listener, yet it also becomes an object—one that can be played with by listener and musician alike. As Appadurai writes, "Where there is consumption, there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure, there is agency" (1996:7). Or as Waksman puts it, though Attali perceives "a new totalitarianism based on an economy of repetitive desire," he also suggests "the possibility of a transformation that would return music to the hands of its makers" (1999:10).

The setting of this totalitarianism and transformation is "a political economy of music as a succession of orders (in other words, differences) done violence by noises (in other words, the calling into question of differences) that are prophetic because they create new orders, unstable and changing" (Attali 1985:19; italics in original). This is a world where genres become too numerous and overlapping to classify, but where innovation is readily apparent. Attali believes that this innovation can create not only new musical orders, but new social orders as well.

Attali's noise-to-music paradigm implicitly places the prophetic musician in a liminal position. The incorporation of noise (undefined sound) into new orders of music is a way to describe a goal of any musical subculture (such as indie rock) that perceives itself as "cutting edge" or avant-garde. In the de-ritualized, global imaginary of music, the indie musician tries to maintain a liminal position, creating unpopular music that is not yet popular music. This is liminality by choice, or liminality as a source of power—the power to imagine new ways of listening and being. This power also supports the indie musician's oppositional identity vis-à-vis the mainstream music industry.

However, Taiwan's fledgling indie scene has not achieved this kind of status in relation to the mainstream. The scene is having a hard time expanding beyond a few venues in Taipei's Wenjiaoshi and a few other clubs on the island. It does support a handful of festivals, such as the annual Spring Scream (created in 1994 by a pair of US expatriates), but in the decade or so of its existence, it has yet to see a band's members quit their day jobs. Wan-ting sees this as a problem: "Lots of people play in a band and they listen to indie rock but they don't buy CDs or go to other people's shows unless it's their friends' shows. They don't really go to shows to see bands and they don't buy any Taiwanese indie rock CDs." In other words, the Taiwan indie subculture seems to be outward facing and focused on foreign music to the near-exclusion of its own sounds. This suspicion is reinforced when I ask Wan-ting whether the music she makes is Taiwanese:

No, I don't think I make Taiwanese music. I think the music I make is very not Taiwanese. The music I really love is from America or Europe, not Taiwan. I don't really like Taiwan music—it's not interesting to me at all.

--Is this a common feeling among indie musicians in Taiwan?

Maybe for seventy percent. Most people are like me—the music they listen to is from Europe or America. That's what we learned. Even if we listen to a Taiwanese band, they listened to European and American music—that's what they learned from. Ninety percent of our influences are European and American music and Japanese music.

This is in stark contrast to the Chosŏn punk movement of South Korea, whose members perform and listen to what might be described as generic, global pop punk, but define it as distinctly local. Labeling it with the North Korean name for "Korea" (Chosŏn), they manage to underscore their Korean identity even while rebelling against the South Korean status quo. Stephen Epstein describes the genre's domestic

significance: "Korean punk permits its adherents to assert new modes of being Korean, and offers a redefinition of Korean identities—to be proudly Korean, one need not follow the hegemonic directives of mainstream popular culture" (2001). These oppositional Korean identities are created partially by the Attalian conversion of noise into a new musical/social order. Chosŏn punks take a relatively new international style (noise) and fill it with meanings that construct a particular Korean identity (order).

When she played punk rock in Ladybug, Wan-ting used it as a medium to express her confusion over identity. While the Koreans have an enthusiastic, inward-facing scene, Wan-ting says she gets more positive attention for her music from foreigners than her fellow Taiwanese. Today, as she experiments with a number of indie genres, she finds that her Taiwanese identity has no bearing on her music:

Actually, I don't really care about nationality... I think it doesn't matter what country you are from. I don't really think being a Taiwanese is important for me. So I think of myself as a person who really loves to create music. I don't even think I'm a rocker. I think I'm a person who just loves music and wants to create music—good music.

One gets the sense that Wan-ting thrives on the ability to subsume all difference into an undifferentiated musical now. She downplays her ethnicity and nationality when talking about music.

Wan-ting has also felt frustrated by the way gender has affected audiences' reception of her music:

I think in Taiwan—and in most Asian countries—if you're a girl and play in a band, people think, "Okay, I'm going to see this girl band because they're cute, they're hot." They're always thinking about looks and not music. That's one thing I really don't care for and I was kind of angry about it before, but now I'm okay with it. But if you're female and you play in a band, you really don't know if you're good or not, because people say you're good for a girl. That's one thing I'm really against. I really want to break this male-and-female stuff in music. It's not about gender.

--It seems that at least half the [indie] bands I hear about in Taiwan have one or more women in them. There's a larger percentage than in, say, Chicago.

Yeah.

--Why do you think that is?

Actually, I never thought about it. Mmm, I guess girls think they can play in rock bands too.

--Is it possible that people play rock if they're dissatisfied?

I think most of the time.

--So do you think that maybe women in Taiwan are less satisfied than men, so they want to react against something and start a band?

Maybe that's part of the reason, but I think actually, in this society men are more depressed. They have much more pressure than girls. So, I feel girls are more open here. They're happier. In this culture, men have huge responsibility for their family, for their parents.

--So if you're a first son, you can't start a band—it's really hard...

Yeah, you have to make money to support your parents, even if you don't have a family. That's your responsibility.

--But if you're a first daughter—

It doesn't matter! [Laughs] Yeah, I think for girls, we don't have a lot of pressure here.

Although Wan-ting wants to use her music to explode differences such as gender and nationality, she freely admits that structural conditions based on these differences have influenced her music. The fact that she is a woman in a patriarchal society has given her the freedom to adopt a liminal lifestyle. Although she believes nationality is unimportant in music, she admits that all of her influences come from the US, Europe, and Japan. Tellingly, when I ask her why the Taiwan indie scene has not achieved more relevance or success, she says it is because—due to the cost of airfare and a small market—Taiwanese musicians do not get to experience enough live performances by American bands. She compares the situation to her years in Chicago, during which she could hear skilled bands every week.

This combination of gendered response and westward gaze is reminiscent of Kelsky's exploration of "ways the trope of Western modernity exerts a pull on the bodies and minds of... educated and ambitious Japanese women." However, unlike her subjects, "who are engaged in projects of resistance against Japan" (2001:4), Wan-ting seems to hold little bitterness and dwells instead on the freedom the system offers women. Being a woman in Taiwan may in some ways be a marginal status, one without some of the privileges and responsibilities felt by a man. Wan-ting takes the freedom offered by this status to live a bohemian life in Wenjiaoshi, making very little money as a guitar teacher, and spending most of her time concentrating on her music.

Instead of supporting her parents as a first son might be expected to do, she receives money from them to help cover her rent. Aged 30 when we spoke in 2005, Wan-ting had no plans of acquiring the social status that comes from incorporation into marriage—describing this as a "sacrifice" she makes to music. Wan-ting purposefully maintains her liminal status as a musician and woman so that she may continue to function as a conduit through which new musical ideas may enter Taiwan—despite the fact that very few people seem to be listening.

Blurry Identities, Focused Ethnography

In this paper, I have used the concept of liminality as a lens on an island and its nascent nationalism, a neighborhood, a transnational music subculture, gender, and one musician's identity as it relates to all of the above. My purpose has not been to reduce to a single paradigm the complexities of these overlapping physical and cultural spaces, but rather to use the paradigm to better see these complexities, hopefully providing a sharper focus for a future ethnography of the Taiwanese indie scene. Whether imposed by political realities or taken on as an artistic stance, liminality represents an instability of identity that requires creativity in order to combat structural invisibility. As a poor fit for the world-making structures that define individuals in a particular context, the liminal persona must convert anti-structure into new structure and noise into order. By adopting a mythico-history of being Taiwanese and spreading it outward to reach even the dispersed readers of this text, Wan-ting attempts to reconstitute her political identity as Taiwanese. As she moves constantly between musical styles, refusing to be identified with a fixed genre, she attempts to reconstitute her musical identity as an innovator. In both cases, she and others like her utilize pre-existing categories (ethnicities, political identities, musical genres) to create something new—something that serves the needs of the present. Such opportunities and their attendant risks (Wan-ting's personal sacrifices may never make a dent in Taiwan's pop culture; Taiwan's

people may overplay their Taiwanese narrative, bringing on Chinese aggression) may come into sharper focus for the ethnographer who keeps an eye out for blurry identities.

Notes

¹ I will use the term "Taiwanese" to refer to the people and things from the island of Taiwan, as well as the Hoklo dialect. I will refer to the Hoklo ethnic group, also called Taiwanese (taiwan ren) in common parlance, as "ethnic Taiwanese." Those (mostly ethnic Han) whose families came to Taiwan during or after 1945 will be called "Mainlanders." The term "Chinese" is perhaps the most troublesome, as it is variously used in Taiwan to describe things and people of the mainland, the ethnic Han of Taiwan, and all citizens of the PRC and ROC. Unless noted otherwise, "Chinese" will refer in this paper to the people and things of mainland China.

² For example, during Chinese New Year, when social superiors give cash gifts (hong bao) to children and employees, unmarried young adults often remain on the receiving end.

³ Because Wan-ting is more fluent in English than I am in Mandarin, both interviews were conducted in English. I have made some minor grammatical changes to her words for the sake of clarity.

⁴ Malkki finds that refugees have been structurally invisible in anthropological and other literature on nations and nationalism because they fall into the interstices of taxonomies. If anthropology has been under the spell of an "assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:7), then it is no wonder that refugees are at once no longer classified and not yet classified. Like other threshold people, refugees are seen as polluting—they threaten national security and boundaries, and "represent an attack on the categorical order of nations which so often ends up being perceived as natural and, therefore, as inherently legitimate" (Malkki 1995:7-8).

⁵ Taiwan participates in the Olympics under the name "Chinese Taipei."

⁶ Listen to Ladybug perform Ghost Child by following the link in the original article at www.folkloreforum.net.

⁷ Democratic Progressive Party, the ethnic-Taiwanese-led, independence-leaning party.

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