Introduction

Let us consider: who are the peoples these days that lack a voice?
Can we hear the voice of the Egyptians? Can we hear the voice of the
Vietnamese or Koreans? Aside from Tagore, is there any other voice
from India?

—Lu Xun, “Silent China”

Hearing Voices

Orated to an audience of young people in a Hong Kong YMCA in 1927, these
words of Lu Xun rest upon a commonplace and far-reaching assumption: that to
find one’s voice is to locate and express an identity true, inalienable, and at times
almost mystical in its sources. Such a premise leads easily to the association of the
human voice with what has been called an “ancient magic” connected with “the
center of human existence,” the idea that the spoken word “reaches deep into a re-
gion of lived experience where it escapes conceptual formulas and where prescience
alone operates” (Ong 1990, x; Zumthor 1990, 6). Voice thus imagined becomes a
trope that cuts deeply across discussions of political, historical, and literary rep-
resentation to become perhaps the master metaphor for discussing identity and
agency. Notwithstanding the deconstructionist demolition of voice as metaphysical
presence, the closely linked fields of literature and cultural studies have generated
an intellectual industry built upon the express or implied intent of giving “voice”
or “speech” to previously silenced subjectivities. As a consequence, we continue
to see innumerable literary anthologies and book series invoking the trope of
voice to index categories of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and national or regional
belonging.

Similarly, practitioners of most major types of cultural studies almost intuiti-
tively cast problems of representation and power in terms of voice: oppositional
voices, listening for voices, letting the subaltern “speak,” and other variations on
the theme of placing faith in such vocally imagined “possibilities for expression,
articulation, agency” (R. Chow 1998, 2–3). Even among poststructuralists wise to the metaphysics of presence and determined to pronounce the author dead, the evocative power of the human voice can remain a seductive ideal. How else to explain Roland Barthes on one hand declaring writing “the destruction of every voice,” and on the other turning his creed of semiotic surface play inside out to find therein an authentic animal pleasure in the voice’s elusive “grain”? (1977, 142–148, 179–189). Even in the Lacanian scheme of the subject, voice assumes central significance as the flip side of presence, as the “object voice” introducing a “rupture at the core of self-presence” with its ineradicable otherness, *jouissance*, and feminine essence (Dolar 1996, 25).

Encountered today in academic and literary discourse, use of the voice trope is organized overwhelmingly by an ideology of multiculturalism. But, as scholars have noted, when applied to literary studies, the multicultural ethos typically relies upon the problematic representational models of reflectionism and authenticity, wherein “ethnicity” functions “as a kind of repressed truth that awaits liberation” (Bernheimer 1995, 8–9; R. Chow 1998, 101). In a world saturated with and at times bitterly divided by competing and clashing claims to the voicing of identity in and through literature, it should not be forgotten that such representational politics comes to us as younger cousin to an older but still powerful ideology: nationalism. Though by no means its only possible rhetorical application, the metaphor of voice has done long service as a means of asserting the presence of the nation as a living, evolving, self-aware cultural entity in its own right. When and how the trope of voice became coopted by any particular nation-building project might be impossible to determine with absolute precision, but the epistemic shift that made possible the identification of voice with expression, articulation, and agency can be roughly located in nineteenth-century Romantic-nationalist thought. This was the period, argues Michel Foucault, in which the understanding of language became humanized, when a faith in linguistic nominalism, in language’s transparency with things, gave way to “a tendency to attribute to language profound powers of expression” originating in the will of the human subject. Thus, “Language is ‘rooted’ not in the things perceived, but in the active subject,” where it “is no longer linked to the knowing of things, but to men’s full freedom.” This new imagination of language, Foucault continues, was a discovery that “[i]n the 19th Century . . . was to have profound political reverberations” (1970, 290–291).

These reverberations, Foucault might have added, have echoed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ obsession with the making of nations. Given the corollary that the people constitute the nation (Hobsbawm 1990, 18–19), it is a short step from imagining language as expressing the collective will of human subjects to identifying the living language of the people with the unique and sovereign voice of the nation itself. Out of this simple equation have come innumer-
able movements to recover and revitalize an imagined authentic voice of national identity located in combinations and recombinations of indigenous traditions of spoken vernaculars and the updated and renovated art-languages of “new” national literatures.

Returning to Lu Xun, himself one of the preeminent figures in the establishment of China’s new vernacular national literature, we see how he, too, promotes the idea that delivering China into modern nationhood meant restoring the sound of the nation’s voice through a renewal of language, literature, and, as his mention of Tagore suggests, poetry. In his 1927 speech, Lu Xun told his youthful auditors that to save their homeland from the fate of its colonized counterparts—Egypt, Vietnam, Korea, and India—China had to speak and be heard, had to escape the silence imposed by an outmoded classical language to “speak its own, modern words,” for “only a true voice can move the emotions of Chinese people and people of the world” (1981, 15). Lu Xun’s advice to youth was informed, of course, by China’s vernacular reform movement begun some ten years before. But turning back even twenty or more years before 1927 we find that many of the canonical moments in Lu Xun’s mission to revive China—its people, language, and literature—are at a fundamental level informed by this same metaphor of the sounding voice.

In the famous “Preface” to his 1923 collection of short stories, Outcry (Nahan), Lu Xun portrays his turn from medicine to literature, from curing China’s bodies to reviving its spirit, as a moment that might have been sparked by vision but was at the same time immersed in a nationally inflected opposition of voice and silence. At the Sendai Medical School, in a classroom of clapping and banzai-shouting Japanese medical students, Lu Xun describes himself sitting and watching as the instructor projects the lantern slide of an accused Chinese spy, surrounded by silent, passively onlooking countrymen, awaiting execution during the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War then being waged in southern Manchuria and Korea. Quite understandably, scholars have emphasized the visual, observational perspective in this well-known episode in modern Chinese literary history (R. Chow 1995; Anderson 1990, 77–79). But to my mind the crucially overlooked dimension of this seminal anecdote lies in its stark contrast between the seen and the heard. For at the same moment in which Lu Xun visually encounters a reflection of his own silent self in the enlarged, dumb, static tableau of benighted “Chinamen,” his ears ring with the riotous voices of another Asian nation, one that had not only defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War ten years previously, but was at that moment achieving an unprecedented military victory over a major Western power, Russia. To be vanquished is to be voiceless, to be seen and not heard—perhaps this was the message that prompted Lu Xun to leave medical school and, so the story goes, make his first attempt at a national revival through literature.
After several abortive projects at publishing progressive literature, followed by the grand disillusionment of China’s 1911 Revolution, it was a decade before Lu Xun was again convinced to turn his hand to the mission of national revival through literature. Here once more he casts the dilemma of national awakening in the figures of voice and silence. Approached by linguist Qian Xuantong in 1917 for contributions to the progressive journal New Youth (Xin Qingnian), an older and more skeptical Lu Xun replies with the famous conundrum of the “iron house”: “Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn?” (Lu Xun 1977, 5). The trope of voice is present still, but qualified by a deep ambivalence. By this time, however, the movement to regenerate a voice for China through the medium of modern vernacular literature was gaining ground fast, and there were few who troubled themselves with such agonized self-doubt. Among Lu Xun’s cohort of new and enlightened literati, what carried the day was enthusiasm for the vernacular language, a new, modernized literature, and the liberating potential of the new ideas this modern language and modern writing promised to deliver. Observes one historian of modern China, once the voice of hope rang out, “there was no turning back for the awakened nationalist” (Fitzgerald 1996, 102).

How modern China’s imagination of sound and voice emerged, and how it echoed across a century, is the subject of this book. To understand this history of the heard, I listen in on a specific aspect of the Chinese literary experience: poetry recitation (shige langsong). As an excursion into the culture of aurality in China’s new poetry, the project might be regarded as an attempt—almost literally—to recover voices lost to history by resurrecting this poetry as it sounded in its day. My motivation, however, is not to reconstruct or restore to rights an obscured or oppressed subjectivity. Instead, I attend to a nationally inflected ideology of voice that consistently informed the auditory dimensions of the modern Chinese poem. The result is a history of the sounded poem in modern Chinese literary practice over a period of about a century: from Lu Xun’s 1908 essay “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (Moluo shi li shuo), to the practice of poetry recitation in China as it happens now, at the outset of the twenty-first century. Throughout these ten decades, the attempts to give voice to new poetry through recitation do, to be sure, entwine with the ideology of a national voice. But even though the problematic of nation functioned as one of the dominant factors directly and indirectly shaping the imagination and realization of reciting poetry, the practice of giving voice to modern Chinese poems cannot
be reduced to matters of national awareness and awakening. As detailed in subsequent chapters, modern China’s performed poetry has done many things: resolved problems of aesthetics, mourned the dead, established bonds of literary solidarity, excited mass sentiment, tapped the sources of revolutionary passion, and most recently, engaged in ambivalent symbiosis with the market economy. Moreover, these multifarious functions of the recited poem have been far from mutually exclusive; any single poetic event could and did combine several overlapping effects.

So even as an approach to modern Chinese poetry’s sound and voice might remind one of the insistent imperative of nation, the contingencies of poetry in living action move in many directions, revealing multilayered, real-world dimensions of poetic creation and reception. One reason approaching poetry as event rather than as printed text can achieve this complexity of perspective is that listening, as opposed to the more familiar academic practice of reading, forces the critic to abandon, or at least supplement, traditional approaches to interpreting the poetic text. Through its orientation toward the aural, I hope to open our ears to new critical approaches to poetry and its place in modern Chinese history. To do so requires engagement with a comparative theoretical perspective, one that joins the study of poetry recitation in modern China to an increasing scholarly interest in critical approaches, not only to the sound and performance of modern and contemporary poetry, but to the importance of auditory culture in literary and historical experience.

**Sounding Out an Approach**

“While the performance of poetry is as old as poetry itself,” writes poet and critic Charles Bernstein, “critical attention to modern and contemporary poetry performance has been negligible, despite the crucial importance of performance to the practice of the poetry of this century” (Bernstein 1998, 3). Bernstein’s statement holds as true for the twentieth-century English-language poetry he refers to as for the Chinese poetry produced during that same period. A review of recent work on auditory culture points to several general and important factors that can help explain this state of general neglect. First, and perhaps most fundamentally, though sound can be “the most forceful stimulus that human beings experience,” its fugitive and fleeting nature makes it a difficult object of study (Smith 2003, 128). Unlike most visually perceived media—written texts, paintings, photographs, and so on—which may be viewed at leisure, and usually without any special equipment, sound is at best an ephemeral object of study, even with the aid of mechanical or digital recording devices. Due in part to the impossibility of capturing sound as sound and holding it motionless in state, critical vocabulary for talking about the poem as live, active voice remains relatively undeveloped. Thus even though the voicing of an orally produced text may constitute a “thing” whose “material
qualities” of “tone, timbre, volume, register” each possesses symbolic value, at the same time voice “cannot be objectified and thus remains enigmatic, nonspecular” (Zumthor 1990, 5, 9). Put in more traditionally poetic terms, the “audiotext” of a poem “is a semantically denser field of linguistic activity than can be charted by means of meter, assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and the like” (Bernstein 1998, 13). In short, because of the nature of sound itself, the acoustically realized poem evades close “reading” even as its aural fullness and complexity exceed the diagnostic abilities of traditional prosodic analysis.

Another, more subtly pervasive issue relegating the study of sound to secondary status is the dominance of vision over hearing, of the eye over the ear, or the idea that, as Douglas Kahn observes in his pioneering exploration of sound and modernism, “Visuality overwhelms aurality in the cultural balance of the senses” (1999, 158). Scholars account for this sensory bias by pointing either singly or in combination to a range of philosophical, historical, and economic factors, including but not limited to Aristotelian philosophy, Renaissance perspectivism, the print revolution, and the spectacularized society of postindustrial capitalism (Debord 1994; Ihde 1976; Jay 1993; Levin 1993; McLuhan 1962). The resulting “visualist paradigm,” as Steven Connor (1997) calls it, has not only dominated Western modes of thinking and perceiving, but deeply informs the interpretive models used by various academic disciplines (B. R. Smith 2003). Such embedded perceptual and conceptual bias is at its most pernicious when applied to the study of sound; for, as Kahn asks, “How . . . can listening be explained when the subject in recent theory has been situated, no matter how askew, in the web of the gaze, mirroring, reflection, the spectacle, and other ocular tropes?” (1992, 4).

A growing body of scholarly work that recognizes and seeks to remedy this ingrained visual bias has begun to emerge during the past decade or so. The disciplines that have begun to attune themselves to sound range widely—from anthropology to history, media studies, religious studies, literature, and cultural studies (Feld 1996; Schmidt 2000; M. M. Smith 2001; Kahn 1999; Morris 1997b). Such research has opened up experimentation in critical methodologies of sound, proving that sound does indeed occupy an important, though by no means autonomous, dimension of human experience in terms of subject formation, class conflict, literary history and imagination, senses of space and place, and religious belief.

Although such research has made significant headway toward creative and meaningful engagement with sounds historical, literary, sacred, and technologized, few have applied their theoretical insights outside the Western Hemisphere. With the exception of Steven Feld’s groundbreaking anthropological work, the human experiences considered so far have belonged to the cultures and histories of Europe and North America, and in particular the impact of modernity on consciousness of voice and sound. Given the shared premise among all these studies of the heard—
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that sound and voice, like any perceptual phenomenon, are culturally and historically constructed—to neglect non–Euro-American cultures and histories can easily create the illusion that Western ways of hearing the modern are the only ways. Following Lu Xun, we might now observe that awareness of the “voice” of China—not its presumed national voice, but its historically distinct narratives and imaginations of the aural experience of modernity—remains in a state of neglect and obscurity.

Thus while aurality may no longer be called “the unthought in accounts of modernity” (Lastra 2000), to speak of sound and modernity in the Chinese experience remains, so to speak, unheard of. It is my contention, then, that listening in to the aural dimensions of Chinese poetry over the past century or so presents an opportunity to expand understanding of the heard world of modernity beyond primarily Western constructs. This is so because, as Kahn asserts, the study of sound presents “a means through which to investigate issues of cultural history and theory . . . existing behind the peripheral vision and selective audition of established fields of study” (1999, 2). The sounds of modern Chinese poetry, I argue, offer precisely this sort of alternative apprehension of Chinese modernity.

But how is it possible to apprehend modernity through a sensory regime itself so resistant to sustained, stable apprehension? Or, in more concrete terms, how does one go about studying the sounds of voices whose echoes have long since died away? Especially given the rarity of recording equipment in China until the past several decades, how can one constitute an object of inquiry at all? As suggested already in the discussion of Lu Xun, the discourse of sound in its modern manifestations is not limited to direct experience of specific acoustic events, but rather expands into those representations of sound that constitute and shape the social, cultural, intellectual, and historical experience of how and what one hears. The definition of “sound” extends beyond commonsense reckoning and into a broader realm that includes “sounds, voices, aurality—all that might fall within or touch on auditive phenomena, whether this involves actual sonic or auditive events or ideas about sound or listening; sounds actually heard or heard in myth, idea, or implication; sounds heard by everyone or imagined by one person alone; or sounds as they fuse with the sensorium as a whole” (Kahn 1999, 3). Sound, and for me this includes the sound of poetry, thus refers both to physical acoustics and to entire realms of imagining that make sound a historically and culturally distinct human construct. Sound may be a fleeting medium in its phenomenal substance, yet ideas and imaginations of sound are inscribed with greater permanence, not just in sound reproduction media, but also in the material domain of the written, pictorial, and even architectural record.

In the absence of preserved recorded media for recited poetry, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, it is the written record of poetry and writing on poetry that this study primarily relies upon. These records include not just
ear-witness accounts of recitations, but also writings that contributed more broadly to a "constructed aural order" (M. M. Smith 2000) by figuring the imagined sound of the poetic voice through deployment of aurally inspired metaphor. In rereading the history of modern Chinese poetry with an ear attuned to the aural imagination, I gesture toward a literary-critical agenda that revises the way in which we encounter the poetic text by opening it up to the world. The recited poem, because it is a sounded, performed text, cannot be disengaged from its spatial, temporal, and social moment. Encounters with these performed poetic words thus naturally work against the tendency to isolate poetry from its social and historical context, and thereby counter the conventional inclination “[t]o constitute a literary text as a static, truth-telling object, abstruse, hieratic, and linear,” and thus place it “in a private, timeless, hermetic isolation” (Morris 1997a, 5). Attention to the orally produced text goes beyond the ahistorical reading because its words are embodied words, whose extension into the medium of the heard orients them toward “a specific body, point of view, and history” (Middleton 1998, 268). Or, in Paul Zumthor’s coinage, the performed poem is “sociocorporeal” in that it “resists . . . any perception that might sever it from its social function, from its place within a real community, from an acknowledged tradition, and from the circumstances in which it is heard” (1994, 221). It is precisely within these functions, communities, traditions, and circumstances that I hope to find a new, auditory medium of Chinese modernity.

**Rethinking Recitation**

As mentioned, reasons for the relative neglect of the performed modern and contemporary poem include the ephemeral nature of sound, the inadequacy of current critical vocabulary to conceptualize sound-based phenomena, and a conceptual as well as theoretical bias toward visuality. While such general concerns explain much, the lack of critical attention to the genre of the performed modern and contemporary Chinese poem also must be understood within the historically specific context of the discipline of modern and contemporary Chinese literature as pursued by scholars both outside and inside mainland China.

Among scholars based outside of China, it is certain that most, if not all, have attended, organized, or even taken part in Chinese-language poetry recitations, as they are typically held now in mostly academic and literary settings. Few, however, have considered the history of Chinese poetry recitation as it has evolved since the 1920s. As for the fewer still who have written about recitation, none have done more than either mention the subject in passing or offer condensed surveys based almost exclusively on secondary sources. Regarding the former, one brief account of wartime recitation is worth noting primarily for ambiguous citation and reproduction of factual error.¹ Such inaccuracies can in part be attributed to the relative
lack of secondary sources on recitation, but it may also reflect a negligence resulting from the discipline’s failure to conceive of modern poetry as having literary or historical significance beyond its presence in print artifacts. As for the survey approach, Russian sinologist L. E. Cherkasskii provides the most substantial treatment of the subject in his discussion of poetry recitation during the War of Resistance (1980, 225–234). But due to an apparent lack of access to primary sources, and perhaps as well to the ideological demands of his time and place in Soviet-era Russia, Cherkasskii’s account does little more than reproduce the ideas of Chinese literary historians writing in the 1950s through the 1970s, who for their own part simply approached poetry recitation as one among many modern literary “movements” (yundong).

As for recent research by scholars based in mainland China, existing studies of modern poetry recitation do offer more empirical detail than the English- and Russian-language work already mentioned, but for quite specific historical reasons have not explored the topic with the interest and energy applied to other aspects of Chinese modern poetry. In the broadest terms, scholars have avoided the study of recitation due to a persistent dialectic tension that dates from the invention of modern Chinese literature early in the twentieth century. This tension plays out between the poles of an autonomous “art for art’s sake” and a socially engaged “art for life’s sake.” The positions and counterpositions in this dialectic have assumed multiple forms and vocabularies in Chinese literary discourse over the past century or so: “commoner” versus “aristocratic,” “proletarian” versus “Europeanized,” “official” versus “independent,” “popular” versus “intellectual,” and so on. At its core, however, the issue hinges on the problematic mission posed first and most forcefully during the May Fourth period (1919–1925)—namely, to invent a national literature that is cosmopolitan and modern but can also reach a nonelite audience thought to require ideological betterment. The War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) period, in particular, stands as a historical watershed marking a shift away from elite modes of writing and toward a politically motivated popularization of cultural production, including new poetry. With some notable exceptions, the felt need on the part of many wartime poets to reinvent themselves and their verse to serve, or at least not offend, the cause of national salvation retarded the 1930s development of poetic modernism. Moreover, and as discussed in Chapter 2, during this same period advocates of poetry recitation attacked Chinese poetic modernism with special vehemence, inveighing against it as an effete literary practice fatally detached from the people and the national situation. This ideological shift away from elite forms of new literature received its greatest impetus from Mao Zedong’s platform for an indigenous revolutionary literature, the 1942 Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. Subsequently enshrined by the Chinese communist state after 1949 as the last word in literary policy, Mao’s Talks identifies the fundamental task
of literature and art as serving China’s worker, peasant, and soldier masses. Poetry recitation, because it is a literary practice strongly associated not just with wartime movements for literary massification and national defense but also with Mao-era literary orthodoxy, has been closely identified with this patriotic and populist strand of new Chinese literature.

Poetry recitation’s historical affiliation with mainstream Mao-era culture is the main factor shaping its reception as an object of serious research during the post-Mao era. This reception results in large part from two general tendencies in China’s literary criticism during the past twenty to twenty-five years. On one hand, China’s political and intellectual liberalization since the 1980s has encouraged a strong reaction against the stifling constraints of politically mainstream national-popular “art for life’s sake.” At the same time, a continuing, nationalist impulse to depict all patriotic literary activities during the War of Resistance in a sympathetic if not heroic light still influences a significant—if declining—number of researchers. Although Chinese literary critics’ relation to the national past has changed immensely as the immediacy of the war has faded and the ideological restrictions of the Mao era have relaxed, recent scholarship on poetry recitation—or more accurately, the lack of such studies—bears the imprint of the life/art, populist/elitist dichotomies. In actual critical practice, this legacy of the national literary past means that the history of poetry recitation is either ignored or its original claims are taken at their word.

It is ignored by researchers who have made the most of the loosening of ideological restrictions on scholarship since the 1980s. Freed from the Mao era’s intellectually crippling injunctions for politically correct methodology and subject matter, scholars of China’s modern poetry began intensive investigations of pre-Liberation-era poets and poetic schools—labeled as Formalism, Symbolism, and, most notably, Modernism—that had for decades been decreed off-limits due to their “elitist,” “bourgeois,” or “decadent” tendencies. Driving such research, observes Jiang Tao in a recent study of early new poetry, was a desire on one hand to refute the narrowly political literary history and criticism of the Mao era and, on the other, to modernize Chinese literature by drawing from its own past (2005, 5). As for the impulse to modernize, most scholars of Chinese modern poetry, if they are not poets themselves, associate closely with working poets. Thus when looking back at their poetic predecessors, they often do so with an eye to recovering the more aesthetically sophisticated poetic insights of the pre-Liberation period. From such a position, the tradition of patriotic recitation that began during the War of Resistance and was coopted by the Chinese communist literary-cultural apparatus in the 1950s and 1960s seems artistically retrograde. Although such official-style recitation remains an active cultural practice to this day, practicing poet-scholars tend to discount it as a form of repugnantly politicized literary atavism. My own
first encounter with this critical stance took place at Peking University in the 1990s, when I first came up with the idea of working on this project. I clearly recall the disbelieving, and vaguely suspicious, expression that came across one young literary scholar’s face when I mentioned my interest in researching recitation poetry. It was a look that asked, with an undertone of mild distaste, “What would you want to do that for?”

On the other side of the critical fence, where Mao-era attitudes continue to hold sway, two of the more substantial pieces on poetry recitation illustrate well the tendency toward heroic oversimplification and uncritical reproduction of wartime discourse. For example, one survey history of Chinese new poetry flatly states that “the Poetry Recitation Movement continued undiminished from the early stage of the War of Resistance up to the eve of national liberation. It forcefully expedited the War of Resistance Salvation Movement as well as the later Democracy Movement of the Guomindang-controlled areas, and greatly advanced the development of new poetry itself” (Yang 1992, 186). As we shall see in the chapters to follow, close examination of poetry recitation activity during that period shows it to be far from this sort of internally coherent, self-confident, historically continuous, politically and aesthetically constructive “movement.” A more accurate characterization would describe poetry recitation from 1937 to 1949 as a series of exploratory fits and starts intended at first to awaken the masses to national consciousness, but later recognizing its own shortcomings and consolidating itself as a cultural form by and for the literary elite.

Another way of attributing literary-historical coherence to poetry recitation has been to label it a literary “school” (pai); specifically, a “recitation poetry school” (langsongshi pai) covering more or less the same period from 1937 to 1949 (Chen Anhu 1997, 558–570). While this approach offers a more finely grained account of poetry recitation, defining a “school” requires coming up with a list of aesthetic features shared by a group of practitioners. The problem here is that the list of features draws uncritically from ideas of direct communication, formal liberation, emotion, and voice that were current during the 1930s and 1940s. One reads, for example, that: “recitation poetry . . . directs the realistic content of battle and the emotion of the nation directly into and among the popular masses”; “Recitation poetry is another instance of the liberation of poetic form”; and “The poetry of the recitation school is poetry of the impassioned battle cry. The soul of the poetry is fervent emotion, and recitation poetry is the voice of high emotion” (Chen Anhu 1997, 568–569). Such assumptions do represent important and persistent elements in the ideology of the sounding voice in modern Chinese poetry; but as ideology they should not be taken at face value. My own approach is to reconsider statements like these in a manner that not only locates them in their historically specific circumstances of utterance, but also makes sense of them as a part of a complex,
Poetic Voices from *Dao* to Now

This book follows a roughly chronological, though by no means historically comprehensive, path through the history of modern Chinese poetry and poetry recitation. The book’s seven chapters proceed from a period of invention and experimentation in poetic voicing roughly congruent with new, vernacular poetry’s establishment in the first several decades of the twentieth century, to consolidation of poetry recitation between 1937 and 1948 (the War of Resistance and Civil War period), on to the development of poetry recitation as a performance genre during the socialist and postsocialist eras in the People’s Republic of China. Chapter 1, “Poetic Interiorities: From Civilization to Nation” lays the groundwork for understanding the Chinese modern imagination of the poetic voice. It does so by examining how a shift in the myth of linguistic authority, engineered by modernizing literati, marked the transition from empire to nation in the early twentieth century. Where the imperial system drew authority from written language’s presumed manifestation of a universal Way or *dao*, proponents of a new nationalist ideology searched for the sources of authority in a “living” spoken language generated from an individual or collective national genius. By giving value to the spoken, this shift implied an emphasis on the heard over the seen; and because poetry had for millennia been regarded as the premier genre for manifesting the *dao*, it was a reinvented poetry that reformers imagined as the bearer of a popular voice. From a discussion of traditional ideologies of writing and poetry, the chapter moves on to analyze ideologies of nation and voice in the work of figures active in the vernacular reform and new literature movements, including Lu Xun, Qian Xuantong, Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren, and Yu Pingbo.

Building on Chapter 1’s argument that an imagination of the sounding voice animated modern Chinese poetry from its inception, the subsequent chapter, “Poetry Off the Page: Sound Aesthetics in Print,” asks how poets experimenting with this new literary genre “voiced” their poems on paper, in performance, or through a combination of print and performance. Here we find that through the 1920s and 1930s, well before poetry recitation of political agitation became an established practice in China, poets of a populist bent deployed paralinguistic, typographic, and formal devices to construct a “recitational aesthetic” of inscribed voice meant to transcend the visible, written text while projecting an imaginary volume and emotive presence. At the same time, academic poets who made a regular practice of reciting poetry in Beiping’s cosmopolitan salons created a visually oriented aesthetics of textual self-reference designed to establish poetry as a discourse independent from natural, spoken language. Although this latter, linguistically self-oriented,
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Poetry frequently incorporated an important sound component in its prosodic structure, it nonetheless came under attack from the populist poets, who condemned it as a static, opaque, printed poetry of the “eye” unable to project a sound of poetry that might achieve wide emotive resonance among a national populace. The conflicted intersections of the seen and the heard in these two poetic currents are significant, first, for how, during their chosen genre’s formative years, poets engaged in an often vituperative battle over what makes poetry poetry, and second, for the latter camp of poets’ determination to establish a metanarrative of national modernity grounded in the register of the sounding voice.

The war years of the 1930s and 1940s, and in particular the eight years of the War of Resistance, represent the most important period in the developing practice of modern Chinese poetry recitation. It was during this time of geographical dislocation, national trauma, and literary massification that poetry recitation, as well as its literary realization in print as “recitation poetry” (langsong shi), took hold as a meaningful category of literary performance. Chapters 3 through 5 approach wartime poetry recitation from several complementary angles. Chapter 3 examines the assumptions underlying the production of “recitation poetry” as an object of literary discourse, as well as the breakdown of these assumptions in later war-period poems. On the one hand, early wartime recitation poems and wartime writing on poetry recitation amplified the notions of vocal aesthetics and national interiority invented in the preceding decades, and in the case of works labeled “recitation poems” even vocalized a poetic soundscape of wartime geography. Midway through the war, however, one finds poems by leading practitioners of poetry recitation, such as Guang Weiran (Zhang Guangnian) and Gao Lan (Guo Dehao), which complicate and even undermine the imagined powers of poetic voice and sound.

There was, of course, much more going on at the time than writing and discussing recitation poems. This was, after all, poetry for performance. Chapter 4 narrates the historical drama of wartime recitation by reconstructing the sights, sounds, personalities, and institutions of poetry performance during the War of Resistance period. Drawing upon diaries, memoirs, news dispatches, performance reviews, and of course the poems themselves, this chapter narrates the heroic ideal of recitation as it encountered the quotidian realities of live performance under conditions often both physically and politically unforgiving. The story begins with the poetry recitation activities of Pu Feng and the poets of the Guangzhou-based China Poetry Forum Society (Zhongguo shitan she) in 1937–1938, moves on to the early wartime rallies in and around the city of Hankou, and from there to efforts at poetry recitation by the War Song Society (Zhan’ge she) in Yan’an, Shanghai’s Rank and File Society (Hanglie she), and various recitation events sponsored by the Chongqing, Chengdu, and Guilin branches of the All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists (Zhonghua quanguo wenyijie kangdi xiehui).
Available accounts of these events make it quite clear that, despite the grand theoretical claims for heard poetry as an avenue into mass consciousness, and despite the brave ambition written into so many of the recitation poems themselves, practitioners of new poetry recitation could do little more than feel their way through an often painful process of trial and error. But despite poetry recitation’s undeniably spotty record of success, recitation advocates did not abandon the efforts to bring poetry to the public ear. Instead, by the end of the war literary circles had adopted modern poetry recitation as a cultural form flexible enough to accommodate the desire for both entertainment and political education—a dual legacy revived years later for the socialist mass culture of the early 1960s.

Chapter 5 moves several years beyond the War of Resistance to the eve of the 1949 revolution, when the restive college campuses of Beiping generated a dynamic new model of poetry recitation. Writing within the ferment of student protest and civil war, the erstwhile poet and newly radicalized Tsinghua University professor Zhu Ziqing reconceived recitation. His formulation, which I call “situational practice,” warrants attention, because whereas former theorists of the recited poem had located this poetry’s potential for intervention in a reified regime of voice-mediated emotion, Zhu reimagined the voiced poetic text as coextensive with the social text of collective action, as an integral element of the entire situation created by the shifting and unstable space-time of live performance. By linking Zhu’s theory to student recitation poetry and an actual historical situation, this chapter revises notions of what constitutes a poetic text while adding to our understanding of a neglected period of Chinese literary history.

The final two chapters compare what has become an established culture of poetry recitation in the Mao and post-Mao eras. Chapter 6 revisits the popular peak of official-style poetry recitation during the early 1960s, a time when poetry took over the stages of China’s theaters and culture palaces as a mass-performance art displaying and engaging national aspirations for a New China. Performed by professional actors in urban centers and popularized through recitals, radio broadcasts, amateur training courses, and symposia, poetry recitation became the hallmark genre of a lyricized socialist enthusiasm. And yet, when given voice on the public stage, poetic expression encountered a subtle but unavoidable contradiction: did the voice of poetry spontaneously capture and project the era’s ideal of a deep, authentic “revolutionary passion” (geming de jiqing), or was it simply a consciously cultivated, and thus ideologically suspect, art of dramatic performance? Through analysis of actors’ own discourse on the art of recitation as well as poetry recitation primers of the time, this chapter makes sense of the tension between poetic passion and dramatic art, while also complicating the idea of Mao-era art as a seamlessly monolithic system of cultural production and reception.

The seventh and final chapter brings this study of performed poetry up to the
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present. Here I offer an explanation of why, even as the current postsocialist market economy has swept contemporary poetry to the cultural fringes, poetry recitation events flourish as never before in China’s urban centers. Professional language artists, amateur recitation enthusiasts, and, of course, poets themselves, recite in venues ranging from private homes to the Great Hall of the People, from trade exhibitions to avant-garde “happenings,” and from high-brow academic conferences to mass-culture tourism festivals. This minor explosion of poetry recitation, sometimes referred to as a “recitation renaissance,” suggests that, instead of falling prey to the culturally leveling influences of the market economy, the practice of poetry recitation has adapted to the new economic and cultural configurations of postsocialist China. Why does recitation live on? Here I argue that whereas socialist-era poetry recitation was a creature of that period’s political institution of the coercive “mass campaign” or yundong, postsocialist recitation thrives in the more autonomous, decentralized, and fluid institution of the cultural “event” or huodong. The point here is that, despite many significant differences, both yundong and huodong represent means for mobilizing the population to meet state development goals: the former designed to advance the Mao-era socialist economy, and the latter a key component of the currently booming sector of the “culture-economy.” More important, however, is how the category of the huodong encompasses multiple varieties of poetry recitation: from events bearing the unmistakable stamp of official ideology to those carrying the earmarks of “independent” artistic practice.

These chapters can hardly claim to be a complete critical history of sound and voice in Chinese modernity. For one thing, exclusive attention to a single form of literary and cultural practice—in this case, poetry recitation—can account only partially for the vast dynamic range of auditory culture in modern China. Also, even within this strictly delimited generic zone, my narration has left gaps to be filled by researchers interested in extending, modifying, or contravening my arguments. There is much more to be said, for example, on recitation during the early years of the People’s Republic, when performed poetry was initially institutionalized to support campaigns such as those accompanying the war in Korea. The April 1976 Tiananmen demonstrations in memory of Zhou Enlai, in which poetry functioned prominently as an expression of protest and grief, represent another high-water mark in the history of recitation. Significant, too, was the role of recitation in the small cults of poetic celebrity enlivening university campuses, and Peking University in particular, during the culture-hungry 1980s.3

What this book can do is amplify some of the most salient intellectual, historical, and literary features that constitute how the past century or so has been heard. It can also remind readers that similar and possibly even richer representations of sound and voice not only cut across all modern Chinese literary genres but find important expression as well in film, drama, art, and, of course, music. Turning one’s
ear even further afield, attention to the auditory imagination of modern China has potentially even broader significance when pursued through other disciplines, such as history, architecture, urban studies, anthropology, and sociology. In short, I harbor no ambition to be the last word on the heard world of modern China. If my book can renew understanding of the modern Chinese poem, that would be good. If it can at the same time begin to restructure our current sense of Chinese modernity, even better. Best of all, however, would be simply to remind its readers that the closer you listen, the more you might hear.

* * *

Finally, a few words on the translation of key terms. Different languages, as Yurii Lotman suggestively describes, are by nature semiotically asymmetrical (Lotman 1990, 127). This means that the translator who seeks precise semantic correspondences across languages seeks in vain. While writing a book in English about a performance form that developed in a Chinese linguistic context, I have inevitably encountered such asymmetries when negotiating between two sets of English and Chinese words, each referring, with a good degree of slippage, to past, present, and emerging modes of orally performing poetry in the Anglophone and Chinese traditions. In current English usage, the most commonly used terms for these modes are reading, recitation, speaking, and declamation. The first of these, reading, is the one most often used today in the United States, due to the contemporary convention of poets and other authors who literally read their work aloud in the setting of a university or college, literature workshop, or book-release event. “Reading” naturally implies that the performer relies on a printed script, such as a book or manuscript, although that is not always the case. In contrast, the less commonly used “recitation” implies that the performance text has been committed to memory, with the further suggestion that such speaking from memory relates to some sort of pedagogical task, as when a student recites his or her lessons. Closely related, and more or less interchangeable with recitation, are “poetry speaking” or “verse speaking,” terms that emerged from the United Kingdom’s “verse-speaking movement”—an efflorescence of competitions and festivals, peaking between 1920 and 1950 but continuing to this day mostly in schools—that promoted poetry recitation as a means of education in the arts (Sivier 1983b). Poetry “declamation,” while generally interchangeable with the term “recitation,” suggests a dramatic or impassioned style of oral delivery.

A set of more or less direct Chinese cognates for these terms would not be hard to find. Songdu or langdu, which share the character du, meaning “read” or “read aloud,” would seem to correspond to “reading,” with songdu suggesting more of a chanting style of delivery, and langdu more of a clear, ringing spoken enunciation. Beisong, where bei refers to memorization, would seem to correlate well with
the English “recitation” and its implied reliance on committing texts to memory. Langsong might then be aligned with the relatively high-volume, relatively stylized delivery that declamation connotes. As in English, however, the borders among these several terms are not clearly delineated. Langdu, songdu, langsong, du, and even the term yinsong, which normally refers to a chanting or even melodic singsong style of recitation used for classical poems, were all used with varying frequencies up until the War of Resistance to refer to the oral performance of modern poetry. It was not until the announcement of a “recitation movement” (langsiong yundong) during the early war years that langsong became a more or less conventionalized term referring to the recitation of poetry or other literary works, whether based on memory or a written script.4 In mainland China, the region on which my study focuses, langsong has remained the dominant term up to the present. For want of precise correlates between the English and Chinese languages, and to avoid confusion, I use “recitation” as shorthand for all the varieties of the oral performance of modern Chinese poetry, and have provided pinyin Romanization of Chinese terms wherever clarification is desirable.