Preface

One minute she’s so happy / then she’s crying on someone’s knee /
saying laughing and crying / you know it’s the same release.
—Joni Mitchell, “People’s Parties”

This book draws on eighteen interviews in Shanghai and sixty-five interviews in Taipei with both laypeople and people working in Taiwan’s music industry, including lyricists, performers, and people working in music companies. Because I was primarily interested in the presentation of, and reflection on, women’s experiences in these songs, the majority of people I interviewed were women. Most of the people I interviewed were college educated urbanites in their twenties and early thirties. To protect the identities of those I interviewed, I often use their self-chosen English names. I have also drawn on a range of English and Chinese-language academic work and the popular press in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and the United States.

I should note in advance that, in opposition to some excellent commentary on an earlier draft of this book pointing out that not all of my readership will be from the United States, I have opted to continue to use the United States as a comparative point with China and Taiwan. I do so because of America’s exceptionally strong influence on Mandopop and because those I interviewed often specifically referred to the United States to highlight their points on both music and culture. Although they often used the United States to mean “the West” as a general category, I am uncomfortable with using the term “Western” when using specific examples because of the tremendous range of music and cultures in Western nations and because it is too problematic on a number of ethical and intellectual levels.¹

One of the greatest obstacles to this research has been the temporal popularity of songs and performers. As Stewart Ewen suggests for style, trying to present the latest trend is innately doomed in that “one of the main points of a style is that it will not remain current.”² This was never more true than with Mandopop trends.
After several summers of updating the lyrics to reflect the most popular songs of that particular year, I finally gave up and replaced many of them with the songs I had begun this project with in the mid-1990s, because these were the songs that were mentioned most frequently in my interviews. Most of the songs that I cite from the mid-1990s have become classics. The newer songs that I discuss are so phenomenally popular that I can’t imagine they will not be remembered years from now. Given the slow process of getting academic works published, however, even the newest of the songs in this book will seem out of date by the time this book is published. Thus, rather than attempting to present the latest trends or a comprehensive view of each artist who has been popular in the past twenty years, I focus on the central themes from the mid-1990s to today, using specific performers and songs as examples of general trends.

The songs that I discuss in the following chapters were either mentioned in interviews, taken from anthology CDs of “women’s greatest hits” and “men’s greatest hits,” or had particularly strong sales. Because of limited space I only include one stanza of each song being examined. The complete Chinese lyrics, and my English translations for each song, can be found on my web page (http://people.cas.sc.edu/moskowitz/songs.html).

I confess to a certain frustration concerning the translations of the songs. Although I believe I have translated them accurately, the depth and expressiveness of feeling is lost both in rendering the poetic verses into English and in reading them without the accompanying melodies. Readers who are familiar with these songs may therefore want to hum the melodies while reading the lyrics—I have found that this helps.

The U.S. dollar amounts in this book are rounded-off sums from local currencies. For Taiwan I used a NT$34-to-US$1 conversion rate. For Hong Kong and the PRC I used a 7 Yuan/HK$7-to-US$1 conversion rate.