
Popular music – mass-mediated, commercialized, pleasure-filled, humorous, and representative of large segments of society – developed in Asia during the first half of the twentieth century and has become a world-wide industry by now. One of the most striking characteristics of its early years was the proliferation of new performers, often drawn from existing local theater or entertainment traditions that were changing into new fields such as cinema and advertising. Among these early entertainers, a large number of women came from local performing arts. Their voices, mediated through new technologies of film and the phonograph, changed the soundscape of global popular music and resonate today in all spheres of modern life.

Women surfaced as popular icons in different guises and in different Asian countries through different routes. The ascendency of women as performers paralleled, and indeed generated, developments in wider society such as suffrage, social and sexual liberation, women as business entrepreneurs and independent income earners, and new life styles. Often, these women established prominent careers in colonial conditions, which saw Asian societies in rapid transition and the vernacular and familiar articulated with the novel and the foreign. Further, these female performers emerged from the underclasses of society and had been engaged in activities with low social prestige and little remuneration. Through the present day, female performers, willingly or not, have often taken on a role model of the modern woman challenging conservatism, morality, and religion. Calling for changes in attitudes and life style, they have evoked discussion and admiration, as well as derision and conflict. Some, including Hibari Misora in Japan and Lata Mangeshkar in India, were elevated as official national cultural heroes, while others, like Inul Daratista in Indonesia, were denigrated for transgressing moral boundaries. Some were rewarded and celebrated, while others faded into oblivion. But their historical significance did not diminish, even if many of the women themselves did.

This conference aims to demonstrate how female entertainers, positioned at the margins of different intersecting fields of activities, created something hitherto unknown: they were artistic pioneers of new music, new cinema, new forms of dance and theater, and new behavior and morals. They moved from the margins to the mainstream and in their wake Asian pop cultures now have followed. These female performers were not merely symbols of times that were rapidly changing. Nor were they merely the personification of global historical changes. They were active agents in the creation of local performance cultures, of the newly emerging mass culture, and the rise of a region-wide and globally oriented entertainment industry. This interdisciplinary conference will bring together a group of scholars from a range of fields including Music, Literature, History, Anthropology, Film Studies, Cultural Studies, Women’s Studies, Performance Studies, and Asian Studies to properly historicize the artistic sounds, lyrical texts, visual images, and social lives of female performers in Asian popular music of the 20th century.
The conference will emphasize multiple valences of "voice" as a key concept in the social construction of changing identities in a global world. In one sense, “voice” refers to the sound and materiality of the singing voice that can be heard on recordings and embodied in film and in live performance. In a broader sense, the voice activates an affective and emotional bodily identification with subjectivities, events, characters, and places through which people can recognize themselves. Placing singing voices in social and historical contexts, conference participants will critically analyze salient discourses, representations, and meanings of “voice” in Asian popular music of the 20th century. For example, “voice” may refer to the expression of a singer’s inner emotions, ideas, and aspirations. But, echoing the views of early 20th century philosopher Theodor Adorno, it may also refer to the voice of a dominant and manipulative culture industry. “Voice” calls attention to agency and subjectivity and the historical contexts through which they are produced, circulated, and embodied. Emphasizing women as social actors in the history of the music entertainment industries, the proposed conference will focus on the female voice in Asian popular music and highlight the particularities of gender in the emergent Asian entertainment industries of the 20th century. These industries increasingly accommodated female stars as role models and changing ideas about gender followed. Scholars have noted that women are often ignored or left out of accounts of modernity (Felski 1995; Pykett 1995; Ardis and Lewis 2002). In contrast, this conference aims to foreground the individuals, the gendered ideologies, and the popular music industries through which women’s voices came to enjoy a prominent and powerful place in Asian modernities. Comparison is a central analytical component of this project.

Modernity and morality are often discursively produced as absolute and universal categories. An analysis of women, gender, and sexuality in comparative perspective enables us to illuminate the often-abstract notions of modernity and morality in specific historical and material circumstances. By examining the local historical and cultural specificities of women in Asian popular music, we aim to understand the conjuncture that enabled women’s voices to emerge simultaneously with modernities in Asia. This comparative approach to Asian modernities, although focused on Asia, will provide useful data for studies of modernity in world and global history (or, what Arif Dirlik has called “global modernity”).

The conference will address the following questions: What was the relationship between women and modern media in different parts of Asia in the 20th century? Under what historical and social conditions did women achieve prominence in popular music in Asia? What forms did women’s voices take in popular music? What meanings about women did audiences derive from popular music? Central to these questions are the role of mass media in (1) constituting feminine identities, especially among youth cultures; (2) defining publics according to gender and class; (3) promoting certain kinds of feminine values while submerging others; (4) creating alternative media spaces; (5) shaping perceptions of the modern woman.
This project differs from previous projects on female subjectivities and global modernity in terms of its scope and orientation. For example, The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group focused on the emergence of a new kind of young woman around the first half of the 20th century who challenged social conventions and stereotypes (for example, the dutiful daughter, mother, or wife). The “Modern Girl” project, however, emphasized visual iconography in art, advertising, journalism, and cinema whereas “Voices of Asian Modernities” focuses on music, sound, the voice, and performance. It is our contention that music, sound, the voice, and performance mark women’s agency in different ways than commercial advertising. For example, the voices of playback singers in Indian film were heard but not seen, lending them a different valence than the flashy and fashionable image of the modern girl. Further, the Modern Girl project identified the near simultaneous emergence of modern forms of femininity around the globe. In this project we wish to identify ruptures and discontinuities that complicate the notion of an emergent type of the “Modern Girl.” In focusing on the popular and the everyday we also hope to contribute to the field of Asian popular culture studies. The burgeoning field of Asian popular culture studies is deeply implicated in the academic study of the popular and quotidian, but equally (and notoriously) implicated for its lack of a well-defined methodology and singular obsession with the present. The often shallow theorizing of historical dimensions in Asian popular culture studies is in particular in need of historiographical remediation. Studies of pioneering women in popular performing arts of Asia have shown how ideas of performance have been instrumental in the construction of new identities by questioning and rejecting conventional forms of presentation. For example, Asian performers play with ideas of “glamour” (defined as dressing up; allure; and enchantment), “camp” (artifice and exaggeration), and “kitsch” (sentimentality and melodrama) for strategic ends. These ideas, and others, will allow us to map the ways in which performers have articulated their own positions in specific contexts. The conference will reveal how women in popular music contributed to new processes of social differentiation, of culture formation, and of history making. Conscious subversion of gendered behavior, parody, and strategic use of cultural stereotypes have not only been instrumental in the making of new fashions but have also found their way to a larger audience and society as a whole. Asian entertainment industries have as such not only seen the rise of the Asian diva, but they have also offered a productive playground for those experimenting with the effeminate and other alternative forms of masculinity, cross dressing, and sheer travesty. The conference will consider these forms, among others, as effects of female voices of modernity.

The Voices of Asian Modernities project (VAMP) is a consortium between the University of Pittsburgh, Leiden University, and the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV).