



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Phònè and the political potential of metal music : a scholarly intervention

Chiu, K.

Citation

Chiu, K. (2020, May 20). *Phònè and the political potential of metal music : a scholarly intervention*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/90131>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/90131>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/90131> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Chiu, K.

Title: Phònè and the political potential of metal music : a scholarly intervention **Issue**

Date: 2020-05-20

Introduction

“In our world, a lot of people can yell and make angry music and be like, ‘The system sucks’ . . . But Freddy [Lim] did something. He took a concrete step to try and change things for the better.”

(Randy Blythe, vocalist of groove and trash metal band Lamb of God, “From Heavy Metal Frontman to Taiwan’s Parliament”)¹

i.

Hypothesis and Research Question

In January 2016, Freddy Lim (林昶佐), the frontman of the Taiwanese metal band Chthonic (閃靈), was elected a member of the Parliament of Taiwan. Many people’s jaws dropped at Freddy Lim’s successful entrance into Parliament, as he had been constantly attacked as “mentally abnormal, with his hair longer than a woman’s,”² an accusation that critics thought would resonate with the relatively conservative voters in the Zhongzheng and Wanhua Districts.³ Whereas the general public’s attention was drawn to Freddy Lim’s so-called abnormality, the heated debates taking place in the local Taiwanese metal community went unnoticed by most. Here, Freddy Lim’s election was at least as controversial, albeit for different reasons. Some felt that Freddy Lim’s turn to politics broke with metal’s aesthetic purity. Consequently, he was condemned for tainting metal with the, in their eyes, undignified sphere of politics.

One example of this criticism can be found in *Extreme Metal in Taiwan* (2007) where I-Kai Liu (劉逸凱) interviewed members of the Taiwanese metal community about their opinions on the relationship between metal and politics. Jax Yeh (葉啟中), the ex-bassist of the Taiwanese power metal band Seraphim (六翼天使), captures the mindset of those who detest the political implications suggested by metal:

I think music should not be messed up with politics. I think music is music, politics is politics, they are two different concepts. I think if you want to play music, then you just concentrate on it. I don’t like music with political connotations because that will debilitate music. I know some foreign bands glorify political implications, but that’s their own business. For us, music is music, and I think musicians should not involve political ideas into music. (Yeh, qtd. in Liu 65)

In this “music for music, politics for politics” line of thinking,⁴ politics is narrowly defined, not

¹ Qin, Amy. “From Heavy Metal Frontman to Taiwan’s Parliament.” *The New York Times*, 26 May 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/asia/from-heavy-metal-frontman-to-taiwans-parliament.html?smid=pl-share&_r=1.

² “Elections: KMT Rivals Slam Long-Haired, ‘Abnormal’ Freddy Lim.” *Taipei Times*, 10 Jan. 2016, www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2016/01/10/2003636862.

³ In traditional Chinese: 袒胸露背，不男不女.

⁴ In traditional Chinese: 音樂歸音樂，政治歸政治.

only as the application of state power and the art of governance, but in the Taiwanese context even narrower still: Yeh's comment connotes the vicious, corruptive brawls between political parties. Some others, however, voiced positive opinions about Freddy Lim's⁵ attempt to "try and change things for the better," such as Randy Blythe, the vocalist of Lamb of God, in the earlier quotation. For these people, politics is more broadly defined as the multiple power relations running through everyday life that affect both collectives and all individuals. In the Taiwanese context, this vision of politics is summarized by an increasingly widespread dictum: "everything is political; no one stands outside politics" (沒有人是局外人). One example of someone expressing this vision is Louie Lu (呂鴻志), the frontman of the Taiwanese metalcore band Burning Island (火燒島). During the Hohaiyan Rock Festival (貢寮海洋音樂祭) in 2017, Lu called for the audience to actively participate in transitional justice.



An image where Louie Lu held a stripe of "everything is political; no one stands outside politics."⁶

Yet, even for those with a broader understanding of politics, there existed a discomfort with Freddy Lim's use of metal music in an electoral campaign and his self-branding as a "rockstar Olympus" bringing "change for Taiwan."⁷ Some questioned whether the promised

⁵ Throughout the thesis, when I refer to him, I use his politically-implicated stage name "Freddy Lim" in full, for two reasons. First, "Lim" is the English spelling of how his family name is pronounced in the Taiwanese dialect. His family name "Lin" (林 in traditional Chinese) is pronounced differently in Chinese. Using the stage name is a matter of respect with regard to Freddy Lim's political message. Second, and more of a practical consideration, as I refer to several people whose surname is Lin, using Freddy Lim in full avoids confusion.

⁶ *Liberty Times Net*, 6 Aug. 2017, talk.ltn.com.tw/article/paper/1124757.

⁷ The phrases "a Rockstar Olympus" and "change for Taiwan" are from the documentary *Metal Politics Taiwan* in which Freddy Lim frames Chthonic and Taiwanese metal in the Taiwanese political context as a form of activism and political dissent. 11 Nov. 2016, www.facebook.com/Metal-Politics-Taiwan-584506105048693.

transformation could be taken seriously or whether it was mere rhetoric. In contrast, some others questioned whether Chthonic's music was Taiwanese enough and metal enough for the band to have serious political ambitions. Central to these discomforts and questions is Chthonic's use of Taiwanese *folk* music that denotes a Taiwanese collective identity. For some members in the Taiwanese metal scene, Chthonic is not qualified to represent Taiwan because the band labels itself as "orient metal," a highly controversial term, since the term "orient" evokes the history of the Western gaze on the East and thereby recalls images of feminization and emasculation of Asians in Western pop culture.⁸ At the same time, some also criticize Chthonic's emphasis on certain types of folk music for failing to account for the heterogeneity of Taiwan.

The specific case of Freddy Lim and the responses to his election, both from within and from outside the metal community, bring attention to the complex cultural status of metal music and its ambivalent relation to politics. Metal in the 21st century, as Jeremy Wallach, Harris Berger, and Paul Greene observe in *Metal Rules the Globe* (2011), has become a global idiom with distinct local accents (20). Not only do cultural meanings ascribed to metal vary according to environments and contexts, even *within* a specific scene, divergent understandings of the nature of the music and the subculture will coexist.

The hypothesis of this thesis is that the ambivalent relation between metal and politics is the consequence of metal's use of amplified and distorted voices and sounds, which Wallach, Berger, and Greene describe in terms of "sonic attack" or "affective overdrive": they are felt by the listener's body, whether one likes this feeling or not, and overwhelm the listener's ability to accurately process meanings (12-13). Since the canonical Aristotelian definition of the human being as an animal who is by nature political because it possesses a voice that can articulate speech,⁹ politics—both in its broad and narrow definitions—has been understood as essentially related to the use of language, whether for public debates, or the expression of interests, values and ideas. Metal, in that its loud and distorted voices tend to hinder sheer comprehension, appears to be fundamentally at odds with such political deliberation. Yet, this has not stopped people who surround metal from commenting on socio-political as well as everyday events from a wide range of perspectives, from the far right to the far left of the political spectrum. As such, metal does not stay outside politics. On the contrary, I will read it for its potential to address pivotal political issues.

In this thesis' exploration of metal's ambivalent relationship with politics, my overarching question is: how do metal's amplified, distorted voices and sounds act in favor of, or counteract certain forms of politics? What is the politics of metal's sonic attack or overdrive—or, as I will come to call it, its politics of *phónè*? To understand this question, we first need to explain the two central terms of this question, politics and *phónè*.

⁸ See, for example, *Contextualizing Asian Masculinity in Media Post-Race: A Critical Race Theory Inquiry on Metadiscourses* by Michael Kyung Park. 2014. University of Southern California, PhD Dissertation.

⁹ See Cavarero's *For More than One Voice*, especially the chapter "Logos and Politics" for how the Aristotelian understanding can be found in classical and contemporary political theories. See also Amanda Weidman's tracing of the dominant part of Western metaphysics in the cultural imagination of the human voice signifying political agency in "Voice" in *Keywords in Sound* (2015) edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, pp. 232-45.

ii.

Politics and *Phónè*

My use of the terms “politics” and “political” is informed both by contemporary political philosophy and by my personal Taiwanese perspective. I understand politics as the ubiquitous power relationships that now permeate every aspect of life and shape people’s ways of being, of thinking, of knowing, and speaking. Theoretically, I take my cue from Michel Foucault’s and Giorgio Agamben’s notions of biopower and biopolitics. Foucault coined these terms to describe the heterogeneous flows of power that seek to regulate life (*History of Sexuality 1*, 139-41). Re-interpreting and radicalizing Foucault, Agamben observes that in the course of the 20th century biopolitics has encompassed all aspects of life. He argues, moreover, that Western metaphysics is biopolitical in nature, since its goal is to politicize and orient human existence (*Homo Sacer* 5-6). Foucault’s and Agamben’s insights of how politics orients people’s ways of behavior and thought resonate with my Taiwanese perspective; I will return to this later (and extensively in my concluding Chapter Four).

The other central term of this project is *phónè*, a Greek word meaning both voice and sound. My use of this term is inspired by Adriana Cavarero’s critique of Western metaphysics from a vocal perspective. In her seminal *For More than One Voice* (2005), Cavarero points out that, in Greek, *phónè* not only means voice and sound as sonic objects and phenomena, but that it also denotes the simultaneous and reciprocal relationships between sonic phenomena, the sensory experiences they evoke, and the meanings derived from such phenomena and experiences (29-31). If, for instance, a metal singer is grunting, this involves sound, but to an audience the singer is also expressing something, giving a voice to something that has an impact on an audience. That is to say: *phónè* is multivalent, libidinally charged, and charged with cultural sediments. It stirs strong, often involuntary responses, it shapes forms of identity and subjectivity, and evokes individual and collective memories and histories that are intersubjectively negotiated. Tuning in to *phónè*, I am able to dig into diverse experiences and contextually-specific interpretations of metal.

Secondly, according to Agamben, the notion of *phónè* has played an essential, but ambivalent role in the Western metaphysical tradition (*Homo Sacer* 7-8; *Language and Death* 38-39). *Phónè* is crucial to an understanding of:

- *logos*, considered as language, speech, order, and system;
- *polis*, considered as the embodiment of politics;
- *bios*, considered as the proper form of life;
- *oikos*, considered in terms of household and governmentality.

The four onto-political concepts taken together, so Agamben argues, are a biopolitical apparatus that effectively distinguishes an articulate voice from sounds and divides people into different categories according to the distinctions made above:

- those who can reason and those who cannot—in the sphere of *logos*;
- those who belong to the political collective or not—in the sphere of the *polis*;
- those who are worthy of life or not—in the sphere of *bios*;

- those who belong to the house or not—within the sphere of the *oikos*.

In all these, an articulate voice determines whether a subject's existence is positively or negatively attributed. Still, important as the distinction between voice and sound may be, the biopolitical divisions involved in fact confuse it. This is because these distinctions all operate by way of a series of affirmation and negation. Whereas the positive pole receives further articulations, the negative pole is dis-articulated again and again, to the point that entities at this pole become indistinctive and come to overlap with mere sound. This inarticulate sound, according to Agamben, is intrinsic to the articulate voice. He also terms it the fundamental negativity of metaphysics, implying that the positive not so much conquers the negative, but cannot do without it. Consequently, *phónè* assists as well as undermines biopolitics.

Likewise, in his psychoanalytical reflection on subject formation, Jacques Lacan observes that *phónè* is a site where the subject meets its intrinsic otherness-within-self (a theme developed further in Chapter Three).¹⁰ In this context my contention is that metal music, though at odds with articulation and distinction from the perspective of language, is not exempted from biopolitics with its amplified and distorted *phónè*. On the contrary, its being appreciated as "other" through sonic attack is pivotal to subcultural constructions of alternative meanings and group identity. A conceptual grounding of *phónè* thus allows me to scrutinize the power dynamics of the contexts in which metal is practiced. I will explain the contexts I focus on in this research project in a later overview.

iii.

The Scholarly Context of Metal and Metal Music Studies

One way to illustrate how *phónè* is central to metal's political ambivalence is by looking briefly at the disciplinary formation of metal music studies. Metal was once a source of moral panic, evaluated negatively by scholars as equivalent with or responsible for deviance.¹¹ From the 1990s onward, however, scholarly works with positive evaluations of metal began to emerge, and in the 2010s metal music studies has become a cross-disciplinary field, drawing scholars from diverse backgrounds, and spawning an increasing number of books, conferences, and even academic journals such as *Metal Music Studies*. As Wallach, Berger, and Greene observe in their overview of the field, a central issue is the relations between metal and the diverse scenes and contexts that surround metal's *phónè*. Often obscure to people not familiar with metal, these relations, according to them, require scholars in-the-know to shed light on them (*Metal Rules the Globe* 10-13). Although not specific to metal, a recurring topic of debate remains the position that scholars should assume in relation to the scenes that they are describing.

¹⁰ Agamben's major biopolitical works include *Homo Sacer* (1998), *Potentialities* (1999), *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), *State of Exception* (2005), *The Highest Poverty* (2013), and *The Use of Bodies* (2016); major works of Lacan with biopolitical implications include *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1981) and *Écrits* (1989).

¹¹ For such moral panics in the US, see Walser's final chapter in *Running with the Devil*, titled "Can I Play with Madness? Mysticism, Horror, and Postmodern Politics." Just a few examples of scholarly works evaluating metal music negatively are: *Metalheads: Heavy Metal and Adolescent Alienation* (1996) by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Music Exposure and Criminal Behavior: Perceptions of Juvenile Offenders" (1999) by Susan C. Gardstrom, and "Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Suicidal Risk" (2001) by Eric Lacourse, Michel Claes, and Martine Villeneuve.

The ways in which influential metal scholars position themselves and engage with metal are in turn influenced by British *cultural studies*. Inaugurated by the Birmingham University Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and founded in 1964, cultural studies was initially concerned with subcultural groups such as mods, skinheads, teddy boys, and pre-teen British girls. CCCS was groundbreaking to scholarship in the 1970s due to the sociological and semiotic approach its scholars took, through which they interpreted social and political behavior that formerly would have been considered to be marginal or deviant. The central argument of the Birmingham school was that subcultural activities can be decoded semiotically and interpreted as symbolic acts of resistance, subverting or pushing against mainstream, hegemonic norms. In the 2006 edition of *Resistance through Rituals*, a seminal cultural studies text first published in 1975, John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts describe and define subcultures as follows:

Working-class sub-cultures, we suggested, take shape on the level of the social and cultural class-relations of the subordinate classes. In themselves, they are not simply “ideological” constructs. . . . They explore “focal concerns” central to the inner life of the group: things always “done” or “never done,” a set of social rituals which underpin their collective identity and define them as a “group” instead of a mere collection of individuals. They adopt and adapt material objects – goods and possessions – and reorganize them into distinctive “styles” which express the collectivity of their being-as-a-group. (138)

Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts understand subcultures as consisting of working-class youths pulled together by shared concerns. Subculture members engage in distinctive rituals, often involving forms of re-use of mass cultural materials in nonstandard ways or in unusual combinations. These rituals, according to the authors, provide a subcultural solution or mode of resistance against the economic, social, and cultural pressures of hegemonic groups in both symbolic and practical ways. Such resistances, however, will ultimately fail, so they argue, since the youths will enter the workplace and will soon be forced to conform to the norm.

Although groundbreaking at the time for its sympathy for subculture, the work of the CCCS was later criticized for its lack of empirical research (Gelder 81). Furthermore, due to a Marxist bias, CCCS scholars tended to over-emphasize the role of class in the formation of subcultures. Both of these critiques led to the emergence of what was called subcultural studies in the 1980s. Subcultural studies downplayed class distinctions, considered other social distinctions such as race, gender, and sexuality, and the interactions between subcultures and the mainstream. Scholars of subcultural studies tend to favor empirical ethnographic investigations and positioned themselves as “critical insider scholars.” Equipped with subcultural knowledge, the insider scholar is capable of shedding light on otherwise obscure subcultural groups. Whereas scholars of the CCCS mainly focused on interpretations of subcultural styles,¹² scholars of subcultural studies were more interested in observations and descriptions of subcultural

¹² Influential works by CCCS scholars include *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) by Dick Hebdige, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1980) by Stan Cohen, and *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991) by Angela McRobbie.

behavior.¹³

Metal music studies, as it developed in the 1990s, inherited from cultural and subcultural studies the double focus on the semiotic interpretation of subcultural styles and ethnographic observations of the behavior of subcultural communities. Influential metal scholars tend to combine the insider/empirical perspective of the cultural ethnographer and the interpretative approach of the semiotician. Deena Weinstein, for instance, approaches metal cultural-sociologically in her seminal *Heavy Metal* (1991) and interprets metal in connection to the formations of scenes, emphasizing her own status as that of an insider. Robert Walser approaches metal from the perspective of musicology and critical theory in the similarly seminal *Running with the Devil* (1993), elaborating on how metal and society mutually influence each other, while emphasizing that his own position is that of a metal guitarist. In *Death Metal Music* (2003), Natalie Purcell similarly positions herself as an insider and provides detailed generic descriptions, historical developments, and observations of the scenes, explaining that death metal, as a subculture, is socio-political in nature because it rebels against the norm. Approaching extreme metal with a combination of empirical research and critical theory in *Extreme Metal* (2007), Keith Kahn-Harris also positions himself as a metalhead to explain the ideological contradictions inherent in the genre.

iv.

Positioning Myself Inside-out

Similar to most musical scenes, metal scholars' repeated insistence on their status as insiders, is symptomatic of a shared intuition that metal cannot be studied in isolation from its scenes. The problem that remains is that there is no such thing as a homogenous metal scene, nor one key "inside" definition. More specifically, the problem is what the scale and nature of this "inside" is. Walser, for example argues that the meaning of metal to its listeners cannot be dissociated from the larger socio-political context. Yet, his "guitarocentric" reading of metal tends to underestimate other elements in metal that are also meaningful. Nevertheless, Walser's guitarocentric approach toward metal shaped many later scholarly works on metal. As influential as it was, however, some metal scholars came to question and criticize Walser's privileging of the guitar, his masculinist reading of metal, and his bias against certain aspects of metal. I will discuss the political stakes raised by Walser and other influential scholarly works on metal in the next chapter.

Harris M. Berger approaches metal from an ethnomusicological perspective as well as from the perspective of a Husserlian phenomenology in his *Metal, Rock, and Jazz* (1999), and, influenced by Walser, focuses on the small scale socio-political context of local scenes, explaining listener activities such as moshing and headbanging. Still other insider metal scholars skip the scene, whether macro or micro, in order to pay more attention to musical styles. Steve Waksman, for example, closely examines musical crossovers between metal and punk in *This*

¹³ Influential works of subcultural studies include *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (1995) by Sarah Thornton, *Inside Subculture: the Postmodern Meaning of Style* (2000) by David Muggleton, and *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture* (2002) by Paul Hodkinson.

Ain't the Summer of Love (2009), and he does so in contrast to metal scholars' tendency to oppose metal and punk because of their different political implications and connotations. Staying "inside" the music, Waksman argues that political interpretations and comparisons of the two genres fail to do justice to the music. Similar to Waksman, in *Death Metal and Music Criticism* (2012), Michelle Phillipov argues that metal exposes the limits of politically defined music studies. On the basis of a combination of a formal analysis of music and lyrics, as well as an analysis of practices in death metal scenes, she contends that metal resists political interpretation and classification, and should be understood for the alternative pleasures it offers, rather than for the meanings it communicates (16).

It may be clear that these are conflicting interpretations by insider scholars equipped with scenic knowledge. Obviously, even among insider scholars, there is no consensus on the scale and nature of what counts as political and which music styles are political or unpolitical enough to be metal. Walser's and Berger's socio-political interpretations of metal do not go well with Waksman's and Phillipov's arguments against political interpretations; Waksman's observations about the affinity between punk and metal do not go well with Wallach, Berger, and Greene's opposing metal to punk (*Metal Rules the Globe* 4). Even more conflicting, scholars' objections to political interpretations are themselves politically motivated, and their scales of what counts as political tend to fluctuate. This is most clear in Phillipov who upholds that metal's loudness and distortion exceeds politics. Positioning herself an inside scholar, she argues against outsider scholars' interpreting metal as "politically reactionary" and contrasts it with other "politically progressive" genres (13). Yet even taking into account her objections to political readings by outside scholars, I note that Phillipov admits to be disturbed by scenic misogyny. In a perturbed tone, she concludes that "an intellectual politics sometimes at odd with personal politics" is required to approach "metal on its own." Intellectual politics, according to her, is more productive for appreciating metal aesthetically and affectively, though she also acknowledges that such an intellectual politics is difficult, as it restricts one from critiquing the political or ethical problematics of metal (159-61). Due to her oppositional definition of or negative approach to the political and politics, Phillipov ends up reasserting the *scenic* ideology of metal's aesthetic value, a value that transcends political and ethical critiques at the *intellectual* level.

At play in these conflicting interpretations are scales and natures of the scene, of the inside, of forms of knowledge, and politics. My contention is that they all come together at the site of distorted and amplified *phónè* in metal, like a Gordian knot. For instance, the repetitive insistence on the status of the "inside," is itself a simultaneous scenic and scholarly form of control. It is a scenic and scholarly politics that inevitably creates an outside. Rather than shedding new light on metal, metal music studies instead mirrors metal's complexity and replicates scenic paradoxes and ironies.

Indeed, in both metal scenes and metal music studies "insider knowledge" functions as a discursive apparatus that marginalizes listeners and ways of engagement that are considered not-metal-enough. Such acts of scenic and scholarly exclusion are most observable in *Metal Rules the Globe* (2011) where Wallach, Berger, and Greene assert that *all* metalheads view metal as the opposite of light entertainment (8; original emphasis). This presupposition of an oppositional other is followed by celebratory enumerations of metal as offering "heroic individualism," "in-group solidarity," and "appreciation of 'great art'" —in sum, empowerment

of people who identify with the “metal canon” or *metal tradition* (8-9, 13, 27; my emphasis).

Appealing as this *metal community* may be, the de facto *metal identity* here is predominantly white, masculine, and insider oriented. It subdivides the very metal community, often with disturbing gender and racial undertones. In this context, I for one—being Asian, female, and gay—quite often find myself left out. Moreover, it often appears to me that even metal scholars working in gender studies, postcolonial studies, and ethnic studies tend to replicate and intensify marginalization and exclusions by selectively accepting or rejecting political, cultural, or musical interpretations from the dominant discourses of metal music studies.¹⁴ So, despite the good intentions of metal scholars and some critics, the inclusion of one or two groups usually means the exclusion of others (Dawes 386-88). Make no mistake: there are passionate calls for acceptance and tolerance.¹⁵ Yet, these calls leave me feeling schizophrenically included and excluded at the same time.

For a project which tackles power dynamics enacted in metal’s *phônè*, I consider it of importance to position myself and to intervene in these scenic and scholarly problematics.

v.

Reading against the Grain – Chapter Overview

With this project I do not aim at substantiating scholarly theories and concepts by way of metal music, or vice versa. Rather, I opt to bring theories and metal into political confrontations and dialogues that are “phonic” by nature. I do so through a combined critical, and in a sense *radical*, reading of and listening to both theories and metal music. A few clarifications are in order here. Formally speaking, my readings of the songs are not radical, as they fit in a generally accepted mode of analyzing music—although it must be noted that such readings are not often performed in the study of metal. My intention, however, is not to reconstruct the meaning of the songs, in terms of music and text, by means of established reading methods. Instead I bring them in dialogue with my philosophical arguments. With “radical reading” I mean to say that I will be reading against the grain at points. I do not only immerse myself in the music, nor do I simply want to experience it; I also want to engage with it critically and reflectively. My approach connects here to methods of reading developed in the late eighties in feminist circles and that have since proved to be of value for many other marginalized groups. Such an approach, then, is a form of political engagement. I am influenced here as well by critical theories that are generally referred to as deconstruction, and which aim to undercut presuppositions or binary oppositions that ground systems of meaning-making.

As stated, I am not only reading, or listening to songs, but also to texts and theories as developed in the field of metal studies. In Chapter One, I critically review pivotal scholarly

¹⁴ Just a few examples: “‘A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty’: Masculinity, Male Camaraderie, and Chinese Heavy Metal in the 1990s” (2011) by Cynthia P. Wang, “[I] Hate Girls and Emo[tion]s’: Negotiating Masculinity in Grindcore Music” (2011) by Rosemary Overrell, “The ‘Other’ as Projection Screen: Authenticating Heroic Masculinity in War-themed Heavy Metal Music Videos” (2015) by Wiebke Kartheus, and “Postfeminism and Heavy Metal in the United Kingdom: Sexy or Sexist?” (2015) by Heather Savigny and Sam Sleight.

¹⁵ On this, see Dave Everley, “Does Metal Have a Problem with Race?” *Metal Hammer*, 27 Mar. 2016, teamrock.com/feature/2016-03-27/does-metal-have-a-problem-with-race/; or Lyndsay Helfrich “On Not Being a Douchebag: The Moral Obligation to Confront Sexism.” *Metal Music Blog*, 20 Apr. 2017, ismms.online/?p=394.

concepts in metal studies. I explain how, as a result of studies' concentration on specific voices or sounds in metal and how they build on scenic discourses, these conceptualizations effectively function as forms of identity control. Against these concepts and controls, I introduce my own phonic approach and methodology, which offers a more balanced analysis of metal. Chapter One, in sum, offers a discursive analysis of metal scholarship, and an introduction of my own approach to the music in terms of close reading.

In Chapter Two I dig into *phónè* in two metal songs. To concretize the forms of scenic-scholarly politics at stake, I read a controversial metal song, AND WE RUN (performed by Within Temptation), and examine how this song exposes the internal contradictions of metal's white masculine insider identity. Drawing from Agamben's critique of the politicization of the human voice, the second part of this chapter reads a canonical metal song, NEMESIS (performed by Arch Enemy) in which the human voice has a pivotal role. I explain why the song's criticism of scenic politics also applies to the socio-political context in which metal is situated, and map *phónè*'s onto-political position. As a whole, Chapter Two stresses metal's biopolitical relevance.

Chapter Three explores a biopolitical agency in metal. To this purpose I engage with two versions of ENJOY THE SILENCE, performed by Depeche Mode and Lacuna Coil respectively. As the title of the song already indicates, it is paradoxical that people are singing about the enjoyment of silence. In my reading of the songs (musically and textually) I trace characteristic layers of *phónè* that lead to different philosophical implications in each version. This allows me to zoom into *phónè*'s libidinal dimension, taking my cue from Lacan's psychoanalytical reflection on *phónè* as the object voice. I then confront metal with Agamben's biopolitical critiques that fixate certain dimensions of *phónè*. The aim of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, I am interested in what propels the politicization of the voice, as it has been observed and critiqued by Agamben. On the other, I also want to investigate whether metal's amplified and distorted *phónè* makes audible what philosophy has marginalized and excluded. As such, Chapter Three is a (bio)political critique from the perspective of *phónè* in metal.

Chapters One, Two, and Three, then, explore the relationship between metal and politics on three levels: a scenic-scholarly level (Chapter One), a socio-political level (Chapter Two), and a philosophical level (Chapter Three). In all these, my readings of the theories and songs illustrate how *phónè* is common to people's experiences and their making sense of their surroundings. Furthermore, it is also in and through *phónè* that people politically contest or negotiate what they feel and perceive as meaningful.

Chapter Four leads me to a new step in my readings against the grain. Here the readings are related both to my theoretical inclination, but also to my personal experiences being Taiwanese. As an inhabitant of Taiwan and as someone trained in Taiwan, I am culturally shaped to understand voice/sound (聲音) holistically, as reciprocating and co-composing elements of an ethically charged soundscape (萬籟). I will elaborate on the political-ethical implications of such a soundscape in this final chapter. It will prove to be important to bring attention to the polytheistic, in-flux worldview of a soundscape in a Taiwanese context. This is different from the authoritative use of the term soundscape by composer, writer, and music educator Raymond Murray Schafer. More importantly, this chapter brings me to an argument that is political in the basic meaning of that term. Taiwanese metal music cannot be considered apart from Taiwan's complex political histories and its current cultural-political situation. As such, I will offer my own particular readings of these histories and situation to support/inform

my reading of soundscapes.

vi.

Soundscape and the Taiwanese Context

In his study *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977), Schafer puts forward a definition of a soundscape as an “acousmatic environment” analogous to “a given landscape.” Advocating for what he calls an “uncounterfeiting analysis” and insisting that a sound figure cannot exist without its ground, Schafer categorizes significant sound features based on whether they are foregrounded, consciously heard or not (7-9). Adapting Schafer’s formulation to a Taiwanese context, in Chapter Four I explain how Taiwanese soundscapes connote and embody forms of (un)consciousness and identity. Elaborating on Schafer’s ideas with regard to soundscapes, I focus on how Taiwanese metal appropriates soundscapes for political purposes. To somehow transmit the many voices and sounds of my home soundscapes, I examine a cluster of songs variously dealing with the question of what it means to be Taiwanese: *THE GODS BLESS TAIWAN* (performed by The Chairman), *FUNERAL* (Flesh Juicer), *JUST Not Meant To Be* (Crescent Lament) *SUPREME PAIN FOR THE TYRANT*, Takao (Chthonic), *FLOWER FOR JUSTICE?* (Burning Island), and *ISLAND’S SUNRISE* (Fire EX).

My final chapter thus takes me to Taiwan, a topic that I cannot *not* write about. The unquenchable urge to write about Taiwan foremost stems from the precarious international status of Taiwan—an independent political body not recognized as an official state. This is visible, for instance, in the following screenshot, where the editors of the BBC cannot decide how to refer to Taiwan.



Image of BBC’s indeterminateness on Taiwan being a place or country¹⁶

In terms of international politics, the Taiwanese are somehow voiceless, and often subjected to political oppressions in various guises, whether from the Chinese, Japanese, or Western side.

¹⁶ “Taiwan: a Country or a Place?” *udn*, 25 May 2017, udn.com/news/story/10966/2483803.

Domestically speaking, Taiwan is noisy, with the Taiwanese still struggling with their traumatic past and searching for a voice and an identity. Such a simultaneously voiceless and noisy situation cannot be separated from the “unofficial” dictatorial state that ruled Taiwan for decades and its atrocities, which still linger in individual and collective memories.¹⁷ In fact, the two understandings of politics in response to Freddy Lim’s election only make full sense when considered in light of Taiwan’s dictatorial past. The phrase “music for music, politics for politics” sounds much like a variation on the all-purpose-formula “X for X, politics for politics” (Hsu 7; Liu 63; Wang 60). This phrasing and mindset was a product of the dictatorial indoctrination and intimidation preempting the Taiwanese to meddle in state affairs. That is, it was a form of political control and oppression. In this context, the dictum “everything is political; no one stands outside politics” is more than a constative description; it is already a political act that resists oppression and refuses to be silent.

As a Taiwanese person who experienced the final phase of the dictatorial period and who has recently spent years abroad, I have come to realize that shunning politics only precipitates the situation of Taiwan. I therefore also aspire to give a voice to Taiwan. I am, of course, aware that I am speaking as a cultural and social “insider” here. My uneasiness with this position is reflected in the often ambivalent tone of the partly-autobiographical Chapter Four. I think the ambivalence of this chapter is best captured by the cover of Chthonic’s 2018 album: 政治 *Battlefield of Asura*.



¹⁷ By unofficial state, I mean the KMT rulership (Kuomintang of China or Nationalist Party of China). Formerly ruling China in the name of the Republic of China (ROC) from 1912 to 1949, the KMT party fled to Taiwan in 1949 after being defeated by the Communist Party of China. Though merely ruling Taiwan, the party nevertheless insisted (in the name of the ROC) to be the embodiment of China’s true sovereignty. The party used to be a member of the UN, until the ROC was replaced by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1971. The KMT party lost the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2016, but is still the largest political force in Taiwan.

By doctorial atrocity, I mean the Martial Law (戒嚴令) from 1949 to 1987/1992 that banned public gatherings, suspended democratic elections, and launched political persecutions and massacres. Though partially lifted in 1987 and abolished in 1992, the legacy of the Martial Law, also known as the White Terror (白色恐怖), still haunts Taiwan in the late 2010s after three decades of rapid democratization. This will be the focus of the final chapter.

Album art of *Battlefields of Asura* 政治¹⁸

In the album art, Freddy Lim is portrayed as an asura (阿修羅), a demigod of which one can never be sure whether he is good or bad. Freddy Lim is wearing a suit that abides by the dress code for a member of parliament. Apparently, the former rockstar is now a many-headed and many-handed semi-god of passion, rage, and vengeance, fighting in several political battlefields that make up the political context of Taiwan. This reading of the album cover is suggested by the release date of the album—October 10, the National Day of the Republic of China (ROC) which was proclaimed by the dictatorial state once ruling Taiwan (see footnote 16). It is also suggested by the two album titles. The Taiwanese title 政治 implies politics in a quite straightforward sense. The English title *Battlefields of Asura* symbolically conveys the intensity of power struggles in Taiwan.

With the message of *Battlefields of Asura* in mind, it is a bit easier to convey my uneasiness in writing about Taiwan. I confess that I am not always comfortable with bringing *phónè* into confrontational political dialogues. I nevertheless do so to prompt people in and beyond Taiwan to critically reflect on their investment in *phónè* and to listen to each other's desires and struggles.

Finally, my project is profoundly modulated by the soundscapes that surround me. This affectionate, sometimes tensed, but always reciprocal relationship is, in my opinion, fundamental to *phónè*'s multivalence. My preliminary answer to the question raised earlier about how metal acts in favor of or counteracts biopolitics, is thus: metal's *phónè* is a site of passion; it enlivens as well as exhausts desires, constantly endangering one's self-identity and subjectivity. The image below visualizes how passions incited by metal can be trite and analogous to overconsumption.



Image from *The International Day of Heavy Metal*¹⁹

The image repeats, critiques, and ironizes a form of uncritical, unreflective engagement with metal, as if it was a kind of branding or a musical equivalent to fast food. I will try to position myself throughout this project counter to such branding and such “food,” in listening to and writing about what I passionately love: metal music. Listening to it, and reading about it, I will try to preserve a constant alertness to my ways of thinking that also form a political act of resistance. My aim is to resist both intentional ignorance and my becoming an unintended

¹⁸ *Books.com.tw*, www.books.com.tw/products/0020207864, n.d.

¹⁹ *The International Day of Heavy Metal*, n.d., www.heavymetalday.co.uk/galleryimages6.htm.

accomplice to (bio)political oppression.