The performance of identity in Chinese popular music

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Citation

Groenewegen, J. W. P. (2011, June 15). *The performance of identity in Chinese popular music*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17706

The Performance of Identity
in Chinese Popular Music

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van

de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,

op gezag van Rector Magnificus prof.mr. P.F. van der Heijden,

volgens besluit van het College van Promoties

te verdediging op woensdag 15 juni 2011

klokke 15.00

door

Jeroen Groenewegen

geboren te Naaldwijk in 1979

Promotiecommissie:

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Acknowledgements

Conventions

Song titles are marked by SMALL CAPS to distinguish them from book and film titles (which take *italics*) and journal articles, book chapters and so on (which take "double quotation marks"). In general, I have included the original-language title only when the work is first mentioned. However, I repeat the original title if the work features centrally more than once at widely separated points in the narrative. Throughout, I use full-form Chinese characters rather than simplified characters, because this research includes not only the People's Republic of China (where simplified characters are the norm), but also Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, where simplified characters are used much less frequently.

Chinese popular culture demonstrates its international aspirations by the abundant use of English captions for books, albums and films adjacent to Chinese titles. However, the captions are rarely faithful translations of the original. For instance, on a 2007 album by Jay Chou, the English caption *On the Run* portrays the singer as an outlaw, whereas the Chinese title *Wo Hen Mang* 我很忙 ('I'm very busy') suggests a law-abiding white-collar employee! Despite these occasionally glaring discrepancies, I have used the self-styled English captions throughout. Translations of Chinese titles can be found in the bibliography, discography or filmography, depending on the kind of work to which they relate.

The same principle has informed my use of self-styled or received English names for places, persons, bands, venues, festivals and record companies. Chinese characters for the latter five groups are not given in the text but can be found in the glossary, with transliteration added in parentheses whenever the English name differs from the standard Chinese transliteration. In cases where people have no English name, I have transliterated their Chinese names using Hanyu pinyin, the most common transcription system. Additionally, I have not referred to people's "real" or "original" names (e.g. He Guofeng or Albert Leung), but to their stage or pen names (e.g. Xiao He and Lam Chik), since in the present context it is the stage or pen name that is most real and original. In further references I use surnames (e.g. I use "Wong" instead of "Faye"), even though some academic publications have adopted the popular press's habit of referring to pop singers by their given names. In the case of identifying these surnames, I can only ask the reader to be understanding of the cross-cultural complexities of this study. In self-styled English names, family names usually come last (Faye <u>Wong</u>), while in transliterated Chinese names, family names usually come first (<u>Huang</u> Liaoyuan). In a number of cases where singers use Chinese nicknames or pseudonyms, I either repeat the whole name (Zuoxiao Zuzhou) or refer to the second part of the name when it is clear that this is the family name, most notably in the case of Xiao He, which means 'little river' but is also a homonym of 'little He', with He being his 'real' family name.

In short, an English SONG TITLE may be followed by the Chinese title in full-form characters 題目 and the year of its first publication in any country (2007), corresponding to an album by the artist in the discography. If an artist has released several albums in a year, the month of publication is indicated in capitals after the publication year (2007DEC). All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction:
Framing the Self

對你説打錯了	Tell you what, you've got the wrong number.
我不是你那個甚麼	I'm not your so-and-so,
你想找的那個	the one you're looking for.
就算我跟她同名同姓又如何	So what if she and I have the same name?
都説你打錯了	I'm still telling you, you've got the wrong number.
我要欺騙你幹什麼	Why would I lie to you?
你們多久沒見	How long have the two of you been apart?
連我跟她的聲音你都不認得	You can't even tell my voice from hers!
你怎麼樣過	So how do you live,
甚麼樣的生活	what kind of life?
是否難耐寂寞	Are you unbearably lonely?
你到底是誰	Who are you, anyway?
總是陰差陽錯	Ah, these fluke calls,
擦過我的耳朵	forever screeching in my ears ...
第幾次打錯了	Wrong number, for the umpteenth time!
這是注定還是巧合	Is this fate or coincidence?
誰是瑪格列特	Who is Margaret?
她知道你的著急一定很快樂	She'd love it if she knew you were so worried.
你們發生甚麼	Did something happen with you and her,
還是你欠了她甚麼	or do you owe her something?
有甚麼捨不得	What's so hard about letting go?
她不住這裡你卻非找她不可	She doesn't live here, so why keep looking?
你們會講甚麼	What would you talk about?
口氣會不會軟軟的	Would you make it all sound sweet?
你緊張得想哭	You're so nervous, you wanna cry.
多年後想起今天	Years from now, if you think about today,
值得不值得	Was it really worth it?

In the following pages, I will discuss a set of lyrics, a sound, and an image, each by one of the three artists whose work has most centrally informed my research. The question that lies at the heart of this study is how lyrics, sounds, and images perform identity in Chinese popular music.

§1 Identity

The above lyrics are of WRONG NUMBER 打錯了 (2001), from Faye Wong's eponymous album. It was her eighteenth album and her last for EMI. The song starts with an upbeat, syncopated bass riff to which a brass section adds a big band feel. The melody in the verses is energetic in the first three lines of each stanza, to drop in the fourth to lower registers that suggest intimacy. However, besides suggesting tongue-in-cheek playfulness, enhanced by Wong's comfortable mid-range and warm delivery, the music does not seem to have a strong connection with the lyrics. WRONG NUMBER is a cover, or rather, an adaptation, with a new arrangement by producer Alvin Leong, of IT'S YOUR CHANCE (2001), an English-language rock song by Singaporean singer Tanya Chua. Neither Chua's original, nor THE EMPRESS' NEW CLOTHES 女皇的新衣, Wong's Cantonese version of this song, mention a telephone, which most likely comes from Lam Chik, Wong's regular lyricist. Can we distinguish Faye Wong's signature from among those of her co-producers?

Not if we go by the lyrics, which suggest that the caller, a persistent fan, cannot recognize Wong's voice. Wong's true self remains elusive, which paradoxically reasserts her public persona of a cool and somewhat distant 'showbiz queen' 歌坛天后. Although the final verse offers the listener the option of disassociating from the caller, as someone who is overly anxious and will later feel regret, throughout the song, *you* still addresses the listener. Just like the caller, the listener is on the other side of the line, receiving the thoroughly mediated and disembodied sound without being heard in the recording. However, WRONG NUMBER makes the listener not a passive receiver but an accomplice. The listener is the ultimate co-producer.

Identities aren't exclusively or even primarily individual. They function within collectives. Translating 'identity' into Chinese is tricky, but pragmatic equivalents such as *shenfen* 身份 'status' and *rentong* 認同 'recognition' stress its social embeddedness. Next to a personal name and unique number, IDs (*shenfen zheng*, 身份証 'evidence of status') usually also categorize individuals as members of larger groups, defined by nationality, ethnicity, age, class, and gender. These solidly established criteria for identity are important to this study, whose first three chapters touch respectively upon issues of nationality and ethnicity; class and subculture; and gender.

However, rather than accepting these categories as natural and given, I follow Stuart Hall and others who argue that they are the result of historically and culturally contingent choices. Nationality, class and gender are not descriptions of anything that is objectively 'out there,' but socially accepted and functional concepts that embody a certain world view and that prescribe specific kinds of behavior. As Wim van der Meer writes:

> There is no such thing as race. Of course, at any particular level we can (arbitrarily) define races, so as to distinguish several, dozens, hundreds, or

thousands of races. ... [F]rom the single origin of mankind there has been a differentiation of genetic constitutions, but there has always been an infinite chain of rehybridization that maintained the genetic pool in a constant flux. ... [I]dentities are similar to races; they do not really exist, but are constructed by sets of definitions. The racial paradigm has become more or less obsolete, but is by and large replaced by the concept of ethnicity. Music in the ontological sense of 'our' music (versus 'their' music) can play a tremendously important role in defining such identities.[1]

§2 Articulating Links

Now to sound. As soon as they recognize the guitar riff of Second Hand Rose's THE TRAIN'S TAKING OFF 火車快開 (2001), the Beijing audience starts clapping along enthusiastically to the song's compelling four-beat. Vocalist Liang Long intersperses the lyrics with folksong-like, semantically empty fillers and mood particles, such as *a* 啊 and *neige* 那個. Each verse ends with a soothing ascending scale on electric guitar, imitating the sound of the accordion. Near the end of the song, the scale is suddenly replaced by a percussion part reminiscent of Northeastern Chinese *yangge* 秧歌, 'rice sprout songs.' The audience now respond by jumping up and down and shouting along with the chorus, sung by all band members in unison:

我們的生活就要開	Our lives are about to take off!
往哪兒開	Where to?
往哪兒開	Where to?

Then bass, acoustic and electric guitar join in for the finale. The electric guitar now plays the two-chord pattern (G-F) with a heavy distortion sound for extra energy. When the music abruptly stops, Liang Long, whose heavy drag make-up mixes with sweat, sings in a teasing, nasal voice: "then just guess," after which the band plays the guitar riff of the opening one last time.

IDS, the national anthem, Faye Wong's WRONG NUMBER, Second Hand Rose's THE TRAIN'S TAKING OFF and other cultural products invite people into their worlds through moments of interpellation, when "the subject is hailed, the subject turns around, and the subject then accepts the terms by which he or she is hailed."[2] In gender studies, Judith Butler has related this process of identity formation to performance:

Because there is neither an "essence" that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there

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[1] Van der Meer 2005:60, 65.
[2] Butler 1995:6.

would be no gender at all. … the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.[3]

These mundane, repeated performances help form identities. THE TRAIN'S TAKING OFF, for instance, negotiates cultural identity by connecting rural Northeastern China, Beijing and the West. I interpret Van der Meer's "construction by sets of definitions" in terms of actor-network theory as articulating and consolidating connections, which Stuart Hall calls "non-necessary links:"

> So it is the articulation, the non-necessary link, between a social force which is making itself, and the ideology or conceptions of the world[,] which makes intelligible the process [the Rastafarians] are going through, which begins to bring onto the historical stage a new social position and political position, a new set of social and political subjects.[4]

Identities are positions in a network, and hence are defined by their connections. This is also how music connects to society and politics. Through the collective singing of "we" by audience and performers, THE TRAIN'S TAKING OFF performs a generation of cheerful but relatively powerless witnesses of sweeping change. This articulation can be used to various political ends, and that is precisely the point. As is the case with all culture, music reflects and influences sociopolitical realities. At the same time, interpreting homologies between music and social reality is difficult to the point that passing judgment becomes a political act.

This study is partly a reaction against an overemphasis on politics in accounts of Chinese music that has insufficiently recognized popular music's polysemy. In 1983 Arnold Perris argued that in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) "there is never a need to ask the question as the Western listener does in some context: What does this music 'mean'? Everyone knows what the music 'means.'"[5] In the 1990s, accounts of Chinese popular music tended to focus on rock music's rebelliousness, to the detriment of other readings and musics. Andrew Jones, for example, argues that pop "is not a mere adjunct to leisure" but a site of ideological struggle.[6] While pioneering studies by Jones, Andreas Steen and others remain extremely valuable, a dichotomous opposition of the People and the state is no longer tenable.[7] Therefore, I explore the issue of music's socio-political significance by tracing connections across the political spectrum, appreciating intermediate positions. Moreover, these articulations and connections are relative to

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[3] Butler 2004:114.
[4] Hall 1996:142.
[5] Perris 1983:15.
[6] Jones 1992:3-4.
[7] Baranovitch 2003:1-9, Fung 2008.

specific issues. As such, I build on trends in the emerging field of Chinese popular music studies, with major contributions by Jones, Steen, Nimrod Baranovitch, Jeroen de Kloet, Marc L. Moskowitz and Anthony Fung, who have addressed cultural identity and gender. [8] At the same time I hope to open up other themes for investigation, such as classification, theatricality and creativity.

However, by itself this thematic approach does not solve the thorny issue of music's socio-political significance. Pierre Bourdieu has described the contingent homologies between the semi-autonomous fields of cultural production and the fields of economy and power, especially focusing on the articulation of class through distinction and taste. In the realm of music, for instance, love songs offer culturally specific scripts or technologies for dealing with real-life situations, while their deliberate polysemy and ambiguity simultaneously invite people to reinterpret and appropriate these songs with reference to their own experience.

§3   World Making

And then there's image. In 2009 Xiao He published his second solo album, *The Performance of Identity* 身份的表演. It does not contain authentic, Dylanesque folksongs of a lovelorn soul, as its predecessor *Birds that Can Fly High Don't Land on the Backs of Oxen that Can't Run Fast* 飛的高的鳥不落在跑不快的牛的背上 (2002) did. Rather, *The Performance of Identity* a collection of improvised explorations of the human voice and electronic equipment, and of the connections and disconnections between acoustic guitar and vocal melody. There are no paraphrasable lyrics on the album, and similarly, the title on the cover is written in highly ornamental and barely legible handwriting. Xiao He's name is nowhere to be found, but his picture is on the cover. With a construction worker's helmet on his head, the towel of a member of the working class around his neck, the armband of a Red Guard around his arm, a girly stocking with embroidered

Illustration 0.1: Xiao He on the cover of his 2009 album The Performance of Identity.

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[8] Baranovitch 2003, De Kloet 2010, Moskowitz 2010, Fung 2008.

shoe on one leg, and the face-paint of a Peking Opera student-role 小生 on his face, and a garishly red, wide-open mouth, the image suggests that identity can be changed and pieced together like clothes.[9]

Popular music performances offer opportunities to people to articulate and piece their identities together, argues Tia DeNora in *Music in Everyday Life* (2000):

> The most interesting questions concerning the social implications of artifacts (whether these are technologies, utterances or aesthetic materials such as music) focus on the interactional level where articulations – links – between humans, scenes and environments are actually produced, and where frames of order come to be stabilized and destabilized in real time. With regard to the issue of musical affect [sic], recognizing music as ... an affordance structure [meaning a structure that favors certain usages over others] allows for music to be understood ... as a place or space for 'work' or meaning and lifeworld making. Music can, in other words, be invoked as an ally for a variety of world-making activities, it is a workspace for semiotic activity, a resource for doing, being and naming the aspects of social reality, including the realities of subjectivity and self.[10]

In this study I retrace how Chinese popular music affords the piecemeal work of world making. I do so by interpreting artworks and their producers rather than audience reception. As such my methodology is based in the humanities and leans on semiotics and hermeneutics. Inevitably this has led to choices and arguments that are informed by my own ethical and political viewpoints. At the same time, extensive fieldwork has inspired an ethnographic approach that links detailed observations to large-scale social, political, economic and cultural trends and events.[11] I conducted formal and informal interviews, attended concerts, studio recordings and band rehearsals, and collected albums, magazines and biographies during visits in 2006 (2 months; Hong Kong and Beijing), 2007 (6 months; Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taiwan), 2008 (3 months; Beijing) and shorter periods in 2009 and 2010. Additionally, I have found support for my findings in surveys and reviews provided by others.

A first step towards tracing popular music's links is to treat it as a sound-image-text complex. Sounds are definitive of music, but pictures on album and magazine covers and the discourses of lyrics and online forums are hardly peripheral to musical stardom. Moreover, music is synesthetic, as we may feel that we recognize the signature of Faye Wong's public image through her unique sound. The above discussions of Wong's text, Second Hand Rose's sound and Xiao He's image illustrate that all these things sing, show and speak. Additionally, the inseparability of the text, sound, and image echoes the performance situation of Chinese traditional musics, many of which are translated into

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[9] 21CN 2009.
[10] DeNora 2000:40.
[11] cf. Bal 2002:133-174.

English as *opera*.

Not only in definitions of music, also in terms of time and space, the scope of this study is wide. Including historical context, it stretches from 1910 to 2010 and from Singapore to Xinjiang. Focus and cogency are provided by the five themes that have informed the division into chapters – place; genre and classification; sex, gender and desire; theatricality; and organizing music – and by in-depth study of the three lead characters Faye Wong, Xiao He and Second Hand Rose. They make very different kinds of music, which offers opportunities for the inclusion of contrasting viewpoints in ways that would have been difficult had I only studied, say, mainstream pop stars. In terms of time, I focus on the 1990s and early 2000s. In terms of space, I focus on the main centers of production in this period: Hong Kong, Beijing and Taipei. Beijing is perhaps overrepresented, as all three lead characters currently reside there. To mitigate this bias, I have included case studies of predominantly Taiwan and Hong Kong pop stars.

The geographic bias of this study is the result of earlier connections in Beijing, which emerged during fieldwork for my MA thesis, and expanded during my PhD research.[12] In 2005 I was able to arrange for six bands from China, including Second Hand Rose, to perform in Amsterdam. Xiao He performed in Belgium and the Netherlands in 2007 and 2009. He named his second solo album after this study, which was then still in the making. The album contains recordings I made at a show that I organized in Beijing. In 2007 I worked as a volunteer in the company of Zhang Yadong, who has produced a number of Faye Wong's albums. Also through international festivals, such as the International Film Festival Rotterdam and Europalia in Belgium, and through the Internet, the boundaries between scholarship (Leiden) and the field (China) have become blurred. I have become a participant, co-producing the world I claim to investigate. I can only hope that, even if you've got the wrong number, what you'll find in this book will help you to engage and create worlds of your own.

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[12] Groenewegen 2005.