The performance of identity in Chinese popular music

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Chapter 4:
Theatricality

§1   Boundaries

In *Imagination and Power: The Ideological Analysis of Theatre* 想象與權力: 戲劇意識形態研究 (2003), Zhou Ning is "concerned with the theatricality in the deep layers of the psychological structure of Chinese cultural character," arguing that "the function of both [ritual and thought] lies in transcending the boundaries between reality 現實 and the fabricated 虛構, or confusing the two, through illusion."[1] During the Boxer Uprising peasants believed they were immune to bullets, which shows that getting carried away can have dire consequences:

> The Boxer Uprising (1900-1901) has many ties with theater; it didn't distinguish the real 真 from the illusory 幻. [The Boxers] gathered and rebelled while singing arias, they practiced martial arts as if playacting, they were possessed by characters from plays and their spreading of fire, going into battle, tricks and moves were all just like those staged in plays.[2]

"Popular music creates alternative universes, echoey soundscapes allowing the listener to drift outside the often-stressful realities of everyday life," argues Witzleben in his article on Anita Mui.[3] Throughout this study, the term *performance* has been instrumental in conceptualizing seemingly stable concepts, such as Chineseness, rock and femininity, as constantly renegotiated creations or articulations of normative or alternative universes. In this chapter, I focus on the theatricality of these performances.

Theatrical events take place in a realm that is different from that of outside, ordinary reality. On a stage, it can be a different year or place than it is in the auditorium. Theatricality is defined by frames: architectural frames, such as an elevated stage or a proscenium arch; visual frames, such as lighting, costume and decor; narrative frames, such as introductions, titles and credits; acoustic frames, such as the production of sound we call singing, and perhaps even musicality in general; temporal frames, such as the special day of the year on which a festival takes place, or a Saturday night. This framing that constitutes the theatrical space can be anything that creates a boundary one side of which is extraordinary.[4]

Not all theatrical events are equally explicit about their framing. Many TV dramas present enclosed worlds to which the viewer is a witness from behind the 'fourth wall.' Usually, elements that might disturb the illusion are carefully avoided so that the viewer can be 'carried away.' But then there is a commercial break, or a news flash, in which a newsreader looks directly into the camera and addresses the audience. Although both kinds of broadcast are theatrical – they are framed by the TV set, among other things – only the second explicitly refers

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[1] Zhou 2003:34.
[2] Zhou 2003:5.
[3] Witzleben 1999:245.
[4] Bal 2002:133, Culler 1988.

to its being-on-a-stage throughout. Theatrical events can be arranged according to a scale of theatrical explicitness, between the extremes of complete ordinary-reality-effacing make-believe at one end, and over-conscious, object-less reflectiveness at the other.

Moments of Theatrum Mundi, such as the Boxer Uprising, present the make-believe extreme of the scale of theatricality. Zhou Ning's descriptions of the Boxer Uprising and his discussion of historical plays bring the Cultural Revolution to mind, when the People worshiped Mao Zedong beyond any sense of reality. Furthermore, Zhou's ideas suggests that the issue of theatricality is relevant to China's current politics. Through detailed analysis of how on-stage reality relates to off-stage reality, this chapter also describes the basic premises that allow Chinese popular music to be politically engaged. Transgressive roles such as the hooligan and the clown cross the boundary between performer and audience, but may in their (rehearsed, framed) improper behavior also address social rights and wrongs. Music can articulate extraordinary spaces and rally crowds for utopia, dystopia or temporary escape. Before discussing transgressive roles and extraordinary spaces, I will investigate the scale of make-believe and reflectiveness by relating it to dichotomies such as idealism/realism, East/West and telling/showing.

Idealism and Realism

By 'make-believe,' at the one end of the scale, I mean that the work presents on-stage reality as autonomous, and puts the fact that it is constructed and framed under erasure. Actors play being unawares of their being on stage, while audiences are expected, and expect, to forget the work's artificiality and be immersed, engrossed and carried away.[5] While this may take place in most if not all theatrical styles, at first glance it seems that mimetic, naturalist and realist styles are especially suitable to convince audiences that they are witnessing events by happenstance, i.e. that these events have not been created for them.[6]

However, on a different level, the 'willing suspension of disbelief' that is necessary for this scheme to work makes these styles less realistic than reflective theater, which doesn't hide its artificiality. Part of the realism of reality-shows is that the actors show awareness of the fact that they are being filmed – for instance, by commenting on what happened when they were drunk and forgot about the camera.

Seen in this light, it is make-believe that seems deceptive. Make-believe foregrounds interaction between characters in an on-stage narrative that can secondarily and implicitly be related to ordinary reality. This sounds a lot like idealism, and the enclosed world of make-believe theater seems perfect for performing the alternative universes of utopia. The related concepts *idealism* and *utopia* go a long way in accounting for make-believe's desirability (dreaming of a better world) and its dangers (dystopia, loss of contact with reality). However, the relation of make-believe and reflectiveness to idealism and realism is not unequivocal. Reflectiveness is indeed realistic and down-to-earth, in the sense that it deals openly with the actual theatrical situation. Nevertheless, at the same time precisely its explicit inspection of the connections between actor and audience, and between actor and role, suggests ideals for social interaction.

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[5] Goffman 1974:6, 48-56.
[6] The mimetic project suggests a fundamental schism between word and reality. Paraphrasing Marston Anderson, quoted in Goldstein 2007:161.

In other words, the degree of explicitness does not say anything about the verisimilitude of either realism or idealism. Make-believe and reflectiveness have different ways of defining (or framing) ideals and reality.

East and West

Noting the predominance of monologues, solo arias and asides in Peking Opera, Zou Yuanjiang argues that Peking Opera performances openly reflect on their being-on-a-stage.[7] Additionally, Chinese theater has a tripartite system that distinguishes between actor, role and role type. According to Zou, this system accounts for the distancing effect, formulism and interruptability of Peking Opera.[8] Its interruptability is illustrated by the prevalent practice of staging *zhezixi* 折子戲, medleys of the most popular acts. This mode of presentation is incompatible with the Aristotelian dogma of unity of action, place and time, and supports Zou's overall argument that Chinese theatricality differs fundamentally from Western theatricality:

> The stage attendant enters, pours a cup of tea and the lead actor drinks it on stage [when] his voice is bad or has gone hoarse. ... Attendants that change costumes [of actors] on stage or that move scenes, screens and props are a common sight in Chinese theater. Connoisseur Chinese audiences, or opera buffs, don't even notice these attendants. But when this traveled to the West, Westerners at first couldn't understand it. … That there could be 'attendants' in Eastern theater, that it could address the audience, and even engage in exchange with the audience is [based on] the principle 'I acknowledge that I am acting.' This is unlike Western theater, which does not acknowledge that 'I am acting.' 'I' am truly happening in the enclosed space behind the 'fourth wall.' 'I' am living in this true environment. This is what Stanislavski argued: you should become Othello if you act Othello … And Chinese opera is exactly the opposite: it acknowledges 'I am acting,' 'I am telling you I am acting …,' I am make-believe 假定. I tell you what will happen, I tell you the whole story [in advance], I am fundamentally not telling stories or acting out a character 演性格. Our opera performances always start with a prologue ... Why a prologue? To introduce the story's plot, whereas Western theater is always about suspense. … In Chinese opera, the complete description of a person's character is presented on his face. The face-paint tells you everything. … So, in Chinese opera everything is fake, there is no hiding and tucking away whatsoever … In this sense, … Western theater is clumsy, it is an imitation [of reality]. But our present opera actually copies Western theater. The stage sets of our present operas can't be moved by ten cars, they are even heavier than [those of] Western theater.[9]

Earl Ernst's study of Japanese kabuki and Joshua Goldstein's study of Peking Opera distinguish Eastern from Western theater in similar terms, which can be further related to the (defining) prominence of the notion of *rasa,* 'aesthetic rapture,' in Indian music and literature. Ernst writes

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[7] Zou 2007:137.
[8] Zou 2007:44, 46-47, 85, 180.
[9] Zou 2007:88-89.

that in Eastern (presentational) theater "the actor does not lose his identity as an actor," while in most Western (representational) theater "every effort is made to convince the audience that the stage is not a stage and that the actor is not an actor."[10] Goldstein argues convincingly that in their activities to distinguish Peking Opera from Western theater, 1920s opera critics such as Qi Rushan over-emphasized Peking Opera's non-realism. This drove a wedge between on- and off-stage reality: everything on stage should be symbolic, illusory and suggestive. Drinking tea on stage became unacceptable, even if the story permitted it.[11] The crux is that essentializing non-realism leads to sacrificing the equally defining permeability of the stage-space and to the establishment of something very much like a fourth wall. Whereas Goldstein describes this transition without passing a value judgment, Zou argues that Chinese theater should be restored to its full reflective splendor, including both non-realism and permeability.

These debates attest to the importance of the scale of explicitness to Chinese stage traditions. Nevertheless, one should not equate make-believe with Western theater, and reflectiveness with Asian or Chinese theater. Although Western and Eastern traditions have employed the explicitness of theatricality in different ways, they are too rich to be assigned single positions on the scale. Erika Fischer-Lichte and Jo Riley show that members of the European avant-garde of the early 20th century

> wanted to propose an "other" theater, different in every way from what had gone before: a theater freed from the chains of literature, constituted as an autonomous art form; a theater which did not imitate a reality which actually existed, but which created its own reality; a theater which nullified the radical split between stage and spectator and which developed new forms of communication between them, so that the chasm between art (theater) and life, so typical and characteristic of bourgeois society, might be bridged.[12]

Western theater innovators who challenged the fourth wall, such as Bertolt Brecht, Vsevolod Meyerhold and later Jerzy Grotowsky, were inspired by Asian stage traditions, but also by Greek theater, folk traditions, popular (music) genres, *commedia dell'arte*, revue and vaudeville. Their theories have in turn influenced modern Chinese theater makers such as Gao Xingjian.[13] To avoid getting caught up in these cross-cultural and cross-media translations, I propose to explore theatrical explicitness per se, prior to the question of whether reflectiveness is more common in, or even defining of, Chinese painting, theater or opera, as compared to Western art forms.

Showing and Telling

Make-believe theater is like *showing* a story, which entails identifying with its characters; and reflective theater is like *telling* a story, including the (critical) distance this implies.[14] However, if a story is told well, the audience will still identify with its heroes. Zou points out that although Peking Opera gives away the plot and is codified, estranging and so on, this doesn't prevent

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[10] Ernst 1974:18-19. Goldstein 2007:159-171. See also Fei 1999.
[11] Goldstein 2007:154, 171. On *yinchang* see Goldstein 2007:74-76, 162, 170 and Zou 2007:88.
[12] Fischer-Lichte 1997:115.
[13] Łabędzka 2008.
[14] Łabędzka 2008:74-79.

opera buffs from forgetting these frames and getting carried away. In such cases reflectiveness and make-believe do not alternate; such alternation happens, for instance, when the title and end credits frame a make-believe movie. Rather, when in Peking Opera a stylized whip symbolizes a horse, make-believe happens through reflectiveness.

Illustration 4.1: A horse, as symbolized in Peking Opera (through a stylized whip).

The relation between human perception and interpretation of phenomena on the one hand, and mimetic resemblance on the other, is complex and contested. Perception involves extracting relevant information from unorganized sensory data by both immersive make-believe – adopting a perspective, becoming part of the data – and distancing reflection – assessing the data by comparing it to other information and scenarios. Theatricality capitalizes on these tendencies in human perception. This is also why in the following pages it is not my goal to pigeonhole performances as either make-believe or reflective, but to investigate how these different aspects relate and what happens when one occasionally gains dominant saliency in an artwork. Additionally, I am aware that audience members witness different performances, even if they would attend them at the exact same time and place. When Peking Opera buffs are engrossed by stylized whips, make-believe is dominant, but it also shows that it takes experience to block out reflective elements.[15]

I have chosen *make-believe* and *reflectiveness* rather than *showing* and *telling* primarily because I do not want to link the distinction to specific media and their particularities, such as verbal narrativity. *Make-believe* and *reflectiveness* are more abstract and less media-specific.

§2 Transgressive Roles

When I arrive at the StarLive on June 8th 2007 I can hardly get in. Over a thousand people are squeezed into Beijing's largest rock venue to witness X.T.X.'s two-hour show, which is later published as *Xie Laughing at the Capital* 傾笑京城 (2008). Drummer Zhao Wei nearly breaks the toms in the drum fill of I COULD HAVE DIED YESTERDAY 昨天晚上我可能死了, which is reminiscent of the Nirvana song PAPER CUTS (1989). Dreadlocked bass player Guo Jian sways his hips, and rhythm guitar player Li Zhao, wearing cool sunglasses, shakes his shoulders. They walk across stage, but make sure not to get in the way of Xie Tianxiao's energetic rock star performance, which is the focus of the show. His white shirt with a woodblock picture of Great Helmsman Mao Zedong contrasts with the dark shirts of the band members, but in general their simple outfit of jeans and shirts suits the straightforwardness of the music. A large portion of the audience sings along with the uncomplicated, catchy melodies that critics have compared to those of the prison songs of the mid-1980s, much to Xie's chagrin.[16] X.T.X. waves his long hair, runs across stage, screams, gesticulates and pushes at mike stands and monitor speakers. During ASIMA 阿詩瑪, Li Zhao throws his sunglasses away as Xie Tianxiao gives the audience the finger. "Fuck you," read his lips as he moves away from the microphone. The mosh pit is seething. A
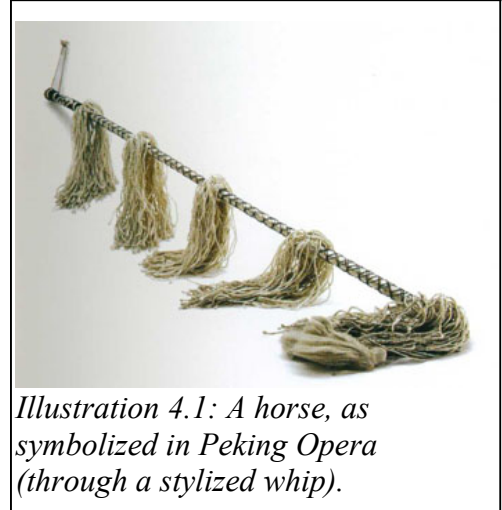
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[15] Goffman 1974:202-210. Page 207 introduces Peking Opera as an example.
[16] Conversation, Yan Jun, October 2008. Cf Yan 2008. Conversation, Xie Tianxiao, October 2008.

girl gets hurt as one of the few remaining bar stools tips over. Her boyfriend picks it up and rushes forward threateningly, but is calmed down by bystanders. Soon the moshing and pogoing is as intense as before. When the song is over, X.T.X. changes back to the typically humble Chinese stage persona and expresses happiness over seeing so many fans. His "I have really missed you" makes him suddenly sound like a pop singer, except for his out-of-town accent and shortage of breath. Male audience members shout "redhot 牛屄"and "I love you, Xie Tianxiao."

Stage personnel help X.T.X. with his frequent changes of guitar (a rare phenomenon in China), straighten up microphone and cymbal stands, and clean up the mess. When agitated fans climb onto the five-foot-high stage, to dance and stage dive, the stage personnel guides them backstage and releases them back into the arena through a side entrance. Although the stage personnel are part of Xie's record company 13th Month and thus familiar to him, X.T.X. is hostile to them.[17] They serve as props on

Illustration 4.2: X.T.X. at his 2007 show Xie Laughing at the Capital.

which to vent his anger. The show turns violent when X.T.X. starts smashing his guitar. The audience reacts hysterically. Guo Jian waves his bass around and eventually breaks it too. Zhao Wei pushes his drum kit over. Strings and pieces of wood fly every which way, but X.T.X. is far from satisfied. He circles the stage, screaming, ranting, pushing at the amps and at fans that have climbed the stage, until finally the stage personnel force the tormented rock hero backstage.

The first time Xie Tianxiao smashed his guitar was in 1998.

> Back then smashing my guitar wasn't staged 表演, I really felt there was too much sadness, and I could only use this way to let off steam. … No one allowed me to, so when I did it, it was very satisfying. Nowadays they demand that I do it, and it's become pointless.[18]

Gibson and organizers supply Xie with guitars, and Xie thinks "No point in not smashing them up," and he gives sponsor, organizers and the audience what they want, resulting in guitar-smashing in about half of his shows since 2004.[19] He has repeatedly explained that he performs a stage persona that is divorced from his off-stage self:

> In the past when I got on stage I was really immersed in that kind of mood, my whole person lived in anger and as soon as I got on stage I expressed it. But nowadays, my on-
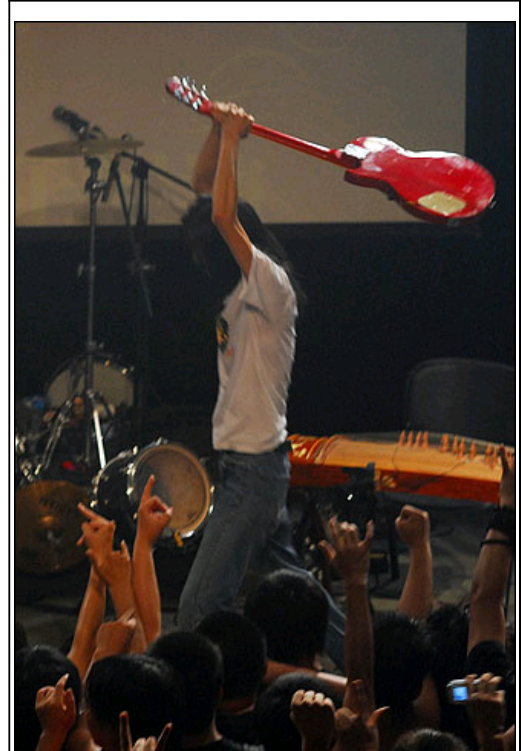
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[17] Conversation, Zhang Ran, October 2008. The name of the company refers to carnivalesque *extra*-ordinariness.
[18] Cheng 2006.
[19] Cheng 2006. Pingzi 2006.

stage me is more like a role, offering everyone a beautiful show. I've become someone else in real life, I'm married and have a two-year old daughter, and I'm happy with my life. In fact, I really enjoy performing the role of X.T.X. on stage. It's just like Peking Opera where people play [the role types of] painted-faces and ladies. The process of passion these stage arts provide is extremely enjoyable. Look at bands such as Marilyn Manson and the Rolling Stones, how do they preserve creative passion? Because they make a clear distinction between life and the stage. On- and off-stage are different to them. Now if you take for instance [Chinese punk rocker] He Yong, he's the same on- and off-stage, even if you just talk to him, he will smash a beer bottle. If you live like that, how can you maintain creative vitality?[20]

According to Zhang Ran, co-founder of 13th Month and organizer of the above show, Xie plays the role of Nirvana's front man Kurt Cobain. This is ironic in that Cobain seems to have been more like He Yong than like Marilyn Manson in the quote above.[21] However, in more general terms X.T.X. performs the role of the *liumang* 流氓, the 'hooligan.' 'Hooligan' is a broad notion that can encompass "rapist, whore, black-marketeer, unemployed youth, alienated intellectual, frustrated artist or poet."[22] The figure of the hooligan gained prominence with the parallel rise of opportunity and insecurity in the PRC of the 1980s, finding expression in the literature of Wang Shuo and the paintings of Fang Lijun and other *popi* 潑皮 'rascal' artists. Hooliganism is the rawness of a distorted guitar and the askew 歪 posture of the 108 outlaws 一百单八将 in the il-

llustration 4.3: Black Whirlwind Li Kui, an outlaw from the Water Margin*, drawn by Chen Laolian (1598-1652).*

lustrations of the classical novel *Water Margin* 水滸傳 (ca. 1370, by Shi Naian).[23] In *The Festival of Liumang* 流氓的盛宴 (2006), Zhu Dake defines hooliganism in a broad sense by the loss of social status, nomadism and defeatism.[24] This definition relates hooliganism to subaltern and underground culture, musically embodied by rock, Northwest Wind and prison songs 囚歌.[25]

Xie's explicit distancing from his hooligan alter ego X.T.X. renders his performance reflective, at least to those who read or watch his interviews. Nevertheless, even these fans generally perceive his shows as authentic and credible or make-believable because Xie scripted them himself and his star persona is rooted in his biography. After Xie Tianxiao left his hometown in Shandong Province at the age of eighteen in 1991, he lived in the dilapidated artist villages on the outskirts of Beijing and engaged in the typical activities of hooligans: womanizing, picking fights, drug use and rock music.

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[20] Qi 2005.
[21] Conversation, Zhang Ran, October 2008.
[22] Minford, quoted in Barmé 1999: 64.
[23] Zhu 2006: 11
[24] Zhu 2006:12, 59, 62.
[25] Baranovitch 2003:18-26 (Northwest Wind) and 26-30 (prison song).

From Hooligan to Clown

Whereas Wang Shuo's cynical satire focuses on the hooligan's *joie de vivre*, Xie employs the role of the hooligan to perform despair and rage over the loss of home and identity. The protagonist of his lyrics typically gets lost in a forest or desert and doesn't know where to go to and who he is. The role of the clown can serve a similar purpose. While hooligans commit crimes, clowns question conventional boundaries through humor rather than violent transgression. Below, I will analyze how clowns transgress stage reality through contextual, intertextual and subtextual connections across the fourth wall. Contextual connections allude to the particular theater event, including plot and venue. Intertextual connections relate the show in question to other theater events and literary texts. A number of artworks discussed in the following pages refer to the classic story *Journey to the West* (1590s, by Wu Cheng'en), which recounts a Buddhist monk's arduous journey to India in search of the scriptures and enlightenment. Subtextual connections articulate links between the theater event and ordinary reality and conventions, for instance by offering a social critique or referencing personal biographies. Humor can make some frames explicit and leave others unnoticed.

Peking Opera, Two-Taking-Turns and Sketches

Chou 丑, 'clown,' also means 'ugly.' Grotesque ugliness links clowning to exorcist ritual.[26] In contrast to the other three role types in Peking Opera, which typically perform kings (*sheng*), ladies (*dan*) and generals (*jing*), the clown usually plays characters of low status. Sometimes even literally so: some perform an entire play in a crouching position, or are trodden upon by the other actors. Much of the clowning in Peking Opera takes place through appearance (outfit and face-paint) and percussion-scored action (acrobatics, slapstick, mime). In comical dialogues the clown often uses colloquial language or dialect, which contrasts with Peking Opera's many stylized speech forms. Although this role type offers space to showcase virtuosity and improvisation, clowns eventually get punished and laughed at for their transgressions.[27]

With the increasing prestige of Peking Opera as a highbrow art form, the clown's opportunities for improvisation have diminished. However, the bawdy Northeastern Chinese stage tradition of Two-Taking-Turns has preserved the clown's transgressiveness, which revolves around comical dialogues between a clown and a lady (*dan*). These dialogues are often carried on to music and are sometimes accompanied by makeshift clothing (for the clown) and deliberately clumsy attempts at acrobatics on his part. The beautiful *dan* serves as a point of crystallization: she points out where the clown is improper, often by hitting and kicking him, which is itself improper behavior for a lady. The clown of Two-Taking-Turns, however, doesn't need to be ridiculed and trodden upon by others; rather, he consciously ridicules himself.

The clown also makes fun of canonical stories, such as *Journey to the West*, and of seriousness in general. His double-entendres and over-the-top exaggerations of instantly recognizable stories and songs play on the awareness of being-on-a-stage, and are often followed by explicit comment on the part of the female partner: that one cannot say this or that in public, or that this does not suit the role he is playing. This reflective stepping into and out of the operative

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[26] Riley 1997:79. Zou 1996. Riley 1997:274, Thorpe 2005.
[27] Wichmann 1991:212, Gao 2006:41, Thorpe 2005:284. Cf. Zou 1996:6 on *huokou* 活口.

frame suits performance situations at temple fairs, as does the comical self-appraisal of clowns and their asking the audience what they want to hear next, and asking for applause. As to subtext, Two-Taking-Turns actors make explicit that their primary goal is to entertain. Their jokes are typically on thwarted sexual and material desire, though without going so far as to refer to specific sociopolitical events.

Starting as a Two-Taking-Turns actor in the late 1980s, Zhao Benshan has popularized a sanitized form of this regional theater for the state-owned PRC media. Between 1990 and 2010 he performed a sketch 小品 of around fifteen minutes in each but one of the CCTV Chinese New Year Galas. The humor in these plays is almost exclusively verbal, including tongue-twisting rhymes, and is supported by acting, stage props and a simple set. Many of the episodes of Zhao's TV series *Old-Root Liu* 劉老根 (2001, 2002) and *Generalissimo Ma* 馬大帥 (2003, 2004, 2005) feature musical performances, usually Two-Taking-Turns.

Both in these sketches and in his TV series, Zhao Benshan portrays (elderly) figures of low social status, a legacy of clown-type roles. In many of the sketches he has a female partner who at times mocks his backfiring wit. However, most of the humor is dry and tongue-in-cheek, with someone saying one thing and doing another (hypocrisy), or the pot calling the kettle black. While there is deliberate overacting in the sketches and the general mode is one of self-ridicule, Zhao and the other actors pretend to be unaware of the stage, and there are few moments of explicit crystallization of the humor. In other words, these shows are dominated by make-believe.

Not only the TV drama, but also the sketches, whose live audience is audibly and visibly present in the recordings, maintain the illusion of an enclosed world. The Two-Taking-Turns shows embedded in the TV series are reflective in the sense that the boundaries between their stage reality and its on-screen audience are made explicit and permeable. Main characters, such as Old-Root Liu, may comment on developments in the TV drama during their embedded on-stage appearances. However, they never explicitly address the audience at home behind the TV set. The permeability and reflectiveness of these Two-Taking-Turns shows is restricted to the narrative reality of the TV series, which itself remains dramatic make-believe.

Zhao Benshan's pieces contain a subtext of social critique. His sketches typically comment on things like the rapid changes in society that ordinary people have trouble keeping up with and the validity of peasant wisdom in the face of demanding government officials, or they parody the efforts of entrepreneurs to sell just about anything to unsuspecting passers-by. These engagements with mainstream social concerns contain numerous intertextual connections, from neologisms to pop lyrics. Sometimes Zhao will face the audience to stress these references, drive a point home, or orchestrate audience reaction. In these moments the theater event momentarily inclines towards reflectiveness.

Illustration 4.4: Liu Liu, Zhao Benshan and Song Dandan performing the sketch Torch Bearer 火炬手 *at the 2008 CCTV Chinese New Year Gala.*

Second Hand Rose's Parody

Hi everybody, so you all came to hear Liang Long brag?

An informant argued that Second Hand Rose's appeal lies in their live shows, and especially in the ribald remarks in-between songs.[28] Lead singer Liang Long seems aware of this:

Liang Long: "You've come to engage in debauchery?"
Audience: "Yes!"
Liang Long: "You've come to hear Two-Taking-Turns?"
Audience: "Yes!"
Liang Long: "You've come to screw pretty girls in the name of rock?"
Audience: "Yes!"
Liang Long: "You've come to screw pretty boys in the name of rock?"
Audience: "Yes!"
Liang Long: "You're too fucking lewd."[29]

Illustration 4.5: Bass player Li Ziqiang at a Second Hand Rose show.

Rather than viewing these remarks as something extra-musical, I follow Derrida's argument for the inseparability of frame (parergon) and work (ergon).[30] Liang Long himself also sees his live shows as integrated performances in which he acts a role throughout, referring to the saying "a lead singer is half an MC 司儀." Just like that of Two-Taking-Turns, Second Hand Rose's humor is primarily directed at themselves. "You see a *dan* and hear a clown," is how Liang Long describes his stage persona.[31] The visual humor mainly lies in Liang Long's drag and the extravagant outfits of band members, who have dressed up as characters from *Journey to the West*. The collage of sounds may create unexpected contrasts, for instance in the musical quotation of the classic Xinjiang folk song YOUTH DANCE (collected and rearranged by Wang Luobin in 1939) in the song YOUTH OH YOUTH 青春啊青春 (2009). Flutist Wu Zekun sings the dialogue of MARRIAGE REVELATION 征婚啓示 through an instrument that gives his voice a Mickey Mouse sound, adding to the caricature-like nature of the lyrics.

Second Hand Rose's shows are mostly scripted. Their songs ideally sound the same everywhere, and in their site-independence and self-absorbedness they incline towards make-believe. Second Hand Rose restricts unscripted moments to transitions in-between songs and during intros, outros and bridges. Such unscripted moments, including improvisation and performer-

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[28] Conversation, Xie Li, October 2007. A former employee of their record company, Big Nation, argued that Second Hand Rose is a live band. Fans collect Liang Long's remarks on the web.
[29] Liang Long in StarLive, Beijing, 10 August 2007.
[30] Derrida 1987, Bal 2002, Ruth 2004.
[31] Conversation, Liang Long, September 2008.

audience interaction, acknowledge the staginess of the performance and add to its reflectiveness. In the bridge of MARRIAGE REVELATION, Liang Long typically improvises on a theme:

> Rumor has it that at the door of the Midi School [or the StarLive, or the New Get Lucky Bar] a group of artists collectively ... engaged in debauchery. Men and woman, young and old, Chinese, and foreign friends, film makers and painters. I heard one of them was a rock musician?!

Despite these moments of reflectiveness, Second Hand Rose's shows are predominantly make-believe overall. They also demonstrate that the stage is a separate world by distinguishing clearly between on-stage and off-stage personas. This is most easily discernible in the plain outfits Liang Long appears in for interviews and press conferences.

MARRIAGE REVELATION is also illustrative because the song offers a social critique, reminiscent of Zhao Benshan's sketches. During a live show in 2007, Liang Long introduced the song with a joke about whoring:

> Once, when Second Hand Rose had performed a show, the night was long and lonely. The brothers said, 'Let's go for a walk.' So we went there. We went to the meeting place. We'd stood there forever, and the fucking police showed up [*audience chuckles*]. They took all of their money [*Liang points at the band members*], only Your Highness had any left [*cheers*]. The police said happily: 'I finally get the chance to meet you, master [*laughter*],' which saved the brothers two thousand RMB [*audience member: "too lewd, too lewd"*]. The next song is MARRIAGE REVELATION.

Liang Long ridicules the whole band, and the police, in an attempt to implicate the audience in his argument that denouncing debauchery is hypocritical. Therefore, I would argue that Second Hand Rose differs from glamrock or Japanese visual kei ヴィジュアル系 bands. Like many of these artists, their performance style criticizes the masculinity of guitar heroism, partly by creating otherworldly stage experiences, but they do not celebrate fashion and superficiality in ways similar to David Bowie, Gary Glitter or Glay.[32] Nor do the explicit artificiality of their shows exclude depth and authenticity. Liang Long explicitly sees his music as meaningful:

> Liang: "Second Hand Rose has an air of staginess. For instance, the initial plan for the clip of SUBSISTENCE (MIGRANT WORKERS) (2005) was to show that you could have different roles. A band member would pose as migrant worker but would be dressed very fancy. Or he'd be someone playing in a nightclub, but dressed as a beggar."
> Groenewegen: "Just like in THE COMMON INTEREST 公益歌曲 (2003)?"
> Liang: "Yes, yes. [Quoting the song's lyrics:] "You are a monkey show-off 耍猴的," you could be all of those roles. It's about offering more perspectives. Because the approach is different, the same object appears different. That is an important function of music, to show the audience different aspects of reality."

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[32] Auslander 2006.

Groenewegen: "Is that also the function of humor?"
Liang: "Humor has a dual purpose. It makes the audience understand that there is more than one perspective. You show them an angle they never suspected. Besides, it is entertaining. The audience hates being preached to. ... Making music is a lot like making documentaries. It's just a bit more theatrical. If it resembles daily life too much, the audience feels no need to see your show. The audience doesn't want to see band rehearsals. Only during the short time-span of a live show do they want to hear what you have to say."[33]

In his account of the documentary role of art, Liang Long inclines towards typification 典型化, the condensation or intensification of reality, a concept that is central to the make-believe of Socialist Realism.[34] In Zhao Benshan's sketches and Second Hand Rose's lyrics, possible social positions are personified by readily understandable stereotypes, supporting arguments against the hypocritical denouncing of debauchery and in support of the carnivalesque adage that all roles can be reversed.

Guo Degang's Crosstalk

In spite of certain geographic and linguistic differences, the crosstalk 相聲 of the early 20th century must have had a close resemblance to Two-Taking-Turns. Practiced in reflective, bawdy variety shows in marketplaces in Peking and Tianjin, it absorbed influences from various stage traditions, including Peking Opera clown roles, and gradually came to center on verbal dialogues between two men: a joker (*dougen* 逗哏) and his sidekick (*penggen* 捧哏). In the newly established PRC of the 1950s, it managed to mend its vulgar ways and gain unprecedented support.[35] The connection between crosstalk and officialdom became stronger still during the 1980s as its practitioners focused on state television shows such as the CCTV Chinese New Year Gala, rather than on live performances.

Guo Degang, who began performing crosstalk in the mid-1990s, gained huge popularity almost overnight in 2006, mainly by re-vulgarizing the genre. He brought it back to the theater (and brought it onto the Internet) while addressing issues that were too sensitive for TV:

説相聲透於甚麼呀，	Guo Degang: I'll tell you what crosstalk is about:
透的是開心	amusement.
就是樂　是不是	Yu Qian: It's [about] fun, isn't it?
有意思，這是第一步	Guo: Arousing interest, that's the first step.
逾笑逾樂，有把樂放在前邊兒	Fun-tertainment; fun is foremost.
我們也跟相聲界，	In the crosstalk community,
有個同人探討我	a colleague scrutinized me.
人們指著我，	This person pointed at me, [*waves his finger*]
你這個相聲太沒有品位	"Your crosstalk is tasteless,
只顧的搞笑	it's merely for laughs."

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[33] Conversation, Liang Long, September 2008.
[34] Zou Yuanjiang credits Socrates for this concept, but links it to the PRC of the 1950-1970s too (Zou 2007:85).
[35] The literary author Lao She and crosstalk performer Hou Baolin are credited for this achievement.

我説呢，先搞笑吧，	I said: "It is primarily for laughs.
	[*his voice wavers, as if he could break into laughter any moment now*]
不搞笑就太搞笑了	If there's nothing to laugh at, now that's hilarious."
對，先樂	Yu: Yes, fun first.

[*The audience laughs. Guo steps back to the table to pick up a towel and wipe his pudgy, bald head. His sidekick Yu Qian has been standing behind the microphone-stand in the middle of the table, which is the only stage prop. Both are dressed in rather plain, traditional, long-sleeved Chinese costumes; this time they are silver, while on other occasions they may be maroon, grey or black. The backdrop is a huge fan, upon which the name of the troupe headed by Guo Degang and the program are announced.*]

我跟中國相聲界有一個協議	Guo: I have an agreement with the Chinese crosstalk
我負責幽默	community. I am responsible for humor,
他們負責品位	they are responsible for good taste.
	[*Guo chuckles, Yu laughs, the audience applauds and shouts. Guo waits for them to finish.*]
逾笑逾樂，先得樂	Fun-tertainment, fun comes first.
	[*Hammers the words down with a pointing hand*]
您通過我們的節目，	Whatever insights you may gain
您悟道了甚麼東西是您的事兒	through our program are your own.
	[*Inclusive gestures*]
並非是我强加的	I absolutely didn't force them upon you.
	[*Stressing every syllable, pointing at 'you,' the audience*]
我們上台是讓您高興，	We come on stage to make you happy,
不是給您上課	not to teach you.
説相聲都講講課，	If it's crosstalk's task to teach,
那還要學校干嘛呀，是不是？	what do we have schools for? [*Nods*] Right?
	[*Yu laughs, the audience laughs along*]

The show overflows with reflectiveness. Guo addresses his audience to persuade them and, true to the art of rhetoric, not only the wording, but also the visual and acoustic framing add to his argument. Although the sketch explicitly opposes the use of crosstalk to disseminate knowledge, I submit that at least one important subtext is Guo Degang's (commercially successful) effort to pit himself against the official establishment as the true bearer of the People's stage traditions.

The lively nature of Guo Degang's shows resides not so much in unscripted improvisation as in the adaptation to actuality of *duanzi* 段子, 'scripts.' This is also consistent with Guo Degang's narrations of the sacrifices he has made for crosstalk, his accounts of the lineages of famous teachers and his introductions of various regional stage traditions, during which he sings excerpts in various dialects.

Illustration 4.6: Guo Degang.

In general, crosstalk pieces have clear subtexts. These frame their transgressive remarks and render them more or less acceptable. In my written account above, I left out some affirmations and intersections of the sidekick, but nevertheless his importance in informing the audience when to laugh is clear. Whereas in Peking Opera the clown is the object of laughter, in crosstalk the joker is the source of laughter, which he often directs at the sidekick. In one piece, Guo Degang first tells his sidekick to get off stage because he is incompetent. When he eventually reveals this to be untrue, stating that "We go way back," Guo immediately continues with a new series of grotesque humiliations, presenting himself as the sidekick's father. An elaboration of this is *zagua* 砸挂, the slandering of other crosstalk performers or well-known public figures. In 2006 Guo Degang mocked a one-time fellow crosstalk student who had become a newsreader, saying that "his wife had slept with another man and was contemplating self-immolation." The newsreader sued Guo Degang.

Guo's stance against the official mainstream has struck a chord with the Beijing band scene. The Downtown Johns (since 2008) are explicitly inspired by Guo Degang. The male band members wear long gowns similar to those of crosstalk artists, and the band has covered the opening tune of Guo Degang's TV series *In Pursuit of Happiness* 追着幸福跑 (2007). The Downtown Johns' decidedly reflective shows, in rock bars and at festivals, usually consist of only a few sinified rock songs and a lot of crosstalk, in which the lead singer humiliates the other band members, with subtexts that ridicule the entertainment industry. When the lead singer claims to be a cultured person 文化人, the guitar player remarks that it doesn't show, and then audience members usually shout "He really doesn't look it!" After which the lead singer explains his sophisticated gastronomic customs, which turn out to be the most common of drinking games.

Illustration 4.7: Downtown Johns at the Modern Sky Festival 2009.

Stephen Chow's Silliness

Although audience interaction is limited in the pre-recorded world of cinema, there are many examples of reflectiveness on the screen, of which Stephen Chow's films are arguably the most influential in Chinese-speaking regions. Chow's humor is known as *mo lei tau* 無厘頭, 'silliness' in Cantonese, and has roots in the comedies of the Hui brothers of the late 1970s and early 1980s.[36] Although his films are typically Hong Kongese and contain many Cantonese language jokes, Chow has gained popularity across the sinophone world, especially with his *A Chinese*

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[36] One of the brothers, Sam Hui, became Hong Kong's first pop star, see Chapter 1 and §3 below.

Odyssey series, which consists of the two films *Pandora's Box* 月光寶盒 (d. Jeffrey Lau, 1994) and *Cinderella* 仙履奇緣 (idem).

Also known as "Journey to the West in Brag" 大話西游, *A Chinese Odyssey* is often understood as a postmodern parody or pastiche of the literary classic *Journey to the West*. The narrative story revolves around gradual realization by Joker of his identity as the Monkey King, and his acceptance of his destiny. Thus, in structure, *A Chinese Odyssey* resembles stereotypical Chinese hero-making stories, as popularized through Jin Yong's novels and their adaptations. Typically a second, romantic plot intersects with the plot of heroic duty. As is the case in most of Stephen Chow's films, *A Chinese Odyssey* recounts the hilarious ways in which an incompetent character saves the day.

Nevertheless, Stephen Chow's silly humor often threatens to undermine narrative depth. He challenges cinema's make-believe through meta-language, anachronisms, time-travel, campy shot-reverse shots, running gags, a deliberately clichéd soundtrack and, finally, a carnival of transformations. The spiritual possession of Joker's right-hand man (I:0' 40), love-inducing spells, schizophrenia (II:0' 14) and the body swap of four characters (II: 0' 46) all cast doubt upon the authenticity of the characters: is any character really him- or herself? This not only works within narrative reality, but also projects itself outside the screen, as a kind of *mise en abîme*, into questioning the make-believability of the roles. One can only answer the question "Is any character really him- or herself?" with: "Of course not: it's a film! It's Stephen Chou acting Monkey King reincarnated as Joker."

A number of scenes contain more explicit framing through plays-within-plays, such as sabotaged invisibility spells (I:0' 40), the over-enthusiastic re-enactment of 'future' events by visitors from the future (II:0' 57) and a scene in which Joker freezes time to discuss his situation with the audience (II:0' 36). When it seems in this last scene that the hero will need to show his true colors, Joker manages to fulfill his desire while making no promises by cleverly quoting the script of Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994). In other words, however silly, the comical twists perform a story of hero genesis that celebrates insubordination, manipulation and non-committalness. Zhu Dake argues that Stephen Chow's characters and their 'naughtiness' 整蠱 are models for a generation that came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[37] Yan Jun, in turn, argues that since the 1990s Chinese intellectuals and artists have increasingly viewed themselves as both critical outsiders to and successful participants in the mainstream, and that Stephen Chow's heroes' typical attitude of ridicule-yet-win reinforces this self-perception, which Yan finds dangerous.[38]

Illustration 4.8: Joker (Stephen Chou) in A Chinese Odyssey II *(1994), confessing his love at knife-point. His "I will love you ten thousand years" parodies* Chungking Express *(1994).*

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[37] Zhu 2006:342-345, 374-377.
[38] Conversation, Yan Jun, September 2008.

New Pants' Parody

From their 1997 debut album, New Pants revealed a playfulness and silliness that contrasted with the ballads of the popular mainstream and the seriousness that dominated the Chinese rock scene. When New Pants were hailed as members of the New Sound of Beijing 北京新聲 in the late 1990s, their adoration of the punk band Ramones was thinly veiled.[39] Over the years New Pants increasingly combined the upbeat and opportunistic style they adopted from the 1970s USA punk scene with synthesizer-generated sounds, and with references to Hong Kong popular culture. De Kloet's classification of New Pants as pop punk obscures their affinity with the "hardcore punk" bands of the late 1990s Boredom Contingent (congregating at the Scream Bar), and newer generations of punk and New Wave bands that emerged at the live venue D-22 around 2005.[40]

In early songs such as HEY! YOU 嘿！你 New Pants address the audience directly, whereas in later works reflectiveness lies in their blatant artificiality. For instance, in LOVE BRINGS ME HOME 愛帶我回家 the band members dance in front of a bluescreen, most widely known as a technique to project maps behind televised weather forecasters. The bluescreen of LOVE BRINGS ME HOME locates the band amidst Hong Kong magazines, RMB banknotes and Beijing street views, but at the end of the clip the screen is lowered to reveal a living room.

The New Pants are exceptional in the Beijing band scene in the amount of attention they pay to images. They appear on the covers of their first three albums as comic book figures (*New Pants* 新褲子, 1998), clay figures (*Disco Girl*, 2000) and robots (*We Are Automatic* 我們是自動的, 2002). Many of the video clips of this period consist completely of these animated alter egos.[41] For instance, in SHE IS AUTOMATIC 她是自動的, robots representing the band members save a girl in a parody of *Star Wars*. New Pants' fourth album *Dragon Tiger Panacea* 龍虎人丹 (2006) reenacts the hipster culture of late 1980s Beijing, when youths wore black sunglasses and training suits and carried ghetto blasters with disco music. In the video clip of the title track, New Pants parody stereotypical 1970s and 1980s Hong Kong kung fu movies, and during live renditions of EVERYBODY 愛瑞巴迪 keyboard player Pang Kuan imitates disco moves from *Saturday Night Fever* (1977, d. John Badham). The album inspired a retro hype in Beijing fashion. Their next album *Wild Men Need Love Too* 野人也要爱 (2008) is an attempt to relive the Beijing of the early 1990s as a period in which macho, long-haired, leather-clad hardrockers enchanted pretty girls.

Illustration 4.9: New Pants on a promotional picture for their 2006 album Dragon Tiger Panacea.

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[39] Yan 1999a; De Kloet 2001:95.
[40] Hedgehog wore New Pants shirts during shows in 2007.
[41] For these older clips, see the DVDs *Sky Image: 1997-2002* 天空影像(2007) and *Sky Image2: 2002-2006* 天空影像 2 (2007).

New Pants' parodies extend into music. Already in their earlier work the adaptation of three-chord four-line punk, and certainly their use of 1980s synthesizer sounds and beats, seems to be reflective playacting. Furthermore, their vocal delivery is sometimes dehumanized through sound effects reminiscent of Kraftwerk. At other times it is exaggerated, rising and falling between falsetto and the lower registers, creating an impression of hysteria. In isolation, these sounds are not necessarily inauthentic, but given their sharp contrast with the underground scene in which they were active, and especially in the context of their artwork and MTVs, New Pants are performing reflective parody.

Having said that, part of the fun is the possibility that the game is real, that the 1980s sunglasses or 1990s wigs are make-believable rather than reflective. The band explicitly states that they truly adore the spirit of the 1980s and early 1990s.[42] Retro works so well because it combines familiarity with estrangement. Many fans remember participating in the hypes of those periods, while the slightest ex-

Illustration 4.10: Millionaire Peng and Pang Kuan on a promotional poster for the 2009 New Pants album Go East.

aggeration highlights the fact that these things are out of touch with current reality, triggering laughter and reflection. The retro style and the parody practised by New Pants remain reflective, without incapacitating make-believe altogether.

Seriousness and political engagement are rare, but not altogether absent. At the Modern Sky Festival 2008, Pang Kuan dedicated the song FAMOUS DIRECTOR 著名導演 to lead vocalist Millionaire Peng, who shot most of New Pants' clips and short films:

我要當一個著名導演	I want to be a famous director
我要女演員陪我睡覺	I want to sleep with actresses
我要當一個著名導演	I want to be a famous director
我要你陪我去嘎納	I want you go to Cannes with me

胡子 禿子 肚子 辮子	Beard Bold Belly Braid
Alright Action Cut	Alright Action Cut

Although the song refers to recent scandals, it is difficult to establish a univocal subtext, i.e. to decide whether New Pants worship these unethical directors or ridicule them. This opportunistic attitude of 'having it both ways' is similar to most of Stephen Chow's roles.[43]

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[42] Conversation, Millionaire Peng, October 2008.

[43] Despite the fact that New Pants comes from Beijing, Millionaire Peng acknowledged that their humor resembles Hong Kong comedies rather than North Chinese genres such as Peking Opera, crosstalk and Two-Taking-Turns, adding that this is a conscious business strategy, adopted in order to appeal to broader audiences (conversation, Millionaire Peng, October 2008).

Top Floor Circus' Absurd Humor

It is said that Top Floor Circus picked their name when they were dining on a rooftop in 2001. They are said to have appreciated its intertextual connection to Kafka's *Auf der Gallery* (1917), which had been translated into Chinese as *On the Top Floor of the Circus* 馬戲團頂層樓座上.[44] Regardless of the accuracy of this anecdote, it captures Top Floor Circus' combination of folksy lightheartedness and absurdity. At first, Top Floor Circus abandoned the limits implied by fixed divisions of labor and frequently switched instruments. They made dissonant and unconventional sounds, or framed conventional sounds in unexpected circumstances. For instance, they ended the second day of the Midi Music Festival 2001 in completely escalated noise, with the rock critic Sun Mengjin repeatedly slapping his forehead with the microphone while his eyes seemed to pop out.[45] Their first EP (2002) contained questioning 'huh' sounds, seemingly demanding explanation, or simply attention. The empty phrases of the phone conversation in the song WWW.FUCKINGMACHINES.COM, from *The Preferences of the Most Vulgar Little Urbanite* 最低級的小市民趣味 (2004), elaborate this: they are framed by subtextual connections to the SARS epidemic and its absurd effects on human relations. The album was banned because a romantic ballad bearing the name of band leader Lu Chen consists entirely of Shanghainese foul language, ending in a men's choir singing the word 'fucking' to background croons. Another song explores all the grammatical and ungrammatical uses of the word 方便面 'instant noodles,' inserting it into catchphrases of popular hits.[46]

Humor has played an increasingly important role in Top Floor Circus' music. In comparison to the examples discussed above, Top Floor Circus are extremely cynical. They are less eager to please than most bands, and less eager to establish collectivity through laughter at an outsider. Most of the songs on their 2006 album *Lingling-Rd 93 Revisited, Timmy!* 蒂米重访零陵路93号 are in Shanghainese and parody punk's aggression as dumb and gutless (with reference to the legendary American punk rocker GG Allin). The song WE DON'T WANT YOU UNDERSTAND US hardly needs explanation, and both JIAO JIAO 娇娇 and MALE GORILLA AND FEMALE REPORTER 公猩猩與母記者 discredit any value in philosophizing beyond the seduction of girls. Top Floor Circus find joy in ridiculing some of the core values of the community, in this case the high esteem which the rock scene accords to revolutionary action and seriousness. It is therefore not surprising that some rock musicians and audiences discredit them as incapable musicians and their music as inconsequential 'malicious spoofing' (恶搞 *egao*, from the Japanese *kuso*).

Simultaneous with their increasing attention to humor, Top Floor Circus have become more conscious of the stage and the audience. Their earlier efforts to break with musical and moral conventions extended into subverting the frames of theatricality by flirting with conceptual and performance art.[47] On April Fools Day 2007, Top Floor Circus organized a "Top-Circus Al-

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[44] Guo 2007a:224.

[45] Cf. Yan 2002:303.

[46] Top Floor Circus resembles the extreme punk band Punk God. However, Punk God's disrespect is more overtly political, resulting in their performance at a pro-Taiwan independence festival and their subsequent exile. The Top Floor Circus change Punk God's signature song YOU DON'T LET ME ROCK 你不讓我搖滾 into "You don't let me take it easy" 你不讓我方便.

[47] Recent albums contain extended covers of the Beatles and the Chinese pop rocker Zheng Jun (the latter in cooperation with Glorious Pharmacy). These performances resemble conceptual art because they address the framing and staging of art works, and are not interested in technical perfection. Lu Chen's solo album *Spontaneous Artifice* 做作

ways OK" Super Chamber Pot Contest "頂馬永遠 OK"超級馬桶大獎賽. In this event, a parody of the *Idols* contests that dominated mainstream media,[48] bands could sign up to play covers of Top Floor Circus songs to a jury of renowned rock critics.

> Groenewegen: "How would you describe your humor?"
> Lu: "It's the dumbest humor around. Everyone should be able to understand it."
> Groenewegen: "Silliness?"
> Lu: "It's not the same as silliness, I still want to say something with it, and try to make a point. I use humor because then people will not be irritated. If you are funny, people like you."
> Groenewegen: "But you have recorded abusive songs, and I don't believe everyone likes that."
> Lu: "We should try harder."
> Groenewegen: "Isn't it a problem that if you are very funny and entertaining, people don't understand what you are trying to say anymore?"
> Lu: "Well, that is precisely what I am trying to get across, that all these things they think matter so much are actually not important. People should let go. Even music is not important. Tonight we will invite real circus artists. I have wanted to do this for a long time. So I discussed it with the [direction of the 2008 Modern Sky] festival and they liked the idea. The audience understands very well that we are no real circus band, so it doesn't matter if it is not technically perfect. If the idea gets across, that's good enough.[49]

Illustration 4.11: Lu Chen as ringmaster at a 2008 show of Top Floor Circus in StarLive, Beijing.

Lu Chen spent a considerable amount of money to hire professional circus acts, including belly dancers, a clown and a magician. When the female magician left, Lu Chen, who was acting as host and ringmaster, commented: "In fact these acts rely on technique, just like the rock bands you have seen in this couple of days." Then Top Floor Circus performed two songs, PUNKS ARE ALL SISSIES 朋克都是娘娘腔 and SHANGHAI WELCOMES YOU 上海歡迎你. SHANGHAI WELCOMES YOU is a parody of BEIJING WELCOMES YOU 北京歡迎你, an official song to promote the Beijing 2008 Olympics.[50] A few days earlier in the Beijing venue StarLive, Lu Chen had introduced the song with a short play. Dressed as the Haibao 海寶, the official mascot of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, he beat five Beijing girls who represent-

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的很自然 (2001) is devised to make the listener aware of his or her musical prejudices.
[48] The title plays on the correspondence between the first character in the words for 'circus' 馬戲團 and 'chamber pot' 馬桶. The top three acts were awarded different kinds of toilets.
[49] Conversation, Lu Chen, October 2008.
[50] Cf. De Kloet 2010:128.

ed the five Fuwa 福娃, the mascots of the Beijing Olympics, stating that "The Olympics are over, it's my time now." The chorus of the song runs:

上海歡迎你	Shanghai welcomes you!
歡迎來買東西	Welcomes you to come shopping,
千萬不要忘記帶上人民幣	and don't you forget your RMB.
上海歡迎你	Shanghai welcomes you!
奧運會有甚麼了不起	What's so special about the Olympics?
讓我們在世博會相聚	Let's meet again at the World Expo

Lu Chen entered through the audience, shook hands with people in the first rows in mock stardom, and invited audience members (in fact members of the rock scene) on stage to participate in a bogus contest. Especially in these live shows, Top Floor Circus go beyond reflectiveness and seek to frustrate the suspension of disbelief. But although Top Floor Circus ridicule the conventions of pop and rock audiences, they stop short of abolishing audience-performer barriers completely.

Xiao He's Playacting

Xiao He: "I want to find a teacher in Beijing who will teach me vocal techniques."
Groenewegen: "Not an instrument?"
Xiao He: "No, it takes a minimum of two years to learn an instrument and then you would still end up playing guitar, trying to adapt what you learned for the guitar. You can learn the same by listening. But I do want to learn vocal techniques, in the style of one of the opera traditions. So that later I can totally be a clown 小丑 on stage, engaging the audience directly."
Groenewegen: "I like clowns, they can cross the fourth wall."
Xiao He: "Yes, clowns can transcend time-space."[51]

The humor of Xiao He and his band Glorious Pharmacy resembles that of Top Floor Circus, especially in their pursuit of freedom and spontaneity, and the bands have collaborated on a number of occasions. However, whereas Top Floor Circus generally focus on concepts and are uninterested in musical details, Xiao He primarily focuses on sounds and rarely positions himself unequivocally vis-à-vis established traditions, through parody or other means. Take, for instance, SWING OH SWING 甩呀甩, which Xiao He performed many times in his solo shows. He recorded an elaborate version of the song with Glorious Pharmacy in 2008:

0' 00	Drum roll. Xiao He speaks in a low voice, almost whispering. Background sounds of playing children.	In my early days I could pee incredibly far, could pee from one block to the next. In my early days I could pee incredibly far, could pee all the way from the men's room to the ladies' room.

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[51] Conversation, Xiao He, august 2009.

	Repetition, delivered as if hushing you to sleep.	Incredibly far... Draw a long, long dragon on the way home, draw a long, long dragon on the night street.
1' 45	Instrumental chorus of guitar, bass and drums led by accordion. The melody is taken from BLUE by the French space disco band Space (*Just Blue,* 1978), but on the accordion is more reminiscent of the Italian folksong BELLA CIAO (aka FAREWELL FRIEND 啊再見朋友). The drums accentuate the off-beat of a slow four-fourth. A marimba echoes the accordion theme. The warm voice of Zhao Zhongxiang is sampled from the TV program *Animal World* 動物世界 (the booklet credits Zhao for inspiring this song). He narrates the difficulties of animals as they are born into this cruel world. Each time the melody is completed, the music pauses briefly. After two full renditions, accordion and marimba play a short question-and-answer sequence.	
2' 30	The music becomes a fast shuffle, but still breaks into a short pause after every phrase of the lyrics. After the first sentence the marimba plays that "different sound," then Xiao He grumbles the second phrase like an old man.	One day I heard a different sound: it came from my father. One day I heard a different sound: it came from my father.
3' 00	Chorus. Zhao narrates: "When the lion cubs enter this world they don't know a thing … Depend entirely on their mother … Are they enemies or friends?"	
3' 40	The music finally starts flowing smoothly. A men's choir repeats the last words of every phrase in close harmony. Solemnity.	So I ran to this day insanely. So I came to this place bravely. So I approach you with my beauty. So I have struggled with a smile, until now.
4' 10	Double time, creating excitement. There is a break after every 'today' which is filled with an ascending scale. With the last sentence, the scale extends into the next measure, and a number of Xiao He's voices repeat 'grand, grand, grand' in a	Today... I can finally pee like my father, so great. Today... I can finally pee like my father, so handsome. Today... I can finally pee like my father, so insane.

	nagging, childish way.	Today... I can finally pee like my father, so grand. enormously grand.
4' 52	Chorus of leading accordion and *Animal World* voice-over.	
5' 31	Ending in the sound of rain, bass and bird sounds. The soft roar of a lion cub. A faltering jazz drum solo and sporadic percussion, long harmonica notes. Several whispers of 'father, father,' as if a family searches for him in a monsoon-struck savanna.	However, I can't pee cleanly anymore (4x), so I grab it and...
6' 35	Sung *a capella*, answered by heavy drum rumblings, fast strumming and noisy harmonica notes.	swing, oh swing (4x).
6' 50	Out of the noise, a sailor's song suddenly arises. A faraway rhythm guitar stresses off-beats, accompanied by hand drums. Xiao He sings with a somewhat suppressed voice. The tempo gradually increases, but suddenly slows down at 'excuse me.' A short, erratic guitar riff fills the gap. The final words are almost *a capella*, and end in fast strumming and noise.	I spray over my pants, I spray over my stomach, I spray over my neck, My jaw, my lower lip, my upper lip, my nose, 　　　　eyes, brows, forehead, hair, hat. Excuse me for spraying over your newspaper, excuse me for 　　　(3x, in Mandarin, English, Cantonese) spraying into your ear.
7' 45	Chorus. "The panda cub has grown up…"	
8' 36	The sound of a horse snorting introduces a noisy grand finale, with a choir, including Xiao He repeating the song's title in a very high voice.	Swing, oh swing!
8' 40		

SWING OH SWING elaborates on the theme of peeing to address the changing relationship between father and son. The song's reflectiveness is most clear when Xiao He sings that he is spraying into the listener's ears. Additionally, the use of samples, the juxtaposition of musical styles and the exaggerations of stylistic conventions make this song theatrical in ways most songs are not. Especially the use of the voice, normally a reliable indicator of authentic presence, now takes on different roles and is multiplied. Although the theme of the lyrics seems personal enough for introspective make-believe, Glorious Pharmacy's studio version emphasizes that it is made by musicians musicking.

Reflectiveness is evident in most of Glorious Pharmacy's songs, on records through comments, in stage directions, in role-play, and during live shows in their use of props and collaboration with actors, dancers, theater makers and film directors. From BEIJING MONTHLY 北京月訊 (2005):

你的笑容	your smile
將破碎在下一個樂章	will be smashed in the [song's] next movement.

[*A loud cymbal bang and a quick three-quarter beat with a sample of what appears to be a laughing monkey.*]

斷裂的手臂下墜	your fractured arm will hang down.
將於地板排擊出	it will tap out on the floor
這部偉大作品最痛苦的一次	the most miserable rendition of this masterpiece.
收場	clear the stage,
這都是我的罪惡	all of this is my wrongdoing,
那比屎要醜陋一萬倍的罪惡	a wrongdoing ten thousand times uglier than shit,
即使它經常披著	even if it often wraps
那件初陽的銀紗	that silver lining of a looming sun.
原諒我	forgive me!
當時我實在是找不到	at the time I honestly couldn't come up
別的東西了	with anything else,
找不到了	couldn't think of anything.

In terms of paraphrasable content, BEIJING MONTHLY addresses the artificiality of music, which it positions as a prerequisite for innovation. When someone shouts "Play it again!" 再来 at the end of the song, without any audible applause, it seems we are in a rehearsal space, and the band is going to work through the song once again. This makes the labor put into the music explicit.

DISTRACTION 走神 (2008) is Glorious Pharmacy's only parody, and it is directed towards an older generation of Chinese rock bands. Xiao He shouts stage directions in-between the lyrics, such as 'next chord' or simply "G," to stress that this music is boring to the extent that the musicians themselves get distracted and need reminders. In HORSE DRAGON 馬龍 Xiao He portrays both the role of the parents who tell their children a scary bedtime story and, with a different voice, the role of the fantastic creature in that story. In the 2005 version of this song, as opposed to the 2002 recording, Xiao He doesn't sing the lyrics of the children Mimi, Niuniu, Lumpy and Blacky. Their tumbling voices are now portrayed by the frivolous interplay of saxophone and acoustic guitar.

As for live events, ever since their formation in 1996 Glorious Pharmacy have been involved in performance art, which in the early period allegedly also involved defecation.[52] At the Midi Modern Music Festival 2003, Glorious Pharmacy invited a number of actors. The physically impaired dancer Xifu smoked and drank beer with his feet. During another song, Xiao He's

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[52] Conversation, Xiao He , 2007.

Illustration 4.12: Actors performing on stage during Glorious Pharmacy's show at the Midi Modern Music Festival 2003.

then-girlfriend Meimei and film director Zhang Yuedong moved through the stage dressed in pajamas and mimed sex. The full-band rendition of SIMPLE TRUTH included a big cardboard mouth and nose to illustrate the simple truths articulated in the lyrics: a sock tied to fishing wire showed that snot can drip into the mouth, but that spit cannot drip into the nose (see Chapter 3). For the release in 2008 of the second studio album *Rumbling Footsteps* 腳步聲陣陣, Glorious Pharmacy collaborated with avant-garde theater maker Meng Jinghui. Among other things, they acted out a robbery, which on the album is a prelude to the title track.

These cross-media connections seem natural developments from Xiao He's interest in rural stage traditions, such as his collaborations with the Longzaitian 龍在天 Shadow Puppet Troupe for a show in 2009. He has has also collaborated with Song Yuzhe and Peking Opera percussionists, for instance on the twenty-minute SONG OF LIES 謊言歌 (since 2007, only live), which is based on a lengthy folk 民間 text: "Please forgive me, I am incapable of lying ... my wife's twenty, we've been married for twenty-five years."

Xiao He's taste for live improvisation and audience interaction can sometimes lead to awkward situations, for instance when people in the audience left during a version of SWING OH SWING in a rock bar in 2004, possibly offended by Xiao He's singing about peeing on the audience's heads and into their beers. At a show in Rotterdam in 2009, the audience's initial participation quickly died; fifty Dutch yuppies waited passively while Xiao He just sat on stage until fellow musicians Yan Jun and Zhang Jian started singing, in Mandarin, "Time's up, just get off the stage!"

Glorious Pharmacy's collaboration with artists, filmmakers and audiences result in invitations for the band to play at exhibition openings and art festivals. Additionally, Xiao He has acted in experimental theater and in a number of films, including the lead role as watermelon seller in Zhang Yuedong's *Mid-Afternoon Barks* 下午狗叫 (2007) and a cameo in Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* 頤和園 (2006).[53] In most of these productions Xiao He was also involved in the music. He has performed to screenings of silent films on a number of occasions, most often to the Shanghai film *The Goddess* 神女 (1934, d. Wu Yonggang) – for instance, in Brussels in November 2007. Xiao He also invited Zhang Yuedong to create video projections for solo shows between 2007 and 2010, and occasionally for the modern dance group TAO Studio. Finally, A DAOIST FROM LAO MOUNTAIN 嶗山道士, the opening song of *Rumbling Footsteps*, is based on the score and dialogues of an eponymous 1981 clay puppet animation film produced by the state-owned Shanghai Film Studio of Fine Arts.

The only major exception to Xiao He's reflective theatricality is his solo album *Birds that Can Fly High Don't Land on the Backs of Oxen that Can't Run Fast* (2002). This album, a live recording at the Little River bar where Xiao He used to improvise weekly, includes back-

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[53]*Interrogation* 審問記, 2003 by Kang He and *Dialogue and Rebuttal* 對話與反詰, 2006 by Wang Xiaoxin, script by Gao Xingjian.

ground noises of people drinking and applauding. In short, it adheres to the esthetics of folk music, making the show's informal setting and casual audience-interaction explicit, without reflecting on its artificiality and the possibility of the singer playacting. This adherence is partially the result of record company Modern Sky's packaging. To be sure, folk-style make-believe and the trope of the lovelorn starving artist have been important to Xiao He, especially around 2000. Nevertheless, on many other occasions he has challenged folk's clichéd sincerity. In 2007 he recorded Zhou Yunpeng's album *Chinese Children* 中國孩子 in his home studio, adding playful noises to the music of this blind singer/songwriter. A CHILD'S COMMUNIST DREAM 一個兒童的共產主義夢想 starts with applause and Zhou Yunpeng asking: "You're still recording?," to which Xiao He replies "No, not at all," and we hear glasses clinking, people leaving and congratulations on completing the album. Then Zhou sings the first verse. The song ends with a short interview on how many songs they recorded, and so on. On the one hand A CHILD'S COMMUNIST DREAM continues folk's unadorned openness, with Zhou Yunpeng as authentic artist, but on the other hand it reveals the artificiality of the process. The two layers could not happen simultaneously in real time. In sum, the make-believe of *Birds that Can Fly High Don't Land on the Backs of Oxen that Can't Run Fast* is Xiao He's, but should be seen as one of his works among many, most of which expose and complicate make-believe.

Faye Wong's Slip of the Tongue

IDIOTS 白痴 (2001) is the only instance of humor in Faye Wong's oeuvre. Whereas the music is serious, Lam Chik's lyrics contain an intentional mistake that triggers their reading as parody, with a critique of humanity's mad dash for progress as its subtext:

哪怕沒有辦法一定有說法	Even if there's no solution, we can always offer an explanation.
就算沒有鴿子一定有烏鴉	If there are no pigeons, there are always crows.
固執無罪 夢想有價	There's nothing wrong with obstinacy, dreaming has its value...
讓他們驚訝	Let them be surprised!
甚麼海角 甚麼天涯	Whatever corners of the sea, whatever limits of the sky,
明天我要攀越喜瑪拉雅	tomorrow I will climb the Himalayas.
甚麼高樓 甚麼大廈	Skyscrapers, so what? High-rise, so what?
鋼鐵能煉成最幸福的家	Steel can be turned into the happiest families!
我們不傻 我們不傻	We're no fools, we're no fools,
我們偉大 我們不傻	We're the greatest, we're no fools!
昨天比明天要更好沒錯啦	Yesterday will be better than tomorrow, make no mistake...
是明天要更好是我唱錯啦	That's 'Tomorrow will be better'! I just made a mistake.
我們大家 光明正大	Everyone, glory is just and great!
來張開嘴吧	Come on, open your mouths!
嘻嘻哈哈劈哩啪啦	Hihi haha, pili pala ...
只有天才聽懂了我的話	It takes a genius to get what I'm saying.

呼嚕哇喇咿咿呀呀	Yalu waci, yiyi yaya ...
烏鴉的嘴巴從不説臟話	Never did a dirty word leave the crow's mouth.
嘻嘻哈哈劈哩啪啦	Hihi haha, pili pala ...
你們以為我們罵誰來呀	And you thought we came to yell at somebody!
莫非我們的嗓子太邋遢	Could it be that our throats have been too sloppy?

In order to hear IDIOTS as parody, the words need to be understood as antiphrasis, that is, it must be assumed that Faye Wong means the opposite of what she sings. The song's commissioning as the theme song of *Big Shot's Funeral* 大腕 (2001, d. Feng Xiaogang) supports this reading, as the film satirizes commercialism in the PRC. However, without this context the antiphrasis becomes obscure, and the music provides no clue.

Additionally, most mainstream popular music works hard to deny the possibility of a gap between sung words and their subtext. Pop stardom is about true belief. Rather than reflective, the pop singer's interaction with the audience is hyper-make-believe. Wang Leehom addressed the audience when he changed the chorus of SET YOUR HEART FREE 放開你的心 from "Baby, I love you" to "Taipei, I love you" during his Heroes of Earth 蓋世英雄 tour in 2006. The main difference with, say, X.T.X. or Second Hand Rose, who also dress up and address the audience directly, is a sense of duality. Liang Long acknowledges that he plays a role, and Second Hand Rose's music comments on sociopolitical reality, whereas pop stars rarely foreground a dichotomy between the identities and situations of their stardom and those of grim or ordinary reality, to the point that their appearances are egocentric and escapist. This is supported by the typical intermingling of biography, star persona and film roles in fan biographies of Chinese stars, from Zhou Xuan to Leslie Cheung.

Pop stars do explicitly reenact film roles and clips in their live shows. Leslie Cheung, when on stage, referred frequently to his film career (Chapter 3). In his 2007 tour, Jacky Cheung included a short opera based on the film *Perhaps Love* 如果愛 (2005, d. Peter Chan). Jay Chou reenacts parts of his role in *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2002, d. Zhang Yimou) by flying over the audience in golden armor. However, these sequences are self-enclosed make-believe. Only when the scripted song is over and the illusion fades does the singer address the audience, make elaborate comments on the framing of the songs (expensive dresses, thank to choreographers), have a drink and crack jokes. But in these reflective moments the singer performs his or her casual self, and again theatrical duplicity is not made explicit.

This also means that pop stars avoid transgressive emotional displays. Although for instance Jay Chou shows that humor is by no means absent, mainstream pop music remains dominated by the pathos of romantic ballads.[54] Their sentimentalism, or *shanqing* 煽情, is similar to that of mainstream films and TV programs, such as *Titanic* (1997, d. James Cameron), Korean drama series (*Hallyu* 韓流, from 2000) and the final appeals of the contestants of *Super Girl*

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[54] A number of Chou's lyrics contain playfulness and humor, most notably OLD INDIAN TURTLEDOVE 印地安老斑鳩 (2000), WILLIAM'S CASTLE 威廉古堡 (2001), MILAN'S LITTLE BLACKSMITH 米蘭的小鐵匠 (2002), CHAOTIC DANCE SPRING AUTUMN 亂舞春秋 (2004), NONSENSICAL 扯 (2007), MR. MAGIC 魔术先生 (2008) and UNCLE JOKER 乔克叔叔 (2008). Additionally, S.H.E.'s EXCUSE 借口 is a parody of Chou's LISTEN TO YOUR MOTHER 听妈妈的话. Cf. Moskowitz 2010:95-99.

(2005) to SMS voters.[55] Additionally, there is a tradition of weeping songs and (semi-)professionalized wailers at Chinese weddings and funerals, and during physical labor. However, whereas traditional ceremonies and popular audiovisual works dramatize the *act* of crying, related pop songs and popular music in general rarely feature its sound (even though 'tear' and 'crying' are its most frequently used words). Andy Lau doesn't cry in his hit song MEN, CRY FOR IT'S NO SIN 男人哭吧不是罪 (2000). In the rare examples of Pu Shu's THOSE FLOWERS 那些花 (1999) and David Tao's THE MOON OVER YOUR HEART (2002) it is not the singer who sobs, but an absent lover. These songs do not relive crying or show it, but comment on it. Popular music seems to present an otherworldly, almost cartoonesque realm, in which tears and violence only exist in a transfigured and estheticized way. The star persona exists in this virtual world, but is also restricted to it. Apparently it is a convention that tears render this otherwise sentimental world ridiculous, too traumatically real and/or no longer make-believable. I will now turn to this virtual world.

§3   Extraordinary Spaces

So far, I have focused on the boundary between musician and audience, and on how artists negotiate this relation by assuming various roles, ranging from the transgressive hooligan and clown to the make-believe troubadour and star. Instead of a bipartite structure of actor and audience, I will now take a step back to consider the tripartite structure of stage, theater space and ordinary world. The theater space is a heterotopia, structurally outside ordinary hegemony. I will investigate the dynamics between ordinary and extraordinary reality in cinema, soundscapes and discos. How does music create space?

Film Music

Swordsman 笑傲江湖 (1990, d. King Hu) is the first film in a trilogy supervised by Tsui Hark and based on Jin Yong's martial arts novel *The Smiling Proud Wanderer* 笑傲江湖 (1967). It starts with rapid strumming of a pipa to a black screen. This is followed by a framing title, "During the Wanli period of the Ming dynasty," on a background of iridescent clouds. The silence of the night accompanies images of embroidering and candlelight. Then we hear the low sound of a gong as more titles explain the location as the imperial library. Erratic pipa plucking creates tension, as we see, but do not hear, the embroiderer pass out. The first on-screen sound is the fluttering of a cape as we see a hazy shot of a nightly thief flying over roof tops. Dry clicks provide sync points with the opening of a drawer and the theft of a sacred scroll. The ambient sound of the wind, visually translated by the flickering of candlelight, is enmeshed in a low drone as the highly-skilled thief escapes in the night.

Most action scenes in *Swordsman* are similarly accompanied by anxiety-provoking acoustic strumming and plucking, with the lengthier scenes elaborated into strikingly independent folk tunes (arranged by Romeo Díaz). Visually, the superhuman abilities of the martial arts masters are illustrated with special effects, including groundbreaking shots of acrobatic flying. Exaggerated sounds, such as the fluttering in the opening scene, serve to render these images – hazy and shot from unexpected angles – continuous and make-believable. Given sound's preci-
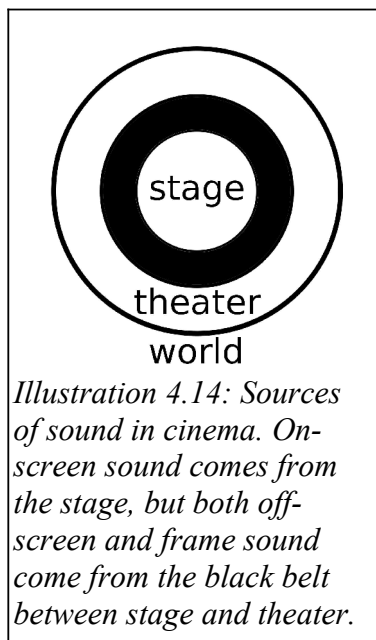
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[55] Wu 2008.

sion, it is also used to punctuate sword stabs and gunshots, many of whose visuals are absent or unclear.[56]

Just like the special sound effects discussed above, dialogues are typically on-screen. The 'magnetic effect' of on-screen images is strong enough to let the lip-synching go almost unnoticed, even in the case of the main culprit, a eunuch played by a male actor (Shun Lau) but with a female voice.[57]

Despite the abundance of pipa-based folk music, *Swordsman* is dominated by the pentatonic melody of the

Illustration 4.13: Ling (Sam Hui) and Yue (Cicilia Yip) in Swordsman.

theme song HERO OF HEROES 滄海一聲笑. Composed by James Wong, the song became an instant hit across Asia after the film's release.[58] Its melody appears numerous times throughout the film, usually slowed down and with a broad synthesizer sound. It is loosely associated with lead character Ling (played by Sam Hui) and the stolen scroll. At a few points the song becomes on-screen music. The first time is when Ling learns it from two martial arts masters as they are being pursued over water (0' 30' 40-0' 33' 10). Their intoxicating and heartfelt singing is violently

Illustration 4.14: Sources of sound in cinema. On-screen sound comes from the stage, but both off-screen and frame sound come from the black belt between stage and theater.

interrupted by a fierce battle in which the old friends suffer fatal wounds while protecting each other. After their narrow escape they repeat the song, now tragically, and bid the world farewell (0' 37' 08-0' 38' 40). Later, a drugged Ling repeats a condensed version of these scenes (1' 15' 44-1' 17' 44). Finally, part of the plot of *Swordsman* circles around the confusion of the score of HERO OF HEROES and the stolen martial arts scroll. Ling plays the song to his sect leader to prove this scroll is a mere score, while ironically commenting on the loss of brotherhood in a power-drunk world (1' 38' 50-1' 39' 53). During all of these instances the song starts on-screen, with a zither or lute as accompaniment. If the lip-synching is convincing to begin with, it definitely ceases to be so when percussion and orchestra join after the second verse.[59]

In this analysis I have introduced a terminology borrowed from the French composer and film music theorist Michel Chion, who distinguishes between on-screen and off-screen sound, and

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[56] Chion 1994:60-61.

[57] This, as well as the cross-dressing of the sect leader's daughter Kiddo (played by the singer Cecilia Yip), prepares the critically acclaimed gender ambiguity of the sequel, *Swordsman II: Asia the Invincible* 笑傲江湖之東方不敗 (1992, d. Tsui Hark,).

[58] Both in its Cantonese version, sung by Wong, Tsui Hark and Sam Hui, and its Mandarin version, sung by Wong, Hark and Lo Ta-yu.

[59] Chion 1994:80-81.

what I will call 'frame sound' in the present context. On-screen sound relates to events that are visible on the screen, such as dialogue. Off-screen sound is equally part of stage reality or diegesis, but relates to events that are not visible, such as a train that has not yet arrived or debris that lands behind the audience after an explosion. By contrast, frame sound, such as voice-over and musical underscoring, is not part of stage reality because the story's characters do not hear it. Therefore it also called non-diegetic sound.[60] On the other hand, it also doesn't belong to theater reality in the same way that, for instance, applause after the screening does. The intermediacy of the sound score is evidenced by the orchestra that in early 20th century America was seated in a pit between the screen (stage reality) and the audience (theater reality). The temporary plot-suspending power of HERO OF HEROES further illustrates the intermediary state of the music. Moreover, in *Swordsman* the song signifies utopia. In the final analysis this relates to the film's undermining of realism and strict chronology, partly inspired by storytelling.

Faye Wong in Wong Kar-wai's Cinema

Ever since 1930s Shanghai, the exchange of personnel, sounds and images between Chinese popular music and cinema has been the norm across the board. This is clearest in the films of Wong Kar-wai. First I will consider the theatricality of Wong Kar-wai's films, paying special attention to Faye Wong. Then I will discuss how these film roles are integrated into Faye Wong's star persona.

Botz-Bornstein describes Wong Kar-wai's characters as dandies who refuse to grow up and cope with lost love, and hence live in an almost virtual manga world:

> Wong's characters stroll aimlessly through urban settings like dandies. And like dandies, they are neither opposed to their capitalist environment nor fully integrated into it, but "play the game" of urban life in a strangely indifferent way, developing … an unreal, dreamlike mode of existence.[61]

Wong Kar-wai alienates and stylizes realistic people, daily objects, geographic locations and historic dates and reframes them in dreamlike comic-book settings. This setting maintains the make-believe and self-contained nature of cinema's fourth wall, but is itself, just like manga and Peking Opera, explicitly not realistic or mimetic but stylized and abstract. Flashbacks and flashforwards, the characters' imaginations and their parts in the plot they share are difficult to disentangle. The frame sound of voice-over and music is exceptionally important in structuring Wong Kar-wai's cinematic language.

Faye Wong's roles in Wong Kar-wai's films are named after her: Ah Faye 阿菲 in *Chungking Express* 重慶森林 (1994) and Shirley Wong 王靖雯 in *2046* (2005). Ah Faye works the cash register of her uncle's fast-food stand, frequently to the sound of CALIFORNIA DREAMING by the Mamas & the Papas, which signifies her adventurous and absentminded nature.[62] The song is playing when Cop 633 (played by Tony Leung) slowly walks up to the fast-food counter. It only

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[60] Paraphrasing Chion 1994:73.
[61] Botz-Bornstein 2008:99.
[62] Takeshi Keneshiro comments on his first encounter with Ah Faye in a voice-over to a sequence of freeze frames (0'39'00), which is the model for Stephen Chow time-freeze scene in his *Journey to the West in Brag*.

turns out to be on-the-air sound when the two of them need to shout to make themselves under-stood: "Do you like loud music?" "Yes, the louder the better."

Ah Faye falls in love with Cop 633 and manages to get hold of the keys to his apartment. [63] She defines her first invasion of his apartment as a dream in her only moment of voice-over. The scene starts with a meta-reflective joke in which the shop owner tells an Indian employee not to daydream of becoming a pop star, and to stop using a radish as a microphone (0'59' 30). "Radishes are to eat." He then goes over to Ah Faye, who is resting her head on her palms and rolling her eyes:

> Owner: "And you?"
> Ah Faye: "Me? I'm not dreaming."
> Owner: "That's right, you're not dreaming. Just sleepwalking."
> Ah Faye: "Yes... Sleepwalking, that must be it."
> Ah Faye [*voice-over*]: "That afternoon I dreamed that I went to his home. When I left that house, I thought I would wake up. Who knows, from some dreams you never wake up."

Not only does this scene poke fun at Faye Wong's stardom – the Indian is singing into his radish-mike as she narrates – it also positions Cop 633's apartment as a dreamlike playground for a childishly mischievous Ah Faye. Ah Faye's dishwashing gloves and her favorite song protect her in this 'male space' (1' 04' 10),[64] but only when we hear Faye Wong singing DREAM PERSON 夢中

Illustration 4.15: Ah Faye (Faye Wong) in Chungking Express.

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[63] Faye polishes a glass window behind which Cop 633 is standing, as if to caress him (43'30). Then cut to Faye polishing a pieces of glass in front of the camera with Cop 633 in the back, as if to caress the camera.
[64] Yeh 2005:133.

人 does she take over completely, putting her own slippers under the couch and sleeping pills in Cop 633's drinking water, adding fish to the aquarium, dressing in a stewardess outfit belonging to his ex-girlfriend, changing the wrappings of canned food, throwing a mock tantrum when she finds a long hair in his bed, and eventually deleting a call from his ex-girlfriend from his answering machine (1' 07' 20-1' 11' 30). DREAM PERSON, a cover of a Cranberries song, features again during the end credits. Its lyrics play with the uncertainty and excitement of having a dream lover,

which could be what Cop 633 is to Ah Faye and vice versa, and finally what the audience is to Faye Wong. There is even a two-second MTV-like shot in which Faye Wong looks directly into the camera and shakes her head to the music, as if to say: "Yes, it is a dream, but I am a star"(0' 08' 31).

Whereas music is usually secondary to the plot – enhancing its make-believability, adding to the tension and tragedy of its events – in these four minutes the music dictates the rhythm and content of the images. Wong Kar-wai does not interrupt the song to make it suit the images, but edits the images to fit the song's

Illustration 4.16: Ah Faye (Faye Wong) in Chungking Express.

length.[65] In general, Wong Kar-wai's unconventional use of music feeds into his virtual, manga-like film style. In many scenes it never becomes clear how much is real, in the sense that they happen in the shared cinematic reality of the actors, and how much happens inside the individual imagination of each of them. Both Cop 633 taking sleeping pills and the role-switching at the end, where he has become the owner of the fast-food stand and Ah Faye has become a stewardess, are hard to believe, even within the film.

Wong Kar-wai in Faye Wong's Stardom

Stars such as Faye Wong appear in a variety of media, such as cinema, studio recordings, live shows and celebrity talk shows. These media have different conventions concerning authenticity and the relationship between actor and performed role. Film roles may impair the make-believability of Faye Wong's ballads. Can Faye Wong's stardom hold these elements together?

Brian Hu argues that Hong Kong pop audiences' knowledge of stars underlies "The KTV Aesthetic" (2006) that integrates music albums, tabloids, TV shows and films. According to Hu, intertextual connections among these media should be taken as deliberate attempts to appeal to the audience's prior cultural knowledge. For instance, when Andy Lau plays a dance instructor in *Dance of a Dream* 愛君如夢 (2001, d. Wai Keung Lau) and parodies a song and choreography of Leslie Cheung, so stepping outside the plot, it "does not break the fantasy of the story since that fantasy had already included the audience's extra-cinematic experiences of Lau from the

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[65] "As soon as the song begins ... the mobile camera sheds its status as the observer of a scene, and begins to express the character's inner world" (Hu 2006: 420). See Yeh 2005:136 on Wong Kar-wai's use of music.
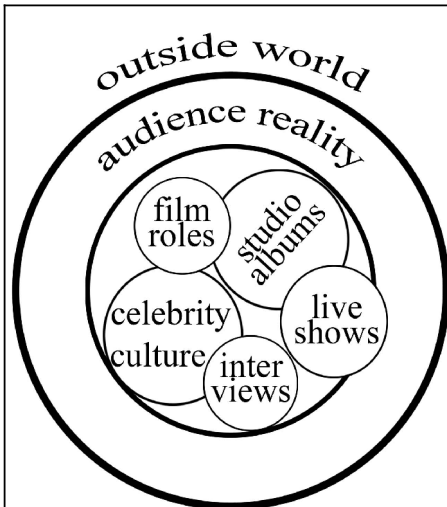
Illustration 4.17: Precursory overview of pop stardom. Audience reality exceeds well-defined theater spaces and mixes with public space.

very start of the film."[66] A subtler example would be Sam Hui's performance of HERO OF HEROES in *Swordsman*, as he also has a singing career.

   Although Faye Wong's roles in Wong Kar-wai's films borrow from her biography, these roles also diverge from her star persona in playful ways, for instance by presenting her as a waitress and air hostess. Ah Faye's behavior, including her eventual trip to California, is perfectly comprehensible within the film's narrative, but at the same time such subtextual connections implicate contemporary Chinese audiences who most likely know about Faye Wong's stay in the USA in 1991-1992. In short, the film role enhances rather than compromises her make-believability as a singer because it presents an additional appearance that carries fans away in an autonomous dream world. Meta-reflectiveness involves fans through intimate references to Faye Wong's career, and thus serves to strengthen hyper-make-believe. Additionally, as I have argued in Chapter 3, the suggestion of a private, true self within or behind the public image is important to Faye Wong's star persona. Ah Faye is a relatively rounded screening of that private, true self.

Jay Chou's Sound Effects

In Chapter 2 I noted that Jay Chou's albums are carefully planned to encompass a wide range of potential genres, including hip-hop, country & western, the Chinese Wind and Latin, and that some albums are packaged around the imagery of one musical and/or lyrical theme: these include the modern soldier of *Common Jasmin Orange* 七里香 (2004), the kung fu master of the EP *Huo Yuen Chia* 霍元甲 (2006), the imperial soldier of the EP *Golden Armour* 黃金甲 (2006), the cowboy of *On the Run* (2007) and the magician-cum-joker of *Capricorn* 魔杰座 (2008). Ad-

ditionally, Chou has presented himself as gentle-*wen-rou* lover, sports car racer, basketball player and classical pianist. Album titles such as *Fantasy* (2001, the English title is transliterated rather than translated in Chinese), *The Eight Dimensions* (2002, literally 'octave space'), *Still Fantasy* 依然范特西 (2006) and *The Era* 跨時代 (2010, literally 'transcending eras') suggest that Chou's music provides access to an extraordinary and magical world.

   Like the multiple personas of such stars as the 'ever-changing' 百變 Anita Mui, Chou's adoption of diverse personas can be seen as a form of costume play, a term abbreviated and disseminated by the Japanese as 'cosplay' or simply 'cos.' Although cos-

Illustration 4.18: Jay Chou on a promotional poster for his 2008 album Capricorn.

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[66] Hu 2006: 414.

play potentially threatens make-believability by exposing a star's artificiality, in general this effect is neutralized by Chinese pop's hyper-make-believe. In the case of Jay Chou, unwanted reflectiveness is subdued by those of his roles that are rooted in his biography, in addition to subtextual connections to his family, and songs such as BESIEGED FROM ALL SIDES 四面楚歌 (2005), which reenacts his antagonism with the tabloid press. This tension is played out in the first feature film Chou directed, *Secret* 不能説的祕密 (2007). It combines details from his biography with a romantic ghost story. Whereas the romance renders Chou's mundane piano lessons magical, vice versa its subtextual references – Chou playing his younger self – render the love story make-believable. These constructions suggest that Chou can adopt different identities if he so wishes while remaining himself and in control.

Jay Chou's interest in film started with the album *Ye Hui Mei* 葉惠美 (2003), named after his mother. Many of its songs include sound effects and samples that suggest cinematic images. The opening track of *Ye Hui Mei*, IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER 以父之名, suggests a mafia film, with Italian prayers, opera singing and gunshots. These sounds, as well as the dripping rain of YOU CAN HEAR 妳聽得到, constitute another layer that differs from the music 'itself.' If one were to consider these songs as film soundtracks, this layer is off-screen sound that is part of (invisible) stage reality. The music highlights the make-believe narrative that evolves in the world of the sound effects.

Typically, the off-screen sound effects take center stage in the transitional frames of intro, bridge and outro. THIRD YEAR SECOND CLASS 三年二班 starts with ping-pong balls, a school bell and a public announcement, suggesting a high school campus. Then, echoing scenes in which a theme played on an on-screen zither is picked up by the pit orchestra (as in *Swordsman*), the ping-pong balls of THIRD YEAR SECOND CLASS fall into the rhythm of the music.[67] Their erratic yet rhythmic sounds even play the solo in the bridge (2' 10-3' 30), ending in a harp arpeggio. In short, these sounds oscillate between make-believe stage-reality and frame reflectiveness.

Similarly, DOUBLE BLADE 雙刀 gradually integrates samples of sword fights into its music. Although the song contains sounds of fist fights earlier on, the hyperbolic sword clashes are only introduced halfway through (2' 36-3' 00), accompanied by the main theme played on wind instruments and strings in half-time to give it the typical feel of martial arts film music. After this transitional bridge, there is a short stop a few measures later (3' 38-3' 40), before the sword-fighting sounds are fully integrated into the rest of the music, contributing to the song's finale.

Although the imagery of kung fu was most likely part of DOUBLE BLADE from an early phase of planning by Chou's record company Alfa Music, in the end the music was completed prior to the video clip. Translating this to logical priority, the cinema sounds should not be seen as a soundtrack to an invisible film, but as illustrating the general idea of the song and materializing images presented in the lyrics. The video clip of DOUBLE BLADE does not reenact the precise acts audible in the songs, but superimposes additional layers of on-screen and off-screen sounds. Alexi Tan made a 13-minute film out of material shot in Los Angeles for this song, and eventually made two clips of this. In the first, Jay Chou walks the streets with a young Chinese-looking boy, with the kung fu sounds only relating to the comic book the boy reads. At the end of this clip, which is the intro of the second version, a criminal gang abducts the boy. The second, most

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[67] Chion 1994:80.

widely viewed clip consists of over-the-top fight scenes in which Jay Chou defeats the gang and rescues the boy.

These fight scenes add numerous points at which we both see and hear swords clashing in perfect synchronization. Besides the intro and outro that contain on-screen dialogue, there are two points at which the music is interrupted for several seconds to add tension and drama to the visual narrative: an opponent going down after taking a blow, or new opponents entering. However, the sword-fighting sounds of the original sound recording remain invisible. This gives them an awkward status in the diagram based on Chion's classification of sounds: they are not really part of the music, but their status as off-screen sounds is also no longer tenable (see Illustration 4.19).[68]

Illustration 4.19: Preliminary overview of the spaces suggested by the sounds in the video clip DOUBLE BLADE.

Soundscapes

In 2008, the luxury fashion brand Louis Vuitton commissioned the New York-based new media company *Soundwalk* to produce audio guides to Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong. These guides are in effect the soundtracks of invisible films. The website www.louisvuittonsoundwalk.com offers maps and three ten-minute audio guides through the three metropolises with voice-overs by actresses Gong Li, Joan Chen and Shu Qi respectively, and also offers the visitor the opportunity to purchase the full 60-minute version. One difference from Jay Chou's albums is the centrality of audience participation: fashionable young people are intended to listen to the recordings on their mobile music devices while actually taking the tours. The sound of the voice-overs is typically low, dry and near, and enhances intimacy by the actresses introducing themselves and consistently addressing the listener as "you."

> Have you arrived at the Mansion Hotel? Find yourself a seat and sit down. Can you get me a cup of tea? Thank you. [*pause, slow cello music*] I am Joan Chen. I'm an actress, and also a director. I was born in Shanghai. I'm meeting you today because I am going to tell you a love story, a beautiful story. Like so many love stories, it is full of hope and despair.

The narratives are devised to carry listeners away in nostalgia the same way that an old photo album might do, as they tell of romances that once (might have) developed in these locations. A layer of light music by Kubert Leung and Albert Yu adds sentimentality and drama. Authenticating street sounds, such as the opening of doors, footsteps on the pavement and a bustling café with high ceilings, present a third layer that resembles off-screen sound.
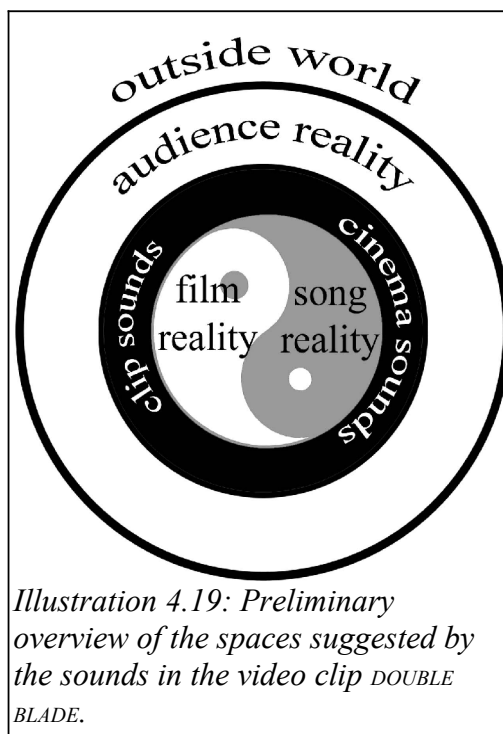
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[68] Chou continued this technique on subsequent albums, most notably in the Disney beginning and helicopter blades of MY TERRITORY 我的地盤(2004), the touch-tone phone dialing of BLUE STORM 藍色風暴 (2005), radio static noise of NOCTURNES 夜曲 (2005), camera shutter sounds of BESIEGED FROM ALL SIDES (2005) and short dialogues before songs.

Acoustic ecology projects rarely contain voice-overs. Whereas Jay Chou provides a focal point in his multiplicities, both in image (face) and in sound (lead melody), the author of the soundscape retreats into the background to make way for relatively anarchic, un-orchestrated and ordinary reality. However, in liner notes, on websites and through other frames, these projects are often connected to outside reality, such as the preservation and reevaluation of old, lower-class neighborhoods in Ou Ning's *Da Zhalan* 大栅栏 (from 2005, Beijing), Yan Jun's *Qiu Jiang Lu* 虬江路 (2008, Shanghai), and Anson Mak's soundscapes in Kwun Tong 官塘(2009, 2010, Hong Kong).

This trend started with *Sound and the City: City – Sound Environment* (2007), which consists of a book and two CDs. It was the result of cooperation between British and Chinese sound artists in 2005 and 2006, including Yan Jun, Zafka, Brian Eno, David Toop, Peter Cusack and Clive Bell. The first CD consists of sounds submitted by residents of Beijing, Chongqing, Guangzhou and Shanghai. Its recordings of newspaper hawkers, knife-grinders, subway announcements and singing school children are remarkably effective in evoking space, both in terms of location and in terms of movement across different coordinates, near and far. This illustrates what Chion calls causal listening, listening for the source of sound production, sometimes aided by verbal and visual frames. A respondent described her favorite sound:

> When I was a kid, I often took a walk with my grandparents on the street near the Liberation Monument, and we would drown in the hubbub of the chatting around us and the merchants' hawking. Only when the bell on the monument rang did I realize that I had entered another world: an elegant, quiet and serene place, a shangri-la 桃源 induced by the bell's sound. Listening to this celestial sound became the joy of my childhood. My childhood memories were carved into that bell sound.[69]

The second CD, consisting of commissioned works, as well as Laurent Jeanneau's *Soundscape China* 音景中國 (2007), draws more attention to the recording and mixing processes. Li Qiang, who accompanied Robert Jarvis in Chongqing, recounts:

> Robert played back the recording [we made during the day] to us in the night club. It was fantastic. All the notes have an uncertain quality to them, the bell, the phone, the trombone, the duck... but you could feel the emotional shifts. Robert explained to us that he had employed a lot of modern technologies, such as splitting the original sound into numerous tiny little notes, dispersing them and putting them back together. I can't believe these are the sounds we encounter everyday, and that, with Robert's processing, these sounds can become so magical as to move beyond the usual sense of sounding good.[70]

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[69] Wu Yu'an about Chongqing, in British Council 2008:160.
[70] British Council 2008:116.

Sound recording divorces sounds from their sources. Although audiences often do not see the production of sound in, say, a telephone conversation or a studio album, these sounds still suggest visual and haptic events.[71]

The sound of water is instantly recognizable, highly versatile and teeming with (localized) cultural meaning. In 1960s and 1970s 'happenings' and the Fluxus movement, water sounds represented indeterminacy and ancient Asian wisdom.[72] In the PRC, it suggests the eternal flow of time, or at least it has done so since Shen Congwen's 1934 essay "History is a River" 歷史是一條河 made this expression a commonplace. On *Journey to the East* 東游記 (2006) FM3 member Zhang Jian plays samples of a quayside to Wuna's guqin playing (part two, 20:35-27:25). The combination creates the impression of a traditional Chinese *shanshuihua* 山水畫 'landscape painting' – literally, a 'mountain and water painting.'[73] The vastness of the water surface contrasts with the fragile human figure presented by the guqin. A distant foghorn occasionally heard in the sample subtly connects the music with the contemporary reality of Shanghai as one of the world's largest cargo ports. The sounds of rustling water in Wang Fan's *Five Primary Elements* 五行 (2006) have more obviously been manipulated, as the sound stays mostly in the higher treble regions. In the works of Huan Qing and especially Wang Changcun, water sounds are still more abstract. The mimetic link retreats to the background and gives way to a play between the individuality of repetitive but well-defined waves and the collectivity of sustained fluttering and noise that arises out of these individual events.

Since 2007, Xiao He has used a MIDI keyboard that produces water sounds in different keys during improvisations, with the loudness and duration of the bubbling depending on how hard he presses the keys. This theatrical frame conflicts with the audience's prior knowledge of the source and behavior of the sounds and thus creates a playful effect, which Xiao He then contrasts with, for instance, repetitive, echoey guitar-picking that sound like waves, and a MIDI-generated trombone solo. In this particular performance, recorded in 2008 and included as SHUI18 on Xiao He's live improvisation album *The Performance of Identity*, the visual projections of slow-motion waterfalls, tornadoes and clouds in dark green tones support the serene atmosphere of human fragility. Like Chinese landscape painting, these sounds comment on water and mountains, rather than imitating them. Although, again, the author takes on a stronger presence through the explicit manipulation of sound, these waves suggest a multiplicity of positions and identities.

Going Out

Karaoke oscillates between make-believe, unscripted performance and reflectiveness. It is make-believe because, just as in live shows by pop stars, fans immerse themselves completely in the event and dream of being a star, *that* star. It is unscripted performance because stage reality is permeable, as everyone takes a turn at the microphone; indeed, karaoke parlors provide additional microphones and percussion instruments, as well as alcohol, to secure maximum participation. But although the audience may be a close circle of friends (if there is an audience at all), and

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[71] Chion quoted in Smalley 2007:39, cf. Auslander 1999:85-87.
[72] Kahn 1999: 243-288.
[73] Additionally, the indie record label Shanshui promotes experimental electronic music.

there may be no conventional stage, the microphone, and the reverb-drowned singing voice it produces, frame the performance as a theatrical event. Finally, it is reflective because sometimes these frames may be explicit – for instance, when someone parodies a singer, or his or her own superiors. If seen as reflective, karaoke ceases to be about becoming the star, and is instead about appropriating songs and roles to one's own repertoire, in which case the distance between the original and its karaoke rendition should be audible.

In the midst of these oscillations, which Jeroen de Kloet calls "multivocal opacity," karaoke remains an *extra*-ordinary thing, similar to the carnival experience as read by Mikhail Bakhtin:[74]

> All were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age.[75]

Just like carnival, the *extra*-ordinariness of discos is defined by their architectural, social and temporal frames – a town square or a club behind closed doors, the week before Lent or a Saturday night. Unlike carnival, disco does not entail the complete reversal or (temporal) suspension of power and identity. Whereas Bakhtin argues that "footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance,"[76] the footlights of disco are fragmented, but not altogether absent.

In his book on youth sex culture and market reform in Shanghai, James Farrer writes:

> Dance halls distort the visual and sonic space around the individual, creating intimacy, fragmenting social interactions, and making overt sexual display and play acceptable and ritualised, as if performed by someone else.[77]

Discotheques, clubs, dance halls and bars offer opportunities for transgressing proper boundaries, but (re)create inequalities too – and what is at stake is prestige, the feeling of being desirable and, occasionally, sex. Farrer:

> The supposed triviality of dance hall play is its most successful ruse. It is what allows, for instance, a young woman to communicate sexual desire and desirability through dance without "meaning anything" – without revealing her hand. It is what allows married men and women to dance intimately with strangers without admitting to infidelity. [78]

Therefore I disagree with Lu Deping, who places discos in opposition to the serious world of work, career and family. Lu argues that in China legislation and social condemnation force disco into a grey area between regulated and unregulated or illegal societies. Whereas Lu argues for

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[74] De Kloet 2010:135-137.
[75] Bakhtin 1968:10.
[76] Bakhtin 1968:7, cf 265.
[77] Farrer 2002:293.
[78] Farrer 2002:325.

the acceptance of disco, I see liminality as disco's raison d'être.[79] Although repression can be more or less severe, friction between disco and society at large cannot disappear altogether.

Their architecture enables discos to function as heterotopia. The interior design of a disco typically consists of a bar, a DJ stand, a dance floor and sitting areas. In the PRC, the bar is usually a relatively large island in the center of the room, pushing the DJ and dance floor to the wall opposite the entrance. The suspension of propriety on the dance floor – described as ecstasy or 'oceanic' experience – is embedded in social and material frames, such as a cover charge, musical taste, dress code, a number of architectural entrances (sometimes including elevators), wardrobes, and peripheral spaces such as private (karaoke) rooms, bars and rooms for live shows.

The group-oriented nature of Chinese disco-going adds another, social, frame. In his account of high-end clubs in Shanghai, Andrew Field writes:

> While Westerners tend to prefer public drinking along an open bar, overseas and local Chinese tend to prefer the privacy of tables and *baofang* [包房, semi-enclosed private rooms with sofas and curtains on three sides], where they can enjoy the exclusive company of a small group of friends without being disturbed by social pirates. While Westerners tend to prefer beer or mixed drinks, overseas and local Chinese prefer Chivas, XO, Jack Daniels or other brand name drinks that confer high status on their bearers. ... Also, ordering a bottle of whiskey or champagne enables drinking to be a communal experience, shared by the group and often purchased and distributed by the highest-ranking male within the group.[80]

Almost all Chinese discos and many live houses and rock venues offer *baofang*, or at least designate a 'consumption area' where customers have to spend a minimum amount per table. [81] The spaces of nightlife in the 2000s are almost as stratified as the teahouse theater of the early 1900s, where "you are where you sit."[82] Both the table tenders of the traditional teahouse theater and the floor managers of the 1990s club needed to recognize customers and seat them according to their status.[83] Drinking games common in these rooms are another similarity.[84] Additionally, the success of private KTV *baofang* over public karaoke further attests to the importance of social groups to Chinese nightlife.

Despite the lack of private spaces, group-oriented partying is recognizable at open-air concerts too. In these more open and carnivalesque settings, communal dancing prevails. In addition to occasional stage-diving and crowd-surfing, fans form congas, dance in circles or engage

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[79] "The true meaning of interpreting disco is not restricted to scholarly research. It's more important that we acknowledge that disco is an art [form], a cultural [expression], a part of our lives. It cannot eternally remain in limbo and play the part of hermaphrodite, it must transcend the boundaries of social taboo and help open up non-artistic spaces within daily, regulated society" (Lu 2007:135).
[80] Field 2008:32-33.
[81] Lu 2007:140.
[82] Goldstein 2007:63-69. The map that Goldstein provides alongside his account of these Peking Opera venues shows *baoxiang* 包厢 ,'box seats,' on the first floor and a variety of seats on the ground floor.
[83] Goldstein 2007:70-71, Field 2008:37.
[84] Field 2008:36.

in a bizarre practice in which ten or twenty people run away from the stage, pushing everyone aside, and then run back again.

Teahouses and rock festivals are notoriously noisy, but the stage provides a focus. Dance floors and mosh pits offer alternative focal points for onlookers.[85] To the participants, the moments of physical proximity and loud music in the arena come closest to Bakhtian egalitarianism. But even on the dance floor and in the mosh pit there are rules and territories, evidenced by the occasional brawl.[86] In the carnivalesque, unscripted performance of the disco, boundaries between stage and venue and between audience and actor become porous and fade, while those between the venue and the ordinary world gain in importance. On the whole, discos dissolve some social differences, but outside-world social status remains visible.

§4   Concluding Remarks

Almost all theater events discussed in this chapter show a degree of reflectiveness, regardless of their media – live show, studio recording or film appearance. The impression that reflectiveness is relatively dominant in Chinese popular music can be associated with the reflectiveness of traditional Chinese stage traditions, the stylized esthetics of martial arts novels and manga comics, and the permeability of dream and reality in Oriental philosophy. However, given the importance of credibility and make-believe in mainstream pop, I submit that it is characterized instead by that specific mixture and style of reflectiveness and make-believe which is typical of a location at a given time. For instance, engrossed listeners of romantic ballads may block out reflectiveness and be oblivious to who is singing and to the semantic content of the lyrics. Michel Chion, following Pierre Schaeffer, calls this 'reduced listening.'[87] To Chion, reduced listening takes the sound as the object to be observed instead of as a vehicle for something else.

However, at the same time the song may be a cover and thus offer the possibility of reflecting on its differences with the original or with other covers. These differences, and larger overviews of the scene, open possibilities for discussing the artificiality of star personas. Daniel Wu's 'mockumentary' *The Heavenly Kings* 四大天王(2006) exposes this artificiality by following the boy band Alive, including their attempts to create success through scandal. Wu juxtaposes these scenes with interviews with cantopop stars that support his case. When the film was released, the Hong Kong
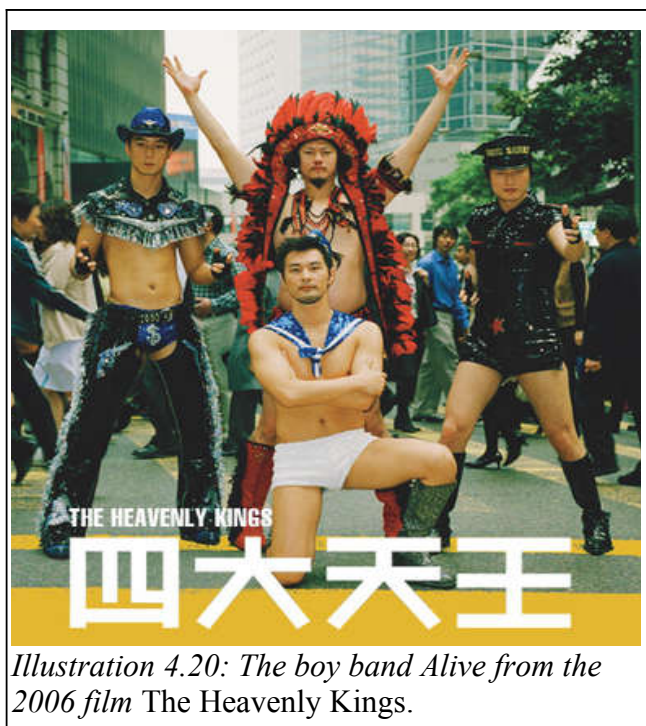

Illustration 4.20: The boy band Alive from the 2006 film The Heavenly Kings.

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[85] The arena is called *wuchi* 舞池 'dance pool' (Lu 2006:140), which is similar to the *chizi* 池子 'pool' of Peking Opera. Field argues that the basic principle of Chinese clubbing is that 'people enjoy being crowded into a tight place' (Field 2008:23).

[86] See my account of X.T.X.'s show above, and Farrer 2002:309-310.

[87] Chion 1994:29.

tabloid press was displeased at being duped into promoting a boy band that had never been serious. However, far from being shocked, Hong Kong audiences seemed to have decided long ago to block out the artificiality of their celebrities.

In other words, mainstream pop is hyper-make-believe. Following the argument of Adam B. Seligman in *Ritual and its Consequences* (2008), I would argue that, like ritual, mainstream pop music creates a subjunctive, an 'as if' or 'could be' universe that helps make sense of erratic lived experience (the 'real,' in Lacanian terms) by editing it into a socially endorsed narrative (the big Other):

> The subjunctive world of ritual resides in inherent tension with such a broken world, and such a subjunctive world is at least implicitly understood to be limited and temporary. Ritual, then, involves the endless work of building, refining, and rebuilding webs of relationships in an otherwise fragmented world. The work of ritual ceaselessly builds a world that, for brief moments, creates pockets of order, pockets of joy, pockets of inspiration. … Once ritual is viewed in this way … we come to realize that ritual is something that is happening to some extent all the time, in the most seemingly common, mundane aspects of our lives.[88]

Near the other end of the scale of theatrical explicitness, Xiao He and Top Floor Circus make attempts at subjunctive universes explicit. They reveal that subjunctive universes are make-believe, not in the sense that they are not true, but in the sense that they are piecemeal, require constant work, and involve choices. Nevertheless, even though their shows can render staged events relatively accessible, spontaneous and 'ordinary,' ultimately their frames, including the venue and their musicality, prevent them from becoming so mundane that they are non-theatrical. Although all music is indeed theatrical, in their uneventfulness and radical democracy, soundscapes occasionally and temporarily shed frames, cease to be music and move into a no-man's land beyond theatricality.

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[88] Seligman 2008:180. Cf. Seligman 2008:7, 20.