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## **The performance of identity in Chinese popular music**

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### **Citation**

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

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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

# Chapter 5: Organizing Music

## §1 Evolution

“Huh-ooohw,” hovers an unstable, low male voice, “huh-eeehw.” A sudden Mountain-Song-like movement lifts the melody to a high pitch: like a rubber band stretched and then released, the voice howls: “ee-oo.” It remains high, but the volume now wavers and decreases, into a nasal falsetto. “li-ih-i-i,” on the last bit of breath. Silence again, a loud sigh “whiii,” followed by high, barely audible, “e-e-e” sounds. Low again: “whoo-oo-ee.” The melody now jumps back and forth between almost painfully high and low registers, while simultaneously working the overtones through changes of the vowel. Silence, another sigh, followed by a glissando. The sixth phrase is relatively conventional – a few drawn-out high notes with only microtonal fluctuations, briefly interrupted by a sudden dive into lower registers. Then the glockenspiel enters with a quiet tremolo.

*On Taoism* 道极 (1985) begins with composer Tan Dun singing the germ cell of the composition. A bass clarinet and bass bassoon take turns developing the melodic line provided by the voice, rendering the music almost monophonic: a single calligraphic-melodic line divided over the three solo instruments employs a palette of tone-colors on a canvas of strings.<sup>1</sup> The seven phrases of the opening, the seventh accompanied by the glockenspiel, also foreshadow the division of the thirteen-minute composition into seven parts. Variations of the vocal ‘refrain’ mark transitions between the composition’s noncentric fields – ‘verses’ in which sounds seem to meander more or less without direction – and its clusters, in which the music becomes dense, erupting in volume and speed.<sup>2</sup>

Tan Dun is trained in Western art music, and *On Taoism* resonates with its esthetics. In the words of Richard Middleton:

For traditional Western music aesthetics, as it emerged from the Enlightenment period, the individuality of each successive work should aim to guarantee what the artist’s creative method is set upon, namely, a means of exploring, modeling, representing *development* – personal, social, technical. This *Bildungsroman* mentality, not without power, still, even in pop music criticism, gave rise in the nineteenth century to two predominant interpretative models: music being related to *narrative*, on the one hand, [and] *organicism* on the other, with both cases governed by the Leitmotif of evolutionary change.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter I will focus on the evolutionary production of Chinese popular music. I use *evolutionary* to refer to any process that repeatedly goes through reproduction, variation and selection. These three steps also inform the division of this chapter in three main sections. Chinese popular music is made by reproducing sounds, varying songs and selecting stars.

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<sup>1</sup> Kouwenhoven 1991:14, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Utz 2002: 373-6, see also Mittler 1997:355.

<sup>3</sup> Middleton 2006:149.

## Organic Pieces

Let me first briefly outline my approach. In the above quote from Middleton's *Voicing the Popular* (2006), evolutionary change means progress, "a sense that time has a direction." In this chapter, rather than the teleology of organicism and Social Darwinism, evolution implies change beyond and often at odds with the pursuits of (individual) human beings. Furthermore, I will argue that *On Taoism* shows that the creativity and originality of art music do not shield it from the modest reproductions, variations and selections of evolutionary change, and indeed that art music performs the possibility of an evolutionary approach to music that focuses on change rather than progress.

*On Taoism* was inspired by funeral rituals and weeping songs from Hunan Province. Tan Dun recalls traveling back to his hometown after his grandmother, who had raised him, passed away:

When I arrived, I noticed that the villagers had special Taoist practices. They sang, they sprinkled wine over the body of my grandmother, they talked to the body. This kind of ritual was something which I grew up with as a child, but which I later forgot about.<sup>4</sup> ... Afterwards, in Beijing, I began to think about it. In that period, I was regarding myself as a new kind of Zhuangzi [the author of an ancient Daoist classic]. I talked a lot of Zhuangzi and felt very proud. ... [I wrote *On Taoism* in a week,] I wanted to write something in a single breath, just like a kid singing for himself. Basically, I used 'non-concept' and 'non-discipline' as a concept.<sup>5</sup>

Tan Dun's Daoism draws from syncretic popular religion, whose animism informs his views on the reciprocal relation between organism and milieu, composer and sound. His later *Organic Music* 有機音樂 series renders this connection more explicit, through both explicit frames and the use of natural, everyday and timeless sounds of water, paper, stones and ceramics. In *On Taoism*, rather than working towards a climax, Tan alternates kaleidoscopic monophonism, sonic clusters and weeping refrains that emerge out of and immerse into silences that function as what I will call *chaosmos* after James Joyce and *hundun* 渾沌 in Daoist terms.<sup>6</sup> According to early Daoism, the chaosmos 'sprouts' or 'gives birth to' 生 entities through intensity 气, spontaneity 自然, clustering 聚 and dispersal 散.<sup>7</sup> Like 'sprouting,' this chapter's title 'organizing music' suggests the pre-existence of and continued nourishing interaction with a milieu, rather than creation ex nihilo.



Illustration 5.1: Tan Dun on a poster announcing the performance of his Organic Music in MoMa, New York in 2005.

<sup>4</sup> The Tan's lived in Simaochong 思茅冲 (Changsha area), near burial grounds.

<sup>5</sup> Kouwenhoven 1991:17-18.

<sup>6</sup> Hall 1978:271, 274; Needham 1956:40-41, 50-52; Kim 2000:33.

<sup>7</sup> Hall 1978:271, 274.

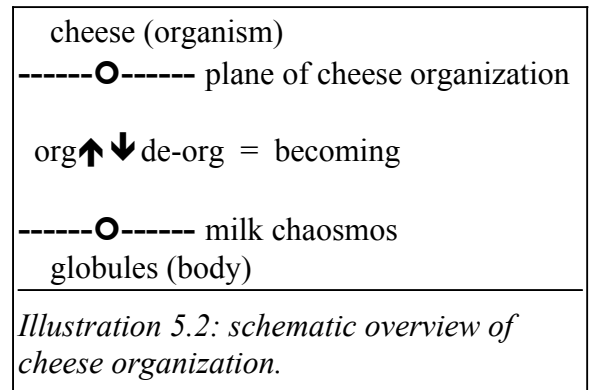
## Disparate Elements

The definition of music as organized sound goes back to the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century French-American composer Edgard Varèse.<sup>8</sup> Varèse related his works to physics, mathematics and biology, comparing composition to the erratic formation of crystals out of a relatively limited variety of internal structures:

There is an idea, the basis of an internal structure, expanded and split into different shapes or groups of sound constantly changing in shape, direction, and speed, attracted and repulsed by various forces. The form of the work is the consequence of this interaction. ... A composer, like all artists, is an organizer of disparate elements.<sup>9</sup>

Music as organized sound suggests the presence of directions or vectors in the sound matter that, once set to work, evolve of their own accord.<sup>10</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus* (1987) offers a vocabulary to describe these processes on an abstract yet detailed level. I will present their insights in a somewhat simplified form, using the metaphor of cheese production.

Our micro-chaosmos starts out with the emulsion of disparate elements we call milk. The milk also contains bacteria that convert milk sugar into lactic acid. As the milk turns sour, the first fragile curds spontaneously form. Enzymes such as rennet assist the curd's crystal-like growth, incorporating more and more of the surrounding elements into its organization. From the perspective of the cheese-to-be, growing means organizing milk globules into curd. The eventual form and taste of the cheese depend on the milieu in which it comes into existence (saltiness, sourness, microbes), as well as its successfulness in this milieu (size, cogency). The final product carries the milk globules of its creation along.



In reality, the coagulation of milk is irreversible. By contrast, in the more abstract theory of Deleuze and Guattari, “cheese” is only a temporary homeostasis. In terms of our necessarily limited metaphor, they argue that “cheese” relapses into milk continuously:

The [cheese] organism is not at all the body, [the milk globules]; rather, it is a stratum on [the milk globules], in other words, a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the [milk globules], imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences. ... A perpetual combat between the [milk chaosmos], which frees the [milk

<sup>8</sup> Based on Hoëne Wronsky's definition of music as “the corporealization of the intelligence that is in sound,” see Varèse 1966:17. On the next page he claims: “As far back as the twenties, I decided to call my music ‘organized sound’ and myself, not a musician, but a ‘worker in rhythms, frequencies and intensities.’”

<sup>9</sup> Varèse 1966:16, 18. Chou Wen-chung was born in 1923 in Shandong and emigrated to the United States in 1946, where he became one of Varèse's very few students. In 1972 Chou became a professor at Columbia University and in 1978 he established the United States-China Arts Exchange, which invited promising graduates of the then-recently reopened PRC conservatories. He invited Tan Dun in 1982, but Tan only arrived in New York in 1986, one year after finishing *On Taoism*. He lives there still in 2010. Cf. Utz 2002:264-270.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson 1991:33.



globules], cutting across and dismantling all of the strata, and surfaces of stratification that block it or make it recoil.<sup>11</sup>

In the larger and less sterile chaosmos of galaxies and ecologies, disparate elements are organized into entities in ways similar to cheese production. However, this is only one side of the creative process of becoming. Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to the equally creative transversal forces of deorganization, and to the messiness of open-ended adaptation, meaning mutations, symbioses and contagions.<sup>12</sup>

These combinations [in milieus and ecosystems] are neither genetic nor structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations. That is the only way Nature operates—against itself.<sup>13</sup>

Making music differs from making cheese. Musical objects or events that may be likened to cheese are often less palpable and stable. Additionally, music works on different levels (or strata). Different things are involved in (and evolve through) making sounds, songs, and stars. Given these complexities, in a sense music is about these interstitial processes of becoming, the constant mutations between organizing and deorganizing.<sup>14</sup>

## §2 Reproducing Sounds

Tan Dun's *The Map: Saving Disappearing Music Traditions* 地圖：尋回消失中的根籟 (2003) performs the exploring, modeling and representing (in a word, the organizing) of the chaosmos more poignantly than *On Taoism*. Commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and cellist Yo-Yo Ma, *The Map* is composed for cello solo and symphony orchestra, and uses audiovisual material of Hunan folk music that Tan previously recorded.<sup>15</sup> The DVD, recorded by Deutsche Grammophon in the exotic setting of the village of Fenghuang, opens with a speech of Tan Dun about sharing inspiration across nations, eras and environments. He then turns around to prepare to conduct. Concentration. Bird-like high dissonant notes on a reed flute (1' 45) introduce the string accompaniment (vibrato and accents) and a long drawn-out, melancholic solo on the cello (played by Anssi Karttunen). The first movement, Nuo (Ghost Dance & Cry Singing) 傩戲&哭唱, enters a phase of stronger contrasts in volume when winds and percussion gain ground, first intermittently with short violent bursts or sound clusters (4' 30), then with a syncopated rhythm and dissonant harmony to a steady three-beat pulse (4' 45). At 5' 17 the video screens flare up, showing a demonic black mask, and then a masked man dancing in a red apron with popular-Daoist *yin-yang* symbols. Harp arpeggio, and the orchestra plays to the trance-inducing pulse of the recorded percussion. The DVD runs an explanatory subtitle: "Nuo – In an ancient ritual, the Shaman welcomes and entertains troublesome ghosts, then casts them out." The cello plays a solo that fragments into lower registers.

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze 1987:159, modified.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze 1987:10, 238 and 241 respectively.

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze 1987:242.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze 1987:300.

<sup>15</sup> 'Music Traditions' in the English caption corresponds to *genlai* 根籟 in the Chinese title, but *genlai* is much richer in connotations. *Gen* means 'root' and refers to 1980s cultural trends known as *xungen* 尋根 'root-seeking'. *Lai* is a rare character that refers to an ancient wind instrument. Its most famous use is in the discussion of earthly, humanly and heavenly 'piping' in the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*.

“He talks to stones, water and animals as if they were human spirits, thus connecting the next life with the past one.” Strings quickly glide from a high note down, inflecting the sound of the Chinese cymbals. Sounds cluster: the cello becomes a percussion instrument as it squeezes short phrases into the space left by the recorded and orchestral percussion, in a question-answer structure. The orchestra drowns out the video (8' 15). A small, syncopated rhythmic cell – an eighth and a sixteenth note – finally prevails in a repeated, large, consonant major chord (8' 28). Stravinsky-like stop and return to the dissonant, return of the reed flutes, a noncentric field with unidirectional sounds developing into a variant of the melancholic cello solo, and then into a short video citation of cry-singing (9' 26) accompanied by subtitles, cello and horns.

In the liner notes, Tan explains:

Metaphorically, the orchestra becomes nature, the soloist symbolizes people, and the video represents traditions ... The last section is made up of Movements 8 and 9, where the cello solo, orchestra and video become “one” and recreate music in its original, monophonic state: simple, like heartbeats. It is a finale that does not end.<sup>16</sup>

Movements 8 (38' 05) and 9 (40' 50) center around the ululating of tongue-singing and the harmonica-like jumps of the lusheng 蘆笙, a wind instrument made of several long bamboo pipes. Part of the virtuosity in these field recordings consists of fast alternation between a few notes, which can be heard as an elaborate type of vibrato. Another effect lies in the polyphony; both the tongue-singing and the lusheng playing are group performances. In Movement 8, the cello adds another layer to the female tongue-singers' almost canon-like performance. Through a number of accelerations that first outrun themselves, the finale of Movement 9 becomes a bombastic two-beat, with the accent on the two, as dictated by the slow, swaying dance of the male lusheng players on the screen (43' 00).

In the documentary *Discovering the Map*, which is included with the DVD, Tan remarks on the richness of local music traditions, saying that “sometimes the music composes me (9' 00).” Elsewhere, he has elaborated:

Many years ago a Buddhist monk from Hunan asked me: ‘Do you really make compositions 作曲? Or are the compositions making you?’ He even repeated it. Honestly, I didn’t get it. It took me over ten years to realize the value of his words. They convey that it is always the refraction of human consciousness that leads you into composing. [These refractions] are above your concepts. Of course this is also a kind of metaphysics, but you [simply] don’t know [whether] this is real 現實.<sup>17</sup>

We don’t know how much of this anecdote is real and how much of it Tan Dun invented to legitimize and promote his music.<sup>18</sup> That goes for *The Map* in general, whose very title resonates with colonialism, and whose dialogues between folksong and cello are framed by and feed into Western art music.<sup>19</sup> Tan’s beautiful scores for the internationally successful epic melodramas *Hidden Tiger, Crouching Dragon* 臥虎藏龍 (2000, d. Ang Lee) and *Hero* 英雄 (2002, d. Zhang Yimou) reveal a

<sup>16</sup> Tan 2004:10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Yue 2004:848, Cf. Zhang 2006a.

<sup>18</sup> Alison Friedman (one-time general manager of Tan Dun’s Parnassus Productions), conversation, September 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Young 2009.

similar amalgam of renewed pride in local traditions, the Chinese nation, and a religiously inspired escape from the nation's teleology, not so much into the chaosmos as into organized transcendence, which resonates with Western interests in zen and New-Age environmentalism.<sup>20</sup>

By contrast, I see organization and the chaosmos as immanent. There is nothing outside the milk.

## Xiao He's Live Loops

Deleuze and Guattari argue that “from chaos, *Milieus* and *Rhythms* are born,” and juxtapose differentiating rhythm to repetitive periodicity or meter: “there is nothing less rhythmic than a military march.”<sup>21</sup> Repetition has become increasingly important in Xiao He's music since 2005, partly due to renewed engagement with electronic equipment. In addition to spontaneity and originality, repetition and monotony have become part of Xiao He's negotiation of organization (curd) and deorganization (milk).

Xiao He's band Glorious Pharmacy recorded their first album *Please Enlarge My Cousin's Photograph* (2005) themselves, on a computer in their rehearsal space. GREEN-OLD WORMS 蒼老蟲 starts with the sound of marching boots, introducing a mock-military choir singing “one-two-one, one-two-one” to a three-quarter beat. Throughout the song, the musical protagonists, meaning Xiao He's voice and Li Tieqiao's saxophone, respond to the relatively unchanging chorus. Towards the end all the music suddenly stops, and Xiao He speaks fast, articulating lazily:

追了到我唱了(liao),其實我還不太 s-s-s 誰老等着, 出名不了, 錢也沒了, 打車的消費不夠好像, 你不知道錄這段, 整整錄了四百遍, 哎, 什麼旋律唱了四百遍, 還能唱得有感情。有感請

... chasing me up to where I'm singing. In fact I'm not so s-s-s... [*inaudible*] Whoever's always waiting, can't get famous, broke, no money to get home it seems... Did you know, we recorded this bit exactly 400 times, ay, is there a melody that after 400 times can still be sung with feeling? [*sings:*] With feeling...

Later in 2005, Xiao He contributed WE PASSED THE DIRECTOR 我們路過導演 to a folk music sampler published by Modern Sky called *Flower Village* 花园村. This song counts as Xiao He's first recording of experimental music. The intro consists of fast random shifts through various preset rhythms usually found in electronic keyboards. The actual song starts with rhythm chords on an acoustic guitar to which Xiao He recorded the same melody in 15 different preset sounds, until he finally sings, first “mi fa sol fa mi si do / la sol fa sol / si la sol la / mi sol fa mi” and then: “we passed the director and became criminals harboring demonic intentions 我們路過導演/就變成/心懷鬼胎/的罪犯.” The lyrics are timed lazily, with the sound bouncing back and forth from left to right, creating a heterophone effect.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas in GREEN-OLD WORMS the repetitive choir mainly serves as a dogmatic background or point of reference (challenged by the off-beat rhythmic accents of percussionist Guo Long and the elusive saxophone and lead vocals), in WE PASSED THE DIRECTOR repetition takes center stage. The performance does not construct irony, struggle or any other kind of interaction between the milieus of

<sup>20</sup> Shi 2006a.

<sup>21</sup> Deleuze 1987:313-314.

<sup>22</sup> Xiao He performed a different version of the song, which came out on DVD, at the Neo-folkfestival in 2005.

individual melody and societal harmony. Instead, it focuses on the repetition, and depletes the repeated elements of semantic and referential content. In the course of its repetition, the refrain disintegrates and deorganizes.<sup>23</sup>

In October 2006 I assisted Xiao He in purchasing a Boss RC-20 Loop Station in Hong Kong. This digital guitar effect allows him to record a musical phrase, loop it, play it in reverse, change speeds, add dubs and new phrases and thus create multilayered sound works single-handedly during live shows. In November 2007 Xiao He bought the Boss RC-50 Loop Station during a tour in Brussels. The RC-50 is an improved version of the RC-20, with stereo output and capacity for longer and more loops, enabling more complex structures than the accumulation of sounds towards cacophony. Starting in 2007, Xiao He would bring keyboards and a laptop to his solo live performances, and early in 2009 I purchased a Shadow SH-075 on his behalf because Xiao He could not find the device in China. The Shadow effectively transforms an acoustic guitar into a synthesizer by associating guitar notes to MIDI sounds.

The impact of this technology on Xiao He's negotiation between repetition and spontaneity is audible on his double album *The Performance of Identity* (2009). *One Man's Orchestra* 一個人的交響, the title of the second CD, refers to Xiao He's ability to build multi-layered sonic constructions during live shows, as well as his increasingly heavy equipment. Recorded between 2006 and 2008, this fairly representative selection of live recordings makes extensive use of loops. Xiao He usually brings his Loop Station with an empty memory, and, besides MIDI sounds, does not use pre-recorded samples. Additionally, his multi-layered sonic tapestries rarely stress a regular beat. They are heterophonic like Chinese instrumental folk music, or present untidy rhythmic and melodic modulations. On tracks such as SHUI18 and JING YANG, sound clusters slide past one another like geological strata, ice floes or milk globules.

The use of layers was typical for his live shows between 2006 and 2008. Xiao He usually performed several times a week, alternating acoustic songs with elaborate improvisations. He would also sometimes stop the guitar loops momentarily to sing-shout unaccompanied. His increasing interest in layers and multiplicities can be related to his theatricality (Chapter 4). A 2007 show in the Dashanzi art district in Beijing contained a song he built up out of layers of feedback from a megaphone, to which he added chainsaw sound samples, connecting the art space with physical labor. In 2008, when live shows slowly picked up again after the Beijing Olympics, Xiao He ended a Beijing



Illustration 5.3: Xiao He on a poster for a show in 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Deleuze 1994:293.

show in *Dos Kologas* with a song in which he first shouted and looped random numbers over a chaotic, tense musical underground. He suddenly stopped this increasingly frantic chaos and played a regular four-beat, over which he hysterically shouted “One! One! One!” referring to the official Olympics slogan “One World, One Dream” 同一個世界，同一個夢想.

## Sediments of Samsara

In their stress on liveness, Xiao He’s dialogues with his electronic devices can be compared to the inter-human cooperation in John Zorn’s game pieces, which also entail memory and repetition. The performer is never alone. Choices made by others elsewhere are already embedded in the instruments and techniques he or she uses, and thus, however indirectly, feed into the creative process. This is true for elaborate presets in state-of-the-art digital equipment as well as for acoustic instruments which carry entire traditions along.<sup>24</sup> In the experimental electronic music that Basile Zimmermann describes, Wang Fan (whom Zimmermann calls Lao Li) uses his Roland VS-880 Digital Studio Workstation to engage in a creative process that consists of four steps: (1) selecting samples or *sucai* 素材 ‘raw material’; (2) manipulating the material by changing its speed, reversing, splicing, and so on; (3) arranging and mixing a maximum of eight tracks of manipulated material into a single stereo track; (4) repetition (*reprise*) of the whole process, whereby the previously arranged stereo track, a “game” in Zimmermann’s words, can serve as raw material in its turn, or be stored for retrieval at a later stage. This four-step evolution continues until Wang Fan decides to stop. In the process, Wang Fan runs into versions of himself he can no longer alter independently of the stereo track, because all the sounds are “piled into one.”

As Middleton points out, repetition and rhythm have become even more defining for music since the Industrial Revolution:

Repetition ... grounds us in more than one sense. And nowhere more than in music, the art of iteration, whose multiple periodicities choreograph our every level of self-production, life and death. At the same time, it is a commonplace that, with the industrialization of culture, the mass reproduction of musical commodities takes the repetition process to another level.<sup>25</sup>

Paradoxically, to Wang Fan repetition is important conceptually as an antidote against mechanic numbness. He relates it to a Buddhist world view. *Meditation* 身體裡的冥想 (2001), for instance, performs a search for the unchanging in the chance elements of *samsara* 輪回 ‘the continuous flow of life and reincarnation.’<sup>26</sup> FM3’s *Buddha Machine* (2004) appeals to a similar coupling of repetition and meditation. The small box with a built-in speaker contains nine loops with ambient sounds that repeat until the batteries run out. It is modeled on devices used in Buddhist temples that play constant chants, and



Illustration 5.4: Cover of Wang Fan’s 2003 album *Endless Repetition* 無限反復.

<sup>24</sup> Zimmermann 2006:253-260. Théberge 1997, Jones 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Middleton 2006:137.

<sup>26</sup> Zimmermann 2006:129-140.

once Brian Eno was reported to have bought one it sold over ten thousand copies in 2005, which is a considerable number for this kind of music.<sup>27</sup>

### §3 Varying Songs

Zong Baihua was an influential Chinese esthetician in the turbulent first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The characteristics of the artistic conception 境界 displayed by Chinese painting are indeed rooted in the fundamental philosophy of the Chinese nation, namely the cosmology of *The Book of Changes*: the two *qi*'s of *yin* and *yang* transform-sprout 化生 all phenomena; the phenomena sprout because they are bestowed with the *qi* of heaven and earth; indeed, all objects are 'qi-accumulations' (Zhuangzi: Heaven is *qi* accumulated). This incessant sprouting of the *qi*'s of *yin* and *yang* knit into 組成 a kind of rhythmic life. 'Qi-resonating-sprouts-movement 气韵生动,' the *leitmotiv* of Chinese painting, means 'the rhythm of life' or 'rhythmic life.'<sup>28</sup>

Zong Baihua articulates 'organization' and 'rhythm' as characteristics of a tradition in which these concepts had hitherto received little explicit attention. Daoism was preoccupied with reversing the process of differentiation rather than with repetition per se. Confucianism incorporated periodicity in concepts such as *wen* 文 '(woven) pattern; writing, culture' and *li* 理 '(imprinted) texture; order, principle.' The (modern) Chinese word for 'organizing' is *zuzhi* 組織, combining characters that mean weaving and knitting.

Zong's conception of 'organization' and 'rhythm' links up with this Confucian discourse. The last of his three functions of esthetic form 美的形式 is inspiring people to approach truth and "the core of the rhythm of life." Moreover, rather than an inevitable fact of life, this is an ethical injunction. At the turbulent historical juncture of the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese estheticism's *raison d'être* lay in its claim of contributing to national progress. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, Zong's discourse of the order-pattern, or of *daoli* 道理, 'texture-of-Dao, rational truth,' amounts to organizing difference and rhythm by making it significant and expressive.<sup>29</sup>

In the cheese metaphor, expressiveness marks the consolidation of curd into cheese. During this process, liquid whey is drained from the curd by a combination of cutting, heating, stretching, folding, salting and pressing. Therefore, the notion of expression here involves the physical labor of pressing. Rather than to the intention of an individual author, it should be related to the articulation of hard cultural forms (see Chapter 2). Deleuze and Guattari describe the relation of formative coagulation and expressive consolidation in the following terms:

[The coagulation] chooses or deducts, from unstable particle-flows, metastable [heterogeneous] molecular or quasi-molecular units (*substances*) upon which it imposes a statistical order of connections and successions (*forms*). [The consolidation] establishes functional, compact, stable structures (*forms*), and constructs the [homogeneous, crystal-like] molar compounds in which these structures are simultaneously actualized (*substances*). In a geo-

<sup>27</sup> Park 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Zong 1996:108. Cf. Wang 1997:55.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze 1987:315.

logical stratum, for example, [the coagulation] is the process of ‘sedimentation,’ which deposits units of cyclic sediment according to a statistical order: flysch, with its succession of sandstone and schist. [The consolidation] is the ‘folding’ that sets up a stable functional structure and effects the passage from sediment to sedimentary rock.<sup>30</sup>

This double process of coagulation and consolidation shows similarities to Wang Fan’s creative process, with the coagulation of content in the selection, manipulation and arrangement of samples and the folding of expression in the piles of sound that result from repeating the procedures. The coagulation-consolidation model and the algorithm of evolution are not incompatible. In its focus on becoming, the process of coagulation-consolidation also describes the morphogenesis of “functional, compact, stable structures.”<sup>31</sup>

Now that the cheese is recognizable as such and its organization is defined, it has become an identifiable entity, something we can categorize, brand, transport, sell and so on. In other words, the cheese can now circulate and function in a larger environment or economy. ‘Expression’ thus also refers to the significance and identity the cheese gains through the process of pressing and folding.

In music, refrains can create relatively stable and expressive organized forms in a way similar to the consolidation of cheese. The best example is how bird songs cease to be meaningless sounds and become expressive by delineating a territory. However, music also has a strong potential for disrupting and deorganizing, for threatening expressiveness. Music produces clearly defined songs, artists and communities, but it may also pull sound (and by extension the connections they articulate) back towards chaosmos, for instance when melodies cease being recognizable because they are ubiquitous, deliberately distorted or lost in the cacophony of mash-ups or rock endings. Sometimes music de-coagulates back into the milk, but music’s disruptive power may also open new possibilities (reorganization). For cheese this might happen through heating (fondue), fermentation or mere ripening. In the following pages, I will show how the relatively stable entities of melodies and songs propagate in myriad variations, freeing up energies, sounds and capital that can then transform or recombine in larger and more complex constellations.<sup>32</sup>

## The Evolution of Labeled Melodies

In her study of the nostalgic Japanese pop genre *enka*, Christine R. Yano introduces the notion of *kata*, which she translates as “patterning; patterned form.”<sup>33</sup> She explains that *kata* should not be seen as false form opposed to original content, or as a formulaic straitjacket opposed to individual emotion and expression. The surface esthetic, attention to detail, performativity, codification, historical significance, and transcendence that define her notion of *kata* finally also include its negation, since singers perfect their *kata* to the point where they vanish.<sup>34</sup> In her analysis of the performance of *enka*, Yano distinguishes *kata* of words (tropes), music (compositional formats and standardized styles of vocal delivery) and bodies (clichéd posture and dress).

<sup>30</sup> Deleuze 1987:40, 41, modified.

<sup>31</sup> Buskes 2006. Simon Frith defines music as “an ordered pattern of sounds in the midst of a vast range of more or less disorderly auralities” (Frith 1996:102), and Jacques Attali’s seminal book *Noise* is based on the conception of music as “giving form to noise in accordance with changing syntactic structure” (Attali 1985:10).

<sup>32</sup> Deleuze 1987:41, 315, 300.

<sup>33</sup> *Kata* is closely related to *katachi*. Both correspond to 形 ‘form’ and 型 ‘model’ in kanji.

<sup>34</sup> Yano 2002:26.



Although the term is not used in this way in Chinese discourse, I submit that *kata* play an important role in Chinese traditional music. All Chinese traditional music is said to go back to a structure and melody called ‘eight beats’ *baban* 八板. Scholars usually divide the Chinese folk music they encounter nowadays into two basic and interrelated systems according to what I see as musical *kata*: composition by stringing together *qupai* 曲牌, ‘labeled’ or ‘fixed’ melodies, and by combining metric type and generalized melody or mode, referred to as *banqiang* 板腔, ‘beat-tune.’ Labeled melodies consist of 20 to 70 measures of 2/4 in their skeletal, unadorned, versions, some of which can be found in a bewildering number of variations across regions and music genres.<sup>35</sup> Kunqu Opera counts as a climax of composition by stringing labeled melodies, and arranges even larger complexes of pre-established sequences of melodies, known as *taoqu* 套曲, ‘melody-sets.’

In this respect, Kunqu is often contrasted with Peking Opera, which replaced it as the dominant national opera style in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and employs a *banqiang* compositional style. The *banqiang* system is characterized by the use of a few rudimentary melodies or tunes (*qiang*), perhaps better understood as modes or modal systems, that primarily diversify through combination with set metric forms (*ban*). Hence, this compositional *kata* is sometimes referred to as “the system of variation through (woodblock) beats” 板式變化體. The specification of metric forms and modes and thus the development towards *banqiang* systems is a general trend in Chinese operatic musics.<sup>36</sup>

However, Peking Opera also employs labeled melodies. For instance, the Kunqu labeled melody THE WIND BLOWS THE LOTUS LEAVES TO A HALT 風吹荷葉煞, from the opera *Longing for Secular Life* 思凡, provides both the label and the melody of Peking Opera’s DEPTH OF THE NIGHT 夜深沉. The newer variant, extended from 20 measures to 107, is used in a range of contexts not implied in the original use, for instance during Concubine Yu’s sword dance in *Farewell My Concubine* (see Chapter 3). Subsequently, players of the jinghu (京胡, the principal spike fiddle of Peking Opera) have recorded instrumental versions that reveal their virtuosity, propelling the melody into other genres.

Additionally, Peking Opera has inherited Kunqu’s system of composition by selection of *kata*:

Musical composition for Peking opera plays is often called *buju* [布局], which literally means “arrangement of the parts.” The composition process is perceived as occurring in three sequential stages. In the first stage, modal systems and modes are selected and arranged for the entire play; in the second, metrical types are selected and arranged for passages of lyrics. Certain standard compositional patterns (*guilü* [規律]) are usually followed in these first two steps. In the third stage, individual melodic-passages are interpretively composed.<sup>37</sup>

Musical *kata* such as labeled melodies and modal systems also function as convenient formats for librettists to compose their words in. In fact, ‘labeled melody’ and ‘labeled lyric’ 詞牌 have often been used synonymously, and the processes of ‘fitting’ or ‘filling in’ lyrics or *tianci* 填詞 in poetry, opera and pop music share many features.<sup>38</sup> In Cantonese opera, the scriptwriter first arranges a se-

<sup>35</sup> Jones 1995:130.

<sup>36</sup> Zhang 1993.

<sup>37</sup> Wichman 1991:131.

<sup>38</sup> Qiao 1998, Feng 2004.



quence of scenes to which he selects fitting types of speech, music and percussion patterns, and only then ‘fills in’ the lyrics.<sup>39</sup> This process of selection, as Yung and other authors argue, is creative, because the ‘repeated’ melodies, modes and words need to be translated to the locality of the narrative context in the script, the role-type, the performer, the instrumentation and the local dialect.<sup>40</sup> Next to music-language-narrative interactions, strategies of translation into local milieus also consist of the cooptation of local folksongs to the labeled-melody system, deliberate changes of tempo which require the addition or deletion of ornaments (expansion and contraction), and the recombination of sentences from different labeled melodies into a so-called *jiqu* 集曲, a ‘gather-song, i.e. a musical medley with a new, unifying text.’<sup>41</sup>

Every single performance is a generation in the genealogy of these melodies. *Kata* continuously coagulate and decoagulate in and out of the milk, so to speak, and fold and unfold into and out of solid cheese, through processes of repetition and differentiation. As such, *kata* such as *qupai* can be understood as memes. Memes are the cultural analogue to genes in biology: “the smallest elements that replicate themselves with reliability and fecundity.”<sup>42</sup> Memetics and related theories present cultural and linguistic forms as having a history and development that are positively alive and possibly antagonistic to their hosts (human brain tissue) – hence, the trope of language as a parasite.<sup>43</sup> The success of musical formulas, such as labeled melodies, depends on their memorability, their ability to stick to and spread through the human brain, and their transmission over vast areas and time spans has often been noted. However, a labeled melody is much longer than the few notes or chords that Steven Jan identifies as a musical meme in his *Replicating Sonorities: Towards a Memetics of Music* (2000), and is perhaps better understood as a memplex – a complex of memes that are mutually beneficent or logically related and therefore procreate as groups.

The Northeastern Chinese theatrical genre Two-Taking-Turns belongs to the labeled melody system. A relative latecomer with its two-hundred-year history, its melodies are borrowed from folksongs and older genres, but recently also from popular music and disco. In the broad sense, Two-Taking-Turns performances are variety shows that contain solo theater (單出頭), solo song (小帽) and multiplayer pieces with fixed roles (拉場戲), next to the characteristic duet of a male clown and a female role-type (*dan*). These latter performances consist of ten to twenty labeled melodies divided in opening, character introduction, dramatic development and reprise. Not all melodies are equally suitable for all parts of a Two-Taking-Turns play in this narrow sense. *HUHU MODE* 胡胡腔, for instance, is habitually used to accompany the dance and acrobatics that open a piece, and its importance has led to a proliferation of variants, moving the melody in the direction of a mode, for instance through combination with folksongs, the elaboration of different elements of the melody and through coupling with metric types (*ban*). Another example of part-specification is that of *CIVIL HAIHAI* 文嗨嗨 and *MARTIAL HAIHAI* 武嗨嗨 melodies. Especially the latter is common, and because its monotone and repetitive nature does not distract from the lyrics it often makes up the bulk of the music of pieces that revolve around language.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Yung 1989:43,136; Chan 1991:89.

<sup>40</sup> For a more elaborate description, see He 1985:255-312.

<sup>41</sup> Yung 1989:155.

<sup>42</sup> Jan 2007, quoting Dennet.

<sup>43</sup> Dennet 1999:8.

<sup>44</sup> Zhai 2007; 2007a.

## Recombining in Medleys

We take the elevator down from the studio located on the 24<sup>th</sup> floor near the Northern fourth ring road in Beijing. “We can use this studio for free at night, because the studio engineer is a buddy of my arranger,” explains Liu Juanjuan, who leads a small music company. Her arranger had been happy to interrupt the recording session of a troublesome guitar solo to show us the expensive equipment of the studio. “We’ve been so successful because we work like a team,” Juanjuan explains, referring to the arranger and writer of the song, with whom she also shares a small apartment. It’s November 2007. As we walk off into the night she asks me what I think of the song they were recording. “It has a familiar ring to it. Who’s the singer?” “Oh, just a friend, we’ll rerecord the vocals in the end. No wonder it sounds familiar though, we usually check the ten most popular songs online, select and rearrange some suitable elements, make a few changes to avoid overt plagiarism and smooth out the wrinkles.” I am surprised to hear this from an ex-employee of an underground rock bar. She responds to my frown: “These guys play the music they really like in their own bands, but as a company we have to think of customer demand.” We wait by the side of the ring road, as taxis are hard to come by around here at this hour. “You should see how I’ll stir-fry 炒 [i.e. make hot, hype] this next song,” she boasts as she finally gets into her cab, “the singer is a good friend of the dean of a high school, so they were able to invest a lot of money for us to plug it. You’ll feel the hype on your trip to Shanghai and Hong Kong.”

The strategy I found so surprising seems to be widely known. For instance, in 2005 Zhao Jian created a minor stir by posting the song *SHOCK2005 刺激 2005* on the Internet. *SHOCK 2005* is a medley 串燒 containing the melody, lyrics and even the exact delivery of individual lines from 23 recent hit songs. In a typical Northeastern Chinese style, Zhao Jian – who posted the song under a pseudonym borrowed from a Zhao Benshan role – attempts to ridicule and “shock” the formulaic nature of Chinese popular music.<sup>45</sup> However, the song is also popular because of its pleasant and recognizable sound. It seems it has only left audiences more cynical, accepting covert and overt citation as to be expected in the struggle of companies, artists and melodies for attention and revenue.

Although Zhao Jian and most specialists downplay the song’s creative contribution, its craft lies in the selection of the phrases, each of which is instantaneously reminiscent of the original, and the structure that creates a logical sequence of lyric and melodic content.<sup>46</sup> The ascending melody enhances the drama of heartbreak, and the pattern of endlessly repeating the chorus truthfully mimics clichéd pop ballads.

## Translating

The recombinatory technique Liu Juanjuan describes and Zhao Jian ridicules can be seen as instances of ‘grabbism’ 拿来主义, a term famously coined by Lu Xun in 1933. Lu Xun pits grabbism against China’s traditional isolationism, the modern ‘giveaway-ism’ of Chinese art to the West, and to the reception of the paralyzing gifts of Western cultural and agrarian overproduction. According to Lu Xun:

<sup>45</sup> Nanjing Chenbao 2005.

<sup>46</sup> He 2005.

[a grabbist] occupies 占有 and selects 挑选. ... this person should be profound, vigorous, discerning and unselfish. Without grabbism, people cannot become New People [i.e. modern citizens]. Without grabbing, the arts cannot become New Arts.<sup>47</sup>

However frequently and aptly grabbism is mobilized and used in sinophone debates on originality, Lu Xun's ethical agenda complicates its use in our current situation. His distinction renders the re-arrangement of popular melodies positively as active and progressive appropriation, or negatively as passive and reactionary submission to cultural overproduction. Still, grabbism offers the possibility of regarding selective reuse as a viable creative strategy, and as such can be connected to the reevaluation of the relation between original and copy in Western theory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The locus classicus here is Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* (*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*), written in 1921, some ten years before Lu Xun's text. Strikingly, Benjamin claims art to be alive, "an idea to be apprehended with entirely unmetaphorical matter-of-factness."<sup>48</sup> To Benjamin, an artwork's vitality is proven by its traceable history of antecedents, formation and its potentially perpetual living-on (*Fortleben*). Benjamin also consistently disavows meaning:

Attaining [to a higher and purer linguistic air] is not with root and branch, but in it resides that which makes a translation more than sharing information (*Mitteilung*). More precisely the actual nucleus (*wesenhafte Kern*) can be defined as that in [a translation] which is not re-translatable. Namely, if one would distill its information as much as one could and translate that, then still that which is untouchable and on which the labor of the true translator is focused remains behind (*bleibt zurück*). It is not transferable like the words of the original are, because the relationship between content and language is different in original and translation. Namely, where in the former they construct a certain unity like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content (*Gehalt*) like a royal robe with ample folds. ...

What seeks to present, indeed to re-present itself in the becoming (*Werden*) of language, is this nucleus of pure language itself.<sup>49</sup>

The nucleus of pure language is not paraphrasable semantic content, but that which is untranslatable and untouchable.<sup>50</sup> As Homi Bhabha writes, referring to Benjamin, Derrida, Salman Rushdie and Paul de Man:

it is the dream of translation as 'survival' as Derrida translates the 'time' of Benjamin's concept of the afterlife [*Überleben*] of translation, as *sur-vivre*, act of living on borderlines. ... For the migrant's survival depends ... on discovering 'how newness enters the world'. The focus is on making the linkages through the unstable elements of literature and life – the dangerous tryst with the 'untranslatable' ... I am less interested in the metonymic fragmentation of the 'original.' I am more engaged with the 'foreign' element that reveals the intersti-

<sup>47</sup> Lu Xun 1981.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin 1968:11.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin 1968:76 (translation modified on the basis of Benjamin 1972:15) and Benjamin 1972:19.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida 1985:193, Cf. Derrida 1979.

tial; insists in the textile superfluidity of folds and wrinkles; and becomes the ‘unstable element of linkage,’ the indeterminable temporality of the in-between.’<sup>51</sup>

Firstly, this quotation makes explicit that this theoretical problem of European high literature and philosophy is also recognizable in the global flows of culture and power. In colonial and postcolonial settings, concepts such as (cultural) translation gain in political momentum. Significantly the (unilateral) marriage of cultures here results not in purification, but in hybridization, a term derived from biology.<sup>52</sup> In this sense the folds also suggest something of the violence that cultural translation brings along with it.<sup>53</sup>

Secondly, whereas Benjamin juxtaposes “the eternal life of works” to the provisional nature of translations, Bhabha chooses to ignore the dreams of eternity and purity, concentrating on and in effect isolating a flux.<sup>54</sup> In such a temporary movement or performance, translation becomes increasingly open-ended, and susceptible to divergence and convergence from explicit and implicit inspirational sources.

Finally, wrinkles and folds take us back to Deleuze: they offer a way of thinking that reconciles the essential superficiality of *kata* and the depth of expressiveness. Similar to Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari discredit translation as the transmission of messages, arguing instead that it establishes a surplus value, enabling creativity and deorganizing.<sup>55</sup>

## Unfolding a Second Hand Rose

The songs of Second Hand Rose typically consist of discernible chunks that follow each other with sudden transitions, or without transitions at all. This compositional *kata* is reminiscent of both the stringing of labeled melodies in Two-Taking-Turns and the highly standardized verse-chorus structures of pop music. Next to recombining compositional strategies, Second Hand Rose also ‘grab’ sounds, melodies and sometimes entire passages from other music, from various Chinese and Western traditions. Indeed, part of the power of Second Hand Rose’s music lies in the juxtaposition and superposition of clichéd sounds: recognizable, but not quite the same.

REVELATIONS OF A QUEST FOR MARRIAGE 徵婚啓示 on *Second Hand Rose* (2003), for instance, starts with a percussion intro played with clappers and a traditional drum. The changing accents and additional notes of the three-quarter or ‘one-beat-two-eyes’ structure instantly evoke Chinese traditional music, specifically the storytelling genre of *kuaiban* 快板, ‘fast boards’ (performed by traditional percussionist Tian Dongjun). The 32 counts of the intro end with a Chinese cymbal on the last quarter that introduces the voice for the first verse. The beat now changes to the regular duple meter, typical of Chinese storytelling. Liang Long’s ten-odd character sentences start on the second eighth note and end with short fillers – drawn, nasal “aah’s” – to which the percussion reacts with ornaments (*hua* 花) on toms and cymbals that spill into the next measure. Hence, similar to Two-Taking-Turns, the transition between the end of a phrase and the beginning of the next is musically

<sup>51</sup> Bhabha 1994:324-326.

<sup>52</sup> On this term, Cf. Canclini 1995.

<sup>53</sup> Rey Chow 1995:185, 200. See also De Kloet 2008, who prefers the medico-chemical term ‘contamination.’

<sup>54</sup> This is a direct example of the creativity of translation: flux is a translation of both *stetem Wandel* ‘constant meandering’ and *Sprachbewegung* ‘movement of speech’ in the original. Something similar happens with ‘active force in life’ which is central to Rey Chow’s reading: its appearance in the authoritative translation can only correspond to the adjunct *gegenwärtig im Leben* ‘(as) present in life’ in the original.

<sup>55</sup> Deleuze 1987:62, 136-137.

most elaborate (between beat 4 and 1 in the example), while the beats in the middle remain unadorned to render the lyrics comprehensible.

- |                |  |
|----------------|--|
| ◦ 那天我心情啊實在不高興啊 | That day I was really in a bad mood.                     |
| ◦ 找了個大仙 我算了一卦  | I found a fortune-teller, laid out my cards.             |
| ◦ 他說我婚姻只有三年的長呀 | He said my marriage would last only three years.         |
| ◦ 我那顆愛她的心有點慌啊  | This heart of mine that loved her so was a bit confused. |

Typical of Chinese opera, every two sentences form a pair: the first (*shangju* 上句) is finished high, and the second on a lower note.<sup>56</sup> In this case, each sentence contains two rhythmic and semantic units (*dou* 逗), each consisting of five full characters and separated by a short caesura, a filler or accentuation. At the same time, the syncopation of the vocal melody in combination with the playful bass line that joins in the second verse create a rhythmic and harmonic development that contributes to the expectation of change after sixteen quadruple measures, more typical of blues-derived structures.

The typical rock sound of a distorted guitar, drums and bass dominate the ensuing first chorus. The order is reversed: first one measure with an ascending scale on guitar, then one in which the vocals comment on the question mark of the guitar riff, each of the four times with increasingly intense slogan-like outcries. The chorus is abruptly followed by a first bridge in which a hesitant and scattered guitar and drawn-out chords on a horse-headed two-string fiddle contrast with the busy drums. The guitar's distant reference to musical clichés typically used in Westerns and the hoarse fiddle Mongolian provenance bring to mind a desolate plain traversed by the repetitive rhythm of a bustling caravan. The bridge temporarily dissolves some of the tension of the chorus. After eight measures the band stops, and only a dubbed fiddle continues to sound for another two measures. With a drum fill we enter the third verse, which is now accompanied not by the Chinese storytelling instrumentation of the first verse, but by a full rock sound: standard four-beat, the bass line nearly subdued by an equally playful guitar line. Then comes second chorus, identical to the first but now with the last line of the verse's lyrics repeated and thus isolated, ending in an affirmative "I really am pregnant!" A second bridge immediately follows the chorus: it seems to have been adapted from the outro of *FUNKY MONKS*, a track from the international mega-hit *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* (1991) by the Californian funk band Red Hot Chili Peppers. The entire passage has successfully propagated itself into *REVELATIONS OF A QUEST FOR MARRIAGE*, where, just like in the original, it functions as a repetitive, soothing background – but it is also coupled to a witty dialogue, which Liang Long says was inspired by a *duanzi* or 'script' of Two-Taking-Turns, with the "worn-out shoe" denoting sexual promiscuity:<sup>57</sup>

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| 哎那天我看見那誰那誰搞破鞋 | Wang: The other day I met what's her name, that worn-out shoe. |
| 哪個?就東北那個?     | Liang: Which one? That Northerner?                             |
| 讓我給堵著了        | Wang: She blocked my path.                                     |
| 真的?           | Liang: Really?   |

<sup>56</sup> Wichmann 1991:33.

<sup>57</sup> Fenghua 2003. The interview mentions Wang Xiaoli 王小麗 as the source. Online discussion forums spell the final character as *li* 利, saying it comes from a piece called *A Shrew Scolding in the Street* 泼妇骂大街, but that piece is by Wang Xiaoli 王小力.

哎呀跟一個男的連摟帶啃的  
 不能不能不能  
 他一家人都那味,他哥也那味  
 他哥不當官的嗎?  
 就是因為這事下去的嗎,  
 (是嗎是嗎是嗎)  
 他妹妹也是,一年跟好幾個呀.  
 是嗎? 連他還不如,  
 他妹妹是個甚麼東西啊  
 (真的真的真的)  
 一開始是個畫畫的,  
 後來不是搞音樂的嗎,二手玫瑰  
 (是嗎是嗎是嗎)  
 那按你那麼說,  
 那二手玫瑰可不算搞破鞋咋的  
 那可不是咋的  
 (真的真的真的)  
 臭不要臉的!

沒啥事你講究我干啥呀!  
 (是嗎是嗎是嗎)  
 我他嗎搞破鞋,啊你不搞啊你?  
 (真的真的真的)  
 不但你搞, 你二嫂也搞...  
 (是嗎是嗎是嗎)  
 那是他跟的, 那是我的鐵子

Wang: She was embracing a man, they were eating each other up!  
 Liang: No way, no way.  
 Wang: Her whole family's like that, her brother too.  
 Liang: Wasn't her brother an official?  
 Wang: He stepped down because of it.  
 (Choir: Oh yeah? Oh yeah? Oh yeah?)  
 His sister's like that too, changes lots of them in a year.  
 Liang: Oh yeah? His sister seems to be worse than him,  
 what kind of monster is she?  
 (Choir: Really? Really? Really?)  
 Wang: It started with a painter.  
 Didn't she get into those musicians, Second Hand Rose?  
 (Choir: Oh yeah? Oh yeah? Oh yeah?)  
 Wang: According to what you say,  
 Second Hand Rose isn't a worn-out shoe or anything  
 Wang and Liang: No, that'd be impossible.  
 (Choir: Really? Really? Really?)  
 Liang [*now in falsetto, assuming the role of the accused*]:  
 You shameless crocks!  
 Nothing's going on, what are you staring at me for!  
 (Choir: Oh yeah? Oh yeah? Oh yeah?)  
 You call me a worn-out shoe, and you're not doing anyone?  
 (Choir: Really? Really? Really?)  
 You're doing it, and your brother's wife's doing it too...  
 (Choir: Oh yeah? Oh yeah? Oh yeah?)  
 That's him taking after me, that's my resolution.

The increasing agitation of the bridge leads immediately into the third chorus, a copy of the first. The last sentence, "I destroy this artist you are," leads to a shortened coda ending in a typically noisy rock cacophony – a tradition most likely developed out of the climactic grand finale of Western opera. The structure disintegrates for a number of measures, then the tempo drops and Liang Long sings the outro. The accompaniment by a single bass drone refers back to the horse-headed fiddle and performs static timelessness. This cyclic-yet-static time is linked to the traditional feel of the first verse. Additionally, the lyrics embody a retrospective morale and a prospective promise:

誰害怕貧窮誰害怕富有啊  
 誰會天長啊誰不會地久  
 如果你恨你就恨出個追求  
 如果你愛我我會一絲不...

Who fears poverty, who fears wealth,  
 who'll be as enduring as the universe,  
 who'll not outlast the world?  
 If you're spiteful, your spite will lead to a [restless] chase.  
 If you love me, I will strip off all my...

The last sentence slows down and a single Chinese cymbal clash replaces the last character.

The structure of REVELATIONS OF A QUEST FOR MARRIAGE – intro, verse<sub>1</sub>, verse<sub>2</sub>, chorus<sub>1</sub>, bridge<sub>1</sub>, verse<sub>3</sub>, chorus<sub>2</sub>, bridge<sub>2</sub>, chorus<sub>3</sub>, verse<sub>4</sub> – is not uncommon in pop and rock music, while it is also congruent with Chinese stage traditions such as Two-Taking-Turns. That Second Hand Rose quotes from specific Western and Chinese sources reveals that cross-breeding and recombination are important compositional *kata*.

## Rearranging Flowers

A sudden burst of activity spreads through the late afternoon heat in the Dong Music office when Zhang Yadong finally arrives in his small record company. Zheng Wei asks Zhang what he thinks of his rearrangement of the song FLOWER 花兒, and they listen to a MIDI demo together with two or three other people who happen to be in the room. Zheng Wei, who graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory, can't help showing disappointment when it becomes clear that a final version will still take some effort. "It sounds too Western 洋," says Zhang, "and it should be less polished. Find a guitar player who's kind of second-rate 比较二." Without vocals, a melodic phrase on the flute takes center stage in the chorus. The beat breaks with a strong accent on the first eighth note of every other measure. "It needs more flow." "You mean the accent...?" asks the arranger. "Yeah," says Zhang, as he marks the pulse by slapping the palm of one hand with the other. Raising his voice, he asks the employee whose computer we are using: "Do you know that song by Dido, with the guitar intro?" The employee surfs to a website where the songs of the British female singer are available in live stream, most likely illegal. "Not this song," says Zhang as he bends over to the computer, "try the next one." As the soothing tones of the song enter the room, Zhang Yadong shakes his head to the inconspicuous four-beat, and Zheng Wei responds by nodding in vague agreement. We listen to another one of Dido's songs. Zhang: "This is too fast, but it's the feeling of the guitar, d'you understand?" "Are we going to record it with real drums or use MIDI?" asks Zheng Wei. Zhang replies evasively: "Yeah, guitar, flute, and then the drums, like that."

Later that day I hear the song again, but now a female voice hums along with the melody. Zhang Yadong introduces her as the singer Ye Pei and shows her around his company. They take the stairs down to the Jet Studio, where Zhang and his studio personnel record the artists he has signed to Dong Music, as well as some of the projects he acquires through his job as production supervisor at the major Chinese record company Taihe Rye and his general network. FLOWER is not a composition of Zhang Yadong, but a cover of a song by Ma Tiao, most likely selected by Ye Pei herself. Years ago, Ma Tiao contributed a number of songs to Taihe Rye Music, including one on Ye Pei's debut album *The Age of Innocence* 纯真年代 (1998), and he briefly worked for them again in 2004. Ma Tiao was born in Xinjiang Province, and many of his songs have a central Asian flavor. Zhang Yadong and Ye Pei's version stresses the folk feeling in the song but dispenses with Ma Tiao's coarse vocal delivery and rock instrumentation. These changes stress that this is a polished studio production rather than an 'authentic' live performance in a small pub, which is what Ma Tiao's recording of 2007 sounds like. Ye Pei's voice sounds electric and cos-

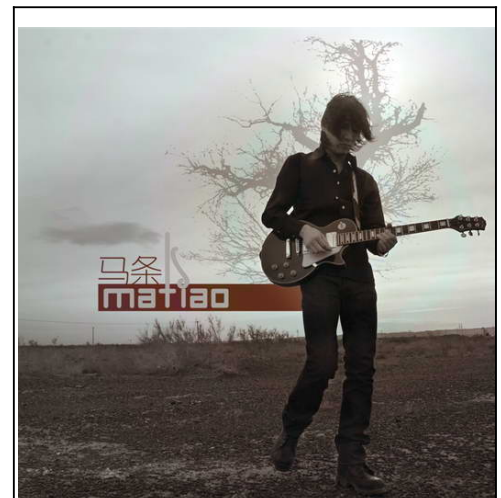


Illustration 5.5: Ma Tiao on the cover of his eponymous album (2007).

mopolitan through a light Cher effect. Nevertheless, Zhang Yadong notably elaborates on the folk sound through sampled folk ‘yodeling’ and playful winds performed by Xiao Bu Dian, a member of Ma Tiao’s live band. This attention to Chinese folk music elements is remarkable given the explanation Zhang offered for declining to produce the second album of Second Hand Rose: “I am more suitable for introducing Western sounds in China than the other way around.”<sup>58</sup>

The list of sounds and people participating in the song FLOWER is endless, and the amount and importance of the input of these people varies greatly. Focusing on the mechanisms of transformation, in these adaptations not only the copyrighted original, but an abundance of instruments, traditions, songs, sounds and sound effects reassert themselves. Some, but not all, of these conscious and unconscious citations are ‘deciphered’ by audiences with great accuracy, adding to a more or less coherent identity of song, album and singer. The rationale that provides coherence to the artistic choices on Ye Pei’s *I Want My Freedom* 我要的自由 (2008) can be enunciated using a single concept:

[the opening songs] FLOWER is the unbridling of nature, LET ME LOOK AT YOU 让我看着你 is attentive freedom, EXQUISITE OXYGEN--DEEP BREATH 悠氧·深呼吸 [composed by Zhang Yadong] is tranquil freedom... every song is a different shade of the state of freedom. Freedoms required for every time and and place can find a suitable place on this album ... “I hope that listening to this album will let you become relaxed, lay down your burden, experience happiness, evaluate your position in life and become your own true master,” this is what Ye Pei wanted to express with this album from the very beginning.<sup>59</sup>



Illustration 5.6: Ye Pei on the cover of her 2008 album *I Want My Freedom*.

This proliferation and evolution of entire memeplexes of labeled melodies, folksongs and pop adaptations are only the more readily discernible formations in the strata of musical organization. Next to these species of songs, the recombinatory techniques of sampling and grabbing described earlier constitute additional frames for popular music, partly accounting for its conservatism, especially when investors demand songs that resemble the latest hit.<sup>60</sup> Adaptation, citation, concept and reference are all strategies of consolidation that direct and create songs, albums and artists.

## Laying out Concepts

Lyricists usually get not only a rough demo of the song, but also a file on the singer containing concepts and images the record company plans to have associated with the star or star-to-be.<sup>61</sup> The making of many albums begins with relatively general and abstract concepts, often pertaining to an

<sup>58</sup> Zhang Yadong, conversation, October 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Anonymous 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Li Ronghao, conversation, September 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Chow Yiufai, conversation, May 2007.



understanding of market demand and decisions concerning the direction an artist should take. Wind Music is a Taiwanese record company that specializes in New Age music and easy listening, a market pioneered by the Canadian composer Matthew Lien. Originally a publisher, Wind Music realized there was potential in producing music. Their catalog is divided not according to artist, but primarily in series of albums with a common instrument, theme or sound. As producer Judy Wu explained, an album starts with deciding on a concept, for instance one or more places in Taiwan, a particular species of birds, or different times of the day in the forest. In this last case they made field recording of forest sounds and sent these to the composers.<sup>62</sup> But Dong Yun-chang, who has frequently composed for Wind Music since 2001, explained that the concepts and field sounds weren't very useful to him. When I asked him how he translates the concepts into music, Dong replied:

They usually send a number of samples too. Two or three tracks of how they want the result to sound. And they say something about the tempo: cheerful and fast, melancholic, and so on. I listen to the examples superficially; listening too hard would compromise my creativity. Then I decide on the key and start trying some things on the chromatic scale. I create a chord progression and later a melody line, and then I sometimes adjust the chords to fit the melody better. Then I send Wind Music a first section (A 段). If it's what they like, I continue to elaborate; if not, I make changes according to their suggestions.

In fact, Wind Music's strategy is very simple. They opt for long-term cooperation with their composers. The first time they might commission you to write five songs, and let's say that 50% of your work needs to be amended. Next time they give you two songs, and you get 70% right the first try. That way you develop a relationship, and you get more and more commissions. If you don't deliver, the workload declines. Now, what do they want? Rule 1: no jazz. Rule 2: make sure that you are in the triangle of Chinese style, Asian style and World Music, and perhaps a hint of pop music. In other words: 70% musical elements from the yellow race, 20% Western musical elements and 10% other musical influences. These other elements cannot contain black music, at the very most a little bit of Latin. I have used samba and bossa nova in the past, but obviously in watered-down versions. ...

Wind Music is not to blame. It's not their choice really. Their strategy is the result of their understanding of the Taiwanese market, based on years of selling World Music. Their music cannot be too pure because they can never compete with true folk musicians. It has to be a nondescript mix of heterogeneous elements that escapes being a precise genre. And then the samples of birds and the Pacific Ocean, well, to me the music is interchangeable and unrelated to these samples. But that's okay too. Music

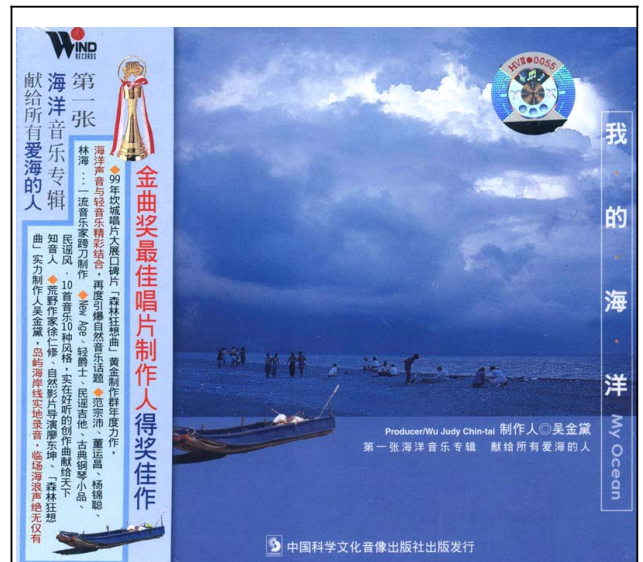


Illustration 5.7: Cover of Wind Music's 2001 album *My Ocean* 我的海洋, for which Judy Wu received the Gold Melody award for best producer.

<sup>62</sup> Judy Wu, conversation, July 2007.

needs concepts such as these, explanations, packaging. It's better to mislead people the way Wind Music does than with covers of magazines and all kinds of gossip ... It's better to do that through music, in that case the package at least contains something, something valuable.

63

Samples – or ‘references,’ as Chinese and Taiwanese record companies call them, using the English word – are instrumental in concretizing concepts, and they establish yet another form of crossbreeding. I will now turn to the role of concepts in the creation of an album by Taiwanese hiphop singer DogG, *Lotus Flower with Radiating Tongues* 舌燦蓮花 (2002).

Firstly, Zhang Weiyuan's detailed account of the creative process reflects a typical and productive antagonism between creating and selling the product – an antagonism theorized by Keith Negus in his account of the collaboration and conflicts between the artist & repertoire department and the marketing department within record companies.<sup>64</sup> In this case, though, the antagonism is between specialized companies, rather than between departments within a company. Rock Records, Taiwan's largest indigenous record company, controls the marketing and hence the budget, whereas the Big Circus production team and especially its leader and artist & repertoire manager Li Wenkuan strive to realize their creative visions, together with DogG. Secondly, against the backdrop of this political and financial struggle, Li Wenkuan identifies a set of concepts to guide the creational process:

Propagating Taiwanese consciousness: [Big Circus] expresses support of Taiwan in their own way, and on this album by applying their means – music, lyrics, images – they attempt to sculpt Taiwan and Taiwanese Hip Hop youth as they envision them.<sup>65</sup>

As a newcomer, DogG realizes that his leverage is limited. Although he voices diverging opinions in meetings and says that his viewpoint is much more pluralistic (and less anti-China) than Li Wenkuan's concepts suggest, DogG simultaneously adjusts his lyrics, vocal delivery and image to suit Big Circus' strategy.<sup>66</sup> This strategy also includes preps for public appearances and interviews that encourage DogG to “leave out that ‘comprehensive art form 綜藝的形象’ stuff of his.”<sup>67</sup> The song PUTTING OUT A RECORD 出唱片 on the album is a musical advertisement and contains some reflection on the constraints:

沒有辦法喔 我又沒辦法  
像馬戲團的猴子一樣賺錢  
反正宣傳預算也沒錢  
我是大馬戲團大金剛  
想爬上新光三越  
來幫自己曝光  
這樣會不會有演電影的機會

Can't be helped. No way I can  
make money as the monkeys in the circus do.  
The promotional budget's been slashed, anyhow.  
I am this big circus's Donkey Kong,  
I want to climb the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Department store  
and help myself to stripping naked...  
Is that what takes to land a film role?

<sup>63</sup> Dong Yun-chang, conversation, July 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Negus 1992.

<sup>65</sup> Zhang 2004a:47.

<sup>66</sup> Zhang 2004a:79.

<sup>67</sup> Zhang 2004a:78.

DogG is by no means free to do as he pleases, but even allowing for this, there is (as Zhang Weiyan points out) a wide gap between the concepts and their materialization in the final album. Bridging this gap involves creative decisions on the part of all participants.<sup>68</sup> Their handiwork of ‘fine-tuning’ the sound-image-text is crucial and defies standardization 版式化. Hence, Zhang rather speaks of mechanisms of (creative) interpretation 詮釋的機制, which he ties to power structures.<sup>69</sup> References guide every step of the process:

[From the striking similarities between these images and DogG’s album design] we can see that during all the work of the production team, ‘references’ [English in original] have a relatively important function as guides and reference 參照. [They use] ‘Reference songs’ during composition and ‘reference models’ during packaging and visual design. Even for DogG’s outfits, the production team consults large quantities of national and international hip hop music and magazines for blacks.<sup>70</sup>

The concepts and the adaptation of the references are developed towards a coherent or even holistic 整体 album by trial and error.

After the producer [Li Wenkuan] and arranger [Wu Congxian] had discussed the concept ..., the arranger started composing [TAIWAN EULOGY 台灣 song].<sup>71</sup> Whenever he finished a demo ... the producer, arranger, artist and the other members of the production team listened to it in a meeting room. This was an instance of ‘concrete appearance’ 具象的呈現, which is neither a language thing nor easily communicable. After listening to the song, everyone engaged in ‘(creative) interpretation.’ Everyone spoke his or her mind, attempting to translate this ‘concrete appearance’ back into abstract, communicable language. ... [After which the respective person(s)] would again use this abstract consensus 共識 to make a new version of the musical or visual passage [and we’d start again] ... We went full-circle time and again, until everyone agreed on the result.<sup>72</sup>

During my own fieldwork, producers explained that similar meetings select all songs for new albums, sometimes out of a hundred demo tapes, labeling a few as the album’s main publicity songs 主打歌, of which clips would be made and on which the marketing would focus.<sup>73</sup> In the case of Big Circus, the album seems to be a byproduct of these consensus-building meetings. As such, the



Illustration 5.8: Cover of DogG’s 2002 album Lotus Flower with Radiating Tongues.

<sup>68</sup> Zhang 2004a:72.

<sup>69</sup> Zhang 2004a:79.

<sup>70</sup> Zhang 2004a:66.

<sup>71</sup> Song refers to the Taiwanese or hoklo pronunciation of *shuang* 爽 ‘cool’, which is then a homonym of song 頌 ‘eulogy.’

<sup>72</sup> Zhang 2004a:59, 60.

<sup>73</sup> Adia, conversation, July 2007, and Huang Ting, conversation, July 2007.

whole production process is the externalization and collectivization of the way the electronic artist Wang Fan folds his selected, manipulated and mixed samples into boundless soundscapes. The role of samples is now taken over by references which form the ‘raw material.’ These referenced entities are well-known and successful creations: they are ‘cheeses’ of proven quality and market appeal. These cheeses are cut up and de-coagulated, releasing particles that can be reused in new constellations of coagulation and folding, aided by concepts that function as enzymes.

Specialization in the popular music industry leads to different levels of commissioning. The standard steps – putting out a commission for composition, arrangement, lyric-setting, music video production and visual design – occur as a combination of rough cuts of a product already in the chain, conceptual outlines of the desired direction, and one or more samples or references.

## §4 Selecting Stars

Cheese production can be presented as clustering and replication in the milk chaosmos (§2), or interbreeding lineages of consolidation and transformation (§3), but also as a process of selecting globules from the milk. The present section focuses on the selection of stars, band members and record industry personnel – a process that includes their strategies of survival and negotiation with gatekeepers in a larger field or ecology.

On May 10<sup>th</sup> 2001, Tian Zhen gate-crashed the Chinese Popular Song Awards held in Nanjing. She tried to explain to the audience that several days earlier the organizers had told her that she lay 4000 votes ahead in an online vote for Favorite Female Singer of the year 2000. However, when Tian told the organizers that she would probably not be able to make it to the ceremony, they gave the number one spot to her rival Na Ying, which Tian Zhen only found out when, after all, she did make it to the ceremony. The incident marked a high point in the rivalry between Tian and Na, and Na actually shed some tears while singing her song, after Tian Zhen had angrily left the stage. More importantly, the event opened the black box of Chinese pop music chart rankings and awards, suggesting that the results could easily be manipulated.

Unlike the Grammy Awards in the USA and Oricon in Japan, there is no authoritative list of pop songs in China. In the PRC, an award ceremony adapted from Hong Kong was held in Guangzhou in 1992, and this led to Beijing Music Radio organizing the first national Chinese Popular Song Awards in 1994. Other yearly hit lists quickly followed, including Channel V’s Global Sinophone Music Charts, which have been available to PRC audiences via satellite since 1998, and a cooperation between CCTV and MTV from 1999 on. PRC audiences eagerly anticipated these ceremonies, which provided rare opportunities to see pop stars who mostly dwelt in Hong Kong and Taiwan. This success prompted a proliferation of awards in the late 1990s, and by 2002 there were allegedly more than 2000 award ceremonies.<sup>74</sup> All these events vied for celebrity presence, which led them to invent new



*Illustration 5.9: Tian Zhen at the 2001 Chinese Popular Song Awards.*

<sup>74</sup> Xu 2009:13.

awards, for instance ‘favorite’ 最受歡迎 in addition to ‘best’ 最佳, ‘most respected’ 至尊, and awards named after the event. In general, award ceremony organizers became more occupied with negotiating with stars and their record companies than with a fair and transparent selection procedure. By 2001 it was a public secret that all the stars present at an award ceremony would get a prize, even if they hadn’t published new material for years.

These yearly red carpet events are often sponsored by companies that want to advertise their product, which partly explains why exposure trumps credibility. Because these companies rarely sponsor radio, radio has a different dynamic. Weekly radio charts are usually established through the tastes of individual DJs and hearsay, and are usually open to suggestions of record companies. According to a 2001 article by He Jianxue, plugging a song in a radio chart usually costs between 200 and 1000 RMB, and occasionally 10,000 RMB.<sup>75</sup> Singers and the industry as a whole seem to regard this as an acceptable instrument for “stir-frying” songs into hits, which also includes paying journalists for favorable reviews. Also in Taiwan, record companies close large package deals with television stations that include the appearance of stars in popular programs, exclusive interviews, and commercial slots for their latest songs. Promotion thus eats up a large proportion of album budgets.<sup>76</sup>

After the Tian Zhen incident in 2001 and subsequent scandals, the credibility of music award ceremonies in the PRC rapidly declined. Even more so than before, the events became parades of various kinds of celebrities rather than evaluations of musical merit. In Hong Kong, public distrust was fueled in 2003 by the alleged bribing of the Jade Solid Gold Best Ten Songs by Albert Yeung, founder of the mighty Hong Kong Emperor Entertainment Group. Nevertheless, the Jade Solid Gold Best Ten Songs (since 1984) and the RTHK Top 10 Golden Songs Award (since 1978) have remained authoritative in Hong Kong and a model in the business. By the way, Faye Wong won the Jade Solid Gold award for Asia-Pacific Most Popular Hong Kong Female Artist seven times between 1993 and 2000, and her songs made it into the RTHK Top 10 an equal number of times in roughly the same period. Since 2001 Mainland Chinese stars have been able to participate in the RTHK Top 10, but given the overall decline of cantopop since the late 1990s, its influence has waned.

In 2008, the PRC Top Chinese Music Chart Awards (founded in 2001) attempted to restore credibility by appointing a relatively transparent jury of twenty prominent musicians, producers and critics and by having the election procedure supervised by New York-based auditor Deloitte, which also handles the Grammy Awards envelopes. However, in tune with the dominance of Taiwanese popular music since 2000, the Taiwanese Golden Melody Awards, established in 1990, remains a trendsetter in Chinese pop. In 1998 they opened the competition to all singers who had published Chinese-language albums in Taiwan. Faye Wong was awarded Best Mandarin Female Performer in 2004.

The first two steps in the Golden Melody Awards selection procedure involve consultation with large numbers of specialists, for shortlisting candidates. Only in the final phase does a small committee meet to rank the contesters, which means that the selection and tastes of this committee are contested, and that committee members are sometimes incapable of awarding their personal favorite because he or she didn’t make it to the shortlist. Given the fact that controversy over such in-

<sup>75</sup> He 2001.

<sup>76</sup> Adia, conversation, July 2007, and Huang Ting, conversation, July 2007. Cf. *The Heavenly Kings* (d. Wu, 2006).



fluent gatekeeping seems inevitable, and the relative unreliability of hit lists in the PRC, the Golden Melody Awards functions well, albeit perhaps conservatively. The Taiwanese folk singer Panai explains:

Taiwanese music lacks subjectivity 自主性. When I was a jury member for the Golden Melody Awards the record companies only wanted things that fit their narrow formats. The companies, but also the local government we cooperate with in a music festival here in Taidong, only want something that looks good, that is easy to package. They want a cake with a nice icing, neglecting the variety of ingredients and preparation needed to make it taste good as well. Fortunately I could often convince the other jury members given my prestige as performing artist.<sup>77</sup>

## The Super Girl Pool

In the spring of 2005, over 120,000 candidates applied for the auditions of the second edition of *Super Girl Contest* 超級女聲, a television program by Hunan Satellite Television based on the British format of *Pop Idols*. The opening tune and the slogan “Sing when you want” 想唱就唱 already suggested that everyone with sufficient will could be a pop star—provided they get the right guidance. Simon Frith has described this idea as the Talent Pool, where success lies in the right combination of talents under the supervision of a record company. Frith argues that although audiences focus on artists, creative decisions are dispersed over multitudes of people:

The ‘creative’ role in his pop scheme is assigned to the *packagers*, the record producers, clothes designers, magazine editors, etc.; they are the ‘authors’ of success, the intelligence of the system.<sup>78</sup>

This view of pop artists as mere puppets is widespread. Andrew Jones is skeptical about the opportunities for creative input singers in the PRC had in the early 1990s, and the Taiwanese rapper DogG had no choice but to comply with the conceptual framework constructed by his manager Li Wenkuan.<sup>79</sup> Although in DogG’s case decisions were made in apparently democratic meetings, Li manufactured consent by hand-picking his employees. The relatively weak position of aspiring musicians is also evidenced by the phenomenon of ‘frozen’ singers, where companies neither invest in a singer nor terminate his or her contract. It had taken half a year since DogG was signed before they started working on an album, Faye Wong was temporarily put on hold by Cinetop, and so was Second Hand Rose for over a year with Music Nation.<sup>80</sup>

However, this representation of events makes the artists appear overly passive. As elsewhere in the world, in the PRC the appeal of *Pop Idols* was based on audience participation. Besides gender, there were no restrictions on applicants, and as such the show was hailed as a break with the paternalism of the PRC entertainment industry.<sup>81</sup> The selection process started with auditions before

<sup>77</sup> Panai and Nabu, conversation, July 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Frith 1988:113.

<sup>79</sup> Jones 1992.

<sup>80</sup> Katie Chan, conversation, August 2007. Liang Long, conversation, June 2007.

<sup>81</sup> San 2006. The air of vulgarizing iconoclasm is also supported by a conflict over popularity the provincial TV station had with the planned-market leader CCTV. With viewer rates estimated around 400 million, *Super Girl Contest* dethroned CCTV’s Chinese New Year Event as the most-watched program of the year. Upon the center’s demands,

appointed juries on March 19<sup>th</sup> in five cities (not including the traditional cultural centers of Beijing and Shanghai) and ended on August 26<sup>th</sup> with finals decided by much more democratic procedures.<sup>82</sup> During the finals the role of the jury was mainly ceremonial, praising all three finalists in superlatives. By contrast, the audience was rowdy and especially the yellow-uniformed fans of Chris Lee at times shouted down the other contestants. Lee eventually won with 3,528,308 SMS votes. In-between these extremes, the contest displayed a variety of selection procedures, of which perhaps the most widely known is ‘PK.’ PK stands for ‘player killed’ and originates from computer games such as *Counter Strike* in which two teams fight each other to the death. In the television show, the English abbreviation denotes a duel of two contestants singled out by the jury and/or SMS votes. After they are given a final chance to pledge and sing, previous contestants come forward one by one to cast their votes publicly, and thus eventually send one of the two PK’ers home crying. Although similar to biological selection, contingency plays a major role in *Super Girl*; nevertheless the success of contestants, and indeed of the program as a whole, lies in the singers’ active involvement in the soap-series-like narrative development. The purposefully tantalizing battles and meticu-



Illustration 5.10: The three finalists of *Super Girl* 2005.

lous selection procedures aim to produce foundational histories of idols that will nurture relationships with millions of fans. A lot has changed since Frith published his article. He ascribes duration and hardship not to the Talent Pool, but to the contrasting model of the Rock Pyramid in which bands work their way to the international top.<sup>83</sup>

## Star Organism Faye Wong

Stars negotiate between ego and identity on the one hand and crowds and multiplicity on the other, both in consumption and production. Faye Wong provides a unique voice and face for products that are the result of her associated milieu, consisting of many players.<sup>84</sup> The selective pressure of pop’s massive audiences is on stars as a whole, whereas the fitness of particular contributors such as sound engineers and hair-dressers is internally decided.<sup>85</sup> Interviewees pointed out that if a singer flops, the blame is passed around the associated network like a hot potato.<sup>86</sup> I will now look into the tension between the individuality and the multiplicity of the star Faye Wong.

Hunan Satellite Television pledged to include more healthy and non-exciting songs and to show fewer shots of ecstatic fans – but to no avail, since viewer rates and demands for advertisement slots kept soaring.

<sup>82</sup> See the roundtable discussion with the cultural critics Li Yinhe, Yu Guoming and Zhu Dake on *Super Girl*’s contributions to a democratic ‘civil society’ through, for instance, the popular criticism of the judges (Zhao 2005).

<sup>83</sup> Frith 1988:111, see also Negus 1992:54-56.

<sup>84</sup> Deleuze 1987:51.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Deleuze 1987: 52.

<sup>86</sup> Huang Ting, conversation, July 2007.

Dai Sicong: “When Faye Wong was introduced to me [in 1988] I was already a famous star maker. They called me the godfather of the music scene. One day someone called me who was connected to a TV station where I often appeared and who was also an acquaintance of Faye’s mother. Faye’s mother was an opera singer, and she thought that the modeling Faye did at the time could develop into a popular music career.

The first time I met Faye, I didn’t think she was very special. She was tall and slender and her big eyes drew attention, but she dressed poorly. She sang at the piano and her voice was already very good. I heard that typical sweet sound, which can only be talent. At the same time she needed a lot of tutoring. She was much too ‘mainland Chinese’ ”<sup>87</sup>

Groenewegen: “Then why did you decide to work with her? And how do you select your students in general?”

Dai: “I look for three things in potential stars: appearance, voice and character. With Faye all these were good, and she was also very eager to learn—that’s also an important criterion. Furthermore, at the age of nineteen, twenty, she was young. ... My classes consist of three parts. For the basic vocal techniques we do exercises from opera 聲樂 first and then we sing covers. We also do music theory, because understanding music better is important for the musical feel 音樂感, which transcends technique. Finally, there’s singing in tune 音准, my students have to be able to hold the key. If all goes well, we practice in front of an audience. I take them to private parties, local contests and karaoke halls. If they can control their nerves in front of a hundred people, performing before thousands or tens of thousands is no problem either. ... Faye was so young back then, she didn’t have a clue. I was the first to tell her to be confident. I taught Faye how to carry herself 做人的道路. We constantly talked at her in order to get her to dress and behave. I even gave her a new name, Wang Jingwen.

[After initial setbacks, such as failing to strike a deal with Wing Hang Records], Polygram’s CEO Duan believed in my star-making abilities. He wanted to sign Faye with Cinepoly, a subsidiary of Polygram. Although Faye did not sing technically perfectly during the audition, she managed to convince Cinepoly’s producer Alvin Leong. But director Chen Xiaobao opposed the deal. Thereupon I kept inviting Chen to dinner, but to no avail. Later in 1989 Faye won the second prize in a contest organized by CASH, and only then did Chen Xiaobao agree to sign her.<sup>88</sup> After that, the company decided everything for her. They hired professionals to redo her image. Usually they also assign the star to a manager they feel can do the job. I don’t know why Faye hired Katie Chan.”<sup>89</sup>

Dai Sicong is a gatekeeper who selects potential singers, molds them to increase their appeal and introduces them to record companies. By saying “There are three people who have made Faye what she is: her father, me and Chen Xiaobao,” he actively negates the roles of Faye Wong and her mother, as well as Wong’s development after Cinepoly.<sup>90</sup> He does not seem to think of the way he molds his students as violent or overbearing, although next to instruction on vocal techniques this also in-

<sup>87</sup> See Chapter 1. Although Dai Sicong himself is originally from Mainland China and speaks fluent Mandarin, he seems to have been one of the driving forces behind Faye’s Hong Kong-ification.

<sup>88</sup> The contest is ABU, and the song is STILL THOSE SAME OLD WORDS 仍是舊句子, written and produced by Alvin Leong.

<sup>89</sup> Dai Sicong, conversation, September 2007. See also Wang 1998:168.

<sup>90</sup> Dai Sicong, conversation, September 2007.



cludes pressure to accept a certain type of behavior and view of life. This implies that to Dai Sicong students have no independent identity and are extensions of their teachers/fathers.

Rather than with these ethical considerations, Dai is concerned with stressing that he makes art as opposed to profits. “I taught her the art, and later those managers of hers made all the money,” he says, surprisingly spiteful. For all their differences, both Dai and Faye Wong’s manager Katie Chan claim to blend professional coaching with emotional care. During the interview cited below, Chan even shed tears when she recounted her memories.

Katie Chan’s career started in the 1980s when she produced a daily pop music show on TVB television with Celine Chao:

The years at TVB were tough. In those years I developed what I think is my most valuable skill: my emphatic understanding of the audience. Later Celine and I started Brain Child, one of the earliest concert operators in Hong Kong, and I got to adjust my insights in the context of live shows. Also in my activities as a manager I focus on the relationship between artist and audience. For instance, I advise Faye to be aware that people observe her constantly. She easily gets bored at award ceremonies, during which I must persuade her to stay alert and not let it show on her face. Or during the break in a concert I ask how the people in the first ring are doing—she picks up on these hints real quickly.

The artists I manage are like my own children. ... Faye has always been very restrained, except for one time. In late 1993 she called me, saying with this tiny voice, “I am Wang Jingwen, and my record producer [Alvin Leong] says I need a manager.” At the time Faye was in a difficult position. Her previous manager [Chen Jiantian] was only in it for the money and had sold her rights [for two million HKD] to Rock Records in Taiwan. However, Rock Records was not planning to move on this anytime soon, and in the meantime Cinepoly understood that Faye had potential and put a lot of pressure on Faye to renew their contract. They even threatened to freeze her, which means no promotion and no airplay, nothing less but the end of her career. So Faye called me in distress. The first thing I did was travel to Taiwan to meet Sam Duan, the CEO of Rock Records. I knew him very well, and asked him: “If you’re not doing anything with her, then let her go!” and Sam simply tore up the contract. Just like that. Then I helped Faye with renegotiating a three-year contract with Cinepoly. All for free: we didn’t sign a management contract until months later. Then Angela came, who manages the Faye Wong account.<sup>91</sup>

Just like Dai Sicong, Katie Chan regards her stars as kin. However, her style is persuasive rather than authoritative. Her cooperation with Wong, Eason Chan and the Korean singer Rain is based on mutual trust and shared interests, and only secondarily backed by three- to five-year business plans that she draws up. When I asked her how Faye Wong’s albums and images are made, she explained:

Usually Faye comes up with the ideas. ... When Faye wants something about eternity or being unattainable, Lam Chik concretizes it in a set of lyrics. At times record companies would find that difficult. For instance, when the lyrics were all about dinosaurs such as on *Fable*. ...

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<sup>91</sup> Katie Chan, conversation, July 2007.

Faye never bothered about the consequences, leaving the trouble of dealing with the company to me. Because we were successful we could get away with it.

We would always go on the road with the same team, with very few changes: Faye, me, Angela and the hairstylist Elaine [Wong]. Faye wanted it like that: she's shy and doesn't open to people easily. At a certain moment, I became her buffer to the outside world. I even represented her at meetings at her child's school. She also never bothered about finances. Not even in 1997 when I was very successful at playing companies off against each other and managed to secure a sixty-million contract with EMI. But she's meticulous about the things that pertain to her directly, namely her sound – she insists on picking the live band – and some aspects of her appearance.<sup>92</sup>

Malaysia-born Alvin Leong was production supervisor at Cinepoly for Leslie Cheung's albums and later Faye Wong's.<sup>93</sup> His working style is explained in a published interview:

Alvin Leong likes to listen to music together with the singers. In the process of listening the singer will select the songs he or she likes and Alvin Leong will also talk about the style of his liking. While listening together they will reach consensus on a number of songs they both like, which they will elaborate according to the style of the singer to build an album. Back then, Shirley Wong's first album was cooked up in this way. ... [Leong says:] At the time I had just come back from America, and I liked American R&B a lot, so we made R&B songs. I didn't consider what the outside world thought of it. Fortunately the record company supported me.<sup>94</sup>

The R&B sound of Wong's first three albums originated from Alvin Leong, and later he introduced Faye Wong to the British sound of the Cranberries and Cocteau Twins.<sup>95</sup> In another interview, Leong elaborates on the relationship between artist and producer:

I often say that communication is important because I want to 'be a tight-fitting garment' to every one of my singers. Singers are artists and production supervisors are artists too. Art inevitably entails subjectivity and persistence. So I understood from early on that there's no room in a recording studio for two artists. Whenever recording, I will abandon my own artistic attitude somewhat. Of course I am not the kind of person to hand my faith to the gods, and neither would I just drift along. I only make an effort to choose my words carefully. For instance, I won't say "The way you sang this is no good," but instead I'll say, "Let's record another time, ok?" ... I can abandon my artistic perspective on details, but I won't choose to yield or compromise when the requirements of an album are concerned. Ideally, production supervisor and singer merge into one another, [so] there's no submission of one to the other. The secret to success is still: communication.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Katie Chan, conversation, July 2007.

<sup>93</sup> Anonymous 2005a.

<sup>94</sup> Anonymous 2005.

<sup>95</sup> Katie Chan interview, confirmed by quoted interview above.

<sup>96</sup> Anonymous 2005a.

A key term in Alvin Leong's utopian discourse is *moqi* 默契, 'tacit understanding or consensus.' In these terms, not being explicit is perhaps an effective strategy to mitigate the subjectivity and persistence that would otherwise lead to conflicts between singer and producer. As long as the artist does not persist in opinions that digress from the producer's plans, Leong can elaborate the sonic identity of the singer towards the R&B and Britpop he likes. The stylist Tomas Chan supports this reading:

Faye Wong doesn't have any high demands. We worked together for some time, [so] she trusts us. Of course she'd still participate and voice her opinions. Decision-making power is ultimately in her hands ... For instance, without knowing she'd show her preferences while she reads a book or plays a game. We would understand her mind under these circumstances and then improve from there, that's our tacit understanding. So as for Faye Wong's participation in her own image and the height of her demands, I'd say the initiative actually comes from her.<sup>97</sup>

Producer and songwriter Zhang Yadong also regards Wong as a driving force. He first cooperated with her in 1994 and became a principal influence on her sound after *Di-dar* (1995) and especially *Impatience* (1996).

Reporter: "[You were one of the first] 'cooks' behind the scenes to step into the limelight and become widely known, is that also because of your cooperation with Faye Wong?"

Zhang: "You could say so. Faye Wong is very, very important. Basically she made me. At the time, no other singer would have given a newcomer like me a chance, and Wong gave me such a free hand, saying feel free to do whatever you like, which leaves you without pressure. Back then she was open to any strange sound. The music of *Impatience* and *Fable* [2000] was unconventional in its day, but she allowed you to do it."<sup>98</sup>

Apparently, Faye Wong (a) selects talented people; (b) gives them the vaguest of directions; (c) allows them the space to do what they are good at, which – as we will see below – sometimes includes complying with their stage directives during sound recordings, photo shoots, interviews and so on; and perhaps (d) reevaluates the connection according to the results and the demands of third parties. Wong's make-up artist A Zing has been responsible for some of her well-known looks. He recounts the first time they worked together:

In 1992 or 1993 we did a photo shoot for the cover of *City Magazine* 號外. Back then I had just moved from Singapore to Hong Kong. I had a preconceived beauty

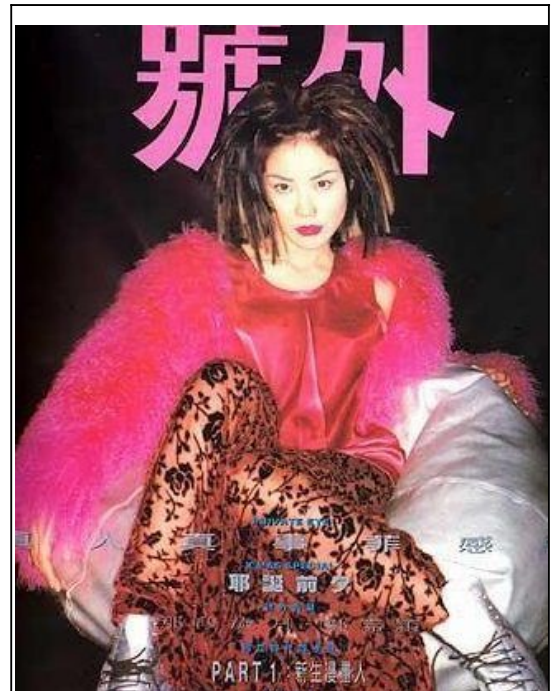


Illustration 5.11: Faye Wong on the cover of *City Magazine*.

<sup>97</sup> Wang 1998: 125-126.

<sup>98</sup> Chen 2007.

idea, or rather, I had a preconceived idea of what good make-up was and I stamped it on every face, without considering their own features. At the time I thought good make-up is long false lashes, full lips and so on. Well, it didn't work for Faye. Next to the cover of the magazine I also did her make-up in the clip for *EASILY HURT WOMAN*. It was an even bigger disaster, I simply applied what was 'in' at the moment: huge red lips etc., and I didn't consider the lighting.

After that she avoided me and did her own make-up. It wasn't until about two years later that the photographer who did the cover of *A Hundred Thousand Whys* 十萬個為什麼 (1993SEPT) wanted me to do the make-up. Faye said no. That was 1994. For me the clip of *EASILY HURT WOMAN* had been a turning point. I abandoned projection and 'good make-up,' opting instead to be sensitive both to the face of the artist and the 'third point of view,' which is the audience, or rather, reception as an abstract, general notion.

When Faye agreed to meet me in 1994 she was very cold and blunt. We sat backstage and she was flipping through magazines. She wanted me to pick what I liked, "Do you like this?" "Yeah." "Well, I don't," she'd say (laughs) – very blunt. She wanted things not to be so stiff. She was really ahead of her time. We had three days for the album cover, I still got it wrong the first day. Faye didn't like any of the pics and we decided to shoot outside the second day, start all over. That was much better. We shot the picture that went on the cover the third day indoors.

Faye had the final say in everything. She was easy to work with, but sometimes her ideas would be too far ahead of our time. For *Ingratiate Yourself* 討好自己 (1994) or *Random Thinking* (1994) she wanted to do snapshots [This was probably for *Secret* (1994)]. That was very new and the photographer didn't get it. And her ideas were not always well received by critics. But everything sold, so the record company was OK with it. Faye could wear anything, she made everything work. In 1995 she introduced Titi Kwan to the team, who from then on took care of the visual image. Titi lived in Paris and could get his hands on the best European fashion. He was very talented and provided coherence. Before that not all the elements would necessarily add up to a consistent idea, but now the images became much stronger.<sup>99</sup>



Illustration 5.12: Faye Wong on the cover of her 1993 album *A Hundred Thousand Whys*.

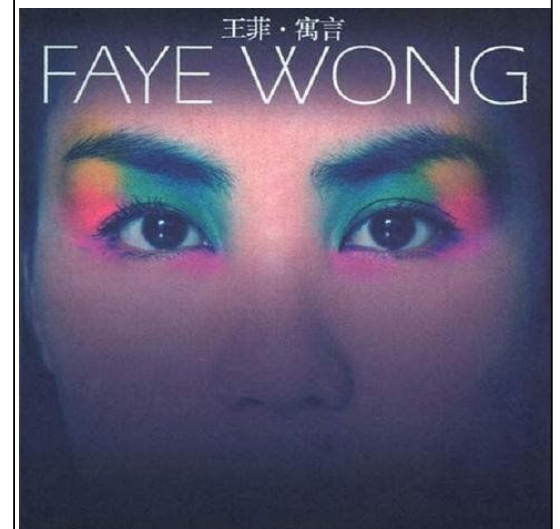


Illustration 5.13: Faye Wong on the cover of her 2000 album *Fable*.

<sup>99</sup> A Zing, conversation, August 2007.

A Zing clearly met with reluctance on Faye Wong's side, but was eventually selected, doubtless also for the merits of his work with artists such as Sammi Cheng. By contrast, the hair stylist Elaine Wong, a friend who was part of Faye Wong's team, had to make way for Ben Lee in the late 1990s, "because Elaine got stuck somewhere, she kept using the same looks."<sup>100</sup>

Secondly, as a make-up artist, A Zing realized he could only express himself through the faces of others. Not only A Zing, but all interviewees stressed that their relationship to Faye Wong was one of serving her, while taking the initiative as necessary. Video director Susie Au:

I thought KNOW YOURSELF AND EACH OTHER [1994] had something virtual 虛 to it, so I wanted to express that in the MTV. I made Faye stand in front of a blue screen and do all these weird movements. She didn't understand, but I said: "Just trust me." We recorded it, and later she let me know through an assistant that she loved the clip. We cooperated a lot since then.

Usually the record company would select three of four songs after an album was recorded to become the main publicity songs, for which they needed clips. After they contacted me, I would brainstorm with my art director Thomas Chen, the assistant director and later also Faye's hair-stylist Elaine Wong. Then we would inform A Zing. We treated the clips as mini-films, which was new in Hong Kong. We'd draft a minimal narrative and then a work plan, but there wouldn't be an elaborate script. Also we wouldn't tell Faye. If I'd tell her there was a story, she'd say "I can't role-play 演戲." So I'd only give her very concrete directions, such as, walk from this spot to that spot while looking over your shoulder now and then as if you're on the run [in A HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE 百年孤独 (1999)]. I later recognized this stealthy, documentary way of filming Faye in Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express*.<sup>101</sup>

Au mentions a variety of inspirational sources, including narratives proposed by the music and lyrics, ideas put forth by Faye Wong, but also references to cultural tropes, images and plot lines that originate from Au and her team. She furthermore shows how Faye Wong is both decisive for the project as a whole and, during the actual recording, cooperative in roles scripted by others. Titi Kwan also fondly remembers manipulating Wong into spontaneous role-acting:

Titi Kwan: "We never had any real meetings (A Zing nods in agreement). Faye would at most suggest a general direction in a few words. I first met her during a photo shoot for a magazine I was working for. She hated the process, she hates fitting, but we were also the first ones to ask her to be natural and spontaneous, and the results were very good. So later we went shopping together in Paris and then I started to help her create an image that wasn't as artificial as that of the other Hong Kong stars. We did *Decadent Sounds* (1995JUL) and then the cover of *Di-dar* (1995DEC). For *Di-dar* she said she wanted something casual (A Zing chuckles). They called for a fitting, but I said it wasn't necessary. They thought it was going to be very plain, but I was thinking more about the attitude than the actual clothes. So on the shooting day, all these huge dresses arrived and Faye was shocked. That was the so-called butterfly look." ...

<sup>100</sup> Katie Chan, conversation, July 2007.

<sup>101</sup> Susie Au, conversation, July 2007.





Illustration 5.14: Faye Wong on the cover of her 1995 album *Di-Dar*.



Illustration 5.15: Faye Wong during her 2004 concert in Shanghai.

Groenewegen: “Did you have a plan for linking the various looks together?”

Titi Kwan: “There was no plan, we grew naturally. We were so young and didn’t realize what we were doing. It was a dream job, we just did whatever we thought was fun. And Faye always looked fantastic. Of course we also had quite some arguments over the years, especially with the photographer who wouldn’t get it. ... During the last show of her last tour in Guangzhou [in 2004], it was freezing and Faye was wearing all these flimsy dresses. I could see she was cold. So halfway the show I ran over to where manager Katie Chan was sitting, took her fur coat, and backstage I threw it on Faye Wong. Faye hardly even reacted: she probably only felt the thing was soft and warm. She performed great, and the fur blended into the rest of her outfit, it looked as if it was planned, that’s how spontaneous she is.”<sup>102</sup>

Given the degree of autonomy of the members of her team, Faye Wong can be seen as a set of disparate sound bits, pixels and scattered remarks elicited and manipulated by a host of individuals. Audiences project coherence and depth onto them because they want to. However, moving towards the other side of this scale and proceeding from the idea that the star contributes a brand name that conveniently denotes this nebula of globules, we could argue that the exclusive endorsement of this brand guarantees a minimum of coherence. Although Faye Wong’s image and sound have gone through great changes over the years, she participates in and thus connects all of them. Indeed, there is reason to believe that Faye Wong’s ability to organize and transcend her associated milieu is what makes her a true star:

Reporter: “People can choose music, but you can’t expect to stumble upon singers suitable for performing your own music. *Fable* and oth-

<sup>102</sup> A Zing and Titi Kwan, conversation, August 2007.

er albums you produced for Faye Wong seem to be entirely tailor-made for her. The style is consistent throughout, just like concept albums.”

Zhang Yadong: “In fact, for neither of those two records did I consider any album concepts (laughs). It’s the strength of Faye Wong herself. Her own character can unify songs with entirely heterodox styles into a single body! But most artists lack that ability, so when I produce for others, I need to know what they exactly want. This involves preliminary planning, because I don’t like albums to have internal conflicts.”<sup>103</sup>

## An Ecology of *Guanxi*

Marc Moskowitz argues:

Mandapop’s acceptance of coproduced songs may also point to a greater focus on teamwork than the obsession with individual performance ... Mandapop lyricists and composers also become famous in their own right. ... [For instance the Taipei-based lyricist Michelle] wants to leave her own mark on the music she composes rather than just doing what the artist has done before. Because songwriters and performers are mixed and matched, Mandapop performers can explore a wide range of identities.<sup>104</sup>

Just like make-up artists, video directors and, say, karaoke singers, producers and lyricists express themselves through the works of others, whom they carefully select:

Zhang Yadong: “Don’t take all commissions as the same thing. You need to cooperate with a star to create your own recognizable style, your trademark.”

Tan Yizhe: “Yes, I’ve already realized this problem.”<sup>105</sup>

Producers often establish their own independent companies, which requires cultivating relations with stars, mainstream record companies, studio artists, investors, audiences and regulators. These connections are crucial to the survival of indie companies in a niche of the larger ecology, and are described in Chinese as *guanxi* 關係 ‘ties of allegiance.’ *Guanxi* generically denotes Chinese structures of interpersonal relations that in the West are sometimes associated with corruption, but that in China are embedded in respectable traditions such as Confucianism and in popular expressions surrounding, for instance, *ganqing* 感情 ‘feelings, emotions of attachment, love’ and *mianzi* 面子 ‘face, dignity, reputation,’ which can be damaged and lost if reciprocal *guanxi* are disrespected.<sup>106</sup> Jason Cho of the Hong Kong production company People Mountain People Sea describes their collaboration with Faye Wong:

Kubert Leung who was the supervising producer of the album is an old friend of us.<sup>107</sup> Like most people who contact us, Kubert knows what we do. Usually record companies request demos from publishing houses, who have enormous backlogs and are more than willing to

<sup>103</sup> Chen 2007.

<sup>104</sup> Moskowitz 2010:107-108.

<sup>105</sup> Zhang Yadong and Tan Yizhe, conversation, October 2007.

<sup>106</sup> Bian 1997:369.

<sup>107</sup> In the 1980s his band Ukiyo-e had made a name for themselves in the Hong Kong alternative music scene, alongside Tat Ming Pair, the former band of Anthony Wong, who founded People Mountain People Sea.

send demos in the musical style described by the record company because a selected song means revenue for them. Conversely, we don't pull songs out of the fridge, but compose songs that are tailored to the artist. Especially for artists with their own ideas about production, this is a plus.

Kubert gave no directions, saying "just do anything you think fits." Eventually he selected a song written by Gaybird [titled COLOR BLIND 色盲 (2001)] out of the two or three we proposed. With HERO 英雄 it was much more complicated because the director and film company who were now involved had definite demands and Faye was less active as a singer. The film producer approached us through Susy Au. Zhang Yadong had written the song and they wanted Faye to sing it. Somehow they decided that [the boss of our company] Anthony [Wong] should produce it, maybe because Faye was in Hong Kong at the time.

Most of the members of our company we know either through the Hong Kong indie scene, such as Gaybird who is in the band Multiplex, or through the theater group Zuni Icosahedron, such as Susie Au.<sup>108</sup>

The overlap of professional assessment and favoritism is the basis on which Chinese independent production companies operate. Not only Anthony Wong's People Mountain People Sea in Hong Kong, but also Zhang Yadong's Dong Music and Shen Lihui's Modern Sky in Beijing and TCM in Taiwan are groups of friends that thrive on the connections and tastes of their leader, in Bourdieuan terms: his social and cultural capital. In other words, *guanxi* are tied to persons, not to companies. As such they complicate the clichéd opposition between Oriental collectivity and Occidental individualism that Moskowitz alludes to. Chinese companies, as well as underground bands, are organized around individuals. These so called *linghun* 靈魂, 'souls' or 'inspirers,' head a family-like circle of friends. Without them, nothing can be decided. In Dong Music, employees call Zhang Yadong older brother Dong, which illustrates both the apparent intimacy within the company and Zhang's undisputed leadership.

These networks of friends are born of necessity and convenience. Working with friends also benefits trust and coherence. Ideally, singers are part of this network. Jason Cho:

We encourage artists to get involved, it's more interesting that way. We don't manipulate. Sometimes it's just like playing in a band. It's all about interaction. Working at People Mountain People Sea is like playing in several bands at the same time.<sup>109</sup>

Just like in these indie companies, democracy is rare on the PRC band scene. In *Rites and Rock in Peking (Rites et Rock à Pékin)* (2001) Catherine Capdeville-Zeng argues that through rock, which is the emotional and musical center that Cui Jian embodies, "potential discord [in his band] is relegated to a secondary, formal level, that of [Confucian] rites."<sup>110</sup> She describes how in the early 1990s Cui Jian disciplined both his band during practice and the audience during concerts, like a conductor.<sup>111</sup> Band members join for the money or because they admire Cui Jian's music and feel that by performing it, it somehow becomes theirs too. At the same time Cui Jian remains the undisputed

<sup>108</sup> Jason Cho, conversation, August 2007.

<sup>109</sup> Jason Cho, conversation, August 2007.

<sup>110</sup> Capdeville-Zeng 2001:134.

<sup>111</sup> Capdeville-Zeng 2001:126 and 308.



“creative engine” imbued with truth and authority to which the others “transfer their effort to merge into the total Cui Jian oeuvre.”<sup>112</sup> Capdeville-Zeng concludes not that Cui Jian is a Western-style autonomous individual in the course of expressing himself, but an Oriental “movement of heart-mind” that always anticipates relating to communities large and small.<sup>113</sup> As such, Cui Jian is a combination of Erving Goffman’s umpire who enables the game to unfold by restricting its players and Elias Canetti’s conductor who “ranks himself first among the servants of music” and simultaneously is “inside the mind of every player.”<sup>114</sup>

Not only Cui Jian, but also the ‘three outstanding ones of Magic Stone’ 磨岩三杰 of the early 1990s, were individuals rather than bands: He Yong, Zhang Chu and Dou Wei (ex-Black Panther). Most lead singers of prominent bands of the mid- and late 1990s went solo, such as Feng Jiangzhou of the Fly and Zuoxiao Zuzhou of No. Other bands went through major changes, often leaving only the singer in place, such as Qiu Ye of The Master Says. Xie Tianxiao’s transformation of Cold Blooded Animal into his accompanying band from the 2000s onwards is another case in point.

However, there are exceptions. Capdeville-Zeng juxtaposes what she calls ‘imperial bands’ such as Cui Jian to holistic 整體 bands. Holistic bands make decisions on the basis of consensus in the whole group, which is how Tang Dynasty, Tongue, Miserable Faith, Subs, Joyside, New Pants, P.K.14, Carsick Cars and Queen Sea Big Shark present themselves. When explaining how their music is created, especially the younger musicians rarely talk of the ‘inspiration’ 靈感 of a creative soul. They favor the less conspicuous term *dongji* 動機 ‘motive.’ It suggests that creation is a collective process triggered by for instance a bass lick, to which the guitar player responds. Paradoxically, most holistic bands in China play a combination of hard, Underground rock styles, such as metal, punk and New Wave, imported from the ‘individualistic’ West.

Xiao He is clearly in charge of Glorious Pharmacy, especially since the departure of saxophone player Li Tieqiao in 2005. Around that time Xiao He had emerged as a solo performer, and by 2010 Glorious Pharmacy stopped rehearsing because they had no shows planned, while Xiao He has a busy schedule. However, compared to Cui Jian and Xie Tianxiao, Xiao He seems to be less interested in realizing his artistic ideas and expressing himself than in engaging people, and more prepared to shift agency to his environment. He often improvises with (visiting) musicians or artists, and in his solo shows he tries to remain sensitive to the performance situation. When I asked him in 2006 what SIMPLE TRUTH was about, he said:

“I used to wanted to be hurt [by my girlfriends], I thought I needed that to make music,” gesturing with a hand holding a cigarette. He puts the guitar case down at the bus stop on our way to his weekly, improvised performance in the Nameless Highland. “Why don’t you use lyrics anymore?”, I asked as I tried to keep the conversation going amidst gusts of cold and dust. Xiao He: “Now, I don’t need all that anymore. Anything can inspire me. Things that I see in the bar, paintings, someone’s face.” “So it’s mostly visual things,” I ask. Xiao He looks puzzled. “I mean, not stories you heard, things you read in a newspaper. Or other

<sup>112</sup> Capdeville-Zeng 2001:131-135, 224-226, see also Zhao 1994: 148-163.

<sup>113</sup> Capdeville-Zeng 2001:319-320.

<sup>114</sup> Goffman 1959:60; Canetti 1962:458-460.

music, like the songs of others, or sounds.” He thinks for a moment: “No, mainly visual. Sometimes changing the format 模式 itself is a breakthrough.”<sup>115</sup>

In 2010 Xiao He claimed that he didn’t need inspiration, that he could create music anytime. And indeed, his speed in composing film scores has been remarkable. His Internet-advertised project “Twelve Musical Portraits of 2010” 2010 的 12 幅音樂肖像 seeks to develop this even further:

Each month of 2010, Xiao He will write a song for one person, telling a story from their lives. Anyone who wants his or her portrait sung by Xiao He can apply via email. A proper application should include: Personal information (resume and contact info) and a brief statement about why you want a song written for yourself. Xiao He will choose one person based on the applications received that month, and make an appointment with him/her in order to know more. At the end of 2010, Xiao He will hold a concert for those twelve chosen people, and will publish the music album: *Xiao He: Twelve Musical Portraits of 2010*.<sup>116</sup>

## Specialization in Second Hand Rose

Let me introduce the population 人口 of Second Hand Rose.

On guitar: Yao Lan. Looks like Lennon, doesn’t he? Yeah, quite the Lennon, just doesn’t know when to die.

On bass: Jiang Ningzhan. He’s a businessman, someone who harms other people.

On folk winds: Wu Zekun. Proponent of five generations. In fact, the previous five generations were all [playing] on fly-overs.

On drums: Beibei. Olympic mascot [One of the five Olympic mascots happened to have the same name].

And me: Little Dragon (*long*). But once a fortune-teller told me: Liang Long (Dragon Liang), you need to change your name into Liang Chong (Bug Liang), that would be ultra auspicious. Let’s start today in this small circle. Please call me Buggy. Thanks.

This is how Liang Long introduced Second Hand Rose in early 2008. Over time, they seem to have been at least three different bands that are conflated only because they share a number of songs, a lead singer and a band name. Liang is the ‘soul’ connecting them, but lacks the will and financial power to assume centrality the way for instance Faye Wong and Cui Jian do. Liang Long depends on his *guanxi* with band members, friends and to a lesser extent on record companies to keep Second Hand Rose afloat, which gives these parties negotional power.

Little is known about Liang Long’s band before he came to Beijing in 2000. The personnel changes of the period between the first (2003) and second albums (2006) are easier to specify: next to Liang Long only Wu Zekun remained, and Wu is arguably the band member most on the periphery of the creational process. He didn’t attend the rehearsals I witnessed in 2007, only showing up for live shows to play embellishments and hurrying back to his paying job at a folk orchestra afterwards. Next to Liang Long, guitar player Wang Yuqi was the longest-standing band member of

<sup>115</sup> Xiao He, conversation, November 2006.

<sup>116</sup> Vitamin Creative Space 2010, their translation.

Second Hand Rose on the debut album. He explained that playing with Second Hand Rose between 2000 and 2005 was beneficial for his *guanxi* as performing artist and songwriter in later years.

Liang Long doesn't understand music. He provides the lyrics, but the music was composed by all of us together. We were very surprised when the album came out and it said: 'Words and music 詞曲 by Liang Long, arrangement 編曲 by Second Hand Rose. However, at the time Liang Long had a relationship with the female CEO of the record company, so we couldn't really say anything.

Second Hand Rose was on the verge of becoming a crash-hot band. However, because of these personal things it didn't work out that way. I was the last of the old band to leave. Basically because there was no musical progress, I had no real connection with the new members, especially the keyboard player [Zhu Qiwei], and finally also because of issues with Liang Long. The real reason for my departure is that Liang Long couldn't accept that anyone stood up against him.

It would have been better if Liang Long had operated like Xie Tianxiao. At least Xie Tianxiao is clear about his leadership, while maintaining an open ear to opinions of others. Liang Long tries hard to suggest a brotherly unity that actually masks manipulation. I heard Wu Zekun only got around two hundred RMB over the whole of 2006, and then Liang Long says: "We're buddies, why mention money?"<sup>117</sup>

The other band members on the debut album were established Beijing musicians. Bass player Chen Jing had played with Dou Wei, and drummer Zhang Yue with The Master Says. They joined the band in 2002 after Second Hand Rose gained something of a name on the live circuit and the experienced Beijinger Niu Jiawei had become their manager.

Wang Yuqi lacked affinity even with Beibei, who had joined the band as drummer after Zhang Yue left in 2004: "To Beibei playing in Second Hand Rose was just fun, he didn't care much about the conditions or prospects."<sup>118</sup> Beibei gained fame as a member of Cui Jian from the late 1990s onwards, and as studio musician.

When I joined Second Hand Rose I had just reached a level where I could participate intensively in arranging and recording. The songs would start with lyrics by Liang Long, he would sing them accompanying himself on the guitar. Then Yao Lan and I would work out most songs. I also recorded the drums, co-produced the album and even recorded some of the bass lines. The only demand was that the music would contain ethnic sounds, such as Two-Taking-Turns. I think the music has traditional elements, but also resists tradition because it seeks to surpass it.<sup>119</sup>

When the sales of Second Hand Rose's second album were disappointing, their Hong Kong record company Music Nation stopped investing time and money in them, without informing the band but also without releasing them from their obligations. By the time Second Hand Rose realized their situation, the only thing they could do was to continue playing live shows and rehearsing while refrain-

<sup>117</sup> Wang Yuqi, conversation, October 2007.

<sup>118</sup> Wang Yuqi, conversation, October 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Beibei, conversation, September 2007.

ing from recording until after the contract finished months later in the spring of 2008, lest the rights to the new material would fall to Music Nation. Additionally, like most bands and pop singers in China, Second Hand Rose had also signed a performance contract that entitled Music Nation to a substantial percentage of concert revenues. Wu Zekun's rumored wages of two hundred RMB in all of 2006 were partly due to endless division of the band's already modest income. However, for the most part of 2007, Second Hand Rose arranged their own shows, circumventing Music Nation, who didn't take them to task for it.<sup>120</sup>

Second Hand Rose has constantly struggled to secure their niche in the entertainment jungle, which has led to a number of notable adaptations. Firstly, next to being a passable bass player, Jiang Ningzhan was crucial in taking on some of the functions of manager, until he left the band in 2008. Jiang makes a living running the Chinese version of the musician magazine *Modern Player* 现代乐手 and organizing endorsement venues for instrument makers. These business activities and his membership of a well-known band are mutually beneficial, feeding into a large network.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, Liang Long explained that he doesn't want to become another aspiring rock star like the PRC pop-rock singer Xu Wei, but would like to develop into broader cultural areas by organizing multimedia projects, writing books and directing films.<sup>122</sup> The sampler *You in a Red Chamber, I Journey West* (2008), which Liang Long supervised, is a step in this direction, and the project was also coupled to an art exhibition. Second Hand Rose's 2010 album *Everybody Has a Lead Vocalist's Heart* 人人有颗主唱的心 also resembles a conceptual art project. The liner notes read:

Bands are never just one person. However, since Western rock was introduced to China, gradually an awkward situation has emerged in which lead vocalists are famous and the other musicians unknown. ... When manager Huang Liaoyuan is not recognized at the door; when guitar player Yao Lan angrily sees countless fans call Liang Long crash-hot; when bass player Li Zichang's name is repeatedly forgotten by most groupies; when drummer Sun Quan looks like an idol but cannot get his own fans; when folk instrumentalist Wu Zekun doubts whether he is truly part of Second Hand Rose: then these five comrades of Second Hand Rose decide they can't go on like this.

On the album, each of these people (including even Huang Liaoyuan, the manager) sings a cover version of a Chinese evergreen. Liang calls it "an internal sampler 内部合辑," and the album may well give outsiders the opposite impression of its explicit purpose. Rather than showing that everybody can sing, the album shows that, in the words of one shop owner, "still, Liang Long sings best."<sup>123</sup> Finally, the frequent reshuffling of band members, Liang's focus on multimedia projects



Illustration 5.16: Announcement of the presentation of Second Hand Rose's 2010 album *Everybody Has a Lead Vocalist's Heart* in Guangzhou.

<sup>120</sup> Conversation, Liang Long, June 2007 and Wang Yuqi, October 2007.

<sup>121</sup> Jiang Ningzhan, conversation, July 2007.

<sup>122</sup> Conversation, Liang Long, October 2007.

<sup>123</sup> Conversation, Free Sound 福聲, September 2010.

and the involvement of Huang Liaoyuan and Beibei, who resigned as a full member, but who said he would remain involved in writing and recording new songs, may move Second Hand Rose towards being what Capdeville-Zeng describes as an “open band” – a band lacking clear boundaries and performing with different members, depending on the circumstances.<sup>124</sup>

## §5 Concluding Remarks

I have argued that Chinese popular music comes into existence in the same way as cheese does – or tofu, for that matter. The process takes place within the milk chaosmos, in which curds coagulate and consolidate. Additionally, this process is spontaneous, immanent, inconspicuous and evolutionary. The disparate elements that reproduce, variate and select may have strongly diverging goals, such as making good music, changing the world, having fun and making money, while still contributing to the process. This renders it impossible to pinpoint a single or even a primary ‘creator.’

Everything in this chapter has happened in the folds. The figure of the fold, ‘grabbed’ from Deleuze and Guattari, offers an image of a world in which everything is connected but which is also full of inequality, uniqueness and violence. The rhythm that arises out of the symbiosis of Xiao He and Wang Fan with their respective electronic instruments; the proliferation and variation of labeled melodies and other *kata*, for instance in Second Hand Rose’s MARRIAGE REVELATION; the use of references to transform concepts into songs at the Wind Music and Big Circus companies; the interaction within the organic team that is Faye Wong; and the negotiations and specialization among indie companies and members of rock bands. All these concepts, sounds and people swim through the milk of this chapter.

There are many more participants in the production of Chinese popular music than I have been able to deal with here. In particular, the music business, government regulation and social and technical developments form entire strata that I have neglected. Yet the above analysis allows me to outline a few major trends.

Over the years, the production of music and stars has been divided over an expanding network of specialized organizations. The decline in economic profits in the industry due to China’s rampant illegal downloading has partly reversed this development. The industry rediscovered autonomous stars – singers and bands that can write music and need less tutoring.<sup>125</sup> Due to cheap equipment and easy (online) access to music, aspiring songwriters can create high-quality demos at home, making it less necessary to involve large numbers of people in the production of songs. Due to his use of technology, Xiao He can create without his band Glorious Pharmacy.

But does that mean he is more of a solipsist? Despite enabling people to connect less with others, technological developments also contribute to increasing connectivity, and the development of niche markets. Internet communities and karaoke are mass socio-technical developments that influence the shape of music directly. In South Korea and Japan, and to a lesser extent Taiwan and Hong Kong, karaoke accrues a growing percentage of the music industry’s income, and so does music for computer games and mobile phone ring tones. The influence of karaoke can be seen from the willingness of companies to invest in singable songs. Although Mainland China lacks a properly functioning monitoring institution, PRC companies also consider karaoke in selecting their main

<sup>124</sup> Capdeville-Zeng 2001:141-204.

<sup>125</sup> Dong Yun-chang, conversation, July 2007.

publicity songs. Faye Wong serves as a counter-example, since she has secured the right to select her own promotional songs and picks ones that are notoriously difficult to sing.<sup>126</sup>

Finally, in the PRC, Taiwan and other parts of Asia, governments have a tradition of participating in and/or interfering with cultural production, revealing their own agenda and its effects on the various aspects of the production process.<sup>127</sup> In the PRC the government ultimately owns all media outlets, including radio, TV and larger live venues. The complexity of PRC government of a vast and in some ways multi-layered and compartmentalized country offers negotiation space, for things like circumventing censorship and bargaining for reduced venue rental fees.<sup>128</sup> *Guanxi* are also crucial in securing commissions to write theme songs for state ceremonies and perform at national events. Whereas the state had a monopoly on cultural production in the 1970s, in the course of the 1990s it became an important commissioner. Whereas in the past the music for such large-scale events as the Beijing Olympics would have been composed by government departments, in 2008 they collaborated with Hong Kong and Taiwan stars such as Andy Lau and Jay Chou.<sup>129</sup>

These and many other issues require further investigation. Stopping here only proves that, as the Daoist Liezi writes, “there is no ultimate in the beginning or end of things” or, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari:<sup>130</sup>

*Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Susie Au, conversation, July 2007.

<sup>127</sup> Mittler 1997.

<sup>128</sup> De Kloet 2010:180-190.

<sup>129</sup> Fung 2003; 2007; 2008.

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in Stevenson 2006.

<sup>131</sup> Deleuze 1987:25.