

Notes on the Opaque Seduction of (Canto)pop: Sonic Imaginations

Research >
China

Western journalists and academics routinely ignore Cantopop. Hence two events that profoundly shocked Chinese audiences worldwide, the death of Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui's illness, passed unnoticed in the West. Whereas Western scholars are fond of the rebellious sounds of Beijing rock, pop sounds from Hong Kong and Taiwan are trivialized and reduced to 'sickly sweet songs' (Dutton 1998: 239). With this bias against the sounds and images of pop, one ignores a rich and complex domain of cultural inquiry. Inspired by Oscar Wilde's adage that 'we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality,' the time is ripe to move from the 'serious, rebellious' sounds of rock towards the 'trivial, superficial', and less missionary, sounds of Chinese pop.

By Jeroen de Kloet

If one should expect Chinese pop to reveal aspects of Chineseness, rather the contrary is true: apart from the language, 'things Chinese' are strikingly absent. In Chinese pop, the rest merges with the West, making it difficult, if not impossible, to draw a line between the two. Its sounds strike most as fleeting; no discernable youth culture surrounds it.

What then makes Chinese pop an important domain for academic inquiry? First, it has the power to link Chinese worldwide – to create an imagined sonic community beyond borders, to foster a form of transcultural citizenship, to provide diasporic Chinese and Chinese in Greater China a shared sense of place. Second, pop creates large audiences, enabling its fans to position themselves in contemporary Chinese society: studying pop's role in the everyday lives of its fans provides insights into the belongings of Chinese youth in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas. Finally, focusing on pop may help combat a bias in popular music studies – a bias towards genres such as punk and hip hop that seem more spectacular, more pregnant with meaning, but appeal to smaller audiences.

I would like to map out, briefly, possible trajectories for studying the opaque sounds of Hong Kong Cantopop and Taiwan Mandapop, with a particular focus on their roles in creating shared senses of place in a world increasingly in flux. In using the adjective opaque, I aim to grasp the paradoxical struggle the analysis of pop entails: how to define its parameters while acknowledging the sheer impossibility of unpacking the genre. The opaque, after all, is intrinsically unspeakable. In order to simultaneously do justice to its opacity and



Jennifer Tang

Audience at a concert by Leon Lai, a popular singer from Hong Kong.

throw light on how it produces a sense of place, I propose studying pop along three trajectories. First, by analysing the transnational opacity of pop: it is neither here nor there but everywhere. Second, by mapping out its intertextual opacity: pop stars are intertextual chameleons slipping between musical, stage and TV identities, as noted by Lawrence Witzleben (1999) on pop diva Anita Mui. And finally, by exploring the camp multi-vocal opacity of pop, constantly destabilizing the boundaries of gender and sexuality, of real and fake, seriousness and playfulness, performer and audience.

Transnational opacity

Chinese filled the stadium when Cantopop star Leon Lai performed in the Netherlands a few years ago (at midnight, so restaurant owners and workers could attend the show). Studies on multicultural societies often ignore the power of popular culture to create imagined transnational communities, let alone its political implications. Pop music is one of the domains (the other that comes to mind is Hong Kong cinema) through which diasporic Chinese create an identity outside the parameters set by the local culture. Pop stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan are global icons, linking the Chinese diaspora across time and space, producing new forms of transnational cultural citizenship.

If the cliché goes that music has no boundaries, I argue the contrary: the popularity of Cantopop stars is confined by definite 'ethnic' boundaries while many of their Western contemporaries defy these. Cantopop is used by the Chinese diaspora as a tactic of distinction, to contest the dominance of Western pop icons, to claim their own cultural space beyond the surveying eyes of Western contemporaries. In Chinatowns worldwide, Chinese buy the latest CDs, talk about releases with family and friends and secure popular cultural capital out of reach to non-Chinese around them. This is both empowering and alienating. The invisibility of Chinese pop – the opacity of this global pop music fan culture – makes it all the more pervasive as it refuses to be contained under the scrutinizing eyes of Western contemporaries, journalists, and academics.

Intertextual opacity

As they play different roles, pop stars are more media personalities than musicians. Intertextuality is, as Derrida (1974) wrote, intrinsic to any text: 'nothing is extratextual'. Yet, the intensity with which intertextuality proliferates differs profoundly. The intertextuality of pop, both Chinese and Western, is more intense than that of rock. Pop star Leon Lai, for example, is a star in a complex intertextual universe: sexy pop star dancing on a videoclip; dangerous gangster on the silver screen; sharp salesman advertising Orange's new mobile

phone; Unicef ambassador helping the Brazilian poor. It may well be this intertextual chameleon that explains why pop travels so well globally: pop generates more mediated spaces and allows for multiple identifications among divergent diasporic audiences. While some audiences will relate to the bad girl image of Anita Mui, others will adore her glamorous lifestyle. Yet others will relate to her as an actress.

The intertextual dimension intersects with a discourse of inauthenticity. Pop, be it Chinese or Western, not only refuses to disguise the importance of packaging, control, and artificiality – as rock does in order to produce the authentic artist – it celebrates it. As composer, lyricist, artist, record company, and producer are intimately involved in the production of a pop song, the author – a crucial actor in the construction of authenticity – is impossible to define, present in his or her absence. In pop, authenticity is just another style: 'the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge and admission of your inauthenticity' (Grossberg 1993: 206). The praxis of inauthenticity aspires to a different art of living where we not so much try to find, but lose, ourselves, true to the Foucaultian ideal of escaping from the identities society moulds for us.

Multivocal opacity

Given the disappearance of the author in pop, it becomes possible to speak pop in different voices. Pop stars change overnight, mirroring metropolitan lives lived in constant flux. In Anthony Wong's song 'Ave Maria' this change is celebrated:

'I want to be high every day
And change by night and day
Like, Maria, reincarnated
Pregnant by night and day.'

Pop's multivocality comes into its own through the karaoke phenomenon, where each and every singer appropriates the songs with his or her own voice. Through karaoke, the boundary between performer and audience becomes blurred. A K-song (*k-ge*) refers to a pop song particularly suited to karaoke, in sentiment and vocal range.

Pop performances are spectacular displays of the multivocal pop aesthetics. Gone is the importance of 'real' live music – what counts is pleasure: the better the pop star entertains the audience, the better he or she is. Multivocality thus entails a deliberate and exaggerated artificiality, which resonates with the aesthetic strategy that Susan Sontag has labelled camp. 'The essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.' (Sontag 1966: 275) The spectacular multimedia performances in which the star changes outfit and hair time and again should be seen in this light. Pop allows stars as well as audiences to speak in different voices, voices that remain ambiguous and opaque, that resist fixation in clear-cut meanings.

Chinese pop is neither here nor there, but everywhere; the pop star is an intertextual chameleon; and by speaking in many voices, subverts the notion of being true to a coherent self. Chinese pop is no different from Western pop and it is precisely this refusal to be contained by nationality that may explain why pop globalizes so well while remaining invisible to the eyes and ears of academics and journalists. ◀

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Dr Jeroen de Kloet is Assistant Professor in Media Entertainment at the Department of Communication Studies, University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on the globalization of popular music and computer hacker cultures in China, the US and the Netherlands. b.j.dekloet@uva.nl
<http://home.tiscali.nl/jeroendekloet>