



'Sonic Traveler' is a jazz fusion band from Hong Kong that combines Western and Chinese instruments.

China's country music: China wind

Milan Ismangil

Chinese Pop music in greater China (Taiwan, HK and China) saw a turn towards the traditional in the early 2000s with the arrival of a new genre called China wind. This genre, created and popularized by Taiwan based artists quickly grew in popularity and since its inception has seen many artists emulate a similar style. China wind as a genre has a high political potential due to its depiction of Chineseness, which makes it an easy choice for promoting the idea of One China and one (global) Chinese culture shared by all ethnically Chinese people.

China wind or *Zhongguofeng*¹ in Mandarin, is known mainly for its music, but is sometimes used as an umbrella term to denote a Chinese style applied to anything from cheerleading to the design of book covers. Most well-known is the musical variant of China wind, which has its origins in the Taiwanese superstar Jay Chou (*Zhou Jielun*) who popularized this genre in the early 2000s. The songs released around this period were demarcated by their use of instruments, lyrics, singing techniques and, in the accompanying video clips, the usage of décor and costumes evoking a sense of Chineseness.

While it has been argued that different depictions of this genre, hailing from Hong Kong for example, have the potential to disrupt the notion of a 'Hegemonic' mainland depiction of Chinese culture,² I argue that while multiple versions do exist they still contribute to the overall notion of a unified Chinese culture. Comparable to how, for example, the 16th century Italian composer Palestrina, and 19th century Polish composer Chopin, are both classified (at least in popular, common usage) as '(Western) classical music' solidifying the idea of a seemingly homogenous Western classical music tradition.

China wind constructs, corroborates and reinforces the idea of Chineseness, building

upon popular narratives surrounding the conception of Chinese culture and history. China wind is a musical pastiche that builds upon cultural Chinese myths to (re)construct a Chinese sound, a self-orientalist view of what Chinese music (and China) is supposed to be. It at once creates a unified past by glorifying depictions of 'the ancient', and unifies the present and future as all fall under the umbrella of Chinese people or culture. In this article I compare different conceptions of China wind and situate these as being part of a growing Chinese confidence on an (inter)national stage since China's opening up (*Gaige Kaifang*) in the late seventies.

Chinese popular music

To understand the popularization of a Chinese style in recent years once must consider the past two hundred years. Starting in the 19th century, China's 'century of humiliation', in which it lost multiple wars and faced great social upheaval, has had a great influence on how the state of China defines itself. The subsequent period of modernization, starting during the late Qing dynasty (19th century) and culminating in the Cultural Revolution, saw a by and large consistently negative attitude of the Chinese government towards pre-modern Chinese culture and

history, either doing away with it entirely or trying to bring it in line with 'the modern world'.

The time period from the late 19th century to the 1960's saw great changes in China's formal musical culture. The region that is now China has a rich history of local folk music, which was and is an abundant source for formally trained composers to draw upon. Many musicians studied Western music or studied abroad (the Soviet Union was a popular destination for a time). This had the effect that many instruments were adapted to play in a Western style; for example, changing the tuning system to be able to more smoothly play with Western instruments or adapting compositional and instrumental techniques.

In the early 20th century, for example, the composer Liu Tianhua used different compositional forms and techniques borrowed from the violin to transform the erhu (a 2 stringed Chinese bowed instrument) into a solo instrument similar to the violin. Another famous example that marries Chinese and Western idioms is the Yellow River Piano Concerto. With idioms I refer to the way in which the piece is composed to best suit the idiomatic qualities of certain instruments, music traditions and other elements. This concert piece, written in the 1960's during the cultural revolution by Yin Chengzhong and Chu Wanghua, uses one of the most popular Western concert formats of

the piano concerto and combines this with Chinese idioms in its instrumentation, melodies and other musical aspects.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-76) saw the large scale destruction of cultural artefacts and a restrictive government that firmly controlled the public cultural domain. Popular music was forbidden and all music had to serve an (ideological) purpose in forwarding the revolution. Around forty years later, however, it seems that China is learning to appreciate its historical heritage and uses it to wield soft power both domestically and abroad. State propagated programs that promote the Chinese language and culture, such as the Confucius Institutes, or the One Belt One Road program, showcase a China that is more than willing to promote its culture to the outside world.

This (re)appreciation of Chinese idioms can also be tied to an increasing nationalist discourse propagated by the communist party in China. Examples include multiple popular television series depicting the Three Kingdoms (a particularly bloody period in China's history that has been greatly romanticized), as well as the many historical television dramas set in imperial China drawing on popular historical sagas and intrigues. Videogames and novels also play their part. While the Chinese video game industry is still an up and coming market, mobile games inspired by the Three Kingdom mythology are hugely popular throughout East Asia. In addition, a thriving online literature scene has paved the way for numerous novels mythologizing and historicizing China's imperial past.

Since China's opening up, modern Chinese pop music has taken a different path from other forms of popular media in China. While television and novels quickly adopted and drew inspiration from the idea of 'ancient imperial' China, popular music artists have engaged with this only fairly recently, since the mid 2000's. This is not to say that popular music (at its advent the mainland market was dominated by Taiwanese and Hong Kong based artists) has not treaded this ground earlier. The immensely popular Taiwanese artist Teresa Teng (*Deng LiJun*) has featured songs that incorporate Chinese elements. Listen, for example, to the 1978 song 'Story of a Small Town' (*Xiaocheng Gushi*), for the fusion of Chinese instruments with smooth Western orchestral lines.³ In another case, one of China's first heavy metal bands, Tang Dynasty, formed in 1988, used song names and lyrics as well as their music videos to evoke a mythical historicized China through the modern genre of heavy metal. They draw upon the past,

and sometimes use Chinese musical idioms, while their music itself can be firmly placed in the heavy metal camp. Nevertheless it could be argued that this also constitutes a form of China wind, depending on the definition one might take.

There is no pre-defined set of features that make up China wind. There are many different definitions and the term itself is contested as well. Even though it is a recognizable genre in Chinese popular music since its popularization (many would say creation) by Taiwanese superstar Jay Chou, many ambiguities still remain. In several interviews held with Chinese music listeners I asked about the particularities of China wind, especially with regard to its political potential in mainland China and the fact that it came from Taiwan, a region with its own political and cultural history. One interviewee said that China wind promotes the idea of the (global) idea of Chineseness, in which it can be argued that China wind can be made by (Chinese) people all over the world, drawing from different inspirations, but all drawing from the root source: mainland China. Regarded within this frame, the fact that China wind hails from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia or even further afield is only a boon to the power of creating a unifying idea of one global Chinese people and culture, which like the Chinese dream perhaps gains its strength from staying vague and inclusive.

Music with Chinese characteristics

What is China wind exactly? Is China wind simply the adaptation of selected musical idioms put into a (mainly) Western invented popular music idiom? Furthermore, whose China is being represented by this music? Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong as well as other locations with large Chinese diasporas feature musicians who make Chinese style music that is not necessarily called China wind. The term China wind can also be taken to be a misnomer, akin to 'Western music'. If we take Western music to include any popular music in the area conceptualized as 'the West', then it would be impossible and pointless to define. A more interesting question than that of definition is how this music is used and conceptualized by its audience and its producers.

An article by Chow refers to an alternative name for this genre, namely: *neo minzu gequ*, or new folk songs with a nationalistic flavour.⁴ China wind can be placed in a larger discourse of 'national music' (*guoyue*), a term with an uncertain terminology. Wu discusses the historical conception of the term national music since the early 20th century.⁵ According to Wu, national music has been conceptualized as

everything from any music made by Chinese people to a more liberal music made by anyone with Chinese instruments. Interesting to note that this article states that Hong Kong cannot (and does not) use the term national music but rather Chinese or Sino music, which the author states is in fact just another term for national music. An article by Zhen frames China wind within a trend of 'traditionalization' (*chuantonghua*) by which Chinese popular music can distinguish itself and develop a (unique) style of Chinese pop music.⁶

China wind has been described as constructing a global idea of what Chinese is supposed to be, building on popular (and often CCP sanctioned) narratives and cultural ideas such as China's long history, the Three Kingdoms and the idea of an 'ancient (imperial) China'.⁷ As de Kloet argues, however, the idea of Chinese wind is used by artists in Hong Kong to 'hybridize' or challenge who is able to define this notion of a Chinese style of music, pushing back against 'hegemonic versions of Chineseness'. This is further muddled by the fact that Taiwan is a major driving force when it comes to the creation and popularization of this Chinese style of pop music.

For China wind there do seem to be more precise requirements than simply being made by 'Chinese'. One of the hallmarks is the use of lyrics that evoke a sense of the 'ancient culture'; this can be done either by, for example, adopting classical Chinese phrases or by simply taking (well known) poems and other writing from China's imperial age and re-contextualize them as song lyrics. As several Chinese academics also argue, China wind is a music style which 'embodies the ancient culture', and allows a new audience to experience and appreciate ancient or traditional Chinese culture in a new way, bringing traditional culture to a young and modern audience.⁸ On the other side of the coin are commentators criticizing China wind for these very reasons as it cheapens and commercializes the richness of the traditional culture, which should be valued for its own merits.

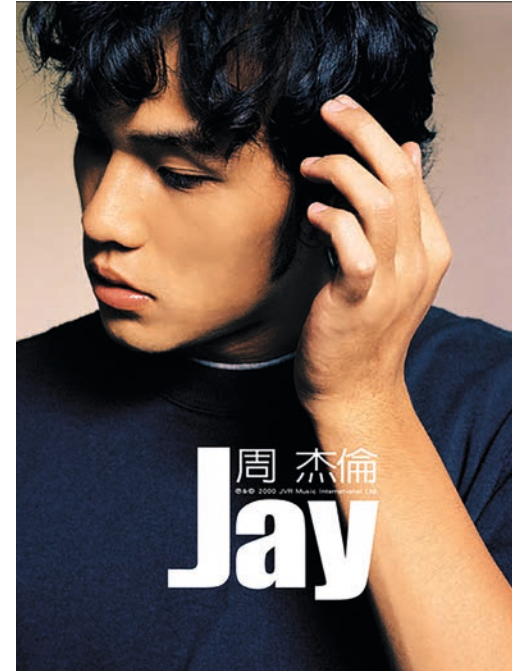
Reading between the lines, however, several common characteristics of China wind do emerge. Firstly, the issue of appearance, both musically and visually (many songs feature music videos) the song has to come across as Chinese. This is done by using some traditionally Chinese instruments and mixing them with more traditional pop elements. Music videos are often situated in the idea of 'ancient' China or feature elements regarded as Chinese. Aside from superficial engagements, artists can, for example, borrow vocal techniques from Chinese opera, make allusions to ancient poetry or literature or draw from the numerous folk music traditions inhabiting China.

The immensely popular song 'Blue and white porcelain' (*Qinghuaci*) is an ideal summation of what characterizes the China wind style.⁹ Musically it features a mix of traditional pop music and Chinese instruments, with the Chinese instruments used for emphasis. It is still very much rooted in Western pop music though, both in the structure of the song as well as the musical content, with a famously used key change utilized by the likes of Michael Jackson at the end of the song to increase the emotional impact. The music clip features Jay Chou singing interspersed with a dramatic story resembling a classical Chinese drama, and many literary allusions to create a sense of ancient China. The lyrics of this song were written by Vincent Fang (*Fang WenShan*), a well-regarded Taiwanese lyricist and writer. Fang wrote many of the songs Jay Chou is well known for and is acknowledged for the literary quality of his prose.

China wind – a Chinese Americana?

China wind is a musical style that is hard to define. I would myself probably identify any song that tries to emulate a Chinese style as being China wind. It is perhaps best comparable with the musical genre known as Americana; a musical genre in the United States that is a collective term for music influenced by traditional American popular music genres such as country, blue-grass and rhythm and blues. If we compare the two genres, both share a similar reference to a mythological past: ancient, imperial China with its court intrigue, flowery speech, costumes and staging, versus the rugged, pastoral existence of the 'all-American' cowboy. Both have a flexible working definition in which various musical and non-musical idioms are combined to create an end-product that is recognizable within the genre. Lastly, while China wind can boast more historical legacy with its ties to Chinese folk music and opera I argue that both have little historical reference to draw upon musically as they have to (re)-invent the sounds of the tradition they are based on.

As discussed, China wind, with its links to the representations of Chineseness can also be easily adapted into a political tool for promoting the unified idea of a Chinese people. Liu et al. argue that popular China wind singers have been invited to the Chinese governments spring gala exactly for this reason as songs in this genre promote the unified idea of the One China policy.¹⁰ I argue that like Americana, China wind both shapes the visual and auditory imaginary of the past, as well as creates a unified feature of what 'distinctly' Chinese popular



Jay Chou.

music is supposed to sound like. In recent years the Chinese government has focussed on shifting the Chinese economy from a production to a knowledge economy, with slogans such as "from made in China to created in China" and an increase in discourse surrounding Chinese creativity. The idea of a Chinese, homegrown style of pop music is an enticing notion. Especially one that evokes ideas of unification and glorification of a past 'ancient' culture. China wind as a genre can be contextualized within larger narratives of 'China's global rise' in an economic and cultural sense. Regardless of the original message of China wind at its inception in Taiwan, China wind today and its treatment by those in power can tell us much about how popular culture articulates the past and shapes a popular imaginary endorsed by an increasingly autocratic regime.

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Notes

- 1 China wind is the literal translation into English; another could be China/Chinese Style.
- 2 Chow, Yiu Fai & de Kloet, J. 2010. 'Blowing in the China Wind: Engagements with Chineseness in Hong Kong's Zhongguofeng Music Videos', *Visual Anthropology* 24(1-2):59-76.
- 3 <https://tinyurl.com/TTSsmalltown>
- 4 Chow, Yiu Fai. 2009. 'Me and the Dragon: A Lyrical Engagement with the Politics of Chineseness', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10(4):544-64, see p.546
- 5 吴学忠. "关于对'国乐'一词的解析". 音乐天地 42, nr. 12 (2004):40-42.
- 6 郑超群. "中国风_在流行音乐中的特色发展", 2014, 142.
- 7 Ibid., note 2
- 8 刘佳馨. "试析'中国风'". 艺术论丛, nr. 2 (2013): 204.
- 9 <https://tinyurl.com/JCBlueWhite>
- 10 Liu, Chen, Ning An & Hong Zhu. 2015. 'A Geopolitical Analysis of Popular Songs in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, 1983-2013', *Geopolitics* 20(3):606-25.



Malaysia's fusion ensemble 'Eight-Twelve' deftly brings together elements of Chinese and Western music to create innovative compositions.