

Rethinking Discourse of Chineseness on Chinese Popular Music

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Abstract

In the context of a globalizing tendency and multicultural fusing, Chineseness as a term is both ancient and new, usually used to indicate the identity of “being Chinese”. Considering transnational flows of capital, culture and migration permeating within the sphere of Chinese popular music, various forms of Chineseness have been created. This paper aims to rethink and discuss the question related to Chineseness in contemporary Chinese popular music through reviewing several articles. By textual analyzing, this paper shows how these articles describe and embody the Chineseness discourse and its future in Chinese popular music.

Keywords: Chinese popular music, culture and identity, Chineseness, China Wind music, television program

1. Introduction

For several decades now, many scholars are devoting to study about questions of Chineseness, namely a kind of cultural essentialism what people often encounter that draws an imaginary limit between China and other regions of the world. The discourse of Chineseness is not specifically a Chinese phenomenon in the first place, rather belongs to an extensive global postmodern culturalist project of identity politics. (An, 2008) Chineseness is used to express cultural differences that are essentially comparable and therefore could across history. Ang (2013) figures out, in the era of China’s rise, an absolutist symbol is being enhancing by the reductive logic of the diaspora (2013: 20), which means the PRC’s carefully constructed Chineseness has become more confident while the diaspora is looking for their Chinese identity. The most currently scholarship has emphasized political, economic, and cultural realities in relation to how Chineseness is shaped (Fung, 2008; Baranovitch, 2010; Chow & De Kloet, 2011), but organized practices which strengthen or deny nationalistic discourses connected to the production of music and cultural products are often neglected.

This paper focuses on rethinking and exploring the question related to Chineseness in contemporary C-pop¹ through reviewing several articles. The concept of Chineseness is shaped by the more extensive political, economic, and cultural context, as well as by the specific geographic and social environment of the dialogists. This article mainly discusses the ways in which Chineseness is constructed in popular music that has been relevant after China Wind² (zhongguo feng, 中国风) prevailed, respectively, a re-centered Chineseness in many creative industries and artists’ Chineseness as a globalizing project. The discourse and paradigm of a re-centered Chineseness have presented even more confident and explicit, in which concepts such as ‘roots’ and ‘blood’ are highly valued.

The paper will firstly start by providing a problem statement of existing debates and questions concerned with nationalisms, identities, and Chineseness of popular music in China. The literature review explores several conceptual and contextual comprehensions of the nature of identity in the context of Chinese popular music and why different types of identity are important. It also examines how various modes of nationalism shape and affect the creation of individuals in contemporary China of their narratives of nations and cultures. Finally, I will make a summary to illustrate why most China Wind songs projects a vague historical and romanticized Chineseness that enhances its storytelling and identities of the diaspora. And understanding the Chineseness of

popular music must be situated in the context of capitalism and transnational flows of global popular culture.

2. Research Problem

As a concept, Chineseness is constantly used and critiqued, but rarely defined. Its explanation is neither explicit nor settled, but rather selective and dynamic, varying across disciplinary approaches as time, place and context change. In fact, for most Chinese, the term “Chineseness” is unfamiliar to them, thus, it takes them quite a long time to figure out what it really means. The discourse of Chineseness is sometimes politicized and ideological in relations to China’s external relations, internal cross-strait politics, and the domestic agendas of the countries involved. However, Chinese literature scholar Rey Chow (1998) pointed out that Chineseness is deemed to be a constructed ethnicity and identity, but it has not been recognized in cultural studies related to China. Especially, in the relatively new field of cultural studies, some scholars such as David Yen-ho Wu (1991), Ien Ang (2001: 1-18), and Allen Chun (1996) who concerned with the Chinese diaspora started to question and critique towards Chineseness as a single descriptive concept, ultimately associated with mainland of PRC. Consequently, to thoroughly face the question of Chineseness, it is inadequate to point out the lack of attempts to treat Chineseness as a theoretical problem.

Following Chow’s (1998) argument, Chineseness should not be considered a cultural reality alternatively a theoretical issue, thereby we could confront certain challenges in defining the concept of Chineseness in popular music. Mr. Siu, the anthropologist, claims that “Chineseness” is not a sequence of immutable convictions and customs, but a mechanism that acquires a wide variety of conditions and emotions. It is a history, a place, a polity, a civilization, and a person who gain their identity through connected with these essential characteristics. Chinese popular music is a broad musical genre, an umbrella term covering branches of Mandopop, Cantopop and Hokkien pop, which not only reflects linguistic diversity, also absorbs styles from different pop music genres. From this perspective it demonstrates the globalization and multiplicities of Chinese popular music. Popular music in China have be perceived by some scholars as the scene of Chineseness in the global music market, rather than the simply copycat of western popular culture. (De Kloet, 2005, 2010; Chow and De Kloet, 2008; Fung, 2008). In other words, it would be incomplete to discuss theorizing the Chineseness of popular music in China if not within a broader framework of Chinese and Asian studies. Most notably, even as the concept of Chineseness in C-pop is deconstructed and critiqued, explicitly or implicitly, and then increasingly in their decoding, none of the contributors sees it as empty or arbitrary.

First of all, Mandopop’s transnational essence mirrors and represents the primary China’s global music consumption market. And here we have to mention the China Wind songs which disseminate widely around the Greater China. This sort of songs, blending itself with all kinds of music styles and genres such as R&B, hip-hop, rock as well as pop ballads, meanwhile generated a unique sound by employing traditional Chinese instruments to conduct musical arrangements and also the lyrical contents often contained complementary expressions to Chinese traditional cultural artworks and achievements. There are two representative artists in aspect of China Wind songs creation, namely Jay Chou and Wang Leehom, who along with their strategies to embody Chineseness in the international music market. Based on packaging for them by the agency, the “strategic essentialism” (Zeng, 2013: 93) displayed in the respective works of Jay and Leehom also overly portrays and markets the figure of the artist based on an effort by the China to replace the hegemony of Western culture.

Although the production of different cultural forms of Chineseness has been argued to be without a center (Tu, 1991; Chua, 2001), it is also admitted that each region has had a different role to play in the production and consumption of Chineseness at different times (Chun, 1996; Chua, 2001; Ang, 2013). However, it has been argued in academic areas that the perceived Chineseness of China Wind works in popular music, whether it is popular or not can lead to a sense of alienation and ambivalent emotions among certain audiences and musical consumers, considering the different understandings of general public with the concept of Chineseness. (Lin and Um 2017; Lin, 2020). Such this issue also occurs in Cantonese pop songs. As the national identity and the significance of Chineseness in Cantopop scene became a critical factor, Mandopop’s social standing rose to unimaginable heights. Cantopop has become a musical category in this sense with a subordinate dialect. Hong Kong, as a hybrid city, does not claim a “cultural center”, which is implicit in its “intermediality” (Chow, 1993), and by reshaping its local culture and identity, Hong Kong continues to display the flexibility in Chinese narratives that plague the mainstream (Abbas, 1997; Chow & De Kloet, 2008).

On the other hand, I would also like to examine about Chineseness in the creative music industry - most representatively *The Voice of China*. Discussions in relation to *The Voice of China*, it is evident that whose Chineseness is authorized and how it is negotiated between different stakeholders are central to such presentations. The reality TV show deftly uses brand culture to create a positive image and advocates a flexible concept of cultural Chineseness, attracting a wide range of the audience from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Chinese-speaking regions of Southeast Asia and the Chinese diaspora at large. These debates have included evidence of a recentered Chineseness as presented on the stage of *The Voice of China* while examining

the way in which two artists Jay Chou and Wang Leehom was ever as program coaches have constructed and utilized Chineseness in order to sustain creative and globalizing projects. It is important to study that for the extramusical correlations, where the production and consumption of Chineseness took place and how they may appear on the emerging platforms, as well as identifying different ways of representing Chinese culture's evolution. Therefore, based on the complex mechanisms of the culture industry and the layers of identity symbols, popular music is a unique medium for the academic study of Chineseness.

3. Rethinking the Discourse of Chineseness

This paper aims to review what some previous Chinese and Western scholars have written about the Chineseness discourse of Chinese popular music. This section includes some main discourse of theory and historical dynamics, involving nationalism, identity, Chineseness and Chinese popular music, through reviewing these collected articles. After analyzing and collating certain examples within literature that illustrate the different ways in which musical Chineseness is constructed in transnational flows of capital, culture, migration. Firstly, the concept of Chineseness is not only a discursive construction (Ang, 1998), but also as an aesthetic and auditory entity carries representations which represent types of Chinese identity serving unique functions for particular audiences. The functions of perceived Chineseness in popular music is worth to explore, just as previous literature (Chow, 2009; Chung, 2011) tended to focus on the sense of national pride clearly inscribed in lyrics or the employment of the sound of traditional Chinese musical instruments.

The real popularity of China Wind music in recent years declined after its peak, but the notion of Chineseness in popular music demanded to be reconstructed (Lin, 2020). This author in her article pointed that a variety of functional forms of Chineseness have been formed through transnational flows of capital, culture and migration. She also argued that Chineseness in contemporary Chinese popular music is often influenced by national policy, music censorship, the market, industry practices and cross-industry integration, and the artistic creations of musicians increasingly play an important role in shaping and authorizing the description of Chineseness among the Chinese popular music in contemporary society. She specifically selected China Wind music creation's representative artist—Jay Chou, as the case study in her article. For Jay Chou himself, the feeling of Chineseness is within his heart, meanwhile it is innate and does not have a distinct sense of uniqueness. Chinese musical expression is characteristic of him and therefore should not be analyzed in a special, separated context. It has also been suggested that Jay Chou's Chineseness in China Wind songs is argued to be intentionally ambiguous and vague (Chung, 2011), a strategy that smartly refrains underlying variability in the perception of Chineseness on multiple markets. Nowadays, With the support of the Chinese government and a different commercial cooperation pattern, Jay Chou has gradually become a model with characteristics of Chineseness—both apolitical and able to gather new generations for the country (Fung, 2007).

Another research uses Wang Leehom as a typical case to explore the trans-nationality of Asian-American themes and the specific criteria of Chineseness that coming out from the singer's musical creation and idol identity (Wang, 2012). Musically, Leehom wants to redefine 'chink' as a musical fad that captures Chineseness and combines it with hip-hop, as he sings in a line from 'Heroes of Earth'. He is an Asian American and trying to find his cultural roots and connect the past and present which belong to Chinese. This essay also mentioned the viewpoint that Wong's theoretical description about the change in meaning of Chineseness in the framework about trans-nation and local nation meanwhile the nationalist revival (Wong, 2010). This essay thus raises certain questions about Wang Leehom's success as a phenomenon by using her expression to integrate the achievements of Chinese Americans into a broader narrative of Chinese nationalism. It also crystallizes a vision of cultural Chineseness, just as Wong puts it, the faith as a purely cultural Chinese identity is possible, one that is separated from the policy and economic system and simultaneously transcends the nation-state. As both authors Lin and Wang through the analysis of the image and work by Jay Chou and Wang Leehom exemplifies the creative and commercial strategies employed to tackle Chineseness in the form of participating and collaborating with the global market.

The same concerns about Chineseness are also presented in the Hong Kong pop music scene. Shortly after 1997, a new identity of "Hong Kong Chinese" appeared according to an investigation undertaken by Prof. Siu-kai Lau, Head of the Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Liu, 1997), indicating the increasing importance of 'Chineseness' as the formative identity in local area. It theoretically and practically forms a kind of consistency in process of discourse about Chineseness—not only about what it is, but also about who give a definition towards it. Related analysis demonstrated that although China Wind music in Hong Kong awakens the consciousness about Chineseness, meanwhile it weakens it in two main ways: first, it makes it into a remote looking, an obscure space and a continuing fight; and second, it feminizes Chineseness, opening up the imaginary space for historical and gender issues (Chow & De Kloet, 2011). For example, the case cited in the article, the video of song "Small" by Joey Yung presents the Chineseness which is motivated in a close but prolonged fashion as a remote glance. Whether in Hong Kong, Taiwan or mainland of China, China Wind has

been articulating and creating about “Chineseness” which is mainly seen as one part of what Chinese people should know about themselves and their culture.

Additionally, such as Andy Lau, Faye Wong, Nicholas Tse have their own works with features of Chineseness. The sorts of identities they create are not determinate, but constantly dynamic, debated and negotiated. For instance, Faye displayed that the former will be chosen as the factor in Hong Kong was weighted against Chineseness, the nature and representation of modernity are related with the British Hong Kong. When a product has to enter the Chinese market, the element of Chineseness suddenly becomes useful again. If Faye is able to recapture her original Chinese nature, such Chinese roots could potentially help encourage further consumption by her audience when she acts as the face of a commercial product (Fung, 2007). Gorfinkel (2011) drew on some other scholars and argued that the dissemination of popular culture items just like songs, films and television shows generates new identities such as CCTV’s music shows, *The Voice of China* and etc... Going back to Lin’s article, she illuminated the ways in which constructed Chineseness functions in popular music’s transnational flows through analyzing *The Voice of China* and examining production practices. The versions of Chineseness perceived in both the music and the show have been institutionalized and authorized via the state’s interference (Lin, 2020). Furthermore, Chineseness will be conceptualized as fundamental and unique Chinese cultural property and core values, placed under the common umbrella of “China” and the common label of “Chineseness”, which transcends the temporal and spatial scales of history.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the further discussion of Chineseness discourse towards transcending of traditional ideological, geographical, and disciplinary boundaries for serious scholarly is worthwhile. These practices whether it is a popular music work or a creative music industry become an advantage, not just for making commercial profits, but also in terms of actively constructing and projecting a Chineseness that is predicted and the target audiences want to be exchanged. However, the display of a re-centered Chineseness that points the diaspora back to the center—namely the PRC—is now more explicit. This re-centered Chineseness not only continues to present an ideology of a national framework, but also attempts to convey a form of nationalism that gathering inward from the periphery. This presentation of Chineseness is even more assertive and compliant with a PRC-led nationalism, thereby re-centering Chineseness.

Nevertheless, new ways of presenting Chineseness in popular music are currently evolving, corresponding to changes both in the global market as well as in local contexts. Markets, state policy, media censorship, industrial practices, cross-industry fusion, and musicians’ artistry will all continue to act a positive role in the construction and dissemination of Chineseness in popular music. Precisely as the popularity of Mandopop around the world, artists improve the concept of an ‘imagined world’ of Chinese audiences scattered across time and space, combining and reinforcing the discourse that popular music and Chineseness can span the national boundaries. There is no denying that Chineseness in popular music has a future. Discussions of Chineseness should be continuously investigated in the evolving cultural practices of popular music in the Sinophone world, as they are always intertwined with questions of power, cultural representation, and politics.

As noted in the reviewed articles, Jay Chou and Wang Leehom have done—may be a strategy adopted to construct a pop music Chineseness in the next decade. In the long term, we may think of China as an organic agent, which is capable of negotiating with external music, culture and commerce, with the authorities eventually coming up with strategic solutions to regain the territory of popular music and to produce and define C-pop. China is also expected to develop into a flexible enterprise, nourishing its pop market commercially and embodying the Chinese dimension of popular music on a larger scale that a new generation can be proud. In the globalization context, Whatever the future of Chinese popular music, there will be challenges and narratives arising from issues of identity and culture. Future investigates in this area will need to focus on the development of the genre resulting from the co-production of music with China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other diaspora areas.

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¹ C-pop is an established musical genre by artists from the Greater China area typically as an abbreviation for Chinese popular music.

² This term is used by many scholars to describe a kind of Chinese popular music which integrate certain traditional Chinese elements.

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