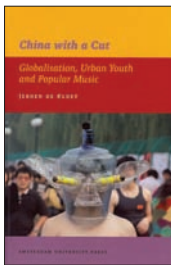




Review Essay

Transnational Broken Hearts

An Overview of the Study of Chinese Popular Music



Jeroen de Kloet, *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music*

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010. 264 pages. Paper, €24.00. ISBN 978-90-8964-162-5.



Marc L. Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. 182 pages. Paper, \$24.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-3422-7.

A CONSCIOUS attempt to develop the study of Chinese popular music as a field of research was provided by a successful two-day conference of the Inter-Asia Popular Music Studies Group (IAPMS) in Hong Kong in 2010 and the recent publication of two monographs, namely Jeroen de Kloet's *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music* and Marc L. Moskowitz's *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations*. The emphasis of this overview will be on monographs in Western languages and these two books in particular.

The study of Chinese popular music began in the early 1990s with a focus on politics. Gradually, scholars came to address other issues including popular music and politics, authenticity, cultural identity, gender, fandom, and modernity, to name the few around which this brief overview is structured. These developments have also meant that music other than rock—initially guitar-based folk traditions and state-endorsed mass music, and recently mainstream pop—has been investigated.

POPULAR MUSIC AND POLITICS

Not long after the 1989 Tian'anmen massacre, Andrew JONES's *Like a Knife* (1992) and Andreas STEEN's *Der Lange Marsch des Rock 'n' Roll* (1996) were published. Both of these titles refer to the songs of Cui Jian, China's first rock star, who among other things performed in the square during the student protests. Cui Jian also features prominently in BARMÉ (1999) and CAPDEVILLE-ZENG (2001).

Like A Knife distinguishes “two broadly defined genres: officially-sanctioned popular music (*tongsu yinyue*), and underground rock music” (JONES 1992, 3). The gist of this pioneering study is that since “genre is a function of ideology, not musical style,” pop and rock both claim to give voice to “the people,” with pop appealing to hegemony, and rock to authenticity (JONES 1992, 20).

Chinese popular music is less a mere adjunct to leisure than a battlefield on which ideological struggle is waged.... Participants in this rock subculture share a coherent ideology of cultural opposition. Rock musicians and fans strive to release themselves from the oppression and hypocrisy that they believe is endemic to China's “feudal culture” by means of a faith in individualism and authenticity. (JONES 1992, 3–4)

Compared to the blossoming of Chinese film studies, research on contemporary popular music lagged behind in the late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. This is partly because the fixation on rock's rebelliousness proved to be inadequate and unproductive. Andrew Jones and Andreas Steen have both published books on the advent of Chinese popular music in partly-colonized Shanghai, including its many ties with cinema. STEEN (2006) presents a meticulous history of the emergence of the Shanghai record industry between 1878 and 1937. In *Yellow Music*, JONES (2001) remains sensitive to politics, presenting the composer Li Jinhui (1891–1967) as a pioneer who has been unrightfully censored and erased from history by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (see also SUN 2007). At the same time, its engagement with colonial modernity leads *Yellow Music* beyond criticality to discuss cultural hybridity, technological innovations, and the presentation of female stars as representatives of the nation.

AUTHENTICITY

Nimrod BARANOVITCH argues in *China's New Voices* (2003) that rock in China is a fad that quickly passed when popular frustration over the Tian'anmen

massacre and the will to change things ebbed in 1994. By contrast, in *China with a Cut* de Kloet argues that the second half of the 1990s “marks the birth of a new generation of Chinese rock music” (DE KLOET 2010, 19).

Part of the difference is related to temporal focus. Baranovitch describes the period between 1978 to 1997, whereas de Kloet covers three generations of urban youths, running from the hoodlums (*liumang*) of the early 1990s, the sawcut (*dakou*) generation of the late 1990s, and the “post-80s” (*balinghou*) that became prominent in the early part of the first decade of the twenty-first century. A more profound difference lies in de Kloet’s criticism of the equation of rock with rebelliousness, as well as the preconception that rock is Western and therefore fundamentally unsuitable for Chinese culture. To identify these inclinations and distance himself from them, de Kloet introduces the term “rock mythology,” which he defines as “a set of narratives which produce rock as a distinct music world that is, first and foremost, authentic, but also subcultural, masculine, rebellious, and (counter) political” (DE KLOET 2010, 26).

China with a Cut shows how the rock mythology is both productive and restrictive for producers, audiences, and musicians in the PRC. Borrowing Arjun Appadurai’s notion of hard cultural forms, de Kloet argues that “rock changes those who are socialised into it more readily than it is itself changed” (Appadurai 1996, 90, quoted in DE KLOET 2010, 28). The rock mythology is productive because it enables “hard scenes” such as underground, heavy metal, hardcore punk, and hip-hop that are discussed in chapter 1 to authenticate their sounds vis-à-vis each other, the “hyphenated scenes” of the second chapter and mainstream pop. It is restrictive because it silences the subaltern sounds of women, south Chinese bands, and musicians with commercial aspirations discussed in chapter 3.

The rock mythology is central to de Kloet’s work to the degree that it hinders him in moving beyond rock and its fixations. For instance, towards the end of chapter 3 he presents the Hong Kong indie pop singer Anthony Wong (Huang Yaoming) as a subaltern voice of Beijing rock, rather than that of the highly influential Hong Kong pop music industry that Wong is arguably more engaged in.

The major difference between *China with a Cut* and *Cries of Joy* is that de Kloet criticizes the pop/rock divide, whereas Moskowitz reiterates it. Moskowitz refers to Baranovitch and quickly dismisses rock as old-fashioned, north Chinese, and political, moving on to the Taiwanese pop stars that dominate Mandopop, or mainstream pop songs in Mandarin Chinese. This approach is refreshing, because it enables Moskowitz, after two initial chapters, to engage with mainstream love songs directly. The drawback is clearest in the final chapter, “Mandopop under Siege,” where Moskowitz ends up defending the study of mainstream pop against the stereotypical response of Westerners: “That’s a great project, but you have to admit, the music sucks” (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 112; see Moskowitz’s opening sentence in chapter 1, and DE KLOET 2010, 25). In these pages, Moskowitz’s argument goes much along the same lines as that of de Kloet, but lacks its clarity. In particular, a more thorough use of the notion of authenticity could have structured Moskowitz’s laudable effort.

First, notions of authenticity underlie Western scholarship’s appreciation of

“ethnic,” “subversive,” and “original” or “creative” music over mainstream pop, which, according to Moskowitz, is (unjustly) perceived as lacking in these respects. Additionally, whereas Moskowitz first argues that “most Mandopop fans are not concerned with ‘authenticity’” (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 49), in chapter 5 he contradicts this by showing that pop songs gain significance when fans believe they portray authentic emotions. Interviewees in Taipei and Shanghai relate pop songs to star biographies and social reality, sometimes in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. To them, songs “are thought to reflect real, rather than purely imagined experiences, both for performers and themselves” (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 74, 80). In other words, authenticity is important not only for rock musicians and researchers of China, but also for pop audiences, even though the ways in which musicians, researchers, and audiences construct and mystify authenticity may differ.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

Baranovitch, de Kloet, and Moskowitz identify cultural differences between north and south China, or between the militarized sounds of Beijing and the softer *gangtai* (which comes from the “gang” of Xiang Gang [Hong Kong] and the “tai” of Taiwan) songs produced by the capitalist music industry of Hong Kong and Taiwan; the differences are so great that Baranovitch, Jones, and Steen exclude *gangtai* pop from their analyses. To them, China means the PRC.

Baranovitch argues that “the Chinese state is engaged in appropriating the concept of Greater China (*Da Zhonghua*),” but rather than in international relations and their impact on culture, he is more interested in the national issue of the representation and participation of the PRC’s ethnic minorities (BARANOVITCH 2003, 231–33). This ranges from the state-endorsed and often collectively composed “Songs of the Masses,” in the first decades of the PRC, to the still officially-endorsed but more contemporary pop (*tongsu*) music of the Mongolian singer Teng Ge’er, the Yi musician Lolo and, in a recent article, the Tibetan singer Han Hong (BARANOVITCH 2009a; 2009b). Baranovitch even argues that “rock music in China can be understood better as a minority discourse” (BARANOVITCH 2003, 103).

Although most of de Kloet’s descriptions deal with Beijing, he includes a number of examples from Hong Kong to show transnational connections. Whereas de Kloet explicitly expresses a reluctance to present China as a demarcated, homogeneous unity (DE KLOET 2010, 17), Moskowitz does not question his discussion of Taiwanese pop under the rubric of Chinese pop music, as his subtitle states. He oscillates between presenting “a shared cultural space for Chinese speakers throughout the world” and its constant fragmenting into distinctive local entities (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 41). The account in chapter 2 of Mandopop puts Taiwan at the vanguard of the transnational mainstream whereas chapter three discusses the history of Taiwanese pop as a separate field, highlighting the use of the Taiwanese language and Japanese influences. Additionally, MOSKOWITZ shows awareness of

the political sensitivity of cross-strait relations, on which he plays with phrasings such as “the tail wags the dog” and “Taiwan’s counter-invasion” (2010, 1–15).

Although most post-2000 Mandopop stars are indeed Taiwanese, analysis of the industry has also shown that the PRC government is actively involved in the development of Mandopop. Referring to important work done by Anthony Fung, de Kloet argues in chapter 5 that “Global capitalism and the Chinese nation-state can work very well together, producing [...] a hybrid mix of cosmopolitanism and neo-nationalism, a mix which serves as the lubricant for the shared accumulation of capital” (DE KLOET 2010, 175; FUNG 2008). In other words, the PRC grants access to its market to singers that never go against the state’s interests, and sometimes actively deliver what the state requires. Rather than producing culture itself and censoring anything else, since the late 1980s the state negotiates with mainly Taiwanese and Hong Kong record companies over exposure for their products in hugely influential state-owned media such as CCTV and official events like the ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. These companies in turn produce stars that can be successful in the PRC market. Anthony Fung has shown how Chinese nationalism is part of the marketing strategies of Hong Kong singer and actor Andy Lau (Liu Dehua) and Taiwan’s leading pop star Jay Chou (Zhou Jielun), the latter with his successful Chinese Wind (*Zhongguo feng*) (FUNG 2003; 2007). A negative example is the experience of the Taiwanese pop star A-mei (Zhang Hui-mei), who lost a multi-million dollar contract with Coca Cola after she was censored in 2000 for singing at the inaugural ceremony of Chen Shui-bian, Taiwan’s first pro-independence president (GUY 2002; MOSKOWITZ 2010, 83).

GENDER: MASCULINITIES

Rather than in geopolitics, Moskowitz argues that Taiwan’s cultural influence should be sought in the realm of gender and emotion management:

Taiwan’s counter-invasion has had profound influences on PRC culture: it has (re) introduced images of women as emotional, gentle, and passive victims. It has also offered a wider range of male identities.... Mandopop has ushered in individualist ideologies and a globalized consumer culture, and it has provided a space to talk about human emotions such as loneliness and sorrow that have traditionally been highly discouraged by both the government and traditional cultural mores. (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 3)

Gender is one of the main themes of BARANOVITCH’S *China’s New Voices* (2003). Baranovitch introduces the traditional Chinese distinction between the masculinities of *wen*, “civility, mildness, literacy and intellectual and fine art capabilities, as opposed to the physical strength and military prowess that constitute *wu*,” and argues that after the gender-erasure of the Revolutionary Era (1949–1976), in the 1980s male intellectuals in the PRC sought to assert their power and *wu*-masculinity through rock (BARANOVITCH 2003, 133). However, the 1989 massacre “was an act of castration whose purpose it was to place China’s intellectuals back in their tradi-

tional position of woman-like state subjects” (BARANOVITCH 2003, 141). The official acceptance of popular music (*tongsu*) since 1986 has helped in “fostering nonrebellious, obedient, docile male state-subjects” (BARANOVITCH 2003, 142). Although Baranovitch acknowledges the influence of *gangtai* pop in this cultural development from macho *wu* to sophisticated *wen*, he presents it as an internal PRC development.

Moskowitz rather stresses the trend-setting power of Taiwanese pop in issues of gender. Chapter 6 of *Cries of Joy* recasts the *wen-wu* divide in terms of *wenrou*, “tender and sensitive,” and hypermasculinity, and chapter 5 presents “*wenrou*, *lamei* [spicy/hot girl] and *ke'ai* [cute, *kawaii*] (or some combination of the three) [as] the three most prevalent forms of femininity portrayed in the Gang-Tai pop industry” (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 85). Of these models, both for men and women *wenrou* is dominant, argues Moskowitz: “Women have become the cultural ideal for what the majority of Chinese hope to be” (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 29, 87).

Baranovitch follows Kam Louie’s argument that sophisticated *wen* is as masculine as macho *wu*, and also Moskowitz concludes that “the *wenrou* male should not be seen as lacking masculinity in the context of Mandopop” (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 101). Nevertheless, Moskowitz frequently refers to *wenrou* masculinity as androgynous and effeminate. The performances of the Hong Kong singer and actor Leslie Cheung (Zhang Guorong) would have been exceptionally suitable for Moskowitz to explore these ambiguities and slippages, as his informants mention Cheung as the paradigmatic male *wenrou* performer (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 92). Fortunately, publications by Helen Hok-Sze Leung and Luo Pei shed light on Cheung’s gender performances and especially the way he suggests his bisexuality while avoiding offence against traditional family values (LEUNG 2008; LUO 2009; CHAN 2005).

GENDER: FEMININITIES

Besides the centrality of being *wenrou* for both men and women, Moskowitz also highlights interesting differences. Whereas female singers stress acceptance and resilience after a breakup, men are more likely to express indignation and anger. Only men use humor in Mandopop, as intellectual playfulness, often including self-belittling, and ridiculing authority are deemed improper for women. These differences point to gender inequality. Indeed, Moskowitz concedes that “Mandopop lyrics are more conservative than the real world,” but nevertheless ends by celebrating the (provisional?) victory of soft Taiwanese femininity over aggressive and nationalistic PRC masculinity (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 86–87). He mentions articles by Larry Witzleben on Anita Mui (Mei Yanfang) and by Anthony Fung on Faye Wong (Wang Fei) that present these Hong Kong-based female stars as struggling with conservative femininities and introducing feminist values, but does not develop similar arguments around Taiwanese stars such as Jolin Tsai (Cai Yilin), Mavis Fan (Fan Xiaoxuan), or Sandee Chan (Chan Shanni); on Mui, see WITZLEBEN 1999; on Wong, see FUNG and CURTIN 2002, and GROENEWEGEN 2009; on Chan, see MARTIN 2003.

By contrast, Baranovitch has explicitly addressed the question whether China's liberalization and free-market economy have led to a comprehensive improvement or deterioration in women's sociopolitical and cultural state and role compared with the Revolutionary Era of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (paraphrasing BARANOVITCH 2003, 113). He describes the reemergence of a domesticated, soft, gentle, sweet, restrained woman between the late 1980s and mid 1990s, but he also identifies a number of alternative female voices. However, his search for alternative voices leads into an evaluation of "authentic" female folk and rock musicians, which would have benefited from a thorough critique of authenticity, such as de Kloet's rock mythology.

De Kloet describes how female musicians claim authenticity by reiterating the mythology rather than challenging it. They do so through the four strategies of "operat[ing] as signifiers of an assumed gender equality (denial), of cultural transgression (dramatisation), of political change (politicization), and of a global modernity (cosmopolitisation)" (DE KLOET 2010, 119).

AUDIENCES

Incidentally, Moskowitz's hesitations over the Taiwan-China issue, over the masculinity of Taiwanese men, and over the emancipatory value of Mandopop resonate with de Kloet's argument that pop's opaqueness enables it to "unfold the *heteroglossia* of everyday life" (DE KLOET 2010, 131). Pop is ambiguous, open to various readings, and therein lies its power.

Part of the novelty of *China with a Cut* and *Cries of Joy* lies in the insight they provide on how audiences use music to articulate identities and manage moods and emotions. Chapter 4 of *China with a Cut* analyzes fanmail and a survey conducted in 1997. It presents music as a technology of the self, as a symbolic toolbox in the processes of self-identity and reflexivity (paraphrasing DE KLOET 2010, 140–41). Chapter 4 of *Cries of Joy* dissects the connections between pop music and the loneliness of Chinese women in contemporary society, quoting interviews conducted in Shanghai and Taipei between 1999 and 2006:

Mandopop songs revolve about being lonely more because Chinese suppress their feelings more. (Mr Chen in MOSKOWITZ 2010, 66)

Taiwanese people believe that you should endure (*rennai*) but never say anything, so we listen to songs and cry. (Xiangyu in MOSKOWITZ 2010, 66)

Likewise, de Kloet connects the function of music to the exceptional pressure Chinese youths face from the family, the education system, politics, and global capitalism. These arguments connect to recent articles by Anthony Fung and Yang Ling that discuss the extraordinary loyalty of the fans of Chris Lee (Li Yuchun), the winner of the PRC talent show *Super Girl* (*Chaoji Nüsheng*) in 2005, treating her as a child that needs support and protection in the hostile urban jungle (YANG 2009; FUNG 2008).

MODERNITY

Both de Kloet and Moskowitz connect pop music to the modern city; unlike Andrew Jones or Basile Zimmermann, they do not discuss the influence of technological innovations on musical production (JONES 2001; ZIMMERMANN 2005 and 2006). Additionally, they do mention the typically modern and urban star system, but stop short of an analysis of its industrial and cultural meanings, for instance the cross-fertilization between the gossip, music, and film industries that Brian Hu put forward (HU 2006).

De Kloet and Moskowitz rather focus on stress, loneliness, and ennui. Paradoxically, de Kloet suggests that reactions against these typical urban diseases are clearest in folk music:

Folk singers evoke... a nostalgic longing for a life beyond the marketisation and globalisation of urban Chinese society and can consequently be read as a critique of contemporary China. However, ambivalently enough, in their own lives, the singers moved from the geographical margins of China towards its political and cultural centre. (DE KLOET 2010, 80)

Moskowitz puts Mandopop under the sign of (individual) melancholia as opposed to the (collective) optimism of PRC pop and mass music (MOSKOWITZ 2010, 23). However, in his chapter on the history of Taiwanese pop, Moskowitz sets up a dichotomy between urban-, middle-, and upper-class Mandopop songs that are concerned with the present on the one hand, and rural, working-class Taiyupop songs that are nostalgic, heavily influenced by Japanese *enka* and sung in Hokkien, the local language, on the other. This reiterates the familiar juxtaposition between urban modernity and rural tradition. De Kloet's remark that "whereas rock relates more strongly to space, pop relates more strongly to time" is debatable, and shows that issues of temporality, memory, and nostalgia are worthy of more attention (DE KLOET 2010, 133).

DEVELOPING THE FIELD

So far, almost all authors of monographs on Chinese popular music have a background in Chinese studies. The first publications emerged as part of the development within Chinese studies from China as an ancient civilization mainly studied through texts, via the addition of contemporary literature as a topic of inquiry, towards a situation in which the study of other aspects of contemporary culture are also viable, including cinema and music. The field's roots in humanities-oriented Sinology partly account for the search for new summits of authentic Chinese culture, often sought in rock music and rebelliousness. This has been gradually changing in recent years and even though authenticity and the rock mythology are still influential in academia, sociological arguments of representability have contributed to a situation in which mainstream popular music has also become an accepted topic of research.

As the first monographs that deal with popular music in the new millennium, *Cries of Joy* and *China with a Cut* are testimony to this development. Moreover, based upon extensive fieldwork, they both contain important insights and data on ongoing issues in the field, of which I have only been able to include a few in this overview. Moskowitz's linguistic background shows in close readings of lyrics that are insightful even though the music is often unfortunately left out of the analysis. De Kloet, and also Anthony Fung and other media studies scholars, make good use of quantitative analysis and discuss the structure of the industry and the influence of government regulations. Additionally, the Inter-Asia Popular Music Studies Group actively promotes interaction in Asia among scholars of popular music, many of whom have backgrounds in cultural, media, gender, or literary studies rather than in Chinese studies. As stated on their website, the group emerged at the nexus of two intellectual communities: the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society (IACSS), a "regional" society for cultural studies, and the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), the "global" association for popular music studies (<http://interasiapop.org>). This is helping the field to open up to much-needed input from scholars based in different locations, connecting to related developments in, for instance, South Korea, Japan, Mongolia, and Thailand. Anthropology, sociology, business, economics, (copyright) law, and musicology: the Inter-Asia Popular Music Studies Group draws on these mighty disciplines, while it also reminds them of Asia.

NOTE

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Transnational threats, security threats that do not originate in and are not confined to a single country. Terrorism, organized international crime, and the possible acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by nongovernmental groups are commonly cited as examples of transnational threats. Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! Share. SHARE.