


Book Review

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Anthony Fung and Alice Chik, *Made in Hong Kong: Studies in Popular Music*. Routledge, 2020, pp. 224, ISBN 9780367226985.

The title of this book, indeed the very phrase ‘Made in Hong Kong’, evokes fleeting images of childhood when the label was stamped onto the underside of what seemed like every item in my toybox. Between the late 1950s and early 1970s Hong Kong was the most significant exporter of toys in the world, and I was a beneficiary. For many growing up in small towns in the UK during this time, Hong Kong and its people also provided us with Cantonese food adapted to the peculiarities of then British tastes. This, we thought, was Chinese cuisine. What did we know? And, in the popular imagination, Hong Kong was crowds of skyscrapers, cutthroat businesses colluding with organised crime, and an axis of Cold War espionage and intrigue, all clumsily combined in novels such as John Le Carre’s *The Honourable Schoolboy*, and TV dramas like *Dangerman*.

What did I know? What *do* we know? Many words could be written about the way understanding changes and knowledge is gained with learning, travel, research, and listening to the singers, songs, and citizens of countries, continents, and cities. But perhaps it was the profound banalities of UK national politics during the years leading up to 1997 that inadvertently revealed the violence and cruel contingencies that lead to such connotations. By then we had a different view of Hong Kong as a small area of land where the narco-imperialism of the opium wars and the colonial humiliation of China still reverberated. In that year Britain reluctantly gave up its colonial territory, with sobbing contractual strings attached and brass bands blaring, in a ritualistic pageant of postcolonial melancholia (to borrow Paul Gilroy’s apt phrase). On the Chinese side, the musical rites were variously understood as signalling pan-Chinese unity and Tian harmony, an assertion of Party-state authority, and a celebration of the unique cultural and economic sensibilities of Hong Kong. As I write, the more ominous interpretations echo.

Some 25 years after the so-called handover, and halfway through the one country, two systems period, the very title *Made in Hong Kong* appears in a branded series of texts with existing geopolitical borders the markets for academic books and boundaries of knowledge. Multiple ironies are latent yet dance out and across the chapters as the volume resists the narrow categories of its published package.



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further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Anthony Fung and Alice Chik have put together a fine collection. Framed by critical cultural studies, it records, celebrates, and intervenes. Engaging and enlightening, the book fills a missing gap in my parochial narrative sketch above, illustrating how the study of popular music can illuminate social, political, and artistic dynamics, along with existential dilemmas. It makes a compelling case for placing Hong Kong central to the main streams of planetary pop, identifying the impact of significant musical dialogues with mainland China and Taiwan, creative exchanges with Japan, and the contribution of the city's people and performers to the Korean wave and K-pop.

The spotlight picks out Cantopop from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s, described as a 'golden age', 'heyday', and 'halcyon days'. A time when the Hong Kong facilitated a vibrant polyglot popular music amalgam of voices intertwining Cantonese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Indonesian, English, Mandarin, along with Putonghua and Hokkien, other regional dialects, and imaginative idiolects. Language, sociolinguistics, and the art of the song lyric are motifs patterned into a book that offers compelling narratives of the outernational and inter-Asian movements of sounds and singers from, to, and through Hong Kong. The reference points range from early 20th century Cantonese opera, through the prescient artistry of Li Jinhui, the eternal Teresa Teng (or Deng Lijun), epoch defining stars like Leslie Cheung, Anita Mui, and Sam Hui, to the post-Cantopop polygonal politics of Tat Ming Pair, Denise Ho, and My Little Airport. The pages are rich in details of these and many other singers and songs, as they speak and sing of the traumas and triumphs of the territory.

The details and dialogues push away from the clichés, dead concepts and abstractions routinely regurgitated in writings about popular music in Asia, especially the overused dichotomy of China/the West, or East/West. A commentary in the coda by C.J.W.-L. Wee cites Ackbar Abbas's call (over 20 years ago now) for scholars to rethink 'kitschy ideas like "East meets West"' and to dislocate 'the local from the parochial' (p. 194). Lee emphasises how the contributors to Fung and Chik's edited book erase and avoid the simplistic binary of Eastern/Western values. It adds to the histories, testimonies, and ordinary art of postcolonialism and, like other postcolonial writing, shows that political domination does not in any direct way equate with cultural control. Songwriters and singers are simply too clever, creative, and cunning.

A recurring refrain throughout the book is that Cantopop is a hybrid. Yet, after 30 years or more of popular music studies there is hardly a genre or style that is not described as hybrid. Maybe some hybrids are more equal than others. Perhaps some hybrids are more interesting than others. Yet, how do we convey a sense of these mixtures without contorting the languages used so carefully by lyricists. Here's an attempt to convey one mixture: 'Embodying "global" Western-Japanese contemporary musical aesthetics along with local Cantonese sensibilities, Cantopop possesses a distinctive hybridity as an urban musical genre' (p. 34). The three singers mentioned in the next sentence are Leslie Cheung, Faye Wong, and Leon Lai. I paused, listened with this description in mind, and I think I got it. But I hear a lot more, and much that I do not have the vocabulary to describe. We all face the problem of how to write about music, and how to convey these fusions and their associations.

Such hybridities feature in discussions of cover songs, another term weaving throughout the book. Whilst the cover song is an idea applicable to the privileging of recordings by pale skinned artists in the USA from the late 1950s through the 1960s during struggles for and against civil rights, I have always had doubts when the concept is casually applied as if universally applicable elsewhere. Contributors to *Made in Hong Kong* hint at the limits of this tendency. Johnson Leow poses an outright challenge. Leow's study of Cantonese renditions of songs initially associated with Japanese musicians brings together production histories, the qualities of songs in performance, and the utter irrelevance of the idea of the cover song for the ears of listeners, concluding that it is

‘impossible to determine which version is the cover and which version is the base’ (p. 97). This insight seems applicable to huge parts of the planet where there is no notion of the cover song and the idea of an underlying concealed ursong is inapplicable, whilst uncritically affirming the conservative ideology of originality and intellectual property.

A pensive reflexivity runs throughout the book. Perhaps the multiversal character of Hong Kong as representation, geography, politics, subjective experience, and popular culture imaginary makes this unavoidable. A sense of nostalgia is tangible, discussed by many authors and appearing in different guises, from memories of the existential pleasures of the pop record, through a politics of disappearance, to psychic premonitions of impending persecution and its artistic consequences. I was reminded of Ailing Zhang’s observation, ‘Hong Kong is a splendid city, but a sad one too’. A sadness also flows through the book. Yet, sad songs say so much (as Bernie Taupin and Elton John remind us), and the sadness of pop is acutely expressive of the shared pains and prospects of our lives. Perhaps the sad songs of the pop singer are more important than protest songs. There’s plenty here to support that. And, Ailing Zhang too knew a lot about the political ironies of sadness.

Bubbling through the entire collection is a utopian impulse, indelibly infused with these intimations of nostalgia, sadness, and irony. A yearning that ‘salvation comes from music and arts, culminating into forces of imagination that produce lines of flight out of the society of control that Hong Kong is increasingly morphing into’ (Chow, de Kloet & Schmidt, p. 179). And affirming the forever renewing ‘aesthetics of pop that are characterised by a transient, intertextual, and multivocal opacity, in which meanings are always rendered ambivalent and under negotiation – in contrast to a rock aesthetic where meanings are generally more explicitly and more univocally articulated’ (p. 177). The allusion to the art of pop and Edouard Glissant’s argument for opacity (against the dull literalism of transparency) resonates and reminds me of Simon Frith evoking the struggle for fun as integral to changing the world.

And, so to the final ironies. I started with a time when ‘Made in Hong Kong’ referred to cheaply produced toys. Yet, these seemingly trivial items provided millions of people with hours of fun and entertainment, and now have dedicated collectors, are remembered and archived on internet pages, and curated in museum display cabinets. The ephemeral toys endure beyond their allotted moment. How strange that an academic book called *Made in Hong* appears in such a cheaply produced edition with a generic blue print-on-demand cover with white text, like umpteen other books from the same publisher, the lettering pale as if manufactured in draft mode to save ink or increase profit margins (£36.99 paperback in the UK). Considering the amount of hard work, in-depth research, critical thinking, and dedication that has gone into the writing of this book it is a shame that the publisher, Taylor and Francis, an Informa Business (revenue over £2 billion, 2022), shows such little commitment to the contents, packaging, and style of the volume. The editors and authors deserve more. Yet, just as the cheaply produced toys of the old Hong Kong live on in people’s collections, memories, and histories, so too will the songs, singers, and the chapters in this book, keeping alive the dreams and imaginings of the forever renewing Hong Kong, its people, and its popular music.

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