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## Citation

Negus, Keith and Shin, Hyunjoon. 2021. Eurasian entanglements: notes towards a planetary perspective of popular music histories. *Popular Music*, 40(1), 158 -164. ISSN 0261-1430 [Article]

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# Eurasian entanglements: notes towards a planetary perspective of popular music histories

*Popular Music* Vol 40 No 1, 2021.

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In recent years, music scholars have argued for a shift towards writing and researching world history, in line with other planetary impulses that invite a more inclusive, de-centred, and less parochial view of cultural life (Stokes, 2018). In this brief intervention we will sketch some ideas that might contribute to one such shift by evoking a narrative of Eurasia and the entanglements of Europe and East Asia.

The term Eurasia has been used in various ways, and the approach we advocate here draws on the many insightful studies of Chris Hann (2014, 2016). The words Europe and Asia derive from classifications of the Ancient Greeks, although Greek concepts were in turn influenced by philosophical ideas from India and China specifically, and the Afro-Asiatic more generally (Bernal, 1987). The term Eurasia was introduced with the category of America and not required before the 'age of discovery'. Europe was then divided from Asia and imagined as a separate continent. The term Euro-America was invented after the colonization of the Americas by European powers and consolidated the division of Europe and Asia. The resulting dichotomy (Europe/ Asia) has been called a Western, Eurocentric, and Euro-American-centric perspective (Hann, 2014; Maçães, 2018).

Eurasia refers to the 'largest landmass of the planet, including the large islands of Great Britain and Japan' along with the 'southern shores of the Mediterranean', and the regions now referred to as North Africa (Hann, 2014, p4). Bruno Maçães (2018) argues that Eurasia will become increasingly important for understanding the changing social, political, and cultural dynamics of a changing 'global order', or a 'post-global' world (Shin and Lee, 2020). Chris Hann's arguments alert us to how histories of popular music are not only geopolitical but can be temporal-political in allowing us to make 'a shift from a transatlantic optic, formed by European expansion since the 16th century, reflected within living memory in the antinomies of the Cold War, and still deeply determinant of global knowledge production in socio-cultural anthropology, to a Eurasian optic which views world history over a much longer period' (Hann, 2014, p14).

Hann's project is part of an impulse for world history. Although drawing on local knowledge, it moves away from rooted and essentialised particularities and towards broader patterns of connections and large-scale narratives. It is more than the 'global-local' of cultural studies. It is about a longer history of entangled and shifting locales. Martin Stokes (2018) has written of this impulse as part of a project to move away from 'comparative history', and to reimagine popular music histories that emphasise connections in a multi-polar world. In a similar spirit, Shuhei Hosokawa (2016) has adopted an 'associative or associated history' to oppose comparative history when reconceptualising Japanese jazz during the 1920s-30s.

We will tentatively sketch our argument by following time's arrow backwards, beginning our journey in Mongolia in the heart of Eurasia. In 2019, a Mongolian rock band,

The Hu, topped the 'Hard Rock Digital Song Sales' chart in *Billboard* with the sounds of throat singing and horse head fiddle bowing. Although sometimes assumed to be sonic symbols of Mongolian identity, these were not thought to be 'ethnic', 'exotic' or 'traditional' enough to be 'world music'. The marketing category of Hunnu rock could not avoid the imaginations of Eurasia: Hunnu is a Mongolian word for Xiongnu in Chinese, and also signals the Huns (a term used by the Greeks and Romans when referring to nomadic populations imagined as ancient peoples of the region). It is both European and Asian. Behind this specific example, Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia, has facilitated a rock scene within which diverse styles from different parts of Eurasia have blended, with notable elements from the UK, Russia, Japan, and South Korea (Dovchin, 2017).

We meet further Eurasian entanglements and encounters by pausing in early twenty first century Seoul and listening to the collaborative, cosmopolitan, aesthetic eclecticism of K-pop. Produced by impresarios at SM Entertainment from the early 1990s, K-pop brought together teams of songwriters and producers from around the world, and was shaped by notable contributions from Scandinavia. 'No. 1', a hit for BoA, was composed by Ziggy (Sigurd Heimdal Rosnes) and Kim Young Ah and is just one Scandinavian-Korean Eurasian planetary pop concoction. Prior to the category of K-pop, 'Hand In Hand', the theme song of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, was written and produced by Giorgio Moroder. It was performed by Koreana, a Korean band that had spent much of their career as a Europop and Eurodisco troupe in the nightclubs of Germany and Switzerland.

Our Eurasian connections then take us to Japan. Not only was early K-pop a version of J-pop with Korean singers, but the genre that came to be called 'Eurobeat' was a Japanese invention that was produced as 'Made in Italy for Japan'. Eurobeat was then transformed into the dance-pop strand of J-pop by producer Testuya Komuro and diva Namie Amuro, while their label Avex Trax released Italian and German dance tracks under the name 'J-Euro'. We must surely mention, again only briefly, the enduring planetary influence of the innovative Yellow Magic Orchestra. YMO ironically and creatively played with orientalist imaginings and representations, and were led by the pioneering Ryuichi Sakamoto who had a profound impact upon electronic pop music, 'world music', hip hop, K-pop, film music, and ambient.

We could then go back a few decades to Shanghai during the 1920s-40s - an urban hub of musical innovation that facilitated fertilisations across art, architecture, literature, performance, political activism, recording, and commerce. Shanghai provided a meeting point for musicians and creative artists from around the world and may well be a much more important cosmopolitan city in the history of twentieth century popular music than the more parochial scenes of Liverpool, or San Francisco, or Düsseldorf. The so-called 'jazz age' of Shanghai (another Euro-American term) was a vibrant musical scene that generated influential sounds created by people whose origins deem them categorised as North and South American, Eastern and Western European, especially Russian, Ukrainian, Austrian, Jewish, and Romani (Marlow, 2018).

One of the great singers of twentieth century popular music, Zhou Xuan is emblematic of this period. Probably born Su Pu in 1918 (or possibly 1920), during her teens she began acting and singing and achieved stardom with the growth of the movies, cinema, and early sound recordings. She died in her late 30s during the conflicts of the anti-rightist purges of the 1950s, when pop songs were drawn into political antagonisms that juxtaposed red music (patriotic song) and yellow music (romantic song).

Zhou Xuan was a star when the people of China began to shake off the enduring influence of imperial powers (United States, France, Britain, and Russia/ USSR in particular). The legacies of emperors still stalked the new republic (since 1912), and it was an age when

revolutionary ideas of change in science, art, and politics existed alongside the traditional influence of still powerful warlords. It was a time when Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria were subjugated, annexed, and encroached by Japanese political elites and their military pursuing modernization via a matrix of further contradictions that opposed the dominant imperial powers through an 'anti-imperialist imperialism'. These complicated histories produced another star in Li Xianglan, who was born in Manchuria, relocated to Shanghai, and became what we might call a pop diva whilst concealing her identity as the Japanese named Yamaguchi Yoshiko. The recordings and performances of Zhou Xuan and Li Xianglan have appeared in many movies over recent decades. The stories of songs and singers in Shanghai and Tokyo during this period were as rich and diverse as those in New York City, Paris, or London.

The musical narratives occurring in Shanghai at this time could be a focus for thinking about how the Cold War and the East-West divide so decisively shaped thinking during the formative years of modern popular music, and might build upon the work of Andrew Jones (2020) and Michael Bourdaghs (2012). Although these writers are more attuned to transoceanic rather than Eurasian connections, their work might allow us to see how the celebration of USA rock'n'roll music was informed by the politics of East and West, and anxiety about the Eastern socialist bloc - even as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan of the 'Far East' were located within the 'Western' capitalist bloc. The Cold War provides an often-unacknowledged backdrop to the 'golden age of rock'n'roll'. Not only did rock music camouflage its appropriations of African forms - a story familiar to scholars of popular music - it also led to the misperception that subaltern peripheries were mere benevolent recipients of original influences. The elevation of rock in histories of popular music involved an understandable celebration of the living present that was probably vital in the USA during the 1950s. But it contributed to a type of cultural amnesia forged within the context of the Cold War.

The next step on our reversing narrative could take us to the legacies from a type of East Asian popular song production line, one similar to the Tin Pan Alley systems of songwriting that characterized New York's music publishing business in the late nineteenth century, but not derivative of this. The production line songwriting of this time led to lyrics that blended literary and moral values. Songs mixed cosmopolitan and vernacular sounds and are important links in the chains connecting sheet music publishing systems and the beginnings of recording in Japan, South Korea, China, and Vietnam. From this period grew distinctively sounding East Asian popular songs with different stylistic categories such as Japanese enka, Chinese shidaiqu, Korean trot, and Vietnamese bolero, all enduring in popularity throughout the twentieth century. These genres were more complex than their associations with common or subaltern peoples might imply, shaped by the urban night cultures of Shanghai, Osaka, Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Saigon, and may be as important as blues, country, and Celtic folk in the history of popular music.

We could travel much further back in time, taking in enduring traces from a longer history of song, dance, and music across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, prior to sound recording and electronic communication. Shōka in Japan, chang ge in China and changga in Korea, all using Chinese characters in their naming, are also predecessors of modern popular songs. Some were songs in the school curriculum, some adaptations of earlier songs heard in Scotland ('Auld Lang Syne'), New England ('Garden Hymn') or Russia ('Stenka Razin'). These were, in turn, versions of tunes and narratives circulating across Eurasia with identifiable trans-Indian, trans-Pacific, or trans-Siberian sensibilities. Such songs

were so embedded into the lives of East Asian peoples that no one thought they were alien, foreign, or strange.

Such songs, tunes and verse had already been on journeys during which they had incorporated elements of Arabic and Muslim stories and poetry in entanglements that stretched across North Africa and into southern Spain as part of the cultural dialogues that characterised what came to be called the Silk Road. Introduced as a phrase by German historian Ferdinand von Richthofen in the late nineteenth century, the term Silk Road referred to the routes that connected the islands at the Far East of Eurasia (now Japan) with the Mediterranean, and the islands at the Far West of Europe (now the UK).

Many years before the introduction of the concept of the Silk Road, Western Europe was known as 'the Far West' in East Asia, a term adopted by the Italian priest Matteo Ricci (1552 – 1610) who introduced himself as 'Matteo of the Far West' when seeking to establish Christian principles in China, and to develop dialogues between China and Western Europe. The Silk Road is one conceptual attempt to convey a sense of this long history of contact and movement. Another might be the Chinggis Exchange, after Temüjin or Chinggis or Genghis Khan (1158/62 - 1227), and the routes established by the Mongol Empire that stretched from the Sea of Japan up to the Arctic and across to the Mediterranean. These not only connected to the Silk Road, but helped keep these routes open and facilitated the various exchanges that declined with the fall of the Empire (Church, 2018).

East and West, North and South, within all points of the compass, travelling these networks, journeyed people trading and exchanging things, ideas, beliefs, art and customs, languages, technologies, germs, medicines, weapons, warfare, animals, plants, food, and spices. At different locations, travellers would encounter professional musicians who held high status in royal courts and societies (Ziegler, 2011). Soldiers on military campaigns took songs with them and often returned with songs, or composed ballads and poems about their experiences (Church, 2018). In many different ways, whether professional musicians or not, travellers made music and sang songs, and exchanged instruments, poetic styles, and narratives.

Although the idea of the Silk Road has been reimagined - in scholarly world history, by musicians pursuing fusion projects, and in the Chinese Government's Belt and Road initiative - there has been little attempt to explore vernacular popular music and exchanges of song, as these occurred across the land and sea routes of Eurasia. Yet, these exchanges are important for a history of everyday culture and popular song. Writing of the profound impact of the Silk Road on world history, and the issues it raises about categories of identity, James Millward argued: '... much of what we consider the intellectual, religious, political or economic patrimony of "the West" or "the East" – or Christendom or Islam or Europe or Africa or Asia – are actually varied expressions of what was, on a fundamental level, an Afro-Eurasian joint venture' (2013, p19). The term Afro-Eurasian is an identity label that merely signals a dynamic or process; a 'joint venture' would be central when exploring more planetary histories of popular music.

On our journey back in time we will mention further important Eurasian entanglements that precede and shape histories of contemporary popular song. Both are related to the introduction of the movable type printing press, and paper. The introduction of Johannes Gutenberg's printing press in Europe allowed a type of early mass production of printed ballads from the late fifteenth century. It resulted in an industry of ballad producers and sellers, creating thousands of songs chronicling topical events (unusual weather, battles, strange animals, adventures, crimes - notably murders), and in response to the popularity of other ballads about everyday human joys, mishaps, emotions, and relationships. They were

usually set to familiar tunes, and frequently reused themes and lyrics from other ballads. In Western Europe, these songs were sold for the price of a loaf of bread or glass of beer, and promoted by 'chaunters', 'pedlars', and 'patterers' in taverns, fairs, markets, and on the street. The broadside ballads became prevalent in Europe and North America between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. The ballads blurred distinctions between news and gossip, information and entertainment, fact and fiction, and gave rise to a thriving popular music business.

As city life in Europe became more regulated, the performance of ballads was forced from the street, fair, and town market, and the broadsides entered 'the more theatrical art of the music hall ... and ... descended by way of sheet music to Tin Pan Alley and, much later, the gramophone record industry of popular music' (Shepherd, 1962, pp103-4). The ballad pedlars became pluggers of sheet music, while songwriting methods were adapted to performance in theatres and clubs, then for recording and radio – using similar patterns of repetition, refrain, rhetoric, rhythms, and vocal melodies that could be sung by ordinary people. In this way, the printed ballads were central to the documentation and dissemination of songs, and growth of a business of popular song.

There are two Eurasian entanglements of note here. The first entails connections of content, themes, and narratives. The ballads were inspired by tales from Scandinavia and northern Europe, and mixed with Arabic tales as these were passed from southern Europe. The ballads studied in Britain show the influence of stories from the Buddhist *Jātaka* and *Panchatantra*. Although often said to derive from India, these narratives developed as they were exchanged across Eurasia, with versions of similar tales found in China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan (Millward, 2013).

The second is a technological entanglement. Paper was being produced and used in East Asia (in China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan) and in Muslim cultures many years before it was introduced and adopted in southern Europe. Movable type printing was used in East Asia long before its adoption or parallel realisation in West Europe. Evidence suggests that Chinese and Korean verses were circulated on sheets containing a woodcut image, and that Chinese woodblock productions from the fourteenth century influenced the sixteenth century layout of ballad sheets in central and southern Europe. The roots of the modern commercial music industry can be traced back to the emergence of the modern ballad business and these important Eurasian encounters in the pre-recording histories of popular music.

This is as far as our tentative reflections on these historical exchanges across Eurasia will take us in this brief article. If we were to take this sketch further it would lead us to the Americas and the so-called Columbian exchanges of people, things, plants, animals, and cultures, via ships across the Atlantic, and the Pacific. It would take in the transport of slaves across the Atlantic to the Americas and Caribbean, and the creation of a blues aesthetic in the United States, along with various Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean styles. There would be no 'American' music of whatever variety without these complex and conflict laden oceanic entanglements. Concurrently our narrative would cut to the forced 'opening' of East Asia by competing imperial powers, and the consequent rise of Japan as an imperial power, and then as a profoundly influential corporate commercial nation that has influenced sound technologies, popular art forms, and design aesthetics around the world. The post-imperial direction taken by Japan influenced the overlapping yet individual routes taken by Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, and led to an identifiable East Asian pop culture that challenged yet complemented the US dominance of global popular music markets (Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008). Eventually our narrative would reach the Eurasian entanglements of popular

music today, with acts such as Superorganism and Peggy Gou, facilitated by the production and circulation of mass and social media, digitalisation and the World Wide Web.

As popular music scholars we can place ourselves within such longer and more geographically expansive histories. In beginning to develop an exploratory argument for alternative planetary histories, we are not suggesting that it will be possible to plot every link and comprehend every connection. We are not proposing narratives within which all events lead neatly and sequentially into one another. That will misleadingly convey the idea that music moves through time and space according to evolutionary connections and social effects. Such assumptions are written into many writings on popular music, mistakenly presenting contingencies as necessities, and coincidences as causalities. It will not be a historical quest for roots or origins, nor a narrative of musical evolution based on progress and development. It would be stories about meetings and encounters - tales of exchanges, influences, and entanglements. It will tell histories of Eurasia as just one dynamic cultural space of creative dialogues stretched across and entangled with many other places and peoples around the planet.

Hyunjoon Shin acknowledges that this paper is based on research that was partly supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2018S1A6A3A01080743).

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