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Middle Eight

Between dislocated and relocated Inter-Asian popular music studies: academic discourse and possibilities

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This article charts the development of 'Inter-Asian' popular music in contemporary music studies. Given the large number of universities that teach Asian pop music and ever-increasing number of Asian music scholars, inter-Asian popular music in contemporary music studies has largely been underrepresented. The lack of suitable concepts, vocabularies and theories that elucidate accurately Asian music, combined with the fact that studies of Asian popular music are minor voices in the global academic discourse, has resulted in the doubled exclusion of both Asian music and its scholarship. In practice, whenever Asian music has to be explained, it has to be artificially dovetailed with concepts of Western music. The result is that the application of these concepts to Asian music often reaffirms the robustness of these concepts instead of revealing the specificity of this music.

The term 'Inter-Asian' was coined in response to the academic exclusion of popular music produced in the Asian region, and is based on the self-representation of scholars who acknowledge the geographical origin of Asian popular music and use the prefix 'Inter' as a political gesture to stress the uniqueness of such music and rectify its dislocation in Western concepts, vocabularies and frameworks of popular music. In the present context, 'dislocation' refers to the cultural disjunction caused by the application, borrowing and adaptation of Western music concepts to the popular music produced in the Asian region. Thus, Inter-Asian popular music (henceforth, Inter-Asian pop music) has often been 'lost in translation' owing to processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation.

The reason for the dislocation of Inter-Asian pop music is the historical lag in the development of humanities and social sciences in Asia. Arguing that this can be considered a form of colonisation, cultural studies scholars Kuan-Hsin Chen and Bent Hua Chua founded the Inter-Asian Cultural Studies Society and its journal in 2000. In 2007, the legacy was passed to the Inter-Asia Popular Music Studies Group, a popular music studies platform for more than 120 international scholars of popular music in Asia. Inter-Asia, as Chua (2015) explained, is a self-referencing concept that was constructed to counter the referencing of Asian cultural phenomena according to Western concepts, and to re-centre theoretical explanations of Asian

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culture in Inter-Asian regions. This self-referencing concept declares the distinctiveness of Asia for theorising and studying popular music studies.

Dilemmas in Inter-Asian popular music studies

In the past 15 years the development of Inter-Asian popular music studies has been focused on the decolonisation of academic discourse and methods. As I observed at the biennial Inter-Asia Popular Music Studies Conferences, most Asian scholars have adhered to the Inter-Asian approach, which deliberately detaches Asian pop music from Western theorisation. Methodology has drawn from Chen's (2010) call for 'Asia as Method,' and scholarship has focused on thick description, narratives and visual images of individual Asian pop music cases. This has resulted in the proliferation of scholarship, which has not yet been formally published elsewhere. Some unique and intellectually intriguing topics include cultural resistance and activism (e.g. underground scenes in China, Taiwan and Japan), the hybridisation of music genres (e.g. The Philippines' rock music and Southeast Asian melodies, such as Thai, Laos and Vietnamese music fused with heavy metal) as well as (post)modernity and religion (e.g. Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim fans embracing K-pop hip-hop). The commonality of these studies underscores the exceptionality of Asian pop music. These studies are contingent on specific socio-political contexts in Asia. Asian scholars have argued that Western paradigms do not fit Asian contexts and for Inter-Asia pop music studies to confront ethnocentrism. For instance, studies of K-pop (e.g. Lie 2012) must be interrogated to ask questions about why K-pop is able to travel overseas and justify its significance. In contrast, studies of Western pop music often presume the global prevalence of, for example, the Beatles, without explaining the band's universalism (Jenkins and Jenkins 2018). Such Western ethnocentrism further drives Asian scholars to pursue the path of the Inter-Asia movement.

Nevertheless, in Inter-Asia pop music studies, a dichotomy exists in the academic treatment of Asian pop music in this region. On the one hand, some Asian music scholars inherit the argument of Asian exceptionalism (e.g. Thornton 1998) in that East Asian culture is more driven by Confucianism than the Weberian sense of rationality. Such tradition stands against the uncritical application of 'Western formula for data reduction to East Asia' (Bomhoff and Gu 2012, p. 373). On the other hand, others, particularly those who are educated in the West, are apt to take academic approaches that are based on the concepts and theories they learned overseas, particularly because they are under institutional pressures from academic publishing. Thus, the mere category of Asian pop music does not suffice, as Anglo-Saxon-based English academic journals often request authors to justify its significance. Framing the Asian case using theories recognised in the West is the most straightforward way to have research published in such journals. Notwithstanding this, there is a sociological truth that the decolonising Asian countries are still globally connected by the legacy of colonialisation. Indeed, the hybridisation of folk and Western music, localisation and the local appropriation of external musical forms are common. The 'high theory' approach suits the historical context of the study of pop music in Asia. Examples are Um's (2013) study on the localisation of hip-hop in K-pop and Chu and Leung's (2013) work on the fusion of Western and Asian genres in Cantopop. This approach is substantiated by the existence of

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commercial popular music markets in Asia, which have been influenced by the 'big 5' (i.e. Sony Music, Warner Music, Universal, EMI and BMG), which are predominant in English-speaking markets (Fung 2008a). In Asia, the diva of Cantopop, Faye Wong, was branded by EMI (Fung 2007), and the Taiwanese Mandopop singer Jay Chou, who was once the most popular male singer across the Greater China region, released his album under Sony Music (Fung 2008b). These transnational music record companies devised a business formula that was based on the Western experience and applied it to the Asian music market. It is no surprise to both audiences and researchers that there are striking similarities between the East and the West in terms of music styles (e.g. pop, reggae, ballads), idol creation, distribution and marketing strategies. Hence, because of their malleability, Western concepts and vocabularies and their application have accelerated the growth of scholarship on Asian pop music, and have satisfied institutional demands to 'catch up' with Western counterparts. Viewed from an Inter-Asian perspective this approach serves as a window for Western scholarship to view Asian pop music. The drawback of most of these studies is their adherence to Western models. Thus, in this context, Asia is still under the silhouette of colonisation by the West.

The dilemma of the Inter-Asia project concerns its delayed dialogue with Western scholarship despite the awakening of Asian scholarship. It is likely that no current scholar has a perfect solution to resolve this dilemma. Moreover, the Inter-Asian concept should not be reduced to an ideological tenet based on uniqueness. After years of borrowing concepts from the West, the scholarship on Inter-Asian pop music is now attempting to create its own understanding by overcoming the barriers imposed by Western concepts. The initial wave of Inter-Asian scholarship originates in the refusal to adopt recolonisation by that Western scholarship which assumes it can be applied universally. Personally, I think it is a great leap forward for Asian scholarship.

However, it is easily forgotten that the intention of scholarship is the quest for truth, patterns and systematic knowledge. When Asian self-confidence has increased, which is evident in its burgeoning economy and political independence, and it has developed its own approach to scholarship, the development of theories that are applicable to the music scene in Asia may follow. Here I want to draw on the fallacious concept of 'intellectual singularity', which I previously addressed at an Inter-Asian meeting (Fung 2013), to raise the following question: are all Asian pop music phenomena singular, unique incidents that are non-repeatable and non-diffusible, or can they also happen in other milieus that cannot be gauged by existing or systematic methods? Although it is possible, I suppose that as our (East and West) world becomes ever-increasingly linked owing to cultural and economic globalisation, it is likely that some occurrences or cultural representations, which are often analysed in music studies, are similar and thus partially generalisable. If this supposition is correct, it might be possible to acknowledge positions beyond the Inter-Asian context.

The Many 'Asias'

Because there are many 'Asias,' the choice depends on which Asia. In the concept of Inter-Asia, Asia is more than a geographic construct. Here I do not refer to the etymology of the word Asia, which is a culturally laden term representing the otherness

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of the West or the unknown if it fails to be recognised by the West. If we seriously considered each nation's sovereign development, we would find that there is nothing called Asian pop music; instead, there is Japanese pop, Korean pop, Cantopop (pop music from Hong Kong), Mandopop (pop music from Taiwan), Thai pop, Indian pop, and so forth. The complexity of Asian history has given rise to multiple trajectories of pop music development, each having its own concerns, agendas and missions, which should be respected. Thus, the suitability and availability of the positions that Asian scholars could adopt should always be plural and variable.

Because of the region's colonial history, many Asian nations can trace their genealogy of pop music to Western popular music. This is precisely in concrete analysis of some of these regions in which Western pop music is part of the pop music history, and there is no reason that we should sidestep Western concepts and their analytical frameworks. Japan and South Korea are two examples. In Japan, *kayokyuku* refers to all Westernised forms of Japanese pop music since the 1920s. Since the 1980s, *kayokyku* has been superseded by mainstream Japanese pop, or J-pop, which is an Anglicised Japanese term that broadly refers to the Westernised music style in Japan, including R 'n' B, soul, rock, hip-hop, reggae, synth pop, and so on. Thus, in Japan, pop music, whether *kayokuku* or J-pop, is deemed chic and fashionable, and by default such notions of modernity come from the West. From Ayumi Hamazaki, the empress of J-pop since 1998 to the idol girl group AKB48 since 2005, J-pop prevailed in Asia until the rise of K-pop. In contrast, local music in Japan is displaced by the category 'music in Japan', a term that does not indicate the modernity of Western pop music. In South Korea, while Western modernity is embodied in the term K-pop, which has developed since the 1980s, pop music is never associated with locally made contemporary music.

My interpretation of Western-acculturated Asian pop music concerns the ontological understanding of Asian pop music and its relationship to society. As a cultural form developed in East Asian regions, pop music is associated with Western superiority, which has long been internalised despite decolonisation. Hence, local Inter-Asian music is not modern, and it is not pop music. It becomes pop music only when a local melody or folksong is hybridised by the West. Thus, the fundamental question is the following: what is J-pop and what is K-pop? In the final analysis, all Western musical genres, including rock, electronic, metal and hip-hop, can be part of pop music. Precisely, Western musical forms are part of the history of J-pop and K-pop. Therefore, in the study of J-pop and K-pop, it is neither necessary nor realistic to deny the Western influence in the development of Asian culture.

Despite the potential dissonance between pop-rock and Inter-Asian versions of pop-rock, it is somewhat unreasonable for scholars to deliberately isolate the Western nomenclature and reject Western concepts in an attempt to arrive at an independent analysis of Asian pop rock, which might offer only an anachronistic study of the East Asian music phenomenon. Is it sometimes worth revealing the truth behind the music – its influence, meanings and aesthetics – rather than pursuing Asian uniqueness or simply dismissing the West for the sake of a political gesture? In fact, in certain contexts, Western concepts better illustrate the effects of music on our increasingly cosmopolitan world.

Lady Gaga and Madonna have been studied as icons of women's power (Iddo and Marshall 2014). In Hong Kong, Faye Wong was studied as an icon of feminism, the values of which are clearly Western in origin, and promoted by the commercial logic of the music industry and media (Fung and Curtin 2002; Fung 2009). These

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previous studies showed that the values of feminism do travel with popular music and music capital. The commonalities of these studies all point to a comparable phenomenon suggesting that popular divas could foster a broad women's movement in modern society.

The connections linking nationalism, authenticity and identity in popular music are not bounded by East–West distinctions. The awakening of ethnic and national consciousness through and by pop music works in tandem with open democracy, celebration and the rediscovery of aboriginality, which is manifested in Taiwanese pop music, such as the music of Amei (Ho 2007). Similar dynamics of open-endedness and constraints influenced rock music as mass art – from Sex Pistols to Rolling Stone – and construct meanings that eventually become sources of appropriation for American's radical, gendered and political identities (Gracyk 2001).

A drastic, seismic shift of paradigms is not required to comprehend Asian music and society. Neither is the complete withdrawal to intra-regional Asia and regionally exclusive pop music studies nor does the continual, non-reflexive replication of Western concepts in Asia offers an optimal solution. Instead, after the rediscovery of local values in the Inter-Asian movement, there is a genuine need to examine non-monolithic Asian pop music in a way that is equivalent to the study of pop music in any other global region. Although discovering the uniqueness of the Asian pop music scene is a viable strategy, in some Asian contexts, understanding pop music and society through Western concepts – considering their limitations and biases – could also be an possibility.

The call for communication with Western music scholarship

The first mission of Inter-Asian pop music studies was to legitimise Asian music scholarship, and this has probably been accomplished. The next goal is to communicate and to connect with Western music scholarship, with an understanding that there is also the 'plural West'. To understand this possibility, Edward Said's thesis of Orientalism (1978), which deconstructs patronising Western representations of Asia, could be applied to the study of Inter-Asian music in order to challenge the assumption that Western music is superior to Asian music. Said's framework could be applied to decolonise the academic discourse of pop music and emphasise that 'Asians create Asians'.

Because there are sufficient reasons for de-Westernising Asian music, a proactive academic trajectory could be applied to examine the effects of Orientalism in Asian pop music after almost two decades of post-de-Westernisation. In prioritising communicative Asian pop music studies, I argue that Asian music scholars could select a new approach, namely a strategic essentialist perspective, a concept developed by Gayatri Spivak (1985). Based on this perspective, while recognising the differences in Asian music, as well as those between Western music and Asian music, scholars of Inter-Asian popular music could temporarily adopt an essentialised position in order to research Asian popular music and further investigate the linkage, disparities and interactions between Asian and Western music. Based on my observations, it may be valid to hold that some Asian scholars have unconsciously embraced Western vocabularies and global micro-structural analyses, which is also a form of strategic essentialism, as a tactic for communicating within Asian and outside with Western scholarships (e.g. Shih 2015, p. 5; Khoo 2007, p. 15).

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J-pop, K-pop, Cantopop and Mandopop incorporate and are inspired by Westernised musical forms and culture. Thus, to examine this Asian popular music, the logic of the strategic essentialist position is to employ vocabularies, concepts and frameworks of Western pop music as readily available tools that could contribute to our understanding of Inter-Asian pop music. Such analyses could be understood by non-Asian music scholars as a point of departure for a new conversation. The vernacularism of Asian pop music should not be the rationale for claiming its uniqueness, at least before any comparison is conducted. Ungrounded claims of the specificity of Asian pop music would only serve to dilute and reduce the need for conversations and comparisons with the scholarship on Western pop music.

'Asia-rising' is no longer a buzzword at least in the commercial realm. The spotlight of the global music industry is now on the Asian pop music market, which has become a rising source of global revenues (e.g. Digital McKinsey 2016) despite the unevenness and plurality of Asian markets and taste. The growing economic prominence, audience and volume of Asian pop music, however, should not prevent scholars of Inter-Asian popular music studies from reflecting on their positions and methodologies. Above all, self-confidence should be accompanied by vigilance against any form of Asian centrism that would prevent a dialogue with the Western music scholarship. Moreover, in Asia, scholarship should be equally cautious of any imbalance in academic discourse. At present, Asian pop music is particularly representative of East Asia and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the enduring values of Asian popular music studies – as well as other popular music studies – should be inclusive, and embrace central, southern and Western Asia and respect the plurality of the 'Asias.' I invite all music scholars to write Inter-Asian popular music studies into a chapter in the world history of popular music. If there were any dislocation of Asian popular music scholarship in the past, do partake in the relocation of scholarship under the more open academic possibilities today.

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