

Sonic Sturdiness: The Globalization of “Chinese” Rock and Pop

Jeroen de Kloet

To theorize further global and regional flows of popular culture, this article provides a critical analysis of “authentic” rock music from Beijing as well as “commercial” pop from Hong Kong. Following Appadurai, I theorize rock as a hard cultural form, which, under the scrutinizing eyes of the West, demands localization when it travels to places outside its perceived homeland, the West. By comparing hardcore punk from Beijing to Cantopop, I discuss whether the soft relates to the hard as pop does to rock. I conclude it does not. The transient, intertextual, and multivocal opaque voice of pop demands a different theorization. I therefore recast Appadurai’s hard–soft distinction into a clear–opaque dualism as a more accurate theoretical tool for understanding cultural globalization.

Keywords: Globalization; China; Hong Kong; Appadurai; Beijing Punk; Cantopop; Anthony Wong; Opacity

Sonic Flows

However far-fetched drawing a parallel between cricket and rock music may seem, both share a similar perceived origin (the West), and both traveled quite successfully to the East (India and China). This article analyzes rock music in Beijing and pop music from Hong Kong, critically interrogating Appadurai’s (1996) distinction between hard and soft cultural forms. Commenting on cricket’s embeddedness in 19th-century Victorian values, Appadurai proposes the notion of “hard” cultural forms to understand the cultural flow of cricket. “Hard cultural forms are those that come with a set of links between value, meaning, and embodied practice that are difficult to break and hard to transform” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 90). Intuitively one would expect that cultural forms like cricket, which are so tightly packaged in terms of symbolic meaning, “ought to resist indigenization” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 90). And

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indeed, in the high period of the Raj between 1870 and 1930, “for Indians to play cricket was to experiment with the mysteries of English upper-class life” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 90). Over the 20th century, however, cricket became profoundly indigenized and decolonized, becoming part and parcel of the (mediated) project of the modern Indian nation-state. To explain this puzzle, Appadurai interprets the localization of cricket as a postcolonial experiment with modernity in which the empire, the nation-state, patronage, commerce, and the mass media play pivotal roles.

Following Appadurai’s notions, rock can be considered a hard cultural form, with rock mythology—the narratives that constitute rock as a distinct music world, as I will explain later—as its set of links between value, meaning, and embodied practice. It imposes a relatively rigid repertoire of styles, which have their perceived origins in the West, upon musicians active in the rock culture. As such, rock “changes those who are socialized into it more readily than it is itself changed” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 90). Hence the striking similarities in both sound and image, for example, of hard-rockers from Beijing and their colleagues in Jakarta or Seattle, with their leather jackets, long hair, and unruliness on and offstage. However, precisely because of the globalizing force of rock mythology, Beijing musicians want to localize rock’s sound and image. In order to become and remain authentic, the hard force of rock—a force with a strong imagined sense of origins in the West—demands localization when the sound travels to places outside the West.¹

The emergence of rock in China in the 1990s, however, coincided with the rapid processes of a state-supported urban consumerism that is deeply embedded in an increasingly globalized capitalist economy (Hui, 2003; Wang, 2001). In particular, China’s youths have been at the forefront of the closely intertwined dynamics of globalization and urban consumerism (Z. Zhang, 2000). Popular culture is pivotal in these processes. For example, like their Western contemporaries, Beijing youths watch *The Matrix* and the *Lord of the Rings*; play the latest X-Box and Playstation; and listen to Jennifer Lopez and System of a Down. Unlike their Western contemporaries, however, they also immerse themselves in pop from Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as rock from their own city.²

Backed up by transnational capital, flows of popular culture not only run from the West to the rest but also from, for example, Taiwan and Hong Kong to mainland China. Beijing rock musicians negotiate the perceived roots of rock, the West, through localization. They also differentiate themselves from what they consider to be the commercial and inauthentic sound of Cantopop and Mandapop: the pop from Hong Kong and Taiwan that largely exceeds rock in audience appeal. The pop–rock divide in China reifies dominant popular stereotypes of the cultural north (with Beijing as the signifier of an “authentic” Chinese culture) and the commercial south (with Hong Kong as the signifier of a commercial Chinese culture). It also articulates differences between what is considered an original, authentic West and a non-West that constantly risks being a mere copycat. I will show how the scrutiny of Western journalists and academics strengthens these differences.

Appadurai’s theorization of hard cultural forms helps explain the localizing urge of Beijing rock culture. When it comes to the soft, however, Appadurai offers no

examples. He only remarks that soft cultural forms “permit relatively easy separation of embodied performance from meaning and value, and relatively successful transformation at each level” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 90). This vagueness suggests not only the need to consider soft forms more specifically, but also to rethink the hard–soft distinction. Consequently, the second part of my analysis recasts Appadurai’s hard–soft distinction as a clear–opaque dualism. The transient, intertextual, and multivocal opacity of pop subverts the hegemonic forces that propel the globalization of clear, hard cultural forms like rock. As such, opaque cultural forms offer a hitherto underestimated prism for studying cultural globalization.

Pop and Rock

The birth of Chinese rock can be traced back to the mid-1980s, when the hoarse voice of Beijing rock star Cui Jian stirred up the waters of Chinese popular culture. Cui Jian’s song “Nothing to My Name” became an instant hit in 1986 and was one of the anthems of the student protest movement in 1989. In Cui Jian’s wake, a vivid rock culture emerging in Beijing conquered mainland China and, although to a far lesser extent, Taiwan and Hong Kong. By now, the label “rock” (*yaogun yinyue*) is too broad to capture the diversity of music styles currently in vogue in the mainland, such as hardcore punk, folk rock, and deep house. Nevertheless, the label retains some of its significance in Beijing record stores, which group together rock tapes and CDs, as distinguished from what is categorized in popular discourse as pop music (*liuxing yinyue*). The latter is perceived to be the inauthentic Other of rock. Essentially, this rearticulates the old dichotomy between “authentic,” “rebellious” rock and its commercial constitutive outside “pop.”³ Authenticity is the key term for unpacking the pop–rock dichotomy. As Herman and Sloop (1998, p. 2) say, the ideology of authenticity provided the ground for a practice of judgment through which musicians, fans, and critics could “distinguish between ‘authentic rock,’ which was transgressive and meaningful, and ‘inauthentic rock’ (or ‘pop’), which was co-opted and superficial.” This pop–rock divide is thus not at all a Chinese invention. Instead, it is a globalized dichotomy whose origin (imagined or not) is in the West (Frith, 1996). Rock is accepted as sincere and authentic. Kurt Cobain’s desperate screams signify a tormented soul, ultimately verified by his suicide. The plastic voice, face, and body of Britney Spears carry a mass-produced product.

Although the generic demarcation is global, the merchandise displayed in Beijing stores underlines another, more locally specific demarcation—a geographical one. Whereas most rock comes from the north, Beijing, the pop music that hits the mainland charts generally comes from the south, Taiwan or Hong Kong (hereafter grouped under the label *Gangtai* pop).⁴ Mainland pop is popularly conceived of as a meager copy of *Gangtai* pop.⁵ Consequently, the global rock–pop divide has a geographical dimension that resembles and hence reifies popular stereotypes about the cultural north and the commercial south. The northern sound of rock is framed by what I call the rock mythology (de Kloet, 2000). This mythology consists of a set of narratives that produce rock as a distinct music world that is, first and foremost,

authentic, but also subcultural, masculine, rebellious, and (counter) political. Not surprisingly, the perceived authoritarian character of the Chinese regime feeds the popular imagination—in particular in the West—to relive the rebelliousness of the rock mythology.

The pop–rock dichotomy dominates academic and journalistic discourses, both Chinese and non-Chinese. It is a crucial marker of distinction for musicians, producers, and audiences. Pop, framed in popular discourse as the primary constitutive outside of rock, is anything but authentic (Herman & Sloop, 1998). The words of Cui Jian are indicative: “Pop music as a strictly commercial product, that is for money only, I am not interested in and am indeed opposed to” (quoted in Barmé, 1999, p. 361). Likewise, Sar, drummer for the Beijing rock band Thin Men, says:

Rock music is totally different from pop. Rock comes from our souls, it is original music, composed and played from the same heart. Pop is the ultimate assembly-line product. . . . There is nothing genuine about it. It is not about expressing your truths but about manipulating consumers. (quoted in Kovskya, 1999)

Both Steen (1996) and Jones (1992) reify the pop–rock distinction by arguing that, when it is not yet commodified, rock is potentially subversive and emancipatory—qualities that pop cannot possibly offer. “Apart from the marginal and marginalized niche market of heavy metal and rock, it is the sickly sweet songs of Canto-pop that fill the airwaves” (Dutton, 1998, p. 239). Such crude judgments and classifications, expressed by rock musicians as well as Western academics, represent the typical opinion of Chinese pop as overtly commercialized and lacking creativity.

Indeed, when it comes to sales figures, Chinese pop by far outweighs rock. Pop attracts a large audience among all generations across national boundaries, including diasporic communities across the globe. The rock audience, on the other hand, remains comparatively small. Nevertheless, it is rock that mainly attracts the attention of Western observers. Several books, articles, and documentaries try to grasp the significance of rock in China (e.g., Baranovitch, 2003; de Kloet, 2000, 2003; Efirid, 2001; Huang, 2001, 2003; Jones, 1992, 1994; Lanning, 1991; Lee, 1996; Steen, 1996, 2000a; Yan, 1999, 2004). Only a few embark on an analysis of *Gangtai* pop (Chan, 1997; Chu, 1998; Ho, 2000; Khiun, 2003; Lee, 1992). In the latter case, analysis is generally guided and confined by parameters set by the rock mythology, privileging the political aspects of pop. For example, Lee (1992) links *Gangtai* pop to the June 4th movement of 1989. Among the few studies that move beyond a political reading of *Gangtai* pop, Witzleben (1999) explores the stardom of Anita Mui, pointing out her own agency. Erni (1998) interprets Cantopop as “a cultural surface upon which Hong Kong’s uniquely contradictory colonial experience finds its own expression” (p. 57).

To unravel the global and local flows of popular music, the perceived origin of rock (and of its mythology) in the West is crucial. Whenever rock travels outside its perceived homeland, the West, it demands localization in order to retain its authenticity. A second important point concerns the particular spatial dimension

of the pop–rock distinction in the Chinese context—the articulation of Beijing rock versus Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop, or the cultural north versus the commercial south. Both reify cultural stereotypes and reinforce particular political boundaries.

Hegemony and Mimicry

Given the perceived Western roots of rock, that rock is labeled and criticized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as representing spiritual pollution from the West is predictable (Leng, 1991). However, the CCP is not alone in drawing its harsh judgment of Chinese rock from its supposed Western origin. Musicians and observers, both inside and outside China, do the same. Reviewing a documentary on Chinese rock music, a Dutch journalist makes what is "original" into "superior": "China is lagging behind in popular music and will never be able to make up for it. It is unclear whether Chinese youth actually wants such music" (Kamer, 1997, p. 16). Shown music videos of Chinese rock, Dutch students are generally dismissive; they consider Chinese rockers to be, at best, bleak, old-fashioned copies of the supposedly real rock from the West.⁶ Both the journalist's as well as the students' comments can be read as a Western, more than a Dutch, response. The mimicry of the Other—here Chinese rock musicians—meets with resistance and disapproval from Western audiences and music critics. I consider this, following Bhabha, to be a hegemonic, colonial attitude: "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (1994, p. 86, italics in original). Chinese rock often sounds and looks the same, but not quite. Both the journalist and my students articulate this difference in a temporal way, by labeling it "old-fashioned." On this difference, this slippage of meaning from "real rock" to "old fashioned rock," rests the hegemonic defining power of the Western gaze. "Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86).

Chinese analysts also subscribe to the hegemonic assertion of the West as the one and only center of real rock. For example, two of the main rock magazines in China—*Music Heaven* and *Modern Sky Magazine*—offer the Chinese gaze on the West (in extensive coverage of Western rock), and the Chinese gaze on an assumed Western gaze (in reports that question whether or not rock in China is "just" a copy).⁷ Given its status as rock's homeland, the West not only establishes the criteria for what rock ought to be, but is also imagined to be the omnipresent judge of Chinese rock.

Copying the West is presumed, in the West as in China, to result in a loss of authenticity, the driving force of the rock mythology, as well as an ideological betrayal of China's assumed uniqueness. Bands in Beijing often accuse one another of copying the West. In the West, accusations of copying are invariably based on comparisons between individuals or bands. In the case of Chinese rock, the danger of copying is not merely individual and creative but collective and ideological. A Chinese rock band must safeguard authenticity by distinguishing itself from other Chinese bands and from the West. In other words, the global sound of rock must be indigenized in

China to maintain its claim to real Chinese rock. Refusing to sinify a sound—to add presumed Chinese characteristics to it—risks copying the better West, a refusal which leads to accusations of inauthenticity. Through sinification, musicians aspire to make Chinese rock that sounds and looks quite different, hence avoiding the hegemonic force of mimicry.

In a report in *Modern Sky Magazine* on hip hop in China, Y. Zhang (2000) expresses the general angst: “Compared to Western music, we will always be in a state of copying. When we have something new, we will throw away the old one. We have all sorts of music, but none is properly digested by us” (p. 19). Chinese music magazines contain elaborate references to generic labels from Western popular music and to Western bands.⁸ The Chinese gaze on Western rock shows that Western sounds travel well to China, but this is mainly a one-way sonic flow. Although Western academics and journalists might privilege both the rebelliousness and Chineseness of Chinese rock, the music itself is rarely taken seriously. A telling account by the Chinese female vocalist Long Hun, entitled “Go West!”, articulates her frustrations when introducing the Beijing rock she “is so proud of” to friends in London:

But their reaction is always: “Well, it’s OK.” To them, these punk bands are just another group of punk bands, Tang Dynasty is just another heavy metal band, and they just don’t have a clue to what’s so good about Zhang Chu and Cui Jian. It really annoys me. I can only say: “You don’t understand.” Only some songs of Supermarket [an electronic band] still interest them, saying: “This is interesting, strange music.” Also the tape of Chinese *guqin* [a “traditional” Chinese string instrument], they play it over and over again. Strange, if it shows that there are indeed boundaries in music, why does foreign music manage to excite us and feel close to us? (Long, 1999, p. 24)

Her last outcry underscores the crux of the globalization of popular music: Why are Chinese rock and pop fans so eager to listen to Western sounds, but the reverse is rare? Why have Chinese musicians and audiences developed an aesthetic sensibility toward popular “Western” sounds but not the other way round? To Western eyes and ears, the only appealing sounds and images are either political (Beijing rock—but only when sinified) or exotic, rather than the familiar and the popular.

The cultural sharing that takes place when the sound of rock globalizes conspicuously does so on Western terms (Kraus, 1989). U.S. journalist Caroline Cooper downplays Chinese pop, the “slapdash Spears rip-offs and the bleating of Hong Kong pop stars” (2000). She subsequently celebrates the Beijing rock band Thin Men, a band that, according to her, is “jumping between classical Chinese Mandarin and the Mongolian dialect of lead singer’s Dai Qin’s home region, and often featuring traditional Mongolian sounds alongside classic electric guitar and keyboard” (Cooper, 2000). To her, sounds that lack Chinese characteristics are “slapdash Spears rip-offs,” or pop singers. Yet they could be a rock band lacking Chinese characteristics. The moment, however, that rock is sinified—classical Chinese Mandarin, Mongolian dialect, traditional Mongolian sounds—it becomes praiseworthy.

The Chinese gaze upon this Western gaze makes the fear of copying—or of mimicry—a pressing matter, as the idea of being watched and judged renders it all the more urgent to localize rock. The following study of the hardcore punk scene in Beijing will demonstrate how Chinese musicians negotiate the demands of authenticity by the localizing tactic of sinification.

Hardcore Punk

The hardness of punk already finds its way in the term *hardcore*. If sounds were categorized on a scale of sonic sturdiness that runs from soft to hard, punk would be at the very hard end. Punk (*pengke*)—journalists and bands sometimes add the label hardcore (*yinghe pengke*) to differentiate it from pop-punk (*liuxing pengke*)—is marginal in China in terms of number of bands and listeners, yet it is highly visible, given its extravagant styles. The hardcore bands of the Chinese punk scene typically adopt names such as Anarchy Jerks, Brain Failure (*Naozhu*), Reflector (*Fanguangjing*), and 69. These four are also collectively known as the “Senseless Contingent” (*wuliao jundui*), under which name they released a compilation CD in 1999. There is an all-female punk band called Hang on the Box (*Guazai hezishang*).⁹ The flyer for a Halloween punk party graphically captures their anarchistic aspirations (Figure 1).

The flyer’s design is typical of an underground event. The text says, in clumsy English: “Will Hold Power, Just Saying ‘No’ to Leader.” Such a provocative statement is not repeated in Chinese. That would be too risky. The Chinese text, then, simply announces a punk party. More than being a conscious political statement against the CCP, both this text and the design of the flyer, like the names of the bands themselves, signify anarchy and rebelliousness—two core elements of the punk idiom. Not surprisingly, when Western reporters cover Chinese rock, punk is often their preferred focus, as the punk scene ties in best with the desired countercultural pose. And the bands perform accordingly. Peter, the angry vocalist for the band 69, says defiantly:

Many people don’t understand punk. I think punk is necessary for Chinese society. Chinese people valued patience for about 5,000 years. Patience makes Chinese people like animals, like slaves. They need punk, they need punk to fight for what they want. If you don’t want to be a slave, you should be punk. (personal communication, April 18, 2000)

So he makes punk music, while stock-trading and working for an advertising agency.¹⁰ However, under the scrutinizing Western gaze, being angry and rebellious is not enough. Chinese punk bands must be angry and rebellious in a different way from their Western colleagues. They localize (or, to use Appadurai’s term, indigenize) by sinification. Though the name 69 refers to sex, it also refers to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), thereby revealing the band’s sinification. In addition to the name, 69 frequently adopt revolutionary classics—communist military songs used during the Cultural Revolution celebrating Mao Zedong and communist ideology—and transform them into quick, short punk songs. Peter says: “69’s music is . . . 1970s



Figure 1. Flyer for a 1997 Halloween Party.

music, the British punk combined with the Cultural Revolution, it's a mixture. I also use traditional Chinese music, because I think punk is white music, just as reggae is black music" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Since the Chinese are not white, some "yellow" elements must be mixed into white punk.

Other Chinese punk bands also indigenize themselves by incorporating images and sounds from the Cultural Revolution. The cover of an "underground" punk-zine titled *Building Up* (*Jianshe*)—copies of which circulate at bars and among the members of the punk scene—depicts a Communist soldier leading his troop. Mocking the jargon of the Communist Party, the cover text runs (in English, thus itself indicating the Western gaze for Chinese punk):

In our great motherland a new era is emerging in which the broad masses are grasping punk thought. Once punk thought is grasped by the broad masses it becomes an inexhaustible source of strength and a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power.

Another example comes from another punk-zine *SP-PNUK* from May 1999, written by Hang on the Box vocalist Wang Yue (the italicized sentence was already in English):

The birth and growth of Chinese punk germinates the explosion of a cultural revolution, a counterculture, an anti-popular consciousness, and a great movement breaking entirely away from decayed and dated thoughts. . . . At the same time, let us all shout: Long live world peace! *Long live anarchism! Long live Chinese punk!*

Again, the reference to the Cultural Revolution signifies punk. Li Peng—who shares his name with the former Chinese leader—is guitar player for different bands and reporter for this punk-zine. Writing on 69 in the punk-zine, he points to the Chineseness of the band’s invocation of the revolution:

The band, whether intentionally or not, has integrated Chinese musical elements into punk music. (It’s not like some bands who only use *erhu* or *guzheng* to display their Chineseness.) The elements they use are mostly from the 50s and 60s, which makes their style revolutionary and powerful!

Li’s view typifies Chinese rock bands’ double urge: to differ from bands that use traditional Chinese instruments, as well as from the West so as to avoid mimicry (thus the invocation of revolutionary China). The quote shows how the demand for localization is consciously negotiated within Beijing rock culture and forms one of its dividing principles. Not only does the pop–rock dichotomy set Beijing apart from Hong Kong and Taiwan, but specific appropriations of the “Chinese” musical heritage mark a distinction, in this case, between punk and, for example, folk-rock music where sounds from ancient China are used. Punk can be considered a very hard cultural form. This explains the power of the punk aesthetic, which travels so well globally, yet also confirms the argument that hard cultural forms in particular are being eagerly localized. Because it is considered Western, punk, as a hard cultural form, demands localization.

Searching for the Soft

The hard–soft distinction helps explain the dynamics of hard cultures like cricket or rock music when they traverse cultural boundaries. What about the soft? Does the hard–soft theorization offer equally relevant insights for understanding the globalization of the soft? Perhaps implicitly acknowledging the dichotomy is imperfect; Appadurai offers no parallel inquiry regarding the soft, nor does he name any concrete soft cultural form. Cryptically, he remarks that soft forms “permit relatively easy separation of embodied performance from meaning and value, and relatively successful transformation at each level” (1996, p. 90). Given the juxtaposition of rock versus pop, and the difficulty of identifying a coherent set of narratives that constitute, for instance, the pop mythology, regarding pop as a soft cultural form seems logical. Pop’s meanings and values seem, relatively speaking, easily separated from its embodied performance.

Yet following this theoretical line risks not only reifying the pop–rock dichotomy, but also, more importantly, ignoring one fundamental difference: While rock musicians are preoccupied with articulating their distinction from *Gangtai* pop (the south) and from perceived origin (the West), pop artists rarely display the same

urgency. Pop stars in Hong Kong and Taiwan, for instance, are concerned about their direct competitors, also from Hong Kong and Taiwan, rather than their loud northern colleagues. Instead of marking themselves out from the West by localizing tactics, pop stars wouldn't care less about recreating the latest fads in the global pop scene. The discourse of localization traced above for rock is absent in pop. Neither in imagery nor in sound (apart from the Cantonese and Mandarin lyrics) is there an articulated attempt to localize *Gangtai* pop. Pop musicians do not debate their Chinese characteristics, as do Beijing rockers. This, however, does not imply that pop is not a globalized sound. On the contrary, as noted earlier, it is precisely the sound of pop that is popular among the diasporic Chinese communities across the world. While acknowledging the theoretical value of the hard, its "obvious" soft opposition does not bring us very far in thinking through the globalization of pop.

If the hard cultural form of rock is embedded in its meanings and values (authentic, rebellious, political), pop defies being straitjacketed in a cluster of negatives (inauthentic, non-rebellious, apolitical). If rock musicians in China continue to perceive their musical origins in the West, *Gangtai* pop willingly collapses the West with the rest. Cultural forms are perhaps like snow: crystal clear when hard(ened), opaque when soft. This opacity explains why Appadurai remains silent regarding the soft.

The transparency of the voice of rock, with its insistence on authenticity, may be productive in creating rock as a distinct music world; it simultaneously confines the proliferation of meaning. The clarity of rock is countered by the opacity of pop. To appropriate de Certeau's thoughts on the everyday power of popular culture: The sound of pop "ceaselessly recreat[es] opacities and ambiguities—spaces of darkness and trickery—in the universe of technocratic transparency, [it] disappears into them and reappears again, taking no responsibility for the administration of a totality" (1984, p. 18). In the terms of Mikhael Bakhtin, the rock mythology is authoritative discourse (1984). Its unitary language lacks ambiguity and results from hegemony. According to Bakhtin, transparency in language represents a hegemonic closure of meaning; it signals the power of social interests on discourse (Garvey, 2000). To Bakhtin, "a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization" (1984, p. 271).

Absolute transparency is not possible, however. Unitary language must still navigate the multiple forces of *heteroglossia*—the contextual conditions that ensure that words uttered at different times, under different conditions, by different people, will gain a different meaning. Utterances are therefore "fundamentally 'impure' or hybridized constructions, complex amalgams of different points of view," evincing a multiplicity of actual and potential meanings (Gardiner, 2004, p. 37). By acknowledging the opacity of pop, I aim to explore the possibility of the appropriation and remolding of words and sounds, which increases the multiplicity of meaning; it propels (or in Bakhtin's language, seizes) the possibilities of new dialogues. Pop's opacity unfolds the *heteroglossia* of everyday life, as opposed to the unitary language of rock that represents "the ideological control of signification" (Garvey, 2000, p. 380).

Theorizing the Opaque

"I adore simple pleasures, they are the last refuge of the complex" (Oscar Wilde quoted in Sontag, 1964, p. 288).

Hong Kong-based pop singer, songwriter, and producer Anthony Wong offers a particularly relevant case for analyzing opaque cultural forms. In 1985, Anthony Wong formed, with Tats Lau, Tatming Pair; the duo scored numerous hits in Hong Kong over the next five years. After the electronic duo split up in 1990, Anthony Wong continued as solo artist and producer.¹¹ Wong's Tatming period has received some scholarly interest, again privileging its political and rebellious dimension (Chu, 2000; Lok, 1993). However, Wong's solo performance remains surprisingly understudied, as if the embedded meaning and values of the hard remain the major legitimizing force for studying *Gangtai* pop. Three planes can be mapped out that together constitute the opaqueness of pop: transient, intertextual and multivocal.

Transient Opacity

Pop captures the feelings of urban life, in particular its fluidity and mobility. Today's pop songs are widely known. Imposed on audiences in taxis, shops, and bars, their banal melodies are usually considered outdated within a few years. Anthony Wong's song "Ave Maria" is illustrative:¹²

I want to be high every day/And change by night and day/Like Maria reincarnated/
Pregnant by night and day/Look at the glamorous goddess/Forever branded on my
skin/You look so beautiful/(illness contracted in daylight always breaks out in the
dark)/I exist till now.

The song captures the sense of living in a state of flux, an experience characteristic of urban clusters like Hong Kong. Celebrated here are the banal, the temporal, the fluid, and the superficial. It might well be the power to spectacularize the present that makes pop so pervasive. The catchy sound that accompanies "Ave Maria" is as banal as it is effective. Once it settles down in the sonic parts of the brain, it is difficult to drive out. If we hear the same song a few years later, the sound will remind us of the year 1995, when the song hit the charts. The banal sound will have become old-fashioned, albeit heartily evoking memories of a time past. Pop's temporality paradoxically immortalizes it. To invoke the classic Kantian categories of time and space: whereas rock especially relates to space, pop relates to time.¹³

Anthony Wong claims to be inspired by the sounds of a German conductor, whose orchestra plays easy listening music.¹⁴ This is merely one source of inspiration. Some songs reinterpret existing, older songs, some from the late diva of *Gangtai* pop, Teresa Teng, others from a popular Kung Fu series that Wong turns into an anthem for the street kids of Hong Kong; still others draw on the old decadent songs from Shanghai.¹⁵ Anthony Wong is not so much defamiliarizing the familiar sounds of Hong Kong from the past and the present as playing with those sounds.

"I exist till now," Wong sings in "Ave Maria." The transient reinvention of the self is accomplished by conspicuous consumption, the driving force of Hong Kong culture.

The familiarity of the song resembles a culture in constant flux: Its smooth surface comforts the listener when shopping, taking a taxi, or queuing up for the latest McDonalds Happy Meal. The song, which had “Day and Night of Causeway Bay” as its working title (Causeway Bay being the primary shopping area of Hong Kong), describes the fantasy of a girl about becoming a star. Whereas Maria’s metamorphosis was destined by divine conception, the girl’s transformation is induced by mundane shopping.¹⁶ Given the song title, everyday banality is imbued with a sense of religiosity, but a religiosity that aspires not to eternity but to the here and now.

Intertextual Opacity

Pop stars often appear in movies, TV series, and commercials; they show up constantly in the tabloids and in TV quizzes. Thus, they are more media personalities than musicians. Pop stars are intertextual chameleons. They provide multiple possibilities for identifications and as such create a universe of their own (Witzleben, 1999). The world of *Gangtai* pop star Leon Lai is complex. It is at times sexy (when he dances in a wet shirt in his videoclip), violent (in his movies), or virtuous (when he helps UNICEF save the world in Brazil). He may motivate us to buy a new mobile phone, when he appears in an advertisement for the Orange network.

The intertextual dimension of pop intersects with a discourse of inauthenticity: pop is regarded as a plastic, commercial sound. If a pop singer can also be a movie star or an actor in commercials, he or she is not purely a musician, but fake. The self-referential, inauthentic aesthetics of pop challenge the notion of the authentic artist and the idea that true art is everlasting. Pop’s artificial intertextuality counters the authenticating drive of other art worlds like rock. Pop not only refuses to disguise the importance of packaging, control, and artificiality—as rock does in order to produce the authentic artist—but even celebrates it. The pop song author—a crucial actor in the construction of authenticity—is absent and impossible to define, because the composer, lyricist, artist, record company, and producer are all intimately involved in producing the music.

During a 1999 performance in Berlin, Anthony Wong disappeared into a corner of the stage and continued singing, while an actor, centerstage, mimicked him. This act deliberately played with the artificiality of pop and celebrated the unnatural. In confusing the real with the fake, it was self-reflective. In a creative, self-reflective move, pop turns authenticity into a style. And in the pop world, style prevails over content, just as aesthetics triumphs over morality (Sontag, 1964).

Pop parodies the ideology of authenticity. In pop, Grossberg states, “the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge and admission of your inauthenticity” (1993, p. 206). But, rather than reading it as a performance of inauthenticity, I read it as a Bakhtinian means of unfolding the different authenticities within popular music. I contend that pop’s fiddling around with rock’s unified language of authenticity is a parodic-ironic re-accentuation that, by making both listener and performer aware of the hegemony inscribed into the idea of

authenticity, opens up ways to rethink it. This rethinking emerges from ironic laughter, a liberating, transcending, and uniting force (Bakhtin, 1986).

Multivocal Opacity

Given the disappearance of "the author" in pop, speaking pop in different voices becomes possible. Pop singers do not pretend to sing in one voice, but in many. In one song they may be entirely disillusioned about love, in the next entirely sanguine, then very strong, and then so fragile. This multivocality is further multiplied by the karaoke phenomenon, where each and every karaoke singer may appropriate songs with his or her voice. Karaoke enables Maria, who was walking in Causeway Bay in the shopping mall, to slip into her desired star persona for a few minutes. A K-song (*k-ge*), a relatively new term in the *Gangtai* pop music scene, refers to a pop song that is particularly good for karaoke, in the sense of sentiment and vocal range. The high proportion of duets in *Gangtai* pop follows the popularity of karaoke, further stimulating the multivocality of pop.

Wong remains deliberately ambiguous—or better, opaque—about his sexual identity, but he incorporates clearly homosexual themes. Such themes are never fixed, but are always open for negotiation, redefinition, and reinterpretation (Hawkins, 1997). Wong's play with the sexual self indicates his multivocal, ambiguous play with identities. He eroticizes his image, adding a queer layer to it, while resisting coming out as gay. Again, karaoke is important, since karaoke enables listeners to become implicated in that same play, to perform different sexual selves behind the doors of a karaoke bar that otherwise they cannot perform in public spaces.

In particular, since live performances are important sites for such identity plays, pop performances offer spectacular displays of the multivocal pop aesthetics. Performances by pop stars are above all visual and musical spectacles; the audience demands entertainment. Gone is the importance of "real" live music; playing endless riffs on a guitar until your clothes are soaked with sweat is not necessary to authenticate yourself. What counts in the world of pop is pleasure. The better you entertain the audience, the better you are. Just as he constantly changes his hair color, Anthony Wong changes his extravagant clothes several times during a performance. He wears a shiny silver outfit, then a costume of white feathers, and then a suit with the colors of the British flag.

Clarity and Opacity

Reading rock as hard cultural form explains the localizing aspirations of Chinese punkers. But Appadurai's conceptualization of the soft proves untenable. A large domain of popular culture, including the opaque sound of pop, remains under-theorized. I therefore propose recasting the hard–soft distinction into a clear–opaque dualism, to subvert this privileging of the hard, to offer a theoretical tool better geared to globalized cultural forms, and ultimately to reshuffle the (global) power mechanism often inherent in the option for the clear and hard.

The rock mythology can be considered a hegemonic unified language, or, again using Bakhtin's words, an authoritative discourse. Since the imagined roots of this language are in the West, when Chinese rockers mimic the West, they are dismissed as merely copying the real West. Mimicry involves a hegemonic slippage of meaning that reifies the West as rock's center. Consequently, rockers attempt to sinify the sound of rock. In doing so, they try to gain their authenticity under the scrutinizing eyes of the West. Localization results in a profound hybridization of the Western sound. Chinese rock—and the popular and academic discourses surrounding it—thereby reifies two different authenticating boundaries: the real West versus the fake East, as well as the cultural north versus the commercial south, with the latter signified by the presumably commercial sound of *Gangtai* pop.

The “problem” of Chinese rock, and most likely of other similar clear, hard cultural forms, is not its praxis, but its discursive framing. This reifies the aforementioned ideological and spatial boundaries. Critiquing the global distribution of discursive power over cultural forms, I argue that foregrounding the opaque sound of pop opens up mental pathways for rethinking the discursive clarity of rock. Pop unfolds what Bakhtin may call the generic *heteroglossia* of popular music, and consequently renders the clarity of the rock mythology more opaque. Pop does not use the direct shock tactics of punk or the anger that characterizes much rock music. The topics are more mundane. Like the sounds, pop lyrics often constitute a surface, transient noise that resonates deeply with everyday life. Those lyrics and sounds are not only knots of a wider intertextual web, they also speak in different voices, through different media. As an opaque cultural form, pop is characterized by a transient banality, an intertextual artificiality, and a multivocal ambiguity.

Pop performs an artificial self; it spectacularizes the present. Pop's banality and artificiality render the music profoundly ambiguous, and it is this ambiguity that makes pop such a popular yet opaque musical form. Whereas the clear sound of rock is eager to localize itself, the sound of pop remains opaque and ungrounded. Rock has its imagined center in the West, whereas pop is neither here nor there. Pop is located everywhere. Above all, it is located in the present. Pop relates to time as rock relates to space. Studying the indigenization of pop will be difficult, just as articulating the coherent set of meanings and values that constitute the pop mythology will be difficult. But precisely because of this opacity, I want to plead for a deeper theoretical understanding of the globalization of opaque cultural forms. But here lies the academic challenge: how to theorize the sound of pop, which so easily traverses geographical boundaries? How to capture its sonic power, as reflected by its sheer popularity? How to translate an analysis of the opaque into a critical interrogation of the clear and hard?

Studying a hard cultural form like rock risks reiterating, if not reifying, the paradigm imposed by the hard itself, situating the West once again at the center, as its perceived origin. The shift towards the opaque, not the constitutive soft of the hard, is a shift towards the non-authoritative global, an initiation of an unclear but essentially different set of meanings and values with multiple centers. This may help interrogate

the unitary language of the rock mythology and its constitutive hegemonic (Western) forces.

Notes

- [1] “The West” is as problematic a category as “the East” or “Asia.” In the case of rock music, the United States and the United Kingdom are, in particular, considered the authentic homeland.
- [2] It is now a truism in academic writing (though far less in journalistic writing) that, rather than producing a homogenized world, globalization leads to increasing heterogenization in terms of culture, economy, and politics (Appadurai, 1996; Colista & Leshner, 1998; Hannerz, 1992; Kraidy, 1999; Robertson, 1995).
- [3] I use Derrida’s idea of constitutive outside to acknowledge how the Other, here pop, is crucial and hence constitutive for the formation of a “self,” here rock. In the words of Mouffe, “By affirming that an object has inscribed, in its very being, something other than itself and that as a result everything is constructed as *difference*, the notion of the ‘constitutive outside’ reveals that being cannot be conceived as pure ‘presence’ or ‘objectivity’” (2000, p. 147). The difference is, in the case of rock, hegemonic, as rock mythology downplays pop as rock’s inauthentic Other.
- [4] Combining the *Gang* of Xiang Gang (Hong Kong) with the *Tai* of Taiwan. Music magazines as well as radio stations have their own music charts in mainland China.
- [5] As explained by the creative director of Sony Taiwan (personal communication, June 8, 2004). This article is based on field research in Beijing and Hong Kong in 1997 (six months), 1999 (one month), 2000 (two months), and 2004 (three months), during which research assistant Qin Liwen was of invaluable help.
- [6] Although I am aware of the danger of essentializing notions such as “the West” versus “the East,” given the cultural proximity of continental Europe to the UK and the U.S., the Netherlands can be (and in China certainly is) considered a part of “the West.”
- [7] Both magazines are in Chinese, but their names appear on their covers in English as well as Chinese. *Modern Sky Magazine* applies a more fashionable style, and is directly linked to a record company. *Music Heaven* is more sober. By 2004 both titles were defunct. Two new magazines are *So Rock! Magazine* and *Rock*. Like their predecessors, the covers of both magazines present Chinese and English bands and an accompanying CD introduces both Western and Chinese rock music. Interestingly, *So Rock! Magazine* gives a lot of attention to bands from outside Beijing.
- [8] Examples of translations of genre terms are: underground punk (*dixia pengke*), punk pop (*liuxing pengke*), thrash metal (*bianchi jinshu*), hardcore punk (*yinghe pengke*), and drum’n’bass (*guyu beisi*) (Yuen, 1999).
- [9] Both on concert flyers and on CD jackets, band names are often indicated in Chinese and English.
- [10] The ideological horizon of punk in Beijing is remarkably broader than that of its Western counterparts, just as its class background differs: punk in Beijing is merely a middle- and upper-class phenomenon. By 2004, Peter had left the punk scene to work for an advertising agency.
- [11] In December 2004, the duo played four reunion concerts, all sold out, at the Hong Kong Coliseum, accommodating 10,000 fans per show.
- [12] Translated by its lyricist, Chow Yiufai.
- [13] I am indebted to Giselinde Kuipers for this observation, which deserves further study.
- [14] To Anthony Wong, the music of James Last, who leads a German orchestra known for its easy listening music, resembles the muzak played in Hong Kong shopping malls.

- [15] Under diverse colonial influences in the 1930s and 1940s, Shanghai produced its own music stars whose songs resemble those of, for example, the German diva Marlene Dietrich. The best known singer of that period is Zhou Xuan (Steen, 2000b).
- [16] The interpretation of this song is based on an interview (March 3, 2003) with its lyric writer, Chow Yiufai.

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