Blowing in the China Wind: Engagements with Chineseness in Hong Kong's Zhongguofeng Music Videos

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While songs with distinct Chinese characteristics, whether musically or lyrically, have always been part of local pop history, “China Wind” (zhongguofeng) is a novel phenomenon. Above all, China Wind owes its production and circulation as a discursive formation to its endorsement by mainstream artists, notably from Taiwan, as much as to its popularity among audiences in Greater China. While China Wind pop is yet to be systematically documented, researched and analyzed, popular and media attention has generally focused on Taiwan-based artists and lyrics. In this essay, rather than focusing on what is considered the main source of China Wind songs, namely Taiwan, we have chosen China Wind songs that originated from Hong Kong and their music videos as the primary subject of enquiry. Our central concern is, how do Hong Kong’s China Wind music videos engage with hegemonic versions of Chineseness? The choice of Hong Kong is informed by our empirical interest in the complex entanglement of cultural and political power in which the postcolonial city is presumably going through. At the same time it is, in theory and in praxis, a correspondence with the ongoing debates on Chineseness—debates on not only what but also who defines it. Our analyses show that while Hong Kong’s China Wind pop evokes Chineseness, it also undermines it in two major ways: first, to render Chineseness as distant gaze, as ambiguous space and as ongoing struggles; and secondly, its feminization of Chineseness, opening up a space for questions on history and gender performance. In other words, the Hong Kong China Wind we have analyzed here articulates something quite different from a triumphalist celebration of Chinese tradition, value and culture. If China Wind as a whole is a culturalist project to rewrite Chineseness in an authentic, monolithic and indisputable way, Hong Kong’s variant, we argue, is resisting.

Yiu Fai Chow released his first Cantopop lyrics in 1989. Since then, he has been collaborating with a variety of pop artists in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. Aside from his lyrical career, Chow is a Ph.D. candidate at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam. His project there concerns young Chinese living in The Netherlands and their use of popular culture, in particular martial arts films, beauty pageants and pop music. E-mail: yiu.fai.chow@inter.nl.net

Jeroen de Kloet is Assistant Professor in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, and works on the cultural implications of globalization in China. He co-edited the volume Cosmopolitans—On Distant Belonging and Close Encounters [Rodopi, 2007], and his monograph China with a Cut—Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music was published by Amsterdam University Press in 2010. E-mail: b.j.dekloet@uva.nl
CHINA WIND

China Wind is an unprecedented current. [Chinese-language] popular music is no longer monopolized by romantic love songs, but is now moved by an irreducibly dense current of Chinese culture.¹

So opens a cover story article featured in the July 22 issue of the Chinese-language Yazhou Zhoukan (Asiaweek) in 2007. Indeed, when you tune in to any pop station in any Chinese community, it is quite likely that you will come across a song which the local presenter will tell you is another zhongguo-feng (China Wind) single. The best-selling Chinese pop³ idol at this moment, Jay Chou, whose song “Lady” (nianzi) featured in his debut album in 2000 which arguably earned him the reputation of “Father of China Wind,” pledged that he would have at least one China Wind song in his releases [Cao 2006]. As in other musical styles or genres, it is difficult if at all possible to pin down what exactly China Wind popular music is. It can be defined musically by its juxtaposition of classical Chinese melody and/or instruments with trendy global pop styles, particularly R&B and hip-hop. It can also be defined lyrically by its mobilization of “traditional” Chinese cultural elements such as legends, classics and language, implicitly or explicitly in contemporary contexts. While songs with distinct Chinese characteristics, whether musical or lyrical, have always been part of local pop history, the China Wind catchphrase is a novel phenomenon.⁴ Above all, China Wind owes its production and circulation as a discursive formation to its endorsement by mainstream artists, notably some from Taiwan, as much as to its popularity among audiences in Greater China. In fact, the term has become so in vogue that it is no longer exclusively or even predominantly applied to popular music but also to popular culture at large. Key the Chinese word zhongguofeng in any search engine, and one will be confronted with top hits covering a wide range of items from fashion accessories, design, animation, packaged tours, to anything else that is modern and yet traditional.

While China Wind pop is yet to be systematically documented, researched and analyzed, popular and media attention has generally focused on: (a) Taiwan-based artists: in addition to Jay Chou, critics also regularly refer to music by Leehom Wang (who has coined the term “Chinked-out” in 2004 for his brand of China Wind), David Tao, Ken Wu, TANK and the girl group S.H.E., in their reports on China Wind [e.g., Cao 2006, Chen 2007, Fung 2006, Lan 2007]; and (b) lyrics: although China Wind is also defined musically, critics tend to zoom in on the lyrical dimension of the songs, citing substantial portions of the lyrics to illustrate China Wind’s evocation of the Three Kingdoms, Lao Zi, Confucius, and so forth. This resonates with a general tendency in popular music studies to privilege lyrics in the analysis, assuming wrongly, as Frith points out, that “words determine or form listeners’ beliefs and values” [Frith 1998: 164]. As if to underwrite the lyrical importance of China Wind, Fang Wenshan, generally considered the most important lyricist of China Wind pop, published a book in
2008 connecting 34 pieces of his China Wind lyrics to Chinese rhetoric, culture and tradition, or what he calls “guoxue,” the study of Chinese classics [Fang 2008].

Given the focus on Taiwan-based artists and the lyrical dimension, discussion of China Wind has been framed by the specific political entanglement across the Taiwan Straits. The Yazhou Zhoukan cover story, for instance, situates China Wind in the “de-sinification” (qu zhongguohua) policy implemented by the Taiwanese authorities, inferring from their temporal coincidence China Wind’s (potential) power to unite culturally what is severed politically. In the words of the Taiwanese scholar Xu Wenwei, “The [China Wind] phenomenon stitches up wounds inflicted by tearing apart. When politics tears apart, popular culture brings stability” [quoted in Lan 2007]. In a more general sense, China Wind has been credited with the attempt if not achievement of reinserting and reasserting sanctioned, sinocentric versions of culture and history for a younger generation. The “Chineseness” that China Wind has been articulating and constructing is largely assumed to be part and parcel of what the Chinese are supposed to learn about themselves and about their culture. As Eric Wolf notes, “the cultural assertion that the world is shaped in this way and not in some other has to be repeated and enacted, lest it be questioned and denied” [1990: 593]. Jay Chou’s rap number “Compendium of Materia Medica” (bencaogangmu)—the title draws from a Chinese medical classic allegedly dating from the Ming Dynasty—is an extreme but nonetheless indicative example. Hailed by China Newsweek, a Mainland publication, as a “progressive song in celebration of Chinese culture” [Cao 2006], the song sings, amidst the names of 16 ancient medicinal herbs: “If Master Hua Tuo were reborn, he would cure your favor-currying attitude toward foreigners/let foreign nations learn the Chinese language/stir up our nationalistic consciousness.” As Anthony Fung observes in his research on Jay Chou, “his most popular songs trigger the audience’s emotions in a celebration of Chinese tradition and values” [2008: 73]. Similarly Wang Peiwen, commenting on Fang Wenshan, Jay’s lyricist, notes “his works show a consistent creative ideal of restoring and returning to traditional Chinese culture” [2007: 51].

In this essay, rather than focusing on what is considered the main source of China Wind songs, namely Taiwan, we have chosen the China Wind songs that originated from Hong Kong and their music videos as the primary subject of enquiry. Although our analysis mainly draws on visual aspects of the music videos, we follow Sarah Pink’s observation that no experience is ever purely visual [Pink 2008]. Hence we will examine not only the visual but also the lyrical text of such videos. Our central concern is, how do Hong Kong’s China Wind music videos engage with hegemonic versions of Chineseness? The choice of Hong Kong is informed by our empirical interest in the complex entanglement of cultural and political power which the postcolonial city is presumably going through. On the one hand, many scholars of Hong Kong popular culture have observed a “process of re-nationalization” following or even prior to the political Handover to Beijing rule in 1997 [e.g., Erni 2001; Ho 2000]. On the other hand, as a hybrid city with no claims to “territorial propriety or cultural centrality,” which is embedded in its “in-betweenness” [Chow 1993], Hong Kong continues to show resilience in troubling dominant narratives of Chineseness by re-inventing local culture and identity [Abbas 1997; Chow and de Kloet 2008]. We are interested
in finding out empirically how popular culture, in this case, China Wind pop, is shaping and being shaped by this tension between nationalistic longing and the city’s hybrid “capacity to think otherwise” [Chan 2005]. It can also be taken as a supplement to a number of studies on Chinese musical nationalism [e.g., Kagan 1963, Kouwenhoven 1997, Tuohy 2001, Wong 1984] which seek “to examine the mutually transformative process of making music national and of realizing the nation musically” [Tuohy 2001: 108]. At the same time, our choice of Hong Kong is more than empirically driven; it is, in theory and in praxis, a correspondence with the ongoing debates on Chineseness—debates on not only what but also who defines it [Ang 2001; Chow 1998; Lim 2006]. By privileging Hong Kong we are aligned with scholars who choose to interrogate dominant versions of Chineseness by invoking Hong Kong as a case study that troubles any essential claim on Chineseness [Abbas 1997; Chow 1998; Leung 2008]. If China Wind, as a whole, shows signs of becoming what Tu Wei-ming may call a Cultural China project, Hong Kong’s variant is resisting, and this study can be seen as a tactic to contest China Wind’s culturalist strategies. In short, this essay is also meant to (re)claim a speaking position for Hong Kong, which can never take Chineseness for granted and whose Chineseness is never taken for granted, on questions of Chineseness [Chow 2009], to let the hybridized hybridize.

For the purpose of this inquiry, we have scanned the pop chart of Commercial Radio Hong Kong from 2006 till the moment we finished collecting data for this study, the first week of October 2008 (Table 1). We have identified 18 songs that would be generally recognized as China Wind, of which eight originated from Hong Kong: two in 2006, four in 2007, and two so far in 2008. The rest were performed almost exclusively by artists from Taiwan who are known for their China Wind pop, including Jay Chou (6), Leehom Wang (2) and Ken Wu (1), and the remaining one by Ah-Niu, a Malaysian-born artist who reached pop stardom in Taiwan. Of the eight Hong Kong China Wind songs, six were released with accompanying music videos. While this group of songs and music videos formed the primary body of data, we have also made occasional comparison with the rest to enrich our visual and textual analysis. We will first show how the Hong Kong videos destabilize Chineseness by rendering it as distant, ambiguous and something to be struggling with. We will then concentrate on a conspicuous dimension of Hong Kong China Wind, that it is mostly embodied in female artists. We will conclude with some thoughts on further research.

DESTABILIZING CHINESENESS

As expected of visual embodiments of China Wind songs, the accompanying music videos evoke a diversity of imaginaries conventionally coded as Chinese, or more precisely traditionally Chinese. From sinified objects such as silk-screen and oriental costumes to sinified genres such as Cantonese opera and swordsman play, these imaginaries of Chineseness, in a general and collective sense, do create “an occasion for constructing Chineseness as a territorially dispersed, yet ethnically integrated imagined community,” as John Eperjesi [2004: 28] argues in his analysis of the film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. However, making Cultural
Table 1  China Wind Entries to Commercial Radio Pop Chart January 2006–October 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Highest Chart Position</th>
<th>Performer (Based in)</th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Lyricist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2006</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error in a Flower Field</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Leehom Wang (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Leehom Wang</td>
<td>Chen Zhenchuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huo Yuanjia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jay Chou (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Jay Chou</td>
<td>Fang Wenshan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peach Blossoms Everywhere</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Ah-Niu (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Ah-Niu</td>
<td>Ah-Niu/Youdi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair, Like Snow</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jay Chou (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Jay Chou</td>
<td>Fang Wenshan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet Dumplings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fiona Sit (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>Khalil Fong</td>
<td>Zhou Yaohui*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goddess of Mercy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Andy Lau (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>Khalil Fong</td>
<td>Linxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond a Thousand Miles</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jay Chou ft. Fei Yu Ching (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Jay Chou</td>
<td>Fang Wenshan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General’s Decree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ken Wu (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Ken Wu</td>
<td>Ken Wu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Armor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jay Chou (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Jay Chou</td>
<td>Fang Wenshan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2007</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysanthemum Terrace</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Jay Chou (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Jay Chou</td>
<td>Fang Wenshan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daiyu Smiles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Vincy (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>Weng Weiying</td>
<td>Zhou Yaohui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12 Flowers ft. Shirley</td>
<td>Chen Huiyang</td>
<td>Linxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small *</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Joey Yung (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>Jay Chou</td>
<td>Fang Wenshan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falling Leaves Returning to Their Roots</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Leehom Wang (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Kuang Yumin</td>
<td>Kuang Yumin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Red Robe</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Denise Ho (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>Benson Fan</td>
<td>Chen Haofeng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January–October 2, 2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sword and Snow</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Denise Ho &amp; Sammy</td>
<td>Benson Fan/Denise Ho</td>
<td>Wyman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain and Water</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Shirley Kwan (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>Plet Blank/Rene Runge/Andreas Kaufhold/Chist</td>
<td>Xiazhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragrance of Rice</td>
<td>17 (as of October 2)</td>
<td>Jay Chou (Taiwan)</td>
<td>Jay Chou</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Zhou Yaohui is the pinyin spelling of Chow Yiu Fai, one of the authors of this article.

**Although Small is written by the Taiwanese Chou and Fang, it is included in our analysis as a Hong Kong song as its performer Joey Yung is based in Hong Kong and generally perceived as a Hong Kong star.
China imaginable is never a *fait accompli*; rather, it is a dynamic, power-ridden and therefore unstable project. The six Hong Kong China Wind videos under our scrutiny demonstrate a paradoxical act of evoking and undermining Chineseness in at least three ways; they have constructed Chineseness as distant gaze, as ambiguous space, and as ongoing struggles.

Of the six videos, *Small* (*xiaoxiao*) and *Goddess of Mercy* (*guanshiyin*) are visually the least sinified. In *Goddess of Mercy* [Figures 1 and 2], despite its title and the Buddhist sentiments of the lyrics, the only sinified object, a Chinese Buddha statue, occupies one single shot in a video that is largely built on news footage of starvation, poverty and disasters in the world. Evoked as a source of spiritual

![Figure 1](image1.png)

*Goddess of Mercy (Andy Lau). (Photo courtesy of East Asia Music [Holdings] Ltd.)*

![Figure 2](image2.png)

*Goddess of Mercy (Andy Lau). (Photo courtesy of East Asia Music [Holdings] Ltd.)*
wisdom, (‘When there is a crisis, we need advice from the higher power’), the Buddha however stays high up (established by a shot tilting from low to high), overlooking, but never intervening, whether visually or narratively, with the suffering of the world. In the end, it is Andy Lau (the song performer) who guides a spoiled boy to stand up, venture to the sun, to the sea, and drop a message in a bottle to nature: peace. In a similar but extended fashion, Chineseness is mobilized as distant gaze in the video Small [Figure 3]. Here a large silk screen with sinified red flower motif functions as a recurring backdrop to a story of childhood romance and lost love. While fragments of a boy and a girl, playing hopscotch, rope-jumping and wedding, intertwine with fragments of a solitary woman, Joey Yung (performer of the song), the silk screen stands there, unmoving and unmoved, bearing silent witness to the past and of the present yearning for the past. If memory, according to the lyrics, wears the face of “a folk story-teller, speaking with the accent of hometown,” visually the silk screen is transforming that nostalgic Chinese face into a more impassive facade, watching but never intervening, like the Buddha.

The Chineseness constructed in another two videos is marked less by distance than by ambiguity. In Daiyu Smiles (daiyu xiaole), lyrically a feminist re-reading of the main female character Lin Daiyu in the Chinese literary classic Dream of the Red Chamber, “hand-drawn” Chinese ink paintings open up a two-dimensional fantastic space in which the physical person Vincy (the song performer) exists. Similar to and yet radically different from the silk screen in Small, the ink drawings in this video do not only function as a backdrop but also as a real world that

Figure 3  Small (Joey Yung). (Photo courtesy of Emperor Entertainment Group)
Vincy interacts with. For instance, at the beginning of the video she would only stand on an ink-painted bridge pondering a pair of ink-painted fish swimming, then she steps down later onto the pond and plays with the ink-painted fish. As if to trouble her role as the melancholic, vulnerable Daiyu, the Vincy in the video is sometimes dressed in black, sometimes in white with a style that defies easy periodization. This ambiguity between tradition and modernity, fantasy and reality, absence and presence, characterizes the Chinese world conjured up by the ink paintings in *Daiyu Smiles*. It is interesting to note that ink also features in the video of a Taiwanese China Wind song *General’s Decree (jiangjunling)*. This video begins with Ken Wu (performer of the song) dipping a brush into a bowl of ink, and ends with him completing the three words, *jiang-jun-ling*, in a traditional calligraphic style. This piece of ink writing, after Ken Wu defeats a group of black guys at basketball, singing “In your world you speak a b c d, but on my soils, sorry, you have to speak Chinese,” functions as a symbolic act of completion, commendation and confirmation, very different from the ambiguous symbolic order in the other ink-painted world.

The video of Fiona Sit’s *Sweet Dumplings (tangbushuai)* takes the element of ambiguity further. Like *Daiyu Smiles*, *Sweet Dumplings*, rather at odds with its lyrical exploration of a traditional sweetmeat and romantic sweetness, features a single female throughout the entire video [Figures 4 and 5]. However, unlike Vincy who traverses her ink-painted world, sometimes in white, sometimes in black, but always wearing a pensive expression, Fiona is not only torn between but visually torn into two fantastic spaces sinified by bamboos, red lanterns, paper fans and a waxed paper umbrella. When Fiona inhabits the dark world, she is dressed in a dark robe revealing her belly and her legs, with dark mascara smeared over the edges of her eyes: she becomes a temptress. When she inhabits the white world, she dons a long white gown, with her long hair hanging down, exuding breath in wonderful colors; she becomes a fairy. In other words, if the ambiguous space of Chineseness confuses Vincy, hence her pensiveness, it

_Figure 4  Sweet Dumplings (Fiona Sit). (Photo courtesy of Warner Music, Hong Kong)_
infuses Fiona, splitting her up into two selves poised in tension. Strengthened by unsteady camera movement and focusing, the tension is finally resolved in the ending scene where the white Fiona is sitting in front of a laptop seeing herself in the monitor; the ambiguous space is therefore contained in an act of modernity, presence and reality.

This ambiguous space however becomes the site of explicit, ongoing struggles in the videos of *Big Red Robe* (*dahongpao*) and *Sword and Snow* (*jianxue*). Mobilizing Cantonese opera as well as a well-known opera singer and actress as its sinification tactic, the video of *Big Red Robe* features Denise Ho (the song performer) as a rebellious apprentice struggling between the wishes of her teacher (to play, like her, female roles onstage) and her own (to play, instead, the male roles—it is a common practice in Cantonese opera to have a woman play the role of a man). Her internal struggles are dramatized throughout the video: in Denise’s facial expressions, in her being alone despite her opera troupe, in secretly practicing male roles, in her wearing a black and a white T-shirt intermittently. Performing Chinese tradition, be it opera or obedience, is represented here as a series of struggles. (We will leave a fuller discussion on another performance, gender, to the next section.) While *Big Red Robe* is filmed largely in a realistic style, the video of *Sword and Snow* adopts the Chinese swordsmanship genre, in which Sammy Cheng and Denise Ho (performers of the song), in quasi-oriental costumes, return in time, separately, from some futuristic apparatus to a large piece of primordial grassland and engage in constant sword fighting. The sinified space opened up by this video is a space of danger, of uncertainty, of struggles. That the two swordswomen return to a piece of grassland and fight forms a telling contrast to the video of the Taiwanese China Wind song *Fragrance of Rice* (*daoxiang*). There a middle-aged office-man, after being fired, falling into a depression, and seeing his wife and daughter leave, returns to his hometown, to his elderly mother and to a patch of ricefield where finally he and his own family are happily
reunited. Instead of fighting, Jay Chou (the song performer) and a guitar-playing companion are singing in this rural landscape: “Do you remember, home is the only fortress?” Rice, ricefield and the concomitant Chineseness are evoked as an idyllic home/town, a space for reunion and happiness.

FEMINIZING CHINESENESS

As alluded to in the last section, gender is an important dimension that the Hong Kong group of China Wind songs has foregrounded and reasserted into dominant, often masculinist constructions of Chinese tradition, value and culture. Of the six Hong Kong China Wind songs, only one is performed by a male artist, a stark contrast to the Taiwanese situation where China Wind was presumably initiated by Jay Chou and has been almost monopolized by him and fellow male artists. It is of interest to note that the only China Wind song that has stirred up any significant controversy is delivered by S.H.E., a Taiwanese girl group. Their single *Chinese Language* (zhongguohua) has been criticized for being too pro-Beijing, with claims that the girls should not sing “the whole world is learning Chinese language (zhongguohua)” but instead “Taiwanese language (taiwanhua)” [Lan 2007]. This controversy has laid bare not only the political nature of the China Wind phenomenon but also the masculinist attempt, to borrow Rey Chow’s analysis on Chen Kaige’s *King of the Children*, “to rewrite culture without woman and all the limitations she embodies” [1995: 141]. Following this line of thought, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the sharp gender division of China Wind in terms of Hong Kong (female-dominated) and Taiwan (male-dominated) has less to do with coincidence than with Hong Kong’s hybridity and its inherent discomfort with dominant narratives, with certain claims to Chineseness.

If Hong Kong’s China Wind pop is to feminize, to intervene by rewriting Chinese culture with a female voice, to use gender as a means to trouble dominant narratives [Hershatter 2007: 108], what does this say? We believe we hear echoes of her uncertainty, of her history, and of her womanhood. First, uncertainty. While Ken Wu, in *General’s Decree*, knows exactly how a Chinese man should act (including the nationalist-racist act of beating up a group of black guys and the sexist act of dancing with some thinly-clad ladies), Vincy, in *Daiyu Smiles* [Figures 6 and 7], keeps on wondering about the fate of a Chinese woman, in this particular case, Lin Daiyu. She takes a long walk through a sinified space of ink paintings, doing exactly the opposite of Ken, that is, not acting. Again it is hardly a coincidence that in four of the Hong Kong China Wind videos, three feature a single female persona in both black and white outfits, while the other one shows a world with two female characters fighting. In other words, the female in these videos is always represented in somatic duality, in psychic schism, a visual device to underline their bewilderment, uncertainty and inner turmoil in the space called Chineseness. Consequently, onto all the ambiguities and struggles in the Hong Kong China Wind videos, a gender dimension must be added.

The notable exception is *Small*, where the female protagonist Joey Yung is visibly enjoying some fond memories of a long-lost past. *Small* is intriguing however not only because of its representation of a solitary woman confronted and yet
content with her personal history, but also because of its intertextuality with another Taiwanese China Wind song *Chrysanthemum Terrace* (*juhuatai*) that also has history as its main theme. The two songs are from the same composer, Jay Chou, and the same lyricist, Fang Wenshan, but the Taiwanese one is performed by Jay himself and the Hong Kong one by Joey. In addition to the production team, the two songs share remarkably similar structure in their accompanying videos—sequences of the past (with other people) intersecting
sequences of the present (with merely the performer). As the theme song of Zhang Yimou’s film *Curse of the Golden Flower*, the video of *Chrysanthemum Terrace* adopts a large selection of footage from that film, a court thriller set in dynastic times, in which Jay Chou also stars. We are therefore presented with Jay in imperial costumes juxtaposed with Jay in contemporary clothes. This visual duality however differs from the female duality with its embodiment of uncertain or conflicting longings. While the imperial Jay is caught in dazzling glimpses of drama, power and glory, the contemporary Jay is seen sitting immobile in a confined interior stylized in traditional Chinese fashion, playing a *guqin* during the extended music break. His occasionally extended arm, at once a hip-hop gesture and an invitation, is luring the audience into a masculinist version of history. This history is grandiose, public and violent; it is at once escapist and inescapable. No wonder that in *Small Joey* would rather indulge in her smaller, more personal and intimate history. The more “antagonistic” video of *Sword and Snow* can be read as an alternative re-imagining of history [Figures 8 and 9].

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*Figure 8  Sword and Snow (Sammy Cheng and Denise Ho). (Photo courtesy of East Asia Music Holdings Ltd.)*

*Figure 9  Sword and Snow (Sammy Cheng and Denise Ho). (Photo courtesy of East Asia Music Holdings Ltd.)*
Two women, not men, appear at the dawn of time, in nobody’s (grass)land and fight; they end up, literally and figuratively, standing close to each other, dropping onto the grass, shedding their swords, surrendering their bodies to the falling snow. Their history has possibilities of intimacy.

The two Chinese words *jian* (sword) and *xue* (snow) draw a revealing intertextual reference to the middle (stage) names of two legendary Cantonese opera performers, Ren Jianhui and Bai Xuexian. Both performers are biologically female. Ren however always performed male roles onstage, and Bai was typically his female partner. Besides performing as a heterosexual couple onstage, the two also led their entire offstage lives as two cohabiting women, close to each other. Their middle names were the ones their apprentices would inherit—*jian* for the male-role performers and *xue* for the female ones. The allusive mobilization of these two words is not only instrumental to the reconstitution of history as “her-story,” or swords giving way to snow; it is also drawing toward another historical product, the performance of gender. This is the major theme in the video of Denise Ho’s China Wind song *Big Red Robe*. If the question for Vincy is “What should I act?” and for Joey “What should I remember?” that for Denise is “What should I perform?”

As mentioned earlier, the video narrative of *Big Red Robe* is set in a Cantonese opera troupe which also functions as a school; in other words, it is a space where Chinese tradition and culture are supposed to be passed on from one generation to another [Figures 10–12]. The video opens with a sequence of short fragments showing a Cantonese opera actress doing her make-up, practicing as well as performing. When the narrative develops, we are increasingly aware of the reluctance of Denise to perform the gendered roles being imposed on her. Interestingly, the actress-teacher in this video, Xie Xuexin, is a professional opera performer in real life, an apprentice of Bai Xuexian, hence the middle name Xue.

At one point, Denise Ho rewrites her teacher’s name from Xuexin (“snow-heart”) into Jianxin (“sword-heart”). As was noted earlier, Denise wears intermittently white and black T-shirts to underline the apprentice’s internal struggles. Most conspicuously, she wears almost no make-up throughout the video—until the last moment when she puts on her make-up and costumes, and, unlike her teacher, performs manhood onstage.

While this final metamorphosis can be interpreted as a (misogynist) preference for manhood, it articulates an oblique rejection of the traditionally tragic roles female actresses are wont to perform: they suffer to become heroines, to win the applause of the audience. The cutting at this point from close-up to medium and long shots, finally revealing an empty theater, shifts the question: what gender do you perform? to: for whom and for what? In the context of the video, if Denise chooses to perform her gender accordingly, she will have secured the blessing of her teacher, acceptance by the theater troupe and the promise of a good career. By betraying operatic and Confucian traditions, she risks losing her parent (teacher), family (troupe) and future (career). In one sequence, we see Denise, in a black T-shirt, eating a bowl of rice with her fellow troupe members, inside. In the next sequence, Denise, in white T-shirt, stands on her own, outside.

Interestingly, questioning gender performance is not a constitutive theme in the Taiwanese China Wind song video *Error in a Flower Field* despite a strikingly
similar mobilization of Chinese opera. This song, performed by Leehom Wang, owes its title to the Peking opera *Huatiancuo*, and a substantial part of the video, like *Big Red Robe*, features sequences of operatic performance. Comparable to the generic comedy of errors, this Peking opera is built up on the dramatic tension of cross-dressing, mistaken gender and misplaced eroticism and love, all finally resolved by two heterosexual marriages. None of this playfulness, if not critique, of gender performance is being translated to the video text. Instead we see Leehom firmly and happily as a man, engaging in various romantic dates with a woman typically wearing long, straight hair. This is perhaps what the female voices of the Hong Kong China Wind have to offer: the courage to think otherwise, to feminize and thereby problematize Chineseness, to suggest that the Chinese tradition, value and culture evoked so positively in the male-dominated China Wind pop may not necessarily be something to celebrate if you are not one of them.

**WHITHER CHINA WIND?**

At the end of the aforementioned *Yazhou Zhoukan* article, Zhou Fengwu, a Taiwanese scholar of Chinese Studies, suggests that only time will tell whether
China Wind will have long-lasting cultural impact or disappear as a former commercial fad [Lan 2007]. While not disagreeing with Zhou’s remark, we hasten to add: which China Wind? In this essay we take Hong Kong’s China Wind songs and their music videos to examine how they might be engaging with hegemonic versions of Chineseness. This is both an empirical and a theoretical act. Drawing on Hong Kong’s historical in-betweenness and its current location in the
re-nationalization process, we seek to turn Hong Kong’s hybridity from a noun to a verb: to hybridize. Our textual analyses show that while Hong Kong’s China Wind pop evokes Chineseness, it also undermines it in two major ways: first, to render Chineseness as distant gaze, an ambiguous site and as ongoing struggles and negotiations; and secondly, its feminization of Chineseness, opening up a space for questions on history and gender performance. In other words, the Hong Kong China Wind we have analyzed articulates something quite different from a triumphalist celebration of Chinese tradition, value and culture. If China Wind, as a whole, is a cultural (or culturalist) project to rewrite Chineseness in an authentic, monolithic and indisputable way, Hong Kong’s variant remains somewhat ambivalent about such ambitions.

Obviously, more research is necessary to understand the China Wind phenomenon. Given the scope and purpose of this essay, we have chosen primarily the music videos of Hong Kong’s China Wind for our textual analyses. We have compared them to a number of Taiwanese China Wind videos. What is the situation in other Chinese pop production locations such as Malaysia, Singapore as well as the perceived center of Chineseness, Mainland China itself? How would the audio dimensions of China Wind construct and contest versions of Chineseness, such as in musical instruments, singing style, and, more importantly, the (regional) language used? And we have not covered issues of audiences and political economy in connection with the production and reception of China Wind [Notes 6 and 7]. With all the limitations of this study, the insertion of Hong Kong in any debates on Chineseness, we contend, is a contestation of who has the authority to speak as Chinese, to define Chinese. The issue is not to define who has the authority but precisely to *undefine*. If China Wind lends itself to a monotonous anthem of sinification that drowns the rich polyphony of dissident voices, the underlying tunes of Hong Kong’s China Wind are to hybridize, to think otherwise. After all, the history of Chinese pop music, and perhaps of Chinese culture itself, is yet to be written.

NOTES

1. All translation from Chinese texts to English is by the authors.
2. Chinese names quoted in this article will be noted in *pinyin*, except for singers who will be presented with their names as known to the public.
3. For easier reading, the term “Chinese pop” used in this essay denotes “Chinese-language pop.”
4. It is of interest to note that back in 1992 when a group of Mainland Chinese artists were invited to perform in Hong Kong, the concert was also entitled “China Wind.”
5. All the three pop radio stations in Hong Kong host their own charts. That of Commercial Radio 2, also known as 903 Top 20, is arguably the most respected and prestigious. The station claims to base chart performance entirely on airplays.
6. *Sweet Dumplings* was also used as the jingle of a computer brand commercial, which might have accounted for the non-diegetic insertion of a laptop in the video. Advertising sponsors, a common phenomenon in the Chinese pop world, and therefore the influence of corporate economy on cultural production in general and China Wind pop in particular, form an important issue, which however cannot be addressed properly within the scope of this essay. See the final section.
7. *Sword and Snow* was the theme song of the Asian Games Fair and the High Resolution AV Festival 2008. See also Note 6.

8. The other two Hong Kong China Wind entries that are not included in our analysis are also performed by female artists.

9. It is worth noting that in Mainland China Li Yuchun, the androgynous Supergirl winner-turned-idol, released an EP shortly before the Beijing Olympic Games of 2008, entitled *Youth China* (*shaonian zhongguo*).

10. For a book-length account of cross-dressing in Chinese opera, see Li [2003]. It is interesting to note that while cross-dressing, both male-female and female-male, existed in Chinese operatic traditions, the former has become the more dominant practice. According to Li, “While women in European theatre were emerging on stage from the early modern period, female performers in late imperial China lost ground to male players from the 17th to the 19th century. Female cross-dressing in Chinese society experienced the same reverse development compared to Europe” [2003: 55].

11. Denise Ho is well known for taking up issues of (homo)sexuality in her music and other creative activities. In 2005, she initiated and starred in a musical which zoomed in on the homoerotic subtext of the Chinese classic *Butterfly Lovers*, in which a young woman, cross-dressed as a young man in order to attend school, falls in love with her/his classmate.

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