Including Music in the Sinophone, Provincializing Chinese Music

NATHANEL AMAR

During the recent anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong, popular musicians from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) produced songs in favour of or against the social movement. In June 2019, more than 20 Hong Kong and Taiwanese singers and composers released the song "*Cheng*" 撐 ("Support") or "*Caang*" in Cantonese. Produced by the Taiwanese music producer Blaire Ko 柯智豪, the song features famous Cantopop singers and activists such as Denise Ho 何韻詩 and Anthony Wong 黃耀明, but also Taiwanese indie-rock bands such as The Chairman 董事長樂團 and Fire Ex 滅火器.[1] The lyrics themselves were written by the Taiwanese songwriter Wu Hsiung 武雄 and the famous Cantopop lyricist Albert Leung 林夕 in both Cantonese and Mandarin. Unlike songs featuring popular singers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the PRC produced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to promote international events such as the Olympic Games or the Shanghai Expo, in this case, artists from Taiwan and Hong Kong all sang in their own language – Cantonese and Taiwanese Mandarin – abolishing any linguistic hierarchy. In August 2019, the Chinese nationalist hiphop crew from Sichuan, CD-Rev (*Tianfu shibian* 天府事變), financed by the Communist Youth League, released an anti-protest song in English and Mandarin entitled "Hong Kong's Fall" (*Xianggang zhi qiu* 香港之秋).[2] The song accuses the United States of interfering in China's national affairs and calls on the People's Liberation Army to "wipe out [the Hong Kong] terrorists," using footage from the state-owned news channel CGTN, which shared the song on its social media accounts with the tagline "Hey #HongKong protesters! Chinese mainland rappers have something to say."[3] More mainstream PRC rappers, such as PG-One, VaVa, and the Higher Brothers, also shared on their social media accounts *People's Daily* pictures supporting the Hong Kong Police Force – using traditional Chinese characters.[4] The Hong Kong protests show how important popular music has become as a strategic tool in the cultural and ideological battlefield between Hong Kong, Taiwan, the PRC, and beyond.[5] The link between music and social movements has been extensively analysed as an affirmation of identities (Eyerman and Jamison 1998), a tool to mobilise the people (Balasinski and Mathieu 2015; Eyerman 2019), or by exploring the role of popular music in expressing "the voice of the voiceless" (Hennion 1983). Beyond political mobilisation, music also plays a role for individuals to exercise their agency and articulate their identities, having a role of "affective agency" (DeNora 2000). The purpose of this first special issue on Sinophone music is precisely to analyse how music circulates and is appropriated by various actors in the Chinese-speaking world and across the Pacific. To understand these musical circulations that transcend national borders, we have to make use of a concept that does not confine China and Chineseness to the geographical and political territory of the PRC.

Bringing the "phone" back into Sinophone

When Shu-mei Shih first coined the term "Sinophone" in her 2007 book *Visuality and Identity*, her aim was to analyse Sinitic-language visual cultural productions "on the margins of China and Chineseness" (Shih 2007: 4), defined not by the ethnic origins of these cultures, but by their language. This ambitious research project is located "within the geopolitical boundary of China as well as without, in various locations across the world"(Shih 2013: 8), and questions the pertinence of "Chineseness as a feature shared by ethnic Chinese on the basis of discrete traits and traditions" (Chun 1996: 113; see also, among others, Chow 1998 and Ang 1998). The initial focus on visual culture – movies, paintings, TV series, photography, artistic installations, and so on – was then legitimated by the importance of the image in a globalised world, "which can cross and recross linguistic frontiers effortlessly and rapidly" (Shih 2013: 8). The concept of Sinophone was subsequently appropriated by many scholars, and now covers a wide range of subjects, from Sinophone cinema (Yue and Khoo 2014) to Chinese-language cinema in Singapore and Malaya (Hee 2019), queer culture (Chiang and Heinrich 2017), queer cinema (Pecic 2018), and literature (Groppe 2013; Tan 2013). An influential reader edited in 2013 by Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards clarified the purpose of Sinophone studies and featured numerous articles on Sinophone literature, which led Lucas Klein to ask: "Wouldn't a better name be Sino*graphic* studies?" (2014: 218). It is true that literature, and to a certain extent cinema, dominates the field of Sinophone studies, and music scholars have so far avoided using this concept. On the one hand, these special issues on Sinophone music offer to fill a gap in the existing literature on Chinese music, which too often fails to go beyond national boundaries and consider the global circulation of music. On the other hand, music is also a critical addition to Sinophone studies, being at the crossroads of various modes of cultural production: it uses visual arts with movie clips and cover illustrations, writings with the lyrics, and sound through musical instruments (see Eugénie Grenier Borel's article in this issue). Music circulates worldwide, through radio waves (see Nga Li Lam's

---

1. See the online video: https://youtu.be/ssCWcBNqvnc (accessed on 19 August 2019).
2. See the online video: https://youtu.be/0qk3f3H1W2o (accessed on 19 August 2019).
3. See: https://twitter.com/CGTNOfficial/status/1163046632646070277 (accessed on 19 August 2019).
4. "China's Biggest Rappers Are Posting an Anti-Hong Kong Protest Meme," *RadiiChina*, 14 August 2019, https://radiichina.com/china-rappers-hong-kong-protest-meme/ (accessed on 19 August 2019).
5. The Vietnamese-American musician and producer Trúc Hô also released a song in support of the protests entitled "Sea of Black." See the online video: https://youtu.be/gh8-kT-9uL4 (accessed on 19 August 2019).

article in this issue), TV broadcasts (see Tian Li's article in this issue), peer-to-peer file sharing, and streaming platforms (see Ge Zhang and Tian Xu's Current Affairs article in this issue): one song or music style can be covered by multiple bands from several countries, each time enriching the song with new or different layers of meaning. This special issue tries to define the outline of what could be a Sinophone music research field.

Decentring or excluding China?

One of the main critiques addressed to Shih's framing of the Sinophone is the apparent exclusion of China – or to be more precise, the territory governed by the CCP. Sinophone studies are, in turn, accused of "essentializ[ing] China into a faceless Other" (Lan 2014: 518) and of "exclud[ing] mainland China and the ethnic majority of Han-Chinese who live there" (Chen 2015: 52). The writings of Shih herself express this ambivalence towards the PRC, as she tries to decentre China and the so-called "ethnic majority" to better pay attention to cultural productions at the margins of China and Chineseness (see also Amy Anderson and Darren Byler's article in this issue):

Sinophone culture was and is not only produced by the Hua people but also by people of various ethnicities, and thus it is defined not by ethnicity (though ethnicity and language sometimes correspond) but by language. (Shih 2013: 7)

Since then, several authors such as Sheldon Lu, Zoran Lee Pecic, and Alvin Wong have tried to include China in their research on Sinophone cinema, literature, and queer studies. Alvin Wong argues that in order to "decentre the hegemonic aspects of Chineseness" we should "include China," or – to quote the famous Sino-American writer Zhang Ailing 張愛玲 – "*ba wo baokuo zaiwai* 把我包括在外" (include something or someone to its or his/her exclusion) (Wong 2018: 1104). For Alvin Wong, citing the work of David Der-wei Wang, "[i]n order for Sinophone studies to demonstrate its greatest potential in decentring Chineseness, one should test its power within the nation-state of China" (*ibid.*). This effort to decentre – or as Chakrabarty would say "provincialize" – China (2007) thus connects the Sinophone approach to postcolonial theories in an effort to re-consider the colonial aspect of China "by recognizing a different mode of colonialism for China, of what may be called 'continental colonialism'" (Shih 2013: 2). Here, we understand music as the expression of a multiplicity of power relations, but also as ways to negotiate one's conflictual identity. The official imposition of Mandarin language in musical production in the PRC, the use of Cantonese in Hong Kong pop music (but also by PRC-based bands as a tribute to Cantopop),[6] and the performance of the *muqam* by Uyghur musicians in Xinjiang (Harris 2008) are all examples of how language in music can be the vehicle of complex power relations. The particular position of Hong Kong, as a postcolonial society both inside and outside the direct control of the PRC, is an interesting case to study in this perspective, especially these days, since Hong Kong can be considered "a vibrant site of Sinophone articulation, where some of the loudest voices against the gradual processes of Mainlandization are heard and resistance politics practiced" (Wong 2018: 1103).[7]

The global circulation of Sinophone music

This special issue of *China Perspectives* is not the first attempt to analyse the global circulation of Sinophone music across several political and geographical spaces. Yiu Fai Chow and Jeroen de Kloet's seminal work

on the circulation of Hong Kong pop music in 2013 also shares similar methodological concerns, albeit not using the concept of "Sinophone." Their work is at the intersection of several fields of studies, from popular music studies to cultural studies and area studies, allowing them to study the global circulation of Hong Kong pop music, contrary to previous works on Cantopop music, which too easily conflate the 1997 handover with the existential and commercial crisis of Hong Kong music (see, among others, Chu 2017). Chow and de Kloet study Hong Kong to undermine the notion of "China" and "Chinese culture" and replace Hong Kong pop music "in a complex transnational cultural web – a nodal point for flows of people, sounds, images, things and ideologies, including the increasingly pervasive ideology of Chineseness – between Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China and the world at large" (Chow and de Kloet 2013: 4). In the Taiwanese context, Marc L. Moskowitz analysed Taiwan Mandopop as a "counter invasion of the PRC" (Moskowitz 2010), outlining what could be a possible field for Sinophone music studies by integrating a reflection on the musical circulations between Taiwan and China that does not focus solely on the PRC.

Taking global circulations of Sinophone music into account does not prevent, however, from asserting the importance of local interpretation and appropriation of music. Both Chow and de Kloet and Shu-mei Shih stress the prominence of the local: "Place does matter at the moment of music consumption" (Chow and de Kloet 2013: 8). For Shih, "The Sinophone spaces are scattered around the world and Sinophone culture is produced in different locations, but in each site the Sinophone is a place-based, local culture, in dialogue with other cultures of that location" (Shih 2013: 8). A study of Sinophone music should therefore emphasise the importance of both locality and time. The same song does not bear the same meaning for the audience, depending on the place and the time of consumption.

A song such as "Descendants of the Dragon" (*Long de chuanren* 龍 的傳人) constitutes a revealing example, as it has conveyed over time a lot of different – sometimes contradictory – meanings for different communities. When the Taiwanese rock musician Hou Dejian 侯德健 first wrote this song in 1978, it was considered a protest song targeting the diplomatic recognition of the PRC by the United States, and used as such by the Kuomintang 國民黨 (KMT). When Hou Dejian emigrated to Beijing in the 1980s, his performance of the song during the CCTV New Year's Gala gave a new pan-Chinese unification twist to the song.[8] Shortly afterwards, the song was appropriated by the mobilised students during the 1989 democracy movement. In 1989, Hou Dejian, who participated in the movement, sang "Descendants of the Dragon" during a Hong Kong vigil in support of the Chinese democratic movement.[9] During his performance, Hou Dejian changed some of the lyrics to reflect his experience of the student movement. One of the most interesting change involved the sentence "black eyes, black hair, yellow skin, forever and ever the descendant of the dragon" (*hei yanjing hei toufa huang pifu yongyong yuanyuan shi long de chuanren* 黑眼睛黑頭發黃皮膚 永永遠遠是龍的傳人), meant to symbolise his vision of a pan-Chinese identity as a single unalterable ethnicity. His encounter with the Uyghur student leader Wu'er Kaixi (Örkesh Dölet 吾

---

6. For instance, the band Mosaic (*Masaike* 馬賽克), from Chengdu in Sichuan, has one song in Cantonese in their last album, *Pop Rave* (*Jin ge re wu* 勁歌熱舞), a tribute to Hong Kong Cantopop songs.

7. Due to the current protests in Hong Kong, this special issue of *China Perspectives* on Sinophone music unfortunately does not include any articles on contemporary Hong Kong music, but it is hoped that the second issue will feature papers on Hong Kong dealing with these issues.

8. See the video: https://youtu.be/xpVH-KpN_VE (accessed on 19 August 2019).

9. See the video: https://youtu.be/-btV6XWtFr8 (accessed on 19 August 2019).

爾開希) during the Tiananmen protests, however, made him realise that all Chinese don't have "black eyes, black hair and a yellow skin," therefore pushing him to change the lyrics to "whether you are willing or not, we are forever and ever the descendants of the dragon" (*buguan ni ziji yuanyi bu yuanyi* 不管你自己願意不願意). In this version, the sense of belonging to a fantasised pan-Chinese nation is no longer linked to a single ethnicity, but to a choice – or more precisely an absence of choice.

The meaning of the song changed again when Yiu Fai Chow, after being asked if he was Chinese or Hongkongese, had to sing "Descendants of the Dragon" with his classmates at the University of Hong Kong in the 1980s, more than a decade before the handover (Chow 2007), highlighting the debates around the affiliation of the citizens of Hong Kong to a greater Chinese identity. More recently, when the Taiwanese-American pop star Wang Leehom 王力宏 released his own version of "Descendants of the Dragon" in 2000, he integrated into the song a depiction of his parents' experience of immigration in a rap section sung in English.[10] "Descendants of the Dragon," a way for Wang Leehom to deal with his complex identity, became a huge hit in Taiwan, the PRC, and Hong Kong, but also among Sinophone communities in North America. In November 2017, during Donald Trump's official visit of the Forbidden City in Beijing, Chinese president Xi Jinping 習近平 quoted the song in order to explain the Chinese "unique lasting culture": "People like us can be traced back to 5,000 years ago. Black hair, yellow skin, we are the descendants of the Dragon."[11]

This example reveals the importance of the multiple interpretations a song can have according to the time and place of consumption. It also shows how songs can help build an "imagined community," reshape history, or promote a "blood identity" (Xu 2011). As a methodology, the Sinophone approach therefore helps deconstruct such claims by looking at the power relations behind the production of songs and their circulation beyond national boundaries.

New directions

In this special issue, each author presents an original case study. A Sinophone music study field should support precise and detailed fieldwork, paying attention to the different meanings given by actors to the production and consumption of music. As the title of this special issue suggests, a strong emphasis is placed on the idea that music is an "art world," in the sense of Howard Becker (2008): it needs cooperation, shared conventions, resources, and a physical place to develop. Producing – and consuming – music is not a solitary task, but involves the cooperation of a multiplicity of actors, from the singer to the composer, the producer, the graphic designer, the consumers, etc. As Becker points out:

> All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. (Becker 2008: 1)

The articles featured in this special issue all take a closer look at the multiplicity of interactions shaping music worlds. Using the critical approaches of Sinophone studies, these articles contribute to deepening some of the reflections hinted by previous research on the notion of Chineseness and its margins. Shu-mei Shih already pointed out that Sinophone studies also aims at analysing "minority peoples who have acquired or are forced to acquire the standard Sinitic languages of Mandarin,

often at the expense of their native language" (2013: 3), such as the Tibetans or the Uyghurs in the PRC. Amy Anderson and Darren Byler's article in this issue offers an important inquiry into the current situation of Uyghur music, and the efforts made by the Chinese state to erase and redefine Uyghur culture. Uyghur musicians are forced to perform an artificial Han identity, equated by the authorities with being Chinese. These considerations pursue previous critical works on the circulation of Uyghur music (Harris 2005), and on the ways in which ethnic minorities – or minority nationalities *shaoshu minzu* 少數民族 – use popular music in an effort to negotiate or affirm their sense of identity (Baranovitch 2003). These studies help us deconstruct the official categorisation of ethnic minorities and the Han majority – a modern historical and political construction that is too often used uncritically. Following in the footsteps of Dru Gladney (2004), the objective is to a certain extent to "dislocate" China and Hanness by showing the complexity of the so-called "majority nationality." These studies consider the PRC a complex entity, more fractured and diverse than often described. If, in the Xinjiang case, the Chinese state is responsible for the erasure of an identity, it also functions as purveyor of national identities through its musical institutions. Eugénie Grenier Borel's ethnographic study of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music shows how an official institution can appropriate Western musical practices to create a national repertoire subject to political control. As Grenier Borel's article shows, the Shanghai Conservatory is at the intersection of both international musical circulation – as its purpose is to train musicians in classical Western musical techniques – and national music with "Chinese characteristics," as it is supposed to support the cultural ideology of the CCP.

Alongside the state, musical infrastructures also provide the necessary tools to circulate music through several geopolitical spaces, and contribute to the construction of new musical identities. The article written by Nga Li Lam gives an original and new historical approach to Cantonese musical identity by focusing on the 1940s and 1950s, before the popularisation of Cantopop throughout Asia. Nga Li Lam shows how radio broadcasts between Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangzhou played an important role in the definition of a Cantonese sense of belonging, long before the state-sponsored policy of the "Greater Bay Area" (粵港澳大灣區 *Yue Gang Ao dawanqu*). In a more contemporary article, Tian Li shows how the Chinese remake of a Korean television music program has shaped new forms of hybrid musical identity – blurring and mixing the notion of "Chineseness" and "Koreanness" through a flow of affects instead of languages. The television is responsible for a new "affect community" created through the circulation of Korean pop covered by Chinese artists, which is eventually at the mercy of the state censors. In the Current Affairs article in this issue, Ge Zhang and Jian Xu explore new musical genres popularised on Chinese streaming websites. This genealogy of *hanmai* 喊麥, a peculiar musical genre originated in Northeast China, explains the roots of this online community deemed vulgar by its detractors, by retracing the history of discos, folk culture, and working class youth subculture in the *Dongbei* 東北 (North-east) region.

This first issue of *China Perspectives* introduces a vast field of research concerning Sinophone music. Other important research areas, such as popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as the political dimensions of Sinophone music, will be addressed in a second volume.

---

10. "Straight from Taiwan they came / Just a girl and a homeboy in love / No money no job no speak no English," see the online music video: https://youtu.be/s8T5hu3uz7c (accessed on 19 August 2019).

11. See the online video: https://youtu.be/J0fABpNxLLc (accessed on 19 August 2019).

The articles published in this issue mainly focus on music circulation in Sinophone communities located in Asia. New Sinophone music studies should also consider analysing music production and consumption in Sinophone communities abroad, for instance the role of Chinese immigrants in the development of reggae music in Jamaica[12] or the resources provided to Californian punk communities by Chinese restaurants in Los Angeles.[13] In other words, the scope of research possibilities for Sinophone music is extensive. This issue therefore provides only a first look at what could be done, and hopes to spark fertile discussion among scholars from various backgrounds who are interested in the transnational circulation of Sinophone music and sound, and the variety of meanings locally attributed to it.

▌Nathanel Amar is a postdoctoral fellow at the Society of Fellows in the Humanities of the University of Hong Kong and is the incoming director of CEFC's Taipei office (namar@cefc.com.hk).

12. The Chinese-Jamaican musician Byron Lee introduced the electric bass guitar to Jamaica, and Leslie Kong, who was born in Shanghai, played an important and too often forgotten role in the production of Bob Marley's early songs. See Berenice Chan, "From Bob Marley to Peter Tosh: The reggae empire built by a Chinese-Jamaican family," *South China Morning Post*, 12 August 2019, https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3022156/bob-marley-peter-tosh-reggae-empire-built-chinese-jamaican (accessed on 19 August 2019).
13. Madeline Leung Coleman, "How Chinese Food Fueled the Rise of California Punk," *Topic*, no. 24, June 2019, https://www.topic.com/how-chinese-food-fueled-the-rise-of-california-punk (accessed on 19 August 2019).

References

ANG, Ien. 1998. "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm." *boundary 2* 2(3): 223-42.

BALASINSKI, Justyne, and Lilian MATHIEU (eds.). 2015. *Art et Contestation (Art and contention)*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

BARANOVITCH, Nimrod. 2003. *China New Voices. Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978-1997*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

BECKER, Howard. 2008. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

CHAKRABARTY, Dipesh. 2007. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

CHEN, Lingchei Letty. 2015. "When Does 'Diaspora' End and 'Sinophone' Begin?" *Postcolonial Studies* 18: 52-66.

CHIANG, Howard, and Ari Larissa HEINRICH (eds.). 2017. *Queer Sinophone Cultures*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

CHOW, Rey. 1998. "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem." *boundary 2* 25(3): 1-24.

CHOW, Yiu Fai, and Jeroen de KLOET. 2013. *Sonic Multiplicities. Hong Kong Pop and the Global Circulation of Sound and Image*. Chicago: Intellect.

CHOW, Yiu Fai. 2007. "Descendants of the Dragon, Sing!" *Thamyris/Intersecting* 16: 95-104.

CHU, Yiu-Wai. 2017. *Hong Kong Cantopop. A Concise History*. Hong Kong: HKU Press.

CHUN, Allen. 1996. "Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture and Identity." *boundary 2* 23(2): 111-38.

DENORA, Tia. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

EYERMAN, Ron. 2019. "Protest Music in the Age of Trump." *Books and Ideas*, 25 April 2019. https://booksandideas.net/Protest-Music-in-the-Age-of-Trump.html (accessed on 28 August 2019).

EYERMAN, Ron, and Andrew JAMISON. 1998. *Music and Social Movements. Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

GLADNEY, Dru. 2004. *Dislocating China. Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

GROPPE, Alison M. 2013. *Sinophone Malaysian Literature. Not Made in China*. New York: Cambria Press.

HARRIS, Rachel. 2005. "Reggae on the Silk Road: The Globalization of Uyghur Pop." *The China Quarterly* (September) 183: 627-43.

HARRIS, Rachel. 2008. *The Making of a Musical Canon in Chinese Central Asia: The Uyghur Twelve* Muqam. Aldershot: Ashgate Press.

HEE, Wai-Sam. 2019. *Remapping the Sinophone: The Cultural Production of Chinese-language Cinema in Singapore and Malaya Before and During the Cold War*. Hong Kong: HKU Press.

HENNION, Antoine. 1983. "The Production of Success: An Anti-Musicology of the Pop Song." *Popular Music* 3: 159-93.

KLEIN, Lucas. 2014. "Review of *Sinophone Studies. A Critical Reader*." *Chinese Literature: essays, articles, reviews* 36: 216-19.

LAN, Fang. 2014. "Review of *Sinophone Studies. A Critical Reader*." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 2: 517-18.

MOSKOWITZ, Marc L. 2010. *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow. Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

PECIC, Zoran Lee. *New Queer Sinophone Cinema. Local Histories, Transnational Connections*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

SHIH, Shu-mei. 2007. *Visuality and Identity. Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

SHIH, Shu-mei. 2013. "Introduction. What Is Sinophone Studies?" *In* Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards (eds.), *Sinophone Studies. A Critical Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1-16.

TAN, E.K. 2013. *Rethinking Chineseness. Transnational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World*. New York: Cambria Press.

WONG, Alvin K. 2018. "Including China? Postcolonial Hong Kong, Sinophone Studies, and the Gendered Geopolitics of China-centrism." *Interventions* 20(8): 1101-20.

XU, Xinjian. 2011. "The Chinese Identity in Questions: 'Descendants of the Dragon' and the 'Wolf Totem'." *Revue de littérature comparée* (337): 93-105.

YUE, Audrey, and Olivia KHOO (eds.). 2014. *Sinophone Cinemas*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.