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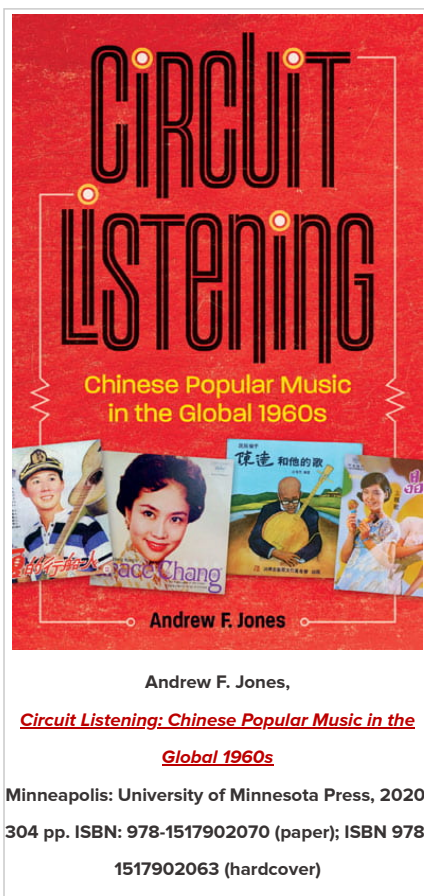
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Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s

By Andrew F. Jones

Reviewed by Jeroen de Kloet

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Allow me a rather unconventional and slightly self-indulgent opening to this book review. I read most of this book during a three-week quarantine in a hotel in Hong Kong. To keep fit, I would do some body combat exercises in the mornings. One online teacher, named Dan, would tell me that this lesson is all about connection, about connecting to the music, to your body, to others, and to the movements. That message is strikingly in-tune with the focus of Andrew Jones's book *Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s*. And it is a powerful message, captured so well in the key concept of this book: circuit listening. The book explores musical cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, in the 1960s and beyond, alternating rich empirical detail with lucid theorizations that hark back to globalization theory, popular music studies, and China studies. It presents an outstanding cultural history that helps to de-center the West and powerfully shows how cultural production is always already a form of cross-contamination, cross-fertilization, and creative entanglement, in the Sinophone world as elsewhere.

In the introduction, Jones sets out the main aim of the book, which is to “listen to the 1960s,” a period marked by Cold War and decolonization, “otherwise.” He emphasizes the simultaneity of political protests across the globe, ranging from the Summer of Love in San Francisco to protests in Tokyo, but also the related revival of folk music, in different generic forms, in the US, Brazil, the Eastern Bloc, Portugal, South Korea, and Taiwan among other places. Rather than thinking of this in terms of

influence, he argues that it would “be more helpful to understand these genres as effects of the circuits in which they moved” (12). Technological developments such as the spread of transistor technology are important constitutive parts of such circuits. In an analysis of how the song “The East is Red” (東方紅) travelled across radically different media circuits and through different times, Jones traces its melody back to a mountain song from poverty-stricken Shaanbei that was picked up by the Communist Party in Yan’an and canonized gradually through the national radio broadcasting network. For Jones, “Circuits can be local and restricted to a particular audience or milieu, but, whether by way of migration or through electronic mediation, they can also scale up, reaching divergent social strata and multiple locales” (19).

In chapter 1, Jones zooms in on “mambo girl” Grace Chang 葛蘭 and Chinese language musicals from Hong Kong and Taiwan. He wonders: how does it happen that we come to see a sound as marking a specific time, and what kind of ideological work does the notion of genre do here? He shows how Grace Chang and her work are products of a complex and multiply mediated circuit, ranging from colonial Shanghai to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Hollywood, and from New York City to Cuba. A word like “influence” would fall short in capturing such entanglements. The notion of the circuit functions not only to explain the circulation of sounds, but also to engage with the constraints put on circulation, often caused by colonial histories of domination and unequal global, national, and regional divisions of labor (37). As Jones explains, “The sort of ‘circuit listening’ I am proposing, then, is inevitably also a kind of historical cartography, a reconstruction of the mediated spaces and sedimented temporalities out of which musical sounds emerge” (ibid.). The chapter subsequently unpacks how Grace Chang reworked mambo and calypso for Hong Kong and Taiwanese audiences.

In chapter 2, Jones explores Maoist quotation songs, in which the Chairman’s maxims were set to music. The songs reached their audiences largely through radio broadcasts, for which a wired network was set up, involving six million loudspeakers scattered throughout the nation. Jones shows how “Mao” is a media-effect, a product of constant citation as text as well as image. He becomes a floating signifier—allowing for “new sorts of semantic promiscuity” (74), whose words and meanings are unstable and shifting. The final example of the chapter, Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise*, shows how Maoist iconography, late 1960s pop culture, quotations songs, and The Beatles can all come together.

The following three chapters cluster around Taiwan. Chapter 3 engages with musical cinema and the struggle of Taiwanese language movies against obsolescence. The chapter gives a close reading of the 1969 musical *Goodbye, Taipei* (再見, 台北), which featured one of the most celebrated singers of the period, Wen Shia 文夏. Although shot in black and white and aiming at rural migrants as its audience, the old-fashioned flair of the movie was countered by a very up-to-date soundtrack, including soul, surf music, psychedelia, and Taiwanese versions of the latest Japanese hit songs. For Jones, they “are quotations taken out of context, fugitive soundscapes signifying nothing” (103). The movie thus plays with notions of original and cover, real and fake, authentic and counterfeit, and can indeed be read as yet another articulation of circuit listening.

In chapter 4, Jones moves to the piracy of Vinyl records and the military circuit in the Cold War period. Taiwan became, in the late 1960s, an important transfer point for military materials and soldiers from the US to the battle fronts in Vietnam. Here, Jones explains in detail why he opts to use the notion of the circuit, instead of, for example, the more commonly used metaphor of flow. The notion of circuit gestures toward electronic circuitry, underlining the

importance of amplification and the electrical distribution of sound, “enabling an unprecedented saturation of everyday life by mass-mediated sounds” (116). Transistors play a pivotal role here, because they not only connect but also function as a switch; they both enable and restrict electrical traffic. “Circuits, in other words, not only expedite but also route and control flows of power and information” (116). Jones shows how pirated records thrived in the 1960s-70s, circumventing Kuomintang censorship and international copyright conventions. Following the work of Tunghung Ho, he shows how local hit music was an unintended by-product of the US military presence.

Piracy also fed into a revival of local folk music, which is the focus of the fifth chapter. Inspired by folk singer Li Shuangze’s 李雙澤 anticolonial call to “sing our own songs,” a campus folk movement came into being. As Jones points out, this claim to one’s own songs was ridden with contradictions, because the folk circuit was entangled with a global folk movement that proliferated in the 1960s. The chapter focuses on folk singer Chen Da 陳達, a blind singer whose collaboration with modernist composer Hsu Tsang-Houei 許常惠 made him a legend. For Hsu, Chen Da represented the essence of Chinese folk music, which was under threat from the forces of modernization. What interests Jones here is “how the imperative of preservation exists in a tense and mutually complicit relation with the very culture of schizophrenia that threatens to inundate its object. To preserve Chen Da beyond his inevitable expiration, his voice needed to become an object, a recorded artifact” (144). But ultimately, although Chen Da may have been popular among urban intellectuals, he was unable to reach either rural fans or urban fans of Mandarin pop or Anglo-American hit music. However, in his wake, folk music took the island by storm throughout the 1970s.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, brings us to Teresa Teng 鄧麗君, probably the best-known and most well-researched of all the singers featured in the book. Jones’s concern is not so much Teresa Teng as an historical personage, but more as “a particular acoustic effect, as an affective affordance, and even as a kind of domestic appliance” (173). The chapter opens with a description of the world’s largest sound system, built on a cliff above the coast of the island of Quemoy (Kinmen), in 1967. Through this system, Taiwan broadcast its propaganda messages to the Mainland. By the late 1970s, recordings of popular music, especially of Teresa Teng, were being played. In 1991, Teng even spoke directly to listeners across the strait, expressing the hope “that my mainland compatriots can enjoy that same—democracy and freedom.” By 1992, the loudspeakers had fallen silent; but the ubiquity of her voice in the mainland had already for a long time been facilitated by other means: (pirated) cassette tapes, vinyl, television, and radio. While her music was censored and deemed “yellow,” Jones shows how even her criticsasters could not help being seduced by her music and, especially, her voice.

I would have liked to see a conclusion in which Jones could speak retrospectively to what his history means for the fields of globalization studies, popular music studies, and China studies. As it is, the reader is asked to distill this from reading the various chapters. But this can also be read as a gesture toward the reader: the text is yet another connecting point in the circuit of popular music, reaching out to readers, who in turn connect it to their own histories, their own references, their own theoretical dispositions. This orientation fits well with the gentle spirit of the book—not arguing about how other theorizations are wrong, but focusing instead on carving out a different history, a different voice. From this perspective, a conclusion is less appropriate: given that all these histories, all these sounds, continue forging new points of connection, propelling forward new renditions of “old” sounds, becoming part of circuit listening, there is no ending point, no conclusive narration.

Jones's book deserves to be read widely. It is a book that presents an important and urgent intervention in the Euro- and Anglo-centric histories of popular music that dominate the field. At a time when the trope of the "rise of China" is almost omnipresent, this book shows how the Chinese-speaking world has always already been part and parcel of the world of popular music. More than a decade ago we asked our students at the University of Amsterdam to read Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV*, which presents a history of the introduction of television in the post-war US, connecting it, for example, to processes of suburbanization and different kinds of technological imaginations. There are many reasons why Dutch students should know more about the history of popular culture in the US; there are just as many reasons why they should learn more about East Asia, or other parts of the world, for that matter. It is my hope that Jones's book will also be read beyond the disciplines of anthropology or China studies, that his book will become an entry point for students and scholars who want to know how sounds travel, how globalization impacted cultural production in the 1960s as much as it does now, and how we can understand cultural forms best when we unpack their multiple connections to other locations, other people(s), and other periods.

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