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The production of locality in global pop: a comparative study of pop fans in the Netherlands and Hong Kong

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Particip@tions Volume 5, Issue 2 (November 2008)

The Production of Locality in Global Pop - A Comparative Study of Pop Fans in The Netherlands and Hong Kong^[1]

Abstract

Studies on fandom show an Anglo-Saxon bias and most of them take gender, age, sexuality and class as the key to understand fandom. Following globalisation theory, this study argues for the importance to include locality as an explanatory category. Comparing fans of local stars - Hong Kong pop star Leon Lai and his Dutch counterpart Marco Borsato - this study finds striking differences. In general, while the Dutch fans see Marco as an ordinary human being, the Hong Kong fans characterise Leon as an extraordinary worker. The different characterisations, the authors argue, are informed by the dominant discourse on being ordinary, emotionally honest and humanitarian in the Dutch society at large, as well as that on being more than ordinary, hardworking and proud in the Hong Kong context. Music fandom is interpreted as a way to produce locality, to provide a sense of home.

Keywords: Globalisation, popular music, fan culture, Marco Borsato, Leon Lai

Introduction

Marco Borsato's hit single, titled '*Rood*' ('Red'), topped the Dutch charts for eleven consecutive weeks in 2006, attesting to the continuous popularity of this local pop star. Shot in black and white with occasional streaks of red, the video clip of '*Rood*' features Marco, donning his typical casual wear including a T-shirt, a blazer and a pair of jeans, singing in a small club venue as if he were doing a live intimate gig. In the same year, his Hong Kong counterpart Leon Lai continued his spectacular shows in Shanghai, Beijing and a major casino in the United States after a series of concerts in his hometown the year before. The year 2006 also saw Leon directing and starring a feature film, and releasing two albums. Born in the same month in the same year (December 1966), the two pop stars share quite a few things in common: both entered show business through a local singing contest; both released their debut album in 1990; both have a repertoire of eclectic, updated and easy-listening pop; both reached the apex of their star status in the 90s but still commands a massive fan crowd. At the same time, while Marco is a married man with three children, Leon remains his city's desirable bachelor, and his love life has been a major source of entertainment news. Again, in 2006, paparazzi in Hong Kong, after spying on his residence for more than a month, so they claimed, managed to 'catch' Leon with a female model, resulting in the publication of highly speculative but nonetheless explicit reports on their presumable sexual indulgence.^[2]

Underneath a surface of similarity – in gender, age, sexuality, career path, musical choice and popularity, Marco Borsato and Leon Lai seem to be embodying rather different resources for local imagination, and making rather different stars for their local fans. In other words, even though they may follow the kind of career trajectory and perform the kind of pop music like many other pop stars in other parts of the world, they point to something more complex than global uniformity. Part and parcel of this complexity, as we will argue in this article, lies in fandom and its production of the local. In our current globalised time, a time when the global is often perceived as a threat to the local, fan cultures emerge around local stars, providing fans with a sense of place. However, studies to fan cultures by and large fail to reflect upon the locality of fandom, running the danger of producing a homogenising discourse in which ‘fan’ is turned into a universal label. Furthermore, studies to fan cultures that have appeared over the past decades present a strong Anglo-Saxon bias (Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992; Baym 2000; Lancaster 2001; Hills 2002; Hodgkinson 2002). Such studies are not particularly helpful in understanding the intricate ways in which not only global but also local stars are appropriated by fans outside the Anglo-Saxon world to produce a sense of locality

As we will show in this article, fandom can be an important means for what Appadurai has called the production of locality (Appadurai 1996). In particular in the context of intense globalisation, the importance of being rooted, to create a sense of home, has, according to Morley (2001), increased. As Sassen (2006, p. 1) puts it: ‘the epochal transformation we call globalisation is taking place inside the national to a far larger extent than is usually recognised.’ Popular music, in conjunction with new technologies, provides ample opportunities for the construction of a mediated sense of home and belonging. Local stars, we will argue, play a pivotal role in the production of locality. This study focuses on two local stars in The Netherlands and Hong Kong: Marco Borsato and Leon Lai. Both singing in their own language, Marco’s popularity is nationally confined to the Netherlands (and, to a lesser extent, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) while Leon has fans not only in Hong Kong, his base city, but also in Taiwan, mainland China as well as the Chinese diaspora around the world. That we situate them as ‘local’ stars is not only in opposition to ‘global’ stars (such as Madonna, Justin Timberlake and other predominantly American and British stars), but also a reference to the more elusively cultural, rather than strictly geopolitical, context in which their popularity operates. This study is based on an analysis of fan websites and face-to-face interviews with fans. Online and offline practices of fandom conflate, as we will show, both revealing a strong embeddedness in their respective cultural context. In other words, the differences between fandom in The Netherlands and Hong Kong resonate with - that is, display and construct - cultural characteristics of both localities.

While this study serves in the first place as an empirical probing into the production of locality fandom entails – production that has hitherto received scanty academic attention - we also build on previous fan studies. While a large body of academic work on fans comes from the discipline of social psychology (for a lucid example, see Giles 2002; for more pathologising examples see Scheel and Westveld 1999; Stack 2000; Lacourse et al 2001), our study takes a cultural studies perspective (Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992). We particularly share their appeal to take the everyday lives of fans seriously, and resist the pathologising notions of fandom that continues to prevail in popular discourse (Jenson 1992). At the same time, we do not wish to fall into the trap of univocally celebrating fandom, and read it as a unique form of popular resistance (see for example Fiske 1992 and Jenkins 1992). In our focus on everyday life, we aim to move beyond a resistance versus compliance rationale, into ‘what fandom does culturally’ (Hills 2002, p. xii). Theoretically, this study aims to connect globalisation theory with fan studies, two domains of inquiry that have so far largely

ignored each other. Empirically, we aim to show specifically how local stars can be used for the production of locality.

Globalisation: a sense of locality

The debate on globalisation is characterised by two opposite poles: one argues that globalisation is a process of homogenisation or McDonaldisation (Ritzer 2000), while the other reads globalisation as a process of heterogenisation. The apocalyptic undertone of the first argument often includes a harsh critique on the United States. Contenders for this line of argument draw support from a multitude of popular cultural phenomena: Hollywood is the global movie factory, Madonna is the global icon, McDonald's is the global eatery, and so forth. Singling out pop music as 'the anthem of globalisation,' Boomkens' account also refers to the Americanisation process in world culture:

Pop music presented itself initially as a foreign cultural item, a product of the cultural domination and colonising urge of world power number one, the United States. Pop music fits in many aspects with the idea of the McDonaldisation of world culture. Just like the Big Mac, American pop music has always been the worldwide yardstick..... There is much to say for the thought that pop music serves as part of the ongoing unilateral Americanisation of the world: pop music as \$ign of the times, expressed in dollars. (Boomkens 2000, p. 27-28, translation ours)

Boomkens is right in suggesting that the chance of a pop singer from Los Angeles breaking into the Brazilian market is higher than a colleague in San Paulo scoring a hit in the United States. But then, why should he or she want to? Secondly, the popularity of 'Latin face and sound' (Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera) in American (and global) pop provides another set of problematics destabilising the hegemonic narrative (see also Stokes 2004).

As earlier research shows, the notion of cultural homogenisation - and the world being colonised into one singular Americanised space - as the outcome of ongoing globalisation, remains more apocalyptic than appropriate in describing what is taking place in various cultural fields (Hannerz 1987; Appadurai 1996; Sassen 2006). Consequently, the other end of the debate interprets globalisation as a process of increased heterogenisation, with new cultural elements being cut and pasted with already existing cultural patterns, producing creolised cultures (Hannerz 1987), or propelling the indiginisation of 'foreign' cultural forms (Appadurai 1996). Global cultural icons can therefore have different readings, and produce different fan cultures, in different cultural contexts. Or local stars appropriate a global cultural form. Drawing on a historical overview of Hong Kong pop stars, Ho (2003) has shown how these stars from the 1970s onwards help produce a sense of locality while employing the globalised cultural form of popular music. Along the same line, it can be expected that these local stars are appropriated by local fan cultures to produce a sense of locality (Appadurai 1996), or to construct a *heimat*, a feeling of home (Morley 2001). This raises the question of how local stars, who make use of this profoundly globalised form of popular culture, pop music, are used by their fans to produce a sense of locality.

Fandom: on fans of local stars

Following Richard Dyers' seminal volume on stars, questions on audienceship and its most visible form, fandom, are inevitable. As mentioned earlier, most fan studies that appeared since the early 1990s show a strong Anglo-Saxon bias. For example, Jenkins' book discusses *Star Trek* fans in the United States, whereas, a decade later, Hills' impressive overview of fan studies (2002) still uses predominantly British examples. Apart from the Anglo-Saxon bias, the parameters of most fan studies do not depart from class, gender and age. Dyer, for instance, while pointing out that 'virtually all sociological theories of stars ignore the specificities of another aspect of the phenomenon - the audience', continues to cite adolescents, women and gay men as displaying particularly intense star-audience relationships (Dyer 1982, p. 36-37). In her provocative juxtaposition of the obsessive fans with the dedicated professors, Jenson (1992) foregrounds issues of status and class (for other class-related fan studies, see Bryson 1996; Brown 1997, 1998; Nash 2001; Jancovich 2002; Stenger 2006). In the same collection, at least three contributions devote specifically to gender-related themes: Cline on female rock fans; Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs on girls' hysterical adoration of the Beatles; and Hinerman on female fantasies over Elvis (for other gender-related fan studies see Baym 2000; Fung and Curtin 2002; Mee 2004; Williamson 2005). As Fiske notes, '[m]ost of the studies so far undertaken highlight class, gender and age as the key axes of discrimination' (Fiske 1992, p. 32). Apart from race (for a study in which fandom is linked to ethnicity, age and gender, see Ali 2002), which is quoted by Fiske as a needed additional axis in stars/fans studies, we would also draw attention to the under-examined global/local dynamics, of which race is sometimes a component.

We do not, of course, suggest that studies along demographic axes (gender, age, class and sexuality) are neither legitimate nor interesting, but they do not contribute much to the globalisation debate mentioned earlier. If an enquiry on stardom is about 'how do stars fit into the ideological discourse' (Butler 1991, p. 11) and fandom is taken as a 'response to specific historical conditions' (Jenkins 1992, p. 3), the studies undertaken so far are not situated, at least, in these specific historical conditions of increasing globalisation as well as the ideological discourse along with it. An investigation in the global and local in non-American pop stars and fans, we believe, will provide an important addition to currently available studies of fan cultures.

Methodology

We have therefore chosen to focus on two distinct, relatively small, non-Anglo-Saxon locales: Hong Kong and The Netherlands. Marco Borsato (figure one) and Leon Lai (figure two) are comparable, as noted earlier, in terms of personal background, popularity and music style. In addition to their entertainment career, both stars are also known for their participation in high-profile charity acts as well as in advertising campaigns. Given our primary concern is with fans and their production of locality through Marco and Leon, we refrain from drawing too much from the textual content of their images. Suffice it to say: whether seen in 'real life', video clips or concerts, Marco mostly appears as an ordinary guy wearing casual outfits, while Leon is polished, trendy and showing a preference for what is generally considered sex appeal, glamour and spectacle. Our choice of Marco and Leon is also supported by their relative typicality in terms of Dutch and Hong Kong stardom. In the Dutch pop world, other bestselling colleagues, such as Frans Bauer and Jan Smit, share similar guy-next-door look as Marco's. In Hong Kong, one of Leon's 'rivals', Aaron Kwok, donned in sexy and glamorous costumes, dared a singing-dancing-acrobatic act with a hanging, revolving pool in his 2007 concerts. Such extraordinary spectacles are not uncommon in Leon's or other Hong Kong pop stars' stage

performance. (de Kloet 2005) We will return to this theme of (extra)ordinariness when we present our findings.



Our data was drawn from two sources: website postings and face-to-face interviews. From message boards, 100 postings were taken from the official Marco Borsato site (www.marcoborsato.nl) from 26 May to 3 June 2000, while 241 postings from the popular Leon Lai Happy 2000 Discussion Forum hosted by www.hongkongcentre.com, during the period 29 July to 5 August 2000. If we can trust the names used by the Borsato fans, it is clear that the site is predominantly populated by woman: 80 per cent. ^[3] Hong Kong fans make use of fake handles, making it impossible to trace the gender balance. ^[4]

We have subsequently interviewed five fans of each star, in both cases four women and one man. Their age ranges from seventeen to forty-two, most of them (eight) are single. Fans were selected through snowballing, with the help of the respective fan clubs. Following a thematic analysis, using a data matrix (van Zoonen 1994), we have identified recurring themes in the discourses employed by the respondents, both in the online postings as well as in the interviews.

Production of locality: the linguistic and the heroic

Linguistic boundaries are employed to produce a sense of locality in cyberspace. The Dutch case is rather straightforward: their postings are only accessible to a Dutch-speaking community. The language use on the Leon Lai site is more spectacular as a linguistic boundary and identification with Hong Kong, rather than China:

(陰謀論)我想講0左好耐,唔知各位有無相同感覺.反黎報'生果'在報導有關Leon新聞時,經常刻意用一d Leon影得差既相片刊登^[5] -- J

This excerpt which criticises a particular 'anti-Leon' tabloid may read like Chinese. This apparently Chinese text, however, is not written in standard Chinese but in the Cantonese 'dialect' widely spoken in Hong Kong. Besides diction, typical Hong Kong Cantonese sentence structures and expressions are generally used in the guest book, drawing, at the same time, a boundary against all non-Hong Kong-Cantonese users, including Chinese from mainland China and Taiwan. As part of its 'Speak Mandarin Campaign,' the Singaporean government tries to discourage Cantopop since it is considered a dialect that does not fit the ideal state-sanctioned Chinese-Singaporean identity (Khiun

2003). But the linguistic hybridisation goes even further in these postings from Leon Lai fans. While standard Chinese is abandoned in all these messages, English is often used, mostly in a mixture with Cantonese. The use of English or Chinglish, the name Hong Kong has given to the mix of Chinese and English, on the site has its reference to the history of Hong Kong which, after one and a half centuries of British colonial rule, was handed over to China in 1997. Given Hong Kong's political and cultural marginality in the greater Chinese context, it is not surprising that the fans of a Hong Kong pop star would reject the standard national Chinese language and use its own mixture of Cantonese, English and Chinglish to mark out its own virtual territory. As Sandig and Selting argue, 'regional dialect can be used as a kind of "regional" style symbolising the regional identity and allegiance of its speakers' (Sandig and Selting 1997, p. 141).

When looking at the content of the messages, one of the most striking features is that they are *not* about music. The stars are more like local heroes. In the case of Marco Borsato, his affiliation with War Child is a topic that frequently returns, like in the following quotes:

Wonderful that you make yourself available like that for War Child and that you went to Kosovo. I understand that you are so deeply moved by everything and that you must work it through. Wish you strength and success with all you do for War Child in the future..... - Sabine

Hoi, Marco, good that you are back again! The photos of Kosovo are nice, but sometimes also very impressive. Sometimes it appears indeed just like Enschede..... Success on 14 June. I am proud to be a fan of someone who makes himself so available for others.^[6] - Rebecca

Putting all these 'good work' messages together, one may invoke an image of Marco Borsato leaving home, flying around to save the world. For all his perceived altruistic merits – he is making himself available for such humanitarian cause – their local star is a hero precisely because he is human, with all his genuine feelings and concerns. To the relief of his fans, wherever Marco has been, he will return to his home (country), he is local. As apparent in the above-quoted and other messages, the idea of homecoming is strong among the fans. The important idea of home in these messages brings to mind Morley's argument that under current processes of globalisation and de-territorialisation, people are more, rather than less, inclined to articulate a sense of home or *heimat*, a sense that often involves a process of re-territorialisation, a redrawing of imaginary boundaries (Morley 2001). Marco Borsato, however, is not only greeted for the 'safe' return to his home country The Netherlands, but also literally to his own home - his family. Marco's wife Leontine (also a show business personality) and their children often receive the best regards or kisses at the end of the fan messages (fifteen of them). Their marriage anniversary is also remembered by a number of fans.

Indeed, the messages on Marco Borsato's charitable acts, in their accents on his genuine involvement and return to his family, articulate and construct a local star not only as a good person of noble acts, but also a normal person of true feelings. Besides the messages on Kosovo and Enschede, many fans write as if they are simply relating to a person very close to them. For instance, fourteen messages are sent mentioning either a friend-like request (asking Marco for coffee at a birthday party in a farm, to cook together), their daily life (telling how they are eating chips and having a good time), or a simple greeting (asking Marco how he is doing). The ordinariness of the content underlines the perception of the star as an ordinary fellow being who is supposed and able to share in

their mundane life. Following this notion of an ordinary, close-by star, it is hardly surprising that even more fans write in to link the more private, emotional happenings in their life to Marco Borsato and sometimes to other fans. A one-minute silence is organised on the chatroom for a boy who died. The picture that emerges here is of a very intimate virtual imagined community.

The fans of Leon Lai care less about his charitable acts. In contrast to the high proportion of charity messages on the Marco Borsato site, only twenty messages are sent in by the Leon fans directly in relation to one single charitable act: Leon would drive a local billionaire around in order to raise funds for charity. All these messages, however, only refer other fans to read related reports in the local press.

Among the rest of the 241 messages, two major themes stand out: the concern with Leon's prizes and the attention to his whereabouts. First, the prizes: late 2000, Leon Lai made an unexpected announcement that from then on he would not accept any (local) music awards any more. It has become a point of discussion during this period because of the rumour that Leon agreed to stand for a regional reward, leading to some press comments on his integrity. Among the 108 messages sent to express their views, most of them are posted in Leon's defence, like this:

Leon has made it clear that he only 'refuses Hong Kong awards'. He didn't break his promise. There are simply too many annual music awards in Hong Kong, they are not representative at all. Leon is wise not to accept them. But this 'Global Chinese Hit-list' is adjudicated by many Asian radio stations. Very representative. It's worth joining in. -- a supporter

Quite apart from discussing whether Leon has broken his promise, messages similar to this supporter's also manage to construct discursively another set of moral standards to be applied in this case, namely local awards can be dismissed, but a 'global' event organised by 'Asian' media is 'worth' their local star's participation. When it comes to winning an international battle against international opponents, the local hero must go and fight for the local honour.

A related but less spectacular display of concern (fourteen messages) is related to a cyber-voting for the best Hong Kong actor hosted by a Japanese website during this period. Leon's fans, after noticing that Leon lags behind Takeshi Kaneshiro, an actor of Japanese-Chinese descent who is also active in the Hong Kong film industry, have to make an appeal:

Please go vote to this Japanese Homepage. Leon is second now. First is Takeshi Kaneshiro. -- Jojo

Such collaborative effort is indicative of the urgency to join forces and help their local hero to fight for the local honour - in this case, in Japan, against a half-Japanese opponent. Indeed, if saving the world is what Marco's fans expect of a Dutch hero, fighting for local honour seems to be more a Hong Kong mission. In this honourable mission, one does not find the other constructions around the local star Marco Borsato, such as his feelings, ordinariness and closeness.

The second major group of messages (fifty-three) posted on the site is, instead, organised on informing one another - either by providing information directly or referring to other media reports - where Leon is. Unlike the Dutch fans who underline the home-coming of their star, the Leon fans seem to be equally eager in telling everyone that Leon is or is not in town. During so, they invariably mention what Leon is actually doing - or working, to be exact. If fans of Marco Borsato would simply

greet him home, their Hong Kong counterparts often add a working dimension to his home-coming. Mermaids' message is typical:

Leon came out from airport is like he was walking on the catwalk modelling not for clothes but ... for Snoopy.

What Mermaids refers to is the well-known commercial involvement of Leon in the promotion of Snoopy suitcases during that particular period - among the various advertising activities he does for other sponsors. When he is not in Hong Kong, Leon's absence is also discursively linked to the notion of work. For instance:

When is Leon coming back? - Angela

Leon should be back soon, he is in Malaysia to start a movie. - Vicky

Distinct from the humanitarian, ordinary person Marco is - as displayed in the messages left by his fans - the Leon invoked by this group of messages is someone who is busy flying around and working. After all, what is at stake, according to the messages, is honour, not feelings; while feelings may come naturally, honour must be earned. No wonder none of the messages, in sharp contrast to the Marco site, is devoted to the kind of emotional expression as just quoted among the Dutch fans.

Production of locality: the social, the charitable and the personal

Three aspects stand out when analysing the face-to-face interview materials: (1) fandom creates a strong sense of community, (2) the charitable activities of the star and (3) the stars' character.

Community

Previous studies on fan culture have convincingly presented the importance of affective bonds between fans, and the related emergence of fan communities that meet both online and offline (Jenkins 1992; Jenson, 1992; Hills 2002). In our study, two sets of discourse on such community feeling are most obvious in the interviews: among anonymous crowds and with fan-cum-friends. Regarding the former, concerts are invariably mentioned as an occasion invoking such collective sensation. Nok-ming^[7], from Hong Kong, recalls:

Like going to a concert. So we would be swaying our fluorescent sticks all together. Wow! I don't know these people sitting next to me, but it feels like we are friends. [So you would be very happy?] Yes, yes, I would be very very happy.

Accounts similar to Nok-ming's abound in interviews with other fans. Marco Borsato fan Erik:

It was simply a fantastic show. Together with Mattijs we distributed lighters for Veronica. We covered the main area, at least 5,000 lighters, a very beautiful experience. When the first number 'Speeltuin' ('Playground') started, all the lighters were lit up. And you saw Marco look at them and wow. We were standing by the side, where Marco played acoustically. It's so beautiful... It's really an unforgettable experience.

Besides concerts, the community feeling is also constructed on a more personal and smaller scale. Fung-yi, when asked about her relationship with other Leon fans, says:

We are quite close. We started off because we all liked Leon, and then we became good friends. Some of them feel like aunties to me. We go to his concerts together, and we become closer and closer. Sometimes we would go on vacation together.

Debbie's experience on the other side of the (pop) world sounds almost identical:

Yes, you wait for his performance. And then at a certain moment you start feeling close to a particular type of people who are also waiting. You have contact with one another and start talking for hours... Now it's no longer only about Marco, like we spent a weekend together at Vlaardingen and Marco had nothing to do with it.

In the case of Tin-yan, the only person she shares her admiration for Leon is her brother, who is three years older:

He would buy magazines, while both of us would buy our own CDs.

Tin-yan's collective experience as a fan together with her brother points to another facet of the fan community: its conflation with the family, particularly in the context of Hong Kong. Besides Tin-yan, three other Leon fans also have (extended) family members sharing the same admiration. Nok-ming, for instance, finds a ready partner in her older female cousin when she needs to discuss matters concerning Leon, like his clothes. Tze-ying's daughter was as enthusiastic as her mother before she started her full-time job.

Sometimes the respondents reiterate the stereotypical images of 'obsessed individual' and 'hysterical crowd' as described by Jenson (1992), while distancing themselves from such fans - Nok-ming decides against joining the fan club because she does not have 'that kind of mentality' while Nathalie, on the other hand, observes that by taking up the fan club 'job', her affiliation with Marco becomes socially 'acceptable'. It is of interest, however, to note that the other dominant image on fan - a loner - is not at all invoked in their discourse. The Marco and Leon fans we interviewed may claim to be less or equally frenzied as other 'super fans'; they never admit to be lonely themselves or hint at other fans as solitary outsiders.

Charity

As in the messages left in the guest books of the Marco and Leon sites, the charitable acts performed by the two local stars receive enthusiastic approval from both groups of fans. Yet far from foregrounding the emotional and human dimension of charity as the Dutch fans do, the group of Hong Kong fans prefer to talk about, indeed, the more-than-human greatness of Leon and the honour and pride he brings from out there to his fans and fellow people here. Stressing the difficulties Leon has to survive, Fung-yi says:

I think he's great. Going to such remote places like Rwanda and Ganxu [in China] must be very tough. You have to get lots of injections beforehand. I think as an artist, he really serves as an

example not only for us fans, but for everyone..... I think he's great. I can only use this adjective 'great' to describe him.

The greatness of her local star is further connected with the idea of honour and pride:

I am his fan, I also share the honour. Not every artist in Hong Kong is willing to spend so much time on charity. And so enthusiastic. I feel very proud.

Both Nok-ming and Chun-fai respond emphatically that they, like Fung-yi, feel honoured by what Leon has been doing for charity. While Nok-ming cannot name the kind of honour she feels ('an unspeakable feeling'), Chun-fai says: 'It's an honour for the Chinese!'

If difficulty, greatness, honour and pride are the key words in the discourse of these Hong Kong fans on their local hero, their Dutch counterparts construct Marco's charity on another set of diction where involvement, emotion and humanity dominate. Unlike the Leon fans who speak more on the physical difficulty Leon may encounter abroad, especially as a star, the Marco fans prefer to speak on the emotional burden Marco has to go through, as a human being. Nathalie, for instance, explains why his fans are touched by his work in Kosovo:

Because it was so clear that he was concerned..... He was there and that touched me quite a lot. I don't know if you have seen the documentary. It was a small village, on one side was a playground and next to it was a mass grave. And almost every child lost a father or mother, and he looked so unbelievably around, like he's thinking: how is it possible. And the fans sat there crying, watching how concerned he was.

Compared to the Leon fans who articulate their honour in Leon's difficult missions outside Hong Kong, the Marco fans are more ready to point out the domestic acts their local hero does for The Netherlands. Nathalie, for instance, when asked if she wants Marco to do more overseas charity work, replies:

He also does a lot for The Netherlands. Jantje Beton, Ronald McDonald House. Overseas work doesn't have more value than in The Netherlands.

From the discourse of the Marco fans, greatness and honour that the local star may reap from his global acts seems much less important than the humanitarianism he shows. Given the person of feeling he is, Marco would simply carry out his good deeds wherever it is, as articulated by his fans. In any case, while both groups of fans attach significance and support to the charitable acts their local stars have been doing, how their notions of charity are constructed diverge - the Leon fans 'glorify' his good deeds in terms of what they bring to himself (greatness) and his fellow people including the fans (honour), while the Marco fans 'personalise' his charitable work into who he is. To put it differently, Leon becomes more a star because of what he does for charity, while Marco, on the other hand, becomes more a human being for the same reason.

Character

For the Dutch fans, the ordinariness of Marco Borsato as a real person, as a real human being is another important marker for their admiration. Despite his obvious public, celebrity status, all of the

Marco fans refer fondly to his being *gewoon*, a favourite Dutch word which can be translated as 'normal', 'ordinary', perceived therefore as unpretentious and authentic. Nathalie:

He is very honest. Some people think that it's only an image, but he simply shows the way he is. If he is cheerful, he shows it; if he is sad, then he cries. On stage, on TV ...

Marco is thus perceived as normal as a friend or a neighbour, and sometimes is approached by the fans likewise, for instance, visiting him. Erik:

Once I had this unique experience at his place, he came out unexpectedly with his little son. There were four of us. Marielle and I kept an eye on his little son, who was smart and nosy. I wondered whether it's okay to take a picture. Then the boy walked away, and there were a lot of canals there, so I wondered whether it's okay to pick him up, and it was OK with Marco.

If the name Marco Borsato is taken away from this narrative, one may indeed wonder if Erik is simply coming across the residence of a new neighbour who happens to come out with his little boy. No wonder he says:

It may sound very strange, but I see him simply as a person. He is obviously the biggest star in the Netherlands, but the star status is very relative and Marco has changed very little. He hasn't changed at all through the years. Marco is simply a person and that's the way I approach him.

In Erik's discourse, the ordinariness of Marco as a person is all the stronger because of and, at the same time, in spite of his star status. Such double mechanism is also at work in the following account by Tessa who, before Marco moved out in summer 2000, lived in the same city as him:

Marco knows that he actually can't. He can't walk in the street anonymously, but how often I have seen him do that. If you didn't know he's a star, you wouldn't tell. He simply walks in his old ragged trousers ...

As underlined by Tessa's discourse, Marco's anonymous walk in the street becomes significant because he is supposed to be well-known and, despite of that, he is still doing it. His insistence on being ordinary is thus cherished. The intricate relationship between the star and the person is perhaps best illustrated in the following sentence of Tessa:

Sometimes a person becomes a star, and sometimes a star remains a person. That is Marco.

According to Tessa, celebrity claims its origin in the ordinary, while, at the same time, ordinariness is being celebrated. One may, in turn, trace this celebrated ordinariness in the Dutch culture, which is often said to be tilting towards the ordinary. Some fans draw the link themselves. For instance, Debbie:

I think there is no other country where the people and the artist are so sober.

When asked if there could ever be a Dutch Madonna, Nathalie says:

No, The Netherlands won't take it. If you do it so big and are so big in The Netherlands, they would find you arrogant and tell you to behave normally. You go and buy French fries by the Febo and do not behave bigger than you are.

Here, the popular local fast food chain Febo (not the McDonald's) is used to underline the typical Dutch ordinariness while the pet phrase, often considered to capture the spirit of the Dutch people *doe maar gewoon* ('behave normally'), is also quoted by Nathalie to talk off the possibility of such extraordinary global stars in the Netherlands.

The Dutch fans are also eager to articulate the emotional importance of Marco's music. Tessa, for example, who labels herself as 'a person of feelings', gives a detailed account of how her endeared grandmother ('My grandma and I were one') wanted to fulfil her last wish, namely to have an official wedding ceremony. For both significant occasions, the wedding and, shortly after, the funeral, Marco's songs were used. Tessa recalls:

I find it so special that my grandma chose my Marco. If someone dies, I play Marco; if I am happy, I play Marco.

Miriam:

After my father died, this song - I was lying on the lawn and staring at the moon - I don't even remember the title, I don't know - the song touched me in a way just like I was with my father.

In stark contrast, their Hong Kong counterparts attach no emotional significance at all to the music of their own star. When asked when she would listen to Leon, Tze-ying simply replies: 'Doesn't really matter.'

Tze-ying's reaction is typical of other Leon fans who, likewise, do not articulate any connection between their emotional life with Leon's music, or with music in general. What is remarkably different from the Marco fans is their discursive nonchalance in severing their music-listening act from any other emotional justifications, such as, like the Marco fans, mood management or crisis support. In general, such resistance to reflect or explain (away) their acts in 'deeper' terms leads frequently to curt, fragmentary answers from the Leon fans - as if to correspond to the fragmentary, chaotic life of their city which allows limited space and time for display of feelings. On the other hand, as indicated by the quotes cited above, the Marco fans are more ready to volunteer lengthy replies, which, apart from echoing the general tenor of laying bare their feelings (like their star), may also be anchored in the dominant discourse emphasising emotional expression and honesty in contemporary Dutch society.

The categorical difference of the Leon fans from their Dutch counterparts is not only confined to the articulated use of music: Leon Lai's star appeal is also constructed differently. While Marco Borsato is fondly compared to one's friend or neighbour - being ordinary - with almost no attention paid to his physical attraction, Leon is anything but ordinary. Not being cast as the boy next-door, he is referred to as 'the prince on the white horse' by Fung-yi. In less dramatic terms, Nok-ming and Tin-yan also mention the good looks of Leon. Regarding the physical appeal of Marco Borsato, only Nathalie says she finds Marco 'sexy' since one year ago, because of 'his little belly and thinner hair'. Interestingly enough, Nathalie immediately contains such sexual appeal in a more normal, domestic setting by adding that she also finds her husband sexy for the same reasons.

The Leon fans also do not foreground him as a person of feelings. Instead, he is a worker of perseverance. Tze-ying, when asked of her views of what a star is, says:

Actually I haven't really thought about it. But, well, I think Leon is very hardworking. And he tries his best in everything he does. He is very demanding to himself.

Tin-yan:

I think he works very hard in everything he does. But he won't shout to everyone. He bites his lips and keeps on working, quietly.

Indeed, Leon's frequent flying to other places of the world is, in its turn, also perceived from the perspective of work. In the extreme case where Leon emigrates to another country, none of his fans seem to object, provided, like what Tin-yan says, he continues what he is doing. Fung-yi even says:

Well, if he suddenly leaves, I wouldn't be happy. But on the other hand, I would also be happy - a bit contradictory - because Leon has a new place to develop his career, I would be happy for him.

Compared to their Dutch counterparts who value the closeness of their local star far above the inaccessibility of global ones, the Leon fan seem to be more able to negotiate distance and separation with work and career - and, again like in their articulation of Leon's charity acts, honour. Chun-fai, like Fung-yi, would not mind Leon basing himself in another place if that would add to his popularity. Cherishing the possibility of Leon becoming a global star like Madonna or Michael Jackson, Chun-fai says:

Of course I want that. I would be very happy..... I would feel proud.

Tin-yan:

That would be Hong Kong's honour and his fans' honour.

Indeed, the idea of leaving behind one's place of origin, work hard for a better future, and bring back honour (and money) to one's family is not an alien thought in the context of Hong Kong. The often quoted post-war metamorphosis of Hong Kong into a prosperous city puts the stress on the enterprising spirit of mainland Chinese refugees. Later, in the uncertain years before British Hong Kong was reverted to Chinese rule, in 1997, the necessity of working hard for a better future, in the sense of earning enough money and emigrating abroad, is reiterated. The Leon fans' welcoming reaction to Leon's hardworking characteristic - even at the expense of leaving them behind to become global - marks a stark contrast to the Marco fans who would rather keep their ordinary, local star close to themselves, both geographically and emotionally. Some of the Leon fans go further than envisaging Leon as global star - they actually see Leon already as one. Fung-yi:

He has fans all over the world. To some extent, he is famous everywhere. His fans are distributed all over the world. In whichever corner there are fans of his.

It comes, therefore, as no surprise when they are asked to speak on their favourite music video clips of Leon, all of them choose those filmed on locations outside Hong Kong, such as Miami and Korea - signs of his outward expansion. In the case of the Marco fans, all of them point precisely to the localities within the Netherlands in the Marco video clips, like Bloemendaal, Leiden and Rotterdam.

Conclusion

It is clear that both groups of fans have managed to create their own community around their local stars, whether in cyber or 'real' space – with similar and divergent characteristics. As far as online community is concerned, both show linguistic features reminiscent of their respective societies at large. While friendliness and rapport is generally displayed, the Leon community leans on sharing information and opinions, but not in, conventionally speaking, private or emotional matters, in comparison with the various emotional exchanges in the Marco community. Such contrast may reflect different cultural accents perceived in the two localities.

At the centre of the fan communities are, of course, the local stars Marco and Leon. In both online communities, they are being constructed as a local hero who either go to save the world (charity) or fight for local honour (prize-winning). Fans' beliefs in the local participation in global setting as well as in the local as home are at the same time being communicated. During the process, however, the local stars are invested with different character. While the perception of Marco Borsato as an ordinary person of feeling and humanitarianism is foregrounded, Leon Lai is largely constructed as an important someone who is busy flying around, both working and striving for honour. Also opinions on charity diverge: as far as the Dutch fans are concerned, their notion of charity is, again, anchored in Marco's feelings and humanity. On the other hand, their Hong Kong counterparts emphasise the greatness and honour their local star may bring.

In general, while the Dutch fans see Marco as an ordinary person, the Hong Kong fans characterise Leon as an extraordinary worker. The Marco fans' notion of ordinariness, with its associated constructions of having feelings, being authentic and accessible, also leads to articulations of strong emotional ties to his music - entirely absent in the discourse of the Leon fans. Besides his good looks, Leon's most remarkable character trait is work: his hardworking perseverance and constant attempt to seek improvement and honour. The different characterisations, we argue, are in turn informed by the dominant discourse on being ordinary, emotionally honest and humanitarian in the Dutch society at large, as well as that on being more than ordinary, hardworking and proud in the Hong Kong context.

Fans use the stars, thus, to produce a sense of locality (Appadurai 1996) or home (Morley 2001). Debates on cultural globalisation (or Americanisation, for that matter) should not be only about cultural products (e.g. the musical form or content), about cultural icons (e.g. pop stars), about cultural flows (e.g. the United States to the rest of the world); they must also be about the cultural practices of audiences. 'Consumers' of cultural products, cultural icons and cultural flows must not be taken as passive recipients, fanatics or even victims, but active participants in the production of meaning in their daily life (Fiske 1992). Even when the music of Marco and Leon sounds not unlike that of their global counterparts, even when they look not unlike their global counterparts, their local fans 'use' them differently.

We do not wish to celebrate the local, and are aware of the danger of cultural essentialism that may be read from our analysis. It is important to acknowledge that these stars are part of a profoundly globalised political economy. They are contracted by global record companies (Universal and Sony respectively), and provide for these companies a way to conquer local markets (Negus 1999; Hesmondhalgh 2002). In other words, the production of locality is often implicated in the logics of global capitalism. Fandom is thus complicit with the global political economy, which, however, does not necessarily disempower fans – they can and still do appropriate the texts in their own intricate

ways. What this comparative study has shown is how fans use local stars to gain a sense of home, to become part of a community that is neither fluid nor transnational, but one that is instead profoundly rooted and quite fixed.

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[2] The incident has in turn sparked off a discussion on the (mal)practices and ethics of local paparazzi.

[3] It is of course possible that the Marco Borsato fans are also using fake names. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that their preference for 'real' names seems to underwrite the penchant for the 'personal' in their postings, which is absent in the postings of Leon Lai's Hong Kong fans. See further analysis in main text.

[4] To provide an additional checking-mechanism on our data, a brief follow-up study was conducted in 2006, involving a comparative analysis of the fan websites of both stars, yielding similar results.

[5] All the Dutch and Cantonese-Chinese messages are translated by the authors.

[\[6\]](#) On 13 May 2000, a serious explosion in Enschede, a city in The Netherlands, took away the lives of twenty-one local residents and turned an entire neighbourhood into scorching debris. This officially declared 'national disaster' led to, among other fund-raising events, a charity concert in which Marco Borsato pledged to join.

[\[7\]](#) All the interviewees agreed to the use of their names for this publication.

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