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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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[Current Contents](#)

[Past Issues](#)

□ Chow, Yiu Fai & Jeroen de Kloet:

'The Production of Locality in Global Pop - A Comparative Study of Pop Music in The Netherlands and Hong Kong'

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

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

Abstract

Studies on fandom show an Anglo-Saxon bias and most of them take gender, age, sex and class as the key to understand fandom. Following globalisation theory, this study argues the importance to include locality as an explanatory category. Comparing fans of local Hong Kong pop star Leon Lai and his Dutch counterpart Marco Borsato - this study finds significant differences. In general, while the Dutch fans see Marco as an ordinary human being, Hong Kong fans characterise Leon as an extraordinary worker. The different characterisations authors argue, are informed by the dominant discourse on being ordinary, emotional 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 find 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 pop star wear including a T-shirt, a blazer and a pair of jeans, singing in a small club venue and performing 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 performing concerts in his hometown the year before. The year 2006 also saw Leon directing and starring in 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 updated and easy-listening pop; both reached the apex of their star status in the 1990s and now command a massive fan crowd. At the same time, while Marco is a married man with two children, Leon remains his city's desirable bachelor, and his love life has been a major topic in 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, leading to the publication of highly speculative but nonetheless explicit reports on their presumable indulgence. ^[2]

Underneath a surface of similarity – in gender, age, sexuality, career path, musical style and popularity, Marco Borsato and Leon Lai seem to be embodying rather different resolutions of local imagination, and making rather different stars for their local fans. In other words, even if they may follow the kind of career trajectory and perform the kind of pop music like many stars in other parts of the world, they point to something more complex than globalisation and its universal parcel of this complexity, as we will argue in this article, lies in fandom and its production of 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, many studies to fan cultures by and large fail to reflect upon the locality of fandom, running the risk of producing a homogenising discourse in which 'fan' is turned into a universal label. Few studies to fan cultures that have appeared over the past decades present a strong Anglo-American bias (Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992; Baym 2000; Lancaster 2001; Hills 2002; Hills 2002). Such studies are not particularly helpful in understanding the intricate ways in which 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 calls 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 (2000). As Sassen (2006, p. 1) puts it: 'the epochal transformation we call globalisation is tal

inside the national to a far larger extent than is usually recognised.' Popular music, in
 with new technologies, provides ample opportunities for the construction of a mediated
 home and belonging. Local stars, we will argue, play a pivotal role in the production of
 study focuses on two local stars in The Netherlands and Hong Kong: Marco Borsato
 Both singing in their own language, Marco's popularity is nationally confined to the N
 (and, to a lesser extent, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) while Leon has fans not
 Kong, his base city, but also in Taiwan, mainland China as well as the Chinese diaspora
 the world. That we situate them as 'local' stars is not only in opposition to 'global' stars
 Madonna, Justin Timberlake and other predominantly American and British stars), but
 reference to the more elusively cultural, rather than strictly geopolitical, context in which
 popularity operates. This study is based on an analysis of fan websites and face-to-face
 with fans. Online and offline practices of fandom conflate, as we will show, both revealing
 embeddedness in their respective cultural context. In other words, the differences between
 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
 fandom entails – production that has hitherto received scanty academic attention - in
 previous fan studies. While a large body of academic work on fans comes from the field of
 social psychology (for a lucid example, see Giles 2002; for more pathologising examples
 Scheel and Westeveld 1999; Stack 2000; Lacourse et al 2001), our study takes a cultural
 perspective (Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992). We particularly share their approach
 everyday lives of fans seriously, and resist the pathologising notions of fandom that
 prevail in popular discourse (Jenson 1992). At the same time, we do not wish to fall into
 univocally celebrating fandom, and read it as a unique form of popular resistance (see
 Fiske 1992 and Jenkins 1992). In our focus on everyday life, we aim to move beyond
 versus compliance rationale, into 'what fandom does culturally' (Hills 2002, p. xii). Thus
 this study aims to connect globalisation theory with fan studies, two domains of inquiry
 far largely ignored each other. Empirically, we aim to show specifically how local stars
 for the production of locality.

Globalisation: a sense of locality

The debate on globalisation is characterised by two opposite poles: one argues that
 a process of homogenisation or McDonaldisation (Ritzer 2000), while the other reads
 as a process of heterogenisation. The apocalyptic undertone of the first argument offers
 harsh critique on the United States. Contenders for this line of argument draw support
 multitude of popular cultural phenomena: Hollywood is the global movie factory, Mac

global icon, McDonald's is the global eatery, and so forth. Singling out pop music as globalisation,' Boomkens' account also refers to the Americanisation process in world

Pop music presented itself initially as a foreign cultural item, a product of the domination and colonising urge of world power number one, the United States. It fits in many aspects with the idea of the McDonaldisation of world culture. Just like McDonald's, American pop music has always been the worldwide yardstick..... The saying for the thought that pop music serves as part of the ongoing unilateral Americanisation of the world: pop music as sign of the times, expressed in dollars. (Boomkens 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. Then, why should he or she want to? Secondly, the popularity of 'Latin face and sound' (Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera) in American (and global) pop provides an example of a problematic destabilising the hegemonic narrative (see also Stokes 2004).

As earlier research shows, the notion of cultural homogenisation - and the world being turned into one singular Americanised space - as the outcome of ongoing globalisation, is more apocalyptic than appropriate in describing what is taking place in various cultural fields (Appadurai 1987; Appadurai 1996; Sassen 2006). Consequently, the other end of the debate into globalisation as a process of increased heterogenisation, with new cultural elements being pasted with already existing cultural patterns, producing creolised cultures (Hannerz 1996) propelling the indiginisation of 'foreign' cultural forms (Appadurai 1996). Global cultural forms therefore have different readings, and produce different fan cultures, in different localities. Or local stars appropriate a global cultural form. Drawing on a historical overview of local 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 lines, 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). The question of how local stars, who make use of this profoundly globalised form of popular music, are used by their fans to produce a sense of locality.

Fandom: on fans of local stars

Following Richard Dyer's seminal volume on stars, questions on audienceship and its form, fandom, are inevitable. As mentioned earlier, most fan studies that appeared since the 1990s show a strong Anglo-Saxon bias. For example, Jenkins' book discusses *Star Wars* in the United States, whereas, a decade later, Hills' impressive overview of fan studies

uses predominantly British examples. Apart from the Anglo-Saxon bias, the paramet studies do not depart from class, gender and age. Dyer, for instance, while pointing ('virtually all sociological theories of stars ignore the specificities of another aspect of phenomenon - the audience', continues to cite adolescents, women and gay men as particularly intense star-audience relationships (Dyer 1982, p. 36-37). In her provoca juxtaposition of the obsessive fans with the dedicated professors, Jenson (1992) fore issues of status and class (for other class-related fan studies, see Bryson 1996; Brov Nash 2001; Jancovich 2002; Stenger 2006). In the same collection, at least three co devote specifically to gender-related themes: Cline on female rock fans; Ehrenreich, Jacobs on girls' hysterical adoration of the Beatles; and Hinerman on female fantasie (for other gender-related fan studies see Baym 2000; Fung and Curtin 2002; Mee 20 2005). As Fiske notes, '[m]ost of the studies so far undertaken highlight class, gende the key axes of discrimination' (Fiske 1992, p. 32). Apart from race (for a study in wh linked to ethnicity, age and gender, see Ali 2002), which is quoted by Fiske as a nee axis in stars/fans studies, we would also draw attention to the under-examined globa dynamics, of which race is sometimes a component.

We do not, of course, suggest that studies along demographic axes (gender, age, cl; sexuality) are neither legitimate nor interesting, but they do not contribute much to th debate mentioned earlier. If an enquiry on stardom is about 'how do stars fit into the discourse' (Butler 1991, p. 11) and fandom is taken as a 'response to specific histori conditions' (Jenkins 1992, p. 3), the studies undertaken so far are not situated, at lea specific historical conditions of increasing globalisation as well as the ideological disc with it. An investigation in the global and local in non-American pop stars and fans, w 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 Kong and The Netherlands. Marco Borsato (figure one) and Leon Lai (figure two) are as noted earlier, in terms of personal background, popularity and music style. In add entertainment career, both stars are also known for their participation in high-profile (well as in advertising campaigns. Given our primary concern is with fans and their pr locality through Marco and Leon, we refrain from drawing too much from the textual (images. Suffice it to say: whether seen in 'real life', video clips or concerts, Marco m as an ordinary guy wearing casual outfits, while Leon is polished, trendy and showin for what is generally considered sex appeal, glamour and spectacle. Our choice of M is also supported by their relative typicality in terms of Dutch and Hong Kong stardor

pop world, other bestselling colleagues, such as Frans Bauer and Jan Smit, share si door look as Marco's. In Hong Kong, one of Leon's 'rivals', Aaron Kwok, donned in s glamorous costumes, dared a singing-dancing-acrobatic act with a hanging, revolvin 2007 concerts. Such extraordinary spectacles are not uncommon in Leon's or other pop stars' stage performance. (de Kloet 2005) We will return to this theme of (extra)c when we present our findings.



Our data was drawn from two sources: website postings and face-to-face interviews. 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 pop Happy 2000 Discussion Forum hosted by www.hongkongcentre.com, during the period of August 2000. If we can trust the names used by the Borsato fans, it is clear that the forum is predominantly populated by woman: 80 per cent.^[3] Hong Kong fans make use of false names 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 recruited through snowballing, with the help of the respective fan clubs. Following a thematic analysis and a data matrix (van Zoonen 1994), we have identified recurring themes in the discourse produced 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. This 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 it is more closely tied 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的
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. The Chinese text, however, is not written in standard Chinese but in the Cantonese 'dialect' 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 barrier to all non-Hong Kong-Cantonese users, including Chinese from mainland China and Taiwan. In the context of its 'Speak Mandarin Campaign,' the Singaporean government tries to discourage the use of Cantonese 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 posts by 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 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. 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 territory. As Sandig and Selting argue, 'regional dialect can be used as a kind of "regional identity" symbolising the regional identity and allegiance of its speakers' (Sandig and Selting 2003).

When looking at the content of the messages, one of the most striking features is the focus on music. The stars are more like local heroes. In the case of Marco Borsato, his involvement 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 are so involved in Kosovo. I understand that you are so deeply moved by everything and that you go through 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 also very impressive. Sometimes it appears indeed just like Enschede..... So glad you are back in June. I am proud to be a fan of someone who makes himself so available for the world.
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 – his willingness to be 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 he has been, he will return to his home (country), he is local. As apparent in the above-quotes,

messages, the idea of homecoming is strong among the fans. The important idea of messages brings to mind Morley's argument that under current processes of global territorialisation, people are more, rather than less, inclined to articulate a sense of home. A sense that often involves a process of re-territorialisation, a redrawing of imaginary (Morley 2001). Marco Borsato, however, is not only greeted for the 'safe' return to his home in The Netherlands, but also literally to his own home - his family. Marco's wife Leontine (business personality) and their children often receive the best regards or kisses at the fan messages (fifteen of them). Their marriage anniversary is also remembered by a fan message.

Indeed, the messages on Marco Borsato's charitable acts, in their accents on his general involvement and return to his family, articulate and construct a local star not only as a person of noble acts, but also a normal person of true feelings. Besides the messages on Kees van 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 to bring coffee at a birthday party in a farm, to cook together), their daily life (telling how they eat 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 supposed and able to share in their mundane life. Following this notion of an ordinary 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 video was organised on the chatroom for a boy who died. The picture that emerges here is of a virtual imagined community.

The fans of Leon Lai care less about his charitable acts. In contrast to the high proportion of messages on the Marco Borsato site, only twenty messages are sent in by the Leon Lai fans 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 news in the local press.

Among the rest of the 241 messages, two major themes stand out: the concern with Leon's integrity and the attention to his whereabouts. First, the prizes: late 2000, Leon Lai made an announcement that from then on he would not accept any (local) music awards any more. This became a point of discussion during this period because of the rumour that Leon agreed to accept a regional reward, leading to some press comments on his integrity. Among the 15 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 real. Leon is wise not to accept them. But this 'Global Chinese Hit-list' is adjudicated by the fans.

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 a supporter's also manage to construct discursively another set of moral standards to which, in this case, namely local awards can be dismissed, but a 'global' event organised by 'us' 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 competition for the best Hong Kong actor hosted by a Japanese website during this period. Leon is 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 fight for the local honour - in this case, in Japan, against a half-Japanese opponent. Indeed, the world is what Marco's fans expect of a Dutch hero, fighting for local honour seems to be the Hong Kong mission. In this honourable mission, one does not find the other constructed as 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 around informing one another - either by providing information directly or referring to other messages where Leon is. Unlike the Dutch fans who underline the home-coming of their star, they seem to be equally eager in telling everyone that Leon is or is not in town. During so many messages invariably mention what Leon is actually doing - or working, to be exact. If fans of Marco would simply greet him home, their Hong Kong counterparts often add a working directory to his home-coming. Mermaids' message is typical:

Leon came out from airport is like he was walking on the catwalk modelling not just a suit 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 and other sponsors. When he is not in Hong Kong, Leon's absence is also discursively linked to his 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 - the Leon invoked by this group of messages is someone who is busy flying around working. After all, what is at stake, according to the messages, is honour, not feeling. Feelings may come naturally, honour must be earned. No wonder none of the messages contrast to the Marco site, is devoted to the kind of emotional expression as just quoted 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) fans' strong sense of community, (2) the charitable activities of the star and (3) the stars' c

Community

Previous studies on fan culture have convincingly presented the importance of affect 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 feelings are most obvious in the interviews: among anonymous crowds and with fan-clubs. Regarding the former, concerts are invariably mentioned as an occasion invoking such a sensation. Nok-ming^[7], from Hong Kong, recalls:

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

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

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

Besides concerts, the community feeling is also constructed on a more personal and intimate level. 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 friends. Some of them feel like aunties to me. We go to his concerts together, and get 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 a particular type of people who are also waiting. You have contact with one another talking for hours... Now it's no longer only about Marco, like we spent a weeker in 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 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 fan community: its conflation with the family, particularly in the context of Hong Kong. Besides three other Leon fans also have (extended) family members sharing the same admiration, for instance, finds a ready partner in her older female cousin when she needs advice on matters concerning Leon, like his clothes. Tze-ying's daughter was as enthusiastic about Leon before she started her full-time job.

Sometimes the respondents reiterate the stereotypical images of 'obsessed individuals' or 'hysterical crowd' as described by Jenson (1992), while distancing themselves from them. Nok-ming decides against joining the fan club because she does not have 'that kind of job' while Nathalie, on the other hand, observes that by taking up the fan club 'job', her admiration for Marco becomes socially 'acceptable'. It is of interest, however, to note that the other image on fan - a loner - is not at all invoked in their discourse. The Marco and Leon fans interviewed may claim to be less or equally frenzied as other 'super fans'; they never isolate 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. Instead of foregrounding the emotional and human dimension of charity as the Dutch fans of Hong Kong fans prefer to talk about, indeed, the more-than-human greatness of Leon's 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] is very tough. You have to get lots of injections beforehand. I think as an artist, he

as an example not only for us fans, but for everyone..... I think he's great. I can 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 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 honour Leon has been doing for charity. While Nok-ming cannot name the kind of honour she 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 fans on their local hero, their Dutch counterparts construct Marco's charity on another where involvement, emotion and humanity dominate. Unlike the Leon fans who speak physical difficulty Leon may encounter abroad, especially as a star, the Marco fans pay 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 a lot. I don't know if you have seen the documentary. It was a small village, on a playground and next to it was a mass grave. And almost every child lost a father and he looked so unbelievably around, like he's thinking: how is it possible. And there crying, watching how concerned he was.

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

He also does a lot for The Netherlands. Jantje Beton, Ronald McDonald House 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 perform on global acts seems much less important than the humanitarianism he shows. Given that feeling he is, Marco would simply carry out his good deeds wherever it is, as articulated. In any case, while both groups of fans attach significance and support to the charitable acts 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 fans (honour), while the Marco fans 'personalise' his charitable work into something more intimate. To put it differently, Leon becomes more a star because of what he does for charity,

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, 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 who 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 fans likewise, for instance, visiting him. Erik:

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

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

It may sound very strange, but I see him simply as a person. He is obviously the same as everyone else 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 his star status at the same time, in spite of his star status. Such double mechanism is also at work in the first account by Tessa who, before Marco moved out in summer 2000, lived in the same house as Marco.

Marco knows that he actually can't. He can't walk in the street anonymously, but he has seen him do that. If you didn't know he's a star, you wouldn't tell. He simply looks like an ordinary person with old ragged trousers ...

As underlined by Tessa's discourse, Marco's anonymous walk in the street becomes even more significant because he is supposed to be well-known and, despite of that, he is still doing it. His being ordinary is thus cherished. The intricate relationship between the star and the ordinary is thus highlighted.

perhaps best illustrated in the following sentence of Tessa:

Sometimes a person becomes a star, and sometimes a star remains a person.

According to Tessa, celebrity claims its origin in the ordinary, while, at the same time is being celebrated. One may, in turn, trace this celebrated ordinariness in the Dutch is often said to be tilting towards the ordinary. Some fans draw the link themselves. F 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 Neth would find you arrogant and tell you to behave normally. You go and buy French 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 Dutch ordinariness while the pet phrase, often considered to capture the spirit of the *doe maar gewoon* ('behave normally'), is also quoted by Nathalie to talk off the possible extraordinary global stars in the Netherlands.

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

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

Miriam:

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

In stark contrast, their Hong Kong counterparts attach no emotional significance at all of their own star. When asked when she would listen to Leon, Tze-ying simply replied: '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 rem

different from the Marco fans is their discursive nonchalance in severing their music from any other emotional justifications, such as, like the Marco fans, mood manager support. In general, such resistance to reflect or explain (away) their acts in 'deeper' frequently to curt, fragmentary answers from the Leon fans - as if to correspond to the 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 replies, which, apart from echoing the general tenor of laying bare their feelings (like Marco), may also be anchored in the dominant discourse emphasising emotional expression in contemporary Dutch society.

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

The Leon fans also do not foreground him as a person of feelings. Instead, he is a person 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. 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's ears and keeps on working, quietly.

Indeed, Leon's frequent flying to other places of the world is, in its turn, also perceived from a different perspective of work. In the extreme case where Leon emigrates to another country, the Leon fans seem to object, provided, like what Tin-yan says, he continues what he is doing:

Well, if he suddenly leaves, I wouldn't be happy. But on the other hand, I would be 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

inaccessibility of global ones, the Leon fans seem to be more able to negotiate distance and separation with work and career - and, again like in their articulation of Leon's charity Chun-fai, like Fung-yi, would not mind Leon basing himself in another place if that would increase 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 send back honour (and money) to one's family is not an alien thought in the context of Hong Kong. Ho Yee often quoted post-war metamorphosis of Hong Kong into a prosperous city puts the : enterprising spirit of mainland Chinese refugees. Later, in the uncertain years before Hong Kong was reverted to Chinese rule, in 1997, the necessity of working hard for a better future and a sense of earning enough money and emigrating abroad, is reiterated. The Leon fans' 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 the local star close to themselves, both geographically and emotionally. Some of the Leon fans go even further than envisaging Leon as global star - they actually see Leon already as one.

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 video clips of Leon, all of them choose those filmed on locations outside Hong Kong, such as South Korea – signs of his outward expansion. In the case of the Marco fans, all of them prefer the localities within the Netherlands in the Marco video clips, like Bloemendaal, Leidschendam, and Rotterdam.

Conclusion

It is clear that both groups of fans have managed to create their own community around their favourite stars, whether in cyber or 'real' space – with similar and divergent characteristics. As the community is concerned, both show linguistic features reminiscent of their respective nationalities. While friendliness and rapport is generally displayed, the Leon community learns from the information and opinions, but not in, conventionally speaking, private or emotional manner.

comparison with the various emotional exchanges in the Marco community. Such comparisons 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 these communities, they are being constructed as a local hero who either goes to save the world or fight for local honour (prize-winning). Fans' beliefs in the local participation in globalisation, as in the local as home are at the same time being communicated. During the process, the local stars are invested with different characters. While the perception of Marco Bruni 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. These opinions on charity diverge: as far as the Dutch fans are concerned, their notion of charity is 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 is associated with constructions of having feelings, being authentic and accessible, also leading to articulations of strong emotional ties to his music - entirely absent in the discourse of Leon. 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 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 (Nedra). Debates on cultural globalisation (or Americanisation, for that matter) should not be confined to cultural products (e.g. the musical form or content), about cultural icons (e.g. pop stars) and cultural flows (e.g. the United States to the rest of the world); they must also be about the practices of audiences. 'Consumers' of cultural products, cultural icons and cultural flows should 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 different from that of their global counterparts, even when they look not unlike their global counterparts, fans 'use' them differently.

We do not wish to celebrate the local, and are aware of the danger of cultural essentialism. This may be read from our analysis. It is important to acknowledge that these stars are produced within 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 new markets (Negus 1999; Hesmondhalgh 2002). In other words, the production of local stars is implicated in the logics of global capitalism. Fandom is thus complicit with the global

economy, which, however, does not necessarily disempower fans – they can and still appropriate the texts in their own intricate ways. What this comparative study has shown is that fans use local stars to gain a sense of home, to become part of a community that is 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 paparazzi.

[3] It is of course possible that the Marco Borsato fans are also using fake names. It is interesting to note that their preference for 'real' names seems to underwrite 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. 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 the lives of twenty-one local residents and turned an entire neighbourhood into scorching ruins. The disaster, officially declared 'national disaster' led to, among other fund-raising events, a charity concert which Marco Borsato pledged to join.

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

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