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

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Chow, Yiu Fai & Jeroen de Kloet:

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

Abstract

Studies on fandom show an Anglo-Saxon bias and most of them take gender, age, class as the key to understand fandom. Following globalisation theory, this study argues 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 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 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 sense of 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 weeks in 2006, attesting to the continuous popularity of this local pop star. Shot in black with occasional streaks of red, the video clip of ‘Rood’ features Marco, donning his typical wear including a T-shirt, a blazer and a pair of jeans, singing in a small club venue as doing a live intimate gig. In the same year, his Hong Kong counterpart Leon Lai continued his success with spectacular shows in Shanghai, Beijing and a major casino in the United States after concerts in his hometown the year before. The year 2006 also saw Leon directing 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 at a young age; 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 90s and commands a massive fan crowd. At the same time, while Marco is a married man with children, Leon remains his city’s desirable bachelor, and his love life has been a major 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, publication of highly speculative but nonetheless explicit reports on their presumable indulgence.

Underneath a surface of similarity – in gender, age, sexuality, career path, musical popularity, Marco Borsato and Leon Lai seem to be embodying rather different realities, imagination, and making rather different stars for their local fans. In other words, even if they both 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 global universalism and parcel of this complexity, as we will argue in this article, lies in fandom and its 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 (2002) and 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, 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 a sense of locality. Our study focuses on two local stars in The Netherlands and Hong Kong: Marco Borsato and Leon Fu. 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 only in Hong 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 such as Madonna, Justin Timberlake and other predominantly American and British stars), but also in 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 interaction with fans. Online and offline practices of fandom conflate, as we will show, both reveals of an embeddedness in their respective cultural context. In other words, the differences between 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, it entails - production that has hitherto received scanty academic attention - with previous fan studies. While a large body of academic work on fans comes from the social psychology (for a lucid example, see Giles 2002; for more pathologising examinations, see 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 appreciation of the 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 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 compliance rationale, into ‘what fandom does culturally’ (Hills 2002, p. xii). 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 play a pivotal role in 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 globalisation as a process of heterogenisation. The apocalyptic undertone of the first argument offends the collective conscience with 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, Mad
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 wor-

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 Stat-
fits in many aspects with the idea of the McDonaldisation of world culture. JU-
Mac, American pop music has always been the worldwide yardstick...... The
say for the thought that pop music serves as part of the ongoing unilateral A-
of the world: pop music as $ign of the times, expressed in dollars. (Boomker-
28, translation ours)

Boomkens is right in suggesting that the chance of a pop singer from Los Angeles br-
Brazilian market is higher than a colleague in San Paulo scoring a hit in the United
then, why should he or she want to? Secondly, the popularity of ‘Latin face and soun-
Martin, Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera) in American (and global) pop provides an
problems destabilising the hegemonic narrative (see also Stokes 2004).

As earlier research shows, the notion of cultural homogenisation - and the world beir-
to one singular Americanised space - as the outcome of ongoing globalisation, rer-
apocalyptic than appropriate in describing what is taking place in various cultural fiel-
1987; Appadurai 1996; Sassen 2006). Consequently, the other end of the debate int-
globalisation as a process of increased heterogenisation, with new cultural elements
pasted with already existing cultural patterns, producing creolised cultures (Hannerz
propelling the indiginisation of ‘foreign’ cultural forms (Appadurai 1996). Global cultu-
therefore have different readings, and produce different fan cultures, in different cult-
Or local stars appropriate a global cultural form. Drawing on a historical overview of l-
pop stars, Ho (2003) has shown how these stars from the 1970s onwards help prod-
locality while employing the globalised cultural form of popular music. Along the sam-
be expected that these local stars are appropriated by local fan cultures to produce e-
locality (Appadurai 1996), or to construct a heimat, a feeling of home (Morley 2001).
question of how local stars, who make use of this profoundly globalised form of popu-
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 it
form, fandom, are inevitable. As mentioned earlier, most fan studies that appeared s-
1990s show a strong Anglo-Saxon bias. For example, Jenkins’ book discusses Star
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) for 
issues of status and class (for other class-related fan studies, see Bryson 1996; Bron 
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 fantas 
(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, cli 
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 le 
specific historical conditions of increasing globalisation as well as the ideological dis 
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 N 
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)
when we present our findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig. 1: Marco Borsato (courtesy of Loe Beerens)</th>
<th>Fig. 2: Leon Lai (courtesy of Pacific Entertainment Ltd.)</th>
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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 per August 2000. If we can trust the names used by the Borsato fans, it is clear that the predominately populated by woman: 80 per cent. [3] Hong Kong fans make use of fa making it impossible to trace the gender balance. [4]

We have subsequently interviewed five fans of each star, in both cases four women.
Their age ranges from seventeen to forty-two, most of them (eight) are single. Fans through snowballing, with the help of the respective fan clubs. Following a thematic a data matrix (van Zoonen 1994), we have identified recurring themes in the discurs 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, language use on the Leon Lai site is more spectacular as a linguistic boundary and identification with Hong Kong, rather than China:
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 are generally used in the guest book, drawing, at the same time, a boundary among all non-Hong Kong-Cantonese users, including Chinese from mainland China and Taiwan. Of its ‘Speak Mandarin Campaign,’ the Singaporean government tries to discourage English use 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 post-Lai messages: While standard Chinese is abandoned in all these messages, English is often 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 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 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 symbolising the regional identity and allegiance of its speakers’ (Sandig and Selting

When looking at the content of the messages, one of the most striking features is the passion about music. The stars are more like local heroes. In the case of Marco Borsato, his support for 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 travelled to Kosovo. I understand that you are so deeply moved by everything and that you stand up for 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 I am proud to be a fan of someone who makes himself so available for War Child.

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 – 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-quote...

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 globalisation, 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 arrival of 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 get involved and return to his family, articulate and construct a local star not only as a star of noble acts, but also a normal person of true feelings. Besides the messages on Koningsdag in Enschede, many fans write as if they are simply relating to a person very close to them in their daily life (telling how they 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 ordinar star, it is hardly surprising that even more fans write in to link the more private, emot happenings in their life to Marco Borsato and sometimes to other fans. A one-minute 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 propor messages on the Marco Borsato site, only twenty messages are sent in by the Leon in relation to one single charitable act: Leon would drive a local billionaire around in or funds for charity. All these messages, however, only refer other fans to read related to local press.

Among the rest of the 241 messages, two major themes stand out: the concern with 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 longer. This became a point of discussion during this period because of the rumour that Leon agr for a regional reward, leading to some press comments on his integrity. Among the 1 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 There are simply too many annual music awards in Hong Kong, they are not re all. Leon is wise not to accept them. But this ‘Global Chinese Hit-list’ is adjudica
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 this case, namely local awards can be dismissed, but a ‘global’ event organised by ‘worth’ their local star’s participation. When it comes to winning an international battle 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 for the best Hong Kong actor hosted by a Japanese website during this period. Leon noticing that Leon lags behind Takeshi Kaneshiro, an actor of Japanese-Chinese de: 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 Take

-- Jojo

Such collaborative effort is indicative of the urgency to join forces and help their local for the local honour - in this case, in Japan, against a half-Japanese opponent. Index world is what Marco’s fans expect of a Dutch hero, fighting for local honour seems to Hong Kong mission. In this honourable mission, one does not find the other construc 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, orga informing one another - either by providing information directly or referring to other where Leon is. Unlike the Dutch fans who underline the home-coming of their star, it seem to be equally eager in telling everyone that Leon is or is not in town. During so invariably mention what Leon is actually doing - or working, to be exact. If fans of M would simply greet him home, their Hong Kong counterparts often add a working dirr home-coming. Mermaids’ message is typical:

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

What Mermaids refers to is the well-known commercial involvement of Leon in the pr Snoopy suitcases during that particular period - among the various advertising activi other sponsors. When he is not in Hong Kong, Leon’s absence is also discursively li 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 messa-
fans - the Leon invoked by this group of messages is someone who is busy flying and
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 messa-
contrast to the Marco site, is devoted to the kind of emotional expression as just quo-
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) fan-
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 a
(Englands 1992; Jenson, 1992; Hills 2002). In our study, two sets of discourse on such
feeling are most obvious in the interviews: among anonymous crowds and with fan-c
Regarding the former, concerts are invariably mentioned as an occasion invoking su-
sensation. Nok-ming[7], from Hong Kong, recalls:

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

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

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

Besides concerts, the community feeling is also constructed on a more personal and
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 bec:
friends. Some of them feel like aunties to me. We go to his concerts together, a
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 by talking for hours... Now it’s no longer only about Marco, like we spent a weekend 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, 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 fan community: its conflation with the family, particularly in the context of Hong Kong. Being 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 help with matters concerning Leon, like his clothes. Tze-ying’s daughter was as enthusiastic a fan before she started her full-time job.

Sometimes the respondents reiterate the stereotypical images of ‘obsessed individuals’ and ‘hysterical crowds’ as described by Jenson (1992), while distancing themselves from such images. Nok-ming decides against joining the fan club because she does not have ‘that kind of enthusiasm’. While Nathalie, on the other hand, observes that by taking up the fan club ‘job’, her attitude towards 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 feel 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 work performed by the two local stars receive enthusiastic approval from both groups of fans from 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 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 sh 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 I fans on their local hero, their Dutch counterparts construct Marco’s charity on anothe where involvement, emotion and humanity dominate. Unlike the Leon fans who spe physical difficulty Leon may encounter abroad, especially as a star, the Marco fans p on the emotional burden Marco has to go through, as a human being. Nathalie, for ir 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 touch a lot. I don’t know if you have seen the documentary. It was a small village, on 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 o Kong, the Marco fans are more ready to point out the domestic acts their local hero Netherlands. Nathalie, for instance, when asked if she wants Marco to do more over 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 global acts seems much less important than the humanitarianism he shows. Given t feeling he is, Marco would simply carry out his good deeds wherever it is, as articula In any case, while both groups of fans attach significance and support to the charitat local stars have been doing, how their notions of charity are constructed diverge - th ‘glorify’ his good deeds in terms of what they bring to himself (greatness) and his fell including the fans (honour), while the Marco fans ‘personalise’ his charitable work int 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, becomes 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 it. 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 apprised of by his fans likewise, for instance, visiting him. Erik:

Once I had this unique experience at his place, he came out unexpectedly with four of us. Marielle and I kept an eye on his little son, who was small, and wondered whether it’s okay to take a picture. Then the boy walked away, and I thought of canals 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 whether it’s okay to simply come 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 same in the Netherlands, but the star status is very relative and Marco hasn’t changed at all through the years. Marco is simply a person and that’s the way he approach him.

In Erik’s discourse, the ordinariness of Marco as a person is all the stronger because 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 street as Marco.

Marco knows that he actually can’t. He can’t walk in the street anonymously, but have seen him do that. If you didn’t know he’s a star, you wouldn’t tell. He simply comes across old ragged trousers ...

As underlined by Tessa’s discourse, Marco’s anonymous walk in the street becomes 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
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. 

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 Net 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 poss 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, th 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 moo 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 a 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 c 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. Or hand, as indicated by the quotes cited above, the Marco fans are more ready to volu replies, which, apart from echoing the general tenor of laying bare their feelings (like may also be anchored in the dominant discourse emphasising emotional expression contemporary Dutch society.

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

The Leon fans also do not foreground him as a person of feelings. Instead, he is a w 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 hardwork 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 everyon lips and keeps on working, quietly.

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

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

Compared to their Dutch counterparts who value the closeness of their local star far
inaccessibility of global ones, the Leon fan seem to be more able to negotiate distan-
separation with work and career - and, again like in their articulation of Leon's charit-
Chun-fai, like Fung-yi, would not mind Leon basing himself in another place if that w
popularity. Cherishing the possibility of Leon becoming a global star like Madonna or
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,
back honour (and money) to one’s family is not an alien thought in the context of Ho
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
Kong was reverted to Chinese rule, in 1997, the necessity of working hard for a bett
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 l
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 Le
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 f
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 n
clips of Leon, all of them choose those filmed on locations outside Hong Kong, such
Korea – signs of his outward expansion. In the case of the Marco fans, all of them pc
the localities within the Netherlands in the Marco video clips, like Bloemendaal, Leid
Rotterdam.

Conclusion

It is clear that both groups of fans have managed to create their own community aro
stars, whether in cyber or ‘real’ space – with similar and divergent characteristics. As
community is concerned, both show linguistic features reminiscent of their respective
large. While friendliness and rapport is generally displayed, the Leon community lea
information and opinions, but not in, conventionally speaking, private or emotional m
comparison with the various emotional exchanges in the Marco community. Such co
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.
communities, they are being constructed as a local hero who either go to save the w
fight for local honour (prize-winning). Fans’ beliefs in the local participation in global :
as in the local as home are at the same time being communicated. During the proce:
the local stars are invested with different character. While the perception of Marco B
ordinary person of feeling and humanitarianism is foregrounded, Leon Lai is largely 
an important someone who is busy flying around, both working and striving for honor
opinions on charity diverge: as far as the Dutch fans are concerned, their notion of cl
anchored in Marco’s feelings and humanity. On the other hand, their Hong Kong cou
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 fa
characterise Leon as an extraordinary worker. The Marco fans’ notion of ordinarines:
associated constructions of having feelings, being authentic and accessible, also lea
articulations of strong emotional ties to his music - entirely absent in the discourse of
Besides his good looks, Leon’s most remarkable character trait is work: his hardwork
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
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 (%
Debates on cultural globalisation (or Americanisation, for that matter) should not be 
cultural products (e.g. the musical form or content), about cultural icons (e.g. pop sta
cultural flows (e.g. the United States to the rest of the world); they must also be abou
practices of audiences. ‘Consumers’ of cultural products, cultural icons and cultural f
be taken as passive recipients, fanatics or even victims, but active participants in the
meaning in their daily life (Fiske 1992). Even when the music of Marco and Leon so
that of their global counterparts, even when they look not unlike their global counterp
fans ‘use’ them differently.

We do not wish to celebrate the local, and are aware of the danger of cultural essent
may be read from our analysis. It is important to acknowledge that these stars are pa
profoundly globalised political economy. They are contracted by global record compa
(Universal and Sony respectively), and provide for these companies a way to conquer
markets (Negus 1999; Hesmondhalgh 2002). In other words, the production of locall
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.

References


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[1] The authors would like to thank Sarah Ralph, Paul McDonald and Elizabeth Eva for their insightful and critical reading of an earlier version of this article.

[2] The incident has in turn sparked off a discussion on the (mal)practices and ethics of the 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. Further analysis in main text.

[4] To provide an additional checking-mechanism on our data, a brief follow-up study conducted in 2006, involving a comparative analysis of the fan websites of both stars, produced 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 lives of twenty-one local residents and turned an entire neighbourhood into scorching flames. 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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