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Me and the dragon: a lyrical engagement with the politics of Chineseness

Yiu Fai CHOW

ABSTRACT *Nationalistic songs are not rare in the pop music tradition of Hong Kong: from the anthemic, heroic-sounding songs as well as sentimental, folkish ballads, generally known as 'minzu gequ', in the 1970s and 1980s, to what I would call the neo-minzu gequ reinvented in trendier R&B or rap numbers during the turn of the century. For me, a cultural studies student and a cultural producer (lyric writer), the power of minzu gequ lies precisely in its tendency to privilege a particular performance of Chineseness by the tactic of excluding the marginal, be they foreign (mostly imperialistic) enemies or domestic dissidents, as well as the possibility of cultural resistance it offers. In 1980 I sang one; in 2005 I penned one. This essay is an inquiry of how 'I' have been dealing with issues of Chineseness through the pop lyrics I have created during the 're-nationalization' process of Hong Kong. Employing the tactics of writing against the grain and writing with a twist, I try to trouble dominant narratives on Chineseness. A central theme of this essay is to resist simplicity, to resist certain political or ideological attempts to simplify and nullify complexity into certain dominant narratives – by mobilizing the autobiographical 'I', in this case, embodied in the duality of cultural studies student-cum-producer. An autobiographical approach is adopted as a response to two major issues of cultural studies: the danger of theoreticism and the question 'What do cultural studies do'. This essay is a chronicle of how I, a lyrical writer, try to write what I have read from cultural studies into a cultural product. It is also an occasion to interpellate me, a cultural studies student, to read the product back into cultural studies.*

KEYWORDS: nationalistic songs, Chineseness, Cantopop, autobiographical approach, resistance

It was summer 1980. During an orientation camp, I, together with hundreds of other University of Hong Kong freshmen, was presented with a choice violent enough to pitch affinity against affinity. We were asked: do you consider yourself a Hong Konger or Chinese? It was the time when the city's political certainty as a British colony evaporated almost overnight, when London was preparing to 'revert' Hong Kong to Chinese rule. After a ritualistic show of hands, the evening ended with a collective singing of the campus hit of the year, the originally Taiwanese song 'Descendants of the Dragon':

In the ancient Orient, there is a dragon
Its name is China
In the ancient Orient, there are a people
They are all descendants of the dragon
Growing up in its giant footsteps
I have become a descendant of the dragon
Black eyes, black hair, yellow skin
Forever, descendants of the dragon.
(*'Descendants of the dragon'*,¹ 1978)

While these emotional verses chanted the soundtrack for a decade that was to see the conclusion of the Sino-British Talks and the preparation for the political Handover of Hong Kong, I was transported to a stage where, for the first time in my life, I was summoned to perform my national and cultural identity. It was obviously not enough for me to have black eyes, black hair and yellow skin, I must say it, sing it, perform it. Chineseness, I began to understand, is not merely a biological category but a social performance.

I was born in the 1960s. I grew up in Hong Kong constantly wondering why the 'official' Chinese I learned in school was different from the Cantonese Chinese I spoke with my family; why my mother had to ask someone to write her application letter for a telephone line in English so that the application would be sped up. My first exposure to cultural studies during my university days reframed such bewilderments into more concrete notions of power and contestation.

Alongside a career in the government, I asked a friend of mine who was already releasing pop music to try my lyrical potentials. It was probably a tactical move inspired by the cultural studies belief that, perhaps, I could do something to engage with dominant versions of truth being circulated in the society, that I could give a voice to my bewilderment as an outsider. It was 1988. Four years later, I became even more of an outsider, at least geographically, by moving to the Netherlands. There, I continued my lyric writing and resumed my (academic) studies in popular culture, travelling not only between two localities, but translating between my double roles as a cultural studies student and a cultural producer. As a cultural studies student, I learn how to be self-reflexive about the historical consciousness and contemporary conjuncture we inhabit. As a cultural producer, specifically as a lyric writer for commercial music, I thrive as a meaning-maker, moving between the spaces of contingencies and contradictions offered by a playful but potentially mattering site of cultural production.

This essay is about my experience in this duality. It is, to borrow Carolyn Steedman's metaphor, a journey into the landscape to see myself (Steedman 1986). If a master may brush off ugly lines of power and contestation from a Chinese landscape painting, this journey is to close up onto the small figures spotted here and there, regaining, hopefully, 'a sense of people's complexity of relationship to the historical situations they inherit' (Steedman 1986: 19). I feel the need to ask 'What does it mean by being Chinese?' at a time when nationalistic sentiments, sustained by simple narratives such as the 'upsurge of the grand state' or the Beijing Olympic Games 2008, have been increasingly employed not only to organize national cohesion but also to feed in global diasporic longing for a perceived homeland. Such celebration of Chineseness conflates with a crucial ideological shift during the 1990s, when the Chinese Communist Party replaced its legitimizing ideology from communism to a market-driven nationalism (Barmé 1999; Gries 2004; Hughes 2006). It is this more recent, legitimizing version of Chineseness constructed during the process of China's de-imperialization, national unification and modernization, that I am engaging with.² While contemporary popular culture is one of its major construction sites (Barmé 1999; Dai 2001), such Chineseness is historically predicated on the 'universal chauvinism' sustained by the structure of the Han-centred Us versus the rest as Other (Chen 2006; Gries 2004; Hughes 2006).

At the same time, popular culture offers opportunities and moments for resistance, subversion and critique (Fiske 1989). A central theme of this essay is to resist simplicity, to resist certain political or ideological attempts to simplify and nullify complexity into certain dominant narratives – by mobilizing the autobiographical 'I', in this case, embodied in the duality of cultural studies student-cum-producer. This essay is therefore about contestations of interpretation, between the personal and the official. As Steedman puts it, 'Personal interpretations of past time ... are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture' (Steedman 1986: 6). In that sense, this essay is not meant to attempt a historical account of the power relations between Hong Kong and mainland China through

the lens of pop music. It is more my own remembering of what I have done and what I have failed to do, with all the possibilities of resistance to and complicity with dominant narratives. This account favours 'the messy, subjective life of the historical agent rather than his/her more "objective" accomplishments or conditions', a shift from 'fact to the experience of fact' (Pollack 1998: 18). My purpose is to stake a singularizing claim of identity through critical personal self-reflexivity. 'Singularity' here suggests that this is not intended to be generalizable to other people's experience; this reflection is of this time, in the spaces I occupy, relevant primarily to the dual role I have and hopefully to our critical understanding of 'Chineseness'.³

Nationalistic songs

Songs like 'Descendants of the Dragon' are not rare in Hong Kong's pop music tradition: from the anthemic, heroic-sounding songs and sentimental, folkish ballads, generally known as '*minzu gequ*', in 1970s and 1980s, to what I would call the neo-*minzu gequ* reinvented in trendier R&B or rap numbers during the turn of the century.⁴ The difficulty in translating *minzu* to English is noteworthy. *Minzu* generally denotes 'the people', with an emphasis on lineage, more than race, which, however, tends to conflate with 'the nation'. In the standard English–Chinese dictionary used in mainland China, the entry 'nationalistic' is given two Chinese equivalents: nation-alistic (*guojia zhuyi*), and people-listic (*minzu zhuyi*). While *minzu gequ* is often refined in the mainland Chinese musical context into the 'ethnic' and the 'nationalistic' – with the purpose of, respectively, preserving and promoting the 'ethnic minorities' and the 'nation', those *minzu gequ* that secure public airplay in Hong Kong are predominantly of the second type.

Although never really dominant in the local pop scene, these nationalistic songs appear frequently enough to carve out their own genre in a market otherwise monopolized by 'love songs'. This unusual cultural phenomenon, however, has attracted rather limited academic interest. In an edited volume on Hong Kong popular lyrics, Mei-kwun Cheung discusses the role these songs play in constructing a sense of home and nation prior to the Handover in 1997 (Cheung 1997). Wai-chung Ho charted the tides of nationalistic and anti-nationalistic songs in the local pop scene to review the sociopolitical relations between Hong Kong and Beijing (Ho 2000). For me, the power of *minzu gequ* lies in its tendency to privilege a particular performance of Chineseness by the tactic of excluding the marginal, be they foreign (mostly imperialistic) enemies or domestic dissidents, as well as the possibility of cultural resistance it offers.

The term *minzu gequ*, a common genre marker in music sites and shops in mainland China, has become a discussion item during the official CCTV Youth Singing Contest 2006. One of the adjudicators, classical vocalist Jiang Dawei, noted the decreasing ethnic (*minzu*) element and suggested changing the term *minzu gequ* to Chinese songs (*zhongguo ge*).⁵ In a related report posted on the CCTV site, writer Zhang Liqiang comments: 'How we are going to deal with the term *minzu gequ* may be controversial ... [but *minzu gequ*] possesses the core element of our nation's musical culture development – Chineseness' (Zhang 2006). This is, in short, the predicament I am situated in when I, as a professional lyricist, am commissioned to work on projects that would force me to walk into the dangerous stadium of *minzu gequ* and do a performance of Chineseness. Informed by my understanding of power and resistance, should I take a bow and go? Or, is it possible to masquerade in a line or two and intervene in my own manner? I tried. In 1980 I sang a *minzu gequ*; by 2004 I penned one.

Another approach

I was (and still am) intrigued, and troubled, by the role such nationalistic songs might play in the construction of Chineseness, especially in connection with the so-called 're-national-

ization' process of Hong Kong (Erni 2001). More specifically, the concern here is how certain Chinese texts (song lyrics) might be deployed to frame Chinese history and identity in the narrow terms of nationalism, thereby confining the possibility of defining Chineseness in other terms such as gender, class or regional spaces (Callahan 2006). While thinking how to theorize on the relation between Hong Kong popular culture and issues of Chineseness, I was reminded of the danger of theoreticism (Hall 1996; Wright 2003) not so much in cultural studies but in myself. What possible contribution may my theorization make when many of my scholarly colleagues have been delivering valuable works in similar veins (Abbas 1997; Chow 2000; Lee 2002)? And, ultimately, what possible contribution? To what?

I thought I had one answer to offer: me and my lyric writing. For almost two decades, I have been writing lyrics for Cantopop (or Cantonese pop songs) in Hong Kong, and more recently, also in Mandarin or *Putonghua*, for the Greater China market. Instead of launching a third-person study on *minzu gequ*, I think it should be more my take to investigate: how 'I' have been dealing with issues of Chineseness through the pop lyrics I have created? More specifically, how this 'I' – someone growing up in colonial Hong Kong, now living 'overseas', in short, someone who can never take Chineseness for granted and whose Chineseness is never taken for granted – seeks to reclaim my speaking position on what is Chinese, and resist dominant, exclusive versions of Chineseness through acts of lyric writing?

Before embarking on such an inquiry, I want to elaborate on two points, which make my preference for an autobiographical approach more than a preference. First: as Wright argues, 'an autobiographical approach is employed precisely to be specific and in the attempt to avoid the pitfalls of overgeneralization and the authority of authenticity' (Wright 2003: 805). Such pitfalls seem to be particularly pertinent in discussions on Chineseness where collective experiences are often overgeneralized and authenticated into collective identity. Scholars in area or sinological studies, in particular, are prone to speak in such collective terms of Chinese identity and culture.⁶ In mainland China, as Callahan observes, academics have also been making their case for 'Chineseness', by essentializing and collectivizing values, traditions and culture (Callahan 2005).⁷ It should be more appropriate, I believe, to speak as me, insisting on my individual experience whose singularity is meant to wrestle with the collective. The singularity is to relieve Chineseness of 'pretensions to a "master narrative"' to become a 'somewhat humbler quilt of many voices and local hopes' (Pollock 1998: 18).

Second: I want to take up Meaghan Morris' question 'What do cultural studies do?' (Morris 1997). If academic writing is meant to intervene in reality and to express any discontent to that reality, so is creative writing. As both a cultural studies student and a cultural producer, I often wonder how I am supposed to make a difference in the 'real world'. Far more often, however, I would wonder if it is possible at all. If strategies of engendering cultural studies as praxis would include empirical research and performative acts (Wright 2003: 816), this very inquiry should serve as an interface between the two. This essay is a chronicle of how I, a lyrical writer, try to write what I have read from cultural studies into a cultural product. It is also an occasion to interpellate me, a cultural studies student, to read the product back into cultural studies. As Chua Beng Huat reminds us, 'The life of a consumer product is very short' (Chua 2003: vii). My wish is to show how cultural studies may matter to such a short life, first of all, by giving birth to at least certain cultural products, and, in the final analysis, in resurrecting such cultural products from its consumerist existence into more endurable knowledge. This is the cultural studies student and cultural producer collaborating to try to understand what cultural studies do.

Re-nationalization I: descendants of the dragon

If there is something from my childhood and adolescent years that remains a chief concern in my writing, it is the tactics of dealing with and dealing in dominant cultures that are so

characteristic of living in Hong Kong. These are the tactics of those who do not have claims to territorial propriety or cultural centrality. (Chow 1993: 25)

When I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, English and Mandarin songs dominated my life. For a long time, I was served a daily diet of school anthems and Christian hymns, all in English. Sometimes we would also practise Chinese songs, in Mandarin, probably from a pre-war, pre-communist China. Again, very occasionally, we would also learn songs that must have been translated because the tones of Cantonese lyrics did not correspond to the notes of the melody, as required by the Cantonese listening habit. It was, in short, silly to sing in Cantonese. And I was growing into the hierarchy of languages and cultures, of the 'in-between' status of Hong Kong Chinese under British administration. But then, slowly, I opened my eyes to local television dramas and my ears to their theme songs, ushering in a localization process that finally ensured the cultural and market space for Hong Kong pop and a whole new genre defined by its locality and its local tongue: Cantopop.

The localization of pop in Hong Kong was intrinsically political, given its linguistic, cultural and political relationship to Britain and mainland China (Cheung 1997; Ho 2000). It was, however, never really politicized – until the wave of *minzu gequ* swept over the city by the end of 1970s and early 1980s, precisely the period defined by Deng Xiaoping's concept of 'One Country Two Systems' (introduced in 1978), the Sino-British Negotiations and the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984). For the second time in my life, I was wondering how I was supposed to fill in the nationality blank: the word 'Chinese' sounded as unlikely as 'British'. It was during such first moments of transition, of a sudden loss of a voice to articulate ourselves amidst the sovereignty negotiations between two nations, that I heard the city's young men and women start to sing songs such as 'Descendants of the Dragon'.⁸ And I was thrust into the dilemma: do I consider myself a Hong Konger or Chinese? Back in 1980, the freshmen of that university year, in a movingly collective voice, articulated and thereby defined ourselves the following way:

Black eyes, black hair, yellow skin
Forever, descendants of the dragon.
(‘Descendants of the dragon’, 1978)

Were we singing in a grand European-style hall or somewhere in the lawn with campfires? I am not sure. I don't even recall if I joined in the singing. I am always surprised why some people could be so sure about so much, even their memories and histories, even their descent, destiny and enemies. What I remember was that among our group members, only two of us raised our hands to declare that we were Hong Kongers. It was a choice fabricated by the necessity of a choice. I felt betrayed, belligerent, eager to make a point, ending up making a person. To use Anthony Fung's words, I reckon my tactic at that particular historical juncture of mine and perhaps not only mine was to appropriate a local identity label 'to resist encroachment of the national' (Fung 2001: 591).

Re-nationalization II: home and nation

As the negotiations between Beijing and London over the future of Hong Kong seeped into the consciousness of the city, *minzu gequ* occupied more and more air time and public space. While the cultural backgrounds of these nationalistic songs will be identified in the following account, my primary concern is confined to how they were conceived and received in Hong Kong, constructing, I remember, at least two imaginaries: a home and a nation.⁹ Such construction might be a personal response to the times Hong Kong was experiencing, like Ivy Ku, a local sing-a-song writer, who released a number of *minzu gequ* during the 1980s. Although she had never been to China at that point of her music writing, Ivy Ku told me she created those songs with 'true feelings for China' (private conversation, 8 November 2006).

Less personally, local record companies were formulating new strategies to correspond to the changing political and economic relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong. As Jolland Chan, a veteran producer and lyric writer, recalled, record companies with local capital (such as Crown and Wing Hang Records) – unlike major international labels (such as Polygram and EMI) – were consciously promoting certain artists to the Chinese market by including tracks that expressed a ‘positive attitude toward the motherland’. Citing Hong Kong singer Cheung Ming-min as an example, Chan hinted at a central directive from Beijing, saying ‘Cheung was given lots of opportunities by CCTV’ (private conversation, 8 November 2006).

On the ‘home’ front, songs hit the charts where a rustic, idealized, vaguely Chinese or sinified space was carved out, luring audiences in Hong Kong to a home at last. These sentimental ballads, with their vivid invocation of a landscape quite alien to local urban dwellers, were singing nostalgia for something we were supposed to cherish, somewhere we were supposed to belong. But I did not. My landscape, crowded with skyscrapers and shopping streets, was more chaotic, noisy and contaminated. These ballads, pregnant with folkish melancholy and hints of homecoming, were celebrations of a more ‘pure’ brand of Chineseness:

Walking on a country trail
The old cow returning at dusk is my companion
Blue sky and the setting sun on my chest
Its colours are the clothes of the evening clouds
Carrying a plough on their shoulders
Farmer boys are singing
And they are blowing a *dizi*¹⁰
Remotely, cheerfully
Sing a country song
Let your thoughts free in the evening breeze
Let your loneliness go with the evening breeze
Let’s forget everything on a country trail.
(‘A country trail’, 1978)

While Ye, a Taiwanese folk song veteran, was known for invoking idyllic landscape as a commentary on the increasing industrialization of his native Taiwan, ‘A country trail’ was perceived by me and many of my contemporaries as what a Chinese home promised to offer – freedom, community, an opportunity to start afresh.¹¹ The conflation between ‘A country trail’ and mainland China was also facilitated because a major performer of this and another of Ye’s songs in Hong Kong was Cheung Ming-min, who, as noted earlier, was generally seen to be Beijing’s favourite. Always donning himself in costumes associated with the traditional and the revolutionary China, Cheung was responsible for popularizing many more explicitly nationalistic songs, including ‘I am Chinese’, which will be discussed later.

And then, sometimes, the homecoming story would be enshrined in a personal narrative where home and nation became one. Such songs were making a certain past desirable, a ‘Cultural China’ imaginable (Eperjesi 2004). To paraphrase Chris Berry, it is not so much China that makes these songs, but these songs help make China (Berry 2000: 160). ‘Father’s straw shoes’, another of Ye’s songs popularized by Cheung in Hong Kong, is a good example:

Straw shoes are the boat, father is the sail
Carrying grandmother’s blessings
And a seventeen-year-old dream
With high hopes it embarks its journey
Sailing to the shores of Yellow River

Loading tons of yellow earth
 When night falls, it anchors at Qingshazhang
 When dawn breaks, it heads off to Shanhaiguan
 ...
 Straw shoes are the boat, father is the sail
 Listening to a faraway home calling
 Carrying half a century's drifting, the weary boat is about to come to the harbour.
 ('Father's straw shoes', 1981)

If home building is about nostalgia for an imaginary past, another major stream of *minzu gequ* during this period of Hong Kong's re-nationalization, is about nation building, about fighting for a better future. While the national signifier 'China' was generally absent in the home building songs, making way for a more cultural logic of inclusion (country trail, old cow, *dizi*, boat, sail, Yellow River), China and Chinese were the key terms in, for instance, 'I am Chinese', which was written by Taiwanese composer and director Liu Jiachang. While this song was intended as a celebration of Chinese nationalism in the political frame of Republic of China, the nation was conflated with mainland China, again through the mediation of Cheung Ming-min who performed this song extensively not only in Hong Kong but also in mainland China:¹²

Silence is not cowardice, tolerance is not indifference
 The traditional Confucian thoughts will guide our footsteps
 Eight years of bitter resistance against the invaders testified to our tough race
 Not until the very last moment, we would never declare war
 When I could bear no more, I would step forward
 I will always remember, to unify China, to restore our territories
 Wherever I was born, I am Chinese
 Wherever I am, I swear I will die a 'Chinese ghost'.¹³
 ('I am Chinese', 1982)

I couldn't help looking over my shoulders to see if all the Chinese ghosts surviving all the years of Chinese history would be right there, behind me, watching. I think they are. And the scariest moment is when they conflate into a monolithic Ghost powerful enough to dictate who is Chinese and who is not. It's no longer the Chinese becoming ghosts, but rather the ghosts becoming the Chinese. The Confucian tradition, the resistance against foreign enemy, the unification, the steadfastness – what a bizarre act of exorcism it is, to expel all the non-conformist, the non-national, the non-committed to create a willing Chinese Ghost called Nation. The nation narrative is nothing more than a ghost story, I think. No wonder you need to be brave. 'Brave Chinese', the first *minzu gequ* hit in Cantonese, was created for a television drama series broadcast in Hong Kong at the end of 1982. While the Sino-British negotiation became the prime concern of the city, this drama series, set against a backdrop of Japanese encroachment in Republican China with a patriotic student as its heroine, gained widespread popularity. So did its theme song, which was performed by its main actress Liza Wang, who, six years later, was appointed by Beijing to represent Hong Kong and Macau in the National People's Congress:

My beautiful hometown was tarnished, my picturesque lake was saddened
 Take a look at the Chinese land, a spirit of righteousness is rising
 I vow to turn my suffering into anger
 Be a brave Chinese, use your hot blood to resist the enemy
 March forward, march forward
 Tens of thousands of us become one, fearless of difficulties, dissipating darkness
 Be a brave Chinese, use your hot blood to wake up the Chinese ghost
 Tens of thousands of us become one, fearless of difficulties, dissipating darkness.
 ('Brave Chinese', 1982)

Become one, such a tempting formula. For the mainland audience, as Dai Jinhua observes, these “‘returned patriots’ confirmed the integration and interpolation of the motherland by singing these pop songs’ (Dai 2001: 172). And for the Hong Kongers at the time of imminent changes, we willed ourselves to be brave, to be Chinese, to become one with tens of thousands of those who at least looked like us. But it is not easy. It necessitates a logic of empowerment by conjuring up an enemy, the other, be it the Japanese during the Second World War, or the colonizers since the imperialistic encroachments. It also necessitates a submission of the part of us alien to the whole, the part of the city alien to the nation, the part of the future alien to the past. Perhaps the bravery is to chop this alienation off to fit in, and the hot blood one can use probably sheds from such an act of self-mutilation. For many people in Hong Kong, there was no other choice but to emigrate, feeding into a variety of diasporic imagination that negotiates with the ‘export of Chinese nationalism’ (Sun 2005: 69), from challenging China as the centre of Chineseness (Tu 1994), foregrounding notions of transnationalism (Ong and Nonini 1997; Ma and Cartier 2002), to categorically questioning the necessity of Chineseness itself (Ang 2001). I left Hong Kong somewhat later than the first wave of emigration, to witness how the rest of the city drove on with that powerful ‘Formula One’ to swerve through twists and turns of the decade. Until 4 June 1989.

Re-nationalization III: performing acts (i) – writing against the grain

Minzu gequ reached its height in the year 1982, when both ‘I am Chinese’ and ‘Brave Chinese’ were listed on Radio Television Hong Kong’s Top 10 Chinese Pop Songs of the Year.¹⁴ With the signing of the Joint Sino-British Declaration in 1984 and the future of Hong Kong decided, the local pop scene saw the emergence of a number of musical groups creating hit songs exploring, among others, issues of ‘post-colonial identifications’ (Chu 2000). I started collaborating with Tatming Pair,¹⁵ an electronic duo, in 1988. The next year, pro-democracy demonstrations at Tiananmen Square were suppressed with violence, shattering a dream into thousands of questions. What does it mean to be a brave Chinese? What is Chinese? What have the Chinese done to fellow Chinese? Who are the enemies? I was staying in London during the entire crisis. Like many others in the city, I joined in rallies to cheer, to support, and eventually to mourn. When the turmoil started settling down into a thickness of post-Tiananmen critiques and re-critiques, I learned from my demonstration days that I actually found it difficult to scream and shout the way demonstrators were supposed to. I learned at least two things about my position in activism and resistance: that I should continue my activism in words rather than in the street; and that I am scared of any unison of voices that silences other possible voices. In 1990, Tatming Pair released a new album; we had to make a response:

The heaven is threatening with flames.
The land is suffocated with words.
The wind is flaring up clouds of violet.
The people are embracing the dread.
Who will arch his bow
And shoot the tongues of fire?
Who will steal the elixir
And fly to the moon to escape her desire?

Want to complain to the heaven?
But the heaven is not to be questioned.
Want to curse destiny?
But destiny is not to be questioned.
(‘Don’t question the heaven’, 1990)

In this song, I invoked a cursed landscape with Chinese mythical figures and classical idiom to allude to the post-massacre China and to question the ideology of silence, of acceptance, conveniently assigned to be Chinese values and traditions, popularly known as 'the heaven' (*tian*) or destiny. I wanted to question not only the political system, but also the 'culture' that sustains it. The title and major theme of the song was borrowed from a poem written by Qu Yuan (±340 BC – ±278 BC) whose honest but bitter advice to the regime of his time earned him a life of frustrations, pain and finally suicide. Legend has it that his poem was originally entitled '*wen tian*', literally 'ask heaven', but the authorities worshipped, or feared '*tian*' to such an extent that it would be total disrespect to place '*tian*' at the end of the title – it had to come first. The title became '*tian wen*' ('heaven ask'). I knew I could avenge the censored scholar and revert to the title he intended. But that would be lying to the time we were experiencing; I decided to keep the twisted and yet more revealing title, to secretly ask: what has changed in these centuries of Chinese history? What kind of 'centuries-old curse' is this Chineseness? What sort of 'traditions' make the Chinese of our time accept what is thrust onto them? What I wanted to do was not to retrieve the meaning of Chineseness in Qu Yuan's or other dynastic time, but to question contemporary, dominant versions of Chineseness, which are often said to be grounded in history. If indeed the Chinese have 5000 years of history, what historical baggage have we succeeded? That would be my question to heaven.

After the song was released, it caused 'considerable discussion in the society' (Wong 1989) and most critics took up those issues on history and Chineseness. Chi Ching, for instance, asks: 'Where is the Chinese courage? Does it only lie in the mythic world?' (Chi 1990). Elvin Wong writes: 'Although the question has remained the same for 5,000 years, we have to keep on asking, because we haven't got the answer' (Wong 1989). 'Don't question the heaven' became the Best Chinese Pop Song of 1990, according to RTHK. But Tatming never got the chance to stage concerts in mainland China in the coming years. In 2005, Anthony Wong, the lead vocalist of Tatming, opened their reunion concert in the Hong Kong Coliseum with 'Don't question the heaven' (Figure 1).

One year later, Tatming finally had their first mainland concert, in Shanghai. This opening song was taken out from the final rundown, shortly before the concert was to take place. The rundown, I was told, had passed the official screening but was revised by the organizer at the last minute 'just to play safe'.¹⁶

My collaboration with Tatming and, later after their suspension, with Anthony Wong, has offered me opportunities to try to trouble dominant narratives on Chineseness. If, to borrow Duara's observation, a certain narrative (for instance, of descent) succeeds in privileging certain cultural practices as the constitutive principles of a community (Duara 1999), I think my job is to (at least attempt to) deliver some potential 'counter-narratives' from Hong Kong (on the margins of Cultural China) popular culture (on the margins of Chinese Culture). My tactic of resistance, in short, is to write against the grain. Thanks to Tatming and Anthony's subversive desire, the local society's pre-Handover anxiety and the music industry's relative openness (or, some would argue, shrewdness to market such anxiety), I was given the space to produce a number of lyrical texts on this tactical line.

Three years after the student demonstrations, I wrote some lyrics for Anthony's solo project in which I attempted to critique the crackdown and Beijing's refusal to 'apologize' from the perspective of patriarchy. If Confucius, or Chinese tradition, was supposed to cherish proper piety from sons to fathers, from subjects to leaders, my question would be: don't you remember when you were a son, a subject? The notion of a rebellious son was also meant to disrupt the dominant framing of the Handover as 'return', particularly as a depoliticized metaphor of a prodigal son returning to the family to which he should belong.¹⁷ More personally, it was my own rebellion to the pious sentiments of 'Father's straw shoes' released precisely a decade earlier. 'How great thou art' was my writing against patriarchy and power:

Figure 1. Tatming Pair performing 'Don't question the heaven' (courtesy of People Mountain People Sea).

Oh father, father, have you never committed a mistake?
Oh father, father, have you never refused to budge?
Yesterday you were proud when you fought the crazy prejudices
And now you say I am too rebellious
I am too naïve.
(*'How great thou art'*, 1992)

'Let's play again when the new century comes', released in 1995, two years before Hong Kongers became nationally Chinese, was written amidst fear of forgetting and the absurdity of remembering. It was the time when the local administration was busy preparing for the Handover Ceremony and the city was nervously struggling with the inclusion to and marginalization from the Chinese 'national imaginary' (Abbas 1997). I wanted to articulate one more time my indulgence with the past, reluctance to accept the present, confidence to the future, all of which was, after all, as naïve and sincere as a child's game; the big guys were up there, deciding everything. *Fragrance* was my allusion to the Fragarant Harbour, what 'Hong Kong' was supposed to mean:

Still trying to distinguish the fading fragrance,
I remember how the flowers flid with grace.
We were so indulgent in the games we played
That we didn't even notice the weather changed
On a particular day.

I remember how we played among the flowers.
Our laughter was so happy.
I remember how we took a deep breath
And dashed though one wonderful century.

Now, I am afraid everything will be forgotten soon.
 Our remembrance becomes absurd, yet beautiful.
 Now, I am no longer playing with you,
 Shall we make a date?
 Let's play again when the new century comes.
 ('Let's play again when the new century comes', 1995)

And then, in 1996, Tatming reunited briefly to release an album commemorating their meeting 10 years earlier, which includes this song, 'A black moon in gusty wind'. We wrote two versions: the Sodom (Cantonese) version speaks with the voice of those who stay behind in the sin city:

I go to hell, you to heaven
 This very night, our city may be even more glamorous
 But the moment you leave, don't ever look back

In the Gomorrah (Mandarin) version, those who leave sing:

I don't have time to take away everything
 This very night, would the city be more beautiful?
 You are behind my back, may I turn around?
 ('A black moon in gusty wind', 1996)

'A black moon in gusty wind', a crystallization of the many conversations between me, who left, and Anthony, who stayed, did not cast any serious shadows on the ongoing festive preparations leading to the Handover Ceremony. This song about migration, about the anxiety of leaving and staying, of the city which was about to become Chinese, did not stir up much discussion even though many Hong Kong people would have migrated by then. It was also one of my last, increasingly scarce, attempts to deliver counter-narratives to the celebrations of Chineseness from the margins of Hong Kong. The post-1997 economic difficulties, generally known as the Asian Crisis, succeeded in replacing, or at least displacing, the city's political angst with a more fundamental onslaught of vulnerability: how do I keep my job? When we live for the moment, it is embarrassing, if not downright cruel, to think of history. It was not the time to ponder issues of Chineseness, when the people of Hong Kong were entering a post-colonial reality that required them not only to accept Chineseness as their political, official identity, but also to embrace it as their economic, pragmatic alliance to secure a better livelihood. As John Erni puts it, 'Hong Kong is measuring its supposed "inferiority" against a modernizing and capitalizing China' (Erni 2001: 396).

Sharing what Wang describes as the Taiwanese 'anxiety over the "China Global" as an encompassing transnational structure that either swallows Taiwan in its stomach or elbows Taiwan out of the international society' (Wang 2004: 269), I turn my gaze away from the centre, to the south. During the last few years, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has been promoting a more specific alliance with its immediate mainland neighbours to form an economic entity, geographically southern. While the Pearl River Delta project is carving itself into the public mind, I am thinking of my private act of carving. If it does not make much sense to launch a frontal critique of the powerful totality called Chineseness, should I try to carve out some cleavages from within? Could I interrupt the widening Chinese boundaries by inserting a 'Southern' identification? In 2005, Tatming Pair included this song in their 20th anniversary album:

Forgotten your snowstorms
 Forgotten your hidden tongues
 Forgotten
 You are perhaps a mythical bird from the North
 That never flies away

I would rather stay in the south
And dance till I can't

You have your bright expectations
I have my secret passions
If we fall in love, we will only waste it
You will always remember
I will always forget
There is nothing but a ballroom
And the currency is a kiss.
(*'Ballroom of the south'*, 2005)

Opening with a series of forgetting acts, this song was meant to acknowledge the beginning of a new period, a new future where southern Hong Kong must live on under the Beijing regime up in the north. For the rest of the song, however, I employed a binary structure in which a 'you/North'-line would always be punctuated by an 'I/South'-line articulating longings not necessarily oppositional but categorically different. I knew I could not ignore – but I could write against – the *fait accompli* of one nation, one people, by suggesting different destinies. The North, or the centre of power, may be as inscrutable, immutable, even indestructible as a mythical bird that never flies away. The South, nonetheless, would rather be a ballroom, a locality of pleasure, transaction and above all transience. Given the increasing economic integration of the South, I was hoping to invoke a commercial, almost frivolous Southern identification,¹⁸ as a possible source of alliance against a politicized version of Chineseness, which predicates on a certain past, monolithic and serious.

Re-nationalization IV: performative acts (ii) – writing with a twist

'Ballroom of the south' was the second plug of Tatming's new album. Enjoying a reasonable amount of airplay and becoming a minor hit, it never unnerved the way 'Don't question the heaven' did.¹⁹ Once again I realized it was not only the city that was summoned to deal with the new post-colonial reality, but me too, as a lyricist. 'The relationship to China can no longer be oppositional in the old way' (Abbas 2001: 624), I agree with Abbas. I couldn't only write against the grain when my fellow Hong Kongers, for instance, warmed themselves to moments of Chinese glory (such as Beijing's successful bid for the 2008 Olympics and the completion of the first Chinese space mission) just as eagerly as they denounced incidences of Chinese shame (such as the initial cover-up of SARS and the exportation of intoxicated products to Hong Kong). I have the feeling that Hong Kong people have learned the trick to claim and celebrate Chineseness quite selectively. And it is not always harmless. As recently as 2005, tens of thousands of Chinese took to the streets to demonstrate against the Japanese who were alleged to twist history to their advantages. Similar demonstrations were organized in Hong Kong. When a democracy activist took the occasion to urge Beijing to respect its own history, he was jeered.²⁰

Could I also claim Chineseness and twist it to my advantage? Like the city at large, the pop music industry in Hong Kong functions increasingly in a new economic landscape where the mainland market dominates. Local pop idols could not rely on the older position of Hong Kong as the nodal point of global Chinese youth culture. They need to establish local popularity and extend it to the mainland to be real stars. Some of the Hong Kong-based stars have become so successful that they would be regularly invited to become 'spokesman' for official events or campaigns in Mainland China, such as Leon Lai and Nicolas Tse.

In 2002, the first time China qualified for the final rounds of the World Cup, Leon Lai was invited by the Beijing authorities to create a theme song. He asked me to contribute the lyrical content. I was reminded of that summer night, more than two decades ago, when

I was forced to raise my hand to the identity question: Chinese or Hong Konger. There and then, many of us wanted to be part of a grand narrative called China. And, for me, the fundamentally intriguing question remains: how else? I knew it didn't feel right to be in the minority, to be stripped of the power to define by myself what is a Chinese. And now, when I was confronted with the chance to speak to the centre, I knew I had to speak like the centre – after all, it would be a song to celebrate Chineseness written in 'official' Chinese.²¹ How else? Could I speak against the centre at the same time?

I couldn't resist the temptation, or challenge, to try the 'how else'. Locked in this triangular tension between speaking to, like and against the centre, I tried to write with a twist. If my collaboration with Tatming and Anthony Wong is (whenever possible) intent on interrogating Chineseness, my other tactic, looking back, would be more like claiming Chineseness in order to disclaim. If the typical disclaimer – for instance 'I am not a racist but...' – is first to negate, then assert, my kind of disclaimer is first to assert, then negate. I am a Chinese, but... My identity as a Hong Kong Chinese living in the Netherlands also complicated my speaking position, invoking hopefully a sense of hesitancy among the audience in anything I claimed as Chinese. For the World Cup theme song, I tried this:

Chasing after each other, full of possibilities
 The world is like a ball, full of competition
 Run and seek,
 Real are those who join the game
 If the gate is made of iron, I am a man of steel
I want your love your love your love

Lay your lay your love on me lay your love
 With your love I will be brave
Lay your lay your love on me lay your love
 With your love I am always charged up.
 ('Charged up!', 2002; italicized lines sung in English)

Confined by the clear intent of such a theme song, I had to create something positive, upbeat, to boost up the national spirit. The verse quoted here, for instance, could very well be understood as a nationalistic summon to the Chinese people to be 'a man of steel,' to 'run and seek' national glory in the international arena. In all probability, the preferred reading of that song must be that way if it did secure the endorsement by the Chinese commissioning authorities. In that sense, I was complicit in this official campaign of Chinese nationalism. In an attempt, however, to open up some space for negotiated reading, I inserted certain twists. First, by avoiding words associated with victory, I tried to twist the aim of the game from winning to joining. If nationalistic sentiments were meant to boost a more militant spirit of fighting and winning, I tried to contain them by invoking a less predictable world of participation and possibilities. Second, by injecting the words 'your love' in a way that would also suggest personal, romantic, rather than national, love, I tried to twist a song of national pride into a mundane love number – I am Chinese, but I am also a mundane lover. When Leon Lai sings 'I want your love', does he want the love of the motherland or the love of a girl? Ambivalence, I thought, would be a good antidote to straightforward nationalistic longing. That some of the chorus lines were sung in English, not Chinese, were also meant to make it more problematic to take the Chinese nation or people as the object of love in this presumably nationalistic song.

My attempt to add twists to the dominant narrative remains, quite often, an attempt. For the World Cup song, it was 'untwisted' at least by the accompanying video, which opened with a collective waving of the red Chinese flags. Sequences of ping pong – communist China's ticket not only to the world of sports, but also to the community of nations – were montaged in to deliver a visual prophecy of China's achievement in the arena of football and

perhaps not football alone. Then, a Chinese player, in his yellow team shirt, kicks a ball right in front of an aeroplane in the process of taking off. The ball swerves literally around the globe and flies through different European and American national and cultural icons. Somewhere during its journey to the West, the ball, amidst a crowd of cheering Chinese children wearing red t-shirts bearing 'China' (in English) on their front, waving red Chinese flags, manages to set loose the hour and minute hands of Big Ben in London, and finally knock off a gargoyle apparently belonging to the Chrysler Building. The music video of 'Charged up!' concludes with Leon Lai, in a space suit, floating out there, flashing a winning smile to the world below him – slightly more than one year before Yang Liwei became China's first astronaut and 'Space Hero'. The officially sanctioned visuals of 'Charged up!', in short, were to fix the celebration of Chineseness without the 'but'.

Nicolas Tse, representing the newer generation of Hong Kong stars, thrives on the re-nationalization process and operates in China even more intensively than his predecessors. When Beijing continues promoting its brand of Chineseness-cum-nationalism, not surprisingly in the site of sports, Nicolas Tse became the younger spokesman for a number of national events. Two years after the World Cup song, I was commissioned to write the lyrics for a Nicolas song that was to become the theme song of the 'Chinese Champion League'. Again, I participated in an official campaign to promote nationalistic feelings. 'Hurry up!' could and would be read by many as an urge to hurry up and demonstrate that the Chinese are strong, heroic and proud. But for what? If I confessed to having injected a substantial dosage of urgency in this song to make it work as a national spirit booster, I also hoped to twist the direction of urgency to one's own chance and destiny. 'This is my time, this is my game,' not ours. If I was reproducing hegemonic narratives of nationalism that tend to embody national chance and destiny in its people – epitomized, among others, in sportsmen of national stature – I was at the same time trying to disentangle them. It remained my modest hope that some, just some, listeners and singers of the theme song, would feel the possibility of their own chance and destiny. To me, that would be a shift, however momentary, from the ideology of acceptance I was writing back in 1989.

Right now, a hero is appearing
Right now, people are cheering
Right now, everything is changing
Hurry up! My chance is a step away
Win or lose depends on who runs fast
Hurry up! Destiny is a second away
The strongest leaves the last.
(*'Hurry up!'*, 2004)

The same year, Nicolas Tse was invited to sing the theme song of the Seventh National University Games. Urged, again, by my 1989 memories, and by my probably stereotypical impression of a new generation of Chinese youth who were more concerned with economics (not politics), with the future (not the past), with success (not fun), I tried to rebel against the Chinese with the youth. To ears attuned to more explicit lyrics on youthful rebellion, 'The best of youth' must be delivering quite a harmless ode to the young students joining the Games. In many ways, it was. However, in a China where university students, the target consumers of this song, once rebelled, challenged and became violently silenced by the authorities, this song, I gathered, would at least serve to twist the dominant construction of Chineseness – predicated on, among others, discipline, sacrifice and punishment – with an (admittedly romanticized) idiom of freedom, indulgence and fearlessness, hopefully opening up spaces for cultural resistance, if not downright political rebellion. In fact, I wrote my lines with probably wishful thinking that they could very well be describing the demonstrations of 15 years ago. The official censors might have sensed something more disturbing

than it appeared; I had to change two references to 'going to the street' and 'staying all night long'.²²

Youth is a pair of arms
Wave them and I can fly
Shout to the city how young I am
Youth is a party
Miss it and you will regret...
When you are young, get the best of youth
Indulge yourself today
Remember our meeting today
During the brightest moments, we are carefree.
(‘The best of youth’, 2004)

The most serious struggle I had with claiming Chineseness took place in the same year: Nicolas’ producer asked me to write the lyrics of a new song about being Chinese. You see, he said, during concert tours in the mainland, Nicolas would always perform this song ‘Chinese’. It always works, the mainland audience just loves it, but it’s not Nicolas’s own song, he explained. Nicolas would like to have his own song that would warm up his concerts as much as the other *minzu gequ*. Finally, I had the opportunity to write a ‘pure’ *minzu gequ* myself. I knew I couldn’t possibly shed the obligatory trope (the Great Wall, the Tang Dynasty), the obligatory narrative of common descent, common destiny, common enemy. Nor could I ignore China’s newfound place and pride in the world. The lyrics, I reckoned, had to address such sentiments to be affective and effective. How else?

What I tried in the first draft was threefold. First, I decided to problematize the category of ‘Chinese’, constructed and guarded fiercely with hegemonic discourses, with the category of ‘yellow’, which, for all its mythical and therefore more fluid qualities, should be more open to interpretations and contestations. What is yellow? This question would be easier and safer to pose, given the necessity of censorship, than: what is Chinese? Risking grand narratives of Chineseness presumably inherited by the Chinese, I tried to put the historical burden back to the individuals of today, to give the ‘yellowness’ your own name, your own shape. Second, recalling the xenophobic tendency in some older *minzu gequ* and in the construction of Chinese nationalism through a performance of victimhood by ‘foreign’ enemies (Callahan 2006), I tried to trouble the narrative with indirect references to past tyrants in Chinese history. For instance, one of the original chorus lines read: ‘Yellow people, who buried you with the dead?’ It was an allusion to the imperial practice of burying people alive to keep a deceased emperor company during his final journey in the underworld. Another chorus line read: ‘Yellow people, who caused you harm?’ which was my reference to the 1989 crackdown. If Chinese people suffered, I was trying to suggest, the suffering was inflicted not only by foreign enemies, but also by fellow Chinese. Finally, fearing this song would be an instrument for a collective performance of Chineseness, not unlike my experience in 1980, I tried to inject more – more histories, more possibilities and, ultimately, more *me*, instead of *us*. I tried to twist a narrative of cultural, national unity to individual plurality. And Chineseness, I learn from Butler (1990), is more a performance than an inheritance; it is everybody’s turn to step onto the stage and perform their own version of Chineseness, which, according to me, should be heroic enough.

Some days later, I got a fax from the producer, containing the response from the censors. All the lines alluding to encroachment from within were marked. On the right upper corner of the fax was handwritten, in Chinese: ‘Overall, inappropriate wording. The main thing should be to embody the pride of the Chinese people as well as their unyielding spirit.’ And above this remark: ‘Not approved.’ Following a discussion with the producer, we decided – how else? – to give and take; I replaced the two chorus lines mentioned earlier

with a prouder 'Yellow people, walk on earth'. I added in the magic number '5,000' to invoke the dominant narrative of China's long history. I did not, however, change the basic questioning tone. Nor did I add in the words 'Chinese' ('*Zhongguoren*'). This time, the lyrics were approved:

Is it from the tidal waves that swept through 5,000 miles
Or the wall that awaits reconstruction?
History fades into all the yellow
Condensing into the setting sun, on my back

Is it from the sweat that dripped through 5,000 years
Or the legendary Tang Dynasty?
Jianghu stirs up all the yellow
Waiting for me to give it a name, and a shape

Yellow people, walk on earth
Stick out a new chest
Yellow people, walk on earth
The world knows that I am not the same
More chaos, more courage
The more the world changes, the more adventurous I become
With nothing, I go everywhere
After 5,000 years it's finally my turn to step onto the stage.
(*'Yellow people'*,²³ 2004)

It's finally my turn to step onto the stage, to perform in my own way what Chinese is, I thought. The music video opened with a vast expanse of desert – yellow earth – with Nicolas, wearing a modern sports suit, walking on his own (Figure 2). When some gusty wind lays bare a terra cotta Qin(-looking) warrior in the desert, he comes alive in the body of Nicolas, who starts beating an ancient battle drum to rally thousands of subterranean warriors. After erecting a huge phallic monument and shooting fire arrows into its mouth, the Qin army joins a contingent of athletes all wearing the same modern sports suit as Nicolas's in the opening scene, all bearing a torch. The video – whose concept was developed by Nicolas himself with the director and the production heavily sponsored by the Chinese sports shoes brand using the song as its advertising campaign jingle (private conversation with executive producer Leo Chan, 6 February 2007) – is a visual journey from a solitary wanderer to collective success; a visual connection, if not conflation, between ancient glory and contemporary strength, between the great unifying era of Qin and modern China. In other words, while the lyrical content, I thought, was seasoned with a stronger dosage of pride, unyielding spirit, in order to preserve and serve the question: how do I perform my Chineseness at this moment of history?, this video was making the question rhetorical and the answer, or directive, was already spelt out in the censors' remark.

The CD, packaged in an oriental(istic) box, dealt me another blow. If one of my attempts in this *minzu gequ* was to twist a dominant narrative of collective identity into possibilities of individual performance, Nicolas gave his own twist to my writing. Undermining my attempt to avoid referring to a grand collective 'we', he inserted the 'us', the 'Chinese', back to the song, delineated by bloodline and an attitude of fury, obviously against 'them', the perceived Other, the non-Chinese 'everywhere in the world'. He delivered the following rap before the last chorus:

Everywhere in the world you will see a yellow face
Red blood flows in 1.3 billion people
You say it's my fury
I say it's my attitude
Fearless, marching forward

Figure 2. Nicolas Tse in MV of 'Yellow people' (courtesy of Emperor Entertainment Group).

Are only us, the Chinese.
(*'Yellow people'*, 2004)

Shoot the dragon

Let me conclude with some clarifying remarks. First, I do not want to leave an impression that I am always conscious about what or how I am writing in my lyrical works. The account I just gave should be taken primarily as a work of analysis and memory, and for that matter selective and artificial. Second, I do not want to leave an impression that my lyrics are always engaging with issues of Chineseness directly or explicitly. More often, I want to entertain, experiment and, in the meantime, earn some money. Third, whatever tactic I may have employed in writing otherwise, I always feel that I am playing tug-of-war with so much unpredictability, from censorship (both self and official), capitalistic logic, institutional structure, art and video directors, whims of the stars, to endless (ab)uses on the receiving end. Talking about a disclaimer, this, I think, will be mine.

What I do want to claim is that this inquiry is first and foremost autobiographical, writing on my experience in the duality of a cultural student and cultural producer. It is about me and my lyrics. Nonetheless, this singular experience of mine can be linked to more general issues of resistance and popular music. Following certain traditions that tend to position popular music as part of social movements (Hebdige 1979), assuming resistance to be explicit, conscientious and intentional, a number of studies on Hong Kong popular music have focused on identity and politics, framing local pop in a more macro scenario of political

struggles (Erni 2007; Ho 2000; McIntyre *et al.* 2002; Witzleben 1999). The current inquiry seeks to add to their insights by laying bare what I would call the micro politics of resistance; it is an account of the personal-artistic-political matrix wrapping around an ideal of resistance. Resistance, for me, is an everyday negotiation of my work, my creativity, my identity and the dominant discourses on Chineseness, a testing out of personal and official limits. It is usually more mundane, probably less influential than I would ideally hope for. Sometimes, it may be complicity. But to paraphrase de Certeau, it will be my 'making do' (de Certeau 1984).

In discussing the ambiguity, or the possibility of ambiguity, of the Chinese identity, Allen Chun says provocatively: 'fuck Chineseness!' (Chun 1996). Allow me to indulge myself in this metaphor: isn't my act of writing an act of ejaculation? I mean, for once in a trillion it may be consequential, the rest I do it for pleasure. In that sense, the pleasure of a cultural student-cum-producer may not be so different from the pleasure of a cultural consumer. In his conception of 'popular pleasures', John Fiske argues that consumers of popular culture derive both 'producerly pleasure' – of making their own meanings from the texts – and 'offensive pleasure' – of resistance to structures of domination (Fiske 1989: 55). Such pleasure is also mine.

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Notes

1. All translations of song titles, lyrics and quotations from Chinese-language sources are mine. Personal names are listed in *pinyin*, except those from Hong Kong.
2. For an account of 'the Chinese race' in modern China, see Dikötter (2003).
3. For that matter, I could also locate my inquiry into issues of 'Britishness', given the colonial past of my city and my own past. For the time being, I feel I could only afford to deal with issues of 'Chineseness', which, despite – or because of – my colonial past, remain closer to me.
4. Some may use another term 'China Wind' (*zhongguo feng*) to categorize such music.
5. It should be noted, for all the ambiguity surrounding the term *minzu gequ*, that my inquiry – and my memory – of *minzu gequ* does not cover the more 'ethnic' stream of the genre, e.g. the release of *Sister Drum* (in 1995/6 by Elektra/WEA). For a discussion on the politics of *Sister Drum*, read Upton (2002). For a more comprehensive and historical account of 'music with national/ethnic character', see Yang (2000).
6. See for instance Tu Weiming's notion of 'Cultural China' (Tu 1994).
7. For a further discussion of academic nationalism, see Chow (2000) and Dai (2001).
8. 'Descendants of the Dragon' gained popularity in Taiwan before catching on in Hong Kong. Hou wrote the song as a protest against Washington's decision to sever diplomatic ties with Taipei in favour of Beijing. That it was appropriated as a song with pro-Chinese feelings surprised Hou: 'You have totally misread my intention!' (Hou 1983). The vicissitude of 'Descendants of the Dragon' illustrates, as mentioned earlier, how a cultural product, regardless of its producer's intention, could and would be appropriated to serve the dominant ideology. My lyrical works are no exception. While intended to open up spaces for resistance, they might at the same time be complicit in constructing grand narratives on Chineseness. The relations between resistance and complicity will be elaborated during analysis of my own lyrical works.
9. For a general discussion on the construction of home and nation in Hong Kong popular music, read Cheung (1997).

10. *Dizi* is a transverse flute, widely used in Chinese folk music.
11. For an account of the 'modern folk song movement' in Taiwan, see Zhang (2003).
12. It would be interesting, but beyond the autobiographical scope of the current inquiry, to chart the career of Cheung Ming-min and its political and cultural significance in terms of Chineseness as he mediated between Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China.
13. The Chinese character for 'ghost' here is '*hun*', which also carries the meaning of 'soul'.
14. According to Chow, these songs were popularized primarily due to anti-Japanese sentiments (Chow 1990). In August 1982, a Japanese history textbook was alleged to have distorted facts surrounding the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), causing widespread uproar among Chinese communities around the world.
15. Generally considered a rare example of balancing between mainstream and alternative pop, Tatming Pair enjoyed critical acclaim and intellectual attention in Hong Kong. See for instance Lok (1995) and Cheung (1997).
16. The identity of the informant is not disclosed as the conversation was conducted confidentially.
17. For an analysis of the dominant family metaphor surrounding the Handover, see de Kloet and Chow's study on the Handover CD *Born on the First of July* (de Kloet and Chow 2000).
18. In terms of pop music, there are signs of an emerging Southern identification. Radio stations in the Pearl River Delta region, for instance, are partnering with their counterparts in Hong Kong and Macau to form their own pop chart '9+2' and their annual music awards.
19. I have only come across one commentary that places the song in the context of Hong Kong's political destiny. The title of the *Asia Times* article, cited on the *Epoch Times* site, reads: 'Listen to Tatming's song and feel the Handover pain' (Ling 2005).
20. For an account of the event written by the activist, see Szeto (2005).
21. In fact, I have been writing lyrics increasingly in Mandarin. Although Cantonese lyrics remain the bulk of my creative writing, I share the 'intellectual concern about the danger of an annihilation of "the local" in the re-nationalization process' (Erni 2001: 409).
22. It is common practice in mainland China for record labels to submit materials related to a musical product to ensure that the songs, and the CDs that contain them, would have no difficulty in getting released. Official theme songs would first be screened by the commissioning authorities.
23. 'Yellow people' also became the theme song of a martial arts television drama series broadcast nationwide in 2005.

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Yiu Fai Chow (周耀輝) released his first Cantopop lyrics in 1989. Since then, he has been collaborating with a variety of pop artists in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China. Next to his lyrical career, Chow is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam. His project concerns young Chinese living in the Netherlands and their use of popular culture, in particular martial arts films, beauty pageants and pop music.

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