

Book Review

Andrew F. Jones. 2020. *Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. ix + 304pp. ISBN 978-1-5179-0207-0 (pbk)

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With *Circuit Listening*, Andrew F. Jones brilliantly closes his unofficial trilogy on Chinese popular music—which started with *Like a Knife* (1992) on the rock and roll subculture in China, and continued in *Yellow Music* (2001) on jazz music in colonial Shanghai. Through his work, Jones has constantly interrogated the status of popular music in the Chinese-speaking world—whether it be “yellow music” (黃色音樂, *huangse yinyue*), state-controlled popular music (通俗音樂, *tongsu yinyue*) or pop music (流行音樂, *liuxing yinyue*). *Circuit Listening* takes a closer look at the place of “Chinese” popular music—including in Hong Kong and Taiwan—during the global 1960s, its influences and circulations.

The book is framed around the metaphor of the transistor “circuit”, which helps the author make connections between different localities and sounds. Jones’s narrative begins with the launch of China’s first manmade satellite in April 1970, which broadcast back to earth the Maoist song ‘The East Is Red’ twice on per minute, a loop. For Jones, the transistor technology of the 1960s was the condition of possibility for the worldwide popularity of the Beatles, as well as the sonic Maoist propaganda network. Thus, popular music and Maoist propaganda are, in Jones’s book, intrinsically linked by a new technology that spreads songs, music and ideas across territorial divides.

Circuit Listening is however not solely focused on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Maoist era, but lingers across the different Chinese-speaking communities in East Asia, and goes beyond the 1960s. Jones analyses the old colonial Shanghai music circuit stretching across Hong Kong and Southeast Asia through the figure of the popular Hong Kong singer Grace Chang (born in Nanjing) and her mix of rumba, mambo and jazz. This new circuit is exemplified in Grace Chang’s movie *Air Hostess*, where Chang travels

and sings in the major centres of the non-communist Chinese-speaking world: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia. Hong Kong is, according to Jones, an open switch, linked to the latest dance and music crazes in America, while Taiwan is considered a more subsidiary circuit, where the mambo craze was triggered by Grace Chang herself.

The PRC in turn was considered a closed circuit during the Maoist era, and even more so during the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966. Indeed, the Chinese nationwide media circuit was constructed around wired broadcasting stations—not wireless—to control the flow of information. Jones’s most innovative idea is to analyse “Mao” as a media product, and “quotation songs”—a musical offshoot of the *Little Red Book*—as pop songs, disseminated by the mass media circuit of the PRC. Mao’s global influence as a pop icon is better seen in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 movie *La Chinoise*, which features a song entitled ‘Mao Mao’ by Claude Channes. A worldwide influence too often neglected, it is analysed in more recent scholarship (Wilcox 2020).

The rest of the book is dedicated to the analysis of the transformation of popular music in Taiwan during the 1960s, and its influence on Chinese music for the decades to come. Jones starts by giving an overview of Taiwanese musical cinema in the 1960s, and the progressive disappearance of movies in *Taiyu*—a variety of Hokkien language spoken by a large majority of Taiwanese people—replaced by movies and songs in Mandarin, the language imposed by the Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party) in power. Another important chapter is dedicated to pirate vinyl records in Taiwan—piracy was indeed a necessity in the context of an authoritarian state. This pirate circuit was enabled by the presence in Taiwan of U.S. military personnel, who brought with them pop songs and hung out in bars and clubs dedicated to jazz and rock music. According to Jones’s estimation, in 1965 companies in Taiwan produced 350,000 pirate records per month, and exported 150,000 to Southeast Asia. There was also a social divide in the appreciation of anglophone “hit music” (or “hot music” 熱門音樂, *remen yinyue*), since pop and rock enthusiasts were mainly urban youth and most often children of “Mainlander” emigrants, associated to the KMT. The relationship between rock music and children of KMT officials is thoroughly analysed in a recent book by Hsiung Yi-ping (2020), which aptly completes Jones’s explanations.

The last two chapters of the book are dedicated to two important Taiwanese figures, namely the folk musician Chen Da and the pop star Teresa Teng. Jones retraces the “discovery” of Chen Da by the composer Hsu Tsang-Houei and a contingent of ethnographers who had gone to the countryside in search of a Taiwanese folk tradition. This short-lived folk revival did not succeed in the 1960s, but its heritage was to be celebrated after the “Campus folk movement” of the late 1970s. Teresa Teng, on the other side, was widely admired

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in Chinese-speaking communities worldwide. Her voice was used by the KMT as a sonic weapon against communist China, broadcast from the island of Quemoy to the PRC, using what were then the world's largest sound loudspeakers. A commodity in the Taiwanese domestic sphere, the voice of Teresa Teng was at the same time a sonic connection between Taiwan and the PRC, where she became hugely popular after Mao's death, and a political subject of contention.

One can argue that Jones's use of the term "Chinese" throughout the book can seem improper, or at least imprecise. The scope of his analysis goes beyond China itself, to encompass Hong Kong, Taiwan and other diasporic communities. In a long note (208), Jones argues that the term "sinophone" is not able to precisely describe the phenomenon he explores. The notion of "sinophone", coined by Shu-mei Shih, offers to decentre China to focus on cultural productions "on the margins of China and Chineseness" (Shih 2007: 4) defined not by their ethnicity but by the Sinitic languages they use. While recognizing the diversity of languages, experiences and influences that shape the different "Chinese" spaces he analyses—which would be better defined as "sinophone" as China *per se* fills only a small part of the book—Jones claims that the term "sinophone" is, in this context, anachronistic and cannot explain the various influences he uncovers—Japanese and American music, for instance. Putting aside this issue of terminology, Jones's book is an important contribution to the study of Chinese—and sinophone—popular music, expanding our notion of what constitutes popular music, and establishing a new and original methodology centred around circuit networks and mutual influences.

References

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