



Tian Ci – Faye Wong & English Songs in the Cantopop and Mandapop Repertoire

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Summary:

This chapter examines the reconstruction of a number of western pop and rock songs in the Cantopop and Mandapop repertoire, with particular emphasis on the musical output of the Beijing-born, Hong Kong-based ‘empress’ of Cantopop and Mandapop, Faye Wong, who has generated more interest in the Western world than most of her peers, outside the relatively closed diasporic world of Mandarin and Cantonese-language pop music.

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Introduction: ‘Covers Without Stigma’

This chapter examines the reconstruction of a number of western pop and rock songs in the Cantopop and Mandapop repertoire, with particular emphasis on the musical output of the Beijing-born, Hong Kong-based ‘empress’ of Cantopop and Mandapop, Faye Wong, who has generated more interest in the Western world than most of her peers, outside the relatively closed diasporic world of Mandarin and Cantonese-language pop music. She is known in the West mainly as an actress in Wong-kar Wai’s 1994 film *Chungking Express*, which included a ‘cinematic music video’ (Witzleben 2000) featuring her Cantonese version of the Irish group the Cranberries’ song ‘Dreams’, and to a lesser extent for her role in Wong kar-Wai’s star-studded 2004 film *2046*. Faye Wong has gradually amassed a significant body of Western fans, known generically as ‘Fayenatics’¹, despite only rarely performing or recording songs in English.

Wong has recorded and performed versions of songs in Cantonese and Mandarin by US, UK, Scottish and Irish artists such as the Cranberries, Tori Amos, the Sundays, Everything But the Girl, and the Cocteau Twins, in the process negotiating an ‘in-between’ position linking mainstream Cantopop and alternative rock music. Her incorporation of both mainstream and non-mainstream songs and musical elements into her repertoire led her to be referred to in the Chinese music industry press in 1994 as *Faye Chu Lau Tze Yam*, a term meaning ‘the voice of Faye’s mainstream’, but also ‘the voices of the non-mainstream’ in spoken Cantonese, which could also be translated as ‘Fayestream’². This indicates that she could almost be said to occupy her own category in the Chinese pop music spectrum, and she has continued to combine mainstream pop songs with more ‘alternative’, even avant-garde oriented tracks throughout her career.

There are many examples of re-interpretations of western pop songs in Cantopop and Mandapop, drawing on what Witzleben (1998: 472) has called a ‘venerable and well-respected tradition in Chinese opera’ called *tian ci*, in which pre-existing melodies are set to new lyrics. Importantly, as Witzleben has observed, the adherence to the *tian ci* tradition of appropriating the tunes of western and foreign songs in Cantopop is a long-standing one, ‘and has never had the stigma which is attached to the term “cover version”’ (ibid. 1998: 472). This is partly a by-product of the craft of song lyric writing in Cantopop, which is practiced independently by a large number of artists and generally considered as a quite separate art from musical song composition. Lin Xi, who has worked extensively with Faye Wong since her debut album *Shirley* in 1989, is considered to be one of the most distinctive Hong Kong-based lyric writers, and as Fung and Curtin have noted, his highly impressionistic and poetic lyrics ‘are charged with metaphors and allegories’ (2002: 281) which are often very difficult to translate. In a biography of Wong which appeared in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1998, *Brave to Be Myself*, Lin Xi’s lyrics were described as “‘‘imagistic’’”: like prose poems. Their language is not fixed, in places its meaning is vague. It takes you into an hallucinatory world of sensitive intelligence’ (Wong and Shue 1998: 102). The comparison to prose poems is noteworthy, given that two of the English song lyrics Wong has adapted, by Tori Amos and Ben Watt, were also written as prose poems.

Distinctive examples of *tian ci* in Cantopop include the late Cantopop actress and singing star Anita Mui Yim-Fong’s controversial song about seduction and the frustrations of sexual repression, ‘Bad Girl’ (‘Huai N’ Thai’), first recorded in 1985, a Cantonese version of Scottish singer Sheena Easton’s song ‘Strut’. This song, which contained Chinese lyrics written by Lin Zhenquiang which are completely unrelated to Easton’s original song, became an Anita Mui signature tune throughout the Chinese diaspora, although its English language source was completely unknown. ‘Bad Girl’ did contain a chorus in English, ‘why, why, tell me why’, which rhymed with the Cantonese title, and segued into the Cantonese for ‘Why can’t I let myself go?’, as well as incorporating other English words, ‘Help me’ and ‘Midnight’. ‘Bad Girl’ was banned in Mainland China in the 1990s for its perceived salacious content (see Witzleben 1999: 247), but remained in Mui’s concert repertoire as part of a medley, sometimes introduced in English as ‘Bad Girl’, until her death in 2003 (and was included in her final Sydney concert in that year). It even spawned a later song in Mui’s repertoire, with Cantonese lyrics by Terry Chan, and the title and chorus in English, called

‘Big Bad Girl’, recorded in 1995³.

Other notable examples of Cantopop songs being launched on the back of English language originals, although with a more guaranteed knowledge of the originals by Chinese audiences, include Taiwan-born and Canada-raised Sally Yeh’s 1985 version of Madonna’s ‘Material Girl’ (retitled ‘Two Hundred Degrees’); Sarah Wong’s 1988 version of Kylie Minogue’s ‘I Should be So Lucky’ (which became ‘Please Don’t be So Clingy’); and Angela Pang’s 1992 version of Abba’s ‘Dancing Queen’ (‘Make Me Shake My Body’). As Eric Chu (2003) has pointed out, many such cover versions remain very close, or even identical, to the originals in terms of their musical settings, and sometimes there are even affinities between the Cantonese lyrics and the sense of the original English lyrics. Chu also notes that up to ten Cantopop and Mandapop albums are released every week in Hong Kong, many incorporating a wide variety of different musical styles ranging from heavy metal to techno to pop ballads, and most spend no more than five weeks in the charts, so an extensive demand for available melodies leads to a widespread appropriation of western songs, including French, Spanish, German, and Italian originals, along with songs from Japan, Korea, other Asian countries and the Middle East. Appropriations of musical phrases, and snippets from sources ranging from classical to film and television themes to pop songs, are also common (one of Faye Wong’s music videos, for example, for the song ‘Stop Halfway’, directly cites Peter Gabriel’s music video ‘Sledgehammer’, with an aeroplane flying around Wong’s head). But as Chu (2003: 6) notes:

There has been no anxiety involved in Mandapop and Cantopop covers, the composers are always credited and the copyright fully paid for, although ... when it comes to sounds and instruments that are country-specific, it’s a different matter (2003: 6).

Cantonese and Mandarin lyrics virtually ensure that the songs become ‘indigenised’ to the extent that the original source is frequently forgotten, or becomes a distant echo, as in the case of ‘Cold War’ and ‘Person in a Dream’, Faye Wong’s versions of Tori Amos’ ‘Silent All These Years’, and the Cranberries’ ‘Dreams’, both of which she first recorded in 1993 and which she sang in identical versions to the originals in her 2004 ‘Live @Hong Kong’ concert, to rapturous applause. Recent concerts by Faye Wong have also included English language cover versions of Sinéad O’Connor’s ‘Thank You For Hearing Me’ (an intriguing rendition in that it effectively removes the scathingly ironic overtones of the original), Burt Bacharach’s Dusty Springfield evergreen ‘The Look of Love’, and Deborah Harry and Blondie’s hit ‘Heart of Glass’. But such examples of ‘straight’ cover versions of English-language songs are relatively rare in Wong’s repertoire, have not been included in any of her studio recordings, and occupy a different role to her Mandarin and Cantonese re-settings of English language songs.

Raised on Appropriation: The Emergence of Cantopop and Mandapop

In her article ‘Cantopop on Emigration from Hong Kong’, Joanna Ching-Yun Lee traces the origin of the English-language term ‘Cantopop’ (also used by Hong Kong writers, and sometimes referred to as ‘Cantopop’) to a 1978 article in *Billboard* by Hans Ebert, revising the term ‘Cantorock’, which he had previously used in 1974 to describe Hong Kong’s locally produced rock music (1992b:14). The term ‘Mandapop’ (or Mando-pop) was later added to refer to Mandarin-language popular songs, which were often versions of Cantopop songs sung by the same singers with different lyrics ‘to fit the different rhyme and tonal patterns of Cantonese and Mandarin’ (Lee and Witzleben 2002: 355). Mandapop began to be marketed in Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China in the 1990s, although both terms are confined to the English language.

The earliest Cantopop singing star was Sam Hui Koon-Kit (Xu Guanjie), who began his career in the English-language cover band Lotus, and who emerged as a solo artist singing in Cantonese in 1974, spearheading a Hong Kong native language song movement which led to the virtual extinction of the English language from Cantopop, a tendency which continues to the present. Hui sometimes combined topical Cantonese lyrics with western tunes, as in his version of Bill Haley and the Comets’ 1955 hit ‘Rock

'Around the Clock', which was transformed into a satirical song about inflation and rising prices in Hong Kong (see Oi-Kuen Man 1997 for an analysis). Lee (1992:14)ref describes Cantopop as 'a new genre characterised by a distinctly British-American popular music style', emerging after Mandarin language songs, which had evolved from Shanghai film songs, lost their popularity in Hong Kong in the early 1970s. As elsewhere, 'The Beatles' visit to Hong Kong in 1964 was particularly influential on the local music scene, and Hong Kong pop music in the late 1960s and early 1970s frequently involved local artists 'performing English-language cover versions' (Lee and Witzleben 2002:, 354), with songs by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Simon and Garfunkel, Joe Cocker and the Andrew Lloyd Weber/Tim Rice musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* proving particularly popular (Witzleben 1998: 470). Witzleben also notes that there is also an extensive repertoire in Cantopop drawn from Japanese pop songs, citing a boxed CD of 55 of the 'most important' songs by the singer Nakajima Miyuki which have been covered in Cantonese and Mandarin versions, including one of Faye Wong's signature songs, 'Fragile Woman' (1998: 472).

John Erni (1998: 62) has suggested that due to its predominantly surface orientation, Cantopop, succeeds in capturing 'the permanent in-betweenness of our existence and our desire' (1998: 62) through three prominent and prevalent features, all of which could be applied to the re-contextualisation of western pop songs: its lack of concern with differentiating the original from the copy; its commitment to 'endless repetition and recombination' (ibid.: 60); and its ready combination with karaoke as a means of representing 'the cultural condition of surface belongingness' (ibid.: 61,60). Often derided as bland, middle of the road, shallow and consumerist by both western and eastern commentators (see Cheung 1997, Tsang 1999, Chan 1999, Western 2001, Witzleben 1994:452), Cantopop nonetheless contains its musically and politically adventurous aspects, most notably in the 1980s output of the duo Tat Ming Pair (see Lee 1992), both of whom have worked with Faye Wong.

Faye Wong's *tian ci*

Fung and Curtin (2002) have provided a reasonably comprehensive overview of Faye Wong's career up to 2001, although they overstress her contribution to gender politics and make misleading comparisons to the 'Madonna phenomenon' and the Spice Girls (2002: 265), as well as reproducing a number of inaccuracies in song and album titles. Wong's first significant cover song occurs on her fourth album, *No Regrets*, released in 1993, with 'Starting from Tomorrow', a Cantonese version of British duo Everything But the Girl's hauntingly melancholic 'bedsit ballad' 'The Road', the rather overlooked final track on their 1990 album *The Language of Life*, which had been written and sung by Ben Watt. This stood out from the relatively mediocre roster of Cantopop tracks on *No Regrets* for Wong's strikingly pellucid rendition of its mournful melody, which on the EBTG original had Stan Getz playing a soaring tenor sax, over subdued piano and orchestra. Lin Xi's lyrics are about a woman resolving to break up with her lover after recollecting her memories of him and 'playing the role of a weak woman for one more day'⁴, and although they fail to match the poetic qualities of Watt's lyrics, and the musical setting is a rather lacklustre copy of the original, Wong's lustrous, opera-trained soprano voice draws out qualities of emotion and coloratura from the melody in the vocal line which easily outdo Watt's rather low-key rendition. The song, a highly unusual, 'alternative' choice for the Cantopop canon, remained in Wong's repertoire for a few years, and was included on her 1995 Live in Concert album. A Mandarin version of the song entitled 'Weak', with lyrics by Pan Li Yu, also about a relationship breakup, was included on her 1994 album *Mystery*. It was a harbinger of change ahead in Wong's repertoire.

Wong's *100 Thousand Whys?*, released in September 1993, marked a breakthrough a breakthrough in terms of her definition as a Cantopop artist, as she began to actively embody alternative western rock styles. The album included Cantonese versions of Sting and the Police's well-known song 'De Do Do Do, De Da Da Da Do Do Da Da', a Barry White song, 'Rainy Days Without You', and 'Seduce Me', a Miyuki Nakajima song, and two songs with English titles, Helen Hoffner's 'Summer of Love' (sung in Cantonese) and a ballad, 'Do We Really Care', sung in English. There were enough standard Cantopop songs, like the opening

track, 'Lau Fei Fei', to placate her fans, and like its predecessor, the album sold more than 300,000 copies in Hong Kong, and was the best selling album of 1993. But the undoubted tour de force of the album was 'Cold War', Wong's version of Tori Amos's song 'Silent All These Years', in an identical musical setting, with insistent piano backing, spare orchestral embellishments and double-tracked choruses, with Wong's vocal intonation and coloratura following Amos's quite closely. Lin Xi's lyrics, however, despite the political overtones of the song's title, maintain little of the implicit sense of Amos's rather surreal, poetic original, which since its appearance on the 1991 album *Little Earthquakes*, and its connection with 'Me and a Gun', a song about being raped, has become an anthem of rape and child abuse, and was re-released as a single to raise funds for a charity organisation which Amos co-founded, RAINN (the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network). Wong's 'Cold War', in contrast, is a relatively conventional 'relationship song' about the lack of communication between a couple, and a conflict of understanding that is never expressed. The chorus runs:

*Facing each other not saying a word
As if you and I have a rapport
Never wanting any childish squabbles
But our expressions silently hinting that this is a cold war
How many years together without a word?*

A vague trace of the 'silence' and the 'years' from the Amos song is maintained, and the lyrics even mention a metaphorical mime artist who becomes symbolic of the pretence and simulation sustaining the relationship, but there is no hint of any sexual violence, which would of course be inadmissible in a Chinese context. The sense of the Cantonese lyrics of 'Cold War' is in fact closer to the Tori Amos song 'China', also on *Little Earthquakes*, which uses the image of the Great Wall of China to embody distance, separation and conflict in a relationship. This suggests an unwitting element of cultural exchange between the two artists, although they have reportedly never made contact. 'Cold War' remains one of Wong's most popular songs, and has remained in her repertoire for twelve years⁵. According to Wang Fei: the Empress's Style:

'Cold War' was the first appearance of 'Fayestream' music. This was the beginning of her unique vocalisation. Her use of a nasal tone, very rich in its features, was a formal invocation of Amos' original vocal. There has always been a tradition of re-wording songs in Chinese in Hong Kong, and Wong was acting within this. What was different was the song she had re-worded was a little different in nature from the popular vogue.

(Unattributed author 1999: p 33).

Wong's 1994 album *Random Thoughts*, her first album under the name Wang Fei, consolidated the radical new departure of 'Cold War'. Stefan Graman describes it as

probably one of the most important albums in Hong Kong music history ... Even though it did not bring on a revolutionary change in the Hong Kong music scene, its contribution to the growth of the Hong Kong music industry is not to be underestimated.

(Graman *All About Ah Faye* 2001).

At the time of this album Wong had begun to hang out on the Beijing rock scene with alternative, dissident punk-styled musicians such as Cui Jian, the Taiwanese rocker He Yong (famous for an angry punk anthem entitled 'Garbage Dump' before attempting to burn his hopuse down and becoming institutionalised) and Dou Wei, who were part of the new Beijing alternative rock movement of the 1990s. Dou Wei was a singer, guitarist, flautist and drummer who had played in the well-known Beijing heavy rock group Heibao (Black Panther), and had begun to embody the musical influence of the Cocteau Twins in his band Zuomeng (Dream the Dream), before starting a solo career in 1994, and later renouncing rock music

entirely in favour of spiritual development. Wong married Dou Wei in July 1996, and the couple had a daughter, but were divorced in 1999. Nonetheless Dou had a lasting influence on the change in direction in Wong's music, and played an active role as a producer in her work, as well as playing drums on some of her tracks and with her on tour. *Random Thoughts* was co-produced by Wong, Wei and Beijing rock artist Zhang Yatumg, and was Faye's first completely 'alternative' album, which also brought her new audiences on the mainland. As Mabel Cheung's 2002 film *Beijing Rocks* (Mega Star/Media Asia) was to show almost a decade later, the Beijing rock scene of the 1990s was regarded by some Hong Kong musicians as an authentic source of vital, alternative, cutting edge rock music which exposed the bland commercialism and artificiality of the Hong Kong music scene, despite the common perception in Hong Kong of mainlanders as 'country bumpkins', which Faye had suffered from with her first album *Shirley Wong* (1989).

The title track of *Random Thoughts* and a song entitled 'Know Oneself and Each Other' were Cantonese re-settings of two songs by the Cocteau Twins, 'Bluebeard' and 'Know Who You Are At Every Age', from their 1993 album *Four-Calendar Café*. The Cocteau Twins' *glossolalia* vocals and dreamy, jangly, ethereal guitars - a constant feature of the *Random Thoughts* album - were a strong influence on Wong's work for the next four years, and according to Max Woodworth (2004) in the Taipei Times:

Wong shares the same distant-sounding, high pitched siren voice of the Cocteau Twins' Elizabeth Fraser, and the gauzy aesthetic of the Twins' album covers even made its way onto Wong's album cover art (2004).

The cover of *Random Thoughts* was also something of a new departure for Cantopop. Instead of a photo of Faye, it consisted of Chinese characters in various different sizes and shades of black and grey, while the photo of Wong on the back cover featured her with short hair and tank top, a tomboy image which she later cultivated in *Chungking Express* (movie mentioned in first section of article) and which led to her celebration as a gay icon (see Hsiao-Hung Chang, 1998: 291). Simon Reynolds has characterised the Cocteau Twin's 'wordless siren-songs' appropriately as 'oceanic rock', comparing them to Helène Cixoux's pre-Oedipal 'écriture féminine':

The baby-talk nonsense of their song titles and Liz Fraser's vocals, which do without any hard consonants or fricatives, are all labial, take us back to the earliest love affair of all, that of mother and child. The Cocteaus are like mother's song, all succour and softness, closeness without having to say anything at all.

(Reynolds 1990: 130).

With Wong herself giving birth to a daughter at the end of 1996 and appearing pregnant on the cover of her 1997 album *Toys*, the resonances with motherhood are appropriate, especially as she appeared to take these aspects of the Scottish duo to heart, and has been quoted as saying 'I like the Cocteau Twins' music because I feel that in their musical thinking I have something in common with them'⁶. While the title track 'Random Thoughts' contained lyrics by Lin Xi which describe the intoxication, emotional conflict and turbulence of being in love, and 'Know Oneself and Each Other' also contained lyrics by Lin Xi, both songs were almost identical musical settings of the Cocteau Twins originals, and a number of the other songs on the album, including 'Pledge', also had a Cocteau Twins-like 'band sound'. But 'Person in a Dream', a faithful rendition of the musical setting of the Cranberries' 'Dreams' from their 1992 *Everyone Else Is Doing It, So Why Can't We?* album, remains the stand-out track on *Random Thoughts*, with its driving, jangling rhythm guitar and skittering drum patterns. Faye even managed to adapt the Cranberries' Dolores O'Riordan's distinctively Irish, high-pitched, lilting intonation, especially on the abruptly-ending long stresses of the "la ah la's in the song's chorus, which are rendered in the Chinese lyrics as 'Ah-la-ha, la-ya-ha, ya-ha-ah', and which Faye subsequently incorporated into other songs, suggesting that both O'Riordan's and Fraser's Celtic intonations may have had a lasting impact on her singing style, along with Sinead O'Connor's⁷.

In her 1994 album *Please Myself*, in many ways a less radical collection of songs, Wong experiments with a shorter lyrical form, clearly influenced by the Cocteau Twins, in both the title track, where she sings a wordless refrain, and the slow, sweet, melodic 'Float', which has lyrics by Lin Xi and a refrain of 'la la's. The stand-out track is 'Being Criminal', a version of British independent group tThe Sundays' song 'Here's Where the Story Ends', from their 1990 album *Reading, Writing and Arithmetic*. This is somewhat in the vein of the Cranberries' 'Dreams', with a jangling guitar pulse, and Faye's vocals follow Harriet Wheeler's soaring, lilting choruses. 1995's *Di-Dar* continues Wong's independent orientation, with the influence of the Cocteau Twins and Dou Wei apparent in some of the songs, and the title track, a self-composed piece with lyrics by Lin Xi, featuring a video strongly influenced by the 'goth' style of tThe Cure, with Faye wearing dark make-up. *The Decadent Sound of Faye* (1995) was a collection of cover songs in tribute to Taiwanese singer Teresa Tang, who had died tragically in 1995 of an asthma attack while on tour in Thailand. The word 'decadent' was an ironic echo of the epithet used by PRC apparatchiks to condemn Tang's music. Wong's association with Dou Wei and the Beijing rock scene, as well as her new-found penchant for trip hop and independent rock, was clearly influencing her musical orientation as well as her rebellious attitude to the music industry, albeit in a subdued and subtle way.

Wong continued to absorb the vocal influence of Liz Fraser (with a touch of Dolores O'Riordan), to the point of recording two indecipherable, wordless songs, 'Where?' and 'Imagine', along with an instrumental by Dou Wei, on her 1996 album *Restless* (also known as 'Impatience'). This album, arguably her most radically independent and experimental to date, also contained two Cocteau Twins songs, which they were specially invited to write for her, although they never met up in person. 'Fracture' and 'Killjoy', both with lyrics by Lin Xi, were Cantonese versions of songs the Cocteau Twins later released as 'Tranquil Eye' and 'Touch Upon Touch'. Both songs have an abstract, opaquely poetic quality, with 'Fracture' dealing with the results of a 'fatigue of love' and a 'tragic embrace'. The lyrics of 'Killjoy' (also known as 'Repressing Happiness') are confusingly opaque (and not helped by the virtual indecipherability of the only available English translation on Graman's website). The rest of the album is suffused with the influence of the Cocteau Twins, and uniquely the music and lyrics of almost all the songs are composed by Faye, giving it an unusual coherence of style and content which contrasts with the standard stylistic 'scattergun' approach of most of her albums and Cantopop in general. The production and arrangements of Zhang Yatung and the inclusion of an instrumental track with input from Dou Wei give the album a much more rock-oriented focus than any of Faye's albums before or since. It is also noteworthy that despite its musical innovations and unconventional style, *Restless* maintained Faye's position as the most popular and successful female artist in Hong Kong. As recently as 2005, Faye stated in an interview:

Impatience [aka 'Restless'] is the album I am most satisfied with. That was the first time I completed an album I liked. I worked with great producers and I loved every song on it. I do things according to feelings and I do them when I think they feel right. For me, Impatience is an album that just feels right.

(Tsui 2005: 21).

Notoriously reticent in interviews, Faye here indicates that *Restless* was the culmination of her independent, western experimental rock inclinations, and implies that she had a degree of control over the album which she has not succeeded in achieving to the same extent in subsequent recordings. In 1995 Faye's continued association and identification with the Cocteau Twins extended to her contributing to the vocals of an 'Asian version' of 'Serpentskirt', a song on the Cocteau Twins' album *Milk and Kisses*. The song was, however, only included on the Hong Kong release of the album, and is otherwise only available on a very rare compilation of Cocteau Twins B Sides⁸. This gave rise to speculation that her admiration for the Cocteau Twins was rather one-sided, and her renditions of their songs have gained little or no recognition in the West outside their respective Cocteau Twins and Faye Wong fan groups.

The 1997 self-titled *Faye Wong* was predominantly more low-key and spare in its arrangements than *Rest-*

less, and, as with future albums, all the tracks were in Mandarin, in keeping with a strong involvement by Zhang Yatung as arranger and guitarist, and Dou Wei on drums on two tracks. Lin Xi's lyrics are also present on seven of the ten tracks, and Faye's 'la la's (or 'dar dar's - the 'r' is actually sounded in Mandarin) predominate in a number of the vocals. The album contained another two Cocteau Twins tracks, one of which, 'Amusement Park', is credited as being 'performed by Simon Raymonde and Robin Guthrie', who provide a typically ethereal, swirling guitar-based instrumental mix, recorded at the September Sound studio in London, for Faye's double-tracked, harmonising vocals. 'Reminiscence' was a version of 'Rilkean Heart' from *Milk and Kisses* arranged by Zhang Yadotung, a Hong Kong-based musician who has been an important influence on Wong as a producer, with lyrics supplied by Wynan Wong. It is a low key song, with acoustic guitar backing provided by Yadotung, and not recognisably a Cocteau Twins song at all, with none of the jangling guitars and ethereal vocals of their trademark sound. Indeed, almost all the tracks on the album, with the possible exception of the final two tracks, which seem aimed at a more mainstream Cantopop market, are in a minimalist folk-rock vein which highlights Faye's vocals, to the extent that the Cocteau Twins' contributions are barely noticeable. The simplicity and coherency of the album in terms of a blending of Cantopop and 'indie' rock styles suggested that Faye may have absorbed the Cocteau Twins' influence to the point of no longer needing their contributions. She has no longer had any recourse to English language songs in any of her subsequent studio albums, relying almost exclusively on contributions from Hong Kong, Beijing and Singapore-based composers along with her own compositions on *Sing and Play* (1998), *Only Love Strangers* (1999), *Fable* (2000) *Faye Wong* (2001) and *To Love* (2003).

Copycat or Reinterpreter?

The 'Faye Wong In Comparison with ...' website⁹ contains text and illustrations assembled to provide evidence that throughout her career, Faye Wong has imitated a number of US and European artists, both visually and sonically. Four Cocteau Twins tracks are listed, with reproductions of appropriate album covers, followed by references to the Cranberries' 'Dreams' and Tori Amos's 'Silent All These Years', complete with a visual comparison of the album covers for Amos's *Little Earthquakes* and Faye's 1993 album *100 Thousand Whys?*, both of which feature boxes and a shared use of squared images and white background designs. There are also visual comparisons of the album cover portraits on Bjork's 1996 *Post* and Wong's 1998 *Sing and Play*, and various other visual poses comparing Faye's costumes and hairstyles with Bjork (explained by the fact that both employed the same designer).⁹ There is also photographic evidence to suggest (rather unconvincingly) that Wong copied Madonna's hands-in-the-air album cover pose with hands in the air from her 1998 album *Ray of Light* (which contains a song entitled 'Beautiful Strangers') on her album, *Only Love Strangers*. 'Die-hard fans' of Faye Wong are addressed, and expressions such as 'desperate', 'weaker' (than the original) and 'nice try' are used to describe these alleged copycat gestures by Wong. Implications are made of plagiarism or at the least imitation, and Wong is portrayed as derivative of these supposed western models.

But to dismiss Wong's recordings and performances of songs by Tori Amos, the Cranberries, the Cocteau Twins, and others as a mere copycat 'karaoke effect' is to misrepresent the enormous impact she has made on Cantopop and Mandapop throughout the Chinese diaspora. These songs represent only a tiny portion of her complete repertoire, and while they may have provided a considerable boost to her credibility as an alternative artist in Hong Kong, the PRC and elsewhere, they have arguably made little contribution to her success in the Chinese diaspora, where the alternative credibility of these US and European artists has little or no currency. Indeed Wong's almost perfect vocal imitation, appropriation and re-contextualisation of these songs into what is arguably a highly original, distinctive and idiosyncratic musical oeuvre could be said to have opened up new areas of experimentation and musical innovation in Cantopop and Mandapop. In the West, where due to the language barrier, Wong has only ever appealed to the relatively separate world of Chinese migrants and small clusters of western 'Fayenatics', her re-contextualisation of these songs is not a recognisable issue for the first group, and arguably only provides further incentive to her appreciation by the second. Undoubtedly the musical direction of Wong's career has been strongly

influenced by her (albeit vicarious) involvement in the mid-1990s with the alternative musical ethos and vocal and musical styles of the Cocteau Twins, the Cranberries, the Sundays, EBTG and Tori Amos, which she effectively absorbed into the musical styles of her later output (evident in the up-tempo, rock oriented opening title track of her 2003 Sony album, *To Love*, where her presence as a composer is also particularly strong). But her re-interpretations of English language songs in the much broader context of tian-ci serve only to highlight the way in which western artists have generally been completely re-contextualised in Cantopop and Mandapop as sources for a new creative output based, like most forms of popular music, on recombinative cross-fertilisation, adaptation, sampling and quotation. They also demonstrate that far from being an ‘unoriginal and repetitive’ local phenomenon, Cantopop and Mandapop, complete with its tradition of *tian ci*, represent, in Witzleben’s expression, ‘a border-crossing and dialect-crossing popular music culture, which is an explicitly Hong Kong adaptation of a primarily Western musical language, with a growing pan-Chinese component’ (Witzleben 2001: 417). Most Anglophone listeners who hear Wong’s versions of Tori Amos’ ‘silent All These Years’ or The Cranberries’ ‘Dreams’ are struck by their resemblance to the originals in terms of vocal inflection, tonal emphasis and ‘grain of the voice’, as well as instrumental backing, yet are usually unaware that she is singing completely different lyrics from the originals. This suggests that tian-ci can be deceptive; it can also operate as a mode of incorporating a perfect ‘copy’ into an original repertoire, in a similar manner to that by which the Australian lyre bird performs perfect copies of the sounds of a kookaburra, a magpie, a rosella, and even a camera shutter, a chainsaw and a car alarm. And no one would question the lyre bird’s originality.

Endnotes

1. There are numerous Fayanatic websites in English, but All About Ah-Faye, [<http://www.wongfaye.org/>] (last accessed 9/1/05) created by Stefan Graman, aka “Mr. Sweden”, in October 1999, is the most detailed and comprehensive.

2. In *Wang Fei: the Empress’s Empress’s Style*, a Chinese -language book collating material from various unacknowledged sources published in Taiwan in 1999. Thanks to Peter Lebaige for the translation.

3. On Anita Mui, *Anita*, [Capital 1995 CD-04-1184. put in discography] The Medley in Track 26 of the DVD, *Anita Mui Fantasy Gig 2002*, (Zhonghua Records), contains a version of “Bad Girl’Girl’.

4. Translation by Diane Yeo

5. “Silent All These Years” was the penultimate track on her 2004 DVD, *Live@Hong Kong* (Sony Music 2004). Wong recorded a Mandarin version of the song on her 1994 album *Mystery*, with different lyrics.

6. Translation by Eric Chu.

7. In *Wang Fei: the Empress’s Style*, it is stated that “this sound has become her trademark and appears constantly in her later songs”, but that “Chinese does not have this tongue position in its pronunciation, where the vocal cavity is rounded and the tongue curled” (1999: 36). However Peter Lebaige notes that: “In fact the Beijing variation of standard Mandarin, the Beijing dialect, does have that tongue position, the sound often occurring as a suffix to words in spoken conversation. I find it hard to believe that Wang Fei wouldn’t have noticed the similarity of the Irish sound to this sound in Beijing Mandarin, and hence would have had little trouble in vocalising it.’ (email to the author, 2002). This suggests that O’Riordan’s vocal style may have had a lasting impact on Faye’s singing style and been absorbed into her Mandarin inflections. Faye later recorded “Break Free”, a Mandarin version of “Dreams” with lyrics by Li Yao on her 1994 Mandapop album *Sky* (Decca/Cinepoly).

8. In an interview with Bruce Stringer on a Faye Wong website, [dated January 2003 [<http://www.lajabour.com/article/simon.html>, put in bib accessed] (24/3/03) Simon Raymonde states: “We heard from Mercury that a big Asian rock star had covered some songs of ours, so we just asked them to try and get us

copies. Then when we heard them we were actually quite impressed. Usually the Cocteau's covers bands don't quite get it, so it was a nice surprise, and instrumentally they even sounded like they had worked hard to get it right. On a whim we thought it might be cool to try and actually try (sic) to do something together, so we made a few polite enquiries. In the end we decided we would send her a couple of the forthcoming album tracks from "Milk and Kisses" and see if she fancied doing some more vocals for the Mercury Asian release. She did a great job and what she did we used! ... Faye certainly must have had some kind of fascination with Liz "cause she got it so bang on, you know, it was kind of spooky. ... We never met, never spoke, never exchanged emails. It was all done through [Hong Kong producer] Alvin Leong who was a great chap, but personally there was no interaction at all. ... I had hoped the collaboration would develop further, but the people with the money thought otherwise".

9. [<http://www.angelfire.com/sd/pianophillic/fayecompare.htm>] accessed 27/6/03

10. Another title website 'Parallel', [<http://statiq.net/suffix/parallel/>] (accessed 8/10/01) put in bib] offers a more positive, extended comparison between Bjork and Faye Wong: both "defy the trends", both have achieved "international critical acclaim", both have been married to rock musicians, both are single mothers, both are "hopeless romantics", both have worn clothes designed by Martin Margiela "before he was well known", both "have sparked off "copycats"", and both have been involved in internationally successful films.

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