



# Pop Music and Wong Kar-wai

By Brian Hu

The impetus for this DVD essay was to answer the question: what makes the use of popular music in Wong Kar-wai's films different? Is there a musical "signature" that defines Wong's specific way of spinning familiar (and de-familiarized) tunes into a film narrative? The question of authorial specificity led, perhaps inevitably, to a consideration of industrial and cultural specificities – namely if there was something about Hong Kong's star system, music landscape, and (post-)colonial ethos that could feed the audio-visual imagination of a wizard like Wong Kar-wai. I continued to pursue this latter question, which led my project to utilize tools from cultural studies (such as a consideration of stars, intertextual materials, emergent cultural practices) rather than approach the topic from purely formal considerations (such as Wong's use of pacing, volume, juxtaposition, etc.). And yet, because I was working in the DVD medium, formal attributes became exceedingly hard to ignore, such as Wong's use of music video devices and his famous repetition of songs.

This DVD essay was produced five years ago, in 2005, and is here reproduced in linear video format. The original DVD experimented, however feebly, with the use of the optional subtitle track as a "footnote" track.<sup>1</sup> However, to minimize the amount of text on the screen, the video is presented here without the "footnotes." As it was completed in early 2005, the DVD does not address Wong's films made after 2004, though I do feel that the repetition of "The Christmas Song" in [2046](#), the 1930s Shanghai tunes in [The Hand](#), and the use of Norah Jones in [My Blueberry Nights](#) reverberate with the discourses of colonialism, nostalgia, and stardom of Wong's earlier films.

Re-viewing this DVD essay now, I can't help but wish I had benefitted from the terrific recent scholarship on Chinese film stars.<sup>2</sup> I realized then that I lacked a model for thinking about stardom within a specific cultural and industrial context, and were I to revisit this project today, I would take a better articulated theoretical position on Faye Wong and Andy Lau, given the developments in the field. Then, as now, I consider stardom to be one of the most important and most understudied aspects of Chinese cinema and pan-Asian media culture more generally, and it strikes me as an important maturation of the field that scholars are beginning to frame their studies within the circuits of desire embodied by stars.

I wish I could say the same about the study of music in Chinese cinema, a gaping absence also noted by Yingjin Zhang in his essay on the state of the field.<sup>3</sup> Music permeates nearly every axis of inquiry in Chinese cinema: reception, marketing, stardom, industrial organization, sound/dubbing, dialect, genre, narrative, gender, sexuality, cross-cultural circulation, historiography, the nation. And yet, aside from the work of Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu<sup>4</sup> and Sue Tuohy<sup>5</sup>, there is little sustained attention to music, popular or otherwise. Is it really possible to conceive of a study of Jia Zhang-ke without attention to popular music? Or of the nightclub film genre? Or of practically any Hong Kong star since the 1980s?

I tackle this last question in my article, "The KTV Aesthetic: Popular Music Culture and Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema," which I see as a companion piece to the DVD essay, which focuses exclusively on Wong Kar-wai.<sup>6</sup> Readers seeking a more contextual (and less visually and aurally enticing) approach should refer to the print article.

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## NOTES

1. The multi-linearity of the DVD medium is a topic that particularly preoccupied me at the time, and is elaborated further in my essay, "DVD Deleted Scenes and the Recovery of the Invisible," [Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies](#) 20.4 (December 2006): 499-508.

2. Some examples include Farquhar, Mary and Yingjin Zhang, eds. [Chinese Film Stars](#). London: Routledge, 2010.; Hudson, Dale. "Just Play Yourself, 'Maggie Cheung': [Irma Vep](#), Rethinking Transnational Stardom and Unthinking National Cinemas." [Screen](#) 47.2 (2006): 213-32; Horng, Menghsin C. "Domestic Dislocations: Healthy Realism, Stardom, and the Cinematic Projection of Home in Postwar Taiwan." [Journal of Chinese Cinemas](#) 4.1 (March 2010): 27-43; Meyer, Richard J. [Ruan Ling-yu: The Goddess of Shanghai](#). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005; Edwards, Louise and Elaine Jeffreys, eds. [Celebrity in China](#). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

3. Zhang, Yingjin. "Comparative Film Studies, Transnational Film Studies: Interdisciplinarity, Crossmediality, and Transcultural Visuality in Chinese Cinema." [Journal of Chinese Cinemas](#) 1.1 (January 2007): 36.

4. Yueh-yu Yeh, Emilie. "Elvis, Please Allow Me to Introduce Myself: American Music and Neocolonialism in Taiwan Cinema." [Modern Chinese](#)

Literature and Culture 15.1 (2003): 1-28; Yueh-yu, Yeh. Phantom of the Music: Song Narration in Chinese-Language Cinema. Taipei: Yuan-liou, 2000; Yueh-yu Yeh, Emilie and Lake Wong Hu. "Transcultural Sounds: Music, Identity, and the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai." Asian Cinema 19.1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 32-46.

5. Tuohy, Sue. "Metropolitan Sounds: Music in Chinese Films of the 1930s." Yingjin Zhang, ed. Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943 (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999) 200-21; Tuohy, Sue M.C. "Reflexive Cinema: Reflecting on and Representing the Worlds of Chinese Film and Music." Mark Slobin, ed. Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. 177-213.

6. Hu, Brian. "The KTV Aesthetic: Popular Music Culture and Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema." Screen 47.4 (Winter 2006): 407-24.

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