HOT POT

DELUXE EXPANDED



SMALL MUSIC PUBLICATION



HOT POT



HOT POT is an indie music zine, with a focus on cultural exchange. The songs discussed herein have diverse global influences, and are the products of complex geopolitical circumstances.

By talking about this music, I want to highlight the interconnected nature of music history. Songs, whether alone or in groups, tend to repeat and recur across decades. I also want to provide a springboard, for those looking to get into Eastern music.

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Contents 东西

2. Oh, those China Nights!
Politics, Pop, and the Pacific

9. Oops! All Sukiyaki
Musical tasting menu

13. Pop Continent
PC Music goes east

16.My Cantopop Nights
Review of Emma-Lee Moss' new book

19. The Carpios
Interview with Rosalie Carpio

20. Fairyland Mixes
Interview with Ella Dorn

Oh, those China Nights!



Li Xianglan, Bai Guang, and Okuyama Saiko,

Briefly a transnational girl group.

Picture great oceans of devotees, all crowding, thronging, clamouring to catch a glimpse of their beloved idol. It's a familiar sight by now, but in the Tokyo of 1941 this was a shocking new development. This crowd was gathered to see Li Xianglan, the 'singing ambassadress for Japanese-Manchurian friendship'.

Born in the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo (now northeastern China), Li was first discovered by a local radio station. Soon, she was an international 大陸メロディ *tairiku merodei* star. These 'continental melodies' were pop songs, incorporating real and fantasised Chinese cultural elements. The idea of occupied China as a vast and exotic frontier, just waiting to be civilised by Japanese hands, carried with it an exciting, romantic con-notation.

Li was also a successful actress. Her biggest success at the time was 1940's 支那の夜 *China Nights*. A rather trite musical melodrama, the film was also an early exercise in multimedia cross-promotion: it took its name from a continental melody hit by Watanabe Hamako. The Manchuria Motion Picture Association, then working on their next Li Xianglan star vehicle, had titled the film so that she might remake the song as its theme tune.

China Nights was also a blatant propaganda project, made to promote Japanese interests in China. In it, Li plays Guilan: an Eliza Doolittle-type just waiting to be rescued, cleaned up, and civilised. Tetsuo, her Henry Higgins figure, is a kind-hearted Japanese sailor. The film's most iconic scene is a confrontation between its two leads. Incensed by Guilan's repeated displays of ingratitude, Tetsuo lashes out — slapping her hard across the face. Touched by his kindness, and by his display of raw, uncontrollable emotion, the Chinese girl falls instantly in love.

The film was a massive commercial success, released right at the peak of a Japanese 'continental boom'. Still, the wild, immoderate passions which Li Xianglan stirred were not uncontroversial. Of the stampede in Tokyo, newspaper Asahi

Shimbun wrote:

> We note with regret the messy pandemonium displayed by members of the audience before a certain movie theatre [...] It was a misfortune to have to witness such a blatant display of our flippant national morality, still unaltered to this day, on the part of a segment of our citizenry and the laxity of their discipline.
>
> Fragrant Orchid, p. 128
>
> Yamaguchi, Y.

Li's films were even more controversial in China. Local audiences found it deeply humiliating to see one of their own so abused; to see her reward her Japanese aggressor with love was worse still.

Besides, the Chinese had their own burgeoning pop ecosystem. 時代曲 *shidaiqu*, or 'music of the era' was the sound of Shanghai's famous International Settlement. Often referred to as the 'Paris of the Orient', the Settlement was a treaty port run by a coalition of foreign powers. There, an expatriate élite had built a home away from home, with easy access to Western-styled architecture, food, and music.

Prestigious nightclubs like the Canidrome could afford foreign jazz musicians, scouted out and recruited from Europe and North America. Less prestigious clubs (which catered mostly to well-off locals) mixed jazz and pop with Chinese folk music. Shidaiqu formed somewhere in the middle of this cultural gradient, using a Western musical vocabulary to build around Chinese themes and motifs.

It was this difference in approach, rather than any real sonic or linguistic divide, which distinguished domestic Chinese fusion from the continental melody type. For Japanese listeners, the Orientalist continental melody was an escape from dreary, drab modernity. For Chinese ones, Occidentalist pop music was a way of accessing modernity — or at least, the exciting, modern lifestyles of their wealthy expatriate neighbours.

When the Japanese came to occupy Shanghai, the International Settlement lost its relative independence. Still, the production of pop music continued. Moreover, as Japan became more and more involved in Chinese media production, the divide between continental melody and Chinese pop narrowed somewhat.

Li Xianglan maintained careers in both genres. Despite her origins as a continental melody star, her song 夜來香 'The Evening Primrose' remains a shidaiqu staple to this day. Furthermore, her Japanese recording of Zhou Xuan's 何日君再來 'When Will

You Return?' helped relaunch the Chinese song as a continental melody sensation.

Still, this linking of musical ecosystems came with some political difficulties. Once during the Second World war, Shanghai's Japan-controlled Municipal Council had Li brought in for questioning. Reportedly, the 'you' in 'When Will You Return?' was too vague, and might be construed as a reference to the deposed Nationalist government in Chongqing[1]. Li's creative direction didn't help matters; the white of her dress on a blue-and-red backdrop was evocative of the Nationalist flag.

Though this incident didn't develop any further, it coincided roughly with a general backlash against continental melody. Not long after this, 'When Will You Return' was banned in both languages; government censors cited its 'effeminate' character and its pro-motion of 'free love'.

In any case, Li Xianglan would soon face more pressing issues. In 1945, the Nationalists really did return to Shanghai. When they did, they began a wave of high-profile treason prosecutions. Of those found guilty, many were executed.

To a public still smarting from *China Nights*, Li Xianglan seemed an obvious target. However, when faced with a military trial, the actress produced some life-saving evidence. Her birth certificate, smuggled from her hometown in north-eastern China, attested that she had been born 'Yamaguchi Yoshiko'.

As a full-blooded Japanese citizen, Yamaguchi could not reasonably be prosecuted for treason. Still, while not technically criminal, her passing for Chinese while filming *China Nights* was an irreparable moral blemish. After signing a document of apology, a judge saw her swiftly repatriated to Japan.

The Shanghai scene's days were also numbered. Though it had survived the loss of the International Settlement (and the demands of a censorious Japanese regime), with the end of the Chinese civil war came a new Communist government.

Much like the Japanese with continental melody, the new regime viewed *shidaiqu* as overly commercial and romantically charged — essentially musical porn. Western instruments were smashed, sheet music was burned, and the genre's architects were heavily persecuted.

1 Later, in Taiwan, 'When Will You Return?' would be banned by the Nationalists themselves. This was because the characters 日 and 君 ('day' and 'you') formed a direct homophone of 日軍 ('Japanese military').It took a late '70s cover by megastar Teresa Teng to fully rehabilitate the song.



Hong Kong Presents… Off-Beat Cha Cha. 1960.

By 1960, China's pop scene had rebuilt itself in Hong Kong. Like the International Settlement before it, Hong Kong was a port city governed by foreigners. It had a similarly diverse upper crust, and its location made it a convenient stop for a steady flow of travelling musicians. Most importantly, its geographic and political separateness shielded its club culture from the political powder-keg that was Mainland China.

'China Nights' resurfaced here too, as the opening track of Diamond Records' Hong Kong Presents: Off-Beat Cha Cha. This version features all-Mandarin lyrics. Its new hook, which roughly translates to 'dreams of spring', is not about China at all. Rather, it is about a yearning to return to warmer, happier times: not a million miles from 'When Will You Return?'. The song has also been rearranged, now featuring a Latin-inspired cha-cha beat. Music like this, the album's back cover asserts, had 'swept the Orient like Asian Flu, but without its ill effects'.

These changes refashion 'China Nights' into something akin to the banned Shanghai sound. Between the circumstances of the genre's exile and the number of Shanghainese immigrants in Hong Kong, shidaiqu was the object of much nostalgia. Performers like Rebecca Pan[2] and Mona Fong, both born in pre-ban Shanghai, regularly performed shidaiqu music — in nightclubs, and on vinyl for Diamond Records.

It's interesting, though, that Kong Ling should be the one to perform it. While Diamond Records did employ many shidaiqu singers, the locally born Kong Ling wasn't one of them. Instead she recorded Western fare, such as show-tunes, jazz standards, and the latest pop singles from America.

Her target audience was similarly Western.

2 Pan would later feature in Wong Kar Wai's '60s-set *In The Mood For Love* (2000), as gossipy Shanghainese landlady Mrs. Suen. The loss of old Shanghai, and the mid-centrury exodus to Hong Kong, is one of the film's recurring themes. Pan's Diamond Records cover of *Bengawan Solo* also features.

Her albums were packaged more or less as they were sung — mostly in English, with secondary or non-existent Chinese text. A much-touted appearance on CBS' Arthur Godfrey Show suggests an effort to sell her albums overseas. Domestically, they might have been flogged to expats, tourists, and American soldiers on leave.

Indeed, this last demographic might account for Kong's connection with the song. Colloquially known as GIs, American soldiers in the Pacific were allowed a limited amount of rest and recreation (R&R) leave. They flocked in great numbers to the region's friendly cities, like Singapore, Tokyo, and Hong Kong, where they would spend profusely in brothels, bars, and indeed, nightclubs.

These GIs also adored 'China Nights'. They had discovered it on visits to Japan, and carried it with them around the Pacific. Its tinny, exotic instrumental and Yamaguchi's wistful, melancholy voice seemed to speak to a wild, romantic Orient; one quite different from the war-torn Korean front. Though they couldn't make heads or tails of the lyrics, they made do with crude phonetic approximations. Even cruder than most was a 'translation' by comedian and pianist Larry Allen. This version swapped the song's hook, 支那の夜 '*Shina no Yoru*', out for the euphemism 'she ain't got no yo-yo'. In Allen's own words, 'What'd you think I was talking about, ehhh?'.[3]

Unlike those in Shanghai, Hong Kong's nightclubs did not discriminate between local and expatriate audiences. Moreover, many of Kong's regular haunts (such as Winner House and Show Boat) were specifically hotel clubs. With such easy access to military audiences, she might have found a song like 'China Nights' incredibly useful.

By shifting it to a roughly contemporary Chinese genre, and singing brand new Mandarin lyrics about nostalgia, Kong could distance the song from its difficult historical context. At the same time, these changes were not so drastic as to alienate the song's new American fans. After all, the song was beloved by soldiers b*ecause of* (and not despite) its obscurity.

— HOT POT —

An instrumental version of 'China Nights' appears on Martin Denny's Exotica (1957), a foundational work in the genre of the same name. Exotica records are speculative world music, made by American mu-

3 Larry Allen at the New Golden Gate Club, Tokyo. https://youtu.be/v4F1kFG4wJk

sicians to suggest distant, usually tropical locales. Like movie scores, they're usually quite high-concept, with titles that briefly summarise their key ideas[4].



Exotica. 1957.

In the case of Denny's album, this key idea might be the nascent genre itself. Like Kong Ling's records, this album consists mostly of popular song covers — more specifically, songs with existing tropical associations. 'Similau' had been a Caribbean-inspired hit for Peggy Lee, and then on I Love Lucy, a courtship dance from 'Africa'. The birdcall-filled 'Quiet Village' is taken from Les Baxter's Ritual of the Savage, a jauntier take on roughly the same subject matter as Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Naturally, Hoagy Carmichael's 'Hong Kong Blues' is set in Hong Kong. By assembling these in one place, and then recreating them in his signature style, Denny constructs the genre's basic canon. 'Here are the songs', the album seems to declare, 'which aren't yet (but will be) exotica'.

Beloved as it was by American soldiers abroad, 'China Nights' seems a natural fit. At the same time, there's a certain irony to its inclusion. To some extent, Denny's version functions much like the Japanese original: frontier music, designed to help listeners escape from dull modernity. Unmoored from its original political context, though, the song's actual setting feels rather indistinct. It might be China, as originally intended, or Japan where the song originated. It might even be the Pacific writ large, connected as it was by the coming and going of US military vessels.

This confusion would only deepen with time, as exotica became more and more associated with the '50s tiki boom. Tiki bars, though ostensibly Polynesian-themed, served Caribbean cocktails with Cantonese food. Exotica, which represented everything foreign (but nothing specific) slotted into this world perfectly, finally reaching its imagined frontier.

4 Take Les Baxter's *The Sacred Idol* (1960). Though written and promoted as the score to an Edward Nassour film, the album's parent project never actually came out — Nassour was found dead in 1962, having stabbed himself in the heart.

In 1963, 'China Nights' landed in America once again. Earlier that year, Kyu Sakamoto's 'Sukiyaki', had become a surprise crossover hit, topping the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Now actively targeting the American market, Sakamoto chose 'China Nights' as his follow-up single.

On paper, this choice made a lot of sense. The song was recognisably Japanese, but its fame amongst G.I.s (as well as the success of Denny's *Exotica)* had proven it compatible with Western musical tastes. Moreover, by including a new English verse, Sakamoto could communicate more directly with his Western fans.

This targeted approach might have done more harm than good. 'Sukiyaki' had taken off because of its capacity to communicate beyond language; while few Americans understood the lyrics, it was easy to pick up its melancholy tone. 'China Nights', on the other hand, with its new lyrics about 'cherry blossoms' and saying 'sayonara', was too conscious of its own foreignness. Peaking at #58, the song showed that 'Sukiyaki' would not be easy to replicate.

As the Japanese economy picked up steam, the country's image began to shift overseas. Instead of serene melancholy, Japan was now a land of hyper-modernity — of urban life taken to a thrilling extreme.

The nature and style of the 'Eastern crossover hit' shifted too. In 1979, idol duo Pink Lady peaked at #37 with disco track 'Kiss in the Dark'. The pair had gained unprecedented popularity in Japan, and an executive at NBC hoped to replicate this effect in America. The only problem? That neither Lady spoke a word of English. After an improbable stint as variety show hosts (all of their lines were memorised phonetically), they returned dejected to Japan[5].

Just over a year later, the Yellow Magic Orchestra's 'Firecracker' reached #60. A tongue-in-cheek rework of an especially Orientalist Martin Denny track, 'Firecracker' traded marimbas for futuristic, video game influenced synthesisers. A dance hit in the States, the song even secured the Orchestra a guest spot on African American music show Soul Train. The song's iconic bouncing riff, a new addition, would also become a popular hip-hop sample.[6]

5 Later, Korean girl group Wonder Girls would attempt the same.

6 In 2000, 'Firecracker' became central to the bitter Mariah Carey / Jennifer Lopez feud. After hearing that Carey had sampled the song for an upcoming project, Lopez rushed out her own version to beat her to the punch.

Oops! All Sukiyaki



Sukiyaki, 1961

In 1963, Kyu Sakamoto became the first-ever Asian act to appear on Billboard's Hot 100. In fact, his song 'Sukiyaki' topped the chart, dethroning Lesley Gore's 'It's My Party' and staying at #1 position for three weeks.

'Sukiyaki', originally titled 上を向いて歩こう *Ue O Muite Aruko*, was not written with a Western crossover in mind. Arguably, the opposite is true. In 1960, songwriter Ei Rokusuke joined a mass-protest movement against increased US. military involvement in Japan. The song's mournful yet resolute lyrics, though tactfully nonspecific, describe how Ei felt about the protests failing to achieve their goals.

Despite this, global audiences were quick to latch onto the song. Since its Western break-through, it has been covered and re-imagined countless times. When considered together, these numerous versions of 'Sukiyaki' form an interesting, genre and language-spanning cross section of music history.

Kenny Ball and his Jazzmen (1963)

The song's first Western remake was by UK trad-jazz artist Kenny Ball. An instrumental cover, Ball's version neatly sidestepped most issues of language. Still, for British audiences at the time, pronouncing 'Ue o Muite Arukō' was a big ask. To avoid this problem, Ball's label Pye Records retitled the song 'Sukiyaki'.

The Japanese hotpot dish すき焼き Sukiyaki isn't mentioned anywhere in the song, nor does it symbolise anything specific. It isn't even that popular in the West, where meals prepared at-table are logistically difficult for restauranteurs. Still, the label might have chosen worse. British audiences could identify the term as foreign (and possibly even Japanese), but would not necessarily have picked up on its culinary associations. After all, they were only just becoming familiar with spaghetti![1]

After the success of Ball's cover, Sakamo-

1 BBC: Spaghetti-Harvest in Ticino. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVo_wkxH9dU

to's original received a Western release. The new title was kept, and it was under the name 'Sukiyaki' that it entered the Hot 100.

Clyde Beavers (1963)

The first English-language cover of 'Sukiyaki' came from fast-working country artist Clyde Beavers (yes). Beginning work immediately after Sakamoto's momentous #1, Beavers took less than two weeks to record, master, and ship his own version.

A Billboard article from the time allows us some insight into his process[2]. After trying his luck with a university linguistics depart-ment, as well as the proprietor of 'an Oriental gift shop', the singer flew from Nashville to DC to request help from the Japanese embassy. Finally, after wining and dining a diplomat, he returned triumphant with a rough summary of the song's meaning.

Perhaps because of this, Beavers' translation is often shockingly literal. They do not lend themselves well to singing, often requiring him to stretch and squeeze syllables to fit the song's rhythm. Indeed, while his commitment to authenticity is laudable, Beavers' experience shows that music localisation is perhaps a job best left to professionals.

The Andrews Sisters (1963)

A version of 'Sukiyaki' appears on The Andrews Sisters Present: The Hits Of The Day. This was a late-career effort from the Sisters, who were long past their wartime commercial peak. It also followed a failed solo turn from lead vocalist Patty, and a lengthy period of musical floundering. By recording a selection of recent hits, the sisters were likely aiming for guaranteed sales.

The Andrews Sisters were no strangers to translation — their first ever hit, 'Bei Mir Bist Du Schön', was originally written in Yiddish. Here, English lyrics by Buzz Cason and Snuff Garrett convey the song's general meaning, with appropriate attention paid to meter and musicality. This would quickly become the song's definitive English translation, further solidifying it as a pop standard. Between 1963 and 1980, nearly every cover of 'Sukiyaki' credits Cason and Garrett as songwriters.

Kong Ling (1963)

In the late '50s and early '60s, Hong Kong was the core of Asia's thriving international nightclub scene[3]. Through the city's

2 https://www.worldradiohistory.com/Archive-All-Music/Billboard/60s/1963/Billboard 1963-06-22.pdf

3 Much of the following is paraphrased from Jonathan Bollen's book 'Touring Variety in the Asia Pacific Region'. If you can't get your hands on the book, his blog is also really great!

ports flowed a steady stream of touring performers, feeding a bottomless appetite for new and foreign experiences. These artists presented themselves as vehicles for culture, delivering the latest and most distinctive styles of performance from their own countries.

To keep up with touring performers, local ones ensured their songbooks were diverse and up to date. Performing 'Sukiyaki', both a popular Japanese song and a recent American hit, might have helped Kong Ling stay relevant in this highly competitive climate. Based mostly on Cason and Garrett's translation, this version adds extra national distinction with a brand new Mandarin chorus.

Jewel Akens 1965

'Birds, bees, love potions, sukiyaki and sundry other items get the rock and roll going over', wrote Record World about Jewel Akens' debut album[4]. 'His tunes are all very simple, and get primarily straight readings from the singer. Album will have strong appeal'.

'Sukiyaki' appears third on this track listing, sandwiched between two #3 hits: 'Love Potion No. 9' had peaked there for The Searchers, and 'The Birds and the Bees' for Akens himself. That it was covered at all (and that an English version could be described as 'primarily straight') shows that 'Sukiyaki' was no longer a novelty but a standard.

A Taste of Honey (1981)

In July 1979, Chicago DJ Steve Dahl detonated a container full of disco records in the middle of Comiskey Park stadium. While conceived as a promotional stunt, drawing audiences for a highly anticipated baseball game, the now-infamous Disco Demolition Night reflected real hostility towards the genre. Disco was, in the public consciousness, the preserve of queer and Black artists and listeners.

For Los Angeles duo A Taste of Honey, this backlash was a cause for serious concern. The group's 1978 debut single, 'Boogie Oogie Oogie' had scored them an early-career #1. While their label Capitol Records wanted another dance hit, frontwoman Janice-Marie Johnson felt that a disco vixen typecast would only hold the pair back. By remaking 'Sukiyaki', a pre-disco record that she'd loved since childhood, Johnson hoped to make a hard pivot towards respectability.

4 https://www.worldradiohistory.com/Archive-All-Music/Record-World/60s/65/RW-1965-04-10.pdf

The result? An R&B ballad with all-new English lyrics. While the song's presentation (kimonos, folding fans, and 'Sayonara') skews a little Orientalist, Johnson made a clear effort to involve real Japanese musicians. To inform her new translation, which narrow the song's scope to specifically romantic heartbreak, she reached out to Ei Rokusuke, the song's original lyricist. The song's shimmering instrumental features *koto* player June Kuramoto, on loan from jazz fusion group Hiroshima.

In January 1981, after a string of failed dance releases, Capitol finally relented. 'Sukiyaki' was released as a single, and after a slow climb through the R&B and Adult Contemporary charts, peaked at #3 on the Hot 100.

Selena (1989)

'80s J-pop was, like all its East Asian contemporaries, aesthetically promiscuous. Jazz music was heavily mined, but so were genres from Latin America and the Iberian peninsula. Because of this, Selena Quintanilla's debut sounds at times like a really good city pop album.

Oddly enough, 'Sukiyaki' is one of the album's less Japanese-sounding tracks. It's a very direct cover of A Taste of Honey's version, only translated into Spanish and rearranged for her Tejano backing band Los Dinos. With no koto player available, this production is driven by maracas, sparse percussion and a plucky synth.

4P.M. (1994)

Between an a cappella intro, a finger-snapping beat, and even a spoken word bridge ('Girl... I don't know what I did to make you leave me...'), this is '90s boy band music at its most egregious. The debut single of vocal R&B group 4P.M., this cover of A Taste of Honey's version reached #7 on the Hot 100.

Teresa Carpio (2004)

If Cantopop were a woman, it would probably be Teresa Carpio. Born to a Shanghainese mother and a Filipino father, Carpio sings comfortably in five languages. During the 1960s, her relative Tony had been a musical director at Kong Ling's label.

Her version of 'Sukiyaki', sung in Cantonese, is closest instrumentally to *A Taste of Honey*'s. Rather than mourning a lost love, though, Carpio's lyrics celebrate a transformative new romance. The song's title, 眉頭今天不再猛皺, translates directly to 'My brow isn't furrowed anymore'.

Pop Continent



Chinese pop-star Lexie Liu

Lexie Liu is pretty famous in China. She pulls astonishing numbers on domestic streaming services, and this Spring Festival she was the face of Miu Miu. 'She's well loved there, she's a rising star', my friend Gigi tells me. 'They call her Little Rihanna'.

Still, like many artists from East Asia's booming music markets, Liu is courting a global audience. 'Pop Girl', the lead single of her most recent project, is a useful example. In its music video, she plays both a teenage girl and her pink-haired digital alter ego. Dancing giddily around her bedroom, a manic Liu chants her celebrity affirmations: 'Skin clear, hair shiny. Girls and gays like me / Tap, I'm on your screen. I serve my pop girl chic'.

Aesthetically, the video's strongly reminiscent of PC Music. Headed by pop idiosyncrat and futurist A.G. Cook, the label and art collective was a major player in the 2010s underground scene. The internet, they posited, might democratise and amplify the aesthetics of pop music. Anyone, whether famous or not in meatspace, could perform celebrity online.

Specifically, Liu appears to be referencing Hannah Diamond's music video for 'Hi'. In it, a lonely Diamond seeks cyber-connection through her MacBook webcam. 'I don't want to be alone in my bedroom', she laments, broadcasting her glossy pink bedroom across myriad online channels.

This isn't a problem, of course. Pop music is nothing if not referential, and Diamond, at least, seems pleased about the connection; 'Pop Girl' is a regular fixture in her HD Heaven DJ sets. Still, it does make you wonder: why might somebody like Lexie Liu want to be Hannah Diamond?

'Pop Girl' is part of a growing trend. In China, Korea, and Japan, PC Music's sonic and aesthetic markers have become staples of the 2020s' music landscape. Those in the idol sphere have been especially early adopters. Aespa, flagship girl group of K-pop pioneers SM Entertainment, have

scored back to back hits with a sound inspired by hyperpop producers SOPHIE and Umru. Another Korean agency, Starship, hired Hannah Diamond herself to produce a set of teasers. In Japan, J-pop group F5ve is a joint production venture between movement leader AG Cook and Lady Gaga producer Bloodpop.

Of course, the cart-horse inversion at PC Music's core (that is, pop aesthetics preceding actual popularity) is rather less futuristic in these countries. In the 20th century, spurred on by a turbulent geopolitical situation, East Asia rocketed at unprecedented speeds into Western-style modernity. China, Japan, and South Korea's star systems were hastily built, based on models imported more or less wholesale from overseas. Even the world-famous K-pop system is, at its core, a localised version of Motown.

Though Cook is often cagey about his influences, his older work provides some useful detail. In an archived interview with Tank magazine, he describes working on a maximalist, 'gyaru'-themed promotional site for makeup brand Illamasqua.[1] The site, built in collaboration with Diamond, makes heavy use of Chinese, Japanese and Korean text. Also attached is a mood-setting playlist, citing K-pop and J-pop artists alongside PC affiliates like Danny L. Harle. So, is PC Music's move east a conquest or a homecoming? In 2013, the original



Snippet of Logo Magazine x Illamasqua

PC Music roster were regulars at London club night JACK댄스 (pronounced 'Jack Dance'). Adam Harper, who attended some of these early gigs, attributes this eye-catching orthography to prevailing trends within London's art scene[2].

'I think always, you can find, people have been consuming media from East Asia', he notes, citing TV shows like Dragon Ball Z, and video games like Mario and Kirby as millennial favourites. 'By the year 2000, and certainly by 2010, there was this image of high-tech cuteness. Many of us learnt the word 可愛 *kawaii* for the first time around this time'.

The label's more futuristic tendencies might also stem from this environment. 'Often ideas of technology or of the future have had this kind of East Asian aesthet-

1 https://web.archive.org/web/20141013194700/http://illamasqua.logomagazine.com/
2 His blog post on this is fascinating. https://www.electronicbeats.net/vol-10-pon-cuter-love/

ic to them', Harper muses, 'Not literally East Asian, but Orientalist perhaps'. Japan's rapid growth in the late 20th century made it the subject of much science-fiction speculation. In the future, some writers thought, the East might become the planet's technological, cultural, and even economic centre. While Japan did eventually stop growing, influential films like Blade Runner have given the idea staying power.

Still, PC Music has always been distinctly British. 'I was certainly aware that there were global influences in the room', Harper says, 'but in London there was always a particular [underground] scene. Occasionally that would involve a conversation with a group, a musical aesthetic or a genre from abroad, but [Jack댄스] was just another form of that London scene'.

For many, the PC Music sound may well be camouflage; to East Asia's infamous idol factories, blurring between affected manufacture and the genuine article can only be advantageous.

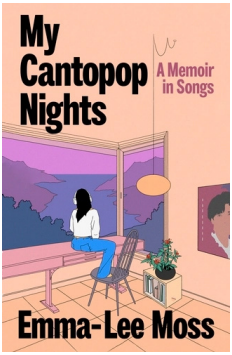
It may also be simple trend-chasing. During the pandemic, K-pop was overrun with '80s-styled synthwave. More recently, the PC Music fad has shared space with various micro-trends: most notably, UK garage, house, and amapiano. Right now, we're seeing a shift to Europop; Le Sserafim, a girl group under mega-label HYBE, recently sampled the Macarena.

For those outside of the major labels, the sound is a route into global alternative community. This November in London, for example, the Margins United music festival will be celebrating 'alternative East and Southeast Asian culture'. Between Cook protégés F5ve, electronic star The Deep, and headliner Yves, all the event's major players are at least PC-adjacent.

Beyond festival placements, the scene is also a useful networking tool. Previously a member of twelve-member girl group LOONA, Yves has bolstered her solo career with a string of high-profile international collaborations, such as UK drum and bass star PinkPantheress, American hyperpop artist Underscores[3], and even Lexie Liu herself.

3 Both PinkPantheress and Underscores are longstanding K-pop fans.

My Cantopop Nights



Near the end of *My Cantopop Nights*, nestled between the acknowledgements and glossary, you'll find the book's only photo. Here, as described nearly three-hundred pages earlier, we see a beaming eleven-year-old Emma-Lee Moss — sporting a version of Aaron Kwok's famous curtain haircut.

In this age of trendy multimedia projects, Moss' one-picture limit shows phenomenal restraint. It's also, I think, necessary friction. No book, no matter how well-written, can fully immerse you in a living, thriving subculture. The records, music videos, and feature films must be allowed to speak for themselves.

To see Kwok model the same hair, you'll just have to dog-ear your page and Google him. This applies equally to the music: *My Cantopop Nights* is not, as its dust jacket proclaims, 'your new favourite playlist'. If a Chinese album's on Spotify at all, there's no telling which language (or writing system) it'll be labelled in. If you want to hear a song, you're going to have to do some sleuthing.

After all, the book is as much about discovery as it is reconnection. Moss, though a Hong Konger by birth, spent many of her formative years in the U.K. While many featured songs are old favourites, others are drawn from movies, or dredged up from mixtapes and vintage record shops.

Some songs are even both. In one chapter, Moss thinks back to a song she once heard at school. In her mind the song is sweet and folkish, sung within the soft range of a child. When she consults a relative, however, she discovers the limits of personal memory. Her childhood folk song is in fact Hacken Lee's 紅日 'Red Sun', stripped of its bombastic production by the limits of playground singing.

Like all city memoirs, *My Cantopop Nights* has to balance the historical and personal. Too much of the former risks dryness, after all, while too much of the latter can come across as indulgent. Moss finds an elegant solution in 缘分 *yuanfen*, an idea akin to serendipity, which holds that all

fateful events are the result of countless past lives and connections.

In a city as connected as Hong Kong, *yuanfen* is everywhere. In the '60s, Moss' father met Frances Yip in a bar, launching a brief career in Cantopop songwriting. Her aunt Eleanor was childhood friends with Teresa Carpio. Moss even connects her indie music career, though based mostly in England, with the ethos of Hong Kong's '60s band scene.

Sometimes, though, there's a visible struggle to fit the breadth of Moss' experience. Its seventh chapter revolves around 月亮代表我的心 The Moon Represents My Heart, sung in 1977 by Taiwanese artist Teresa Teng.

The Moon Represents My Heart is not Cantopop by any reasonable standard. While Teng did sometimes sing in Cantonese, this song is in fairly standard Mandarin. Moreover, her music draws less from '60s youth culture and more from the 時代曲 *shidaiqu* sound of interwar Shanghai.

During her life, Teresa Teng was a highly political person. A staunch supporter of Taiwan's Kuomintang government, she refused to perform on the Communist side of the strait. Instead, her voice was broadcast there as propaganda, borne by radio towers and megaphones.

Today, though, her honey-sweet disposition (and her untimely death at just forty-two years old) have made her into a mythic figure. In the current climate, such a career would be impossible. Chinese people agree on almost nothing universally, and living celebrities are as much beholden to a capricious public as they are actual government censorship.

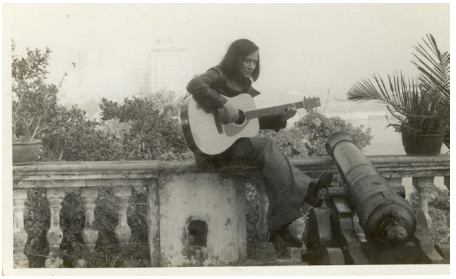
As the saying goes, 'Wherever there are Chinese people, there is Teresa Teng's music'. The Moon Represents My Heart has particular cultural cachet; as Moss pithily observes, it is 'the most Chinese song'. Amid a period of disconnection, Moss is visited (via algorithm) by Teng's digital ghost. This is certainly serendipitous.

Like all hauntings, though, the encounter highlights the boundaries of Moss' bookworld. However compelling they might be, there are some places a book called *My Cantopop Nights* can't go.

— HOT POT —

My Cantopop Nights *is out in hardcover now. It costs about £22 in any bookshop.*

The Carpios



Tony Carpio

When I call Rosalie Carpio, it's a sunny morning in London. It's the evening in Hong Kong, so she's just finishing up a busy day of teaching. I begin by thanking her profusely for agreeing to chat about Tony and his legacy.

In the preceding day, I've read pages upon pages of documents — all direct from Rosalie. Most relate to Tony Carpio, an accomplished bandleader and her late husband of 40 years. Others relate to the couple's children and extended family.

I tell her somebody should really publish these. It's got clear historical significance: in a sense, the Carpio family story is the story of music in Hong Kong.

Like all Hong Kong music stories, it begins in pre-war Shanghai; Tony's father, Tomas, played the banjo there. 'Filipino musicians travelled all over Asia', Rosalie explains. 'In the thirties, the main place they went was Shanghai, because it was just an open port'.

When the Japanese invaded, Tomas and his family returned to Manila. There, his son Tony was born. By 1956, though, the Carpios set sail once again, this time for Hong Kong. Now that politics had rendered Shanghai inhospitable for musicians, the then-British colony was the locus of Asia's music industry.

Tony and his cousin Fred found work as musicians, and later bandleaders. In Hong Kong's extensive nightclub scene, virtually all the bandleaders were historically Filipino. Author Jonathan Bollen attributes this to a comfort with American culture, the product of historic colonisation.

Rosalie, a performer herself, concurs. 'Filipinos were successful everywhere they went,' she explains, 'because they were versatile. They could play anything'.

By the mid-1960s, Tony was music director at Diamond Records. While at Diamond Tony worked with a range of bands, such as frequent Kong Ling collaborators the Fabulous Echoes. Still, Rosalie stresses that 'his band' was really the Corsairs.

We go through their 1965 album, and I find some old favourites. Of course, 'Quizas, Quizas, Quizas' is there. Nat King Cole's version of the same features prominently in the sixties-set *In The Mood For Love*. Also present are versions of 夜來香 'The Evening Primrose' (written here as 'Yie Lai Sian') and 'China Nights'. These songs, holdovers from '30s Shanghai, were Diamond staples — they'd been recorded by Mona Fong and Kong Ling respectively[1].



The Corsairs, 1965

I decide there's something swashbuckling about a band of roving guitarists. A corsair is a pirate, yeah? A privateer? Rosalie thinks for a moment. 'I hadn't thought of that.' She draws my attention back to the album's cover. 'Corsair was a brand of car. There's three cars there, right?'

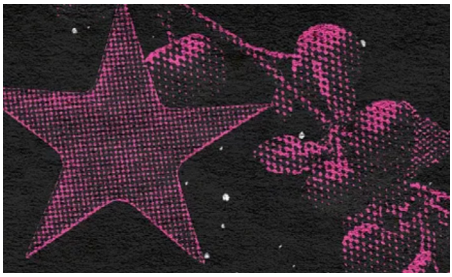
Near the end of our call, I ask Rosalie about Cantopop. The Carpio family has worked extensively with Hong Kong's Television Broadcasts station (TVB), even training some of their biggest stars. I'm really curious about this; in my head, Cantopop and English music feel like separate worlds.

'The Filipinos played all that music too, on the recordings'. Rosalie explains. 'They worked every week, on TVB and ATV, and they played all the Chinese songs'. Indeed, no-one exemplifies this collaboration more than Teresa Carpio. Teresa, who is half Chinese on her mother's side, sings in both English and Cantonese. She's even starred in a Sam Hui music video — in 'Tsim Sha Tsui Susie', she plays the titular Susie!

Nowadays, things are a little harder for creatives. The Hong Kong nightclub scene, in which the Carpios got their start, has more-or-less evaporated since COVID. Rosalie, though, along with her children Bernard and Chris, is committed to keeping the family legacy alive. To her, it's a matter of perseverance. 'You have to keep your skills up, no matter what. Even Tony always practiced eight hours a day, the whole way through.'

1 These, too, were recorded with Filipino bandleaders. Mona Fong sang with Cardin Cruz's band, and Kong Ling with Celso Carillo's.

Fairyland Mixes



Five months ago, Ella Dorn's Fairyland DJ mixes started going viral. Her debut video, *early 'oos mandarin trip-hop playlist,* has racked up eighty-five thousand views since its release. Another, *women of mongolian pop and trance* is just shy of a hundred thousand.

Dorn doesn't seem all that surprised. 'I kind of expected it to take off. I keep seeing niche K-pop DJ mixes in my recommendations, and this feels like the next step up'. While YouTube's algorithm is famously opaque, Dorn sees some common trends.

"I do find that the further East I go, the more successful the videos are. I wonder if it's a 'feeling very Chinese' sort of thing". She's referring to a recent social media trend, in which disillusioned young Westerners are adopting Chinese aesthetic and lifestyle habits.

Mercifully, not all her listeners are China-maxxers. 'I would point out what appears to be a big diaspora listenership for my Mandopop videos', she explains. As her music tastes skew older, they're well-suited to those trying to reconnect with their roots.

Though Dorn has lived in Taiwan, she's not personally Chinese. She's also not from Mongolia, Georgia, or any other country featured in her mixes. Her curatorial instinct, though, is second to none. One of the UK's most promising culture writers, she writes a Fairyland Substack as well as a regular column in the New Statesman.

Often, fresh ears can be an asset. To help build her mixes, Dorn keeps a detailed spreadsheet of songs. 'I actually keep a notes section, of my first impression of a song ever. So I know how stuff will hit the first time.'

For those looking to expand their horizons, she offers a single piece of advice. 'Sign up to RateYourMusic and think of any genre,' she says, 'then pick a random country'. RateYourMusic, one of the world's largest music databases, is a powerful tool for discovering songs. Dorn finds one tag especially useful. 'There's also *esoteric*, where a small number of people have given [a song] a high score'.



