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# The ABCs of Chinese Pop: Wang Leehom and the Marketing of a Global Chinese Celebrity

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GRACE WANG

At the closing ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Taiwan-based singer Wang Leehom appeared on stage with other prominent stars of Chinese and Asian pop for a rousing version of “Beijing, Beijing, I Love Beijing,” the catchy and often-replayed song that celebrated affection for the host city. Wang’s participation as a torchbearer and official performer in the Olympics underscored his enormous celebrity status both in China and the greater Chinese diaspora. Yet, despite being one of the most popular artists in the global Chinese market and a pop star with pan-Asian appeal, it is likely that most Americans watching the closing ceremonies on television had never seen or heard of Wang before. It is also likely that most US viewers were unaware that Wang had, in fact, been born and raised in Rochester, New York and did not learn to speak Mandarin until he enrolled in Chinese language classes as an undergraduate at Williams College. The singer’s unlikely musical journey from the suburbs of Western New York to international pop icon in Asia provides an entry point for understanding how discourses of race, market, and belonging are reworked in global contexts.

How did Wang, a second-generation Chinese American, end up becoming one of the industry heavyweights of Mandopop (Mandarin language pop music)? What does the singer’s immense stardom and fandom in Chinese-speaking markets suggest about the travel and translatability of identities such as Asian American, Chinese American, Chinese diasporic, and ABC (American-born Chinese) in Asia? This essay uses Wang as a case study to investigate the transnationality of Asian American subjects and the particular calibrations of Chineseness that emerge from the singer’s music and public image. Through an examination of the racial and national contexts that frame Wang’s belonging in Mandopop, this essay explores what Sau-ling Wong trenchantly describes as the “vast zone of complex cultural negotiations” that marks

the distance between “true cultural affinity and easily identifiable foreignness,” between discrepant formations understood as Chinese American, Chinese diasporic, and Chinese.<sup>1</sup> This essay argues that Wang capitalizes on a fluid dynamic of sameness and difference to appeal to a heterogeneous Chinese-speaking audience that stretches across China to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the greater Chinese diaspora. The singer’s flexible positioning in diverse Chinese spaces highlights the multiple mediations that constitute diaspora, an imagination of community sutured and unified through imperfect translations across linguistic and national communities. This essay also draws on Wong’s theoretical discussions of the shifting meanings of Chineseness in transnational and national frameworks and the “nationalist recuperation,” to use her phrase, of Chinese American accomplishments into broader narratives of Chinese nationalism to pose certain questions about Wang’s phenomenal success.<sup>2</sup> How does the singer infuse his cultural productions with a critical Asian American perspective—most evident in what he terms “chinked out”—and how are such efforts received in Chinese contexts?<sup>3</sup> Moreover, how do the resistant and coalition politics that animate Asian American identity construction in the US become subsumed into larger discourses of racialized diaspora and Chinese pride across the Pacific?

“Crossing over” into Chinese markets clearly frees Wang from the burdens of representation, expectation, and racialization that Asian Americans face attempting to achieve commercial viability in a racially stratified US popular music landscape where Asian American singers are, for the most part, invisible. While Wang did not pursue a music career in the United States prior to releasing his first Chinese album, his writings and interviews convey an astute understanding of the racialized assumptions that guide dominant US perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans and restrict their access to mainstream popular culture. However, achieving commercial success in Chinese contexts requires Wang to gain cultural, aesthetic, and linguistic fluency in the particular parameters that guide the transnational space of Mandopop.<sup>4</sup> While Taiwan’s Mandopop operates in a relatively open environment, singers aiming for the largest audience possible must remain careful to avoid broaching political issues that might be perceived as critical of the Chinese mainland or Taiwanese government. In his music, public appearances, and commercial endorsements, Wang steers clear of potentially divisive topics such as cross-straits politics, deftly uses (and is used by) corporate culture to project a positive image and brand, and promotes a flexible notion of cultural Chineseness to appeal to a broad cross-section of consumers in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Chinese-speaking Southeast Asia, and the greater Chinese diaspora.

This essay begins by outlining how Wang’s carefully cultivated image as a diligent and passionate musician who continually strives to improve himself holds appeal in Chinese contexts. It elucidates how the singer negotiates a Chinese-language music scene and cultural landscape replete with perceptions about what it means to be Chinese American or ABC. Given the singer’s prolific output in music and

film, this essay focuses on songs and albums that specifically thematize Chinese American subjectivity and/or modes of belonging to an identity that coalesces under the sign “Chinese” such as Wang’s hip-hop remake of “Descendants of the Dragon” (2000), and his “chinked out” aesthetic found in the albums *Shangri-la* (2004) and *Heroes of Earth* (2005). Although the specific term “chinked out” failed to resonate fully with Chinese media and fans, both albums were critical and commercial successes and helped establish Wang as a singer with shared stakes in raising the global profile of Chinese music. Ultimately, Wang’s music allows him to transform his outsider status as a racial minority subject in the US into a source of capital that fuels his ongoing artistic experimentations in Chinese music.

### **The Public Persona of Wang Leehom**

While Wang is not the only Chinese American pursuing a career in the Chinese popular music scene, he is one of its most established stars.<sup>5</sup> Since his breakthrough album *Revolution* (1998), he has been at the top of the Chinese music charts, releasing on average one new album a year and staging elaborate shows to promote them. While best known for his music, Wang, like other entertainers in the Asian popular music industry, works in a multitude of realms.<sup>6</sup> Given his longstanding endorsement deals with multinational brands—McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Nikon, Head and Shoulders, and Sony Ericsson, to name a few—Wang appears in commercials, billboards, and print ads throughout Asia. As an actor, he has appeared in several high-profile Chinese films, including *Lust, Caution* (2007), *Little Big Soldier* (2009), and the romantic comedy *Love in Disguise* (2010), which the singer also wrote, directed, and scored. And finally, Wang participates in a wide range of philanthropic work, from UNICEF to World Vision Taiwan, an aid relief organization. The dizzying scope of Wang’s activities speaks to the wide reach of his fame in Chinese markets and his public image as a multi-talented artist who continually seeks new challenges and projects.

As the child of upwardly-mobile, post-1965 Asian immigrants, Wang’s childhood holds many of the stereotypical trademarks of high-achieving Asian American kids: he began playing the violin at the age of six and enrolled at the preparatory division of the prestigious Eastman School of Music; he excelled at school (fan sites often include the fact that he scored 1600 on his SATs and turned down Ivy-League schools to attend the smaller Williams College); and he felt pressured to pursue a career in medicine like his father and brother, both of whom are doctors. Yet, Wang “broke the mold,” as he puts it, by defying his parents to follow a more precarious career path in music.<sup>7</sup> On an extended summer visit to Taipei as a teenager, he joined a talent contest and caught the interest of music producers. He released his first album in 1995, at the age of nineteen. As a college student, Wang flew back and forth between Taipei and Massachusetts to record and promote his albums. After years of transcontinental travel and a brief stint studying

at the Berklee School of Music, Wang moved to Taipei to pursue his burgeoning music career.<sup>8</sup>

These biographical details are key in shaping Wang's persona as a positive role model who possesses impressive academic and musical credentials. Thus, while the model minority stereotype placed upon Asian Americans in the United States fuels perceptions of this pan-ethnic group as studious, diligent, and overachieving—traits generally perceived as “uncool” and incompatible with being a pop star in the US market—these qualities comprise part of the singer's appeal in Chinese-speaking markets. Unmoored from the US racial context, traits such as hard work and discipline no longer signify “Asian” characteristics used to discipline the “deficiencies” of other racial minority groups or accentuate the cultural difference of Asian Americans, who are often pathologized as possessing a work ethic that veers toward excess and deviance. Through transnational figures like Wang, the fictions upon which the model minority myth rest become exposed as cultural narratives that serve dominant US racial paradigms.<sup>9</sup>

While Wang's pleasing physical appearance no doubt serves as a major factor for his popularity, his marketing and media coverage—in concert with his music, film, and commercial endorsements—capitalize on a well-honed narrative of diligence, passion, and achievement. Promoted early in his career as a “quality idol” (that is, a “pop idol” blessed with marquee good looks and deep musical talents), Chinese media subsequently dubbed him a “composer idol” (unlike other “mass produced” idols, Wang writes his own songs, plays a multitude of instruments, and constantly changes his musical image and style) and even a “perfect idol.”<sup>10</sup> Fans, in turn, cite Wang's upstanding character, work ethic, academic and musical prowess, willingness to pursue his dreams, and dedication to promoting Chinese music as key reasons for their devotion.<sup>11</sup> In his music and media appearances, the singer enhances his image by promoting the values that derive from practice and determination.<sup>12</sup> For example, Wang graciously thanked his fans in his acceptance speech at Taiwan's 2006 Global Melody Award by pledging to continue striving to be worthy of their support: “I think I wasn't very good at singing before but I am determined to practice every day and practice makes perfect. . . . I will continue the hard work.”<sup>13</sup> On his official website, the singer posted a longer version of the speech where he linked the principles of hard work and self-improvement to the collective goal of raising the global profile of Chinese music: “[Chinese artists'] competitors should not be each other, but rather the international artists who have historically set the standard in popular music. I know if we put in the hard work to improve our skills, we will be one step closer to making Chinese pop music a worldwide phenomenon.”<sup>14</sup> His comments correlate the need to practice with nationalist goals of elevating Chinese music on the world stage. Such a public performance of self coincides with Aihwa Ong's description of the shift in Asian growth zones towards promoting citizenship through neoliberal ideals of self-improvement and market-driven individualism. As Ong observes, “in East and South Asian environments, neoliberal ethics of self-responsible citizenship are linked

to social obligations to build the nation.”<sup>15</sup> Responsibility lies with the individual to acquire the flexible skills and knowledge needed to accumulate capital and contribute to the collective growth of the nation.

Wang’s carefully choreographed image allows him to flourish in a music industry dependent on corporate support and state approval. As Anthony Fung observes, in more “closed” nations like China, both state and market forces determine which cultural products gain popularity: “popular music that is allowed to operate in China first has to meet the regime’s political agenda before it is circulated to the public . . . the PRC evaluates the potential impact of popular music and a star’s image on its people, considering the revolutionary power and the possibility of popular culture being used to westernize, globalize, and pervert China in some way.”<sup>16</sup> Given China’s status as a market powerhouse, Taiwan’s Mandopop artists are careful to acquire approval from the Chinese government. Most popular singers avoid discussing issues related to Taiwan’s official status, focusing instead on topics such as shared cultural traits or the personal realm of emotions (love, loneliness, heartbreak, and so forth).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, when Mandopop artists investigate social issues, they focus on topics such as intergenerational conflict or domestic violence and locate the responsibility for change in the actions of individuals rather than the political leadership of the state. For instance, Wang promoted environmental awareness in his album *Change Me* (2007) through a neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and self-improvement, highlighting what young people can do—from recycling to reducing personal consumption—to effect change in their local communities.

The Chinese government’s selection of Wang as a torchbearer and performer at the 2008 Beijing Olympics provides evidence of his exemplary standing in China. In Taiwan, Wang is similarly lauded for bringing pride to the country. In 2009, the Taiwanese education ministry selected the singer to help launch a “character-building plan” that would “cultivate the nation’s moral character, quality, and taste.” The following year, the mayor of Taipei named Wang the city’s representative for the Shanghai 2010 world expo, observing: “with his great image, high popularity and international profile, Wang is a one in a million pick for goodwill ambassador.”<sup>18</sup> Such accolades point to the success of the singer’s marketing and image as an artist who reflects positively on Chinese people around the world.

Finally, it is worth noting that the reality of widespread piracy and illegal downloading in Chinese contexts (although not exclusive to that region) creates a synergistic relationship between multinational companies looking to market their products in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and artists seeking to increase their celebrity and generate alternate revenue streams for their music. Product placement figures prominently in Wang’s music videos, and clips from his videos also appear in television commercials. The close entwinement between a company’s image and its celebrity spokesperson means that both mutually constitute the public face of their respective brands. Wang’s many commercial endorsements, coupled with his music,

films, and media coverage, reinforce his public persona as an exemplary role model who possesses extraordinary industriousness and talent, follows his heart and passion, and refuses to be a mass-produced idol. Still, how did a singer who began his music career with clear linguistic (if not cultural) deficits come to serve as a cultural ambassador of Chinese music in Chinese-speaking Asia and the diaspora? As the next section shows, Wang followed in the footsteps of other Chinese Americans who travelled to Taiwan to pursue their musical dreams. In the process, these artists capitalized upon and helped mold perceptions of ABCs in Mandopop specifically, and Chinese contexts more generally.

### **The LA Boyz and the Construction of ABC Identity**

When Wang's first album debuted in 1995, he stepped into a Chinese music scene already versed in marketing ABCs to Chinese-speaking audiences. Just three years earlier, the LA Boyz—a trio of Taiwanese American teenagers from Orange County, CA—took the Taiwanese pop scene by storm. Composed of two brothers, Jeffrey and Stanley Huang, and their cousin, Steven Lin, the LA Boyz served as foreign but still familiar vehicles to repackage US hip hop culture into a hodgepodge of colorful clothing, dancing, and clean-cut fun. Translating hip hop for a Taiwanese market, the LA Boyz sanitized the music into an innocuous style of singing, dancing, and rapping that, while linked to a national feeling of Americanness, distanced itself racially from blackness.<sup>19</sup> Best known for their coordinated dance moves and songs rapped in English, with a sprinkling of Taiwanese and Mandarin thrown in for good measure, the LA Boyz projected an image of American modernity, athleticism, and youthfulness that was rendered cool through their hip hop iconography, while also accessible through their emphasis on shared ethnic heritage. What linked the LA Boyz to their fans was less a common spoken language than what Paul Gilroy describes in a different context as a “playful diasporic intimacy,” a sense of closeness brokered unevenly through the shared consumption of cultural productions across diasporic communities.<sup>20</sup>

While the LA Boyz did not achieve musical longevity, they helped other Chinese Americans envision their purported “home” countries as viable sites to pursue recording contracts and fame.<sup>21</sup> While being Asian American might lack cultural capital in the US popular music scene—the dismal sales of MC Jin, the first Asian American rapper to release an album on a major record label, illustrates this well—as an ABC in the Chinese music industry, a singer could achieve a certain amount of success.<sup>22</sup> If, within the confining black-and-white racial categories of the US music industry, Asian Americans are unable to claim ownership or musical authenticity in any popular musical genre, in the Chinese market, they can market themselves as “LA Boyz” who hold local understanding of American culture. In short, “crossing over” into Chinese popular music allowed Chinese Americans to claim elusive qualities rarely—if ever—granted to Asian Americans in the US cultural

context: authenticity and soul. As a Chinese American record producer based in Taiwan noted: “I don’t think that someone who has only listened to Western music can give you Western music with its soul—that comes from being in the environment and having grown up in it and really knowing the culture. You might be able to imitate it, but you won’t get the same kind of ‘soul.’”<sup>23</sup> Such a remark paradoxically re-deploys the same logic used to delegitimize the musical authenticity of Asian Americans in the US.

As one of the earliest Chinese American groups to achieve commercial success in Taiwan’s music scene, the LA Boyz helped solidify an image of ABCs as embodying a particular combination of “lack and privilege”—a lack of literacy in Chinese language and culture, but the privilege of US education, “insider” access to US popular culture, and “unaccented” (that is, American-accented) English. While ABC is an identity marker with limited circulation outside of Chinese communities in the United States—used primarily by the immigrant generation to indict subsequent generations of Chinese Americans as “hollow bamboo” (read: assimilated, “Americanized,” and emptied of Chinese “roots”)—it is a familiar acronym imposed upon and adopted by Chinese Americans abroad to make their identity legible in Chinese-speaking nations. Even if there exists no homogeneous or authentic Chinese identity against which the cultural and linguistic incompetence of ABCs can be measured—the heterogeneous dialects of, and forms of being, Chinese around the world speak to this impossibility—the purported emptiness of ABCs translates into a range of negative stereotypes.<sup>24</sup> For instance, in Taiwan, ABCs have a reputation of being rude, loud, and spoiled: “locals often stereotype ABCs as being rich and arrogant, with a poor command of Mandarin. They are often boxed in certain roles on TV dramas as bumbling homecoming kings.”<sup>25</sup> While these negative shortcomings—whether the source of jokes in TV dramas or portrayed as “cute” in the case of the LA Boyz—are often made visible in the cultural realm, they are also intimately linked to geopolitical relations of power: the continuing pre-eminence of US empire, the hegemonic reach of English as an “international” language, and Taiwan’s post-war economic and political dependence on the United States. The geopolitical relationship of power and dependency between Taiwan and the United States helps to structure the perception of ABCs in Taiwan.

Still, while ABC identity acts as a signifier of privilege upon which local Chinese can graft various claims of arrogance, lack, and inauthenticity, it also signposts the inevitability of diaspora: one’s ethnic destiny to remain Chinese or *huaren* regardless of birthplace. The use of the term *huaren* rather than *zhongguoren* in discussions of Chinese diaspora is significant. While both translate as Chinese, *huaren* refers to people of Chinese descent and emphasizes shared racial and cultural heritage; *zhongguoren*, on the other hand, links Chinese identity nationally, politically, and territorially to mainland China.<sup>26</sup> As the pan-ethnic category “Asian American” gains legibility as ABC or *huaren* in Chinese contexts, it accrues a new set of descent-based connotations. As Sau-ling Wong astutely observes, “the concept of *Asian Americans*



doesn't travel well, and for good reason. Explicitly coalitional, more anti-essentialist than it has been given credit for, it grew out of a specific history of resistance and advocacy within the United States."<sup>27</sup> Unmoored from the US, the signifier Asian American becomes linked less with domestic claims of cultural and political belonging based on racial minority status and more with diasporic discourses of origin and ethnic descent. Chinese Americans become part of a *huaren* global network marked by transnational flexibility, mobility, and capital.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, while the coupling of Chinese Americans with Chinese "homelands" (and normative Americanness with whiteness) replicates a politics of exclusion reinforced by US racial politics, it also enables new forms of inclusion based on shared Chinese cultural heritage. As a contradictory sign of privilege and "lack," ABC identity straddles a complex terrain of belonging and foreignness, a dynamic that resonates with the racial position of Asian Americans in the United States. This may be the reason why Wang claims that he feels most at home with other ABCs: "I've got a lot of people asking me whether I feel more American or more Chinese, and I say the group that I most identify with are the ABCs."<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the singer observes that being Chinese American in Asia has allowed him to contextualize ABC identity as one of many hybrid forms of being Chinese in the world.

The transnational nature of Mandopop reflects the global Chinese market that comprises the consumer base for the music. Pop icons like Wang serve as bridging figures, whose celebrity augments the imagination of a global Chinese network connected through their shared popular cultural consumption. The singer, in turn, speaks of his audience through globalizing frameworks, claiming: "the place where the Chinese people live is the place for Chinese language songs. There is no national boundary in music."<sup>30</sup> While such a statement conveniently elides discussions of political, national, and territorial differences, it also makes tangible a vision of cultural Chineseness—the belief, as Wong puts it, "that a purely cultural Chinese diasporic identity is possible, one divorced from political economy and transcending nation-states."<sup>31</sup> Put differently, the global popularity of Mandopop celebrities enhance the notion of an "imagined community" of Chinese listeners dispersed across time and space, converging and reinforcing discourses about the ability for both music and Chineseness to transcend borders. As the sonic embodiment of Chineseness, Mandopop markets itself as the culture industry that produces, sells, and markets *huaren* music for the global network of Mandarin-speaking *huaren* to consume.

### **On Being and Becoming Chinese**

The construction of Wang as part of a global Chinese community stitched together through shared ancestry and roots is, on the one hand, a shrewd marketing tactic that transforms him from a semi-foreign artist (as an ABC and a Taiwan-based singer) into a pan-Chinese singer who appeals to an enormous mainland Chinese audience.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, Wang's articulation of the feeling of belonging that marked his

arrival to Taiwan appears undeniably sincere, exemplifying the allure that the possibility of diasporic belonging holds, particularly for racially marginalized communities.<sup>33</sup> As he observes: “growing up in the States, I was always a minority. I was trying to fit in, especially when I was an adolescent. But going to Taiwan for the first time was an incredible feeling. I think it must be . . . belonging. I couldn’t fit in then because I couldn’t speak Chinese, but it’s still a feeling.”<sup>34</sup>

This feeling first finds musical translation in Wang’s hip-hop infused update of the popular patriotic song “Descendants of the Dragon” (2000). In his interpretation, the singer added a new verse (sung/rapped in English and Mandarin) about his parents’ immigration from Taiwan to New York and his racial inheritance as a “descendant of the dragon.”<sup>35</sup> His updated lyrics appear, at first glance, to present a classic immigrant narrative of a young couple who came to the US with few resources and achieved success through hard work and strength of character. As Wang raps:

Now here’s a story that’ll make u cry.  
Straight from Taiwan they came,  
Just a girl and a homeboy in love.  
No money, no job, no speak no English.  
Nobody gonna give ‘em the time of day.  
In a city so cold, they made a wish.  
And then they had the strength to graduate with honors.

The cultural capital that his parents brought with them from Taiwan as upwardly mobile and educated immigrants pursuing higher education degrees notwithstanding, Wang ends his verse not with his family’s eventual settlement and assimilation but with the failure of migration fully to dissipate the pride that the Chinese feel as “descendants of the dragon.” That is, the success that his parents achieve in the United States reflects less on the attributes of the host country—from often-cited virtues of US meritocracy to the American Dream—and more on the ability of Chinese people to compete and thrive globally. Thus, rather than a “nation of immigrants” integrating new arrivals into a shared cultural space, the song reconfigures the United States as one of many sites for the territorial settlement of Chinese communities. The nation signifies, to use Arjun Appadurai’s words, a “diasporic switching point”—one (albeit powerful) node in a global network of sites where ethnic Chinese take up residence.<sup>36</sup> While such a narrative of diasporic sensibility might feel uncomfortably close to affirming dominant discourses of Asian Americans as unassimilable, foreigners and/or sojourners on temporary visas, it is useful to remember that Wang’s primary audience is not located in the US. Within the Chinese transnational circuits that comprise Mandopop’s consumer base, the United States, with its comparatively tiny Chinese population, represents only a peripheral market.

Drawing on longstanding discourses that construct the Chinese people as descendants of the Yellow Emperor, the song depicts Chineseness as embodied physically through shared racial features—“black eyes, black hair, yellow skin”—emotionally through the patriotic love one feels for the Chinese nation, and psychically through the spirit of the dragon that flows in the mighty Yangtze and Yellow Rivers. Becoming Chinese, as Wang’s new verse suggests, entails a process of retrieval, reclamation, and cultural homecoming: “many years ago, on a quiet night, my family arrived in New York. Nothing can destroy what is in our hearts. Longing for home every day and night. I grew up in someone else’s land. After I grew up, I became a descendant of the dragon.”

If embracing one’s Chineseness involves the individual act of excavating what lies submerged in one’s heart, it also entails the collective recognition that the slumbering dragon is awakening. In a series of journal entries Wang penned in 2000-2001, he drew upon nationalistic beliefs that the twenty-first century belongs to China: “Many people have said that the 21st century will witness the ‘awakening of the dragon,’ the rise of Chinese people in the global community. I too believe this to be true. . . . The remake of [Descendants of the Dragon] is intended to encourage taking pride in who we are and creating a general awareness of this pride regardless of where we live or may have grown up.”<sup>37</sup> Wang harnesses himself to this “awakening dragon”—which encompasses China, East Asia’s “smaller dragons” (including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore), and overseas Chinese communities—and sonically represents this future through the scale and grandeur of his vocal arrangements. As he elaborates: “I thought, ‘I need to make it sound big!’ . . . The strength and the power of a billion and a half lives was on my mind as I approached this song’s production.” If the sound of a chorus of voices joining and multiplying in unison conjures an image of greater China surging and rising, it also produces a feeling of transnational connectivity that allows the singer (and his listeners) to imagine their expansive size. The diasporic intimacy marketed and commodified in songs like “Descendants of the Dragon” gives Wang access to success on the level and scope of China’s growing dominance. The “bigness” sonically resonating in the twenty-something tracks of vocals layered onto each other is also the vibrating boom of China’s consumer marketplace and the purchasing power this population represents in global capitalism.

“Descendants of the Dragon” helped forecast Wang’s interest in exploring the contours of a Chinese sonic identity and to create a “more internationally recognizable Chinese pop music sound” that reflected the ascent of China in the new millennium. The singer’s commitment to creating an identifiably Chinese sound in Mandopop resulted in two R&B/hip hop albums, *Shangri-la* (2004), which incorporates the music of ethnic minorities from China, Tibet, and Mongolia, and *Heroes of Earth* (2005), which draws from the traditional “high” arts of Beijing opera and Kunqu (one of the oldest forms of Chinese musical theater). Both albums

emerged after a period of study and travel that Wang undertook, searching for musical sources that he viewed to be specific and original to Chinese culture.

In the liner notes to *Shangri-la*, Wang theorized the premise for the album as twofold. First, despite a rapidly growing Chinese presence in the global economy, “the world’s understanding of Chinese people, pop culture and music still lags behind. As much as we hate to admit it, we are still faced with age-old stereotypes and unjust prejudices that need addressing.” Second, Chinese pop music does not possess a unique sonic identity and tends to draw on Western pop genres rather than the “rich sources that abound in Chinese culture.” While Wang gestures broadly to the “world’s” prejudicial and stereotypical understandings of Chinese people, he links his remarks specifically to the racism that Chinese people experience living in the United States. That is, the singer connects the project of creating a strong Chinese musical identity to the nationalist goal of raising the profile of the Chinese people and to the more abstract objective of countering American cultural hegemony and white global power. His efforts can be interpreted as participating in two related strands, Chinese nationalism and Asian American cultural politics. On the one hand, the release of *Shangri-la* and *Heroes of Earth* coincided with a renewed moment of intense Chinese nationalism visible in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, the popularity of patriotic kung fu films such as *Yip Man* (2008), and the success of musical trends such as *zhongguo feng* or “Chinese Wind,” a fusion of Chinese traditional elements with Western styles like hip hop and R&B (a category which includes the music of Wang). The singer’s experimentation with Chinese traditional music—coupled with bold declarations of Chinese pride—participates in and helps fuel existing market-driven nationalism. On the other hand, as an assertive, masculinist voice that talks back to US racism, Wang’s resistant stance finds strong echoes in Asian American cultural politics, from writers like Frank Chin to jazz musicians like saxophonist Fred Ho.<sup>38</sup>

Describing his project as “chinked out,” Wang depicts his outsider status as a Chinese American who grew up in “someone else’s land” as a source of inspiration that fuels his ongoing experimentations in Chinese music:

Derived from the historically derogatory racial slur “chink,” used to put-down Chinese people, “chinked-out” repossesses the word, turns its negative connotations upside-down, and uses them as material to fuel the new sound of this music. The term describes an effort to create a sound that is international, and at the same time, Chinese. In this album, I decided to implement some of China’s most precious and untapped resources, the music of its “*shao shu min zu*” or ethnic minorities, concentrating on the regions of Yunan, Shangri-la, Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia. This is NOT one of those “world music” CD’s. It’s

an R&B/hip-hop album that creates a new vibe the whole world can identify as being Chinese.

While Wang's decision to label his efforts "chinked out" fueled controversy amongst Asian Americans in the United States—many of whom objected to his use of the derogatory term and the implied parallel between the reclamation of a racial slur by a privileged and highly-educated Chinese American and the repossession of the "n-word" by African American hip hop artists—it is critical to emphasize that the term "chink" does not hold the same valence in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong.<sup>39</sup> Most of his Chinese-speaking fans in Asia did not fully understand or care about the nuances of the word "chink" in the US context. Wang himself noted as much, observing: "I realize that people [in Asia] don't really know this term [chinked out]. . . . But if people go abroad and are not aware that they are being insulted, I don't want people to be ignorant of that. I want people to know that there exists this kind of understanding of Chinese people in the world."<sup>40</sup> By using the phrase "chinked out," Wang positions himself as a bridge to those in the Chinese-speaking world who may not necessarily recognize the type of prejudices that Chinese people face in their global travels and migrations.<sup>41</sup>

Through the term "chinked out," Wang invokes the experience of being Chinese American in the US and the racialized hierarchies of power that frame global understandings of the relationship between East/West broadly, and US/China (and Taiwan) specifically. As he explained in Chinese media outlets: "the word 'chink' is a derogatory racial slur used by white people to insult Asians. I grew up in New York and I heard that said that to me."<sup>42</sup> Yet, while "chink" fixes one in a static position of inferiority and marginalization in the US national context, being "chinked out"—reformulated as a verb and practice—enacts a process of transformation to strength, pride, and "cool" on the Chinese international stage. Imagining himself as "chinked out" allowed Wang to reject the reductive assumptions placed on Chinese Americans in the US. As he recalls: "When I was growing up, people would come up to me and say, 'Oh you're Chinese? You know kung fu? You like Bruce Lee?' . . . That's one of the reasons that I've done 10 albums in Chinese, and not one in English."<sup>43</sup> Comments such as these portray his decision to pursue a career in Mandopop as a conscious choice given the "stereotypes and unjust prejudices" that limit dominant understandings of Chinese/Chinese Americans in the US popular imaginary.<sup>44</sup>

Wang followed *Shangri-la* with a subsequent "chinked out" album, *Heroes of Earth* (2005), which drew musical inspiration from Beijing opera and Kunqu. Combining multiple influences and styles, the singer assembled an impressive ensemble of musical "heroes" to appear on the album—from the Korean pop sensation Rain to Chinese American rapper Jin and Beijing opera singer Yan Li. Explaining his desire to infuse the album with confidence and masculine swagger (outside of his trademark love songs), the singer noted: "I wanted to make the chinked-out style more hip-hop yet more Chinese, and borrowed musical elements

from traditional Chinese music like Beijing opera. Many characters in Beijing opera like General Yue Fei and Emperor Qian Long conquered the earth with their might and attitude. And I found the same attitude in rap.”<sup>45</sup> Drawing a parallel between the “strong self-esteem” evoked by contemporary rappers and the military and political strength that allowed “ancient heroes” to rule the world, *Heroes of Earth* anticipated a future that once again belonged to the Chinese people.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the critical and commercial success of *Shangri-la* and *Heroes of Earth*, Wang’s term “chinked out” failed to gain much traction with Chinese fans and media. Chinese media tended to describe his music through the more familiar discourse of “Chinese wind.” Thus, despite a promotional strategy that involved repeated explanations of “chinked out,” the existing category “Chinese Wind” proved a far more compelling and legible framework to understand his music. The English phrase “chinked out” was both too abstract and culturally specific for Chinese audiences who lacked previous familiarity with the racial slur. Still, while the specific contextual meanings attached to “chinked out” did not fully resonate, *Shangri-la* and *Heroes of Earth* effectively conveyed Wang’s desire to explore the sonic nuances of Chineseness in Mandopop. The critical and commercial success of these albums helped established Wang as one of the main cultural arbiters of “Chinese Wind” and bolstered his image as a multi-faceted artist who strives to develop Chinese musical traditions and to promote Chinese music around the world.<sup>47</sup>

In a recent interview, Wang observed: “I never really had plans to launch an American career. I think I’m lucky that things started in Asia, because I was able to develop as a pure musician, to be known for my music and let the music speak for itself . . . I’d rather be known for my music than as the ‘Chinese artist.’”<sup>48</sup> His words imply a belief that given the invisibility of Asian American singers in the US popular market, he would likely be typecast as the “Chinese artist” and be constrained by the stereotypical assumptions tethered to that label in the US. Participating in Mandopop allowed Wang to enter a musical landscape in which his racial similarity, rather than difference, marked the terms of his belonging. While, as an ABC, Wang inhabits a particular Chinese subjectivity within Mandopop—one marked simultaneously by lack and privilege, familiarity and foreignness—he also uses his music to explore these shifting dynamics, coin new terms, and experiment with Chinese music modalities. Moreover, as a mainstream artist who aims for the widest audience possible, Wang also smooths over questions about the heterogeneity of Chineseness through his stylized grooves, his winning smile, his heartfelt love songs, and his carefully crafted image that emphasizes an upstanding character, quality credentials, a sincere disposition, and pride in being a “descendant of the dragon” with a “pure” passion for music. While Wang’s success facilitates much of the musical freedom afforded to him by his record company, the singer also fails to stray far from the parameters that would limit his broad appeal in Mandopop.

What happens, to rephrase Wong’s question, when Asian American subjects and cultural texts leave the US and enter geographical, diasporic, discursive, and

popular cultural sites also understood as “home”?<sup>49</sup> This essay begins to answer this question by using Wang’s remarkable musical career in Asia to analyze how the transnational landscape of Mandopop fosters, markets, and commodifies linkages between Chinese American, Chinese diasporic, and local Chinese communities. While the notion that Wang’s music speaks “for itself” in Asia is, for the most part, an illusion given the commercialism of Mandopop and the multiple constituencies that the singer serves (and is beholden to) through his brand, participating in Chinese contexts does allow him greater freedom to explore the sonic nuances of Chineseness. Returning to his “roots,” Wang explores the multiplicity of their meanings and suggests new ways of imagining, consuming, marketing, and being Chinese in the world. In the process, the singer achieves a level of fame, critical acclaim, fandom, and celebrity that is nearly impossible for an Asian American to attain in the racialized space of the US nation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “When Asian American Literature Leaves ‘Home’: On Internationalizing Asian American Literary Studies” in *Crossing Oceans: Reconfiguring American Literary Studies in the Pacific Rim*, eds., Noelle Brada-Williams and Karen Chow (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Wang coins the term “chinked out” to describe his exploration of Chinese sonic elements in hip hop and R&B, a term I explore more fully later in this essay.

<sup>4</sup> Taiwan’s Mandopop has dominated Chinese-speaking markets since the 1990s, including in China, where it represents the largest percentage of Chinese-language music sales. The incredible heterogeneity of Chineseness contained within Taiwan’s Mandopop—artists hail from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Canada, and the United States, among other places—has created a music industry skilled at navigating the contradictions of marketing ethnic Chinese singers as belonging to a shared global Chinese community. For more on the cultural and geopolitical landscape of Taiwan’s Mandopop, see Marc Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Other Chinese Americans (including those born in/from the US) in Mandopop include Khalil Fong, Stanley Huang, Yan-J, Coco Lee, Wilbur Pan, Joanna Wang, Vanness Wu, and David Tao. Korean American artists are similarly visible in K-Pop (Korean popular music).

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that unlike the United States, where blatant celebrity endorsement for commercial brands is viewed as “selling out,” in Asia, one measures the fame and popularity of an artist by the vastness of the products that s/he represents. For high-profile singers like Wang, whose endorsements span an impressive network of national

and international brands, the line between music and advertisement can be difficult to delineate. See Geoffrey Fowler, “In Asia, It’s Nearly Impossible to Tell a Song From an Ad,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> “Talk Asia Meets Wang Leehom,” January 2009. Last accessed August 4, 2010: <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/01/09/ta.wangleehom/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup> This is a standardized biography culled from English and Chinese language media, and online fan sites and blogs. The repeated references to particular details about Wang in multiple sites solidify an accepted narrative of his background (some of which may be exaggerations, like his perfect SAT score).

<sup>9</sup> This should not discount how Asian political leaders and intellectual draw from rhetoric—frequently framed through neo-Confucianist discourse—to tout the superiority of Asian values over the West. See, for example, Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism.” *History and Theory* 35.4 (1996): 96–118 and Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 81. Wang is free of the particular ideological function that model minority discourses serve in the US given that Mandopop is neither marketed to, nor has high circulation in the US.

<sup>10</sup> See “Save ‘Private’ Leehom Wang: The Reasons for Saving Leehom Wang,” *Sina Music*, Jan. 7, 2009. Last accessed June 21, 2010: <http://ent.sina.com.cn/y/2009-01-07/ba2331445.shtml> and “Wang Lee-hom: No Disguising Talent,” *China Daily*, July 24, 2010. Last accessed August 4, 2010: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2010-07/24/content\\_11044996.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2010-07/24/content_11044996.htm). Unless otherwise noted, translation of Chinese-language media is by Yi Zhou.

<sup>11</sup> This comes from an investigation of two mainland Chinese fansites (Wang’s Baidu forum at <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%CD%F5%C1%A6%BA%EA> and the fan club “OurHome China,” at <http://bbs.leehom-cn.com>), an online Taiwanese fansite at <http://www.leehomwang.net/phpBB2>, and Wang’s official US facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/leehom>. It is worth noting that Wang’s positive image resonates with qualities associated with other Mandopop stars, including the hugely popular Jay Chou, with whom Chinese media often compares Wang. The “subversive” twist of both Wang and Chou may well be their transformation of “being good” into a form of cool.

<sup>12</sup> For an incisive analysis of the reasons that Chinese fans privilege such traits as diligence and perseverance, see Chow Yiu Fai and Jeroen de Kloet, “The Production of Locality in Global Pop—A Comparative Study of Pop in the Netherlands and Hong Kong.” *Participations* 5.2 (2008): [http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%202/5\\_02\\_contents.htm](http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%202/5_02_contents.htm). The writers link the pride that Chinese fans feel about the strong work ethic of Hong Kong star Leon



Lai to the belief that possessing such characteristics is necessary to achieve success and accrue wealth in a global economy.

<sup>13</sup> “Singapore’s Chua, Taiwan’s Leehom Wang Win Top Mandarin Music Awards,” *Channel NewsAsia*, June 10, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Last accessed July 15, 2010:  
<http://www.wangleehom.com/press/byleehom/view?id=274>.

<sup>15</sup> Aihwa Ong, “Experiments With Freedom: Milieus of the Human.” *American Literary History* 18.2 (2006): 238.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Fung, “Western Style, Chinese Pop: Jay Chou’s Rap and Hip-Hop in China.” *Asian Music* 39.1 (2008): 71.

<sup>17</sup> For a perceptive analysis of the politics that accompany trans-border fame across multiple regions and publics, including the cross-straits politics that led to the two year ban of the popular indigenous Taiwanese singer A-Mei from China see Eva Tsai, “Caught in the Terrains: An Inter-referential Inquiry of Trans-border Stardom and Fame” in Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat, eds., *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 323–344. For more on the sociopolitical reasons for the appeal of private emotions in Mandopop see Thomas Gold, “Go With Your Feelings: Hong Kong and Taiwan Popular Culture in Greater China.” *China Quarterly* 136 (1993): 907–925 and Marc Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy, Cries of Sorrow*.

<sup>18</sup> See Flora Wang, “Education Ministry Launches Character-Building Plan,” *Taipei Times*, June 18, 2009 and “Pop singer named goodwill ambassador for Shanghai Expo Taipei Pavilion” *Taiwan Today News*, December 22, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Here I draw on Ian Condry’s analysis of the racial/national politics of mainstream Japanese hip hop in *Hip Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>21</sup> While the LA Boyz disbanded after a few years, Stanley Huang returned to Taiwan to pursue a solo career, while Jeffrey Huang founded MACHI—a hip-hop collective that draws much of its talent from Chinese Americans and other overseas Chinese.

<sup>22</sup> Jin’s decision to relocate to Hong Kong in 2008 to pursue a music career in Chinese markets speaks to the barriers that Asian Americans face in the US popular music scene and their perception of opportunities in their purported “homelands” abroad.

<sup>23</sup> Tinna Yang, “American Dreamers: ABC Artists in Taiwan,” *Taiwan Review*, July 1, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Here I draw insight from Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Yasmin Lee Arpon, "Taiwan's ABCs," *Asia News*, December 26, 2008–January 1, 2009, 30–31.

<sup>26</sup> While I focus on ABC identity in this essay, other acronyms/identities also exist and carry slightly different connotations depending on their context and usage, for example: ABT (American-born Taiwanese), FOB (fresh off the boat), ABR (American-born returnee), *meiguo huayi* (American of Chinese descent) and *meiji huaren* (US citizen of Chinese descent).

<sup>27</sup> Sau-ling Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads." *Amerasia* 21.1/2 (1995): 17. Wong cautions that prioritizing transnational frameworks may deflect attention away from US domestic racism.

<sup>28</sup> Here I draw on Chih-ming Wang's perceptive analysis of the politics of Asian America in Taiwan in "Thinking and Feeling Asian America in Taiwan." *American Quarterly* 59.1 (2007): 135–155.

<sup>29</sup> Clarence Tsui, "Patriot Games," *South China Morning Post*, September 27, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> "Leehom: The High Quality Idol," May 22, 2007, *OurHome China* (original in *MV magazine*). Last accessed July 12, 2010: <http://bbs.leehom-cn.com/thread-103971-1-52.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Sau-ling Wong, "Dancing in the Diaspora: 'Cultural Long-Distance Nationalism' and the Staging of Chineseness by San Francisco's Chinese Folk Dance Association." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2.1 (2010): 28, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/50k6k78p>. For more on the concept of cultural China, see the influential set of essays in Wei-ming Tu, ed., *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Here I draw insight from Fung's analysis in "Western Style, Chinese Pop" of how Jay Chou successfully negotiates state and market demands to achieve massive popularity in China.

<sup>33</sup> For more on the necessity to resist the essentializing allure of Chinese diaspora and to construct a critical diasporic framework see Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1993) and Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> "Patriot Games," *South China Morning Post*, September 27, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> For an astute analysis of the deployment of nationalistic songs like "Descendants of the Dragon" in greater China see Yiu Fai Chow, "Me and the Dragon: A Lyrical Engagement with the Politics of Chineseness." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10.4 (2009): 544–564.

<sup>36</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 171.

<sup>37</sup> Unless otherwise cited, the quotes attributed to Wang come from this online journal, originally posted on the Asian division of Sony Music's website but subsequently reposted on countless fan sites.

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reader for his/her insights of how Wang's "chinked out" stance reflects both an Asian American aesthetic and a manifestation of Chinese nationalism.

<sup>39</sup> See Brian Hu, "Pop Goes the C-Words," *Asia Pacific Arts*, April 13, 2006. Last accessed May 25, 2008: <http://www.asiarts.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=42893> for a perceptive analysis of the controversies that emerged around Wang's use of the term "chinked out" within Chinese American communities.

<sup>40</sup> "Leehom: I Want to Use Music to Resist Discrimination," *Beijing Entertainment-Information Newspaper*, January 31, 2005. Last accessed July 15, 2010: <http://www.huaxia.com/yl/yltk/442916.html>.

<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting the class implications of Wang's imagination of diaspora, which privileges a vision of global travel (unencumbered by passports, borders, and cost) and participates in Chinese nationalist projects of representing China at its best. Although space limitations prevent a fuller exploration of this topic, I am grateful to the anonymous reader for highlighting this issue.

<sup>42</sup> "Leehom: I Want to Use Music to Resist Discrimination," *Beijing Entertainment-Information Newspaper*.

<sup>43</sup> Karen Sum, "Perfect 10," *Teens*, May 2005. Last accessed August 1, 2010: <http://wangleehom.com/press/leehom/view?id=138>.

<sup>44</sup> Understanding "chinked out" as an Asian American aesthetic helps contextualize the singer's emphatic emphasis that *Shangri-la* is "NOT one of those 'world music' CDs"—a designator that places the standards, tastes, and hierarchical designations of the US/West at its implied core. Wang's statement conveys an astute understanding of how the exoticism and foreignness of "world music" in a US context is measured by its distance from a normative white (Eurocentric) center and its pleasurable consumption in "first world" markets. At the same time, his observation betrays a US perspective given that, as a mainstream Mandopop album, *Shangri-la* is hardly in danger of being viewed as "world music" in Chinese contexts. I am grateful to the anonymous reader for highlighting this distinction.

<sup>45</sup> "Hom Run!" *Teens*, June 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Space limitations prevent a fuller examination of the masculine nationalist discourse and the privileged vision of affluent modernity that Wang draws on to promote his vision of “chinked out.”

<sup>47</sup> See “The Chinese Wind Swept the Music Field,” July 19, 2007, *OurHome China* (original in *Dongnan Newspaper*). Last accessed July 11, 2010: <http://bbs.leehom-cn.com/thread-120882-1-44.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Small, “West Meets East,” *Berklee Today* 21.2, October 22, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Sau-ling Wong, “When Asian American Literature Leaves ‘Home.’”