

Listening to New China:

The Art-Tune Records Company, Cultural Propaganda, and Music Transplantation in Early Cold War Hong Kong (1950s-1960s)

I SABRINA Y. TAO is a PhD candidate in modern Chinese and Sinophone literature, film, music, and popular culture at the University of Oregon, 27 Friendly Hall Eugene, OR 97403-1248, United States (ytao@uoregon.edu).

ABSTRACT: This paper explores how the Art-Tune Records Company (*Yisheng changpian gongsi* 藝聲唱片公司), a Hong Kong-based private corporation and a shadow agent of the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s China Records Factory, fostered the circulation of Chinese music to Hong Kong and Overseas Chinese audiences in the 1950s and 1960s. Against the colonial government's political censorship and US-imposed sanctions on the PRC, Art-Tune sought to remaster and reproduce the recordings of China Records Factory by deploying tactics of depoliticisation and underscoring Chineseness. It also delivered gramophone music with multiregional and multilingual versions to foster listeners' emotional sympathy with cultural China and the new PRC regime. The successful migration of PRC music abroad contributed to dynamic intermedia practice with the reformulation of socialist Chinese music into Hong Kong martial arts movies. The paper discusses how socialist music was transformed from a propaganda medium to Chinese symbols that appealed to diasporic Chinese across Cold War geopolitical divides.

KEYWORDS: cultural Cold War, People's Republic of China's overseas propaganda, Art-Tune Records Company, folk songs, socialist music, depoliticisation, Hong Kong martial arts movies.

Introduction

In the early 1950s and 1960s, there was fierce ideological combat between the Socialist and the Capitalist Bloc. Referring itself as the leader of the "free world," the United States of America (USA) built its worldwide propaganda network and exported cultural products aimed at glorifying capitalism and bourgeois cosmopolitanism. Meanwhile, socialist countries such as the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) also exported cultural products to fight back. How did cultural goods from the PRC go global, and how did the PRC government conduct cultural Cold War across different geopolitical spaces in East and Southeast Asia?

In the China field, the study of the Mao era (1949-1976) has long been confined within the national framework of the PRC. In recent years, scholars have begun to position PRC history in the global context of the Cold War and have noticed the transnational flow of cultural products within the Socialist Bloc (Volland 2017), or between socialist and capitalist countries (Cook 2014).¹ The transnational propaganda network between socialist PRC, capitalist Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia has therefore been drawing attention, especially in the realms of film (Du 2017, 2020; Xu 2017), media (Yan 2010), and performing arts (Wilcox 2020). Although there has

been research on the institutional history of cultural agencies and the reception of the PRC's cultural products in Southeast Asia (Xu 2017; Wilcox 2020), the role and significance of Hong Kong in this propaganda network has been less explored. Meanwhile, in the field of Hong Kong cultural studies, the discussion of Hong Kong's unique cultural and political identity has also been confined within its own geographical scope. Inspired by Ackbar Abbas' notion of "a space of disappearance" (1997), local scholars in the post-handover period attempted to rediscover colonial history by pointing out the distinctiveness and hybridity of Hong Kong's cultural makings in terms of the multiple influences they received, ranging from pre-1949 Shanghai, Guangzhou, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea, and the USA.² However, apart from studies on Hong Kong leftist film

1. Nicholai Volland's book investigates the PRC's global literary space and the travel of texts and authors in the early socialist era (1959-1965). Alexander Cook's edited volume explores the worldwide circulation of Mao Zedong's Little Red Book (*hong bao shu* 紅寶書) and the creative uses of Mao's quotations.

2. This is especially true for Hong Kong cinema studies. For a historical overview and Hong Kong cinema's transnational and border-crossing nature, see Law and Bren 2004. About Hong Kong cinema's influence from Southeast Asia during the Cold War era, see Tan 2010; Taylor 2011. About its Japanese influence, see Yau 2009. About adaptations of Hollywood melodrama into Cantonese and Mandarin films, see Ng 2008a, 2016.

institutions, cultural influence from the PRC during the Cold War era has not been given close attention.³

This paper therefore aims to build a bridge between China and Hong Kong studies by examining Hong Kong's interaction with PRC culture in the early Mao era (1949-1966). By highlighting Hong Kong's global positioning in the 1950s and 1960s, I argue that the colony was strategically used as a nexus and gateway for the PRC's cultural propaganda in East and Southeast Asia. I will uncover the history of the Art-Tune Records Company (*Yisheng changpian gongsi* 藝聲唱片公司), a Hong Kong-based private corporation and a shadow agent of the PRC's China Records Factory (CRF, *Zhongguo changpian chang* 中國唱片廠), as well as how it promoted the circulation of PRC music to Hong Kong and Chinese diasporic audiences.⁴ Challenging the long-standing assumption that PRC music was monolithically politicised and was rarely distributed overseas, I contend that socialist music in the early Mao era was more diversified, as it not only included political music but also encompassed all sorts of other genres, notably traditional Chinese and regional folk music. Against the restrictions of Hong Kong's political censorship and US-imposed sanctions on the PRC from trading its cultural productions in Asian markets, Art-Tune carefully selected PRC music with less political messages and deployed repackaging strategies and commercial foils for overseas exportation. The acoustic musical sphere fostered the emotional sympathy of Chinese diaspora listeners with cultural China in their soul-searching for "roots." In addition, I will also discuss the intermediate practice between gramophone records and film, in particular the transplantation of PRC music into Hong Kong martial arts movies, and how such recontextualisation diminished the original socialist messages while generating new meanings of anticolonialism and anti-authoritarianism at the outset of the 1967 riots.

Cultural Cold War in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia

In her most recent study, Christina Klein defines cultural Cold War as "efforts by the US and other national governments to achieve political ends through social and cultural means" (Klein 2020: 27). America's instruments for waging cultural Cold War started to develop in the late 1940s as a result of Truman's and Eisenhower's calls for information and psychological warfare campaigns (Cull 2008). In East Asia, the cultural Cold War took place in 1954-1956, especially in the wake of Stalin's death and the Korean War armistice in 1953. Responding to this global ideological combat, at the Geneva conference in 1954 and Bandung conference in 1955, Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 of the PRC proposed "peaceful coexistence" (*heping gongchu* 和平共處) aimed at reconstructing an image that posed no threat to its neighbours. Turning to strategies of diplomacy and persuasion, the Beijing government implemented methods to "win the allegiance of Asia's neutral populations, assert its leadership of the emerging non-aligned movement, and divide the US from its allies" (Klein 2020: 27).

For three parties – the USA, the PRC, and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan – a most important ideological battlefield during the Cold War was Hong Kong, an outpost for intelligence gathering,

propaganda, and covert actions (Zheng, Liu, and Szonyi 2010: 5). With an open border to mainland China throughout its colonial history, whenever there was rebellion or war, the territory was constantly inundated by waves of expatriates and refugees of either Chinese nationalist or communist backgrounds. The great chaos of war and dislocation as well as the drastic turns of fortune between the communist and nationalist powers in mainland China reinforced conflicting political allegiances, "laying down soil in Hong Kong for different ideologies to take root, grow, and contest with each other" (ibid.: 98). All three parties set up cultural agencies in the British colony.⁵ For the PRC's side, Hong Kong was regarded as China's "window to Southeast Asia, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Western world." In the early 1950s, PRC leaders sought to "make maximum use [of the British colony] under long-term planning (*changqi dasuan, chongfen liyong* 長期打算, 充分利用)" to "break the embargo by the US-led Western camp against us [China]" (Jin 1998: 4-5). Among its many efforts to form a patriotic united front (*aiguo tongyi zhanxian* 愛國統一戰線) that would not antagonise the legal framework in Hong Kong, the Beijing government viewed mass media as an important tool in winning the hearts and minds of people across different political and economic spectrums (Zheng, Liu, and Szonyi 2010: 102). As such, soon after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, the PRC began to export cultural goods, especially leftist films, to the Asian Pacific Region to promote friendship and gain international support for its new government.

However, it should be noted that the political position of Hong Kong at that time remained neutral. Indeed, London wanted to demonstrate Britain's value as a close ally of America by involving the colony in the containment of the PRC. Given its vulnerability in the shadow of China, Hong Kong's role had to be indirect, discreet, and nonconfrontational (Mark 2004: 6). As such, leftist film corporations in Hong Kong were wary of delivering revolutionary messages due to censorship from the colonial government.⁶ The result was a steady flow of well-made pictures seemingly apolitical, particularly opera films (*xiqu pian* 戲曲片) adapted from traditional folktales with rich evocations of regional and classical Chinese culture.⁷

3. Previous discussions have centred on the institutional history of pro-PRC leftist film companies in Hong Kong, as well as analysis of the cultural politics behind individual films and filmmakers torn between commercialism and opposing political stances. See Fu 2018; Lee 2020.

4. By referring to PRC music, I mean music composed and produced in the PRC, as well as old songs (especially reformed folk songs and regional opera after 1949) performed by PRC musicians.

5. In 1954 the USA established The Asia Foundation (TAF) to conduct psychological warfare in the informational field in East Asia (Klein 2020: 28). Sponsored by the United States Information Service (USIS), the ROC government also supported the publication of anticommunist literature and translation works in Hong Kong. For details, see Du 2020.

6. Films related to the recent political history of communist warfare or the War of Resistance against Japan were rarely approved; films with themes of heroism and class exploitation were subject to the censor's scissors or bans. On the film censorship policy of the British colonial government in Cold War Hong Kong, see Ng 2008b: 23-35.

7. *Fairy Couple* (*Tian xian pei* 天仙配) and *Third Sister Liu* (*Liu sanjie* 劉三姐) were the two most well-known opera films exported to Hong Kong by the Southern Film Corporation. For a full discussion of the two films and their significance to PRC's international cultural propaganda, see Xu 2017 and 2020.

From Shanghai to Hong Kong: The Art-Tune Records Company

Apart from opera films, the PRC also exported to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia a large number of gramophone records that were mostly regional folk music performed by traditional Chinese instruments. Responding to the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1956, music of the early socialist period (1949-1966) was composed to reflect the views and aspirations of the masses. In order to encourage “people’s music,” the Beijing government promoted the collection and study of regional folk songs, as well as reconstructing new songs by adapting from ancient songs (*guqu* 古曲) and regional folk music or making original compositions, and the lyrics were written to praise new socialist life. Deprived of their former rustic nature, these new folk songs were performed either by traditional Chinese instruments with collectives of choruses and folk orchestras, or were combined with Western symphony, piano, and military band music based on the Marxist principle of socialist realism. Unlike highly politicised songs produced during the Cultural Revolution with straightforward propaganda messages, folk songs in the early socialist era were mostly aimed at praising the diligence of workers, peasants, and soldiers (*gong nong bing* 工農兵) and their contribution to socialist construction, or to extolling the beautiful scenery of the PRC.⁸ Similar to Chinese opera films, when exported to Hong Kong, Macao, and overseas they were expected to present a benevolent image of China and evoke nostalgia among millions in the Chinese diaspora.

As for the market in Hong Kong, traditional Chinese music (*guoyue* 國樂 or *Zhongyue* 中樂), especially Cantonese music (*Yueyue* 粵樂), had been flourishing since the beginning of the colonial period.⁹ This was largely due to the colonial government’s liberal cultural policy that nourished the development of indigenous culture, especially the mass production of Cantonese songs, opera, and talkies in the early twentieth century. Apart from Cantonese music, Western music and popular Mandarin songs were also made into gramophone records, occupying the bulk of Hong Kong’s music market after 1949, especially since the relocation of Pathé Records (*Baidai changpian gongsi* 百代唱片公司) from Shanghai to Hong Kong in 1952. Most traditional Chinese music records, however, were exported to the British colony from the PRC by several local companies, including the Art-Tune Records Company, Bailey Record Company (*Baili changpian gongsi* 百利唱片公司), and Hong Kong Oriental Record Company (*Dongfang changpian gongsi* 東方唱片公司) (Zhu 1999: 295-6). Though there is little background material on each of these companies, most of them were market-oriented. Art-Tune Records was an exception, as it was a shadow agency established under the official orders of the PRC’s Committee of Overseas Chinese Affairs (COCA, *Zhongyang renmin zhengfu Huaqiao shiwu weiyuan hui* 中央人民政府華僑事務委員會 or *Zhong qiao wei* 中僑委). Not only could it not engage in overt marketing in Hong Kong, but it also had to apply a variety of repackaging strategies before distribution overseas.

In the early 1950s, ordered by the Central Broadcasting Bureau (CBB, *Zhongyang guangbo shiye ju* 中央廣播事業局), China Records Factory in Shanghai was instructed to work together with COCA to manufacture and distribute gramophone records overseas.¹⁰ As it was not convenient for the CCP to export records directly by using the name China Records Factory, COCA considered the necessity of

establishing an independent records company in Hong Kong, with an identity and image separate from both CRF and the PRC government. According to an official document issued by the CBB to CRF, the new company should engage in distributing PRC gramophone records (1) “to supply for those “blank spots” where Chinese gramophone records could not be exported”; (2) “to enable Overseas Chinese to get access to their motherland’s music and satisfy their entertainment needs,” and (3) “to accomplish the goal of education and political propaganda.” Here, the blank spots where gramophone records could not be distributed refer to countries with which the new PRC government had not yet established official diplomatic relationships.

As a Hong Kong-based private agency specialising in distributing PRC records, the Art-Tune Records Company was thereby established in 1956. It was located on the corner of Lau Sin Street near Causeway Bay, where staff rented a cheap two-story building as their shop front.¹¹ With special permission from Premier Zhou, the company was managed by Zhao Hongpin 趙洪品 (1902-1985), a Chinese Indonesian patriot who engaged in communist propaganda in Southeast Asia during the second Sino-Japanese War.¹² Although appearing in different guise, the Art-Tune Records Company fulfilled the same political purpose as CRF. Branded as “produced by Art-Tune,” the records for exportation were in fact copied and edited from those produced by CRF Shanghai Branch.

The business procedure was like this: CRF first manufactured records, then China National Sundries Export Corporation (CNSEC, *Zhongguo zhin pin chukou gongsi* 中國雜品出口公司) in Shanghai transported the records from mainland China to Hong Kong, and finally, the Art-Tune Records Company took charge of repackaging and marketing them in Hong Kong and overseas. In order to

8. Notable pieces include “Fisherman’s song of the East China Sea” (*Donghai yu ge* 東海漁歌), “The triumphal song of the reservoir” (*Shuiku kai ge* 水庫凱歌), “Mountains and rivers in Guilin” (*Guilin shan shui* 桂林山水), “Capriccio on the River Huai” (*Huaihe sui xiang qu* 淮河隨想曲), and “Mountain stream” (*Shanjian xiliu* 山澗溪流), to name a few.
9. Originally, the term *guoyue* was used in both the Republic of China (1912-1949) and Hong Kong to describe traditional Chinese music. However, after 1949 the term *guoyue* was banned in the socialist PRC and was replaced by the term “national music” (*minzu yinyue* 民族音樂, or simply *minyue* 民樂) (Wu 2001: 184). In Hong Kong, however, the term *guoyue* has always been in use, referring to either ensembles of traditional Chinese musical instruments in general or those in Cantonese opera. From 1930s to 1950s most of the local orchestras or versatile bands in Hong Kong were referred as “Chinese music orchestra” (*guoyue tuan* 國樂團). In the early 1960s, the term *Zhongyue* emphasised the political divide between “Western” (*Xiyue* 西樂) and “Chinese” music in colonial Hong Kong. On the distinction between *guoyue* and *Zhongyue* in the history of Hong Kong music, see Yu 2001: 66; Chou 2017.
10. Taken over by the CCP from Great China Records (*Da Zhonghua changpian* 大中華唱片) and changing its name to People’s Records (*Renmin changpian* 人民唱片廠), CRF was formally established on 1 January 1955. It later became China Records Corporation (CRC), or *Zhongguo changpian zong gongsi* 中國唱片總公司. See Editorial Department 1989: 16-25.
11. According to my interview with Xie Xiaolong 謝小龍, the original Art-Tune Records Company should be located on the second floor, which had now been transformed.
12. Born in 1902 in Leqing county, Zhejiang Province, Zhao Hongpin left for Medan, a city located in northeastern Sumatra, in 1930. Two years later, he joined the CCP and founded the Great Earth Bookstore (*Dadi shudian* 大地書店) in 1938 to sell and promote books on progressive leftist thought and China’s Anti-Japanese War. In the 1940s as a chief leader of the Anti-Fascist Alliance in Indonesia, Zhao cofounded several clandestine groups to collect information on the battlefield and conducted patriotic propaganda among Overseas Chinese in Indonesia, while establishing liaisons with anti-Japanese troops in Malaysia. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, he was assigned as translator of Bahasa Indonesia in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, and then became the first director of the Art-Tune Records Company in the 1950s. For a full biography of Zhao, see Ping 2015: 614-6.

circumvent censorship from the colonial government, the Shanghai side categorised these records as “daily-life sundries,” and they were transported together with other daily-life products of CNSEC to Hong Kong.

As an independent private company, Art-Tune Records reedited, redesigned, and repackaged PRC records and sold them abroad under its brand by maintaining a neutral status. It not only helped preserve contemporary Chinese music after 1949, but also accomplished the political goal of “building a patriotic united front” among Hong Kong and Overseas Chinese communities. The criteria for censorship were as follows:

- (1) Music programs in the records should conform to the cultural diplomacy of the PRC and its relevant policies on Overseas Chinese affairs;
- (2) Records distributed should propagate patriotism and provide Overseas Chinese with healthy music programs with high aesthetic standards, while promoting international friendship by recording prominent music pieces all across the world (mainly from Southeast Asian countries);
- (3) Records should be oriented towards audiences in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, especially those in regions that have not yet established formal diplomatic relations with the PRC. As an old saying goes: still water runs long (*xi shui chang liu* 細水長流). In order to achieve long-lasting effect, the company should continue producing art programs with fewer political implications;
- (4) Distribution should also consider the ever-changing political situations in Southeast Asia.¹³

As such, the Art-Tune Records Company was tasked with selecting programs and making appropriate changes to the titles, lyrics, and introductory handbooks when necessary. Based on the visual forms shown on the gramophone covers, the main strategies for distribution included: (1) de-mainlandisation (*qu dalu hua* 去大陸化, meaning to erase all background information related to mainland China) or depoliticisation; (2) simplification of words; (3) an emphasis on regional flavour.¹⁴

Depoliticisation/de-mainlandisation

Depoliticisation was one of the most common strategies in the export of gramophone records to Hong Kong and overseas. For example, in the repackaging of the album *The Partridges* (*Zhegu fei* 鷓鴣飛), both the CRF and the Art-Tune version have identical music programs; the only difference is the image – the way Lu Chunling 陸春齡, the well-known bamboo flute player from Shanghai, is presented on the cover. In the CRF version, on the black-and-white photo printed on the cover, Lu was wearing a Chinese tunic suit (*Zhongshan zhuang* 中山裝).¹⁵ In the Art-Tune version, however, his apparel was changed into a tuxedo with a bow tie.¹⁶ Issued in 1962, the CRF version would remind audience of its political background, especially the ideological implications of Lu’s tunic suit. The Chinese tunic suit was first introduced by the Chinese nationalist revolutionary Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 as an alternative to both Western business dress and the Manchu robe worn by China’s last emperor in the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) with its wasteful and feudalistic associations. After Sun’s death, the CCP leader Mao Zedong 毛澤東 chose to wear

the Zhongshan suit, which was seen as proof that Mao was “inheriting Sun’s mantle of authority.”¹⁷ The tunic suit’s link with Chairman Mao gave it a new name: “the Mao suit,” and it became widely accepted after the founding of the PRC. As such, the birth of the Zhongshan suit and its evolution to Mao suit have strong bonds with modern Chinese nation-building and the shift of political power from the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT, Kuomintang) to the CCP. What is also noteworthy is that political leaders within the Socialist Bloc in the Cold War era were also fond of the Mao suit, especially Kim Il-Sung in North Korea and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam. However, due to the link between the Mao suit and communism, in the Western world the suit was associated with things malignant. For instance, in the 1960s James Bond series of movies the supervillain Ernst Stavro Blofeld, craving world domination, wears a jacket in khaki with a collar loosely based on the Mao suit. In this case, the suit represents “a blandly clad evil, where the mantle of power can all too easily become abused.”¹⁸ The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the containment and fear of communism among Euro-American countries and in the US-dominated Capitalist Bloc in East Asia, notably Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian countries. As such, it would be more appropriate for cultural workers in the PRC to remove symbols of communism when distributing gramophone records overseas. Therefore, they strategically changed Lu Chunling’s suit into a Western tuxedo – the dress code of Western merchants, compradors, and musicians in jazz bands or ballrooms in the concessions of treaty-port cities such as semi-colonial Shanghai before 1949.

Similar case can also be found in the album *Joyous festival* (*Xi qing* 喜慶), a selection of traditional Chinese songs played by China Central Song and Dance Ensemble (CCSDE, *zhongyang gewu tuan* 中央歌舞團). In the CRF version the image on the front cover is a Chinese New Year picture (*nianhua* 年畫) during the Great Leap Forward, a campaign led by the CCP to boost the PRC’s economy and industry. The painting in this version has clear political implications as it presents joyful peasants celebrating the harvest of agricultural products under the slogan “If you are courageous enough, the yield will be ample” (*ren you duo dadan, di you duo da chan* 人有多大胆, 地有多大產).¹⁹ By contrast, the Art-Tune version replaced it with

13. COCA 中央人民政府華僑事務委員會, “面復關於藝聲唱片公司唱片節目的審查範圍, 標準和手續意見” (*Mian fu guanyu Yisheng changpian gongsi changpian jiemu de shencha fanwei, biao zhun he shou xu yijian*, COCA’s written response to the scope, standards, and procedures for censoring the music programs of the Art-Tune Records Company), 31 October 1957.

14. As the focus of this paper is on the Cold War cultural politics behind the distribution and circulation of PRC gramophone records, in the following analysis I pay attention to the visual forms rather than musical forms.

15. See the record cover at the following link: <https://www.discogs.com/fr/release/6086930-Lu-Chun-Ling-%E9%99%86%E6%98%A5%E9%BE%84-%E9%B9%A7%E9%B8%AA%E9%A3%9E-The-Partridges-Flute-Solo> (accessed on 23 November 2022).

16. See the record cover at the following link: <https://www.discogs.com/fr/release/23252714-%E9%99%B8%E6%98%A5%E9%BD%A1-%E9%B7%93%E9%B4%A3%E9%A3%9B-The-Partridges> (accessed on 23 November 2022).

17. Montefiore Clarissa Seabag, “From Red Guards to Bond Villains: Why the Mao Suit Endures,” *BBC*, 2 November 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20151007-from-red-guards-to-bond-villains-why-the-mao-suit-endures> (accessed on 25 March 2021).

18. Montefiore Clarissa Seabag, “From Red Guards (...),” op. cit.

19. See the record cover at the following link: <https://www.discogs.com/fr/release/25262875-%E4%B8%AD%E5%A4%AE%E6%AD%8C%E8%88%9E%E5%9B%A2-%E5%96%9C%E5%BA%86-Joyous-Festival-Xi-Qing> (accessed on 23 November 2022).

A hundred children (*bai zi tu* 百子圖), a traditional Chinese painting that advocates the Confucian morality of reproduction, as “a hundred children” conveys the message of the well-known Chinese idiom “more children (especially sons) will bring a family more blessings” (*duo zi duo fu* 多子多福).²⁰ Therefore, socialist imagery is replaced by imagery that emphasises traditional Chinese family values, which coincides well with the conservative clan culture within Chinese ethnic groups (notably Cantonese, Teochew, and Hakka people) in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.

A third example is CRF’s *Festival dance* (*Jieri de wuqu* 節日的舞曲) and Art-Tune’s *Ballroom dance* (*Jiaoji wu* 交際舞). The CRF version was originally issued to celebrate the founding of the new PRC, as “festival” (*jieri* 節日) in the title refers to 1 October, China’s National Holiday. On the front cover we can see major construction in Beijing, including the Great Hall of the People, Tiananmen Square, and the Monument to the People’s Heroes. The buildings manifest socialist aesthetics as they were inspired by Soviet architecture.²¹ In the Art-Tune version, however, there are merely two couples standing at the centre, with fireworks in the background and three lanterns hung on top (Figure 1). The dancers wearing tuxedos and *cheongsam* 長衫, along with the image of traditional Chinese lanterns, effectively combines Chineseness with Western style, representing bourgeois taste devoid of communist messaging.

Figure 1. Art-Tune version of *Ballroom dance* (ATC-154).



Source: photo taken by the author.

Simplification of words and regional flavour

Meanwhile, staff and crew of the Art-Tune Records Company also implemented the strategy of simplification, which was to remove words and symbols with special meanings from the title of a song or on an album cover in order to conceal communist implications. For instance, the Chinese instrumental music piece “Singing meeting of rice sprout dance song” (*Yangge hui* 秧歌會) in the album *Joyous festival*, was simplified as “Singing meeting” (*Gehui* 歌會), effacing the political message of the rice sprout dance. As a traditional Chinese folk dance to celebrate harvests, the rice sprout dance, or *yangge* dance, often involved long parades of peasants in rural northern China dressed in red, green, or other colourful costumes swinging their bodies to festive and jubilant music played by drums, trumpets, and gongs. However, when the CCP launched the

New *Yangge* Movement (*xin yangge yundong* 新秧歌運動) in the 1940s, the rice sprout dance was adopted to reflect class struggle and rally village support for the Party. By incorporating socialist elements in their gestures and props, progressive cultural workers transformed the *yangge* dance and reinvented this traditional folklore art form into a new revolutionary dance. Popularised by the CCP in urban settings, the reformed *yangge* dance from 1949 to 1951 became a political instrument for communicating socialist ideals to the people, “especially stories about the success of the CCP developments, the undying support of the Chinese people, the righteous leadership of the CCP, as well as the bright socialist future of China” (Cohen 2009). For anticommunist governments seeking to limit the spread of leftist politics, the Cold War *yangge* in Overseas Chinese communities became a target of suppression, as it was seen as a threat to colonial governance (Sutton 2014).²² As such, the staff and crew of Art-Tune Records had to wipe away the term *yangge* in the new version in order to circumvent censorship from the British colonial government.

Apart from this, music titles that reflected socialist construction were also simplified. For example, Li Ruixing’s 李瑞星 song “Beautiful view in the suburbs of Shanghai” (*Shanghai jiaoqu fengguang hao* 上海郊區風光好) was renamed “Beautiful view in the suburbs” (*Jiaowai fengguang hao* 郊外風光好). The new title blurred the location in the PRC and purposefully created a sense of imagination and nostalgia for the homeland among Chinese diasporic audiences. In addition, the title of performance institutions, along with background information on PRC orchestras and performers, were all simplified or deleted. For instance, as a “selection of music programs from China Central Song and Dance Ensemble,” there was an introduction to the ensemble printed on the back cover of CRF’s *Joyous festival*. However, in the Art-Tune version, the introduction part was taken away due to the communist background of the CCSDE. In other cases, the performing institutions were often replaced by a so-called Art-Tune orchestra of traditional Chinese music instruments (*yisheng minzu yuedui* 藝聲民族樂隊), or Art-Tune orchestra (*yisheng guanxian yuedui* 藝聲管弦樂隊).

The example that best integrates strategies of depoliticisation with simplification of words is Art-Tune’s *Selected songs from dance drama: Bow dance* (*Wuju xuan qu: Gong wu* 舞劇選曲: 弓舞). The original CRF version was named *Selected songs from “Small Swords Society”* (*Wuju “xiao dao hui” xuan qu* 舞劇“小刀會”選曲), a collection of songs from a Chinese national dance drama that narrates the story of a civil clandestine group in Shanghai planning

20. See the record cover at the following link: <https://www.discogs.com/fr/release/14291961-Unknown-Artist-%E5%96%9C%E6%85%B6> (accessed on 23 November 2022).

21. See the record covers at the following links: <https://www.discogs.com/fr/release/11306666-Various-%E7%AF%80%E6%97%A5%E7%9A%84%E8%88%9E%E6%9B%B2-%E4%B8%80-Jie-Ri-De-Wuqu> (accessed on 23 November 2022); <https://www.discogs.com/fr/release/11789014-Various-%E7%AF%80%E6%97%A5%E7%9A%84%E8%88%9E%E6%9B%B2-%E4%BA%8C> (accessed on 23 November 2022); <https://www.discogs.com/release/25262947-%E4%B8%AD%E5%A4%AE%E5%B9%BF%E6%92%AD%E6%B0%91%E6%97%8F%E7%AE%A1%E5%BC%A6%E4%B9%90%E5%9B%A2%E6%BC%94%E5%A5%8F-Festival-Dance-Jieri-dewuqu-%E7%AF%80%E6%97%A5%E7%9A%84%E8%88%9E%E6%9B%B2> (accessed on 23 November 2022).

22. On the communist association of the Cold War *yangge* and its circulation in Overseas Chinese communities in the 1950s and 1960s, see Wilcox 2020.

an uprising against the corrupt late-Qing regime. Promoted by the CCP in the early 1950s, the dance opera was performed in public to commemorate the history of the masses' struggle against feudalism and Western imperialism in the late nineteenth century. It also aimed to remind PRC audiences to never forget class struggle and foreign invasions. As can be seen from the attire of the couple on the front cover, the peasants were dressed as amateur soldiers carrying swords, which were very much like the Taiping soldiers well known for challenging the Qing government. In the Art-Tune version, however, the front cover was changed into a peasant couple dressed as Chinese minorities shooting arrows and running freely, with the man on the right jumping high off the ground (Figure 2). Unlike the background of the CRF version that has both the flag of the Small Swords Society and the faraway main entrance to the Forbidden City that symbolises the imperial power of the Qing regime, the background of the Art-Tune version is a simple white floral pattern, making audience wonder where the couple is, and which Chinese ethnic minority they belong to rather than thinking about their political subversiveness. As for the title, the CRF version highlights the dance drama *Small Swords Society* by enlarging the font size, while the title of the Art-Tune version, *Selected songs from dance drama: Bow dance*, is linguistically ambiguous, as the audience cannot tell whether the dance drama is named *Bow dance*, or whether "Bow dance" is the title of one music piece from the dance drama. As the names and background information of the original composers, conductor, and performance institution were all wiped out, such simplification further lessened the communist associations in the CRF version, giving the audience an impression of pure Chineseness remote from any political inclination.

Figure 2. CRF version of *Small Swords Society* (left) and Art-Tune version of *Bow Dance* (right).



Source: photo taken by the author.

With the designation of COCA, the Art-Tune Records Company also recorded a large number of dialect records, in which on-site regional music was recorded by special engineers sent out by the company. Exported record programs were divided into several categories, including regional opera and music, Chinese folk art (*quyi* 曲藝), traditional Chinese music, solo performances by Western musical instruments, and folk songs from Chinese minority groups.²³ Dialect records that consisted of regional opera soundtracks from either well-known opera films or stage performances were full of linguistic variations. Meanwhile, the sense of "Chineseness" epitomised by traditional Chinese musical

instruments and indigenous songs from minority groups effectively catered to the tastes of Overseas Chinese audiences in Southeast Asia, as they recalled their emotional sympathy with cultural China in their soul-searching for "roots," a utopian construction of their homeland.²⁴

Audience reception and copyright issues

A total of 13 local companies were responsible for distributing CRF records in Hong Kong, including bookstores, department stores, and electric appliance stores.²⁵ Apart from this, concerts and other stage performances sponsored by companies with PRC backgrounds also contributed to their sales. Starting from 3 July 1960, Friendly Voice Company (*You sheng hang* 友聲行), a local company authorised to distribute CRF records, together with two other private companies, Chung Fu Company (*Zhong fu hang* 中孚行) and Yuet Wah Hotel (*Yue Hua zhan* 粵華棧), held a "China records concert" (*Zhongguo changpian xinshang hui* 中國唱片欣賞會) for a total of three days in the Hall of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Central.²⁶ As the event was successful and well received by audiences, soon afterwards Friendly Voice and China Resources Company (*Hua run gongsi* 華潤公司), a well-known Hong Kong export and import company with a PRC background and acting as sole agent for CRF, held another concert, "The night of China records" (*Zhongguo changpian zhi ye* 中國唱片之夜), in cooperation with Lan Heung Kwok 蘭香閣, a Hong Kong restaurant, to further expand its influence. Regularly held each Friday evening, the concerts involved live performances of songs from both CRF records and Hong Kong leftist films. Later the companies also contacted local hotels, theatres, and Chinese radio stations in Hong Kong to broadcast soundtracks from CRF records distributed by Art-Tune and Bailey.²⁷

As most Art-Tune records were repackaged from CRF records, such concerts helped promote sales in the local market. However, it should be noted that from the beginning of distribution, Art-Tune always kept a low profile. Compared with other commercial record companies in Hong Kong, especially Bailey, it seldom engaged in overwhelming publicity. The advertisements were instead printed

23. See the catalog of the Art-Tune Records (*Yisheng changpian mulu* 藝聲唱片目錄) published in Hong Kong in 1960.

24. An official document from CNSEC to CRF named "Reasons for manufacturing dialect musical records" (*wei dingzhi fangyan gequ changpian you* 為定制方言歌曲唱片由) published on 24 September 1956 discloses that some overseas clients asked the PRC government to "provide records that include dialect songs with folklore forms and mainly cater to the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. (...) Based on Chairman Mao's principles of 'Hundred Flowers Movement,' we [CNSEC] therefore encourage you [CRF] to produce dialect records, among which Chaozhou dialect, Hainan dialect, Hakka, and Amoy dialect are most welcomed..."

25. See "香港藝聲唱片公司廣告" (*Xianggang Yisheng changpian gongsi guanggao*, Advertisement of Art-Tune Records Company Hong Kong), *Ta Kung Pao* (大公報), 16 February 1959. As for the sales, in the mid-1960s gramophone records from the PRC occupied more than 70% of the market share in Hong Kong and Macao (Editorial Department 1989: 31). However, due to a lack of historical evidence, the claim needs further verification from other sources.

26. For details concerning the China records concert, see China Resources Company, "中國唱片欣賞會總結" (*Zhongguo changpian xinshang hui zongjie*, Summary report of China records concert), 10 September 1960.

27. Siu-wah Yu points out that Chinese music was mostly performed in leftist theatres such as Ruby Theatre (*Zhujiang xiyuan* 珠江戲院), Astor Theatre (*Puqing xiyuan* 普慶戲院), or Sunbeam Theatre (*Xinguang xiyuan* 新光戲院), etc., rather than in music halls administered by the colonial government. See Yu 2005: 98.

on the margins of leftist newspapers, with a few lines describing its low prices and free distribution during holidays and festivals.²⁸ These frequent sales promotions cannot be explained without considering the nature of Art-Tune Records Company, which cannot be taken for granted as a commercial company simply due to its location in Hong Kong. According to a personal interview with Xie Xiaolong 謝小龍, a former staff member of Art-Tune Records, though established under the orders of COCA, the company lacked financial sponsorship from the PRC, and its staff and crew received very low salaries. Instead, it was an independent business institution separate from CRF and had sole responsibility for its losses and profits. As for its staff and crew, the majority were not professionally trained in music recording, so the records they distributed were of low quality. Assigned with propaganda missions, they were mostly offspring or family members of Overseas Chinese who had contributed significantly to the CCP's international propaganda during the second Sino-Japanese War.²⁹

In addition, as people working for Art-Tune lacked awareness of copyright, the company was often accused of piracy. Apart from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, the company also manufactured and exported repackaged CRF records to Taiwan, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Cai Jiaqian 蔡佳倩, a current staff member working for China Records Corporation Shanghai Branch, told me that in Taiwan, a local records company named Queen Records Company (*Nüwang changpian gongsi* 女王唱片公司) pirated and sold large numbers of Art-Tune records in the 1950s and 1960s, as during that time anything coming from the PRC was forbidden due to the White Terror and the ROC's containment of communism. Once discovered, Friendly Voice Company in Hong Kong reported to CRF by letter saying that Art-Tune Records and other overseas companies were pirating their records. However, CRF acquiesced and did not take any legal action, probably because they were aware that its exportation overseas was under the orders of COCA.³⁰ Meanwhile, Bailey was also dissatisfied and accused Art-Tune of piracy. In response, staff at Art-Tune claimed their copyrights from CRF and instead accused Bailey of infringement.³¹ Although it is difficult today to prove the validity of these claims, in the early 1980s Bailey declared publicly that it had gained exclusive copyright from CRF, insinuating Art-Tune's infringement.³²

The 1980s was also the time when Art-Tune came to an end. One reason was that the market for gramophone records worldwide was declining; another may have been the constant copyright issues that the company was unable to resolve. The brand is still retained today but has turned into a film, TV, and entertainment corporation named Hua Wen Film Company (*Huawen yingshi gongsi* 華文影視公司). Established in 1995, it has been responsible for distributing PRC films and Chinese-language teaching videos to Hong Kong and Overseas Chinese communities in Malaysia, Japan, and the USA.³³ Whatever the case, with strategies of depoliticisation, the wide circulation of gramophone records by the historical Art-Tune Records Company successfully raised the Cold War Bamboo Curtain in East Asia. Meanwhile, it also made great contributions to education about and the development of traditional Chinese music in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Liu 2020).

Transplantation of socialist music into Hong Kong martial arts movies

As discussed earlier, the Art-Tune Records Company repackaged PRC songs originally composed to celebrate revolution or socialist construction. However, in Hong Kong-produced Cantonese martial arts movies (*wuxia pian* 武俠片) in the 1950s and 1960s, these soundtracks were borrowed freely and randomly, which was made possible due to the mass reproduction of records, the lack of copyright protection, and original music composition in Hong Kong. For example, "Fisherman's song of the East China Sea," which was used to praise the hard-working peasants in the early socialist period, was set as background music in the battle scene of *The Ingenious Swords* (*Baigu yin yang jian* 白骨陰陽劍, 1962). Similarly, part of "Daring general" (*Chuang jiang ling* 闖將令), an ensemble of wind and percussion instruments in traditional Chinese music (*chuida yue* 吹打樂) composed by Lu Chunling to celebrate contributions made by people from all walks of life during the Great Leap Forward, was used as the opening theme for *Four Crazy Heroes* (*Huangtang si guai xia* 荒唐四怪俠, 1964). A third example is "The triumphal song of the reservoir." Played by traditional Chinese instruments and led by cloud gongs (*yunluo* 雲鑼) at the beginning, the song was composed to extol the diligence of labourers working for socialist construction. However, in the Cantonese martial arts film *The Six-fingered Lord of the Lute* (*Liu zhi qin mo* 六指琴魔, 1965), parts of the song were used as background music in the combat scene or when the heroine was jumping up and down from the roof. PRC music was also borrowed for scenes with special effects. "Heroes conquered the Dadu River" (*Yingxiong men zhansheng le Dadu he* 英雄們戰勝了大渡河), a song composed in 1951 to praise how the People's Liberation Army managed to cross the Dadu River in Sichuan to liberate Tibet, was used in the opening scene with the well-known Buddha's Palm in *The Young Swordsman Lung Kim-fei* (*Ru lai shen zhang* 如來神掌, 1964).³⁴ From these examples we see that Hong Kong-produced martial arts movies in the 1950s and 1960s were market-based, and their chief purpose was entertainment rather than moral didacticism or conveying political messages of national independence and solidarity advocated by the PRC. The commercial use of socialist

28. "藝聲唱片公司舉行酬賓贈送" (*Yisheng changpian gongsi juxing choubin zengsong*, Free distribution from Art-Tune Records Company), *Ta Kung Pao* (大公報), 19 January 1962; "藝聲唱片減價一月" (*Yisheng changpian jianjia yi yue*, One-month reductions for all Art-Tune records), *Ta Kung Pao* (大公報), 15 September 1974.

29. Interview with Xie Xiaolong, 24 July 2019.

30. Interview with Cai Jiaqian, 10 July 2019.

31. Interview with Xie Xiaolong, 24 July 2019.

32. "港商欲灌錄我文藝節目，可循正當途徑進行洽商" (*Gang shang yu guan lu wo wenyi jiemu, ke xun zhengdang tujing jinxing qianshang*, Hong Kong businessmen intend to record our Chinese music programs, making it possible to seek legal ways for negotiation), *Ta Kung Pao* (大公報), 18 April 1980.

33. Interview with Xie Xiaolong, 24 July 2019.

34. In other cases, PRC music was inserted into static and emotional scenes in Hong Kong-produced Cantonese martial arts movies. Well-known pieces include "Pea-blossoms are in bloom" (*Wandou huakai* 豌豆花開) from *Small Swords Society*, Lu Chunling's bamboo flute solo with traditional Chinese music accompaniment, "Today and yesterday" (*Jin xi* 今昔), the Chinese lute (*pipa* 琵琶) song "Five heroes in the Langya Mountain" (*Langya shan wu zhuangshi* 狼牙山五壯士), as well as "Capriccio on the River Huai" and "Mountains and rivers in Guilin." For a formal analysis of these pieces, see Chang 2017.

Figure 3. The leader of the peasant waving the flag of “Following the way of heaven to seek justice” (*shun tian xing dao* 順天行道).



Credit: screenshots by the author, from *Small Swords Society*, directed by Ye Ming 葉明 (Shanghai Tianma Film Studio, 1961).

music in Cantonese martial arts movies therefore erased the original political meanings in the socialist context. Such random borrowing without giving credit to the original composers and music titles could only happen in a time and place in which there was no clear and strict legal protection of copyright.

However, the transplantation of socialist music into martial-arts movies could create new political meanings in its own environment. A typical example is “The prelude of ‘Small Swords Society’” (*“Xiao dao hui” xuqu* “小刀會”序曲). Composed by a PRC musician named Shang Yi 商易 (1929–2001) in 1959, “The prelude” starts when the angry masses are prepared for an uprising against corrupt Qing officials colluding with foreigners in 1853 (Figure 3), thus having subversive implications of anti-imperialism and nationalism. However, when the soundtrack reappears in the opening scene of King Hu’s (Hu Jinquan 胡金銓) *Dragon Inn* (*Longmen kezhan* 龍門客棧, 1967), a transnational Mandarin martial-arts movie produced in Taiwan and released in Hong Kong by Shaw Brothers, it is preceded by a voice-over introducing the cruelty and oppression of the authoritarian Eastern Depot, or sword-wielding secret police and its leader, Eunuch Tsao, to the masses. The scene begins with the entrance of Eunuch Tsao, the chief villain, and his attendants. Acting as a motif, “The prelude” here not only sets the tone, but also heightens the emotional intensity of the film narrative.³⁵ Indeed, rather than fighting against Qing officials and Western imperialists, King Hu’s *Dragon Inn* is more about the battle between the Eastern Depot and the victimised general’s offspring and their supporters in the late Ming dynasty, a time with apparent spatial-temporal distance from the social reality in colonial Hong Kong. However, when the film was on screen, it achieved overwhelming success, as its theme of protesting against organised authority and despotism recalled the ferment of Hong Kong’s 1967 riots, in which pro-communist leftists conducted large-scale strikes and demonstrations against the British colonial government.³⁶ As such, “The prelude” was instilled with new meanings of anti-authoritarianism and anticolonialism that evoked affective response among Hong Kong audiences sympathetic to the local leftists.

Conclusion

This paper explores how PRC gramophone records in the 1950s and 1960s were distributed and circulated in Hong Kong, a nexus in which all three parties – the PRC, the ROC, and the USA – engaged in a cultural Cold War to win the hearts and minds of Overseas Chinese people. I focus on the Art-Tune Records Company, a Hong Kong-based private corporation and a shadow agent of CRF in the

PRC, to examine how the company managed to break through the restrictions of political censorship from the colonial government and US-imposed sanctions on the PRC and successfully distributed records in Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and other overseas markets by means of repackaging and reproducing records from CRF in Shanghai. By deploying diverse tactics and commercial foils such as de-mainlandisation and simplification while emphasising regional flavour, Art-Tune managed to deliver gramophone music with multiregional and multilingual versions to nurture a sense of cultural belonging and emotional sympathy with the new PRC among Hong Kong and Overseas Chinese audiences.

The successful distribution of gramophone records from the PRC to Hong Kong and overseas has not only promoted the circulation of Chinese music abroad, but also contributed to dynamic intermedia practice and cultural expressions with the transplantation of Chinese music into Hong Kong martial arts movies, in which propaganda messages of socialist China in CRF recordings were recontextualised with new meanings of anticolonialism and anti-authoritarianism in the social reality of 1960s Hong Kong. The paper also seeks to prove that apart from Cantonese opera and Cantopop, traditional Chinese music in Hong Kong before the 1970s was open to multiple influences, particularly from the socialist PRC across the Cold War Bamboo Curtain.

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35. For a thorough analysis of music and sound effects in King Hu’s early *wuxia* films, see Law 2014.

36. Barrett Michael, “Everybody Goes to ‘Dragon Inn,’ King Hu’s Martial Arts Milestone,” *Pop Matters*, 18 July 2018, www.popmatters.com/dragon-inn-king-hu-2585592275.html?rebellitem=1#rebellitem1 (accessed on 25 March 2021).

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