

My (Non) Music Enlightenment

(text for a podcast of [outliers radio](#):

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translated by Hu Moran

I was born in a compound residence of Military Area Command. My parents were both military officers and my maternal grandfather who lived with us, was a carpenter. They spoke Hezhou dialect, Lanzhou dialect, mandarin with Hunan accent respectively, and mandarin as well. My neighbors spoke mandarin, Henan dialect, Shaanxi dialect, Lanzhou mandarin mixed with Dongbei dialect, etc. As I frequently lodged with different relatives, and transferred to different primary schools for three times, I never gained a fixed feeling for language and was not sure which group I belong to, since each background has its own accent.

I did not go to kindergarten. In primary school, we always sang theme songs of TV episodes in unison in music class. While in middle school, one of the teachers played us orchestral music and asked what instruments we could hear, and a student said, "Trumpet!" I was baffled. Who is Trumpet? Where does it come from? Where does it go?

Except for the harmonica, I didn't touch any instruments until I was 14. I learned to play the guitar for a week when I was 14, and then that potential of guitar was forbidden by my mom. I can only figure out just one, two, three, four, five, six, seven of those notes on a numbered musical notation by present.

I would like to say that, music has never been able to be transformed into notes for me, or maybe just except for rests. Music is direct, sensual, from sound to body, from vibration to electrical signal. Music is also complete, never being decoded and analyzed, its logic unexplained, and its reason buried deep down where the light of enlightenment cannot reach. It is an abyss beneath

dialect and accent. From this perspective, I don't understand music at all. Or rather, the thing I understand should be called "non-music".

#### ? – Funeral Music

My earliest memory about music was Funeral Music. It seemed to contain an endless amount of time, indeed, it seemed to be releasing an endless amount of time. What accompanied the music was the minimalist voice of the radio broadcast reading national leaders' obituaries. The two vocals, which were already very standardized, became more standardized, more even, and more endless in such a situation. For a child, these two things seem to be the world that external to "I", which was huge, uninteresting and endlessly cyclical.

#### ? - The Athlete's March

Luckily I could listen to the Athletes' March, an experience that lasted well into my middle school years. It had a comedic effect. Whether it was heard in the stadium of Military Area Command, or in the school playground, or on TV, I was always trying to find the beginning and the end of this piece, but failed. I think if Erik Satie was still alive, it is the ultimate piece he would have wanted to write.

#### Kao Ling-feng (aka Frankie Kao) - The Story of Pickles (1978)

I heard this song by an adobe wall on top of a hill in the suburbs. It was the earliest pop song I could recall. By then I had heard countless music: I was no longer innocent and blank. I had heard the Shaanxi Opera, the Revolutionary Model Opera, the reveille, the bugle call, the light music of Paul Mauriat, and, perhaps, had already heard songs of Li Guyi who was one of the first pop singers after Culture Revolution in Mainland China. These sounds had encoded my brain with a set of pre-staged stress response devices. But what is this? Hey, waiter, give me a bowl of pickles? Nuts! I was only a few years old when I experienced this very system failure.

#### Mitsuko Horie - Flames of Youth (1979)

This one is the theme song of Moero! Attack. But I'm talking about the version

we had in music class-----the class monitor wrote on the blackboard: hold European inner nun that oh bring, island forest nun grunt, how would western inner oh, how would western inner oh (Chinese characters pronounce as similar as the Japanese lyrics : bo orini na yah dai, do rin ni gulu, ande siri yah, ande siri yah) ... This is language mutation!!! This is heterogeneity!!! This is the reality of another dimension since the 1980s!!! A class of more than 50 students singing together!!!

Li Lingyu - Pink Memories (1985 or 1987)

When I was in junior high school, my family moved to another military compound, which was relatively small. One summer, the man in charge of the wire broadcasting was particularly fond of singer Li Lingyu, therefore I was forced to listen to this song several times a day and was getting sick of. It appeared at all occasions like breakfast, lunch, siesta, morning break, afternoon break, dinner, and evening study. This song became functional and acted as a signal. But why did that man think the group of guys lived here who in fact researched and developed chemical weapons need such a large dose of humanity? I'm growing up at that time, so I can't understand memories, let alone "pink". I was just confused.

He Wenbiao - Star Wars (1984)

There were no opportunity to listen to foreign electronic music back then, but I had He Wenbiao's tapes. Fast electronic beats, light tones, but at the same time accentuated by smooth melodies. That is to say, in the form of discontinuity and modernity, the continuity is resolutely guarded as the structure of agricultural civilization. The feeling of this song was both new and familiar.

Michael Jackson - the way you make me feel (1987)

I think it might be 1987 when I was firstly amazed by Michael Jackson's extraordinary voice. For instance, the spasmodic sound of "g'on girl" in this song. Moreover, the percussion (including electronic sounds) is so dominant that it's completely different from melody-driven music, something that I've

never heard before. If what shaped me before was a continuous, complete, sliding structure, then M.J.'s music was assembled, explosive, mechanical, thus my body changed forever.

Alan Tam - Flowers in the Water (1991)

I probably heard Alan Tam's songs when I was in high school. I think it might be the Mandarin version. Now every time I think about this song, it is accompanied by a fragrance of hair spray, which suggests that back then people around had started to imitate the hair style appeared in Hong Kong movies. In the meanwhile, this song is accompanied by the aura of poetry and verse of the Tang and Song dynasty, probably Li Shangyin. I had no opportunity to hear Claude Debussy's music or seen Claude Monet's paintings at the time, but was reading Song Iambic Verse Appreciation Dictionary and Works of Stream of Consciousness Literature. Words, rhymes and instruments overlapped on different levels to create rippling impressions. For me, this is the jewel of Chinese culture.

Chen Li - Vain Longing (1987)

Compared with that in HK and Taiwan, pop songs created in Mainland China are relatively a little less atmospheric and weak in literary grace, but instead more functional. It's just like a knife. We shall consider it as a back step from Claude Monet and Georges Seurat to Gustave Courbet, which was seemingly mild, indirect, smooth-moving and petit-bourgeois, but in actuality violent and straightforward. It is a naked socialist revolution with sleek materials, that is to say, 'the pebble is the weapon of the proletariat'. The proletariats here are of course people like me, enslaved to the adult world and lacking the knowledge to rebuild my life, culturally barren, emotionally exuberant yet repressed and ultimately, blind.

Chi Zhiqiang - Tears Behind the Iron Window (1988)

Once a friend of mine from a band took me to visit a released prisoner. He was sentenced to eight years in prison for robbing a few cents during the first round of Yanda---or "strike hard"---campaign in early 80s, and has been

disconnected with society ever since. He had recorded over 200 prison songs. I had heard many people sing Tears Behind the Iron Window before then, but the lyrics always varied and the tune was not always Chi's version. The song's style is not that decent. Of course it's not in good taste. Do not expect to give birth to Delta blues or anything here. It's just barren, with nothing but a shaky body. During my growing up I was surrounded by this state of barrenness, not by ECM jazz, for instance.

Cui Jian - It's Not That I Don't Understand (1986/1987)

I heard this song on the radio in 1986. It was a thunderclap. The lyrics were all understandable, but what was it? There was no melody! Several lines running in parallel with no main focus! At the same time there was a feeling of sorcerer's dance in Chinese folk culture, while the suona horn conducted as a purely physical noise device. There was also syncopation, that is to say, what was once a complete sound now can be syncopated and in disorder. There were also all sorts of clear, disorderly high pitches, hysterical high pitches. .... I can put it in a clear way at this moment, but back then it was totally shocking, and no words could describe it. The structure, and the form of energy, was completely different from the world I was in before, the one that had been fabricated beyond my knowledge.

Xue Yue - Don't Kiss Me on the Street (1986)

I think I heard this song in a movie written by romance novel writer Chiung Yao. The rests were particularly moving. As I said it was the only musical note I can recognize. It was certainly in the absence setting of classical Chinese aesthetics that I recognized it immediately: the special sense of space. Not the scholar taste of Southern artists Ni Zan and Su Dongpo, but the northern one, such as Fan Kuan, where first there was large size and then the blankness of his painting was vast. By the way at that time I might probably hadn't even seen Zhang Daqian's modernized ink paintings. Anyway, the few lines of refrain reveal themselves bare from the vacancy when there was no accompaniment, not in the form of flesh, but in the form of machine, with the sounds of the street behind it.

Roman Tam, Jenny Tseng - Heart of Steel (1983)

Actually, what attracted me most in The Legend of the Condor Heroes were the villain lady Mei Chaofeng, and the sort of thing like the Nine Yin Skeleton Claw, the brains, the miserable moonlight, and the people abandoned by human society. It was something that beyond my imagination at that time. Heart of Steel was about deserts which the singers'd never even seen, and was sung in Cantonese, a language I didn't understand at all. For me, these all had to do with the boundaries of imagination. Despite being drawn to the cult elements, I succumbed to the haunting sentiment of the touching theme song and later gradually forgot (or pretended to forget) about Mei Chaofeng.

Wang Di - Harvest Beans From Melon Seeds (1986?)

Wang Di's most famous song is the one from The Trouble Shooters. But I've also heard another one. I forget the title, and just remember the lyrics are like "My dad said this to me, what the fuck are you doing there ....." It's the first time I've heard dirty talk in a song. The feeling was so great. Me and a few of my classmates suddenly became angry. That is to say, the anger, which we didn't make sense before, was suddenly given a form by Wang di. It was very simple blues rock, and it was very real angry youth. Of course, for many years afterwards, me and my friends encountered the same problem: anger needs a form.

Liu Hong - Platform (1987)

In 1987, this Cantonese singers were different from ones of Hong Kong and Taiwan later on. Their Mandarin was not standard either, but with a flavor just as a tea restaurant chef, which was not at all high class. "My heart is waaaiting, forever waaaiting, yeah." But, more or less, it's probably fair to say that this is the singing-with-one's-life style. I might be despaired of the aesthetics at that point since I was just raised up by those people with no taste at all.

Zhu Feng - My Life (1985)

This is the ending song of Master Haideng. For a while such kind of particularly

masculine female singers with a strong voice were very popular. I must have been in my first year of high school at that time and was questioning everything. There's nothing special about this song, and it was just frank and dark in particular. It was like the beginning of works by so-called ghost kung fu writer Chen Qingyun: Darkness! Darkness! Darkness that you can't see your own hand! Particularly poor in aesthetics, but super powerful for the singer. What a bold and rough life. Whether darkness or slumber, the will to life was the driving force of this voice.

Jacky Cheung Hok-yau - Passing through Your black hair, my hand ( 1985 )  
It is possible that Lo Tayon's original version was better , but I happened to hear Cheung's version first. It is very amusing about his slurred Mandarin, which sends out a sort of pretentious feeling: three "of"s in one sentence, or three repetitions in trivial parts which carry no meanings. Plus such affected unclear Mandarin, with all aforementioned elements, produced a shadow and echo in language. That's probably the reason why I became curious about those minor stuff later on.

? - L'Internationale (2018 park version in the mix)

Of course it was not the metal band Tang Dynasty's version. At that time, I wasn't heard of them. It was sung together in the streets with a lot of people in protest. Many of them forgot the lyrics, but somehow everyone kept singing along and we were moved. It was live event at the first place, not hi-fi. And it was something other than language. It was below the language. It was mumbling, humming, and a lot of voices, mixed in between the melody and the lyrics and also mixed in the turbulent space and time of streets, which could be seen as different forms of life being layered one by one. As to me, music is a living event. This experience was an enlightenment.

Li Yaming - Cool (1988)

"A kind of freedom that was once dreamed of is like a coastline, which can be twisted and changed". The song itself is the coastline that keeps twisting and changing, the melody of which was written after the lyrics, neither was neat,

but constantly extending and turning, with a constantly autochthonous generated melody other than a flowing line. This might be the collaboration between Chyi Chin and Hsia Yu at their peak. But Jiang Jianmin's guitar was fluid, and it connected this unearthly spectacle with carbon-based life (I later read *Neuromancer*, what that song achieved might be the landscape of the matrix that the novel protagonist comes into after human-machine intergration). This was the unspeakable feeling that I experienced when I skipped my night classes in grade three of senior high school: freedom was no longer an idea, an object, but a structure, a relationship always in flux.