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Gossips about Stars: Newspaper and Pop Culture China

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Gossips about Stars: Newspaper and Pop Culture China

Chua Beng Huat

Introduction

The presence of ethnic Chinese across the globe is an available empirical resource for the organizing of transnational Chinese subjectivities and ‘communities’ for different purposes at hand. There has been no lack of illustrative instances, since the late 19th century, of how this dispersed and disparate body of people have been activated, even interpellated against the wills of individuals within it, to be discursively constructed as a ‘diasporic community’ and politically mobilized to promote different ‘Chinese’ causes. In modern political history, this population may be properly addressed as a ‘diaspora’ in the late 19th century because an overwhelming majority of its members were first generation immigrants who were oriented to a ‘home’ in China. Those born outside China were also diasporic by default, as a consequence of being denied citizenship in the countries of birth and residence.ⁱ Under those circumstances, the politics of China was a constant factor that activated and divided this diasporic population into different camps, with different ideas about how to save China and lift the Chinese people out of the decaying dynastic, imperial regime and stifling traditions, so as to propel both into the modern world. For example, the Southeast Asian fragment of this global diasporic population was mobilized, at different times, to be united in support against the Japanese invasion of China, to be divided in allegiance to the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party during the civil war and to vicariously take pride in the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) detonation of its first atomic bomb in the early 1950s.

Until 1949, politically speaking, being ethnic Chinese might be said to be loosely coterminous with being Chinese citizen. The defeat and retreat of the Kuomintang to Taiwan as the Republic of China (ROC) introduced the first rupture between ethnic-cultural Chinese identity and citizenship, with both the PRC and the ROC claiming all ethnic Chinese as their own citizens. In 1955, a second rupture was enacted. The then Prime Minister of PRC, Chou En Lai, announced at the inaugural conference of Non-Aligned Movement, in Bandung, Indonesia, that an ethnic Chinese outside PRC should obtain citizenship and develop allegiance to the country of

adoption. This effectively severed Chinese ethnicity from Chinese citizenship. For those living outside the PRC, Hong Kong, Macau and the disputed Taiwan, 'Chinese-ness' becomes exclusively an ethnic-cultural marker; one can be culturally Chinese without being a Chinese nationalist.

Since then, all efforts to mobilize the 'overseas Chinese' population unavoidably activate the 'cultural' rather than the 'national'. For example, the establishment of the Chinese language university, Nanyang University, in Singapore in the mid 1950s, appealed and obtained contributions of funds from Chinese individuals across social classes and across the globe. In more recent times, attempts to develop a pan-overseas-Chinese business network in the early 1990s when capitalism triumphed in East and Southeast Asia; and to explain this rise of capital in terms of Confucianism and finally, the attempt to conceptualize a 'greater culture China' by exploring the overseas Chinese communities as the 'center' were all these instances in which the 'cultural' Chinese was evoked. The criticisms, anxieties and resistances against these attempts, among both Chinese and non Chinese, tended to be framed in terms of 'Chinese chauvinism' rather than Chinese nationalism. The ethnic Chinese population outside the 'Chinese-nation' has undoubtedly become a 'cultural' community without any presumption of a 'homeland'. In this contemporary sense, the appropriateness of calling this population a diaspora is highly problematic.ⁱⁱ It is often a term that is imposed on individuals by others for the latter's own self-interest rather than appropriated by the individuals within this population as self-identity.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Singapore - an independent nation-state where the ethnic Chinese population is the demographic majority - citizenship has gained increasing importance over ethnicity as an identity marker, although it remains difficult to escape the ethnic identity marker that is officially imposed on every individual by the state as an instrument of governance (Chua, 2003). Similarly, in Taiwan and Hong Kong, very large segments of the local ethnic Chinese populations struggle to escape the geopolitical absorption of their home into the PRC and have no wish to be Chinese 'nationals'. It is, therefore, the cultural definitions of the Chinese outside China that one needs to address. This is reflected in many ethnic-Chinese intellectuals taking up different personal political positions on different issues of 'Chinese-ness' (Chun, 1996; Ong, 1999; Chow, 2000; Ang, 2001). These cultural definitions are invariably

and increasingly marked by local politics, which further creates differences under the generic sign of 'Chinese-ness'. For example, ethnic Chinese culture in Singapore must operate within official multiracialism as national policy, the Chinese in Hong Kong are struggling to come to a satisfactory definition of themselves in cultural and political terms as part of the PRC (Chan, 2004) and the independenists in Taiwan have stopped addressing themselves as 'Chinese', regardless of the fact that the language that they take as their own, 'Taiwanese', is the same as the Minnan or Fujian language of the Fujian province in southern coastal PRC.

However, beneath these differences, the construction of a more abstract and generalized sense of 'Chinese-ness' remains a constant possibility. It is a possibility that is constantly being exploited by different groups, from national leaders to civil society groups, for different purposes. Amongst the most successful in exploiting and realizing this possibility of a transnational Chinese 'community' are the popular culture industries that market their products across the region. This is reflected in academic analysis of Chinese-languages-popular-cultural-products crossing national boundaries under the auspices of the concept of 'diasporic' Chinese (Sinclair *et. al.*, 2000; Fung and Ma, 2002; Sun, 2002). However, how the national border crossings into different and geographically dispersed ethnic Chinese populations can generate a sense of transnational Chinese community – which I have nominally designated as Pop Culture China (Chua, 2000) - remains largely unexamined. A place and space in which such a possibility is constructed is in Chinese language based newspapers which circulate among the different local and transnational ethnic Chinese communities. In this essay, I want to examine the presentation of news of Chinese-language(s) popular cultures in the entertainment pages of a local Chinese newspaper as one of the many constitutive elements that contributes to the definition and maintenance of one version of transnational 'cultural' Chinese community.

Pop Culture China

In the 1990s, the visible rise of overseas Chinese capital in Asia was often interpreted as a cultural propensity among the ethnic Chinese to engage in business, ignoring the fact that the colonial economic social structure in the host countries had left the Chinese migrants with few opportunities other than to trade. The interpretation

spawned a new confidence in a larger Chinese ‘culture’, which supposedly unites and provides cultural continuities among the overseas Chinese across their geographical dispersion, giving rise to the idea of a ‘cultural China’. In his editorial introduction, entitled ‘Cultural China: the periphery as the center’, to the special issue of *Daedalus*, (Annals of the American Academy of Arts and Science) *The Living Tree: the changing meaning of being Chinese today*, the renowned neo-Confucian scholar, Tu Weiming (1991) surmised that with the rise of the economies of Japan, South Korea Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, these peripheral locations ‘will come to set the economic and cultural agenda for the center [PRC]’. Although not ethnically Chinese, Japan and South Korea were included because they are culturally within the gambit of Confucianism. Behind this concept of ‘cultural China’ is not only the displacement of the PRC as the Chinese cultural center/core but, more importantly, the possibility of the resurrection of a neo-Confucianism that will unite the dispersed overseas Chinese communities.^{iv} The 1997 Asian regional financial crisis that wiped out a huge chunk of the accumulated wealth in the region, including those of ethnic Chinese, put a stop to the triumphal imagination of a Cultural China built on ethnic Chinese capitalism, ideologically based on neo-Confucianism.

Meanwhile, there is no doubting the fact that there is a dense traffic of popular cultural products, in various Chinese languages, crossing borders everyday between locations where ethnic Chinese constitute a significant portion of local populations. The most significant nodes in the corridors of traffic are, of course, PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, reaching into more peripheral ethnic Chinese populations in cities in the Asia-Pacific rim. The flows of Chinese language(s) pop cultural products link these locations into a specialized network of economic exchanges. The transnational aggregated population of consumers makes up the market of the Chinese pop culture industry. Reflecting the size of the market, all the five large global record companies – Polygram, Warner, Sony, EMI and Bertelsmann – have regional studios, production plants and distribution networks in Chinese popular music. The geography and economics of the crisscrossing flows of ethnic Chinese popular cultural productions, products, artistes and consumption across the national boundaries may be discursively constituted as ‘Pop Culture China’.

Pop Culture China and the Decentering of Cultural Chinese Identity

From a ‘cultural’ standpoint, Pop Culture China may be said to be substantively and symbolically without a center, in part, because of the nature of Chinese languages used in the cultural products. For example, in popular music, the primary languages in circulation are Mandarin, Cantonese and Taiwanese/Minan/Hokkien, reflecting the dominant language of the different locations of production and consumption.^v Cantonese predominates for Hong Kong and Mandarin and Minan/Hokkien for Taiwan. Transnationally, in Singapore, songs of each of the three languages have their respective and shared audiences. Similarly in Taiwan, young people would sing *Cantopop* pieces in karaoke lounges with heavy Minan accent. Also, the songs are often produced in more than one Chinese language; for example, a Cantonese and a Mandarin version. Sometimes more than one Chinese language is used in a single song and, increasingly, occasional lines of English lyrics are added.

This multilingualism is also increasingly common in films. In the action movie *Time and Tide (Shun Liu Ne Liu)*, for example, Cantonese and Hokkien (in music), Minnan/Hokkien accented Cantonese and Mandarin, even Spanish, were used. Even when Mandarin is used throughout the film, different accents that reflect different places of origin of the actors are not necessarily erased by a voice over of a ‘standardized’ language. For example, in the internationally acclaimed, award winning film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Wu Hu Jan Long)*, Mandarin of different accents - Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and PRC – were noticed. The use of different languages in films and television programs explains why an ostensibly ‘Chinese’ film/program often also carries ‘Chinese’ subtitles. The dialogue may be in one Chinese language, while the subtitles in another; for example, Cantonese dialogue, standard Mandarin subtitles, or vice versa. It also signals the fact that the film/program has traveled across Chinese linguistic, and often geographical, boundaries.

It should be apparent that in Pop Culture China, Mandarin is not accorded the privileged place as the ‘official’ language of all ethnic Chinese. In addition to the earlier mentioned political realignments of ethnic Chinese to the different nations of adoption or birth, local sentiments have also provided the necessary ideological

resources for constructions of difference between ethnic Chinese of different locations. However, the plurality of 'Chinese-ness' is highly interactive because the different Chinese languages can be made mutually understandable via a common written script (although local variations would occasionally intrude here). Comprehension across the different languages is facilitated by subtitles of written Chinese for those who can read. This common written script engenders and enables spatial and national crisscrossing flow of constantly circulating practitioners, products and consumption of Pop Culture China among the dispersed population.

While different histories of migration and settlement have rendered any claims for a 'shared' past and 'shared' culture spurious there, nevertheless, exists among the globally dispersed ethnic Chinese population, a monetary and cultural economy of popular culture – in production, circulation, dissemination and consumption. Here, a soft-bedrock of shared 'Chinese-ness', of a sense of 'community', without a permanent cultural center and not amounting to a dominant identity for anyone in particular, remains discursively imaginable and materially realizable; indeed, its financial dimension is already observable as part of the global recording industries. This discursive, imaginable and 'realizable' possibility is constantly made manifest and visible through a set of economic and culturally coordinated social institutions whose activities collectively constitutes the 'Chinese entertainment cultural industry'. Among these institutions are the entertainment pages of the daily Chinese language(s) newspapers around the world.

Newspaper Print Space as Transnational Chinese Space

It is by now conventional academic wisdom that 'community' is an imagined phenomenon. In his conceptualization of the 'nation as an imaginary community', Benedict Anderson (1983) has given prominent place to 'print' – its technology and its capitalization – as a vehicle that enables the forging of horizontal and egalitarian ties that constitute individuals as equal citizens. This social science conceptualization of 'community' is one-step removed from the lived social reality of everyday life. In the phenomenological 'natural attitude' of everyday life, the 'community' persistently manifests itself as the environment in which one resides and which both enables and

constraints one's routine activities as a member. Within print media, daily newspapers are of specific importance. They provide the multitude of readers with a sense of 'synchronicity' of inhabiting in the 'same' space and time; a synchronicity which is essential to engendering a sense of identity derived from a presumption of being inhabitants of the 'same' reading community, with specific individual readers remaining unknown. The newspaper page-spaces and their contents enable the idea of community to be imagined, to become 'visible' in a taken-for-granted manner.

In the constitution of a manifest sense of community, the pages of the daily newspaper are proxies for the geographic, physical spaces contained within the boundaries of the community. In principle, this means that all the different geographical spaces within the boundary must be represented on a routine basis – events from all locations should be reported daily without prejudice. This signifies the 'inclusion' of the residents of these spaces as constituents of the 'community' which the totality of the newspaper pages represents. Accordingly, to appear inclusive and democratic, the pages of the daily newspaper are arguably relatively 'homogenized' spaces in which different locations and different segments of the community have the rights to claim spaces. That this is not done is because of the limitation of the page-spaces. The empirical absence or presence in the pages on a particular day is determined, in principle, by the absence or presence of events rather than on the preferences or prejudices of the reporters and editors.

In the relatively homogenous page-space, differences between locations are concurrently diminished and emphasized. Location difference are emphasized by tagging the name of the place to event reported, to mark the boundaries and the geographic space the pages contained, so as to signify the 'inclusiveness' of all the specific locations that are collectively constitutive of the community spatially. Simultaneously, differences must be 'de-emphasized' in order to constitute the equality of all spaces, and by extension the equality of all individual denizens, within the geographically bounded community – no spatial location and no individual is formally more or less important than another within this community boundary. For the newspaper, these simultaneous processes are routine practices of journalism and are observable in the daily edition of the newspaper taken as a whole. They are what ethnomethodologists have noted as 'seen but unnoticed' character of newspaper

reportage (Garfinkel, 1967). These processes are therefore present in the entertainment pages, which are part of the material basis for the constitution of the boundaries of Pop Culture China as a ‘community’. For this essay, I shall use the entertainment pages of the month of May 2004 of Singapore’s national Chinese language newspaper, *Lian He Zao Pao*, as a resource to demonstrate the various relatively stable, if not invariant, features in the ‘practical accomplishment’ of a sense of Pop Culture China.

Pop Culture China as Practical Accomplishment

First, a human community must have physical boundaries, that is, it has its specific geographic spaces. To constitute Pop Culture China, the major locations in which it is produced, distributed and consumed must be present in the reportage to provide a sense of its geographical boundaries. For illustrative example, in the entertainment page of Saturday (29 May 2004) edition of the *Lian He Zao Pao*, the following locations were reported: PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. This is in fact quite typical of the daily entertainment pages in this national Chinese language newspaper. There, inclusion is, of course, a simultaneous exclusion of other places on earth that are not part of the ‘group’ of spaces. The daily repetition of their co-presence on the same page, reinforces the representation of these locations as ‘belonging together’ as a relatively ‘coherent’ geographic-spatial unit in the world. This stable and repetitive presence provides a sense of the important nodes in the Pop Culture China community.

Second, a community is always a community of people not spaces; geography has therefore to be peopled by individuals and groups; entertainers featured in the entertainment pages are often tagged by places of their respective origins. Such tagging is particularly necessary for new and emergent entertainers, who may not be known ‘sufficiently’ to the community of readers. For example, in an article on the occasion of the issuance of the first album by a new singer, Huang Yida, he was referred to as ‘local newcomer’, in *Lian He Zao Pao* (8 May 2004), signaling that he was from Singapore. However, when an entertainer reaches ‘celebrity’ status – a phenomenon to be discussed in the next section - their places of origin can be and are often omitted in reportage because it is presumed to be ‘common’ knowledge among

the readers. Thus, singers Faye Wong and Jay Chou, actresses Zhang Ziyi and Maggie Cheung need not be tagged, except occasionally perhaps as a reminder to regular readers, or what is more likely the case, as background information to a new generation of readers/audience. In the deletion of their origins, the particular entertainment-celebrity simply belongs to the Pop Culture China community itself, without qualifications.

Third, the inhabitants of Pop Culture China must not be static but must be mobile, traversing across the geographical spaces of which they collectively represent and which together constitute the bounded spaces of the community. Thus, performances of an artist from one location in another is a frequently reported event; for example, Singapore's singer, Stephanie Sun Yanzi was reported (29 May 2004) to have stealthily flown to Taipei for dancing classes in preparation of her first solo performance in Quanchou, PRC, in June 2004. Several places 'normally' covered in the transnational traveling of the entertainer-inhabitant – Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taipei - were all present in one report on the singer Faye Wong's press interview in Shanghai, just before her solo performance: she confirmed that she had to miss the Cannes Festival, although she was in the supporting cast of Wong Kai Wai's new film 2046 which was premiered at the Festival; she was asked to comment on her 'proud and rude' attitude during the Golden Melody Awards in Taipei (in which she was awarded the annual Best Female Singer); she had dismissed the question of the rumor of her attempting suicide at an earlier press interview in Hong Kong after returning home from film shooting in Bangkok (15 May 2004).

Major events in the entertainment calendar of Pop Culture China are the most convenient vehicles to present the crisscrossing of the physical terrain of the community by its inhabitant-performers. An example is the annual Golden Melody competition in Taiwan in 2004. Reportages of pre-, during- and post-event covered the 'gathering' of stars, coming from different corners of the Pop Culture China to one location to compete for the awards – not only were the winners worthy of write-ups but the losers were also worthy of mention, particularly their 'magnanimity' or their 'bitterness' in losing (8 and 11 May 2004). Another event-instance in the month of May was the participation of members of Pop Culture China community in Cannes Film Festival (22 May 2004): one photograph of a line of the actors and actresses in

the Wong Kai Wai's much anticipated new film, *2046*, included Zhang Ziyi and Gong Li from PRC, Tony Leung (Liang Chao Wei) and Carina Lau (Liu Jia Ling) from Hong Kong and Takeshi Kaneshiro, the Taiwan-born, Tokyo-based Japanese actor.^{vi} Another had Andy Lau (Liu De Hua) from Hong Kong, Zhang Yimou, the famous fifth generation director from PRC, Zhang Ziyi from PRC and Jing Tseng Wu from Taiwan, for Zhang's new kungfu film, *Si Mien Mai Fu*. The gathering of all these inhabitants of the community on the same page, in words and pictures, constitutes the 'visualized' manifestation of synchronicity and inclusiveness of the community in celebration. In both of these instances, the pictures also make visible the integration of both the geography and personalities in the Chinese-language popular culture industry; thus affirming the very discursive object of this essay.

Fourth, the inhabitant-performers are sometimes 'interactively' presented within a report, in comparison. This serves in part to elaborate a 'shared' value system. A new arrival on the scene may be compared and assessed against the career of a predecessor, thus setting up a sense of continuity, of generational depth and structure. For example, the above mentioned Singaporean male singer, Huang Yida, was immediately likened to his predecessor Sun Yanzi. Both had moved from Singapore to Taipei for final 'polishing' of their singing, public relations and stage performance skills before launching their first album and subsequent career. The meteoric success of Sun could be held as the standard by which the latter, Huang, is to be measured. Appropriately at this early stage of his career, he made some modest self-effacing comments in the face of the high standards of achievement of the former. Such comparison again reinforces the idea of the entertainers being measured by a shared standard of a community (8 May 2004). Similarly, the report on the release of the first album by the new singer from Malaysia (where 20 per cent of the population is ethnic Chinese), Ai Chen, was compared to the Singapore male singer Ah Du (24 May 2004).

The above list of features, found in the newspaper page-space, which partake in the construction and visual 'realization' of Pop Culture China as a 'community' are obviously non-exhaustive. However, to the extent that without them a visualized realization of the imagined community would be unlikely to succeed, they may be considered a minimal list of essential features. In this sense, they are essential but

normally unnoticed textual structuring strategies that ‘realize’ the implicit claim of a newspaper as the printed proxy or representation of the community which it both constructs and serves simultaneously.

Pop Culture China as a ‘community’ is not complete without the reader/audience that these pages assume implicitly. The reader/audience that is outside the pages is thus a part, arguably the more significant part, of the community. Without the reader/audience as a consumer of the cultural products, for which the entertainment pages serve as part of the advertising and marketing effort, there would be no Chinese pop culture industry. This relationship within Pop Culture China between the entertainers and consumers, as mediated by the newspaper and other print media, requires some explication.

Celebrities

In the construction and realization of Pop Culture China, it is the entertainers who are constantly featured in the page-space. In addition to the news about cultural products – new entrants to the scene, new films, new television shows, new music album releases and concert tours – the trials and tribulations of the entertainers are regular features in the entertainment pages. ‘News’ on and about the entertainers are ‘personal’ events that are conventionally labeled as ‘gossips’, such as public misdemeanors like drunkenness or speed driving, ‘secrets’ of pre-celebrity days, ‘unholy’ liaisons, marriages, divorces or other entangled sexual relations. For example, the currently ‘hot’ five-member Taiwanese boy-band, 5566, came in for much attention in the page-spaces of the month of May entertainment pages. One member was reported to not having any problems with dating older women, as he is rumored to be dating an actress who is older than him (13 May 2004). On the same page, another member of the band was reported to have driven a young woman, on the night of the 6th of May, to a convenience store to purchase some contraceptive device (13 May 2004). The same story appeared again two days later (15 May 2004), which in turn carried a report on another member of the band as having used ‘foul’ language on a young male student during an outdoor shoot for a television program. Finally, one of the members was reported to have had a car accident (29 May 2004). This series of consecutive reports in rapid succession on a boy-band in the daily newspaper

was both a reflection of its current popularity and of the entertainment pages' contribution to this popularity itself. This is part of the media process of the manufacturing of entertainers as celebrities, defined here as 'who, through specific personal achievements – their doings, rather than their ways of life – gaining an appearance in the news and concomitantly considerable albeit fleeting public attention' (Langer quoted in Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000:11).

These reports on ethnic Chinese celebrities in the *Lian He Zao Pao* conform closely to two established observations about the relationship between celebrities and their audience or fans. First, as Turner, Bonner and Marshall (2000: 12) point out, '[a]mong the defining attributes of the signifying system which produces celebrity is the dissolving of the boundary between public and private lives'. Second, this blurring of difference is executed with an interest, arising from skepticism towards the media hype and commercial marketing, to 'uncover' the 'real' self of the celebrity in question. The suspicion and the interest to tear away the media veil have been formulated as 'the "oppositional resentment" of the popular audience' (Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000: 13). The entertainment pages thus routinely, concurrently valorize ethnic Chinese entertainers as icons, or more consistent with the language used in Chinese language(s) media, 'idols' in some reports, while in other reports 'exposes' their anti-social, deviant or otherwise iconoclastic behaviors, as if to cut them down to size.

Within Pop Culture China as an imagined community, it is the activities of the textualized-entertainers who serve as the foci of reader-audience-consumer interest. It is these textualized-entertainers who bind the community of readers to themselves and thus 'hold' the community together, rather than the geographic spatial reference of a 'greater China'. Although the readers of the entertainment pages are external to the text, their real presence is assumed in the idea of newspaper as a vehicle of communication. Of course, this population of readers is not a monolithic or consciously organized mass as 'community'. They range from readers who only skim the entertainment pages to those who are fans of specific celebrities, and who would cut out the columns which feature their idols and preserve the cuttings as mementoes in their collections of memorabilia. Regardless of the degree of intensity of involvement with the popular cultural scene or with specific artistes, readers are

consistently drawn into the territories and the lives of its entertainer-citizens of Pop Culture China, manifested in the pages.

Each reader may be isolated from the rest of the readers, without awareness of each other's presence and interests. The sense of 'community' of readers would manifest only 'occasionally', in both senses of 'an occasion' and 'infrequently'. A weak sense of community may be said to manifest when the information in the page-spaces of the entertainment pages emerge as topics of conversation in chance gatherings between friends and/or strangers; the information serves as 'currency' that circulates within the reader-community, however fleeting. A strong sense and an affirmation that there is a 'community' of readers would manifest when a reader discovers and joins a fan club of specific artistes (Soh, 1995). This possibility for community has been succinctly stated by Wark (quoted in Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000: 14), 'We may not like the same celebrities, we may not like them at all, but it is the existence of a population of celebrities, about whom to disagree, that makes it possible to constitute a sense of belonging ... to something beyond the particular culture with which each of us might identify'.

Placing Singapore

I have argued that, from a cultural point of view, Pop Culture China lacks a center because of the use of multiple Chinese languages. It is, however, not without an economic structure. Economics and the cultural practices must therefore be analytically disaggregated. Its economic structure is dependent primarily on demographics of consumers and the production infrastructure. As this paper is concerned with the ethnic Chinese of Singapore and their newspaper, the latter's placing in the economic structure of Pop Culture China should be reflected in both the extent and character of reportage on the conditions of Chinese popular cultures in Singapore.

First, given that *Lian He Zao Pao* is the national Mandarin newspaper of Singapore, it can be expected to cover as much local news as possible. The entertainment coverage should therefore reflect Singapore's position in the Pop Culture China industry. Coverage tends to be focused on events, artists and movements of management personal in local television industry, which is limited to

two local media companies. Within one week (10-15, May 2004), the following items were reported on consecutive days: the local version of American program, 'Bachelorette'; a new local television drama series, 'Durian King'; the resignation of one senior executive from one of the television stations and speculation on whether he would rejoin the other station; the selection of the judges for local version of the television program 'American Idol' and finally, the cross-gender role of a local television actress in a local drama series. In all these instances, the absence of Singapore and Singaporean entertainers in the music and movie scene was obvious, reflecting the absence of Singapore's presence in these industries. On the other hand, Singapore as a place of consumption of Chinese language(s) popular music was reflected in the coverage, in the same week, of concerts by Hong Kong singers, Fung Fei Fei and Yen Ni.

Demographically, relative to PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong, Singapore has the smallest number of ethnic Chinese, thus the smallest consumer market. This has a very significant negative impact on the career paths of Singaporean artistes and cultural production industries. It disadvantages homegrown talents. They have to move to other locations to further their careers. The steady stream of this flow is made apparent by two reports in the entertainment pages of the month: Singaporean actress, Zhang Yi Hua, was reported to be 'striking out in Taiwan' (15 May 2004). Her decision to go to Taiwan points to the limited, if not total absence, of opportunities in Singapore for a career in film. Even if she had chosen to stay in Singapore, her chances of transnational success would still depend on being 'discovered' by consumers, elsewhere in Pop Culture China. This is true, for example, for Singaporean actress Fann Wong, a Singapore television artiste who became a recognizable face in Pop Culture China in the early 1990s, for her role as the 'Little Dragon Girl' in the kung-fu series, 'Return of the Condor', produced by Singapore's state-owned television company, MediaCorp. After the series was broadcasted in Taiwan, she became an instant success there, with cover page appearances in mass circulation magazines, including those that were completely unrelated to pop culture business, such as computer software magazines.

The other is the above-mentioned report on the new singer, Huang, who as mentioned was compared to his predecessor and fellow Singaporean, Stephanie Sun

(Sun Yanzi). Sun had trained with a small music school in Singapore, operated by a songwriter who pens music for Taiwanese and Hong Kong singers. Upon the recommendation of her trainer, Sun signed up with a Taiwan-based record company and went there for a period of time to hone her skills, configure her image and subsequently, to release her first album. Her first album stood on the top of the charts for five weeks in Taiwan, sold more than 300,000 copies there and sold 7,500 copies in the first day of release in Singapore. She has since won the award for the Best New Comer for the year 2000 in Hong Kong and a similar title in Taiwan's Golden Melody awards in 2001. At the same Taiwan awards, Sun's mentor won the Best Composer award for the song he wrote for Sun.^{vii} It was reported that new talents from elsewhere in Pop Culture China are coming to Singapore to be trained by him (11 May 2004). Obviously, as a consequence of its limited consumer-audience and production support system and infrastructure, Singaporean-Chinese songwriters and singers had to make the same journey to Taiwan to claim their places in Pop Culture China, as Taiwan emerges as the production center for Mandarin Chinese pop music. As for movies, few Singaporean artistes have made it to the big screen, except occasionally as support cast, anywhere in Pop Culture China.

Conclusion

It is the argument of this chapter that any conceptualizations of the 'overseas' Chinese population as a 'diasporic' community based on traditional belief systems and institutions, such as Confucianism, is increasingly problematic as knowledge of these systems and institutions atrophied in each successive local-born population throughout the global geographic dispersion of the Chinese population. On the other hand, in locations where the different Chinese languages continue to be used, either exclusively or beside other languages, as lingua franca among the ethnic Chinese population, there have been increasing cultural exchanges and flows of popular culture products, artistes and consumers. This dense traffic of cultural production, circulation and consumption holds within it the potential for the emergence of an imaginable 'pan-Chinese community', which can manifest through different channels, modes and media of communication in different Chinese languages. This potential

and imaginable pan-Chinese community may be discursively designated as Pop Culture China.

One of these media is, of course, the local Chinese language(s)-based newspapers in the different locations where ethnic Chinese communities are found. This essay is an attempt to disclose how Pop Culture China is made 'concrete' and available as a sphere of cultural consumption through the analysis of the page-space of the entertainment pages of the daily Mandarin newspaper in Singapore. The page-space can be analytically treated as the proxy for the geographic spaces contained within Pop Culture China and the entertainers, whose lives and activities are reported daily, constitute its citizens. The other part of the inhabitants of Pop Culture China is the reader/audience of the newspaper cum consumers of the cultural products. The daily entertainment pages place their readers within the geographic boundaries of Pop Culture China, signaled by the various places, particularly the major cities, acting as sign-posts that mark the territory. The occasional conversational exchanges between readers instantiate the presence of a 'community' – at least among the co-present conversationalists - in which the information gleaned from reading serves as the currency of exchange within the 'community'.

Given the occasional character of this 'community', one should not of course attribute any kind of deep 'Chinese' identity to the consumers of the multilingual Chinese cultural products. For example, it is certainly far-fetched to think that a group of Mandarin-cum-Minnan speaking young Taiwanese will reflect seriously on the depth of their ethnic Chinese identity, when they are trying to sing in a small karaoke room in Taipei, one of the Cantonese songs by the PRC-born Mandarin singer Faye Wong. It is, as they say, just entertainment! Furthermore, it is in the character of pop culture consumption to be a passing fad with no deep identity investments on the part of the consumers. In these circumstances, being culturally 'Chinese' and being part of the 'globally-dispersed-ethnic-Chinese-community' is a rather ephemeral identity, and by no means exclusive one, within the constellation of possible identities for each of the consumers in the Chinese language(s) popular cultural industry.

Parenthetically, let me return to Singapore and its Chinese language artistes. Since political independence in 1965, Chinese languages have been in decline as the state actively makes English the language of government administration, business

transactions and the medium of instruction in schools, from primary to tertiary. English has without any doubt become the dominant language for Singaporeans; the laments of the government of the disappearance of Chinese language competence are therefore ironic, if not insincere. Now, with the ascendancy of capitalism, the improved financial conditions of the population and the expansion of consumer culture in East Asia, Singaporean Chinese language artistes have a much greater transnational space for their skills and products. They can now break out of the confines of the island-nation and make cultural connections with artistes throughout Pop Culture China. In spite of the need to go to the other locations where ethnic Chinese are dominant and thus to an expanded consumer market, with good production infrastructure, the chances of popularity and economic success for these Singaporean artistes are much greater than their compatriots who perform in the English language. Singaporean singer, Tanya Chua, who led the Singaporeans in singing national day songs during the 2004 National Day Parade, had been reported to have said that although she preferred to sing in English, she had to sing in Mandarin to earn her living. This is one of the very few instances where there is a reversal of fortune and the subverting of the privilege of English language between the two language-speaking communities. And, as Pop Culture China is a very significant economic sphere that links locations with significant ethnic Chinese populations, the ever entrepreneurial Singaporean state has already begun to ease up on the banning of Chinese languages other than Mandarin in the mass media. This is reflected in the films produced by state-owned enterprise, Raintree Pictures, which use different Chinese languages where appropriate, so as to seek a bigger share of the market in Pop Culture China. Evidently, beyond discursive possibility, there is an economic reality for the configuration of a pop culture China as a 'pan-Chinese community'.

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ⁱ It is important to stress the 'modern political' because it could be argued that imperial China as the 'Middle kingdom' had no national boundaries of its own. Its 'boundaries' might be said to be constituted by the other kingdoms that paid tribute to the Chinese emperor. Under those circumstances, being Chinese was a 'cultural' category rather than a citizenship category.

ⁱⁱ For a critical commentary on the use of the term 'diaspora' to describe the dispersed overseas Chinese population see, Wang Gungwu (2000),

ⁱⁱⁱ The most cogently argued position against interpellation of the self by others into a transnational diasporic 'Chinese' community for political purposes is Ien Ang's resistance against the invitation to condemn 'Indonesian' violence against 'Chinese' during the 1997 riots in Jakarta; see Ang (2001).

^{iv} Empirically, any cursory observation of the Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese population will suggest that a construction of a 'cultural China' based on grand Confucian tradition in the periphery of the PRC is very flimsy. Take Singapore as example, where the learning of Mandarin is compulsory for all primary and secondary ethnic Chinese students, few individuals below the age of thirty, even forty, have ever read any Confucian text in the original. Thus, any presumption of cultural 'depth' in any grand Chinese philosophical traditions is dubious, although familialism remains an abiding part in the everyday life of the Chinese-Singaporeans.

^v Taiwanese, Minnan and Hokkien are one and the same language, although with different local accent. It is called Taiwanese language by Taiwan independenists, called Minnan or Fujian in Mandarin and Hokkien in Singapore.

^{vi} The inclusion of the Japanese actor is a reflection of the possibility of a larger construction of the popular culture sphere in East Asia, which will include Japan and South Korea, see Chua (2004).

^{vii} Singapore seems to contribute more songwriters than singers or actors to pop culture China. In the 1980s, there was a brief flowering of local Mandarin songs, known as *Xingyao* (songs from Singapore). This wave has since ebbed but some of the individuals involved have gone on to write songs for Taiwanese and Hong Kong singers or become performers themselves in Taiwan.