Mainstream Culture Refocused
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CHAPTER SIX

Listening to Popular Poetics
Watching Songs Composed for Television Dramas

This chapter switches gears to focus on a ubiquitous but little noticed phenomenon: songs—especially their lyrics—composed for television dramas. In an age when poetry reading has become a marginalized activity, popular songs, among them those composed for television dramas, have, for better or for worse, become (popular) poetics of the age.\(^1\) Together with the exponential increase in the production of television dramas in the last three decades, the bulk of songs composed for them has also accumulated into a phenomenon of its own. Some of them have become part of the regular repertoire of popular music, often heard independent of their original dramas.\(^2\) Although they have existed under the radar of critics, as part of television drama and popular culture, their musically conveyed expression nevertheless manifests a range of sentiments, indeed the pathos of the age. As such, they offer another point of entry into understanding contemporary Chinese mainstream culture and the social and ideological implications within it. What is sung and how it is sung, whether the lyrics complement or contradict a particular drama’s theme, in what ways they do so, whose voice the lyrics represent, what the music and visual images say about the lyrics, and what some of the recurrent tropes are constitute some of the questions I will explore in the following.

Before addressing these questions in conjunction with specific songs, let me take a step back and offer a brief discussion of what I mean by “popular poetics.” Today, a textual definition of “poetics” has to take into consideration the contributions of recent theoretical developments in literary theory and criticism, especially in terms of understanding how and why definitions of “poetics” have now become part of “theory” itself and why they have been expanded beyond the traditional understanding of poetry. Jonathan Culler, conscious of the influence of poststructuralist theory, for example, defines poetics as “linguistic acts of all kinds.”\(^3\) Speaking of “acts,” Culler points out one aspect of poetics that is especially relevant to my discussion at hand:
A poem is both a structure made of words (a text) and an event (an act of the poet, an experience of the reader, an event in literary history). For the poem conceived as verbal construction, a major question is the relation between meaning and the non-semantic features of language, such as sound and rhythm. How do the non-semantic features of language work? What effects, conscious and unconscious, do they have? What sorts of interaction between semantic and non-semantic features can be expected? . . . For the poem as act, a key question has been the relation between the act of the author who writes the poem and that of the speaker or “voice” that speaks there. . . . In thinking about lyric, it is crucial to begin with a distinction between the voice that speaks and the poet who made the poem, thus creating this figure of voice.4 (emphasis original)

As “act,” Culler continues, the “figure of voice” can be both a personal utterance and an extravagant exaggeration. Lyrics, in the latter case, “strive to be an event.”5 If we expand the distinction between semantic and nonsemantic features to include the use of music and image, we can easily recognize popular songs, including those composed for television dramas, in poetic terms.

When it comes to poetics, additionally, we must note that notions such as “figure” and “metaphor” themselves have been reexamined and understood anew, especially, as Culler states, when literary theory has “embraced the paradoxical conclusion that language is fundamentally figurative and that what we call literal language consists of figures whose figurative nature has been forgotten.” What this means “is not that there is no distinction between literal and figurative but rather that tropes and figures are fundamental structures of language, not exceptions and distortions.”6 Our everyday—literal—language, in other words, can be made “anew” and thereby reexamined when we try to recover the “forgotten” figurative origins within it. In this sense, in studying lyrics that appear to use “literal” language and, as a result, that are read as “ordinary” or conventional (which in Chinese is referred to as da bai hua, a term commonly used to dismiss lyrics in certain kinds of poetry and contemporary popular songs including songs written for television dramas), our reading should become an act that aims at recovering, as it were, the “figurality” that is forgotten and taken to be ordinary. Examining “poetics” in a “popular” sense entails paying attention to what appears to be da bai hua, or literal and everyday language, something that is generally assumed to be the defect of songs composed for television dramas.

“Popular poetics” thus defined can be further understood in conjunction with the notion of “social poetics” developed by Michael Herzfeld, who emphasizes (popular) poetics as a social act, stating that “social poetics recognizes that people deploy the debris of the past for all kinds of present purposes” and
that “social poetics is about the play through which people try to turn transient advantage into a permanent condition in this socially comprehensive sense. It links the little poetics of everyday interaction with the grand dramas of official pomp and historiography to break down illusions of scale.” What is meant by “social poetics” is an approach or a way to understand the dialectics within (and sometimes across different) cultures in ways in which, in Herzfeld's examples, national identities are constantly challenged but nevertheless continue to be evoked and maintained. The fluidity that Herzfeld recognizes in poetic “figure of voice” as social acts echoes the notion of “significance” in the study of poetics, identified by Culler as an act of interpretation that “depends not just on the convention of unity but also on the convention of significance,” and where “the rule is that poems, however slight in appearance, are supposed to be about something important, and therefore concrete details should be taken to have general significance. They should be read as the sign...for important feelings or intimation of significance” (emphasis mine).

Musical Lyrics as a Convention of Significance in Visual Narratives: From Film to Television

Part of the significance in studying the musically conveyed lyrics of songs composed for television drama stems from understanding popular poetics as social acts of meaning making that play with different “conventions of significance.” In reading such songs, therefore, we need to take into consideration the relationship between music, imagery, and lyrics as poetic “figures of voice” that help “intimate signification” in visual narratives. Indeed, in addition to being mediated through words and instead of being read aloud, part of the meaning in songs is organized through a melodic convention of significance and interpretation of the lyrics, including the use of different musical instruments and the different ways in which a song is sung and “stitched” or “sutured” together with images.

A related “convention of significance,” then, is the way in which music and songs were developed in the history of the making of such visual texts as, first, film and, then, television drama. In filmmaking, whose history is much longer than the making of television drama, the use of music or songs has played an important role in meaning making, and, as such, it has long been blended into filmic narratives. Today, even though filmmakers experiment with films without much or any music (as a way of resisting it as a familiar norm of meaning making), music continues to be a major part of cinematic poetics or filmic composition.

Musically, the impact of filmic songs often exceeds the visual texts themselves. Throughout the history of Chinese cinema, for example, many songs
composed for films have become so popular that they continue to be passed on independent of their original films as part of the modern Chinese popular music repertoire.\textsuperscript{9} Songs from films made in the 1930s, especially, have contributed to Chinese culture, including the national anthem of the People’s Republic of China and other popular musical classics.\textsuperscript{10} Films from the Mao era and the early 1980s, additionally, contributed to the development of a musical tradition, combined with Western, Soviet, and Chinese styles of singing. Within this “convention of significance,” with its underlying ideology of modernization that today is better than yesterday and tomorrow is going to be better than today, filmic songs are always upbeat and their lyrics grandiose and idealistic. Since the late 1980s, however, the role of music or songs in film has significantly changed along with filmmaking as a cultural practice. Other than such early experimental films as \textit{Yellow Earth} and \textit{Red Sorghum}, the “fifth-generation” directors and their younger counterparts appear to have “purged” songs from most of their films.\textsuperscript{11} With the decline of the popular impact of the film industry in China, contemporary Chinese culture has witnessed nearly two decades in which there has been an absence of songs popularized by films (with the exception of the one from \textit{Titanic} and a few from Hong Kong films).\textsuperscript{12}

During the same period, television dramas came to replace films as a major cultural outlet for which songs are written and performed, and through which they are heard and spread. Songs composed for television dramas emerged along with the socioeconomic changes that both inform and are informed by changes in cultural production in general and in visual-narrative-related “conventions of significance” in particular. Indeed, in China today, along with the rise in the dominance of television drama as a major popular visual form of storytelling, television dramas have become the only visually featured narratives that have continued to include in their total composition one or two songs.\textsuperscript{13} In television drama, early examples of musically rendered popular poetic “acts” or “events” include songs from such Hong Kong dramas as \textit{Huo Yuanjia}, \textit{Chen Zhen}, and \textit{Old Shanghai}, as well as ones composed for such mainland productions as \textit{Journey to the West}, \textit{Ji Gong}, and \textit{Yearnings}. The film, \textit{Still Life}, which I discuss in Chapter 1, used music from some of these well-known dramas to enhance a sentiment, indeed a paradoxical sense, of nostalgia and hope (against hope). If we take a closer look at the context in which these early dramas came about and emerged as “cultural events” and also at the ways in which their music is reevoked and employed in a different context as in \textit{Still Life}, we are able to see the extent to which the songs and music composed for these dramas can function sociopoetically to effect additional meanings in face of a new social reality.

In the case of the three Hong Kong dramas, their popular reception on the mainland in the early 1980s had more to do with the timing of their broadcast
than their quality as television drama. China in the early 1980s was hungry for anything from outside. That cultural hunger conditioned the development of a “convention of significance” that helped the rapid spread of all kinds of imported cultural products, among them television dramas (and the songs that came along with them). The cultural sentiment of the time (in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution) was actively “stitched” into the reception of both the visual narratives and the music and lyrics of the songs composed for them in such a way that they continue to be remembered as a cultural event symbolizing an important moment of recent Chinese history. As such, their signification can be reevoked and made anew with additional social and ideological implications when the same songs are heard in a different context and shown from a different perspective.

In the case of *Yearnings*, the first broadcast of this fifty-episode-long narrative in 1990 helped mark the sentiment of another moment of change in contemporary China and did so, among other things, with two songs that have since become popular classics: “Haoren yisheng ping’an” (literally, “a good person deserves a life that is safe and sound”; “Bless Good-Hearted People” hereafter) and “Youyou suiyue” (literally, “those long years that are life”; “Long Ago Years” hereafter). The popularization of the drama became a cultural event, marking the turning point between the decade of the 1980s and that of the 1990s within the reform era. Inevitably, the poetics of these two songs became an event of sorts themselves.

The year 1990, when *Yearnings* first appeared on television, signaled symbolically the end of the 1980s after the turbulent year of 1989. Chinese intellectuals as a whole found themselves at a crossroads from which different groups were to embark on different paths, including some who would join with other forces to stake out a space in popular culture. As mentioned in the Introduction, with the involvement of a group of well-known writers including Zheng Wanlong and Wang Shuo in the creation and production of *Yearnings*, and with this first Chinese fifty-episode “indoor television drama” (*daxing shinei ju*) receiving unprecedented public fanfare and generating considerable controversy, the creation of this drama marked the moment at which many writers and intellectuals were to turn to popular culture for expression. Indeed, it is not far-fetched to suggest that, as a cultural event in which a group of writers joined efforts in creating a television drama, the success of the drama *Yearnings* signaled the end of a phase and the beginning of another within the reform era. On the cultural front, what was ending was the so-called *wenhua re*, or “culture fever,” an intellectual movement that attempted to be another round of (modern) Enlightenment. What was beginning was the shifting of writers and intellectuals in their
role as “social actors” into dispersed positions, with some entering the domain of popular culture, including the making of visual narratives such as television drama. The sentiment expressed by the two songs in Yearnings helped mark such a shift and a turn to popular culture in search of meaning and value.

Sung by two of the best-known singers of the time, Mao Amin and Li Na, the two songs—their lyrics and melody—help set not just the mood of the entire drama but, more important, the poetic tone, indeed a “yearning” sentiment, of its theme. With one song placed at each end of an episode and being repeated in each new episode, these songs, like most television-drama songs, function as a modern version of the commentaries found in traditional theater, storytelling, and vernacular fiction in which the third-person narrator surfaces to offer, through poetic lines, commentaries and expressions of moral inquiry beyond the melodramatic narrative of the story itself. We hear such lines in the song “Bless Good-Hearted People” (roughly translated; the emphasis is mine) as “who will drink with me; in the years that we know each other, wherever we are, close or far away, it is this feeling (ci qing) that warms human existence”;

or in the song “Long Ago Years”: “throughout life, we search far and low, yearning for a genuine way of being; who can tell me, if I was right or wrong... let us put the past in the past; let us keep the genuine feelings (zhen qing) and start anew.” Together with the musical composition and imagery, these lyrics help bring out the theme of the drama (dian ti), indicating that what is being yearned for is zhen qing, or true feelings, which in essence means “genuine kindness.” This repeatedly expressed yearning for “genuine kindness” thus became a sentimental figurative voice of the time in which Yearnings was conceived, produced, and received, marking the beginning of yet another change that was quietly but surely occurring in Chinese society and culture.

Along with this change, popular culture became an arena where struggles for ideas and values take place. The success of Yearnings and the two songs composed for it signaled the beginning of a shift in the relationship between intellectuals and “popular culture” and a change in cultural production that would, in turn, effect changes in popular poetic “conventions of significance.” Expressed through melodies that were composed to enhance the “yearning” sentiment and were carried nationally first through television and later through radio and other electronic means, independent of the drama itself, these songs were to become part of contemporary Chinese popular and social poetics whose “figure of voice” can be made anew whenever it is reevoked at the “right” moment (as in Still Life, for example).

In what follows, I will focus on two major poetic themes—that of “history” and that of a sense of (seemingly sentimental) “longing”—one that recurs
mainly in history/emperor dramas and the other, in all of the other subgenres, such as anticorruption, family-marriage, and youth dramas, that I have studied in this book. I will explore the lyrical and musical deployments of poetic conventions, the question of figure of voice, the ways in which these poetic “acts” either reinforce or destabilize conventional meanings, and the ways in which we can understand their implications. After thus discussing each group of the lyrics, I will briefly consider the “suturing” effect of such popular poetics and the ways in which to understand such effects within the larger context of social transformation.

The Trope of History: Singing a Modern Chinese Ambivalence

One thing that characterizes songs composed for television dramas is that, unlike ordinary pop songs, songs composed for television dramas convey meanings that are simultaneously abstract and specific or detailed. They are part of a specific narrative for which lyrics are supposed to be composed accordingly, and they are abstract in the sense that some kind of general significance is implied. On the surface, especially when it comes to such subgenres as the history drama, songs—lyrics and music—are composed to correspond to the genre. Most of the emperor dramas (of the zheng shuo, or serious, type), for example, open to a symphonic orchestra that suggests something grandiose and serious, and they are often accompanied by lyrics that are composed with “history”—or historical sentiment—as their main theme. On a first-impression level, the lyrics, music, and images—the three components of television-drama songs—are all synchronized to set the tone for the drama to come (or to enhance what has just been shown). What they “do,” in other words, follows a familiar structure of expectations that habitually associates the meaning of history with what is grandiose, what is magnificent, what is violent, and what is “sublime.” They strive, in other words, to be an “event,” which, in the case of the best-known emperor dramas, fits their theme. But more interesting in all of this is the fact that the imagery, music, rhythm, and other nonsemantic features complicate the words or lyrics; the “figures of voice,” in other words, complicate both semantic and nonsemantic meanings.

In Chapter 2, I identify the television glut in representations of emperors as both a form and an act of “re-collecting,” not so much collecting “history” as collecting modern and contemporary imaginaries of “history.” When it comes to the songs composed for these dramas, one hears additional “figures of voice” that complicate such acts of re-collecting. To identify these figures of voice, let me first bring in the television drama version of the well-known historical novel Sanguo yanyi (Romance of the three kingdoms), a drama that can be con-
sidered as an earlier version of what was to become the subgenre of the history/emperor drama (of the “serious” type). Adapted from a well-known and long popularized “history” novel, the television drama version was yet another addition to the versions of this legendary work of literature. Put on the air in 1994, a few years before the onslaught of emperor dramas on television, this eighty-four-episode serial was expensive in terms of production costs and expansive in scale. Part of the extravaganza is the music composed for the drama, which, together with the imagery of fire, battlefields, and legendary figures, sets in motion the drama that tells the stories of well-known historical figures, their personalities, their relationships, and their personal and political skills that are imbued with the contradictory implications regarding heroism that Romance of the Three Kingdoms is well known for. In this sense, the adapted drama continues the narrative tradition of the novel, which is more about human relationships and human drama played out in a historically known period than the history of the period itself.

What is interesting, however, is that the song composed for the drama has something to say about (the concept of) “history” itself:

On and on rolls the Yangtse River, charging eastward
Like heroes, billows upon billows they contend but
All fallen in the end: gain or lose, right or wrong
Everlasting are only the green hills
Time and again the sun sets lonely in the west

Fishermen and woodsmen still comb the beach, hair grey
Watching the autumn moon and spring wind
Life’s happiness lies: a wine jar, good company
Past events still hang on the lips of people present.20

“History,” as the lines suggest, may be more than stories of the past that people chat about in their leisure time. Like traditional storytellers’ opening remarks, these lines tell the viewer not to take the dramas of these characters too seriously; compared with the natural world, human glories come and go.

Juxtaposed in contrast to the “natural world,” “human glories” become a metaphor for “(human) history” and are set up in problematic terms as something not to be taken seriously, especially when seen in relation to the natural world. At the same time, given the serious tone of the music and imagery that accompany these words, this contrast reveals what I would call an ironic double figure of speech, which is commonly used as a rhetorical device in poetics; in suggesting that there is no need to take past events seriously, these lyrics
in essence are saying precisely the opposite: they are asking in what ways we should take “history” seriously and based on what should we do so.

This ironic double figure of speech, in other words, is a rhetorical marker through which we can explore what these few lines actually say. Ostensibly, by evoking the Yangtze River, the green hills, the autumn moon, and the spring wind, and by juxtaposing the ephemeral nature of human beings’ earthly concerns including their heroic deeds with the everlasting cycles of the natural world, these lines evoke a familiar (Chinese?) cultural convention that resorts to a sense of irony by placing human desires against the long view of history. Juxtaposing “nature” and the “human world,” the speaker is essentially asking: compared with the natural world that tirelessly continues its cycle, isn’t it laughable that humans fail to realize that they are just mere mortals in that world? But if we understand this question as a double figure of speech, its real implications lie elsewhere. To explore this issue further, let me continue with a few additional textual examples drawn from emperor dramas.

The four “serious-type” emperor dramas mentioned in Chapter 2, Emperor Kangxi, The Yongzheng Court, The Qianlong Court, and Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, are all accompanied by one or two songs. In the lyrics, one hears “commentaries” on the meaning of those “pasts” that are at times ironic and at times entirely serious. On the one hand, past glories, no matter how magnificent they once were, are now understood as always destined to end; on the other hand, they are defiantly celebrated even though they appear to have indeed ended up in the “dustbin of history.” This double figure of speech with regard to history occurs differently in different emperor dramas, with emphasis falling on one side or the other, indicating the existence of different perspectives in the representation of past emperors. In the last lines of the opening song for The Qianlong Court, we hear:

Endless stretches of wealth
Suddenly disappear like the setting sun, like the tail end of smoke
Like a dream are those one hundred years of efforts for prosperity
In a split of second, it rises and falls.21

The sentiment underscores the drama’s emphasis on the ways in which a seemingly prosperous time under the reign of Qianlong gradually weakened and the ways in which human weaknesses contributed to the decline of a prosperous age. Whether or not the lines are intended to warn against present pursuits of wealth and glory, this is a historical view not unfamiliar to most Chinese. By supporting the theme of this particular drama, these lyrics echo the lyrical sentiment found in the song for the drama Romance of the Three Kingdoms, both
emphasizing the ephemeral nature of “human glories” but both also asking the same implied question: in what ways should we take history seriously?

By comparison, the opening song for *The Yongzheng Court* strikes more of a celebratory and defiant tone:

In judging heroes from the past, success or failure
Who is to say they are in the know
Thousands of years of crimes and accomplishments
Let others judge
Against all odds you travel alone
Wanting to leave behind a strong country
Still, you cannot stop a bad name from being attached to you when you are gone.

People say the worst suffering in life is human suffering
You still have no regrets
People say those who win over hearts win over earth under heaven
Let us see who rules over it.22

Even though the original Chinese version does not have pronouns such as “you” or “they,” some kind of a pronoun is in fact implied. In this translation, I have made the “speaker” an interlocutor speaking directly to the emperor Yongzheng, the subject of this drama. But one might also make the speaker assume the position of “I,” in which case the speaker would be the (imagined) voice of the emperor speaking defiantly toward a historical record that has not been particularly kind to him. The changeable or unstable nature of the pronouns in this case is interesting. On the one hand, using “you” or “I” changes the identity of the speaker in the lyrics. But, on the other hand, the different pronouns do not necessarily suggest there is a different “figure of voice” in each speaker. To be sure, with the speaker addressing the emperor as “you,” a modern individual is singing about Yongzheng, the emperor, wondering what he might say after more than two hundred years, during which time he has come to be known as a cruel and ruthless ruler. It is a sympathetic voice that echoes the one in the lyrics of the song in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*—historical judgment is always subject to change, coming and going in cycles beyond the control of mere mortals. With the speaker speaking from the position of “I,” the voice becomes a defiant one. Either way, it does not really change the implications of the lyrics. When sung in the Chinese original, neither “you” nor “I” is specified; the “speaker” in effect sings with both of these voices implied. The real signification here lies with the figure of voice. But before I explore the question
of figure of voice in these songs, let me bring in one more example, from the 2004 hit *Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty*, without which my discussion here would not be complete.

The lyrics of its opening song go as follows:

> In the midst of a long rolling river, you are a little drop
> Among the rolling mountains, you are a unique peak
> You hide loneliness in the cracks of dark clouds
> You write dreams on the sky and grassland
> You warm the earth by burning yourself to ashes
> Dancing fires reveal your last innermost feelings.  

Unlike the song in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in which nature is set up in contrast to the human world, in these lines the “everlasting” nature of the natural world is employed as a metaphor for human history, and, as such, the natural world carries with it a sense of glory, of something sublime. Unlike the ironic sentiment expressed in the two examples given earlier, these lyrics deploy nature to personify a “glorious” past. How do we understand this (albeit subtle) shift in voice with regard to (representations of) China’s past? Is there still an ironic double figure of speech at play in these lines? My answer is yes.

Words and terms like “loneliness,” “dream,” “ashes,” and “dancing fires,” for example, continue to suggest the ephemeral nature of human glories. Even if they are “written” into history (symbolized by the natural world), from the long point of view of history, such glories are still like “a little drop” in a long rolling river. At the same time, what is powerfully written into history is not so much glory as rather universal human feelings and failures. Hence, “glories” have become part of the dark clouds, sky, and grassland, and, indeed, the “debris of history” accumulated like ashes burned from human desires that are constantly dancing like fires. Here, the ironic double figure of speech has become more complicated, suggesting an ambivalent (more than ironic) point of view toward history.

This ambivalent point of view is not particularly new in relation to modern Chinese history. In fact, it is largely a product of modern Chinese history. As such it can explain why ambivalence abounds in critics’ responses to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century emperor-drama craze in general and to the drama *Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty* in particular. Some view the drama as the latest Chinese display of cultural conservatism and nationalism, while others, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, celebrate the drama for signaling a “new historical consciousness,” a consciousness, I suppose, that may not be imbued with as much ambivalence. Most critics outside of China, I dare say, would tend to feel uncomfortable with any kind of display of the glory of past (Chinese)
rulers, let alone the elaborate and extravagant displays found in emperor dramas. In this sense, one might suggest that there is something provocative in the phenomenon of emperor dramas that can even generate a moment of cultural intimacy among critics. These critical responses, positive or negative, however, indicate less about “Chinese history” than about historical point of view, or historical consciousness, and its contemporary implications. What is “contemporary” within the Chinese context is the ever-present specter of the “Chinese quest for modernity,” by which I, following Marshall Berman’s definition, refer to the collection of modern Chinese experiences and all the attempts or efforts at trying to make sense of them.24

From the ironic double figure of speech identified earlier to the seemingly earnest tone in this last song, there continues a shared sense of history whose manifestation is ambivalently modern. Manifested in the ambivalence in question are the tensions within this collection of modern experiences and intellectual endeavors in which the notion of history itself and the question of how “historical China” should be understood and how it relates to modern China continue to be contested, both in China and elsewhere. Put differently, what we actually hear in these songs, returning to the ironic double figure of speech described earlier, is yet another moment of intimation of a modern (Chinese) sentiment, an ambivalent one to be exact, that characterizes part of modern Chinese experience.

Even though in the West there is a habitual reflex to dismiss such sentiment as potentially nationalistic and therefore conservative (Western media, for example, tend to discount nationalist sentiment in China by attaching the label of “official” propaganda to it), I would argue that this ambivalence manifests more than a desire for past glories or a desired national identity. It is also a cultural act of negotiation with the dominant “modern” historicist or teleological view of history within which (premodern and modern) “Chinese history” simply has not been able to find a place to sit well.25 The popular poetics expressed in these lyrics demonstrate, albeit in their limited ways, yet another attempt at presenting history and its understanding in a different light. If anything structurally “Chinese” is reinforced by the poetic act of double figure of speech in these lyrics, it is the ways in which they intimate a nonlinear, circular, and ephemeral sense of history. Indeed, the poetic acts and poetic voices, though realized through familiar conventions of signification (such as evoking tropes of nature, evoking a Daoist sensibility about being resigned to nature’s forces, and evoking a sense that the universe is cyclical by nature), nevertheless point the question of modern Chinese experience back to its own historicity. Measured against the linear and teleological view of history, where does the significance of Chinese history lie? Why does it matter? Or, for that matter, does it matter at all?
The lyrics of the songs indicate an uncertainty in relation to these questions. The trope of history figured in these songs continues to manifest uncertainty and ambivalence, once again, not really about history as such but about how history is perceived and evaluated. In this sense, so long as China’s path to modernity continues to be littered with this kind of uncertainty, one can expect more such ambivalent singing of “history.”

The Social Poetics of Shang Gan (Sentimental Longing) in the Midst of Roaring Economic Development

The lyrics discussed above, when musically rendered in conjunction with images, convey a touch of emotion that is sentimental. In the age of postmodernism, sentimentality has been discredited for its alleged nostalgic psychic orientation that is deemed conservative by nature. Perceived from this perspective, the songs I examine in this section could easily be dismissed as being even more sentimental than the ones discussed above. And yet, although modernist and postmodernist aesthetics have rejected sentimentalism, its persistent presence in popular culture in general and in Chinese television drama in particular is worth noting and still demands explanation. In song after song composed for dramas ranging from anticorruption dramas to family-marriage dramas to youth-drama subgenres, we hear lyrics filled with emotions of longing, hope, or despair and about loss, times past, loneliness, love, and friendship. Depending on the context, such lyrics function, sociopoetically, as cultural expressions that, to be sure, resort to “melodramatic conventions” to question social reality, but, precisely because of that, also help reveal where the social tensions and cultural uncertainties reside from which such sentiments stem, informed by a range of layered cultural and historical legacies. It is with this understanding that I turn to songs from a number of different subgenres that are composed and sung in a range of different styles. Despite their stylistic differences, however, they tend to share what can be identified as a sentimental figure of voice.

Earlier I mentioned the songs in Yearnings and identified the sentiment for “genuine feelings” expressed in those songs. Let me pick up where I left off on this point and explore other songs that evoke a similar sentiment. First, from the opening song of Yingxiong wuhui (Heroes have no regrets, 1996), an anticorruption and anticrime drama:

Besides true feelings, what else can I give you?
Besides kindness, what else do I love you for?
Besides courage, what else can I leave behind?
Besides heartache, what else can I forget?
Dreams allow us to choose, again and again
And also make us miss one another, again and again
True feeling keeps us together
Besides having no regrets, what else can we say? \(^{27}\)

In relation to the drama, this song refers to the failure of a love relationship between the male protagonist and his girlfriend because the latter does not want him to continue to work as a policeman and yet he, after leaving the police force for a while to work in business, decides to return to the force. Their relationship fails, but in these lyrics we hear, again, the yearning for “true feelings” and “genuine kindness” that human beings both long for and are prone to destroy. A relationship that is difficult to realize in real life “poetically” becomes the basis for a sentiment where “true feelings” reside. The times may have changed in that corruption, crimes, and danger abound, but human longings have not changed. “True feelings,” however, are never enough in the face of the complexities of the social world. This song reveals a contradictory feeling of wanting to have no regrets for one’s choice while feeling helpless in the face of its consequences. What prevents the lyrics from being too sentimental is an insistence on recognizing that which is positive in face of loss, thereby preventing the figure of voice from being dominated by a sense of self-pity.

A second example is the only song composed for *Xingjing bense* (Good cops and bad cops, 1999), another anticorruption and anticrime police drama:

At dawn on my way, nothing can keep me from stepping forward
Kind-hearted people wish me good luck
Dusk falls like a curtain
But I am not lonely
I am willing to suffer even more
I surge forward in wind and rain, looking for the road ahead
I must conquer this darkness; that is why I will not give in
I must conquer this darkness; that is why I must not cry. \(^{28}\)

In these lines, we hear from someone who is lonely and faces a “dark curtain,” but he must conquer both loneliness and darkness regardless. We hear a mixture of despair and courage that, ironically, reminds me of the imagery of history, as described by Walter Benjamin, in which history “flairs up briefly,” shedding light on what underlies it (in this case, the mixture of despair and courage). \(^{29}\) Although narratively this drama focuses on the struggle between a group of “good cops” and their corrupt superior officer, the formers group’s eventual triumphant is not expressed in this song. What is revealed, rather, is
once again a seemingly sentimental feeling about an individual living in a not so pretty social reality who is still determined to press ahead.

The third example comes from Yu Guanyin (Jade goddess of mercy, 2003), a Hai Yan (youth) drama discussed in Chapter 4:

Please remember what I said on those wintry nights
Please leave me my hope expressed under the moonlight
Please let me kiss your name
Please let me remember your kindness deep in my heart
I look up at the starry sky
Calling out to heaven for you to appear.30

There is a permanent sadness to the longing expressed in these lyrics because, at the end of the drama, the male protagonist knows that not only will he never be together with the woman he loves, he also will never know where she is and what her life is like. This is the case not because his loved one has died or married someone else but because, after many tragedies, she chooses to become an undercover police officer assuming a different identity. Metaphorically, her change of identity symbolizes an unconventional loss for the young male protagonist, who is yet to come to terms with what his loss means. Once again, the sentiment of longing voiced in the song points to a social reality that is both harsh and unrelenting, and also to psychological challenges individuals have to confront.

In addition to the lyrics, the sentimental feeling in each of these three songs is expressed musically in what is generally referred to as tongsu yinyue, or popular music. This musical convention of significance contributes to both the ways these songs convey a sentiment and the ways they are received. Its origin can be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s when Deng Lijun, a Taiwanese singer, was introduced to China and her songs were popularized there, when Taiwanese “university campus songs” (Taiwan xiaoyuan gequ) were all the rage, and when Su Xiaoming, the first Chinese to try to sing in the tongsu manner, caused controversy.31 Each of these constitutes part of the “cultural event” of the development of tongsu gequ, or pop songs—both in terms of music and lyrics—in the early post-Mao era. With music thus going “light” and lyrics becoming more vernacular, this cultural event in the early 1980s carried with it a “mind-altering” cultural function and ideological implications.32 Despite some initial discomfort and resistance on the part of the elite, by the 1990s, the popular style of singing had gone mainstream. All the songs that I have just mentioned and most songs from television dramas are composed in the style of pop music. The speaker in these songs often assumes the position of “I,” talk-
ing directly to someone, baring his or her heart and revealing emotions with a touch of sentimental longing.

As my interpretations above indicate, the “sentimentality” in these songs is of a contemporary variety. It expresses a sense of longing, to be sure, but there is not a particularly strong indulgence in sentimentality. Mixed with the longing is hope and a determination to move forward regardless. Past and present, good and bad, darkness and brightness, loneliness and togetherness, kindness and indifference are not necessarily paired in binary oppositions but accepted as things that coexist in life whether one likes it or not. At the same time, there is a strong desire for what is “good,” what is “true,” and what is “genuine.” The feeling behind this is not Pollyannaish but is symptomatic of a society uncertain of its values and struggling to reclaim acceptable ones.

This uncertainty is most interestingly manifested in the song—lyrics and music—composed for *The Police Chief* (2002). I discuss aspects of the drama in Chapter 3, but for the sake of this discussion, let me briefly review the story. Zhong Liu yi, a supposedly highly intelligent criminal who has had a rags-to-riches life experience, vows, as an act of vengeance, to corrupt all officials who may be potentially useful in his future business dealings. When the new police chief arrives in town, Zhong tries his usual scheme but fails. From then on, the two are locked in a struggle until Zhong finally has had too many run-ins with the law and arranges to have himself killed by, of all people, his girlfriend, who is also the daughter of the police chief. She defies her father and first allows herself to be seduced by Zhong and then falls in love with him. The moral ambiguity throughout the story of this drama is expressed in the theme song of the drama as well. Sung by the actor who plays Zhong Liuyi, the lyrics go as follows:

Is there a past event still worth remembering?
Memory continues to pierce through my aching heart
Is there still a past event that I can wave away?
Silence has taught the lonely you to find excuses to forget
Are there still friends to trust?
Wishing time could be reversed so that I could find that first genuine love
Is there still gentleness I can feel?
A kind heart I can still trust and a promise worth remembering.

No complaints, no regrets
True love never changes
Loyalty is my life’s companion
Even if there are dangers ahead and I am lost in a fog
A future hand is holding you
You will continue your endless journey ahead, do not stop
I have nothing else to desire. 

This is another example of lyrics in which the speaker expresses a longing for something that exists only in memory. Who is the speaker here? If it is Zhong Liuyi, the sentiment expresses a contrast to his portrayal in the drama. There, he is a ruthless criminal full of hatred and vengeance. But the drama represents him with a twist: it reveals, as part of its plot, why a fine young man ended up being so ruthless and so vengeful. This background information is particularly worth noting for it is related to what is expressed in the song.

Those familiar with contemporary Chinese history know the significance of the resumption of college entrance examinations in 1977 shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Zhong belongs to the first group of young (and not so young) people who passed the examinations and entered college. The drama specifically notes that, unlike most of those people, Zhong is originally from the countryside (as opposed to “sent-down youth,” who were originally from cities). Even though much of this information remains in the background of the story, all of it is significant in that it leads to the “life-changing” moment when Zhong is betrayed by his first love, a woman who comes from the family of a high-ranking official. Her family connections help him start out in business. In historical terms, this refers to early liaisons in post-Mao China between power and capital: individuals connected with a level of power enjoyed opportunities to start commercial or business ventures (in the 1980s). In the drama, Zhong becomes part of such a venture thanks to his girlfriend, only to be sacrificed by her kind of people when their illegal business transactions are discovered. Zhong is persuaded to take the blame and is sentenced to jail. After he is released from prison, Zhong strives to become rich so that he can help the poor but also seeks revenge. Thus, we are given moral ambiguity: he helps children in the countryside, on the one hand, and schemes to corrupt as many government officials as possible, on the other. The social implications of this moral ambiguity surface in the lyrics of the song.

Reading the lyrics against this narrative background, we sense something beneath the thin cover of sentimental-sounding longing. That is, the “sentimentality” expressed in this song is socially rather than individually oriented. When we situate what appears to be personal—such as “memory continues to pierce through my aching heart,” “silence has taught the lonely you to find excuses to forget,” “wishing time could be reversed so that I could find that first genuine love,” and “a kind heart that I can still trust and a promise worth
remembering”—within the context that I have just described, the figuraiity of these sentimental-sounding terms becomes less “sentimental” and more critical. What is “remembered,” in Zhong Liuyi’s case, is not something to be nostalgic about; the figuraiity of his memory denotes a mixture of past events that is not easily absorbed or easily forgotten.

Such sentiments are repeatedly expressed in songs written for other anticorruption dramas including Black Money, Absolute Power, and Red Carnations. In Black Money, for example, the lyrics of the opening song read as if someone is repenting, wishing for life to start over differently and yet knowing that all that has been done will remain part not only of his or her memory but also of his or her reality. In the lyrics, the line “give me one more chance” is repeated six times, followed by “I thought I could” four times. It is not clear which character in the story this song is written for specifically; it could be written for any or all of the characters and, by extension, for all who care to listen.

Mixing regret, longing, and the knowledge that what is done cannot be changed or forgotten, these lines echo the sentiment and criticism that I have identified in all of the songs I have discussed here. Looking at these songs together with other songs in family-marriage and youth dramas in which the longing for love and the regret for lost love are strongly expressed, one cannot but sense that the popular poetics in contemporary China is preoccupied with a sense of loss in the face of a society undergoing rapid change. But the predominant sentiment expressed through the seemingly sentimental longing is, once again, nostalgia juxtaposed with hope.

This dialectic of hope constitutes part of the continuing sociocultural search for meaning and values. At the same time, this dialectic—along with the tensions, contradictions, and political implications within it—is symptomatic of the suturing function of the mainstream culture. Sentimental longings are critical of the present, but, depending on how such emotions are rendered, their expressions can at the same time be informed by a sense of helplessness. It is this sense of helplessness that entails an implicit acceptance of the reality that can be manipulated by different social and ideological forces. For further understanding of televisual songs and their poetic and ideological implications, more remains to be watched, listened to, debated, and examined. Stay tuned.