Once Upon a Time in China: The Wong Fei-hung Theme Song as a Transnational Anthem

By Colin McGuire

This piece was awarded the T. Temple Tuttle Prize of the SEM Niagara Chapter. A full open-access version of McGuire's prize-winning work has been published by Ethnomusicology Forum, the link can be found at the bottom of this post. Still, we would like to recognize this piece in its original conference paper form for its success, and thus have included both the original paper abstract and a relevant video link provided by the author.

Abstract: Master Wong Fei-hung (?????, 1847–1924) was a southern Chinese martial arts hero who, starting in the mid-twentieth century, became associated with a folk song called “On the General’s Orders” (???). Over one hundred Hong Kong movies and television serials forged the connection by using that tune as Master Wong’s theme music. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s concept of unisonance, as well as Martin Daughtry's and Sue Tuohy’s work on national anthems, this paper explores ways this song acts as a (trans)national anthem. The research is based on long-term fieldwork with Toronto, Canada’s Hong Luck Kung Fu club (????) and complementary work in Hong Kong, combined with song analysis in relation to the cinematic legend of Wong Fei-hung. Director Tsui Hark’s internationally successful film series, Once Upon a Time in China (1991–1994), featured James Wong’s “A Man Should Better Himself” (?????), which set lyrics to the melody of “On the General’s Orders.” This further appropriated the folk song for Wong Fei-hung and brought the tune into the realm of popular music, where it has become a karaoke staple. The themes associated with Tsui’s Master Wong have a deep resonance in Chinese culture and undergird the signature song’s importance: negotiation of tradition in the face of modernity, evolution of culture under foreign influence, and resistance to domination by other groups. The self-strengthening message of the Wong Fei-hung song fosters a sense of imagined community as a folk song that has become a transnational anthem crossing the borders of Guangdong province, Hong Kong, Macau, Greater China, and into the diaspora.

Link to "A Man Should Better Himself" with Chinese characters, Cantonese romanization, and English translation:

A full version of McGuire's prize-winning work has been published by Ethnomusicology Forum and can be found here [1].

Source URL: https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/19/piece/793

Links:
[1] https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2018.1463549