

THE SONG OF THE DRAGON: FRED HO AND THE FORMATION OF AN “AFRO-ASIAN NEW AMERICAN MULTICULTURAL MUSIC”

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I am trying to create a new American opera that appeals to today's youth – particularly inner city youth – who think of opera as something conservative and exclusionary [...] I at least want my artistic/theatrical concept to be more exciting and captivating, and for the martial arts to demolish the aesthetics of grade-B action films, boring Broadway and moribund modern dance.

—Fred Ho¹

Fred Ho's *Journey Beyond the West: The New Adventures of Monkey* (1996) was an “Afro Asian score for ballet,” an eclectic brew of high and low culture as well as Afrodiasporic and Asian American cultural elements. Moreover, as he admitted, “not only [was *Journey Beyond the West*] the first Chinese American ballet with a libretto sung totally in (Mandarin) Chinese, but more significantly, [it included] a music score that defied categorization as either Chinese or ‘jazz’ music but was a unique and unusual hybrid” (“Kreolization” 142). Creating new music, however, is not merely an aesthetic exercise for the self-taught baritone saxophonist and composer. As he explains, in order to create new music “there has to be a new type of ensemble, i.e., players directed into new musical and social relationships” (“Kreolization” 142). New music, new hybrids, new social, and musical relations—this was political as well as cultural “kreolization,” to echo Ho's re-spelling of Creole in order to (re)define intercultural mixing as “the formation of entirely new identities

¹ Ho, “Beyond,” 47.

and cultures" that arrives from a subordinate positioning ("Kreolization" 143).²

Ho defines kreolization as a process of continual renewal because kreolized identities and cultures have often been "selectively appropriated by dominant social groups into the dominant identity and culture, but politicized and deracinated," forcing the creation of ever "newer" identities and cultures ("Kreolization" 143). His work is thus positioned in "already hybrid" spaces complicated by his use of elements gleaned from popular culture. Understanding his own work as operating within a tradition, he terms the "popular avant-garde," his use of popular culture elements is both aesthetic strategy and political advocacy. Yet while he is candid about his desire for large-scale populist audiences, he is equally opposed to "accessible" art. Defining the popular avant-garde as an aesthetic program dedicated to "elevating standards, promoting the necessity and importance of experimentation but at the same time being rooted, grounded and vibrantly connected to the people," Ho castigates accessibility in art as a needless "dumbing down, a pandering" to popular audiences.³ He is also wary of various connotations of "avant-garde" because "it can be both purveyor of change or perpetuator of privilege, solipsism and snobbish elitism [particularly if it implies] the completely anti-political position of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake, which I and others would assert, is political by asserting the autonomy of art and ideas as standing above society and thereby tacit acquiescence and accommodation to the status quo)" ("Imagine," n.p., original emphasis).

While Ho's work operates within a context of an historical Asian American jazz movement and its set of political commitments, in this essay I want to pursue a slightly different tack and focus on Ho's articulation of a "popular avant-garde" as the basis for the creation of his music. Indeed, Ho's creative work engages a wide variety of musical traditions in his efforts to create the music he describes as an "Afro Asian new American multicultural music."

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Antonio Gramsci, an early theorist of popular culture, understood "the popular" as a locus of intersecting interests, rhetoric and representations, a

² Ho acknowledges Dorothy Désir-Davis, who re-spelled "kreolization" as a way to distinguish her perspective from Melville Herskovitz's and from conventional anthropology writ large.

³ Interview with author, September 05, 2007.

space of both conformity and opposition to elite culture.⁴ Similarly recognizing popular culture's hybrid nature and yielding both conservative and radical energies, Ho channels his creativity into recognizable forms he can then implode from within, challenging audiences' expectations even as they are entertained. Because Ho's extravagant creativity and unapologetic embrasure of consumer cultural signs occurs in tandem with his stated agenda of revolutionary creative production, he interrogates popular culture's commodification of creative work through a provocative set of inquiries into the meanings of various idioms, traditions and cultural hierarchies, especially as he points to "the people" for their tastes and legitimation. Ho's admiration for *Lone Wolf and Cub*, a *manga* (Japanese comic book) and the movie series it inspired, is not only to participate in *otaku* (*manga* and *anime* fan) culture but is also an expression of his political and cultural solidarity with popular audiences.

A robust muscularity energizes Ho's creativity as well as his hypnotic cover of Duke Ellington's and Juan Tizol's "Caravan." The title of this composition speaks to cross-cultural exchange and its dominant modal flavor connects jazz to non-Western musical traditions. It also speaks directly to a legacy of a "popular avant garde" in jazz. Ably demonstrating his sympathies and abilities within a jazz tradition, Ho's arrangement of the song highlights the centrality of cross-cultural fusions in Afrodiasporic music and, in particular, within jazz.⁵ Royal Hartigan's introductory drumming is precise yet coupled to an edgy nervousness that is mirrored by Kiyoto Fujiwara's bass ostinato pattern, both men providing the "Latin tinge" early jazz musician "Jelly Roll" Morton argued was an integral component of jazz music. Peter Madsen's arpeggiated entrance on the piano pauses the track briefly before the horns enter, stating the first theme. The saxophonists—alto saxophonist Sam Furnace, tenor saxophonist David Bindman, and the baritone saxophone of leader Ho—emphasize the melismatic nature of the dominant theme, a modally inflected line that conjures a vaguely Middle Eastern aura. While supporting the

⁴ See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*. Trans. William Boelhower. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1991.

⁵ For a cogent investigation of Ho's work in relation to jazz, see Susan Asai, "Cultural Politics: The African American Connection in Asian American Jazz-based Music." She also provides a succinct summary of Ho's early activist and musical activities. For a more detailed biographical sketch, see Wei-hua Zhang, "Fred Wei-han Ho: Case Study of a Chinese-American Creative Musician." Ho provides an outline of his public activities in his article, "Beyond Asian American Jazz: My Musical and Political Changes in the Asian American Movement."

heterophonic reading of the theme by the saxophonists, Fujiwara and Hartigan continue their Afro-Latin dance.

Despite its rhythmically charged undercurrent, the straightforward tonality and swing rhythm of the second section of "Caravan" works as an aural respite after the protracted modality of the initial section. While the saxophone solos are fine examples of postbop jazz improvisation and provide a textural contrast to the rhythm section's spirited propulsion, Madsen's piano solo is a compelling blend of modality and Don Pullen-esque technique, his sharply focused glissandi and chord clusters lending his solo line a powerful emotionalism. Finally, an energetic crescendo achieves an unequivocal resolution.⁶

Ho's rich oeuvre, however, covers more than energetic interpretations of past jazz masters. His original music thunders, whispers and whirls on its own merits while paying homage to his creative influences and predecessors. On the recording, *Red Arc: A Call for Revolución con Salsa y Cool* (Wings Press, 2005), Ho and his collaborator, poet Raúl Salinas, evoke the fire music and jazz poetry happenings of the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, as titles such as "Peltier 1" and "On the Police Murder of Jonathan Rodney" attest, they are directly concerned about contemporary realities. *Journey beyond the West: The New Adventures of Monkey* (1996) is a re-interpretation of popular Chinese tales of Monkey King, a figure who protects the lowly and oppressed from evil spirits and the caprices of the gods. As Susan Asai notes, "Within the socialist framework of Ho's politics, The Monkey King can be thought of as the equivalent of a working-class hero defying the capitalist, bourgeois forces that oppress the masses" (Asai 98). Through all of his works, Ho has built an aesthetic informed by political histories as well as by his insistence on the efficacy of music to serve as a revolutionary tool of "the people."

It is not only Chinese mythology that inspires him. In the composition, "Monkey Decides to Return Home 'to Right the Great Wrongs,'" included in *Journey*, Ho's voicings for the horns recall Chinese opera themes and they are assisted in no small part by the use of instrumentation borrowed from Chinese operatic ensembles. Another recording, *Voice of the Dragon: Once Upon a Time in Chinese America* (1997), is a re-invention of ancient Chinese myths, the Chinese martial arts tradition and its popular

⁶ Don Pullen was a jazz pianist who developed a highly individualized style blending conventional piano technical abilities with avant-garde sensibilities. During the latter part of his career, he was involved with integrating African, Brazilian, and Native American musical traditions with his wide-ranging blend of jazz styles. His piano performances were noted for his precise use of glissandi and chord clusters.

culture form, the martial arts action film, as well as of Asian and Afrodiasporic musical influences Ho describes as “Afro-Asian new American multicultural music” (“Kreolization” 142).

We can hear this merging of political acumen and musical hybridity throughout his work. For example, “The Unity! Suite (For The Struggle of Workers),” from *We Refuse to Be Used and Abused* (Soul Note, 1988) is introduced by a horn section led by Ho’s baritone sax, which slowly works towards a propulsive riff, the rhythm section as a whole energized in a hyper-big band swing journey of militant self-knowledge and political awareness. Jon Jang’s insistently dissonant piano jabs contrast sharply against the horn charts and performances, which are finely balanced and energetic, while Ho’s arrangement effectively renders the piano’s evocation of workers’ struggles within the unity of the larger ensemble. Hafiz Modir’s tenor saxophone solo midway through the recorded track is another evocation of Middle Eastern musical traditions and performance styles that, underscores the multicultural orientation of Ho’s music. Ho’s baritone saxophone riffing is the source for much of the pulse’s energy but the ensemble is clearly enjoying themselves, inspired by the charts and each other’s performances.

There is an increased sophistication to Ho’s arrangements on *The Underground Railroad To My Heart* (Soul Note, 1994), particularly in the tune, “Lan Hua Hua (Blue Flower),” which begins with a visceral solo baritone saxophone introduction leading to soprano vocalist Cindy Zuoxin Wang’s singing a Chinese folk song about the story of a beautiful young woman, Lan Hua Hua. The song recounts Lan Hua Hua’s sale at auction to the highest bidder, an old man with a face marked by “many an evil scar.” The figure of Death appears to save Lan Hua Hua, while he sings about giving his “heart and mind, [to] take the love of Lan Hua Hua.” the song’s haunting melody registering her only escape from her oppressive marriage-contract. Signaling how her physical beauty has doomed her, Ho’s baritone sax re-enters, initially squeaking and squonking (thus recalling the introduction), but he slowly works towards Wang’s plaintive vocalizing. Indeed, when she re-enters, voice and baritone saxophone voice the melody together, blending effortlessly and ending the piece in a dramatic unison crescendo. Ho described the piece as a “Chinese folk song of Chinese peasant women in protest against the oppressive tradition of

⁷ The liner notes to *We Refuse to Be Used and Abused* list Fred Wei-han Houn on baritone and soprano saxophones and flute. He has legally changed his name to Ho in 1989. I use “Fred Ho” throughout the text.

arranged marriages.” Indeed, his forlorn arrangement grants listeners an opportunity to feel the frustrations and discontent of those women.⁸

In contrast, “Big Red! (for Malcolm X and Mao Zedong),” from the recording of the same name (*Big Red!* 2004), begins as an exhilarating call to action. Pianist Art Hrahara is a highlight of the track and the support from Hartigan on drums and Wesley Brown on bass fill out the piano trio central to the arrangement, forming an alert and compatible musical partnership. Brown keeps everything anchored, enunciating pulse, harmonic movement, and confidence to the rest of the rhythm section. In addition to Malcolm X and Mao Zedong, Ho dedicates the composition to political activists Richie Perez, Safiya Bukhari, Kwame Ture, and Modibo (James Baker). Likewise, the spoken word section honors the memories of victims of racially motivated hate crimes, including Vincent Chin and Yusef Hawkins. As the composition unfolds, the larger ensemble gives way to the piano trio, which generates a sense of discursive contemplation. When Ho re-enters, the trio shadows his spoken word diatribe against political complacency, lending the track an energized sense of social awareness.

One last musical example: the composition, “Free Mumia Suite,” finds Ho directing a fusion-era big band, complete with Hrahara’s prominent electric piano. Once again, Hartigan shows why he has maintained the drum chair for Ho’s recordings. He is sublime under Ho’s robust solo, providing both propulsion and timbral interest. Hrahara’s switch to organ under Bindman’s tenor sax moves the composition towards the blues but the group soon strays away to oblique Carla Bley-esque ensemble interplay. As the piece continues, Hrahara returns to an acoustic piano and the performance becomes even more abstract. Eventually, abstraction gives way to funky soul jazz and the ensemble hits a deliciously joyous groove during the final “Stop the Execution, Start a Revolution!” section of the suite, before ending somewhat unsatisfactorily –or perhaps, ambivalently, voicing a reluctance to end the demand for justice. The controlled frenzy of the composition and its clear debt to the blues echo the politicized creative work of Charles Mingus, a composer who similarly blurred the distinctions between mainstream and avant-garde trends in jazz while anchoring much of his music in the blues.

The political tenor of jazz artists such as Mingus, Max Roach or Archie Shepp, who drew equally from the past as well as from their own individual musical aesthetics were models for Ho’s own developing sense

⁸ All quotes in paragraph, Ho, liner notes to *The Underground Railroad to My Heart* (Soul Note, 1994), except for *Lan Iha Iha*’s English translation by Miles Tomalin.

of purpose for his music.⁹ But it is not only African American precedents Ho recognizes. He cites earlier Asian American cultural expression, writing, "Other early Asian American folk cultural forms include oral tradition of folk stories, ballads, chants and folk songs brought over by the early Asian laborers from their peasant oral traditions." Importantly, "the great body of the Asian American cultural tradition emanates from the working class Asian communities and is [created and performed in] the Asian languages and dialects" ("Revolutionary" 384). In other words, confining Asian American cultural expression to those writers, musicians, and artists who chose to create works that would resonate with the dominant English-speaking mainstream culture or who attempted to scale the cultural ladder to high art status, neglects or forgets the rich panorama of Asian American culture that operates outside of dominant-culture requirements such as English language use.

Moreover, early Asian American folk culture was shaped by the structural racism Asians faced and by their poetry, music and other cultural activities that expressed their "feelings and experiences of separation, loneliness, disappointment, bitterness, pain, anger and struggle" ("Revolutionary" 384). Ho has also written articles detailing the musical and political histories of an earlier generation of Asian American musicians that included Frank Chin and his group, A Grain of Sand, as well as the folk group, Yokohama, California.¹⁰ Ho has tapped into these reserves of Asian American culture in forming his Afro-Asian new American multicultural music, the musical component of his popular avant-garde.

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Ho has written about his idea of revolutionary art and its relation to popular culture, setting a four-point agenda—speak to the people, go to the people, involve the people, and change the people—and emphasizing the need to engage popular audiences. His goal is not to merchandise his art more effectively or to lessen the political impact of his art, but to increase the effectiveness of his work in creating a revolutionary consciousness in his audiences ("Revolutionary" 289). His views echo those of Angela

⁹ He mentions Mingus, along with Ellington, John Coltrane, and Archie Shepp as musical influences in an interview with Fiona Ma, "Talking About a Revolution: Fred Ho's Monkey Orchestra shakes up the San Francisco International Jazz Festival."

¹⁰ See Ho's article, "An ABC from NYC: 'Charlie' Chin: Asian American Singer and Songwriter."

Davis, who has argued, "As Marx and Engels long ago observed, art is a form of social consciousness—a special form of social consciousness that can potentially awaken an urge in those affected by it to creatively transform their oppressive environments. Art can function as a sensitizer and a catalyst, propelling people toward involvement in organized movements seeking to effect radical social change. *Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge*" (236; added emphasis). Ho's idea of a popular avant-garde is fundamentally anchored to Davis's notion of popular culture's engagement as a means to motivate audiences to question normative assumptions and ideologies.

I want to focus on two of Ho's major works, *Deadly She-Wolf Assassin at Armageddon!* and *The Voice of the Dragon: Once Upon a Time in Chinese America* . . . , as they exemplify his efforts to create a new type of ensemble and a new set of musical and social relations through an aesthetic practice he terms the popular avant-garde. His use of popular culture as source material for his art provides a sharp contrast to his efforts at organizing and funding his creative endeavors through the institutions of high art culture. Though *Voice of the Dragon* was commissioned by the Mary Flagler Cary Trust, the World Music Institute, and the New York State Council on the Arts and *Deadly She-Wolf Assassin* was funded partially through the Japan Society and composed while in residency at the For David and Julia White Artists Colony in Ciudad Colon, Costa Rica, Ho insists that artists do not—indeed, must not—acquiesce their political positions in order to receive grant monies. While continuing to rely on conventional arts funding organizations, Ho also has recognized the constraints granting organizations can often require in exchange for their support and has turned his entrepreneurial energies towards self-production. As he admits, "In the absence of a revolutionary national organization or movement, I have [formed] my own production company, Big Red Media, Inc.." In this way, he adds, he has taken control of the means of production and distribution of his art ("Beyond" 50).¹¹ This has meant an increasing attention to developing a popular audience rather than

¹¹ Bruce Lee faced similar obstacles in Hollywood and eventually returned to Hong Kong to make movies. *Enter the Dragon* was essentially a Hong Kong movie with distribution and a small sum of capital from Warner Brothers Films. In a move that mirrors his cinematic and narrative strategies, Lee attempted to use Warner Brothers and Raymond Chow, a Hong Kong movie mogul, in a synergistic manner: the publicity that Warner Brothers studios could give this film coupled to the knowledge of the Asian markets by Chow and his associates helped Lee achieve the transnational success of the film.

relying on grant funding to subsidize smaller, elite audiences of high art patrons.

Ho's reliance on the appreciation of an audience willing to fund his work through their purchase of tickets and recordings partly motivated his development of "a growing body of opera/ballet/musical theater works aimed at [...] children, teenage and adult audiences" (*Voice* n.p.; emphasis added). At the same time, his interest in cultivating a youth audience partially motivated his incorporation of the martial arts action film, a genre he once found demeaning for its depiction of Asian males as cold-blooded asexual killing machines—a representation of Asian masculinity as non-human at its most basic level.¹²

However, Black Cherokee activist Day Star advised him to recognize martial arts as part of his tradition. Otherwise, Star argued, you will allow the way in which they have been "appropriated and misrepresented [in films] influence you because then you're just reacting to it. Take it back! Make it something revolutionary."¹³ Her advice forced him to recognize the liberatory possibilities of martial arts and, by extension, of martial arts movies. In fact, *Voice of the Dragon* was part of Ho's program to "de-Europeanize" the world, fueling his search for alternative models and forms onto which he could transpose his larger creative ambitions.¹⁴

Soon after his conversation with Day Star, he began incorporating martial arts choreography. By the same token, just as martial arts movies take their narrative cues from classical Chinese literary works such as Luo Guanzhong's *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Ho uses Chinese folk

¹² Ho is aware of other US popular culture misrepresentations of Asian males such as the emasculated laundry boy and cook employed in domestic tasks that were gendered female under US patriarchy. See Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* for a cogent study of the ways in which Asian males have been (mis)represented in popular culture. Lee addressed other stereotypes of Asian males in a response to an offer to portray Charlie Chan's son in a television series that was to be titled *Number One Son*. Lee, in rejecting the offer, said, "It's about time we had an Oriental hero. Never mind some guy bouncing around the country in a pigtail or something. I have to be a real human being. No cook. No laundryman" (Little, *Words* 98, added emphasis). His constant struggle was to "be a real human being." This was not just an internal struggle but a battle that he waged in the world, in the society of men, much like the heroes of *Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws*. As noted in the text, Lee placed himself within a contemporary perspective that transcended historicism or an overly reverential reliance on tradition.

¹³ Interview with author, September 05, 2007.

¹⁴ See Kyle Gann, "Monkey Business: Fred Ho De-Europeanizes Opera with Martial Arts."

tales and mythology, thus linking these two traditions in his work since the mid-1990s. Significantly, his scores, which are a blend of African American musical practices and instrumentation with Chinese instrumentation and musical aesthetics, form a kreolized accompaniment to his martial arts-themed works. In this sense, Ho asserts, "Martial arts and music, for me, have many parallels. Each is a metaphor for the other. Music is about developing a sound that will bring down the walls of Jericho, it's about finding *chi*. Martial arts [also develops] a way to transform form so that it becomes highly individual, agentive and impactful."¹⁵

Jazz musicking privileges collective dialogical frameworks, the development of an individual "sound," and the metaphor of the soloist as both member of and distinct from the rest of the ensemble. These are well-known tropes throughout jazz discourse. Correspondingly, a major part of traditional Asian martial arts training is the perfection of forms, a specific series of moves which an individual must master in order to advance and attain mastery of a specific style. However, the belief is that the martial artist will acquire these moves as a type of "second nature," allowing the martial artist's *chi* to flow effortlessly through any physical confrontation. In this way, Asian martial arts address both the physical and the spiritual development of its adherents.

The links he suggests between Afrodiasporic music and Asian martial arts practices are connected through his view concerning the essential nature of African musicking. In a discussion of the nature of "the groove" in various Afrodiasporic and popular musics, he juxtaposed "commodified and reified music" against music with a "vibrant, vital sense of the [Afrodiasporic] tradition," arguing that while the former is merely entertainment, the latter conceives musicking as shamanism, a sound and activity directly connected to the forces of nature: "[African] rhythms [move] down deep to the cellular level and those rhythms will fill the body and keep the body alive, energetic, sensual, fertile. That's the kinesis of it! It's not just simply recreational spectacle. The real African kinesis of it is that these rhythms are energizing at the cellular level [and in] life at all levels."¹⁶ The links between music, physical and spiritual development, and aesthetics mark the correspondences within the variegated elements comprising Ho's popular avant-garde and his vision of an Afro Asian new American cultural synthesis.

¹⁵ Interview with author, September 05, 2007.

¹⁶ Interview with author, September 05, 2007.

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The music of *Deadly She-Wolf* reinforces the ways through which conventional connections are rearranged. Asian and Afrodiasporic elements blend into coherent musical statements and serve as aural compliment to the conflictual yet familial relations among characters in the work. These blended musical elements in *Deadly She-Wolf* exploit this contradiction in order to (re)create myth as a site of counterhegemonic contestation as well as an enactment of a revolutionary popular avant-garde. Describing his aesthetic agenda for the work, Ho has admitted his debt to not only the narrative of *Lone Wolf and Cub* but also to the film series' composers, Hideakira Sakurai and Kunihiro Murai:

The music for the *Lone Wolf* movies innovatively combines Japanese traditional influences with the hippest of contemporary "jazz." In the film music, there is virtually no melody. Rather, texture and rhythm abound. I've tried to retain this approach in my score. The only "thematic motif" is a three-note descending line (whole step to half step ala traditional Japanese *iwato* mode) and a four-note ascending figure (minor third-whole-step-whole step) evocative of a clarion jazz-blues riff or the first four of five notes in a primal pentatonic mode. I've upped the musical intensity with increased metrical complexity, more "free" improvisation and greater layering of cross- and poly-rhythms, while at the same time retained much of the flowing, poignant "minimalism" of traditional Japanese music-theater.¹⁷

In conjunction with his stated musical purpose, "The Way of the Wolf" leads things off with the sound of Masaru Koga on the Japanese *fue*, or bamboo piccolo, accompanied by Royal Hartigan's percussion work and Yumi Kurosawa on *koto* (Japanese string instrument). After a brief introductory section, Art Hirahara's electric piano begins a rhythmic accompaniment figure above a funky backbeat, supporting Koga's alto sax solo. The next track, "Imperial Intrigue," begins with ethereal *koto* figures. The drums and an electric piano join the *koto* in a conversation between the Asian and Afrodiasporic musical elements. Towards the end, a flute enters, maintaining the song's ephemeral feel. The conclusion is almost comical with its contrastingly declarative mood. "Enter: The She-Wolf Secret Weapon" is built from an interlocking set of rhythmic and thematic lines performed independently by each member of the ensemble. "'Round and 'Round Hades We Go!" is distinguished by solo percussion sections and an extended finale. "In the Shadow of the Wolf" is the recording's

¹⁷ Program notes for *Deadly She-Wolf Assassin at Armageddon!*, n.p.

ballad, which temporarily suspends the loud volumes and swift rhythms dominating the other pieces in the work. At one point in the ballad, the instrumentation is reduced to solo electric piano, underlining the poignancy of the piece. The next composition, "Nightmares," is a lively flute vehicle that evokes the soul jazz fusion of the 1970s with its steady backbeat rhythm and electric piano 'comping' though a *koto* faintly playing in the background lends the track an enigmatic touch. "In a Silent Way I Seek My Prey" is a haunting melody performed on the *shakuhachi* (Japanese bamboo flute) and supported by the *koto*. The pair sensitively accompanies each other before the *koto* performs its own significant solo segment.

"Bok Mei: The White Lotus of the King Kong Palm of Death" is primarily a hypnotic modal groove with an accompaniment figure that, as the track progresses, is passed from electric piano to *koto* and the horns. A notably visceral electronic keyboard solo is a highlight and the track ends with a simple tonic resolution dominated by the horns and rhythm section. "Colonel Ulysses Sam Armageddon" provides a funky *koto* line above what sounds like an undiscovered 1970s martial arts film soundtrack. The next song on the recording, "Qaseem, The Killing Machine" begins with a funky bass line. The piano trio introduction is appropriately suggestive and the composition develops into a hard bop modal excursion. Midway through the track, the piano solo is a singular example of the musicianship in this group and Hartigan's drumming is again to be singled out for its exemplary musicality and technical virtuosity.

"The Storm of the She-Wolf" begins with a statement on solo *koto* of Ho's four-note ascending figure. Despite the composition's title, the track is dominated by *koto* and flute, sounding more like the calm before the storm than like the actual storm. In fact, as "The Storm" segues into the next track, "We Have Arrived in Hell," the vibrancy of the latter track evokes the tensions and unease of an arrival in the netherworld, offering a distinct contrast to "The Storm." Finally, in "Pick up the Sword: End of the Assassin," the *koto* introduces the central motif of the composition above Hartigan's intriguing cymbal work. The baritone sax enters briefly after a false ending by the *koto* but the conclusion of the piece is one last statement of the four-note ascending motif by the *koto*, accompanied by the *shakuhachi*'s high pitched squeal and a bass note sounded out by the electric piano. The Japanese and funky jazz elements are aligned at the end, signaling their musical and aesthetic congruencies.

I described, if all too briefly, a large part of the music from *Deadly She-Wolf* in order to convey two ideas. First, the music can stand alone without the dramatic narratives to sustain it and is able to convey the

tensions as well as the compatibilities between the diverse Asian and Afrodiasporic musical and cultural elements. As ethnomusicologist Weihua Zhang observes,

Diversity is [one] of Ho's musical qualities. He likes to synthesize different musical styles and genres and mold them. His expanding use of elements from a variety of musics such as West African, Latin, reggae rhythms, Filipino kulintang, Chinese and Korean instruments, Arabic and Japanese modes, has become characteristic of his compositions. Almost all of his works are marked by multiple sections and changing meters and moods. (Zhang 96)

Secondly, and more importantly to this essay, the development of Ho's multicultural music increasingly took shape as not only Asian instrumentation and musical aesthetics were blended with Afrodiasporic musical traditions, particularly jazz and rhythm'n'blues, but in conjunction with his idea of the popular avant-garde, utilizing links to Asia that were not exclusively bound to Asian high art cultural traditions such as Japanese Noh or Chinese Peking Opera, but to popular-culture forms such as *manga* and *samurai* and *kung fu* film genres.

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Ho's attraction to Japanese *samurai* and Hong Kong *kung fu* films as creative models increased as he began to note these genres' oppositional aesthetics. Additionally, using popular forms such as the martial arts action film as inspiration and foundation for his aesthetic principles, Ho created works that openly celebrated their populist origins.¹⁸ Similar to writer Lu Xun's revolutionary use of woodblock prints in early-twentieth-century China, Ho chose to appropriate a degraded form of commodified culture, such as the martial arts action film, in order to create revolutionary works that subvert hegemonic or corporate-economic signification and authorization.¹⁹ The martial arts movie *Enter the Dragon* and, in particular, its star, Bruce Lee, influenced Ho's aesthetic and political vision for *The Voice of the Dragon*, a work he describes as a "music and martial arts cantata," ironically citing a high art musical form in tandem with the martial arts.

¹⁸ See Bruce Lee, *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, a journal of Lee's philosophical and aesthetic thoughts.

¹⁹ For more on Lu Xun and the historical context in which he operated, see Jonathan Spence, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895-1980*.

An example of the value of Lee's work for Ho is his borrowing of Lee's iteration of "the art of fighting without fighting" as an ideal. In *Enter the Dragon*, Lee's character is challenged to a fight by another martial artist, known simply as Parsons, after Lee answers a question about his fighting style with the aphoristic "My style is the art of fighting without fighting." Unable to avoid his challenger, Lee points out that the ship's deck is too small for a fight and suggests taking one of the lifeboats to a small island nearby. Parsons agrees and steps into a lifeboat. Without getting into the lifeboat himself, Lee lets out its lead line, stranding Parsons as he and the lifeboat separate from the larger ship. Handing the line to Chinese ship workers who had suffered abuse from Parsons earlier in the scene, Lee cleverly "fights without fighting."

Clearly echoing Lee's dialogue, Chen Jack, a character in Ho's *Voice of the Dragon*, declares, "To subdue your enemy without fighting is the highest skill." In Ho's popular avant-garde, popular culture is the repository of "folk" knowledge and the subaltern epistemes of "the people," who, he recognizes, are no longer the peasants of rural seventeenth-century China (the period in which *Voice of the Dragon* is set) but, to varying degrees, cosmopolitan subjects whose common ground can be found in popular culture. Thus, Ho positions his music and creative work within the same discursive turf populated by devalued popular-culture forms such as the martial arts film genre in order to reach those audiences he is most interested in educating people, particularly the young, who are marginalized and oppressed because of their skin color, class, and/or gender positioning.

Defending his use of martial arts films as a creative template, Ho pointed to an introductory scene in *Enter the Dragon* with a conversation between Lee and his Shaolin master teacher to illustrate how Lee was a philosopher-fighter whose martial arts skills had "gone beyond the mere physical level [to reach] the point of spiritual insight."²⁰ When asked to name the highest technical level he hopes to achieve, Lee replied, "To have no technique." In Ho's view, this intuitive, "down to the cellular level" act of *immersion* in an aesthetic and technical tradition acts to *transcend* conventional limits. Likewise, as his self-taught musicking attests, it mirrors his own immersion in jazz through working with established jazz artists such as Archie Shepp as important first steps that

²⁰ This quote begins the conversation between Lee and his master teacher under discussion. This scene was cut from the original theater and video releases of the film. Its re-insertion to the DVD release radically re-frames the film's narrative and Lee's message or intent for the film.

enabled him to work through the jazz tradition and to eventually transcend it.

More provocatively, Ho views Lee as “the Asian John Coltrane.”²¹ In order to understand this comparison, it might help to recall Amiri Baraka’s assertion (writing under the name LeRoi Jones) that “John Coltrane [. . .] is an example of the secular yearning for the complete change, for the religious, the spiritual” (Baraka 198). Coltrane, recognized widely in the jazz world as one of the most visible advocates for the spiritual impulse running through jazz music, cast a wide influential net. For his part, Coltrane recognized music’s affective powers and looked for ways in which to focus his music towards benevolent ends:

I’ve already been looking into those approaches to music—as in India—in which particular sounds and scales are intended to produce specific emotional meanings [. . .] I would like to bring to people something like happiness. I would like to discover a method so that if I want it to rain, it will start right away to rain. If one of my friends is ill, I’d like to play a certain song and he will be cured; when he’d be broke, I’d bring out a different song and immediately he’d receive all the money he needed. But what are these pieces and what is the road to travel to attain knowledge of them, that I don’t know. *The true powers of music are still unknown. To be able to control them must be, I believe, the goal of every musician.* I’m passionate about understanding these forces. I would like to provoke reactions in the listeners to my music, to create a real atmosphere. It’s in that direction that I want to commit myself and to go as far as possible. (Quoted in Porter 211; emphasis added)²²

Ho views the creation of an Afro Asian multicultural music in the same way: “I was profoundly drawn to and inspired by African American music as the expression of an oppressed nationality, for both its social role as protest and resistance to national oppression, and for its musical energy and revolutionary aesthetics” (“Kreolization,” 135). In this way, he comments further on the various ways African musicians transformed various Western European musical practices and assumptions through their own aesthetic frameworks to create vital African American music cultures and traditions. As stated earlier, Ho, like Coltrane, believes the shamanistic power of African music – and by extension, of African

²¹ Interview with author, September 05, 2007.

²² I am indebted to Porter’s explication of these interviews for the information contained in this paragraph. The chapter entitled, “So Much More to Do,” from which this quotation is taken, deals at length with Coltrane’s interconnected interest in spirituality and music.

American music—enables the music to “reach down to the cellular level” and empower both musician and listener.

He further supports his comparison of Lee and Coltrane by noting that both were iconoclastic innovators. In 1960, Coltrane recorded *The Avant-Garde*, announcing his immersion in free-jazz aesthetics, which did much to legitimize the style for some jazz critics due to Coltrane’s proven stature within mainstream jazz. In Lee’s case, his “total system,” as Ho calls it, known as *jeet kune do*, was a break from traditional *kung fu*, incorporating not only martial arts techniques but also a philosophy with a strong Taoist influence. Furthermore, Ho points to Lee’s assertion that an individual, using self-discipline and a high degree of intuition that has been “trained” by philosophical ideas found in Taoism and Buddhism, must often act in opposition to hegemonic interests in order to maintain her political, ethical, and artistic integrity.

* * *

Ho’s Afro Asian multicultural music is an aural complement to the idea that a multicultural ethos might arise to subdue or overcome the divisive idea of “pure” cultures or the unyielding allegiance to conservative notions of culture. Ho’s music articulates the inability of tradition *by itself* to give contemporary Asian Americans a voice as well as to reveal how tradition can be used to evoke a multicultural perspective that transcends the limits of race, gender, and nationality. As Rey Chow writes, “In the ‘third world,’ the displacement of modernism is not simply a matter of criticizing modernism as theory, philosophy, or ideas of cognition; rather, it is the emergence of an entirely different problematic, a displacement of a displacement that is in excess of what is still presented as the binarisms of modernism-postmodernism” (*Writing Diaspora* 57).

Ho’s multicultural orientation confronts notions of race, however defined and manifested, which are unwittingly aided by the intentions of postcolonial critiques that appear grounded, intentionally or not, by ideas of cultural purity. Chow argues, “This, then, is the first of the postcolonial dilemmas faced by peoples of the non-Western world – the inevitable tendency toward nativism as a form of resistance against the dominance of Western colonial culture” (*Ethics* 152).²³ This “self-fetishizing gaze” becomes another instance of the continuing legacy of colonial domination.

²³ In the chapter, “Between Colonizers,” from which this quotation is taken, Chow pursues an interesting study of Hong Kong’s unique position within a postcolonial context. Her observations can be grafted onto Lee’s own stratagems given his formative years spent in Hong Kong but space does not permit exploring this idea.

For example, as Chow notes, Hong Kong has “always been dismissed by the mainland Chinese as too Westernized and thus inauthentic” (*Ethics* 154). Describing the situation as an opposition between nativists and postmodern hybridites, Chow writes, “While nativists suppress the fundamental impurity of native origins, postmodern hybridites tend to downplay the legacy of colonialism *understood from the viewpoint of the colonized* and ignore the experiences of poverty, dependency, and subalternity that persist well beyond the achievement of national independence” (*Ethics* 155; original emphasis). Thus, “[f]or the postmodern hybridite, the word ‘postcolonial’ does not differ in essence from ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘international’” (*Ethics* 155). However, Ho avoids Chow’s dilemma by constructing the two positionalities (nativist and postmodern hybridite) not as simply oppositional but as dialectical. Because engendering a revolutionary consciousness in his audiences remains Ho’s primary goal, not merely entertaining them with high-concept spectacle (though he assuredly accomplishes that, as well), his creative work remains rooted in dialectics between education and entertainment, popularity and populism, and tradition and innovation.

Ho’s popular avant-garde is a masterful blend of Afrodiasporic and Asian musicking, Chinese martial arts, and the martial arts action film genre, which draws its counterhegemonic power from its ability to reach audiences without having to dilute its revolutionary message or massage its transformative ideological impulse. Asian martial arts such as *kung fu* and *karate*, after all, originated in the practical strategies for confronting elite power created by oppressed populations who had been stripped of weapons other than their bodies and intellects. Binding the popular avant-garde to his iteration of an Afro Asian new American multicultural music, Ho’s creative works demonstrate, by voicing truth to power, the inherent power of subaltern cultural production despite its marginalization, occlusion, and/or defamation by dominant cultural hierarchies. Importantly, Ho reminds us that blacks and Latinos embraced the martial arts as well, because it revolutionized, to use his term, their sense of identity by fostering camaraderie and self-discipline.

Indeed, Ho’s innovations on the myriad set of influences and traditions through which he creates lend his work remarkable power. The popular avant-garde, then, is more than a means to educate—it is a powerful cultural adjunct to revolutionary action. From this perspective, Ho asserts,

Many would say: Fred, let’s focus on what’s possible. Or, Fred, your ideological and political predilection seems to preclude propensities for the here-and-now possible reforms. But I will only quote Sun Ra in response: Everything possible has been tried and nothing has changed.

What we need is the Impossible. The music we make must embrace the Impossible in the arduous journey to make the music a true force for social revolution. ("Imagine" n.p.)

Ho activates his audiences to reconfigure the racialized and gendered inequalities that are the basis for the normative relations of power they face in their daily lives by creating alternative and imaginative narratives of women warriors and other revolutionary agents. By placing these "impossible" examples of multiple multicultural perspectives within his hybrid cultural productions, Ho ably demonstrates, even if only within the space of one of his performances, the possibilities his "popular avant-garde" art hold for advancing progressive, even radical, social transformation.

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