

Viva Tonal: Engendering New Sound in 1930s Taiwan

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Quite a few scholars have discussed the 2004 documentary *Viva Tonal* (dir. Chien Wei-ssu and Kuo Chen-ti, 2004) in light of nostalgic accounts by Taipei elites, historiography of postcolonial counter-memory, gendered cosmopolitanism, among others. Former President Lee Tenghui related the film to his formation years and viewed it as a documentary on the everyday culture under Japanese rule. Edward Gunn looked upon the film as a work of “forgotten modernity” setting in motion a series of new questions about Taiwan’s past, present, and future. Kuo Li-hsin criticizes the directors for highlighting the positive aspects of Japanese colonial legacy to the neglect of common people’s frustration under a repressive regime which not only censored art works and news media but used violence to crack down the rebels and dissents. Kuei-fen Chiu hails on the other hand the film as a “historiographical practice” in retrieving the local language and voice long lost under the Japanese and KMT rules. Sylvia Lin regards the film to be about new cosmopolitan women and their modern lifestyles in the 1930s who were eager to pursue free love, to indulge in foxtrot or tango, and to make Taiwanese music more sensual, if also popular.

These interpretations are convincing and perceptive, they all tend to focus on local cultural or gender politics. What I propose here is to examine the documentary from a trans-regional perspective and to consider the critical path of Taiwan as a hub of transculturation across Pacific Asia. I argue that music culture of the 1930s Taiwan owe a lot to Columbia Records Company and phonographic technology, in addition to benefitting from Japanese, American, Chinese, eastern European, and many other influences—Japanese folk and popular songs, American Jazz and Blues, Beijing and Taiwanese opera, Czech and Russian Nationalist composers, or Italian Bel Canto, for example. I shall pay more attention to the early globalization processes of Taiwanese social imaginary and expressive culture than just local political economy. I shall talk more of acoustics and new technology of recording as well as of listening on. The roles of record collectors and of cultural memory reconstruction will be investigated along the way, so that we may better comprehend the local, national, and regional cultural dynamics.

I hope by viewing the film this way, we can understand how the Taiwanese people have been shaped by the music they make and they listen to. As a result of such relatively unique transculturation experiences, I would like to suggest that Taiwanese are more open to foreign ideas, more adaptive to social change and lifestyle shift.

The transculturation process as depicted in the documentary unfolds historically and contingently around personal fortunes, national predicaments, transnational agencies, and emerging international situations. The label “Viva Tonal,” for instance, was developed by Columbia Records Company in conjunction with Victor using new electric technology of vivid sound and high fidelity. The first “Viva Tonal” came out on Feb. 25, 1925. Roughly 15 years ago, a teenager and orphan (14 years old) by the name of Shojiro Kashiwano left for Taipei to work for his “uncle” (a friend of his father’s) and later became an apprentice at the Taipei’s Columbia Records Branch. Kashiwano’s Japanese boss was so impressed by the young man’s hard work and ingenuity that Kashiwano was to marry his boss’s sister and to inherit the business. As the new Chairman, Kashiwano was fond of listening to Taiwanese folk music and drama—especially the traditional north wind ensemble. But when he was introduced to the southern school of Taiwanese opera singing, which tended to appeal to young women with freer style of singing and plotting around love and romantic relations (such as Chen-San Wu-Liang or Liang Chu), Kashiwano decided to dedicate the label “Viva Tonal” to Taiwanese folk and popular music. Between 1933 and 1939, almost 1800 records produced by Columbia in Taipei, and these Taiwanese music records were widely circulated in southern China, Malaysia, and Singapore. In America, “Viva Tonal” was quickly replaced by “HIFI” labels; however, the label got disseminated and acquired a new life in Taiwan or southeast Asia.

The film documents the success story of Viva Tonal in Taiwan between 1933 and 1939, with focus on colonial modernity at large but also closing in on the predicaments of a few famous singers (like Chun Chun or Li Xianglan), song writers (such as Chen Chun-yi, or composers (Teng Yu-hsian immediately coming to mind). It highlights a group of music-lovers' passion for almost anything modern and foreign during a period of upheaval and turmoil. These elderly characters being interviewed reminisce about the private histories of their music collections, compositions, struggles and life lessons during their prime as Japanese subjects, Taiwanese nationals and discrepant cosmopolitan figures in pursuing "new expressions and freedom. Celebrating industrialization, urbanization, and modernization miracles in Taiwan (not just in Taipei), the film also dwells on war and destruction—Sino-Japanese, Pacific war, and World War II. It touches upon the role of music to coerce and to manipulate, but also on its potentials to construct counter-public sphere and to give vent to dreams and personal revelries. Though colonized, Taiwanese listened to Duke Ellington, Erico Caruso, and Johannes Strauss. Women danced, smoked, and articulated their perspectives. (Consequently, quite a few male intellectuals were alarmed.) Composers tried to model their careers on Bartok, Borodin, Sibelius, and so forth, thinking that they might create national tone poems or ballads. However, it is the production and reproduction of Taiwanese popular songs within the 6 years that is most remarkable. Up to two thousands of Viva Tonal labels captured the thrill of Taiwanese tunes, while photographs were brought in to make music available at such semi-public places like shops, schools, and even homes.

The first lyric you hear is a pop song "The Dance Age" (1933); it conjures up a carefree and cozy picture of a group of young women seeking pleasure and happiness. "In a resurgent world, you love the ones you choose," the film opens with this question, "what kind of era would inspire such a song?" "What triggers artists of the time to compose or to sing? What are their roles in the development of Taiwanese popular music?" The archival fever and with it identity quest seem to be the main obsession for the main person in charge of a radio station, a music connoisseur and a vinyl record collector. The voice over is in Taiwanese. It is no wonder that Kuei-fen Chiu interpret this film to be retrieving the repressed language and collective memory. She advocates that "In presenting Taiwanese as the language of the first-person voice-over and in its engagement with collective memories of the colonial past, *Viva Tonal—The Dance Age* inherits the legacies of *xiangtu* literature debates" (Chiu 25). However, Chiu hastens to point out that the film "shifts away from the suffering of the oppressed to how people lived their fantasies in the cultural ambience of rapid modernization under Japanese rule" (26). She is quite correct in suggesting that the interviewees' recollections "bear witness to the vigorous transnational flows that involved colonial Taiwan in a vast global network of cultural industries. She concentrates on historical revision and on the implication of the flowering of Taiwanese pop songs as a way to prove that Taiwan in the 1930s should be recognized as a "peer" or "participant" in the international community of music culture rather than as "a wounded party" (Chiu 29). In this respect, she pushes forward "a new historical imaginary "to be invented, "one that conceptualizes Taiwan as other than a victim suffering from colonial damage" (29). She looks upon the filmic representation of popular entertainment as underscoring "the birth of s Taiwanese culture out of the intermingling of different cultures" Chiu 29). Her observations of the urban middle class interested in consuming Japanese and western music while those living in the countryside and the south tended to buy Taiwanese opera or traditional types of music, in addition to her positive portrayal of ShojiroKashiwano in light of "his crucial role in making Taiwanese popular songs a trend," are so articulated as to respond to Kuo Li-hsin's comments on the film as nostalgic, parochial, and elitist. Her interpretation is complemented by Sylvia Lin's argument that the film documents the gendered cosmopolitanism of the 1093s, with new women coming to the foreground to build their lifestyles as agents of modern social imaginary. (Here, Yang Chien-he's novella, "The Season when the Flowers Blossom," should certainly illuminate us as to how a new woman upon graduating from high school faces the dilemma of having her freedom to anchor a career and of unselfishly taking up the responsibility of starting a new family with a man). Lin also singles out the ethnicity issue in the film, especially with regards to the aborigine being mobilized as volunteer soldiers to die for the Japanese emperor at the end of the film.

While agreeing mostly with Chiu and Lin, I think their essays can be expanded further in dealing with the following issues:

- 1), new technology and music consumption in the local and transnational cultural economy;
- 2), archival research and the project to rewrite national history;
- 3), the production and circulation of Taiwanese popular music in a trans-regional context;
- 4), Japan's holy war across the Pacific and the appropriation of Taiwanese music;
- 5), the fates of teenage suicide bombers and young shonenko technician soldiers.

First, let us discuss new acoustics and international listening public. Viva Tonal and new electrical recording technology make available vivid sound in high fidelity. In the film, a watch repair shop owner talks about his uncle's amazement in the first encounter with phonograph. Initially, his uncle thought that some instruments might be hiding beneath the machine, until he heard human voices. For it is practically impossible to insert so many male and female singers into that tiny device. Out of pleasant surprise, his uncle decided to buy a phonograph and became a dedicated music lover. He would often turn on the music so loud that not only the entire family but the whole neighbors would share the delight of listening to Taiwanese and western music. Together with radio broadcast, phonograph helps sustain a political economy of music and consolidate a community. Jacques Attali famously defines music as a neurological-emotional way to penetrate people's ears without their consciousness so that they can comprehend and become appreciative of previously nonsensical "noises" to find delight in a system of sound and signification. The new sound is particularly perplexing and potentially enlightening and even liberating if it is foreign. The Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee says that he discovered a completely different world of classical music when he turned on radio in Cape Town, South Africa. That childhood experience transformed his conception of what Bach and the world classics meant to him. Similarly, as I grew up in central part of Taiwan, listening in on to Karl Haas's and Wu Hsin-liu's Adventures in Good Music and classical music showcases put me in touch with western culture. I remember the religious nature of tuning in to these radio programs. If this holds true for contemporary audience, we can imagine the shock, excitement, and awe phonograph and Viva Tonal records must have produced in the 1930s Taiwan. The main person in the document, A-Chen (Li Kun-chen), shows his zeal and marvels every time he manages to locate vinyl records from the 1920s or 30s. His archival search motivates the documentary and in fact keeps updating or rewriting Taiwan's music history. "Among the remaining 3 to 4 early Caruso vinyl records in the world today that are still playable, Taiwan owns one," he remarks. As Ben Anderson suggests, nationalism begins with the idea of "all in one"—especially we are number 1. Taiwan film critics have been encouraged by the fact that ten of Edison's kinoscopic short newsreels were shown in Taipei in August 1896, the first exhibition in Asia, and three months ahead of Japan's Kobe. The postcolonial racing against time constitutes the momentum of history rewriting and of an imagined community. This is my second point about archival fever to unpack the past as if all sorts of valuable would be uncovered in the treasure hunt. I have written on the Tanaka collection at National Taiwan, just to suggest that the national treasure retrieved sometimes has to do with personal, national, and transnational predicaments. For the musical inspirations were from Chen Chun-yu who happened to fall in love with Chun Chun, and the composer Deng Yu-hsien studied in Japan, not to mention the producer of the Viva Tonal labels in Taiwan was originally from Taiwan, plus the music consuming public and cultural industry of the time were all shaped by American Jazz and European dance music. Chun Chun's high pitch singing in fast tempo was partly influenced by the trill and turns, flowery delivery in quickened pace of Bel Canto tradition made famous by Adelina Patti and Nellie Melba. Of course, the 3 and half minutes limit on each side of vinyl record also contributes to the faster tempo.

Columbia's viva tonal labels were a commercial success in Taiwan and in southeast Asia. Taiwanese or diouchou (or fujianese) is a middle Chinese turned dialect in southern China after tens of thousands refugees sought shelter in the late Tang. Chinese migrants in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore all found solace by listening to viva tonal labels from Taiwan, a phenomenon also noticeable in the production of Taiwanese films from 1940s to 1970s. We can thus trace the genealogy of Taiwanese popular songs from Chun Chun to Teresa Deng to Chou Jielun in southern China and Southeast Asia. This is a trans-regional republic of popular musical culture very much like Latinate Literature for medieval and Renaissance Europe, Anglophone literature for the commonwealth, and increasingly Sinophone writings from Macao to Malaysia to Tibet and California.

It is only natural that Taiwanese should learn from Japanese melodies and try to appropriate them. (It is ironic, as pointed out by Chen Pei-feng, that when KMT regimes came over, singers associated with Myriad Stars Club tended to retranslate what they thought were original Taiwanese into Chinese songs. And lately the Chinese versions have been rendered yet again into Taiwanese.) But in the film, cross pollination is at work with Japanese and Taiwanese popular songs. Taiwanese composers also sought eastern European inspirations. As the tension built up when Japan engaged China and later with America and allies, Japanese colonial government in Taiwan appropriated Taiwanese songs and turned them into marches to mobilize Taiwanese to be soldiers for the emperor. "Flowers in the rainy night" became a theme song for military staff and porters, while "Sorrow in the Moonlight" was recast as a call to arms so that porter's wife can prepare herself for war. Against these interesting cases of appropriation, the directors show footages of war and destruction. The most tragic scenes are on those Japanese teenagers who were recruited and stationed in Taiwan so that they would be suicide bombers in attacking US marine bases in the Philippines and across the Pacific. When Mr. Liu's father charged them with watch repairs for only twenty dollars, they would give him hundreds saying that they wouldn't be able to spend the money after tomorrow. Recently, a documentary has been made in relation to the forgotten history of teenage engineers sent and mostly died at the Japanese airplane technical support and maintenance institute—Shonenko (dir. Kuo Liang-yin and Shuhei Fujita, 2006). These kids' graveyards were accidentally discovered by several Japanese elementary school children, and it was only until 2007 that their stories got told, in terms of "Bird without Borders."