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# Music for Our (Hi)Stories

## Reading Beethoven through Adorno in Alex Kuo's *Chinese Opera*

### Abstract

*In Alex Kuo's 1998 short novel Chinese Opera, American pianist Sonny Ling performs for the Chinese audience at the Beijing Concert Hall in the Spring of 1989. The program for his concert, which is also his "political statement," is "Schumann's Kreisleriana; Liszt's Mazeppa Revenge; Beethoven's Opus 111; No intermission." The concert represents for Sonny, who does not speak Chinese even though he was born in Chongqing a few years before his parents migrated to the United States, the only and crucial way to establish a transnational communication and alliance with his parents' people beyond geopolitical and racial hegemonic categorizations.*

*I read Sonny's music—which stands as the high art of the Romantic tradition and is deeply connected to the writing activity at multiple levels—in dialogue with Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy of music as founded on his conceptualization of hope and freedom in Beethoven's late works. I argue that in Chinese Opera art invites to recover the libertarian and revolutionary connotations and the emphasis on the individual non-conformity inscribed in the Romantic idea of nation, as a way to fight the transnational authoritarian and populist turns of the past and the present.*

**Keywords:** *Asian American Studies, Transnational American Studies, Alex Kuo, Romantic music and aesthetics, Adorno's sociology of music*

*Doesn't pure instrumental music have to create its own text?  
And aren't the themes in it developed, reaffirmed, varied, and contrasted  
in the same way as the subject of meditation in a philosophical succession of ideas?*  
(Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum*—fragment 444)

**I**n his 1995 *The Romantic Generation*, Charles Rosen provides a critical overview of Romantic music by exploring the generation of composers and musicians who were active between Beethoven and Chopin. *The Romantic Generation* focuses on both the function of music in

Romantic thought and the impact of literary experimentation on music. Rosen places musical language, forms, and styles of the early 19th century in relation to the dominant cultural ideas of Romanticism and its extramusical cultural developments. In the intellectual and cultural context of early Romanticism, music is an absolute system independent from the contingencies of outside reality and as such it constitutes a model for any system of thought, from language to philosophy and history. The linguistic turn of the late 18th and early 19th centuries also reconceived both language and music as forms of art. As Wilhelm von Humboldt began to conceptualize language as an independent system, Samuel Taylor Coleridge celebrated it as a product and process of the human mind, which “emancipate[s] the mind from the despotism of the eye,”<sup>1</sup> for emancipation from the senses is the way to reach the abstraction irradiated by reason. Music came to be seen as the first general language of mankind of which existing languages are particular individualizations. Thus, Rosen describes Romantic music as “an everyday act of creative imagination” (1995, 1) identified with speech and consciousness. Romantic music figures prominently in Alex Kuo’s short novel *Chinese Opera*, published in 1998. In this essay, I argue that Alex Kuo converses with the Romantic tradition precisely by presenting music as high art and using it as an alternative language to both the limitations of verbal languages and the official accounts of global history. Kuo renders music a transnational language that can convey individual subjectivity and consciousness in universal terms.

As Daniel Chua states, absolute music is only a discourse of Romanticism (2004, 75). Far from being a music ontology that effaces itself from the world, as we shall see, instrumental music is the expression of the subject situated in context. The Romantic ego expresses the self within musical forms, such as tonality, counterpoint, harmonic and rhythmic practices, which are not only the result of past formal developments, but also, as Theodor W. Adorno argues in several passages of his writings on music, the means to express the cultural project of the specific historical time in which the composer is framed. In his aesthetic sociology, Adorno devotes much attention to music theory. Particularly, he examines the epistemological foundations of musical discourse by focusing his analysis on the relationship between music and society. Serious, not commodified music, Adorno argues, has the ability to sound the truth of the human condition—the sorrows of the modern subject. My hypothesis, therefore, is that *Chinese Opera* can be read according to Adorno’s music theory and the methodological and epistemological question it raises of the significance of the relationship between art and history, social space, and subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Coleridge also calls language “the armory of human mind; at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests” (see Shawcross 1907, II, 22).

In this essay, I shall consider the ways in which the cultural and historical context can illuminate the music selection in Kuo's novel as well as the ways in which music conveys the individual's relationship with culture and history, accessible through no other medium. *Chinese Opera* focuses on the few months preceding June 1989, which American pianist Sonny Ling and his girlfriend, the opera and jazz singer Sissy George, spend at the Beijing Conservatory, where Sonny teaches music history. The linear temporality of the present, however, is disrupted by flashbacks, dreams, and short stories. Against the highly political context with the intensification of protests and violence, the central part of the novel—central both thematically and formally—focuses on Sonny's solo concert at the Beijing Concert Hall. The program is "Schumann's *Kreisleriana*; Liszt's *Mazepa Revenge*; Beethoven's *Opus 111*; No intermission" (1998, 61). In the first two parts of this essay, I argue that the music selection, as much as *Chinese Opera* itself, foregrounds the relationship between history and art, music and literature, activism and repression in ways related to the Romantic experience. Both the music and the novel are in fact a reflection on the historical revolutions of the past and the present, both open to a future of possibilities. The last section of this essay signals a shift in paradigm from the capacity of art to communicate transnationally and beyond language to that of its moral significance for a community, showing how insightful Kuo's use of music can prove to be in disclosing alternative possibilities for the future through a questioning of past and present dimensions—a rejection of what has been done to people and how it should have been different. In this sense, Kuo seems to build a dialogue with Theodor Adorno's philosophy of music as founded on the latter's conception of hope and freedom in Beethoven's late works. For Adorno, Beethoven's music is the articulation of an experience of freedom not yet realized.

### **1. Composing a cycle: language, history, identity, and back to language**

In 1805, Friedrich Schlegel asserted that "music, as inspiration, as the language of feeling, which agitates consciousness at its source, is the only universal language and the only ideal for any language that would justify itself by acting upon the innermost heart of consciousness" (translated in Bonds 2014, 114). While Schlegel establishes a movement from the universal to the particular, in a seminal text for the Jena circle, *Fragments from the Posthumous Papers of a Young Physicist, a Pocket Book for Friends of Nature* (1810), Johann Wilhelm Ritter, reversing the terms, writes: "each language can in addition serve music as its accompaniment; it is the representation of the particular in the general; [...] [t]he folk of all languages understand music, all languages are understood by music itself and translated into the general. Nevertheless, man himself is the translator" (translated in Rosen 1995, 59). According to Ritter, music is an ordered

system which has its basis in man's aesthetic sense, while in their desire to arrange sounds into patterns, the particular languages follow this musical order.

The idea of music as general language that precedes speech was reinterpreted by Robert Schumann through the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann, particularly his *Kreisleriana*, and grounded his technique of ambiguity, where music is enriched by words but not dependent on them. Thus, attempting to communicate obliquely what cannot be directly enunciated, Schumann "creates a literary effect entirely by musical means" (Rosen 1995, 68). Far from being just an exemplary paradigm for language, for the Romantics music becomes the independent inner reality created by man: it reproduces the *movement* of the mind before speech and as such music is a paradigm for thought (Chua 2004, 196). Therefore, Schlegel compares instrumental music to philosophy considering it a form of pure reason on its own themes,<sup>2</sup> while Coleridge makes music central in any theory of the arts by arguing that instrumental music serves well as a model for the representation of history. He finds the analogy between music and history in the reenacting of the mnemonic trace left by the past on the present, which, however, always strives for a "prepared and corresponsive future" (1812, 114-115). For Coleridge, history is a formally independent aesthetic structure like a work of music, a way of ordering experience artistically. In that, it is a formal procedure not dissimilar from a novel, as the coeval historiography was beginning to assert; moreover, the historical novel of the time, inverting the focus, was introducing the idea that history is the product of human decisions.

Only a few decades later, in the mid-19th century, Franz Liszt elaborates the idea of the composer of program music as a tone-poet who, drawing on a poetic image or narrative, demonstrates music's capacity to take the listener to a higher plane of ideality. Thus, Liszt states that music would

cease to be a simple combination of tones and become a poetic language, one that, perhaps better than poetry itself, more readily expresses everything in us that moves beyond accustomed horizons, everything that eludes analysis, everything that stirs within the inaccessible depths of imperishable desires and presentiments of the infinite. (Translated in Bonds 2014, 114)

The movement toward the infinite, though, does not situate music outside history. Liszt encouraged the development of national schools, which generated a music pedagogy that sounded national-political debates about national identities. Tonality, as Adorno maintains,

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<sup>2</sup> See Fragment 444 of Schlegel's *Athenaeum*, translated by Firchow (1971, 239).

created well-established sequences of chords that were always entered into a particular context and thus

they provided space for musical specificity just as concepts do for a particular reality, and at the same time, as with language, their abstractness was redeemed by the context in which they were located. The only difference is that the identity of these musical concepts lay in their own nature and not in a signified outside them. (1998b, 2)

Consequently, according to Robert Witkin, “In Adorno’s formulation, the musical material with which the composer works is both ‘congealed history’ and ‘language’ and the business of composition itself has to be seen as an historical process, a dynamic engagement with history” (1998, 113).

On both the structural and the diegetic level, *Chinese Opera* presents a cyclical framework for the (hi)story it narrates. Structurally, the novel is framed by two slim parts that constitute a sort of prologue and epilogue, whose function is that of embedding history in the story.<sup>3</sup> Diegetically, the story begins and ends with a roundtrip: from the United States to China and back from Beijing to Chicago. Within a temporal span of only a few months, Kuo inserts the individual stories of many characters in the larger historical context of 20th century China, from the end of imperial time to June 1989, while American and global history appears on the scene as a responding echo that drives global geopolitics within a system of shared responsibilities. History plays a fundamental role throughout the novel, as anticipated by the two excerpts placed on a blank page before the story begins. The excerpts thus introduce the story and suggest the main idea of the text: the first is from *Dogeaters* by Jessica Hagedorn and reads: “I just want you to get my damn history straight, it matters to me;” the second comes from Don DeLillo’s *Mao II*: “We do history in the morning and change it after lunch.” The two novels have many affinities with *Chinese Opera*, the most evident of which are a formal structure that displays the continuous returning of events, voices, and images within the text; a theme that highlights imperialism, totalitarianism, and international revolutions; a reflection over the writing activity and language. Through the selected quotations, Kuo delineates an intertextual (and interethnic) discourse about history based on three principles: history carries a significant weight; history is subjected to a continuous process of manipulation (to the point of self-mockery) and commodification; and history is everyone’s personal matter in the twofold sense that it concerns everyone personally and is constituted by everyone’s personal life. If history can be

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<sup>3</sup> On the role of Kuo’s narrators in structuring the relationship between history and stories see Sarnelli 2019.

fabricated to serve specific purposes, it also calls for serious (re)interpretations and demands the individual's responsibility to set it straight.

Individual stories are fragments that participate in both making sense of history and gathering their sense from history. In the following pages I shall try to investigate the role of art in Alex Kuo's novel by considering Kuo's music selection, as much as *Chinese Opera* itself, as fragments of a larger (hi)story about actions and counteractions, subjectivity and subjections, political activism and repression. Without claiming to provide any exhaustive technical or formal analysis of music, which is neither within my competence nor the objective of this essay, I will start discussing the cycle of fragments as that Romantic aesthetic form that in music both develops and deconstructs the proportions of the classical sonata, regarded as the highest expression of the Enlightenment values of rationality and progress. In dealing with such a broad field and complex subject, I will only concisely focus on some formal and ideological issues that I deem relevant to my discussion of Kuo's novel. I will contend that through his protagonist's musical performance, Kuo outlines a deconstructive representation of any hegemonic central perspectives regarding ethnic hyphenated identities.

The classical sonata, which is usually structured in a layout of three or four movements, reflects the classical ideals of form, symmetry, and balance, and embodies a sublime order of diversity within a unifying scheme. As one of the fundamental methods of organizing, interpreting, and analyzing the world, the basic sonata structure, like the coeval novel form, according to Adorno, well represents the social space. For Adorno, the highest development of the sonata form, as achieved by Beethoven in his middle-period compositions, represents the culmination of the bourgeois ideal of reconciliation between the individual and society, freedom and order, the particular and the collective. The dynamic development (the distinctive intervallic progressions of major and minor scales, the contrastive motivic-thematic particles) and the more static principle of rest and equilibrium within the sonata end up synthesized on a higher level, where the oppositions dissipate. Adorno equates the totality of the sonata form with that of society, thus the sonata mirrors the ideology of its historical time, namely bourgeois development, which ultimately subsumes its constitutive elements—the individual subjects—in the collective order of (hierarchical) social relations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Following Adorno, Witkin defines the bourgeois society of Beethoven's time as a "society in sonata-form" for

The hierarchical construction of music in which tones are related to one another through their tonal centres is paralleled by the structural ideal of a bourgeois society. Such a society, like the sonata-allegro, was both individuated and hierarchical. The sonata-form is a closed form; its illusory dynamism is achieved at the cost of a restriction in the openness of the

The Jena Romantics' conception of the fragment as an aesthetic form that expresses their loss of belief in a holistic and soteriological view of the world in the wake of the French Revolution, reorganizes the relation between unity and parts. In the complex aesthetic debate of early Romanticism, the fragment is generally viewed as a partial whole, either a residue of something once complete and now broken or decayed, or a microcosm that reflects a greater, unrepresentable whole and encapsulates its characteristics.<sup>5</sup> The Romantic fragment in music, as in poetry, entails a renunciation of classical focus by redirecting the synthetic power of absolute unity from a single appearance into a multiplicity of fragments. According to Rosen, Romantic music is epitomized by Robert Schumann's cycles of independent songs which attain their full meaning only as separate parts within the context and the performance of the whole work. Whereas traditionally a cyclical form may merely signify the return of an earlier motif in a subsequent one, with Beethoven's late compositions and especially with Schumann

cyclical form is not a form at all but the disturbance of an established form. [...] A cyclical form makes an earlier movement intrude on the domain of a later one. It is this dislocation of an accepted form which had such an appeal to the Romantic composer: it enabled him to use a traditional form but give it a more personal urgency. (Rosen 1995, 88-89)

Therefore, the cycle on the one hand disrupts standard forms by returning them to the subject, and on the other hand places different parts into an open design. Although each fragment or song has its own individual value, it acquires full meaning only as a part of an infinitely repeatable cycle. The architecture of the Romantic cyclical form is that of a finite, preconceived structure that never reaches its final closure, but, by leaving both its beginning and end open, implies a potentially infinite reactualization.

In *Chinese Opera*, Sonny plays a cycle of fragments drawn from the most representative tradition of Romantic music (Schumann's *Kreisleriana*; Liszt's *Mazeppa revenge*; Beethoven's *Opus 111*). The pieces, as the chosen expression of the pianist's subjective will, are not arranged in a particular formal or chronological order, but appear to achieve unity through the simple addition of one piece to another. Nevertheless, as Rosen suggests, in the Romantic aesthetics of the fragment the specific, sometimes opposing demands of the whole and of each individual opus

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'sensuous particulars' to each other—a restriction inherent in diatonicism. The system of tonal relations which ensured the lawfulness of all relations among elements concealed the unfreedom of the individual tones and the force with which they were constrained in their relations. (1998, 45)

According to Lukács, the writing of the novel is a similar search for meaning and integrity (Witkin 1998, 28-29).

<sup>5</sup> For an exhaustive analysis of the dual aspect of the fragment-form see Frank 2004.

“are intended to coexist without being resolved” (1995, 83). The three pieces, all extremely difficult to execute, express strong unresolved polarizations: Robert Schumann’s 1838 *Kreisleriana* is a dramatic, poetic and eccentric composition in eight movements, which seems to start in the middle of a process already initiated before the beginning of the first violent piece and proceeds through systematically opposed rhythmic periods and accents that do not cohere in any traditional harmony, but seem to emanate from separate, independent voices; composed as an exercise in 1826 and reworked on until the final version of 1851, *Mazeppa* is the fourth of Franz Liszt’s *Transcendental Études*, which requires layers of violently contrasting sounds in order to render its very dramatic and almost comic scenario; and the 1822 *Piano Sonata No. 32 Op. 111*, the last of Ludwig van Beethoven’s piano sonatas, is built on an antinomy of two highly contrasting movements, *Maestoso-Allegro con brio ed appassionato* and *Arietta-Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*, therefore it is a denial of the sonata’s idea of integration which, as seen, is traditionally composed of three or four movements. The structure of Sonny’s concert, which does not allow for intermissions or applause, is a cycle in which each section follows the previous one and ends itself unresolved. Without a systematic center, Sonny’s musical performance deconstructs all the symmetries and geometries of classical tradition while, by leaving open all the contrasts, it foregrounds what Schlegel calls the “chaotic universality” of infinite individual stances (Frank 2004, 210).

The concert represents Sonny’s personal “closing statement” (Kuo 1998, 123) to his parents’ people. Interestingly, Sonny explains the musical selection for his recital program to the orchestra Director Zheng Xiaomei by sending her a journal article about his father. Sonny in fact had traveled to Beijing in order to shed light on the muddled story of his family, which is mostly unknown to him. Through Sonny’s conjectures and a few mediated pieces of information, *Chinese Opera* depicts the image of the no-name father as a brilliant Chinese psychologist, who had believed in his country’s social and political changes until, in disagreement with the model of governance of both Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek, he chose to exile himself and his family to the United States. In the new country, however, he became a bitter man “worried over the McCarthyism, fighting off alcoholism” and “writing his memoirs and a book about China funded by laundered grants from the CIA” (1998, 58). Outlining a different project for his own life, Sonny, who was born in Chongqing in 1944 two years before his family moved to the United States, chooses for himself a strongly oppositional identity. He calls himself “an American by birth” and refuses to be identified as either Chinese or Chinese American. In *Chinese Opera*, ethnic hyphenated identities are only used as marks of identification in power relations and are assigned according to racial views and geopolitical positions. Thus, Sonny becomes alternatively



an “oriental American” according to the white American ambassador, just “American” for the *People’s Daily*, and “American Chinese” in journalist Cao Feng’s report for *Xinhua*, the official News Agency of the People’s Republic of China. Similarly Sissy, who is the daughter of a Native American man confined to a reservation in the state of Washington and an African American country singer, is never believed to be an American, but rather seen as the ethnic Other from a Chinese perspective: Mongolian, Uygur, or Tibetan.<sup>6</sup> Whereas much of Asian American literature (and minorities literature in a broad sense) usually represents the intergenerational conflicts within the family as expression of the East-West struggle inherent in the process of assimilation into American mainstream society, Kuo reorganizes and resignifies the father-son and father-daughter trope in relation to identity politics and transnational power apparatuses.<sup>7</sup> By, on the one hand, manifesting the arbitrary character and ontological inconsistency of racial definitions and, on the other hand, overhauling the center-periphery dynamics, Kuo establishes an identity polarization that cannot be resolved in a synthesis of the two terms, or in a position of suspension between different structures of citizenship and belonging, but that instead keeps open the deconstructive relation between (compound) national definitions and an individual’s identifications with a nation(ality).

However, by claiming to be American, Sonny is not choosing between repressive and dictatorial China and the free and democratic United States. Sonny and Sissy—as their names visually show—are in a symmetrical position as both have inherited a history of exiles and violence. Precisely as the Romantic musical cycle is predicated upon an always expanding, incomplete meaning that develops further with each reactualization of an antecedent motif in the different pieces, the Tiananmen protests are a fragment of the global cyclical history of political activism

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<sup>6</sup> I have written at length on the discursive strategies and cultural constructions performed in the novel in order to produce subjectivities based on either the power positions of the authority figures or the divide between nationality and the ethnicized body in *Panda in the Promised Land* (2019).

<sup>7</sup> Although there are many variations of this trope, the intergenerational conflict plot foregrounds the nativist/assimilationist dialectics and the contrast between Eastern and Western cultural values and practices as found in many Asian American narratives, by building on the oppositional stance between the immigrant parents and the native-born American children. On the one hand, the parents, striving for an identity position that at the same time keeps alive the cultural roots of their countries of origin and expects from their children only specific forms of American upward mobility, end up being depicted as different, archaic, and “unfeelingly oppressive” (Li 1998, 129). On the other hand, the second-generation subjects shape their identities negotiating between a structure of indebtedness towards the parents’ sacrifice, which produces the docile subject of a model minority, and the desire to make their own choices, which mostly translate into forgetting their ethnocultural past and assimilating into mainstream society, thus generating feelings of alienation from their parents.

and violent repression, so much so that Sissy cries: “This is like Sand Creek. This is Wounded Knee” (1998, 108). The East-West, China-United States contrast is here revealed as a mere ideological polarization.<sup>8</sup> In the process of mutual de-centering and de-familiarization, Kuo summons a legacy of subversion and policing that affects the world transnationally. The self-exile from China that Sonny’s father imposes on himself in an attempt to escape the oppression derived from the political situation in his country does not bring him to a real alternative in the United States; rather, in the new context, he experiences disappointment for his own compliance with the CIA and suspicion and attacks from the American government based on his nationality. Alex Kuo puts this man’s story in a comparative relation with the material circumstances of the lives of all the other characters in the novel: in an intricate plot that weaves together the many stories of individuals in different historical times and spaces, clearly audible echoes spread from the stories of both Sissy’s Native American father and her Chinese friend, Professor Luo. Just like the original natural environment, Sissy’s father has almost disappeared from the land that had been his home for centuries and mostly survives in his daughter’s dreams and his people’s stories. Similarly to Sonny’s father, who never speaks directly in the novel and the rationale for whose actions is to be found in the political-historical context, the only words uttered by Sissy’s father also denounce a past of violence: “Be careful with yourself Sissy, you are the only one of us left” (1998, 19). Through the stories of the two fathers, the novel highlights the numerous existing correspondences between Sonny’s Chinese legacy and Sissy’s American one: both fathers symbolize a history of oppression that has been carried out for political and economic purposes. Professor Luo is another part of the same equation. He becomes a dissident during the April protests due to a lesson about the revolutions that shook Beijing in the 20th century, starting with the Boxer Rebellion against Western colonialism. After the Cultural Revolution professor Luo had migrated to Australia in order to escape “his country’s fascist government” (1998, 97) only to find himself an unwelcome “legal alien, needed but unwanted” in Canberra. When in 1989 he has to flee again because his words to the students are deemed seditious by the authorities, as will be seen in the next part of this essay, Sonny follows his flight in a dream in which Luo joins a couple of runaways from Guatemala. In this merging of times and geographies, Kuo reveals a systematic and programmatic sequence of historical crimes. The endless recycling of stories of surveillance and discipline that run through the novel evokes Berlin, Jerusalem, Buenos Aires, Greenham Common, Bogota, and Hiroshima to implicate the

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<sup>8</sup> For a reading of the novel through Abdelhebir Khatibi’s concept of double critique as a way of problematizing the very notion of the binary by undermining all radical polarization, see Sarnelli 2015.

historical regimes of oppression under the dominant form of state power, as well as individual and communal acts of resistance.

Sonny's musical performance, as a consequence, is his personal fragment, balanced and complete in itself and yet grounded in the global history and collective perspectives it contributes to open up. Sonny's statement, precisely as the Romantic fragment, is

a closed structure, but its closure is a formality: it may be separated from the rest of the universe, but it implies the existence of what is outside itself not by reference but by its instability. The form is not fixed but is torn apart or exploded by paradox, by ambiguity, [...] implying a past before the song begins and a future after its final chord. (Rosen 1995, 51)

In the relationship between history and subjectivity, Adorno argues, music is the most eloquent of all languages, for

Every musical phenomenon points to something beyond itself by reminding us of something, contrasting itself with something or arousing our expectations. The summation of such a transcendence of particulars constitutes the 'content;' it is what happens in music. But if musical structure or form is to be more than a set of didactic systems, it does not just embrace the content from outside; it is the thought process by which content is defined. (1998b, 6)

Communicating the invisible movement of the mind in Ritter's terms, Sonny's music is able to convey meanings beyond the barrier of language. For Sonny, who does not speak Chinese, music represents the only and crucial way to convey his statement to his parents' people, thus opening the gate for a transnational communication and alliance beyond geopolitical and racial hegemonic categorizations.

## **2. Narrating a cycle: blankness, politics, fiction, and back to blankness**

*Chinese Opera* is also a fragment in a collection of narratives which originate from something very political. In the novel, the activity of writing is refracted in multiple instances and always invested with the high task of undertaking a quest for truth. Both Alex Kuo the real writer and the novel's narrator, who claims to be delivering "his acquired reconstructed *history*" (1998, 10, emphasis added), share the activity of writing with journalist Cao Feng, who also wants to write a story about Sonny drawing from his imagination, since he believes it "would be more truthful anyway" (1998, 78). This triple authorial voice conjoins in the desire of writing a novel which would "reflect what a revolution really meant today, exactly forty years after Mao declared its success atop Tiananmen in 1949" (1998, 85). In his effort to "replicate [Sonny's] recital as much

as language would permit” (1998, 82), Cao only knows that his story will be a political metaphor and the title should be “Point Blank.”

Going into “the point-blank triple trills where all the notes faced each other” is also Sonny’s way of playing the last part of his concert, the Beethoven piece, the one he “had been waiting for all his life” (1998, 71). In Romantic musical aesthetics, blankness describes an idea of absolute music as a timeless autonomous work that transcends all historical particularities. However, Daniel Chua argues that “music’s abstraction is itself a political ploy” (2017, 30) that tries to erase from music any cause and any context, while there is always a history and a politics:

Throughout its history, ‘absolute music’ has functioned as a blank flag hoisted above the parapets of some political crisis in the hope that the erasure of meaning would compensate for the reality of failure. The abstract reigns as a refuge when the politically concrete breaks down. The early romantics were the first to hoist music’s non-representational sign, displaying its empty surface as the tattered promise of a freedom that the French Revolution failed to deliver. In the wake of the Terror that followed the euphoria of 1789, their philosophy of pure music internalised the revolution as an aesthetic state bristling with the potential for freedom but with no concrete policies for the present in case liberty were to realise itself prematurely again as violence. (2017, 31)

Blankness therefore is not an evasion into a vacant void. As the colors of the rainbow mix together resulting in whiteness, Chua further explains, music blankness is a formal whiteness that is full rather than empty. In including and working with a proliferation of signs, music is a blank force that, it seems to me, functions as the Kantian faculty of the imagination: an attempt between senses and reason to assign meanings to the intuition of things in the aesthetic realm. This is particularly true in the case of freedom for, according to Kant, freedom is a manifestation of the “autonomy of the will” not accessible to experience—according to “the property of the will by which it is a law to itself”<sup>9</sup>—that founds the moral appraisal of the modern subject. As we shall see in the last part of this essay, music embodies an experience of freedom as both the most radical emancipation of the individual’s talent and the fullest possible communion with a (trans)national collectivity. Music’s blankness is, in fact, where truth dwells; it is “the unseen truth that permits one to see” (Chua 2017, 29).

Cao’s “Point Blank” becomes the program for another cycle of fragments which includes both his stories, as the fictionalized and thus more truthful version of real events, and Sonny’s dreams that anticipate, complete, or explain Cao’s thoughts. What connects the different stories

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<sup>9</sup> I am referring here to Immanuel Kant’s classical theory of the Will, developed in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). The quote can be found in the edition edited by Guyer (1998, 440).

that Cao Feng writes is the necessity to investigate political and social ideology in order to find reasons for unintelligible historical events, for “some stories are beyond the comprehension of journalism; they belong to fiction” (1998, 116). In a continuous echoing of stories about revolutions and repressions, the two words ‘point’ and ‘blank’ create connections between and among a number of narratives: Cao’s review of Sonny’s recital; his memories about the racial reception reserved to Sonny at the American Embassy, where the white diplomatic corps was absent; the rumors about a demonstration to be held in Tiananmen Square; Cao’s potential novel about Sonny as “the exiled son of China’s last revolution” (1998, 86); his musing on Maoist revolution which turned its spirit of rebellion against the upper class and its corrupted power into a market ideology with its logic of commodification; and “Smoke,” a story secretly written by Cao. “Smoke” stems from the news of a woman who intended to commit suicide by throwing herself from the 13th floor of the Bank of China. Narrated with no small irony and an incisive cinematic framing, the story tells the heroic attempt of psychologist Shen Zang to save the woman and avoid the spread of panic among the small crowd that observes her from the street. Surrounded by a disproportionate deployment of police forces, Shen Zang does not begin to negotiate with the woman, rather he tells her a story, one that “she must listen to if she had hung on to life for so long” (1998, 81). Shen’s story (contained in the story written by Cao, which is included in Kuo’s story) in turn narrates infinite stories of oppression and non-violent resistance that mothers have handed down to their daughters throughout history, in different times and locations.

Cao’s stories appear to be closely connected with Sonny’s dreams, for parts of the latter are rewritten by the former, while the dreams disclose the motivations that prevent Cao from actually completing his fictional works: one reason is his preoccupation with the historically contingent situation of the 1989 Beijing spring; a second reason has to do with Cao’s uneasiness with the role that art has universally assigned to heroic figures. In the first oneiric image sketched in chapter two, Sonny also views himself as “the exiled son of China’s revolution,” who has returned to lead his students “to complete the task unfinished by Mao,” while in the background television footage covers “their heroic ascent up a snow-covered peak” that keeps transforming into mount Kilimanjaro, McKinley, Fuji, until “it had become all of them” (1998, 23-24). Specularly, in the penultimate chapter, Sonny dreams of surreal stories of runaway people first from his childhood and then from China, Guatemala, Japan, Bogota, the West Bank. In the dream, moving through many doors and different passages, the stories follow one another, blur into each other, and ultimately mirror Sissy’s simultaneous activity of helping Professor

Luo disappear beyond the wall of police surveillance by offering him her people's stories of resistance.

In Chinese tradition as much as in Romantic sensibility, dreams are a classical epistemological site that demands serious analysis and interpretation. The endeavor becomes even more urgent if one knows that "the dreams are thickest here where there is no room for error" (Kuo 1998, 114). By challenging Western narratives that proleptically assume that certain historical dynamics accrue to certain geographies or ideologies through a tracing of alternative symmetries, Sonny's oneiric fragments generate "an expanding kaleidoscope" (1998, 109) in which both repression and activism, policing and solidarity, can be found worldwide. The ambiguity of meaning that stems from constantly expanding geographies and historical times calls for continuous acts of interpretation. Without foreseeing any final, conclusive end, Kuo reactivates the logic of musical fragments in the space of dreams and stories: both music and fiction give to the listener and the reader an opportunity to respond individually and actively to art. According to Adorno, interpretation is a crucial part inherent in music, what ultimately distinguishes it from language. While the interpretation of language, Adorno argues, is based on understanding it, musical interpretation encloses a dual action: on the one hand, an interpretation in music is itself a performance, just as the activity of writing, so that "to play music correctly means first and foremost to speak its language properly" (1998b, 3); on the other hand, since music reveals truth in an oblique way, it demands interpretation from the listener. Thus, listening to music is an activity of the mind that, as a silent reading, can happen in the individual's imagination and presupposes a good deal of effort in order to receive insights.

Blankness, as a consequence, does not qualify music as a shelter removed from the outer world, or as an empty container to be filled with any historical or political ideology; rather, music is a space for a productive proliferation of signs. By remaining just a title on which many stories and reflections pivot, Cao's "Point Blank" signals a void full of unwritten or unpublished stories. The impossibility of materializing thoughts into written words discloses a hindrance in the present condition and reinstates the necessity of imagining a different future. In a formulation that recalls Adorno's view of freedom in the music of Beethoven, Chua maintains that

the claim of blankness is both a form of retreat and an act of freedom. The eradication of reality on the surface allows music to retreat into an independent realm where it can reformulate the possibility of a freedom that has yet to be realised. Both the withdrawal and the promise are blank; one erases the present as a political failure, whereas the other prefigures the future by abstracting the ideals as form emptied of content. (2017, 32)

In music, going blank suggests a movement of the will, a progression from the creative process that embraces everyone as a totality in its attempt to represent the non-representational. In *Chinese Opera*, stories, dreams, and music are the means of expression of the subjective imagination: by assuming a position of absolute autonomy, art, as for Adorno, is what survives the Freudian civilization process, unrepressed sensuality, rationality without an end. As what manifests and communicates the individual's consciousness, art is also historically and politically positioned. Music and fiction are expressions of the individual's creative mind in action, which returns agency to subjectivity and sets the subjects on a path of political and social engagement that is continuously re-(en)acted through art and its enduring search for alternative voices.

### **3. A hope for freedom in (trans)national communities: Kuo through Adorno through Beethoven**

After the concert, journalist Cao Feng congratulates Sonny by saying that during the performance he saw “some of the older persons crying. You were convincing. [...] You believed in the music you were playing, a breathless conviction, and we did too. [...] I think there was more than just music tonight in your playing.” The orchestra Director Zheng Xiaomei agrees: “I think Mr. Ling said something *defiant* and *assertive* and *hopeful* to us tonight” (Kuo 1998, 74, emphasis added). My final observations in this conclusive part of the essay try to cast light on that *something more than just music* in Sonny's performance that shifts the paradigm from the singular person—‘I’ or ‘you’—to the collective ‘we’ of the (trans)national community. In my view, Kuo expresses the Romantic desire for individual freedom in a non-authoritarian and non-divisive nation. The ending of the novel gives, in fact, ethical solidity and importance to the individual's engagement in the fights of the community. Correspondingly, it demands that the collectivity takes on the responsibility of questioning the ideologies of the past, which affect the material conditions of the present by means of acts of repression stabilized and narrativized by national and international powers. As for Coleridge, Sonny's tripartite statement introduces the past into the present and together they produce the future dimension.

Schumann's *Kreisleriana* is based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's character Johannes Kreisler, a passionate musician of immense talent, albeit emotionally unbalanced, who is Hoffman's own alter ego and a recurrent figure in his novels. The music thus plays with the idea of insanity, schizophrenia, and what is lacking when the world of everyday reality not only coexists with a

hallucinatory world, but is unintelligible without its irrational and often absurd shadows.<sup>10</sup> Sonny comments on the shadows of the past by playing this *defiant* first part of his concert with “no soulful self-indulgence in nineteenth century melancholia” but instead with “intelligent and graceful distance” (Kuo 1998, 70), before moving to the present with *Mazeppa*. *Mazeppa* is inspired by the legend of the rebellious Ivan Mazeppa, who had a love affair with a married Polish princess and because of that he was tied naked to a horse and made to run in the wilderness. The horse ends up in Ukraine, where Mazeppa is rescued by Cossacks, and eventually becomes their leader and national hero. The story contains a spectrum of characteristically Romantic literary elements, such as human suffering, catastrophe, and triumph, so that it also inspired Lord Byron and Victor Hugo. In his *assertive* part Sonny plays Mazeppa’s *revenge*: “into the dark [...] into that mad catastrophic diaspora between war and revolution, returning into the colossal arpeggiated revenge” (1998, 71).<sup>11</sup> Focusing on the grandiose finale, like the hero who in Hugo’s 1829 words “falls then rises a king,” Sonny “proclaim[s] his personal statement of the triumph of individual will and talent not wasted” (1998, 61). Lastly, the Beethoven part—“floating and distancing, liting here in compensation in these final high semiquavers, celebrating that pace in solitude, and without regret, rising into that final magnificent evaporation” (1998, 71)—expresses both the human condition of silence and the future possibility of a freedom not *yet realized* in history. This is insightfully explained in what is the most famous verbal account of the sonata: the lecture given by Thomas Mann’s fictional character, Wendell Kretschmar, in *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend* (1948), for which Adorno was consulted as musical adviser. In a lecture entitled “Why did Beethoven not write a third movement to the Piano Sonata Opus 111?” Kretschmar shows to a small audience that, after a returning with crescendo intensity of the variations of the initial motif,<sup>12</sup> the Arietta, deprived of the dramatic dialectic of

<sup>10</sup> According to Rosen, Schumann’s music, with its interplay between developed and suggested melodies, hints at the “presence of a secret”: “The inaudible in Schumann’s music is not conceived, as in Bach, as a theoretical structure which can only be imperfectly realized in sound, but as a structure of sound which implies what is absent” (1995, 10).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, following Adorno, Sonny’s Liszt piece can also be considered as a disclosure of something that had been absent up to that moment. According to Adorno, in fact, the assertive statements in which the intentions of art become “eloquently unambiguous” are to be found in “the supreme moments of great music, and they are often the most violent moments.” In these cases, music does not “impart knowledge,” but rather expresses “the decisive, even the magisterial confirmation of something that has not been explicitly stated” (1998b, 4).

<sup>12</sup> As in *Mazeppa*, the finale of Beethoven’s Sonata *Opus 111* also switches to a major key: *Mazeppa* is in D minor but its final cadence is in D major; the first movement of the Sonata is in C minor and the second in C major. The contrast between a minor and a major tonality can create a tension in the music modulation that may be resolved or not afterwards. Together with



the classical sonata form, finds its natural conclusion in silence. The difficulties of the sonata are to be understood, Adorno believes, in terms of an impending historical impasse.

In his musical essays, as in his entire work, Adorno criticizes a society and world he considers inhuman. The Enlightenment claims about the universality of humanist values based on reason and the abstract promises of freedom, which served to legitimate a class-specific ideology of human progress and the mastery of nature, ultimately led to Auschwitz. Beethoven's middle-period style, according to Adorno, corresponds to specific historical conditions which appeared to offer dialectical synthesis, at least as a possibility.<sup>13</sup> The Enlightenment tradition of bourgeois humanism, which Adorno values as humanity at its peak (1981, 137), is fully expressed in Beethoven's sonatas in his middle period which, as seen, best represent the natural tendency of art toward unity as well as a belief in possible human wholeness. Focusing primarily on these works, the history of Beethoven's reception has shaped the expressively potent image of a Promethean Beethoven whose music signifies the self-generated fullness of a subject that will lead humanity towards its moral utopia. His "powers of subjective production," writes Adorno, are "heightened to the point of hubris, to the point where man becomes Creator" (1998a, 283). This is why Beethoven's music has been played at many historical landmarks: at the first Western concert in the People's Republic of China after the reopening of the dialogue with the West in 1973; the Fall of the Berlin Wall; the night of the attacks on 9/11; the first concert in the West Bank by the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in 2005. We must also remember that the *Ode to Joy* from the 9th Symphony is the basic theme for the European Union organizational anthem which represents Europe as a whole beyond national borders.<sup>14</sup>

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its perfect three-part balance, tonality's potential for contrast and tension constitutes the basis for the classical sonata. For a discussion of Adorno-Mann's reading of the Arietta and the introduction of a C-sharp after the introductory C, see Hoeckner 2003 and Chua 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Rose Subotnik, however, argues that Adorno knew that synthesis is an impossibility even in the sonata allegro and that in fact Beethoven was already "beginning to sense in the second-period style [...] that individual freedom is an illusion, or at least a problem." Consequently, she notes that Adorno "interprets the third-period style as a critique of the second-period one" (1991, 22).

<sup>14</sup> At the first Peace Congress in Paris on August 21st, 1849, Victor Hugo supported the project of the United States of Europe as the actualization of the Romantic cosmopolitanism which sought to preserve the variety of nations in the world as a way to promote the development of the whole continent, just as the individuals could contribute to the perfectibility of the nation by improving themselves. In his discourse, Hugo insists that diversity can be maintained within unity by finding a balance in the dialectic between nationalism and cosmopolitanism that politically privileges the integrity of nations over cosmopolitan communion:

un jour viendra où vous France, vous Russie, vous Italie, vous Angleterre, vous Allemagne, vous toutes, nations du continent, sans perdre vos qualités distinctes et votre glorieuse individualité, vous vous fondrez étroitement dans une unité supérieure, et vous constituerez

In *Chinese Opera*, Kuo plays with the idea of a Promethean Sonny who dares to seek knowledge and rebels against the established order, but ends up rejecting the narrative of the mythological hero. When questioned about his decision to leave China in the middle of a new cycle of revolution and repression, Sonny replies that if he stayed in a country where he is just a visitor, “it would only be a symbolic but inconsequential and romantic gesture” (1998, 123) that would transform him into another martyr. Sonny rejects the heroic paradigm which ties the idea of freedom to its inherently tragic destiny since the hero’s moral code demands that he be willing to sacrifice his life for the higher cause of the collectivity. Sonny instead fulfills his contribution to the Chinese cause as well as his act of freedom through his musical statement, after which he decides to go back to his political life in Chicago. In fact, Sonny does not play the *Eroica* nor the 9th Symphony, but for his *hopeful* part he chooses instead Beethoven’s last piano sonata, which Adorno regards as the composer’s last will, his act of leavetaking:

The close of the Arietta variations [of op. III] has such a force of backward-looking, of leavetaking, that, as if over-illuminated by this departure, what has gone before is immeasurably enlarged. This despite the fact that the variations themselves, up to the symphonic conclusion of the last, contain scarcely a moment which could counterbalance that of leavetaking as fulfilled present—and such a moment may well be denied to music, which exists in illusion. But the true power of illusion in Beethoven’s music—of the ‘dream in stars eternal’—is that it can invoke what has not been as something past and non-existent. Utopia is heard only as what has already been. (1998a, 326)

The Arietta is a backward-looking force in which the final cadence represents the *enlarged* residue of the past reverberating in the *fulfilled* present like a historical echo. Retrospective, forward-looking, and timeless qualities all coexist in this music. According to Charles Rosen, the final movement of the Arietta “succeeds as almost no other work in suspending the passage of time at its climax” (1971, 446). At the same time, Adorno seems convinced of the momentum’s inevitability.

Whereas Western bourgeois humanism, understood as the dialectical unfolding in history of Enlightenment values, is best represented by the music of Beethoven’s middle period, the music in his late style signals the interruption of the progress of history. It departs from both Kantian and Hegelian philosophy and is an indictment of such bourgeois beliefs that resulted in ideologies of enslavement and populist commodification. For Adorno, Beethoven is the epitome of the bourgeois artist who overthrows the bourgeoisie through his bourgeois art: “If he is the

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la fraternité européenne, absolument comme la Normandie, la Bretagne, la Bourgogne, la Lorraine, l’Alsace, toutes nos provinces, se sont fondues dans la France.” (1875, 383)

musical prototype of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, he is at the same time the prototype of a music that has escaped from its social tutelage and is aesthetically fully autonomous, a servant no longer. His work explodes the schema of a complaisant adequacy of music and society” (1998a, 90). The dissolution of the middle-period style with its powerful resolutions results in a denial and subsequent exclusion of the subject as a free entity integrated within the social order. The language of reason and of the mastery of objects is hence replaced by silence.

Adorno perceives the catastrophe in Beethoven’s late style as that art that, filling the silence with the not-existent, reinstates freedom as critique. In order to protect itself from becoming ideology and to retain its authenticity, which in Adorno’s sense is protesting the conditions that dehumanize the human, art has to acknowledge the impossibility of its harmonious coexistence with social forces and consequently has to withdraw from society into the individual imagination.<sup>15</sup> In contrast with the motif of the hero, Sonny’s self-assertion of a consciousness is a cry for particularity that refuses to integrate itself into totality and instead, borrowing Chua’s quoted words, retreats into the independent realm of music, from which it can reformulate the *possibility* of freedom. His retreat, however, is not a disappearance into a formal void, but the very activity that enables the articulation of his identity against a given world: Sonny finds his American identity in his political life in Chicago. If “freedom is real in Beethoven only as hope,” as a tension towards the future, as Adorno claims, Sonny’s last variation foregrounds the present gaps, those holes that are “full of inaudible cries that things should be different” (1973, 381). Rose Subotnik notes that Adorno does not deny the remains of human hope in Beethoven’s late work:

The significance Adorno derives from Beethoven’s late work is precisely the opposite: what is humanly necessary is ontologically impossible. The dichotomy to which Adorno points in Beethoven’s third-period style is not a Kantian duality, for which no synthesis is conceivable, but the remains of a synthesis, the vestiges of an individual human subject sorely aware of the wholeness, and consequently the survival, that has eluded it forever. (1991, 37)

Adorno’s critique therefore invokes hope in the music of the late Beethoven by gesturing towards an alternative history after the catastrophe.

Alex Kuo, like Adorno, writes in the post-Terror, post-Auschwitz, post-Tiananmen time. While always reinstating revolution as an ideal and hope, Kuo questions its historical manifestations, their heroes and martyrs, and the triumph of ideology that “culminate in a nation that colonized

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<sup>15</sup> On the complex issue of how the music of Beethoven’s late style negotiates its authenticity between the principles of autonomy and heteronomy through the superimposition in its form of contrasting, irreconcilable antinomies see Subotnik 1991, 24-30.

itself" (1998, 86). Sissy and Sonny leave China immediately before June 4th, 1989. At the airport, the Conservatory chair Madame Zhou bids them farewell by saying: "Sonny, next time you come to Beijing, you can play your encore, Bach's Goldberg" (1998, 129). For his Beijing concert, Sonny had originally planned on playing Variations 25, 26, and 30 of Bach's series of the *Goldberg*, "but it didn't feel right" (1998, 74). The *Goldberg Variations* is Johann Sebastian Bach's 1741 composition consisting of thirty-two pieces, which include an initial Aria that serves as the basis for the subsequent thirty distinct variations; the Aria is then repeated in the last piece, the *Aria da capo* (Williams 2001). The reprising of the Aria may suggest an endless loop as the piece ends as it begins, with the return of the Aria, but unlike a cycle of fragments, the composition recalls a whole text reflecting on itself. The concepts of number and symmetry become in fact the core of the work's structure and order. With its perfect architecture, its harmonic unity obtained out of independent parts, and its relation between the audible and the inaudible (Rosen 1995, 5), "the expanding intervals in the canons of Bach's Goldberg Variations may have echoed the structure of the Ptolemaic universe" (Chua 2004, 80).<sup>16</sup> In a historical moment in which the rational structure of the cosmos has long shown its collapse, Sonny renounces the harmonic geometries of classical and Baroque language and plays a beautiful fresco of Romantic music, with bluntly nationalist nuances.

In the Romantic conception, nations function as individuals on the world stage, simultaneously unique and connected to a larger cosmopolitan whole. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this essay, the Romantics negotiate between part and whole, the individual and the collective, solitude and connection, striving for an (im)perfect balance between the opposites. As historian Warren Breckman summarizes:

Romantics were acutely aware of the inadequacy of a naked individuality shorn of roots, connections and belonging. The tension in Romanticism's basic view of the human person fueled a search for a principle that would combine a liberating ideal of individuality with the fullest possible identification of the individual with a greater whole. In political terms, we might say that Romanticism desired the individual freedom promised by modernity with none of its centrifugal, alienating, and divisive effects. Stated more broadly, this desire drove a Romantic quest for the most radical emancipation of the creative person, *and*, with equal fervor, it fed a yearning for a connection with something larger and grander than the self, whether with nature and God or with community and nation. The goal of this Romantic dream was not the obliteration of the individual but a harmonious and endlessly enriching exchange between the individual and the totality. This was, strictly speaking, impossible. This underlying impossibility helps to explain why in Romanticism, despite the Romantics' dream of harmonious unity, emphasis could swing between the self and the totality, the individual and the collective, and the assertion of autonomous selfhood and the submission

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<sup>16</sup> On Variations 25, 26, and 30 see Williams 2001 and Forkel 1920.

to a higher power. (2008, 4)

Built as an open cycle of fragments, *Chinese Opera* does not resolve the opposites in a way that allows the reconciliation between the individual and society. And yet, by staging different examples of the individual's engagement with the historical and political world through artistic action, Kuo foregrounds art as the realm where individuality and collectivity would not be mutually exclusive. That is, provided that social protests remain imperative in the present as in the future, in art as much as in the outer world.

Although possessing an individual voice, the Romantic subject is conceived of as fundamentally connected to something larger. The Romantic search for a way out of the crisis of values and identity is the search for a new community in which the individual can put down roots, and toward which it is ethically responsible. The community sought by all the characters in *Chinese Opera* is found transnationally in sharing the same history of oppression and attempts to resist it. The transnational nature of the communities makes Kuo reject late 19th century nationalism, with its organic attachment to an ethnic identity and the idea of a nation homogenized in language and blood. In fact, in *Chinese Opera*, music is a universal language that enables communication beyond the particular languages; history—events as much as ideologies—reproduces itself in different epochs and all territories; and the protagonist dismisses the role of the national hero representative of the whole nation. Though asked to take on that role, Sonny does not become the bearer of a historical mission, neither as a hero nor as a particular nation's grass-roots element who gains power in order to protect that nation's particularity. Rather, the Romantic spirit of the three compositions in Sonny's recital, as the cycles of stories and dreams in the novel, imbues the Tiananmen protests with the Romantic *Zeitgeist* and its ideals of freedom and self-determination. In *Chinese Opera* the role of art is that of an invitation to recover the libertarian and revolutionary connotations and the emphasis on individual non-conformity that pertain to the Romantic idea of nation, as a way to fight the transnational authoritarian and populist turn. In this sense, *Chinese Opera* and its intertextual echoes are more relevant now than they ever were in the past.

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