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Anxiety of Belonging: Hong Kong Music and Subjectivity

Panel: Performing Arts and Island Societies: Beyond State, Nation, and Empire

The island of Hong Kong is often called a cultural chameleon. Before it became a Special Economic Region of China in 1997, this island territory has been called variously as a place of disappearance, a postcolonial city, a metropolis of pleasure, an East and West crossroad, a shopping paradise, and Pearl of the Orient. In every phase of its metamorphosis, Hong Kong always manages to transform itself according to the shifting context and uncompromising internal and external pressures. Some refer to its vitality and ability to keep going as the "Hong Kong spirit." In this paper, I examine the nature of the Hong Kong spirit through the music of Hong Kong singers Roman Tam, Sam Hui and the recent Cantonese music revival movement spearheaded by a group of local musicians. Using three moments of Hong Kong music making as a focus, I want to show that there is a cultural thread connecting most music production in the territory. By focusing on the music, performance, and its underlying message, I argue that behind this so-called Hong Kong spirit belies an anxiety of belonging that is borne out of the territory's geo-political in-betweenness and cultural hybridity. Hong Kong's constant struggle to belong is what contributes its survival and cultural creativity.