Kawa: Rediscovering Indigeneity in China via Reggae

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Abstract

Kawa is a reggae group from Yunnan's Ximeng, an autonomous county for the Wa people in the southwest of China, bordering Myanmar.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Black Studies, Caribbean Studies, Cultural Studies

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Kawa is a reggae group from Yunnan's Ximeng, an autonomous county for the Wa people in the southwest of China, bordering Myanmar. When I learned about Kawa's story in 2016, I was first intrigued by the geographical similarities between Yunnan and Jamaica: both regions are characterized by tropical climates, lush vegetations, and perhaps most prominently, proximities to marijuana plantations. Outsiders often associate the musical style of reggae with a stereotypical "laidback" lifestyle projected onto these locales. Known as "Yunnan Reggae," Kawa's music indeed exhibits some of the most characteristic elements of reggae music—slower tempos, remixed vocals, and repetitive chords falling on the offbeat.

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/p1590467_64k.mp3

"Yunnan Reggae"–Kawa

Recently I realized this climate connection was simplistic and reductive, and what I failed to grasp in Kawa's music was far more important—a notion of indigeneity manifested through reggae's generic elements. In Steven Feld's "From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis: The Discourses and Practices of World Music and World Beat" in 1995, he noted the affinity of many indigenous cultures for reggae music. "Its [reggae] perception by indigenous peoples outside the Caribbean as an oppositional roots ethnopop form has led to its local adoption by migrants and indigenes in places as diverse as Europe, Hawaii, Native North America, Aboriginal Australia, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, and Southeast Asia" (110). In the 1970s, "roots" reggae translated the everyday lives of Jamaicans as well as their Rastafarian spirituality into a stark resistance to racial oppression, economic inequality, and colonial capitalism that they had experienced in history. The music was deeply embedded in the Jamaican culture. Around the same time, however, engineers and producers in Jamaica–many of them Chinese and Chinese-Jamaican–began to experiment with remixing reggae songs, contributing to an adaptive style of pop music as well as its international popularity. Therefore, against the global market force for "a world music," reggae was quickly adopted to preserve indigenous cultures, remixing a wide range of ethnomusical elements.

But note that Feld's list did not include East Asia. In fact, indigeneity as a discourse has been largely absent in this region. Taiwan is perhaps the only exception, where the Austronesian peoples have claimed their indigenous status and political rights. Japan and the Koreas are often considered as the most ethnically homogeneous countries in the world. And China, while officially acknowledging its ethnic diversity, never thought its internal migration of the Han majority as a potential threat to its ethnic minorities and indigenous cultures. I grew up in the southwest of China in the 1990s, when the internal migration of ethnic groups was already a norm. I could not remember if "indigeneity" meant anything even remotely political. I could not remember if the cultural traditions of ethnic minorities were meant to be tied up to the land on which they are/were practiced. What I do remember is that there are regions where the ethnic minorities concentrate and in which they integrate.



https://youtu.be/pu2J4AeNpak

This post examines how the Chinese reggae group Kawa introduces an indigenous discourse through the sonic elements of reggae. In their performances, Lao Han often opens with a statement about being an indigenous ethnic minority. Most members of the group have non-Han Chinese backgrounds—Wa, Hani, Aini, and Hui. And even the name Kawa refers to the Wa people in their own language.

Kawa always find the most innovative ways to incorporate ethnic elements into their interpretations of the genre. In "Yunnan Reggae," for example, sampled vocals from Wa people, lyrics written in Wa language, and traditional Wa instrumentation all work together to portray living cultural traditions closely associated with the Wa ethnic identity. However, it is the intimacy with the land Kawa expresses in their music that foregrounds their indigenous sentiments.



https://youtu.be/6mr3vDx4i9c

Although the entirety of the lyrics consists of two lines, the song "Red Hair Tree" reveals an indigenous life dwelling on the land—in its neighborhood, locality, and proximity.

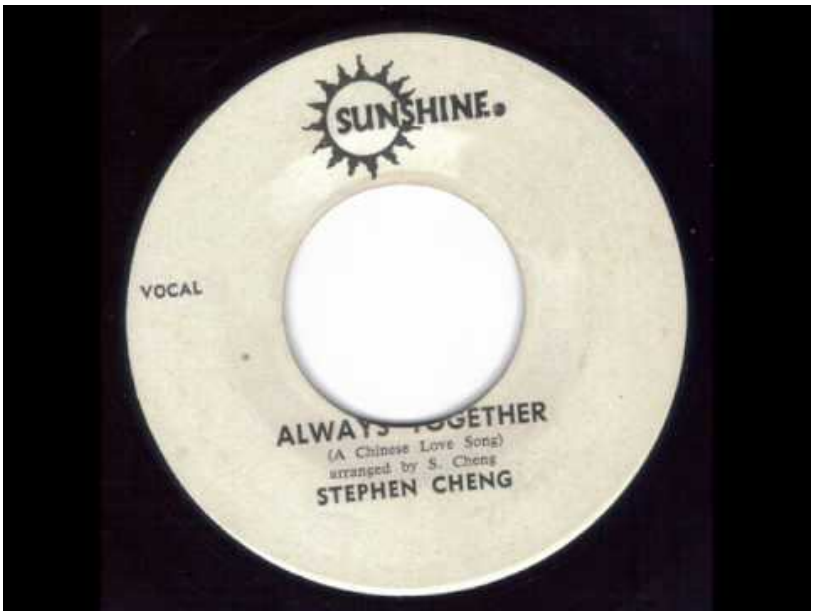
> *Such a huge red hair tree*
>
> *Hitting the wooden drum sounding dong dong*

"Red Hair Tree" resembles a labor song narrating the mundane activities of logging and drum crafting. The first line describes the tree's size, invoking a reverence for its sublimity. The glistening red color contributes to the plant's vibrant animacies. As Ai Yong explains, "If you have chatted with the elders on the A Wa Mountains about this land, you will see an extraordinary beam of light glistening in their eyes, carrying endless assurance and reverence" (translated by Meng Ren). The second line translates that reverence into a more intimate whispering. Due to the Wa people's animist beliefs, the red hair tree's spirit is reincarnated in the wooden drum. The "dong dong" sound then embodies an invocation of the natural spirits. "The Wa ancestors believe, where there is the red hair tree, there is god's blessing. In the past, the tall and robust red hair trees surrounded all Wa villages." As Ai Yong continues to explain, the natural spirits are called for protection in exchange for the people's worship.



https://youtu.be/Al4cr4iLAhI

"Red Hair Tree" is not the first time when reggae prompted the Han Chinese to confront questions about migration and indigeneity, however. It is often forgotten that the Chinese diaspora in Jamaica contributed to the development of reggae. Stephen Cheng's "Always Together (A Chinese Love Song)" in 1967 is a rare yet symptomatic example of how the Chinese imagined indigeneity through remixing reggae.



https://youtu.be/QgPTgq-rN3U

Despite its obvious rocksteady overtone, the song combines a wide range of Chinese elements. It opens with a pronounced bass line coupled by the guitar and then the accented drum beat. Although this rhythmic beat is reminiscent of typical reggae songs, the music flow is somehow disrupted by the sudden appearance of the male vocal. Stephen Cheng sings in Mandarin. His chest voice meanders across a wide range, registering a sonority that is more often heard in Chinese opera than in reggae songs (or pop music in general). His delivery accentuates on the extended vowels, exaggerating the dramatic ups and downs of the tonal language—Mandarin Chinese. In fact, the music is adapted from a well-known Taiwanese folk song "Green is the Mountain (Gao Shan Qing)." On the surface, it is a romantic love story. It depicts the scenic landscape of the mountains and waters of Alishan, which the Taiwanese indigenous Tsou people traditionally inhabit. Through a metaphorical parallel, the romantic love between a young Tsou couple is embodied in the companionship between the mountain and the water, which resonates with its English title "Always Together."

Indeed, "Green is the Mountain" was written by the Han Chinese who fled to Taiwan during the Chinese Civil War, and it is often criticized for romanticizing the experience of the indigenous peoples who were forced to move into the mountain. When the song is rendered into reggae by Cheng, however, it re-contextualizes this imagined indigeneity as a diasporic yearning to restore the lost connections between land and culture. "Always Together" was produced by Byron Lee, a Chinese-Jamaican who founded the renowned ska band Byron Lee and the Dragonaires. As record producers, sound system owners, or band managers, numerous Chinese-Jamaicans like Lee contributed "Chinese elements" to reggae during its formative years. In return, reggae carries on the tradition of cultural remix, always opening itself up to local adaptions.

https://vimeo.com/42170253

Reggae has always been an eclectic music form. As we have seen, both examples combine a wide range of musical elements from different cultures—from ethnic minorities in China to Chinese and African diaspora in Jamaica. Despite almost a half century apart, the two reggae songs foreground

a discourse on indigeneity that is shaped by the migration of people and the mixing of culture. Despite the most generic "pop" elements, the local adoption of reggae reveals an attempt to comprehend the relationship between ethnic identity, cultural practice, and the land. Understood in this way, Kawa's reggae music becomes an important voice in understanding ethnic differences and indigeneity in today's China.

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Featured Image: Screen Shot from "Kawa: Chinese Yunnan Reggae Band"

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