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A Band as Mediation

Lam Kwan-yu Jeffrey

This essay is to analyze the experience of audience as well as the band member in the culture of band activities. I was working with a Hong Kong band Chochukmoⁱ as a videographer doing documentary on them for three years. Being a fans, an audience of their show, a friend of them and a witness of their music production and performance, I am trying to portray their activities and the cultural meaning and construction behind. I will firstly talk about the publicness of the band and how their music piece is experienced and consumed. In the second part, I will go through their live gig experience and some of the songs decoded by the audience. Lastly, we will look at the band as celebrity and the community formed surrounding it.

Our texture of experience is subsequently under change and modified by mediated text. One of the texts could be provided by music. Music, a product as voice speaking from the band, is actually also under influence of the culture of how the listener decodes it. The mediation of meaning is evolving along timeline. The band performance of the song is the mediation from the song content to the listeners. Meanwhile the lyrics and melody mediate the concept behind the songs. In a boarder perspective, the song promotion campaign and side-products like Music Video and the container (digital package for download or CDs) are also a kind of mediation for the song and the consumer. Under the mediation of all the media mentioned, the song gets in touch with the personal experience of listener, and reconstruct under various time frame, context by people with different identity and experience.ⁱⁱ A complex meaning is generated throughout the mediation. The song is more than purely a song. The production of a song and the consumption of it is not articulated by a straight and direct connection, but a web of mediated connection. The music band, where the origin of the song is made of, is the crucial hub in the center of the mediation flow.

ⁱ Chochukmo Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/chochukmo>

ⁱⁱ Silverstone, Roger (1999). *Why Study the Media?* London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage publications, pp.13.

However, the band can hardly be completely independent of their music production from the context of music assembly line. There is struggle between the music creation and receiver anticipation, including the listener and the music companies. There is pressure on the type of music they want based on the popularity of listener taste. Chochukmo, looking for the disintermediation and break down the chain that deform their music, has been signing to indie labels instead of big music companies to sustain their freedom and minimize the bounce back thrust from the commercial reasons. With the aid of internet technology, they can promote their music with low cost on the web platform, without interference of publishers and dealers. As a rock and roll band, they can grab the power and the control of music production in their hands. Thus it is easier for them to express their style and belief in their music, rather than under a filter of commercial elements which might contradict to their composition. It also matches with the nature of rock and roll which contains an idea of politics of resistance.

The band Chochukmo, along with the administration team behind it, lean to social network service as a platform for promotion. They give out ticketingⁱⁱⁱ information of their upcoming show and information of music festival attending^{iv} in social network. The effect is as influential as paying a huge budget promoting over mass traditional media. It is due to the subscription from the listeners from the past and their usual practice to look for music information online. Under this new trend of show information flow, the music band nowadays can become less restricted by the mediator like music companies or show organizers. At every end of show they performed, they will do the photo time after show with the audience^v. It enhances the sense of belonging from audience as big family with the band. From the photo posted online, the audience is reminded that they witness the music path of the band and living inside culture formed by the band.

ⁱⁱⁱ Waiting No More: 倒數 19 日 票務最新情況 https://instagram.com/p/1VFoHVM_md/

^{iv} Chochukmo concerts & tour schedule 2013
<https://www.facebook.com/chochukmo/photos/a.403032234062.177877.60457949062/10151560920489063>

^v Photo Time after show
<https://www.facebook.com/chochukmo/photos/a.10150744502054063.434806.60457949062/10151557228859063>

According to guitarist Mike Orange, the band managed to progress according to their blueprint^{vi} generally. During some casual chats with them whenever I meet the band, I was told they are still under the shadow of the implicit rule of the music scene. For example, they are requested from show organizers or sponsor companies that they must include popular cover songs^{vii} in their show set list that easily resonate with non music loving audience. The purpose is for better ticket selling, but somehow the value of uniqueness of the band is under attack and the show turns vulgar. The whole concept of musical language and performance practice in a show is polluted along with the compromised. Partial belief of the band is abandoned on the night. Sometimes the band member feel painful dealing the situation and it makes them constantly to reflect on their experience and pick a balance point. As a result, they mostly reject invitation from Leisure and Cultural Services Department or other government organizations which comes along with tones of regulations and focus on performing for more open minded organizers like Clockenflap^{viii}. All the efforts made is to retain their music production shape.

Thinking deeper, it is about how you treat music as mediation. Some regards music as amateur hobbies or tool in exchange for money. The band Chochukmo expressed that they view music as mediation to share their ideas, via the music notes and words. They resist the way the current music scene lures them to act. Instead they self reflect on their value and judgment; create more music from this core and from their past experience on music production. They knew the popularity of a band will help them to be promoted to the mass to a wider extend, but more importantly they do not changing the nature and intention of music writing just because of that purpose^{ix}. To music companies, chart ranking is everything that matters; to Chochukmo it is subordinate and trivial. They rather

^{vi} Time Out Hong Kong: Chochukmo: A Tragedy Your Majesty
<http://www.timeout.com.hk/music/features/57698/chochukmo-a-tragedy-your-majesty.html>

^{vii} Ying-Hsueh Chen: 演奏通俗的曲子
<https://www.facebook.com/yinghsueh.chen.1/posts/10152689501016486>

^{viii} Clockenflap <http://www.clockenflap.com/>

^{ix} Time Out Hong Kong: Chochukmo: A Tragedy Your Majesty
<http://www.timeout.com.hk/music/features/57698/chochukmo-a-tragedy-your-majesty.html>

work on opening heart and share their messages^x instead of faking and manipulate by other parties on their music production. As a band they want to be the mediator that have thought, but not only follow the form of the stereotype where the music displayed at CD shops or iTunes are selling the same without soul inside. They once held an album release concert without album release^{xi} because they are not yet satisfied with the music production and delayed the release date. CD printing deadline is not as important as the quality of the music.

Chochukmo claimed to deliver their taste and creativities in music, and to provide more choices to people. They embrace diversity and they don't define their music genre. Like guitarist Les Hunter said, the genre categories is just for easier management of CD shop^{xii}. They do not conform to the inherent mediation category like light house music for comforting, heavy grunge music for releasing anger. Instead, they make collage of elements from the past. Time Out Hong Kong described their music as “math-rock sound – full of style crossovers, abrupt changes and tempo fluctuations – has become more complex, with hip-hop, acoustic, Latin and rock influences all making appearances^{xiii}”. They are paying efforts on diverting what they experience and hybridized into a product. With the help of globalization, they have a better understanding on western and eastern music, as well as allowing them to have a broader world outlook. They spend time to look into the music area they like and make something new from it. I think this is a good treatment mediation can do. If every musicians fall into the music capitalist system, new combination of music will extinct. Making a mixture out from the past, neglecting constraint from other parties is valuable for what a band can achieve.

^x Ian Curtis—Joy Division 主唱逝世 35 週年，至今仍在英國屹立不搖的理由
<https://www.facebook.com/ThomYorkeMusicPrison/photos/a.250867718382506.60156.250816011721010/656215647847709>

^{xi} Chochukmo A Tragedy Your Majesty Album Release Concert
<https://www.facebook.com/chochukmo/photos/a.10150744502054063.434806.60457949062/10151539436229063>

^{xii} 有線電視：獨立音樂的熱血時代 3：觸執毛與混合搖滾 (7:00)
http://cablenews.i-cable.com/webapps/program_video/index.php?video_id=12213905

^{xiii} Time Out Hong Kong: Chochukmo: A Tragedy Your Majesty
<http://www.timeout.com.hk/music/features/57698/chochukmo-a-tragedy-your-majesty.html>

Talking about the live performance of Chochukmo, I would like to start with a few songs of them. “Good Night^{xiv}”, talking about getting out of the fight when family member argues, has a part in the song where the band can interact with the audience. “Time! To say goodnight! Woo woo woo woo woo woo woo” Audience will sing along with the band vocal. It is crucial experience for connecting each other and forming a community. The music lines displayed the audience desired experience in live gig. Common memory and fantasy is generated in audience brain through imagination. Throughout the dance tempo of the song, the audience shakes their bodies and create space, physically and mentally to indulge in the meaning of the song through the interactive mediation. It echoes with the experience they had in the past when they had a fight with family, and in this specific space they can escape from the daily life; meanwhile it is a rehearsal of their real life. They watch and engage into the song, with more or less pleasure, in the performance. In the process they create memory which is public, popular, pervasive, plausible and therefore both compelling and from time to time also compulsive.^{xv} It is a form of playfulness and it requires in complex and subtle ways, our active participation^{xvi}. The impact is huge as audience sing-along, producing a direct experience of what the song is about. More meanings can be introduced like in 2012 band vocal Jan Curious addressed the song for the government officials^{xvii} to mock them staying away from ruining the education system.

They have another song “gull up in the sky” in their latest album. “Gull up” has the same pronunciation with ‘trash talk’ in Cantonese foul language. It is a play of the song name where it relates with the social politics at 2013 where government officials are having loads of bull shits in public on free-to-air TV license. Thus, the experience the band member had in the society is utilized back into the music creativity. The construction is built upon their personal experience. This processing is getting hit nowadays in Hong

^{xiv} Chochukmo ~ Good Night 2015/05/01 Chochukmo Waiting No More Concert
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAwO-jWJCto>

^{xv} Silverstone, Roger (1999). *Why Study the Media?* London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage publications, pp.126.

^{xvi} Silverstone, Roger (1999). *Why Study the Media?* London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage publications, pp.77.

^{xvii} 黃之鋒觸執毛 一同 Rock 爆香港 唱到《Good Night》時高聲說：「呢首送畀吳克儉，叫佢早啲！」
<http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20120911/18013523>

Kong. Few months ago the music group the pancakes performed the internet song 話你
意鳩怕你撈^{xviii} and received enormous welcome from the audience.

Chochukmo is good at bringing out these kinds of social issues into their music. In
another song “Love Ain't Red^{xix}”, it talks about ideological issue of moral and national
education. There is myth in the song on the color mentioned.

Don't tell me what to love
Don't teach me how to love
I have seen how you love
It's a different kind of love
...
Love is green love is blue
Love is brown love is purple
Love is pink love is white
Love is black love is yellow
Love
Don't paint me red
I'm colorful

At the first level, the signifiers (the red color) and the signified (the praise of the
communist and nationalist ideology of China's government) united to form a sign with a
simple denoted meaning: love red love country. At the second level (the level of myth),
this sign turns into a signifier, that is linked to second set of signified - a broad,
ideological theme about selection of how to love. Again, the song reflected the diversity
Chochukmo always embrace. The song is embodied in the social movement against the
MNE school curriculum proposed by the Education Bureau to raise awareness to the
public. The song also represents a view of political inclination. How should we react to
the manipulated education policy? Should we fight against the order or just come along
with it? Dealing with the struggle, the song resonates with the audience who decode the

^{xviii} 【城宴 2014】嘉賓表演 - the pancakes (Part 1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEy92aRezmY>

^{xix} Chochukmo - Love ain't red (Live) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1QQoEvunmE>

meaning inside. The song writing and performance contain the authenticity and convince audience to believe in the value and description of the song as a truth. The band formed an intimate relation with the audience and gain sincerity via the music. The lyrics are simple, direct and conversational. They speak to the heart of everyone's experience at that time. The song concept is constructed upon the familiar object color and the common belief among the Hong Kong people, including the band members. The trust among the group is reinforced and persuasive power is increased. The local condition and timing affect how the audience read the song, and also how the band writes the song. The emergence of a more public private life, the intensification of such performative behaviours, behaviours which create both the social and the individual, and which allow the performer not just to present herself to the other but to reveal herself to herself – an essential reflexive act. Quoted from Raymond Williams, it is a shared practice of making meanings involving everyone in a particular culture. “Everyone, in the course of making sense of the world & becoming a person, is an active producer of meanings, a creative interpreter^{xx}” The power of the song lies in its truth: the truth of the words, of the way in which they are sung, of the circumstances to which they speak and of the contexts in which they are received.

Chochukmo even created “23^{xxi}” which puts them in danger when they are touring China. They used national anthem of China, melodically and lyrically. “We are all together, Face the enemies' fire” However the head is faced towards communist party for redress a miscarriage of Tiananmen incident for justice. Originally the China national anthem has a strong feeling of combat, which is feared and kind of resisted by Hong Kong people. But when audience listen to the song in concert and think of the twisted meaning fighting for justice, another meaning is decoded and gives courageous effect instead of fear. We see the political point and ambition of the band by this ethical and pedagogical work. Despite the band's desire to spread out the implicit meaning of the song, they are advised not to perform the song in China. It is because some other bands are fined heavily for claiming

^{xx} Nick Couldry (2002). *Inside Culture: Reimagining the method of Cultural Studies*, Sage Publications Ltd, pp.25.

^{xxi} 23 <https://chochukmo.bandcamp.com/track/23>

for justice and against communist party^{xxii}. The meaning generated by the song is not dominantly decided by producer, but also recognition from the audience. Because of the orientation of the communist party, there are group of Hong Kong people identify more with “23” rather than the national anthem. The group of people formed an imagined communities and the song is imagined as commonly owned. They might not have whole idea of what other Hong Kong people experience is, but they believed among the group, the members will listen and sing the song and experience the same with their personal experience. The music set boundary for the movement identity. For Chochukmo, the group formed through their music is mainly youngsters. It represents the power of the young generation. Through their passion on the music, they express their care to the society and voice out their thoughts. The song will record the mental attitude of those people at that moment. Inter-textuality will be injected into the song. New meanings are reconstructed. Referred to Donna Haraway, instead of any one political or cultural vision that captures in itself ‘the whole truth’ whether it is a patriarchal politics or an essentialist feminist politics, the point is to imagine new cultural connections – not in the hope of achieving some unproblematic common language, but to multiply possible dialogue^{xxiii}. This can rarely be seen in the mainstream music scene as songs with political issues will be censored before published. With the music scene system remained unchanged for decades, we lost the diversity. All it remains is the praise of harmony of the society, without plotting out what the people need. Gradually and eventually, we are loosening our territories of freedom of speech as well. We should start defending by not conforming to the rule imposed by the authorities from the music scene. We need songs and interactions that allow us to recognize and claim a certain normality, ordinariness, security and identity for ourselves and our fellows^{xxiv}. Chochukmo had been playing few times in Street Music Series^{xxv}. The regular street showcases funded by Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust had over 70 shows over the years. Among friends, the band

^{xxii} 港樂隊廣州演唱撐佔中被「勸告」 <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/realtime/news/20141022/53046237>

^{xxiii} Nick Couldry (2002). *Inside Culture: Reimagining the method of Cultural Studies*, Sage Publications Ltd, pp.33.

^{xxiv} Silverstone, Roger (1999). *Why Study the Media?* London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage publications, pp.77.

^{xxv} 《開放音樂》 - 街頭音樂系列 Street Music Concert
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/104463683997/>

criticized the curator only select musicians based on his personal taste. As long as it is funded by general public trust, it should be a wide range of different artists instead of subjective personal choice. They hope the curator, being one of the authority of music scene, can understand the importance of diversity and embrace the other possibility beyond his own vision.

In the end to talk about the band as celebrity and spectacle, it is the mediated public image being important role to maintain the identity. For most of the synopsis introducing the band in the music festival booklet, the line “being described as ‘The most charismatic band to have emerged in southern China in recent years’ by TIME Magazine” will be included. Having such a big description along with a honorable critique authority, a sense of respect will be induced to Chochukmo. This is how the image construction is established. The authoritative sentence is the key. Readers then cannot disassociate Chochukmo as just purely a music band with being a celebrity group. They will not question on the authority of the band manager who quote the key sentence nor the writer who writes it from the magazine. Spectacle posed a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations. Also the word “Chochukmo” is always represented in a colored logo^{xxvi}, with specific font type. It reinforces the impression of the mediated public image of the band being unusual and extraordinary in the aesthetic aspect.

Being a friend with the band, I found the band is not as united as it is on the platform of the media. In front of camera or reporters, they empathize on collective social instead of individual, where their music is a compromise with other band members. It is a careful coordination with the drums, bass, keyboards, guitar and vocal, with the multiplicity of ideas inside from each one. Chochukmo once broke up after a difficult tour of China in 2010 because they lost the patience of adjusting with other and insisting on individual’s view. Two years later they reunited with the addition of new bassist Waiting Soul. After three years of music journey, Waiting Soul left the band. I was astonished that after the

^{xxvi} Chochukmo pink logo

<https://www.facebook.com/chochukmo/photos/a.437679094062.236473.60457949062/10150358024579063/>

last performance of Waiting the band members left the venue without saying goodbye. I interviewed Waiting personally and found out among the five members there is not a strong friendship. It is never the priority, other than creating good music. I can never see this point of view at any mass media, it is always hidden. At the last concert, I anticipated a mediated good bye scene but it is not happening. I was then conscious that I become one of the anticipation that pressuring them to do something that might not be their desire. As a fan I was giving thrust to them to be the band that should be friendly to each other. Waiting left to pursue his bassline to be performed rather than a compromised Chochukmo bassline. We are mediated that the band is growing healthily but on the other perspective I see the fragility of the group. Waiting reminded me of the characteristics of a role of being in the band as a member. If he cannot satisfy with giving idea and being accepted, what is the difference with just joining in a session in the performance which is replaceable but not being a constant band member?

Chochukmo didn't disband. They are looking for new bassist and move on their journey. There will be the idol-worship and fan culture who financially and mentally supporting them to carry on. There will be groupie^{xxvii} being more interested in relationships with rockstars than in their music. They show their support by displaying merchandise of band^{xxviii}, hashtagging the band^{xxix} in social network sites and are proud of the information sharing bloom^{xxx}. Chochukmo is fond of the girls backing them. They invite their girlfriends on their Music Video forming Chochukmo team B as a parody^{xxxi}. In concerts, the band will read out cheesy planned MC tag repeated for several shows like

“You (Audience) are part of us^{xxxii}”. The actions sustain the relationship between the band and the supporters. I hope the band can continue on promoting the construction of an alternative music scene apart from the mainstream thoughtless entertaining music.

^{xxvii} Groupie in Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groupie>

^{xxviii} Selfie of fans after show <https://instagram.com/p/2JiN3hCeRI/>

^{xxix} tags of chochukmo at instagram <https://instagram.com/explore/tags/chochukmo/>

^{xxx} #chochukmo screen capture <https://instagram.com/p/2KsRCtkSr4/>

^{xxxi} Chochukmo - One O'clock (Official MV) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtu9AG-pA4k>

^{xxxii} MC tag recorded by fans <https://instagram.com/p/2KjE7RuqkL/>