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Brief Biography

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Sounding the Bromance: The Chopstick Brothers' "Little Apple" Music Video, Genre, Gender and the Search for Meaning in Chinese Popular Music

Introduction

> [Songs like "Little Apple"] are like beautiful trash, totally lacking in culture, and quite unable to give people spiritual satisfaction.
> Prof. Jiang Bo'an, cited in Li Xiazhi, *Beijing Daily*, 8 July 2014, p. 12.

> In terms of unfiltered, dog-pissing insanity, few things in this universe rival the video for Chopstick Brothers' "Little Apple".
> Drew Millard [blog],
> http://noisey.vice.com/blog/chopstick-brothers-little-apple-music-video.

> China's summer internet sensation: the Chopstick Brothers' "Little Apple". It's outrageously, deliriously good, brimming with more postcolonial smackdowns than you can shake a camcorder at. Panda-monium [blog],
> http://slorgzilla.blogspot.ie/2014/12/panda-monium.html, 2 December 2014.

> Lian_cheng1: From a Chinese perspective, this song is much more interesting than "Gangnam Style"
> yc06151: It has no meaning, it's just bubblegum.
> Comments posted at 2015 New Year Concert Jiangsu TV,
> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hk0DlbhzriQ, all accessed 11 April 2016.

Possibly China's most watched music video in 2014 was the Chopstick Brothers' "Little Apple". A clear follow-on to Psy's "Gangnam Style" of summer 2012, "Little Apple" shares with its Korean predecessor a confection of deliberately ungainly dance actions, a lavishly tongue-in-cheek production, an older-than-usual lead male vocal presence and a subsequent history of proliferation in a remarkably varied succession of national and international pastiches and parodies. "Little Apple" directly cross-references K-pop through inclusion of a role for Korean singer-actress Bae Seul-ki, and it points to Korea more generally through use of spoken Korean and by setting part of the MV in two scenarios: a date that leads to cosmetic surgery (a reference to the perception in China of a strong Korean penchant for such interventions) and a simulated Korean TV war drama (a staple of many Chinese TV channels). The MV meanwhile takes inspiration also from Western culture (biblical, historical and contemporary): there's spoken Chinglish, blonde wigs for that distinctly Caucasian look, the garden of Eden, nautical costumes that'd fit well in a *Pirates of the Caribbean* remake and a mermaid straight from Hans Christian Andersen. Further ingredients include a lascivious lady-snake, cartoon turtles and spaceships, naked men dancing (safely pixellated) and plenty of cross-dressing. Massively successful, "Little Apple" is nevertheless difficult to confine to a single, definitive interpretation, as those responses cited above already reveal.

In this article, I analyse the song and the accompanying music video, tracing their manifold apparent sources of inspiration, and drawing particular attention to the manner in

which male-on-male love is celebrated through music and dance. “Little Apple” is an interesting case study of the performance and experience of gender and sexuality in contemporary Chinese popular culture, and its remaking in a slew of new versions disseminated online provides further insights into how Chinese and others are responding to these cues. As such, the case study explores not just the making of meaning in contemporary Chinese popular music but also how a wide set of audiences hear, sing and dance in the act of refashioning this experience for themselves. Assessing “Little Apple” also provides a means of analysing an emergent Chinese popular music genre known as *shenqu*, or divine song, and so the study contributes to the rounding out of our knowledge of Chinese popular culture in that way as well.

The “Little Apple” Song and Music Video: Genesis and Content

Prior to looking at issues of genre, gender and the formation of socially situated meaning, I first provide some orientational information on “Little Apple” and its creators. I then offer a summary-outline of the sound and vision tracks of the music video. While a full analysis of the music or lyrics is unnecessary in this article, some initial remarks on these will provide helpful context for those who’re not immediately familiar with the current idioms of Chinese popular music more generally.

The Chopstick Brothers are two Beijing-based musicians and filmmakers named Xiao Yang (b. 1980) and Wang Taili (b. 1969). Working together since the mid-2000s, their breakthrough success came in 2010 with a 42-minute film named *Old Boys*, which became a viral hit on China’s leading video-hosting site, Youku.[1] Briefly, *Old Boys* shows former classmates and would-be entertainers Xiao Dabao and Wang Xiaoshuai, who are now in early middle-age and working as a wedding host and barber respectively. They share a passion for Michael Jackson, and, upon hearing of his death, enter a talent show and make a fresh attempt to achieve their life aspirations through music and dance. Despite their unlikely appearance, their contest performances act as a resonant reminder of the powerful complexities of hopes, nostalgia and disappointments in the modern urban state.

The success of *Old Boys* led to a series of higher-profile productions of which the most elaborate so far, and most germane in the context of this article, is a full-length film entitled *Old Boys: Way of the Dragon* (*Lao nanhai meng long guo jiang*, 2014). The music video of “Little Apple” was released prior to the film, with the intention of acting as an online trailer for it, and so drumming up publicity for the film itself. This hope was massively realised; indeed, the success of the music video has rather eclipsed that of the film. The name of the film refers to a famous Bruce Lee film, *Way of the Dragon* (1972) wherein Lee visits Rome to protect a relative’s restaurant from encroaching gangsters. The Chopstick Brothers’ film takes up its namesake’s themes of martial arts, the mafia, comedic moments and use of a diasporic setting. Meanwhile, Wang and Xiao’s film also owes much to their earlier film: they reprise the principal characters from *The Old Boys*, and again the frustrated duo seek to fulfil their dream by winning a TV music talent show, this time in New York. Arriving in the US, they’re mistaken for the White Tiger Brothers, a notorious pair of Korean assassins hired in for a gangland hit. Inevitably, the film has numerous diegetic song performances, among

[1] The film can be viewed at http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjE4MDU1MD, accessed 23 October 2016. Prior to this major success, the Chopstick Brothers put out several other impactful songs, among which “Bless You, Most Beloved” (*Zhufu ni zui qin’aide*) of 2007 includes Wang cross-dressed as a Japanese geisha and an amount of comedic martial arts visuals; see http://v.ku6.com/show/DTZRTttQ22llfnuZ.html, accessed 23 October 2016.

them “Little Apple”, the core of their Big Apple audition. But while song once again offers a space where the principals seek to establish empathetic relationships, in *Old Boys: Way of the Dragon* the dramatic plot is finally resolved by means of flying feet and furious fists rather than by moving appeal to hearts and minds.[2] In fact, “Little Apple” is rather unremarkable in the context of the film, where it is shown in “live” performance mode and so without the great majority of the visual aspects of the music video.

The complete visual make-up of the MV is listed in a moment (see Table 1), but it is worth underscoring the prominence given to K-pop performer Bae Seul-ki (b. 1986). Bae had gained a significant following in China over the preceding decade, especially via Internet broadcasts of her song and dance work, and had established a particularly strong reputation for her retro dance skills. As such, her selection in a dance-based video designed for Internet dissemination within and beyond China shows the care taken by the Chopstick Brothers in assemblage of their product. Notably, although she is a singer in her own right, we don’t hear her as such in this video, and, as I will discuss further below, she does not take up the role of love interest for Wang or Xiao.

Reference timings	**Visual track**	**Sound Track**
0:00	Coffee shop, evening; a young couple	Piano with drum kit vamp [Korean, spoken] Girl: Brother, am I beautiful?[a] [Korean, spoken] Man (acted by Xiao Yang): Just so-so [Korean, spoken] Girl: What? [Korean, spoken] Man: Do looks matter? [Korean, spoken] Man: Do looks matter? [Korean, shouted] Man: Do looks matter?! Music track pauses and fades Phone ringtone [Chinese, sung]: You are my tiny little apple [Korean, spoken] Man: Hello? [Korean, shouted] Man: Do looks matter?!
0:29	Consulting room; girl and cosmetic surgeon Chinese caption, as if from a silent film	Bass drum, then breathy generic oriental flute [Korean, spoken] Girl: God bless me with more beauty
0:43	Operating room; girl’s face marked up for surgery; medic’s hand with swab	
0:46	Recovery room, removing the bandages; girl with hands together as if in hopeful prayer, doctor, nurse;	accelerating heartbeat (drums)

[2] This film can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=931cT1w8dZg, with “Little Apple” beginning at 47:57; accessed 23 October 2016.

	Face finally revealed as that of a middle-aged man (acted by Wang Taili) Doctor bows, then flees the room; nurse follows hand over mouth; girl picks up mirror	cymbal roll [Korean, spoken] Girl: How…? Silence
01:05	Cut to Main title sequence Chinese and English captions: Chopsticks Bro.	Electronic metallic impact sound followed by vibration and whoosh
01:10	Cut to recovery room Chinese captions] "Little Apple" performed by the Chopstick Brothers lyrics and music by Wang Taili	Electronic impact sounds cued to captions Girl/Wang: scream Whoosh then synthesized instrumental intro begins: main theme on generic oriental plucked lute/zither accompanied by bass, drums and off-beat claps
01:18	Cartoon Garden of Eden: Wang Taili and Xiao Yang dance naked, except for blonde wigs, to either side of an apple tree. The dance mixes swaying and poses derivative of Western classical art (notably, a standing version of Rodin's sculpture The Thinker)[b]] [Written Chinese captions] Xiao Yang (in a short blonde wig; loins pixelated) Special performance Pei Seqi (Bae Seul-ki; in a red-and-white ringed snake suit) Wang Taili (in a long blonde wig; loins and chest pixelated) Garden of Eden [end of captions] Wang reaches for a gleaming red apple, pointing up at it with a disco-like pose Dance shows crossed arms to telegraph the forbidden nature of the desire	[English spoken] Xiao: Stop! Apple not eat!

		[Chinese, sung, with subtitles][c] Wang: I planted a seed that finally bore fruit Today is a great day [Korean spoken, overlapping the above]
	Bae is represented by a red-and-white snake with long eyelashes	Bae: Just eat. Just eat. [Chinese, sung] Xiao: I pluck the stars down to give to you [Korean, spoken, overlapping the above] Bae: Hurry up and eat [Chinese, sung] I pull down the moon to give to you Let the sun rise everyday for you
	Bae is now in human shape, dancing in an undulating disco manner, her hair shaped and coloured like a red apple Wang reaches for the apple Xiao crosses his forefingers	[Korean, spoken, overlapping the above] Bae: It tastes so good [English, spoken] Xiao: Stop! Stop! Apple not eat! [Chinese, sung, overlapping the above] Wang: I turn myself into a candle and burn just to illuminate you I'll give all I have to you, I only want you to be happy
	Wang bites into the apple Chinese subtitles: "Does it taste good?" Chinese subtitles: "It's amazingly tasty!" Xiao takes the apple	Spoken words [Xiao, covered by song track] [Chinese, sung] Xiao: You make my every tomorrow meaningful Spoken words [Wang, covered by song track] [Chinese, sung] Although life is short, I'll love you forever, [backing voices join, singing emphatically] never to leave you
02:03	Cut to Bae and backing dancers; gradually interleaved with Xiao and Wang presenting the same dance Xiao's finger emits a ray that shoots a cartoon UFO from the sky	[Chinese, sung, additional synthesized string pattern in accompaniment] Xiao: You are my tiny little apple No matter how much I love you, it will never be too much Your little red face warms my heart Lights my life's fire, fire, fire, fire, fire, fire! Wang: You are my little apple Just like the most beautiful cloud on the horizon
02:26	Xiao bites the apple and begins to choke; flash backs to the Korean dating couple	Music stops dead; bird song Thunderclap; a bell tolls
02:40	Xiao reappears suavely garbed in eighteenth-century fairy-tale costume, including a	

	new white-blonde wig; the sun shining from behind his head; beach scene, with similar art style to Garden of Eden section; a cartoon turtle is present much of the time.[d]	Whoosh effect and instrumental music resumes
	Wang, cross dressed and with a curly blonde wig, is addressing Xiao; brief view of contemporaneously dressed backing dancers	Wang makes bubbling, fish-like sounds [English, spoken] Xiao: What are you talking about? [three times, overlapping with more fish language from Wang]
	Wang disappears in a flash of smoke and reappears on the sand in mermaid form, wriggling off, toward the sea	[English, shouted] Xiao: No! [Chinese, sung, overlapping the above] I've never disliked you I like everything about you [English, shouted] Xiao: Can you hear me? [Chinese, sung, overlapping the above] Wang: With you every day is fresh With you the sunshine's brighter Xiao: With you the nights aren't dark You're the white cloud and I'm the blue sky
	Xiao baits a fishing rod with an apple and makes a cast	
03:09	A slender arm rises from the sea, apple in hand Chinese subtitles show: "Is it you? Is it really you?" A pretty brunette mermaid has emerged holding the apple, waving encouragingly to Xiao	Wang: In spring, I stroll with you among the flowering shrubs Spoken words overlap the above [Xiao, covered by song track]
	A sad mermaid-Wang looks on from behind a rock Playing with the apple, Xiao kisses the mermaid and they laugh together Wang looks on hurt	On summer nights, I accompany you to watch the stars twinkle Xiao: In autumn at dusk, I linger with you in fields of golden wheat In winter, I feel warmer with you as the snowflakes dance [final four syllables—literally "getting hotter"—emphasized by the addition of the chorus]
03:26	dance ensemble scenes are cut into mermaid-Wang's dismay; including a modern-dressed Bae (still wearing the apple-red wig), the backing dancers, the cartoon turtle, and Xiao and Wang in their	Xiao: You are my tiny little apple No matter how much I love you, it will never be too much Your little red face warms my heart Lights my life's fire, fire, fire, fire, fire, fire! Wang: You are my tiny little apple Just like the most beautiful cloud on the horizon

	eighteenth-century costumes Eighteenth-century Wang in deep reverie Flashback of gleaming red apple	Spring comes again Whoosh sound to silence [Korean, spoken by girl from opening scenario, now with echo] God bless me to be more beautiful [chimes]
03:55	In a village, a girl in traditional Korean costume offers an apple to a similarly attired boy; they laugh and run; cut to the same scene but with Wang (cross-dressed) and Xiao as the principals, as if the two are now adult Xiao is now in military uniform Wang offers Xiao an apple Xiao plants an impassioned kiss on Wang's cheek as his unit departs; the two are desolate	[Korean, spoken] Young girl: Eat it when you're hungry Whoosh and instrumental main theme resumes [Korean, spoken] Wang: Eat it when you're hungry [Korean solider, shouting] Emergency meeting! [Korean, spoken] Xiao: Don't date other guys. [Korean, spoken] Wang Eat it when you're hungry [Korean, spoken] Xiao: Never ever date other guys! [Chinese, sung, overlapping with above] Wang: You're never a burden I like everything about you [Wang weeps beneath the next four lines] Xiao: You make my day fresh You make the sun brighter You light the night up [Korean, shouted] Xiao I'll definitely return! [Chinese, sung, overlapping the above] You're the white cloud and I'm the blue sky
04:30	Xiao in battle as his unit is cut down one by one interleaved with Wang becoming increasingly concerned at home	Battle sounds overlaid on the music in Xiao's scenes Wang: In spring, I stroll with you among the flowering shrubs [Chorus]: hey! Wang: On summer nights, I accompany you to watch the stars twinkle [Chorus]: ha! Xiao: In autumn at dusk, I linger with you in fields of golden wheat [Chorus]: hey! In winter, I feel warmer with you as the snowflakes dance [final four syllables emphasized by addition of the chorus] Xiao: You are my tiny little apple

		No matter how much I love you, it's not enough Your little red face makes me feel warm at heart Lights my life's fire, fire, fire, fire, fire, fire!
	[Wang receives a box containing Xiao's uniform, a medal and an apple with a bullet hole; flashbacks of their first and last moments together, including Xiao's shout that he'd return] Further flashback to their childhood and to the apple	Wang: You are my tiny little apple Just like the most beautiful cloud on the horizon Spring comes again and flowers bloom on the mountainsides [Korean, cried] Wang: You liar! [Chinese, sung] The hopes I sowed can now be reaped [Chimes]
05:17	Cut to Bae and backing dancers in Garden of Eden; Bae and dancers alternated with beach group dance scene from earlier	Instrumental passage
	Wang and Xiao appear in contemporary costume fronting the Garden of Eden-dressed backing dancers, now on the beach (Wang is not in drag)	Wang & Xiao with chorus: You are my tiny little apple
	Bae in both snake and contemporary costumes, dancing on the beach with eighteenth-century Wang and Xiao; backing dancers in both outfits alternately	No matter how much I love you, it will never be too much
	Wang and Xiao dance naked in the Garden of Eden as one cartoon spaceship opens fire on another; Xiao in scrubs, face marked up for cosmetic surgery, is wheeled along a hospital corridor; Korean-drag Wang and uniformed Xiao lead a procession of dancing soldiers through the village	Your little red face warms my heart Lights my life's fire, fire, fire, fire, fire, fire!
	Flashbacks to Wang's shock after cosmetic surgery; the Korean dating couple in the coffee shop; the little girl with the apple	You are my tiny little apple

	Similar interleaving of dance scenes and flashbacks continue, with levity allowed to more explicitly penetrate the fourth wall	Just like the most beautiful cloud on the horizon Spring comes again and flowers bloom on the mountainsides The hopes I sowed can now be reaped
06:06	Cut to black screen [Chinese caption] 7 October 2014, Major Film Award Premiere [English caption] Coming Soon	Whoosh; instrumental sounds slow fade
06:10	Wang and Xiao tied up and surrounded by figures with guns	[English, spoken] Xiao: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! [English, spoken] Wang: Don't kill me. I've got a family!
06:13	Calligraphy on a blood-stained cloth, engulfed in flame [Chinese captions] The Old Boys The Way of the Dragon Release Date 7 October 2014	 echoing stylized gun shot and whip crack, followed by a sound reminiscent of reloading a gun magazine Whoosh
06:19	[end]	

Table 1: Summary outline of 'Little Apple'.

Notes:

Reference timings are cued to the video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d59boCs31uM; accessed 23 May 2016.

[a] "Brother" is a colloquial term for a male partner.

[b] The reference makes sense in the wider context of the video insofar as The Thinker was initially commissioned as part of a detail illustrating Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and set around a doorway named the Gates of Hell.

[c] Chinese singing of many kinds is regularly subtitled, not least in music videos. The practice nods to televisual precedent in this multi-dialect and multilingual state and, in popular music, to the widespread cultivation of karaoke performance.

[d] In classic Chinese literature, the turtle can act as a symbol of cuckoldry, so its selection here may not be entirely arbitrary.

Taken as a whole, the video interleaves comic dance scenes with a succession of tragic love stories, moving from botched cosmetic surgery following an everyday lovers' quarrel to the original fall of mankind and from the mermaid's sacrifice to the death of a partner in war. This is by any measure an unusually wide-ranging set of visual and narrative content for a Chinese music video. Yet, little if any of this tragedic narrative is reflected in the song lyrics. Performed mostly in alternation by Wang and Xiao, these offer a simple, even naïve, love song rich in naturalistic images and metaphors. In fact, the frequent shifting of visual imagery may even disguise the fact that two men sing these endearments to one another throughout the song. Incidentally, the apple is not a routine symbol of desire, temptation or infatuation in Chinese contexts, although the Judeo-Christian forbidden fruit association is obviously familiar enough that it can be pastiched. Pressed on the choice of the apple, Wang Taili has apparently claimed that, "An apple is one of everyone's favourite kinds of fruit, so it's suitable in representing a beloved person or object." (Fig. 2)[3]

Figure 2: Still from "Little Apple" showing Xiao Yang about to bite the apple



In contrast to the multiplicity of visual imagery, the music of the song remains tightly unified in style throughout, making predominant use of a G minor harmony, with occasional shifts to the chords of F and Eb major and D and C minor. Phrases are typically sequential two- or four-bar units and the melody is primarily founded around G, Bb, C, D and F with occasional inclusion of A or Eb as expressive passing notes, this in common with much other Chinese music which is strictly heptatonic but makes predominant use of the notes of a

[3] Wang's statement is cited by Anon., "Kuazi Xiongdi 'Xiao pingguo' cheng zui xin wangle shenqu" (筷子兄弟《小苹果》成最新网络神曲, The Chopstick Brother's "Little Apple" Becomes the Latest Internet Divine Song), *Yinchuan wan bao* 27 June 2014 n.p.; available at http://ent.ifeng.com/a/20140627/40145942_0.shtml, accessed 24 October 2016. Note a divergent claim, again attributed to Wang, in the news report "'Little Apple' Sweeps Across the Pacific" http://www.china.org.cn/video/2014-11/25/content_34144590.htm, accessed 24 October 2016. There's a Korean children's song, "My Face is Like an Apple" (*Sagwa gat-eun nae eolgul*) which may be another potential root for the idea, although there seems to be no melodic overlap between the two; see further, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNXCL6e8Ftc, accessed 12 July 2016.

pentatonic scale. The music is set in a fast quadruple metre (with beats 2 and 4 of each bar marked by synthesized claps) with no variation of tempo throughout and little variety to the instrumentation or texture. Variety comes from the occasional silences or whooshes, the varying overlaid sound effects and (on repeated listenings) in the alternation of the two singers' voices.

As noted in Fig. 1, the opening scenario is not accompanied by the song, but each of the other three scenarios shares a common musical structure of:

- an 8-bar Intro comprising two closely related 4-bar units, i1, i2
- a 16-bar Verse with the phrase structure: a, a, b1, b2
- a 16-bar Chorus which reiterates the bass line from the Intro but now set to new melodic material, c1, c2a, c1, c2b

"Little Apple" ends with an Instrumental of 8 bars duration (essentially, a prolongation of Gmin7) followed by a reprise of the Chorus (with this time Wang and Xiao singing together rather than alternating). A very short Outro fades on reiterated G figurations. Figure 3 shows the start of a piano score which, when used alongside the music video, offers a reliable guide to the song and also exemplifies how such music is rapidly made available online by fans desirous to recreate the piece themselves in live performance.[4]

Figure 3: Piano transcription of "Little Apple" (excerpt, showing the Intro, Verse and part of the Chorus)

[4] Source: https://musescore.com/user/65436/scores/471426, accessed 22 December 2015.

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Overall, the music owes more to 1980s' disco than to more contemporaneous pop songs, whether in China or elsewhere, a detail noted by numerous critics and commentators

when comparing it to both PSY's "Gangnam Style", and to a second and contemporaneous Chinese song, "Chick Chick" (*Xiaoji xiaoji*, 2014). Sung by Rollin Wang (Wang Rong), "Chick Chick" also racked up notable overseas impact, though less within China itself as compared to "Little Apple". An uncredited journalist on the Euronews website cites Wang and Xiao's manager, Liu Yuanlong, as stating:

> One of the major reasons the Chick Chick song is so popular in Europe and the U.S. is because this style of music is in line with international music norms. For foreigners this rhythm and music is exactly the same as the music and beat of the most innovative dance music. So when they listen to it, they don't think it's a totally Eastern thing, they think it's in line with the rest of the world.[5]

This backward-facing musical aesthetic, which neatly matches the vibe the Chopstick Brothers' established in *Old Boys*, also functions to make "Little Apple" far less satirical than "Gangnam Style". This avoidance of audible sarcasm is also common to "Chick Chick", and so these two examples hint at to a wider pattern in Chinese pop. This is not to say that Chinese pop has no satirical songs at all, but it remains the case that as recently as the early 1990s, the announcement in a major Beijing newspaper that a song was "quite unable to give people spiritual satisfaction" (as cited at the opening of this article) would have been understood as a clear warning from the political elite as to the questionable career prospects of all those involved in the creation or dissemination of the work so identified. This context encourages us to read between the lines of Rollin Wang's own description of "Chick Chick":

> Some people among our Chinese audience think this song has no meaning. But I think this kind of song can relieve pressure and make people happy. Different songs have different values—the value of this song is that it offers a simple[,] kind happiness[;] all you have to do is consume it, you don't need to think too much.[6]

Wang, here, seeks to avoid any challenge that her song might be a meaningless commercial product on the one hand and, stressing the positive social contribution of stress release, she's also anxious to drive away any thought that there might be veiled meanings within the song itself. Arguments as to whether song reveals profound truths or offers temporary respite from the pressures of mortal existence, and whether or not it is socially responsible to seek to escape the world via such musicking, go back at least 2,500 years in China. Examples that bookend this lengthy, unresolved conversation range from the philosophies of Mozi, (*c*.470 – *c*.391 BCE), not least his claim that (court) music was an egregious waste of human energy and tax resource, and a unnecessary burden upon the nation's poor, to recent work on Taiwanese pop music by Marc Moskowitz. Moskowitz (2010:115) proposes that the temporary affective shell of popular music acts as a tacit negation of the hyperpolitical world surrounding the listener in China or Taiwan, which looks like a very political act indeed.[7] It is also a matter of the particular quality of aesthetic stance

[5] Anon., http://www.euronews.com/2014/12/04/china-aims-for-gangnam-style-hits/, accessed 22 December 2015. Wang's song is online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxzgwJ8tSE0.

[6] Anon., http://www.euronews.com/2014/12/04/china-aims-for-gangnam-style-hits/, accessed 22 December 2015.

[7] Lauren Berlant's notion of the "juxtapolitical" in American women's literature exposes a further aspect to this idea. Berlant (2008:3) describes the reading of sentimental literature as producing an ultimately disempowering space, one that that raises the possibility of political action but then forecloses upon the activation of it. In China's recent history there have been periods where governmental powers have held high expectations that citizens would perform regular, overt acts of governmentally sanctioned forms of political participation, such that opting out may be more (counter)revolutionary than it is in the US, even if it is ultimately just as fruitless in terms of providing a means toward social change. I'm grateful to Byron Dueck for this cross-reference.

in question, a key component in these songs being their emphasis on loneliness and heartbreak. As Moskowitz explains:

> In allowing people to give voice to their lives in very personal and emotional terms, this seemingly benign music [Mandarin-language pop] overcomes the almost irresistable forces of both contemporary state demands and traditional Chinese expectations of stoic silence and group orientation. (*Ibid*.:115)

Genre: Madness and Memory in Divine Song

The remarks above have already laid out the musical trajectories (Korean, Chinese and Western) that fuse briefly in "Little Apple" and have begun to point at what's at stake in the formation and experiencing of meaning through producing or viewing music video in China. In this section, I outline an indigenous classification of certain mass culture songs within which many Chinese listeners place "Little Apple"—as mentioned earlier, Chinese commentators regularly describe "Little Apple" as a *shenqu*, or divine song. Assessing the divine song genre, then, draws out the local frame of reference for which "Little Apple" was designed and which is engaged when it is viewed or performed.

It is not the inclusion of religious imagery that places "Little Apple" in the divine song genre. The term, which appears to have emerged within China's vibrant Internet slang subculture, originates from the Chinese translation of the title of Dante's *La Divina Commedia* (completed 1320). Divine songs are those that are a bit crazy, maybe even epic (in the gamer sense, rather than that of Albert Lord/Homer). The first item to be described as a divine song is "Perturbed" (*Tante*, 2006), sung by Gong Linna and composed by Robert Zollitsch. "Perturbed" well illustrates the elements of epic craziness that have come to be fundamental to classifying a song as falling within the genre, and, like many of those already mentioned, it's primary means of dissemination was viral via the Internet.[8] Fast-paced and virtuosic, the vocalist is accompanied by an ensemble of *dizi* (transverse bamboo flute), *sheng* (mouth organ), cello and *yangqin* (hammered dulcimer). Her lyrics consist of *luogu jing*, the mnemonic syllables used in *jingju* (Beijing opera) and many other varieties of traditional Chinese opera performance, typically to accompany scenes with a large amount of movement and gesture. In *luogu jing*, a syllable represents a percussive strike or short pattern, whether on drum, gong, cymbals, or woodblock (or on some combination of these instruments; see further Li 2001). Percussionists learn these patterns by chanting the syllables but do not normally expect to sing them in live performances. While these syllables are certainly meaningful for opera percussionists (and suggestive for listeners with some familiarity with traditional opera), they are an unlikely choice as song lyrics, and so the song is already an improbable progenitor for a genre of popular music, even without considering its instrumentation or musical content. Gong meanwhile alternates vocal styles from Beijing opera to add further sonic displacement, and her facial expressions and gestures contribute even more to the building of a sense of unprecedented spectacle. These factors accumulate the epic craziness for which divine song has become known, even while later examples tend to move away from the directly virtuosic in performance; "Little Apple", for example makes only the most straightforward demands upon its vocalists, whether in terms of range, rhythmic variation, syncopation, melisma or lyrical complexity.

[8] "Perturbed" is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNF4siu5vAo, accessed 11 April 2016.

Since 2006, this categorization of divine song has been applied retrospectively to songs from earlier decades, to songs and music videos from outside China. Examples cited in an online encyclopaedia entry that are particularly salient to the discussion of "Little Apple" include "Gangnam Style" and "Chick Chick", LMFAO's "Party Rock Anthem" of 2009 and Ylvis's "The Fox (What Does the Fox Say)", 2013, this last also sharing with "Little Apple" that it was planned as a comic teaser for an upcoming show rather than as a self-contained music video.[9]

The case of "Chick Chick" provides further perspective on the workings and characteristics of divine songs. Lying between "Perturbed" and "The Fox" in terms of use of onomatopoeic lyrics and (lack of) narrative development, the lyrics of "Chick Chick" comprise lines as in verse 1, as follows:

母 鸡 母雞母鸡母鸡母鸡母鸡 咕咕 day
Muji muji muji muji muji muji guguday
[Hen hen hen hen hen hen cluck cluck-day]

小鸡小鸡小鸡小鸡小鸡小鸡 咕咕 day
Xiaoji xiaoji xiaoji xiaoji xiaoji xiaoji guguday
[Chick chick chick chick chick chick cluck cluck-day]

母鸡母鸡母鸡母鸡母鸡母鸡 咕咕 day
Muji muji muji muji muji muji guguday
[Hen hen hen hen hen hen cluck cluck-day]

公鸡公鸡公鸡公鸡 喔喔 喔喔喔
Gongji gongji gongji gongji gongji gongji wo wo wowowo
[Cock cock cock cock cock cock oh oh ohohoh]

Guguday is not a standard Chinese mnemonic for the sound of a chicken. Instead, it soundchecks the equivalent Korean term *kkokkodaeg*, and so offers a linguistic hint as to the significance of K-pop in the sphere of imagination of those creating Chinese popular music in this decade. In fact, the bassline and verse of "Chick Chick" also draws heavily on K-pop models, notably T-ara's "Bo Peep Bo Beep" (2009).[10] The ensuing verses gradually introduce other farmyard animals, whose sounds and dances (including many moves based on those of the farmyard chicken), are set across a cartoon backdrop with occasional retro costume montages inserted.

If the cross-referencing of K-pop, grotesquely mimetic dancing and cartoon visuals recall the style of "Little Apple", there are significant differences as well. The more contemporaneous music production of "Chick Chick" has already been mentioned, and its dancing invariably displays the professional body beautiful, whether that of Wang or those of her bare-chested and prominently six-packed male backing dancers (see Fig. 4), as compared

[9] See further, "Shenqu" (Divine Song), http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A5%9E%E6%9B%B2/2912471, and https://hahachn.wordpress.com/2016/03/30/xi-nao-shen-qu/, both accessed 11 April 2016. On the Ylvis song, see Jesse Thompson, "What Does the Fox Say?: Ylvis's Viral Hit to Become a Children's Book", *The Telegraph* 12 November 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/10443715/What-Does-the-Fox-Say-Ylviss-viral-hit-to-become-a-childrens-book.html, accessed 27 October 2016.

[10] "Bo Peep Bo Peep" is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9403-9CptH8, accessed 31 October 2016.

to the mix in “Little Apple” of the more fluid moves of Bae Seul-ki and the backing group and the intentionally less artful gyrations of Xiao Yang and Wang Taili.



Figure 4: Rollin Wang and Backing Dancers in “Chick Chick” (still from the online MV)

Divine songs, then, may differ in the kind of epic craziness they place on display and the exact means (sonic, visual, narrative, whatever) they employ to achieve this goal. Irrespective of the particular combination of means, Chinese commentaries on the genre agree that one final component of the divine song is the earworm effect—and what could be less unsurprising than finding the apple has a worm within it. Earworms are tunes that stick in the head, tunes that one continues to hear even when the music has ceased—involuntary musical imagery, as a recent research team puts it (Williamson, Liikkanen, Jakubowski and Stewart 2014; for a somewhat contrasting viewpoint, see Beaman and Williams 2010). Despite initial attempts to lay out the musical attributes of earworm tunes—James Kellaris (2001), for example, argued that such music utilized repetition, simplicity, and unexpected incongruity—there is some remaining belief among researchers that human experiences of earworm situations cover a wide set of songs and types of music, and earworms seem to be constituted in the main out of one’s individual listening memories rather than inspired by particular types of melody or rhythm. This rather runs against the idea of divine song as a genre based on the earworm notion even if repetition, simplicity and unexpected incongruity is, in fact, a good summary of the majority of the songs discussed in this article (at least on first hearing and viewing). What can be said, is that the concept of the viral video (and so behind it, the earworm) is strongly established in contemporary China. Virality endows such videos with counter-cultural cachet, whether by means of their apparent eschewing of traditional forms of music industry promotion or of the norms of practice taken up by the state in its own acts of cultural self-definition. Such videos are nevertheless highly visible marketing tools, and, through their success, they contribute to the ongoing project of reimagining key public tropes and values, not least among them those associated with gender, to which we turn in a moment.

To round off this section, however, I want to briefly return to the idea of "Little Apple" as a music video created as a promotional tool to publicize the film *Old Boys: Way of the Dragon*. In genre terms, this makes it less a text in itself so much as a "paratext". This term was offered by Gérard Genette (1997 [1987]) to refer to the supplementary parts of a book (such as the author's name, cover design, dedication or typeface), each of which impacts the way we read the words within the volume itself. This idea has subsequently been mapped across to other media. Here is Jonathan Gray, delineating an electronic world thoroughly penetrated by promos, spoilers, spin-offs, interviews and directors' cuts, discussion sites, fanfic and YouTube parodies:

> If we imagine the triumvirate of Text, Audience, and Industry as the Big Three of media practice, then paratexts fill the space between them, conditioning passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiating or determining interactions among the three. (2010:23)

Gray's later discussion suggests one reason why "Little Apple" may be a superlative example of its kind: "a third key task [for the producers of a paratext] is to open sufficient room for storyworlds to be inhabitable, so that viewers have the interest in commandeering portions of the world" (*ibid*.:207). In the case of the "Little Apple" phenomenon in China, the primary way to bodily enter the storyworld is through group dance, which, even more than *karaoke* singing, remains a significant factor in urban Chinese social settings.[11] Known as public square dancing (*guangchangwu*), after the impromptu occupying of such public spaces as parks and squares for dancing to amplified musical accompaniment, this form of socializing and self-entertainment dates back at least to the late 1980s, when groups of enthusiasts—typically middle-aged and older women—met to keep limber through practicing ballroom dances. In this context, for Chinese audiences, "Little Apple" is more a dance than a song, and its exaggerated and busy comedic ensemble movements both support massed, non-expert participation (in a way that the more professionalized gyrations of "Chick Chick" do not) and provide rich opportunity for humorous interpersonal exchange.[12]

Gender: Brotherly Love, Cross-Dressing and Embodiment

Above, I have drawn attention to the fact that although the lyrics of "Little Apple" mark it out as a love song, it is one in which one man sings endearing sentiments directly to another. One might argue that Wang and Xiao sing *alongside*, not to, one another, but there's still the issue of Wang's cross-dressing within each scenario in the music video. If some of that contributes to comedic impact, passages in the lyrics certainly extend beyond those that we might imagine would serve to celebrate a purely fraternal kind of intimacy, as in the following extract:

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[11] We could also note here the massive success of "Little Apple" in inspiring a remarkably diverse series of pastiche and parody MVs within and (far) beyond China, a topic I hope to pursue in a future study. These too are ways for a number of viewers to claim part of the storyworld for themselves.

[12] For a guide to learning the dance, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nmhFnJH58k, with first a group rendition then the moves taught from 3.40 onward; accessed 11 April 2016. For a time in mid-2015, there was a governmental proposal to introduce official "unified" versions of the movements used in public square dance, with twelve model dances being put forward, first among them "Little Apple". The initiative was widely derided by dancers as unnecessary governmental interference, and was finally dropped; see further [the formal announcement in Chinese], http://www.sport.gov.cn/n16/n2061573/n2760828/6285558.html and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/25/china-grandmother-line-dancing_n_6938894.html, both accessed 31 October 2016.

I pluck the stars down to give to you
I pull down the moon to give to you
Let the sun rise everyday for you
I turn myself into a candle and burn just to illuminate you
I'll give all I have to you, I only want you to be happy
You make my every tomorrow meaningful
Although life is short, I'll love you forever, never to leave you

Accordingly, in this section I assess the framework Chinese history allows for interpreting such artistic expressions of brotherly affection. In fact, Chinese history is replete with examples of men forming very close relationships of the brotherly kind—the bandits in the classic novel *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) offer a prominent example.[13] Those with a more musical basis include the men Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi. Bo Ya was a player of the classic *qin* zither, active approximately 25 centuries ago. *Qin* performer John Thompson has translated a biographical entry tracing the friendship of these two men that occurs in the eleventh-century *History of the Qin* (*Qin shi*) as follows:

> Zhong Ziqi, a man of Chu,...was a friend of Boya. When Boya played the *qin* Zhong Ziqi was a good listener. When Boya was focussed on Mount Tai, Ziqi said, Wonderful, as grand as Mount Tai. When Boya's focus was flowing streams Ziqi said, Vast and swelling, like flowing streams. Whatever Boya described Ziqi attained.
>
> When Boya traveled on the north side of Mount Tai and met heavy rain he stopped below a cliff, took out his *qin* and played it. First it was Continuous Rain Lament, then it was Crashing Mountains Melody. Each time he played Ziqi completely understood. Boya then set aside his *qin* and sighed, saying, Wonderful. When you listen it is like our hearts are resonating together. How can my thoughts escape like this? When Ziqi died Boya split apart his *qin*, broke his strings and never played again, because at that time there could never be another person who could understand his music. (Thompson, n.d.; footnote refs. Omitted)

Cross-dressing, meanwhile, has been a staple of many forms of Chinese traditional opera. These arose in periods when imperial edicts on public propriety prevented men and women from performing onstage together, but became over time part of the core appeal of the operas themselves, albeit one that appears also to have led to the abuse of actors who impersonated women by certain of their more powerful. These elements come together in certain versions of the tale of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, a drama in which Zhu, disguised as a boy, attends school with Liang, where, having become sworn brothers, they gradually discover even deeper feelings for one another. Finally revealing herself to Liang, Zhu is forced into an arranged marriage and has to resume her female identity, leading to a tragic outcome for all (see further, Xu 2016). The drama is performed in numerous Chinese opera traditions, but is particularly renowned as an item in the *yueju* tradition, which initially emerged near Shaoxing in East China but became fully professionalized in Shanghai in the early twentieth century. Although *yueju* was originally acted mostly by male singers, in the 1930s all-female troupes achieved commercial success, and this gradually became an enduring norm in the tradition, such that in a scene between Liang and Zhu from the first part of the drama we'd see a woman acting a man (Liang) singing to a woman acting a woman cross-dressing as and impersonating a man (Zhu). "Little Apple" is less layered than this, but

[13] Wang Taili was also a renowned writer of *qiuge* (prison songs), a popular music genre of the late 1980s, and another setting for male-male companionship.

of course it is also a far shorter utterance in terms of overall duration, and so a somewhat similar density of engendered enactments might be said to occur.

In seeking to understand the Chopstick brothers' music video, we can also turn to a recent set of ideas emerging from studies of the American bromance.[14] As Diana Sargent notes, bromance proposes models for masculinity that may be ironic but still underscore male hegemony, a sign that bromance is "the latest reflection of American masculinity in crisis" (2013:1). Sargent argues that this crisis has its roots in race via the civil rights movement as well as in the impact of feminism and of gay/lesbian campaigning, all of which came to undermine previously unexamined assumptions of white, middle-class male heterosexual normativity (*ibid*.:4-5). China's recent history contrasts rather markedly, of course, but here too there's been a need to reconstitute gender after the complexities of the Mao years, most notably the Cultural Revolution, during which women were publicly expected to model themselves upon men while working for less pay and respect (and domestically expected to continue to carry the greater burden in terms of familial duties; see further Wolf 1985; Mittler 2012: 335-48). Sargent underlines the anxiety about homosexuality found in many a US bromance:

> Though not necessarily overtly homophobic, buddy films and even bromances are only able to portray close male friendships representative of a larger masculinity by constantly denying elements of homosexuality that may emerge in the films and similar television portrayals. This is accomplished through dismissal of intimate moments through comedy or action, or perhaps by incorporating homophobic dialogue. (2013:11)

The "Little Apple" music video does not incorporate explicitly homophobic dialogue or actions, but it does share this tendency to dismiss male-to-male intimacy through fast cuts to comedy or action. If the video teaches us that the forbidden fruit is likely very tasty indeed, it is the persuasive undulations of Bae Seul-ki as objectified woman-temptress-snake that introduces this threat to the platonic relationship hitherto experienced by the two Chopstick Brothers in Paradise. The immediacy of the physical world threatens a relationship predicated on a lifetime of fellowship and mutual care, as shown at most length in the Korean War scenario later in the music video but already hinted at in the ensemble's name. (A single chopstick is no use to anyone; and they form an identical pair, not a combination of complementary opposites, like a knife and fork.)

Humour and action, then, act as a dissipation of the passion built up between the principal characters, and this keeps "Little Apple" in what Chinese audiences would construe as a safe place. Nevertheless, it is also notable that humour and action scenes work somewhat like music, dance and formation of gender itself—performative, stylized, constructed, dramatic, replicable, expressive, ambivalent and open to dispute (see further, Butler 1990:140). Moreover, in "Little Apple" the music and dance elements continue almost throughout once they finally begin, and so aren't as effectively closed off by a change of scene or insertion of humour as might otherwise be the case. In encapsulating their stylized repetitions within an aesthetic shell and through the visual effort of performance, these media can temporarily make tangible new forms of feeling and embodiment.

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[14] Connor Martin (2013) describes "bromance" as "a portmanteau term...that utilizes the bro suffix to inflect a previously unmarked term; if some such inflections seem primarily intended to emphasize a non-homosexual interaction between two men (bro-fist, bro-hug), these same terms can also be understood as exclusionary to women."

Meanings: Towards a Conclusion

Earlier, I noted Chinese commentaries that painted the disco musical ingredients of the song as anachronistic as compared to certain other contemporaneous songs. I want to return to that idea now in light of what has just been said about male-to-male duetting in a feelingful music and dance setting. Richard Dyer, as long ago as 1979, drew attention to the contrasting ways different musical genres worked, both in terms of drawing on our bodily resources (for example, the phallic thrusting of much rock) and in forming a space within which human beings can formulate their dreams of alternatives to the everyday. Dyer saw the passionate, romantic and erotic embodiments of disco as peculiarly able to open a space for a positively empowering form of social bonding:

> Disco is part of the wider to-and-fro between work and leisure, alienation and escape, boredom and enjoyment.... This to-and-fro is partly the mechanism by which we keep going, at work, at home,.... But what happens in that space of leisure can be profoundly significant—it is there that we may learn about an alternative to work and to society as it is.... The movement between banality and something 'other' than banality is an essential dialectic of society, a constant keeping open of a gap between what is and what could or should be. (Dyer 1979:23)

The quote will remind ethnomusicological readers of somewhat contemporaneous passages by John Blacking, for instance this passage on the Venda people of South Africa:

> the Venda make music when their stomachs are full because, consciously or unconsciously, they sense the forces of separation inherent in the satisfaction of self-preservation, and they are driven to restore the balance with exceptionally cooperative and exploratory behavior. Thus forces in culture and society would be expressed in humanly organized sound, because the chief function of music in society and culture is to promote soundly organized humanity by enhancing human consciousness. (Blacking 1973:101)

In the intervening decades, ethnomusicologists have mostly moved away from offering such all-encompassing interpretations of social forces, preferring to write about what can be more directly evidenced in the words and practices of the music makers themselves. While that caution makes much sense, a closely ethnographic approach is potentially less revealing when we wish to assess on the broadest level the emergence of new mass media products and practices, like those in "Little Apple", that seem to spark a wide range of interpretations all at once across a widely distributed community of viewers. In such cases, I am arguing, we can use our specialised insights to contribute by drawing into critical relief not only the music (and dance) content itself or the reactions of particular people to those but also the significant frames of reference that shape and underpin those creative, artistic and social processes as a whole.

In assessing the models of brotherly love located in "Little Apple", it is difficult to avoid turning to another vaunted musical expression of a similar nature, if different means, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. In asking whether the work is beyond interpretation, Nicholas Cook notes the profound musical ambiguities contained with the Ninth Symphony and it's harking back in the 1820s to an ideological moment forty years earlier when it seemed that social revolutions would lead to the formation of a more egalitarian (brotherly, in the

gendered language of the age) Enlightenment system (1993:101). Cook argues that our role is to keep hearing the earnest as well as the ironical so that the Ninth Symphony isn't fully consumed by the ideology of its particular context of performance or replay (*ibid*.:105). Although some musicologists would claim the music's capacity to resist full incorporation into new interpretations as a sign of that composition's deserving status as a timeless masterwork, the idea of searching for whatever points out beyond a single interpretation seems to me salient advice for the study of music and music videos much more generally. An example in "Little Apple" occurs in the Garden of Eden scene where Xiao Yang shoots down a UFO with an electric charge from his finger. Instead of Adam being temporarily charged with godliness (as, for instance, in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, Figs. 5 and 6),[15] now the force comes from man and strikes up to discombobulate the heavens, significantly in the context of this song—the empowering gesture is one of disco.

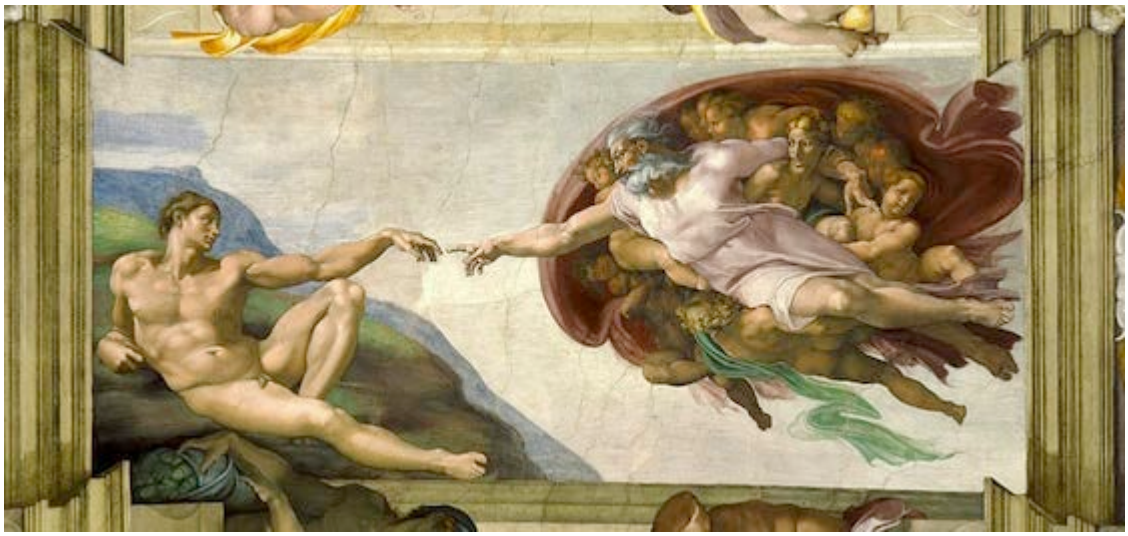


Figure 5: Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam *from the Sistine Chapel, c. 1512*

[15] Fig. 6 is sourced from Chen Nan, "Chinese Internet Pop Song Wins at American Music Awards Gala," *China Daily* 25 November 2014, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2014-11/25/content_18970468.htm, accessed 11 April 2016.



Figure 6: Xiao Yang (left) and Wang Taili in a Disco-Inspired Victory Pose upon Receiving the International Song Award at the 42nd American Music Awards, Los Angeles, 23 November 2014

Returning now to the opening evaluations of "Little Apple", I think we can see that there's much more to "Little Apple" than "bubblegum" or "beautiful trash [that's] unable to give people spiritual satisfaction," and also why some within the Chinese establishment might fear (and wish to leave unspoken) it's potentially empowering embodiments. Rather than being an exercise in "unfiltered, dog-pissing insanity", "Little Apple" illustrates an emergent new genre within Chinese popular music, the divine song, one in which the insidious craziness of the viral earworm is actively sought and celebrated. If there are numerous "postcolonial smackdowns", the music video is very thoughtfully designed for a range of audiences specifically in East Asia, ranging from the matrons of public square dance to consumers across the region whose aesthetic senses have been shaped by K-pop precedents and who might be drawn to the ensuing film. Ultimately, it provides an extraordinary dance space for the ordinary person, one that celebrates two men's claim to an enduring, intimate relationship. For six minutes or so, as viewers of "Little Apple" we inhabit a world defined by profound and loving male collaboration.

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Glossary of Key Terms and Names

Bae Seul-ki [Korean]		배슬기
"Bless You, Most Beloved"	*Zhufu ni zui qin'aide*	祝福你最亲爱的
"Chick Chick"	*Xiaoji xiaoji*	小鸡小鸡
Chopstick Brothers	*Kuaizi xiongdi*	筷子兄弟
Divine song	*shenqu*	神曲
Gong Linna		龚琳娜
Gong-and-drum syllables	*luogu jing*	锣鼓经
Public square dancing	*guangchangwu*	广场舞
Kkokkodaeg [Korean]		꼬꼬댁
"Little Apple"	*Xiao pingguo*	小苹果
"My Face is Like an Apple" [Korean]	*Sagwa gat-eun nae eolgul*	사과 같은 내 얼굴
Old Boys	*Lao nanhai*	老男孩
Old Boys: Way of the Dragon	*Lao nanhai: Meng long guo jiang*	老男孩猛龙过江
"Perturbed"	*Tante*	忐忑
Prison songs	*qiuge*	囚歌
Wang Rong (Rollin Wang)		王蓉
Wang Taili		王太利
Xiao Yang		肖央

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