

Chained Arias: Censorship of music in Taiwan under martial law

Modern Taiwan is often regarded as one of the few Asian cities that enjoys a great extent of freedom and a democratic political system. In recent times, Taiwan has also produced a diverse and well known pop music culture, with many famous artists including divas like A-Mei (張惠妹), dance-pop artists like Jolin Tsai (蔡依林), singer-songwriters like Jay Chou (周杰倫), bands like Mayday (五月天), and even indie artists such as Sodagreen (蘇打綠) and Cheer Chen (陳綺貞). Taiwanese pop songs have their own unique style, using performed in Mandarin, consisting mostly of gloomy and sentimental tones, with highly poetic and beautiful lyrics about separation and lost love. Yet, behind all the modern poetic artistry lies a history consisting of a martial law system that greatly restricted music creation and included the persecution of many musicians.

From 19 May 1949 to 15 July 1987, known as “the period of White Horror”, the Taiwanese people, under the rule of the Nationalist Government, were chained under a martial law system. This included political and moral censorships in all aspects, including in publications and media. In terms of music, songs and performances at the time had to be approved by the government before they could be recorded or broadcast through mass media such as radio and television (which was at the time, also controlled by the government). The consequences of writing and singing prohibited songs could be severe: musicians could be put into jail, treated violently, or even be sentenced to death. Tracing back the very beginning, the government had been censoring music since 1947. Yet the extent of censorship was greatly increased from 1950. In 1961, the Taiwanese police issued the 10 criteria of censorship – 10 reasons under which a song could be banned. At the same time, the 10 criteria represented an admission by the then Taiwanese government of music censorship¹ (Li, 2015).

English translation: 1. Promoting left-wing ideology 2. Songs taken from Mainland China (ruled by Communist Party) 3. Gloomy and sad lyrics – which affects	Original text in Chinese: 一、意識左傾，為匪宣傳； 二、抄襲共匪宣傳作品之曲譜； 三、詞句頹喪，影響民心士氣；
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¹ The criteria were originally written in Chinese; to keep the authoritative tone and wordings, the original text will be cited on the right of the English translation.

the morale of citizens	
4. Content that is inappropriate for teenagers	四、內容荒謬怪誕，危害青年身心；
5. “Unhealthy” and “unclean” melodies and lyrics that is opposed to the moral standard	五、意境誨淫，妨害善良風化；
6. Songs which harm education	六、曲詞狂蕩，危害社教；
7. Songs that promote violence and hatred, which can result in civil disorder	七、鼓勵狠暴仇鬥，影響地方治安；
8. Songs that mention the negatives of society, which can lead to misperceptions	八、反映時代錯誤，使人滋生誤會；
9. Songs containing vulgar and frivolous wording	九、文詞粗鄙，輕佻嬉罵；
10. Songs of a depressive nature	十、幽怨哀傷，有失正常。 (Li, 2015)

The first two criteria were due to the Nationalist Party in Taiwan at the time being political enemies with the Communist Party in Mainland China (who had won the civil war in Mainland China and forced the Nationalist Party to escape to Taiwan), and with Japan (due to the invasion of the Japanese Army in China during World War II, when it was still under the rule of the Nationalist Party). Thus, music associated with the Communist Party and with Japan was banned to ensure the stability of the Nationalist Party's rule in Taiwan. The most famous example of a song banned under these criteria is probably “When will you come back?” (何日君再來) by Teresa Tang (鄧麗君), a simple song that tells of the yearning for a lover to come back. The song was banned simply because of the “problematic” title – the coincidence that “君” (meaning “you”), is pronounced the same as “軍” (meaning “army”), changing the question into possibly being heard as “When will the Japanese army come back?”. This was deemed harmful to citizen mental health by mentioning the painful and unhappy memory of WWII.²

From the tenth criteria, it's also seen that songs were not allowed to be sad. This was to prevent people from thinking about the negative side of their society, which could lead to dissatisfaction with the authoritative government. Teng Yu-hsien (鄧雨賢, 1906-1944), known as “the father of Taiwanese folksong” (台灣歌謠之父) is a famous composer for traditional Taiwanese

² From *Tales From The Martial Law Era*. (2007, July 15).

songs sung in Hokkien (Zhang, 2017). All four songs within his most celebrated series of work, *the April Rain* (四月望雨, an abbreviation of the first character of each of the four song titles), were banned due to various reasons:

1. “Redness of Four Seasons” (四季紅): the “紅” (red) in the song title is a symbolic color for the Communist Party – and saying there is redness in all four seasons throughout the year could be interpreted as to yearning for the Communist Party’s rule forever.
2. “Sadness in Moonlight” (月夜愁): the “sadness” mentioned in the title.
3. “Desiring the Spring Breeze” (望春風): the song contained the lyrics “still not married at the age of seventeen to eighteen” (十七八歲未出嫁), which was considered “inappropriate to teenagers” and “unhealthy” according to the then “moral standard” of the government, as 17 to 18 year olds were deemed too young for romance (teenagers of that age were still in school) (Skkytw, 2012).
4. “Flowers in the Rainy Night” (雨夜花): the first line of the song – “flowers in the rainy nights, fell into the endless wind” (雨夜花雨夜花，受風雨吹落地) – could be understood as describing the pain and sadness (fall) of the Taiwanese people (the “flowers”) during WWII (wind) (Zhang, 2017). While the lyrics “with a fragile heart, my future is dark and hopeless” (軟弱心性，乎阮前途失光明) is not only “depressive” but was also accused of being a metaphor for the dark and hopeless future of Taiwanese people under the rule of the Nationalist government.

Though no one could be sure if Teng intended to use those symbols and metaphors within his lyrics, the reasons for their banning seem quite illogical and far-fetched. And even for instances where the interpretation of the lyrics is obvious, the reasons cited for banning the song (e.g. containing sad content) is still unjustified.

With an increasing amount of songs being banned at the time, one might wonder what was permitted. From the 1950s, to juxtapose music with political propaganda, the Taiwanese government produced a series of “clean” song to “cheer up” the people. The songs contained content which promoted

and supported the Nationalist Party, and set the Communist Party and the former USSR as the enemy. An example of this is the famous “Anti-Communist and Anti-Soviet Union Song”:

<p>English translation: Defeat the USSR, overrule the communist, Eliminate Zhu and Mao³, kill the betrayers, Get our mainland back and free our brothers, Obey our leader, finish the revolution, carry out Three People's Principles, Revive the ROC⁴, revive China, the ROC forever, The ROC forever and ever.</p>	<p>Original text in Chinese: 打倒俄寇，反共產、反共產 消滅朱毛，殺漢奸、殺漢奸 收復大陸解救同胞 服從領袖完成革命三民主義實行 中華民國復興、中華復興、民國萬歲 中華民國萬萬歲 (Meister Grothe, 2013)</p>
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The series of “clean songs” were used to demonstrate to songwriters what songs were acceptable, and even praised, during the White Horror Period, and aside from praising the government, it seemed there were not many subjects available that were safe to write about. Yet Taiwanese musicians held a very strong belief in freedom of creation. To rebel, plenty of performers were still performing prohibited songs, and some songwriters kept on writing censored songs too. The most famous example is probably Luo Da You (羅大佑), whose debut album *Zhi Hu Zhe Ye*⁵ (之乎者也, 1982) caused a great splash in the Taiwanese pop industry, as well as Taiwanese society at the time for his rebellious image, reflected in the songs he wrote. Bearing the same name as the album, the song *Zhi Hu Zhe Ye* contained different lyrics in the last verse for the version released universally and the version released in Taiwan.

Universal version:

³ “Zhu Mao” is the abbreviation of Zhu De and Mao Ze-dung, the crucial members of the Chinese Communist Party.

⁴ Short term for “Republic of China”, which means the Nationalist government

⁵ A Chinese proverb meaning to say things in a blurred and indirect way for “courtesy” and “obedience”; like this song, the word is generally a negative word often associated to the criticism of old-school and outdated moral standard.

English translation Censor this song, Will this be passed? If passed, Please print it for piracy.	Original text in Chinese 歌曲審查之 通不通過乎 歌曲通過者 翻版盜印也 (Gtrjohnson, 2010)
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The original version of the lyrics not only blatantly criticizes the government for censorship, it also at the same time criticized the severe problem of piracy. While Luo probably knew there was no way the lyrics of this verse would pass censorship, he still wrote them as a direct protest to the censorship system.

The lyrics were amended for the Taiwanese version of the song, and were deemed fine to be put into the album. The album itself was permitted to be sold in Taiwan, but was not allowed to be performed through mass media.

Taiwanese version:

English translation Turn a blind eye, Don't speak but exhale, Cover your ears, Then both of us will be happy.	Original text in Chinese 眼睛睜一隻 嘴巴呼一呼 耳朵遮一遮 皆大歡喜也 (Luo, 1982, Track 6)
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In the Taiwanese version of the song, Luo turned his criticism into sarcasm, telling the police who were enforcing the censorship to turn a blind eye and let him release his song. At the same time, the lyrics questioned his Taiwanese audience whether nobody speaking out against the government meant that everyone was happy.

Parallel to the initiation of the democratic movement in the 1980s, martial law in Taiwan came to an end in 1984. Following that, the censorship of music and performances was also greatly reduced.

After the White Horror Period ended, there no longer were restrictions on the expression of sadness and sentimental feelings in song and media. Now able to express these feelings, many songs of such a nature were created and

released. The unlocking of such emotions after a period of restriction may possibly be what formed the unique style of current Taiwanese pop songs. While this might be seen as a positive outcome from the music censorship of the past, the end does not justify the painful means to get there. Freedom of creation and expression is still an essential element when composing music, and the voices in the hearts of those creating music should not be locked by power and politics.

(Reference list removed, text shared with the writer's consent)