

Wonderland:

Khalil Fong's Album as Sonic Fantasy of Black-Chinese Collaboration

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## Abstract

This paper presents a literature review of existing scholarship answering the following research question: How does Khalil Fong synthesize Black American musical traditions within a Chinese-language pop context in *Wonderland*? The reviewed works are then applied to Track 2 of the album as a sample analysis to demonstrate their relevance.

## Introduction

From a Chinese American father and a mother from Hong Kong, Khalil Fong (方大同) was born on July 14, 1983 in Hawaii. Despite his heritage and own time living in Cantonese speaking cities, he led a music career only penning in English and Mandarin. His upbringing was strict, homeschooled by both parents with no tv, snacks or toys. Having no access to the flamboyant pop that entertained the masses on MTV, he absorbed his parents' music collection: funk, soul and jazz records from decades prior. The likes of Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye and B.B. King marked the path his musicality would follow. His debut album is aptly titled *Soulboy* (2005). It is his third album *Wonderland* (2007) whose roots I want to dissect. *Wonderland* was his first album released in Taiwan, cementing his entrance into the Mandopop sphere. Aptly titled, it draws on fantasy and idealism. This album, like much of his discography stands as testament of Black-Chinese collaboration. The influence Fong drew from his predecessors makes them present in the music even if they were not physically in the room.

This February marking the anniversary of his death. His record label, Fu Music, posthumously reads Fong's "aim was to eventually introduce a more authentic soul, R&B, and hip-hop sound into Chinese music." An aim, I believe, was accomplished.

## 夠不夠

作词：方大同/茹岚 作曲：方大同 编曲：方大同

Lyrics: Khalil Fong/Ru Lan Music:Khalil Fong Arrangement: Khalil Fong

! marks a code-switch

Chinese	Pinyin	English Translation
1 你爸爸妈妈 不会随便让你嫁	nǐ bà bà mā mā bù huì suí biàn ràng nǐ jià	Your parents won't just let you marry anyone
2 有财能够讲话	yǒu cái néng gòu jiǎng huà	Money talks
3 你君临天下 单位价格太浮夸	nǐ jūn lín tiān xià dān wèi jià gé tài fú kuā	You're the queen of the world, but your price tag is way too high
4 除非可以刷卡	chú fēi kě yǐ shuā kǎ	Unless I can pay by credit card
5 你的要求 让我发抖	nǐ de yào qiú ràng wǒ fā dǒu	Your demands make me tremble
6 已经拥有 还没有拥有的 够不够	yǐ jīng yōng yǒu hái méi yǒu yōng yǒu de gòu bù gòu	What I already have, and what I don't have yet—is it enough?
7 够不够 做你的宝贝!	gòu bù gòu zuò nǐ de bǎo bèi	Is it enough to be your baby?
8 Do u know how it feels		
9 Every time that u say goodbye		
10 Goodbye u say		
11 Do u know how it feels		
12 Every time that u make me cry		
13 Don't break my heart !		
14 Oh 我对你的爱 在世上难买	wǒ duì nǐ de ài zài shì shàng nán mǎi	My love for you is priceless
15 要是错过 我也无能为力	yào shì cuò guò wǒ yě wú néng wéi lì	If we miss our chance, there's nothing I can do

16 你想开宝马 我和我的! 的!Toyota	nǐ xiǎng kāi bǎo mǎ wǒ hé wǒ de Toyota	You want to drive a BMW, but I'm in my Toyota
17 是否让你尴尬	shì fǒu ràng nǐ gān gà	Does that make you feel embarrassed?
18 你最爱卡拉 我对戴蒙有 看法	nǐ zuì ài qiǎ lā wǒ duì dài mēng yǒu kàn fǎ	You love carats but I have a different view of diamonds
19 你说我是傻瓜	nǐ shuō wǒ shì shǎ guā	You call me a fool
20 你的朋友 说我太瘦	nǐ de péng yǒu shuō wǒ tài shòu	Your friends say I'm too skinny
21 怎么不在意 我对你的爱 够不够	zěn me bù zài yì wǒ duì nǐ de ài gòu bù gòu	Why don't they care if my love for you is enough?
22 够不够 是否能体会!	gòu bù gòu shì fǒu néng tǐ huì	Is it enough? Can you even tell?
Chorus repeats Line 8-15	Chorus repeats Line 8-15	Chorus repeats Line 8-15
23 Baby tell me ! 如果我离 开	Baby tell me rú guǒ wǒ lí kāi	Baby, tell me, if I were to leave
24 Oh 要是我不再与你合拍	Oh yào shì wǒ bù zài yǔ nǐ hé pāi	Oh, if we were no longer on the same page
25 再不会有我在这里等著 你	zài bù huì yǒu wǒ zài zhè lǐ děng zhuó nǐ	I wouldn't be here waiting for you anymore
26 再没有我的安慰	zài méi yǒu wǒ de ān wèi	There'd be no comfort from me
27 我会心碎	wǒ huì xīn suì	My heart would break
28 只剩下我每一天每一 天在回味	zhī shèng xià wǒ měi yī tiān měi yī tiān zài huí wèi	All that's left is me, day after day, reminiscing
29 失去你 失去爱 世界不再 美	shī qù nǐ shī qù ài shì jiè bù zài měi	Losing you, losing love—the world isn't beautiful anymore
Chorus repeats lines 8-13	Chorus repeats 8-13	Chorus repeats lines 8-13
30 Oh 我对你的爱 在世上难 买	Oh wǒ duì nǐ de ài zài shì shàng nán mǎi	Oh, my love for you can't be bought in this world

31 要是错过 Oh 不要错过	yào shì cuò guò Oh bù yào cuò guò	If you miss it, oh, don't miss it
32 如果爱我 不要错过	rú guǒ ài wǒ bù yào cuò guò	If you love me, don't miss it,
33 我对你的爱你难道还不明白	wǒ duì nǐ de ài nǐ nán dào hái bù míng bái	Don't you understand my love for you yet?

### Literature Review

**R&B's Origin** in Black American music tradition is well acknowledged internationally. Still, I was surprised by the number of journals analyzing the subject across Mainland China and Taiwan. Authors Zhang Luoxiao and Wang Zikun provided a concise history of R&B's emergence in the mid-20th century and the key elements of its production. R&B songs are complex, typically layering synthesizers, reverb, and syncopated rhythms with vocal techniques such as melisma and sliding tones over I-IV-V chord progressions. To adequately identify and label these elements as they appear in *Wonderland*, a formal music theory background would be required. Fortunately, the genre is not defined by musicality alone! R&B is equally distinguished by its lyricism. R&B lyrics are deeply emotional; as Zhang and Wang observe, the genre's adoption abroad has established R&B as a medium for artists "using it to convey their profound reflections on life, society, and culture, as well as their innermost feelings" (p.84). Nowhere is this more prevalent than *Wonderland's* second track 够不够. Khalil Fong uses this song to lament about our materialistic society and its impact on finding real, genuine love. He expresses the difficulty of being held to standards he fears he will never achieve.

**Code-switching** “occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more language varieties in a single conversation” (Gumperz, 1982 as cited in Du, 2023). Functionally, users convey inclusion in or solidarity with a group. To code-switch effectively, the speaker must be familiar with both languages. Khalil Fong asserts his identity as an ABC, smoothly navigating between English and Mandarin. His English lyrics serve as a solidarity marker to the American musicians who inspired him to create music of his own. *Situational code-switching* occurs to accommodate the setting, such as a Black worker using AAVE with friends and standard American English with coworkers. *Metaphorical code-switching* to convey a certain idea or emotion. Khalil Fong’s discography leans heavily on metaphorical code-switching, with English being used to share his inner thoughts. Analyzing *Wonderland* Track 2 够不够 (How It Feels) Fong begins the song addressing the love interest stating the facts of their situation; (你爸爸媽媽不會隨便讓你嫁...) When he begins describing the emotional impact of the situation, we see our first switch from Mandarin to English; (Do you know how it feels...) Code-switching is best analyzed through the matrix language frame model where Chinese serves as the principal language whose syntactic frame English is embedded into. In analyzing the bilingual lyrics of popular ABC singers, Du identifies four functions of code-switching: (1) code-switching for rhyme, (2) code-switching to shift from introspection to addressing a second person, (3) code-switching for common expressions, and (4) code-switching for the chorus.“ (p.64) *Inter-sentential* when one switches languages between sentences, and an *intra-sentential* switch is within the same sentence. In 够不够, Fong does both. Code-switching for the chorus is done inter-sententially, while code-switching for the rhyme, as in Lines 16 and 23, is intra-sentential. The rhyme in Line 23 is special in that it is accomplished not just by code-switching but through his musicality. ‘Me’ and 离开 lí kāi do not rhyme outside of Fong’s unique delivery, singing the

note of 离 lí slightly longer than 开 kāi so listeners' ears associate it with 'me'. Throughout *Wonderland*, Fong can be heard making adlibs, "oh, hey, la," which are often written in English amongst the rest of the Chinese lyrics. However, I chose not to include those as examples of his code-switching. Chinese iterations of those sounds do exist (哦 ó , 嘿 hēi, 啦 lā), making it hard to identify if Fong intended them to function as English.

**Commodity Culture** is an idea introduced by Bell Hooks where members of the dominant culture take on elements of minority cultures differentiating themselves for personal gain. The Golden Melody Awards are often referred to as the Grammy's for Mandarin music of which Fong was nominated for thirteen across his two-decade career. Skeptics may view Khalil Fong's musical success as a function of commodity culture. As a Chinese-American, he holds a distinct advantage in the Mandarin-speaking market, offering the novelty of Western musical influences through a face the audience recognizes as their own. One has to wonder, would this music resonate the same way if it came from someone who looked like the artists who inspired it? An appeal to Otherness is not only a commercial strategy, it also speaks to those consuming it. As a Black woman who has navigated marginalization within Chinese spaces, Bell Hooks offers those of us "who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation." (Hooks, 1992). It is possible that I am made ignorant to Khalil Fong's participation in commodity culture by my desire for something familiar in my target language. However, the differences between being Chinese born and American born should not be neglected. While Fong may look like he belongs, he along with other ABCs carry the role of a minority within China. When he creates music that others identify as Western, American or even Black, it is an accurate reflection of the world that raised him.

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