

Prodigy of Taiwan, Diva of Asia: *Teresa Teng*

By David B. Gordon



Teresa Teng in a late-1970s photoshoot in Japan, where her “cuteness” was especially central to her image. Source: <http://tiny.cc/khuwk>.

Teresa Teng (1953–1995) is the best-known and most beloved singer in the history of modern East Asia. Born on the island of Taiwan soon after it became the seat of the anti-Communist Republic of China (ROC), Teresa quickly emerged as a Mandarin pop sensation among overseas Chinese. In her early twenties, she proceeded to take Japan by storm as a surpassing singer of pensive Japanese ballads. By the end of the 1970s, in turn, her fame had spread far into the People’s Republic of China (PRC), where her careful renderings of ‘30s Shanghai classics made her a symbol of their society’s movement away from Cultural Revolution-era radicalism and toward an appreciation of everyday pleasures for tens of millions of Chinese. In the early 1980s, her career reached its zenith with a mammoth Fifteenth Anniversary Tour—including six straight days of sold-out concerts at the Hong Kong Coliseum—following which she spent the final decade of her life unsuccessfully seeking a new role for herself. Teresa Teng has been remembered since her death in 1995 both for her sheer talent as a singer and performer and as an emblem of the cultural unity of greater China—mainland China, Taiwan, and ethnic Chinese communities worldwide—even as its political divisions refused to heal.

For students taking survey courses in history and the social sciences, Teresa Teng’s life story will shed considerable light on her glory years—the 1970s and 1980s—an era when East Asia pulled itself back from the brink. Mainland China abjured the fanaticism of its Cultural Revolution while Taiwan progressively abandoned martial law and its attendant ideological rigidity. Japan prospered and served as effectually a model for its neighbors. Crass consumerism swept much of the region, yet the need for the balm that Teresa’s tremulous singing voice offered remained heartfelt. Accordingly, Teresa Teng’s success highlights the emotional dimension of East Asian life in the late twentieth century. Fortunately, this dimension is now more accessible than ever through contemporary media. Videos uploaded on YouTube and elsewhere present many of her performances, and the remarks left in comment sections beneath the videos show how fans perceive her significance.¹ Although students may have differing responses to Teresa’s

music—the backup orchestrations in particular will seem dated to many—the encounter with her and her fans’ emotions can provide them with a fresh, vital angle on a period that directly shaped the East Asia of today.

MODEST ORIGINS Teresa Teng was born into a “mainlander” family in Taiwan in 1953. This means that her parents hailed from mainland China, which until 1949 had been ruled by the Nationalist Party. Teresa’s father, Deng Xuwei, had been a military officer for the Nationalist regime, fleeing to Taiwan with his family when that regime collapsed on the mainland. By the time Teresa was born, Taiwan had spent several years as a remote outpost of the ROC and several more as its base. Numerous local Taiwanese, however, viewed the incoming mainlanders as arrogant interlopers. Deng Liyun—christened “Teresa” as a baby—faced this unsettled backdrop for her childhood.

Among her siblings—three older brothers and one younger one—it was Teresa who became the darling of her parents. From age two, she began humming songs on the radio. Her father enjoyed Beijing opera, and her mother appreciated Huangmei (primarily Anhui Province) theater, so her family, though poor, exposed her to a musical smorgasbord. By age six, the family lived in Taipei, Taiwan’s capital, where Teresa began voice lessons from an acquaintance of her father’s who instructed an air force band. In the martial environment of 1950s Taiwan, it was fitting that her first mentor introduced her to singing before military audiences, a practice she continued throughout her life.

As Teresa’s confidence in her abilities grew, at age eleven she entered a China Radio-sponsored musical competition among some fifty contestants of all ages—and won! She quickly entered the ranks of Taiwan’s recognized “tween” singers of Mandarin popular music. Virtually all of this music came from elsewhere: standards from Shanghai, contemporary pieces from Hong Kong, and translations of Japanese *enka* (sad love songs). This Mandarin pop—henceforth Mandopop—fueled Teresa’s career as the performer whom Chinese usually call by her stage name: Deng Lijun.

HONG KONG AS THE BASE Events now moved rapidly for Teresa. Having withdrawn from school to concentrate on music, in 1967 she debuted at Paris Night, an upscale Taipei nightclub, and performed onstage there for a record seventy nights. She also released her first LP, which included a version of her later hit “When Will You Return?”² The following year, she performed abroad for the first time, and in 1969, she sang alongside major Mandopop stars at a lavish charity concert in Singapore. By this time, her career of superlatives was beginning to take shape.

It was also steadily moving her from the island of Taiwan. In 1970, at age seventeen, she made her Hong Kong debut at the famed Lee Theatre as Teresa Teng—her name henceforth in English-language discourse. Hong Kong would be critical for her success: When the Communists took over mainland China in 1949, Shanghai’s thriving musical scene reestablished itself in the British colony, which quickly became *the* proving ground for aspiring Mandopop artists.

Teresa was fortunate to receive assistance from Yao Housheng, a well-known local producer. Taking Teresa under his wing, Yao encouraged her to perform as an adult, that is, to sing ballads and to do so with concentrated feeling. Teresa’s voice tended to be soft, but Yao turned this to her advantage by having her hold her microphone very close to her lips except when exhaling. The resulting quasi-whisper became a trademark of her delivery through the rest of her career and engendered what has been called a “private emotion” in her listeners—as though she were singing for each of them individually.³

MAKING IT IN JAPAN As Teresa’s reputation burgeoned in Hong Kong, interest in her work appeared from another direction: Japan. During the early 1970s, Japan Polydor was one of that country’s leading recording companies. In a sign of Western economic influence, the company formed part of the Europe-based PolyGram label and was headed by an Austrian national named Wolfgang Arming. To increase revenues, Arming decided to introduce the rapidly expanding mainland Asian pop scene to the Japanese market, sending Japanese talent scouts to Hong Kong for this purpose. During their stay in Hong Kong, the scouts were greatly impressed by Teresa’s performance at a live music bar. A Japanese executive became convinced that she could succeed in Japan as a Taiwanese Misora Hibari—a classic enka star whom Teresa had idolized since childhood. Teresa’s father initially rejected this proposal because Teresa already prevailed throughout major Chinese markets—adequate success, in his view. However, eventually he was persuaded to let her begin a new, Japanese incarnation as pop singer Teresa Ten (written in *katakana* letters).

Teresa’s Japanese musical debut took place in 1974. Following an unsuccessful single, she hit it very big with a breakup song called “Airport” for which she received numerous new artist awards. Although her earnings steadily increased, Teresa found Japan a sharp contrast with anything she had ever experienced. Japan comprised the second-largest music market anywhere after the United States, which meant that everything was on a larger scale. For example, each musical TV program possessed its own full backup band, in contrast to the simple guitarist-drummer-keyboardist combination that prevailed in Taiwan. Each star had their own retinue attending to every aspect of their appearance, yet at the same time, there was an unrelenting pressure to generate more hits. Despite her mixed feelings, Teresa received fresh stimulation from working in Japan, as singing with greater backup and within the melodramatic enka tradition allowed her voice to develop substantially greater expressiveness. And her success in Japan gave her cachet as she returned to the production of Mandarin hits in Hong Kong.

THE MOON AND NEW YORK CITY Teresa first sang her most famous Mandarin ballad, “The Moon Represents My Heart,” in 1977.⁴ Regarded as her trademark, it has since been covered by nearly every major Mandopop star and group in the past thirty years—including a rap version



Tie-dye and tradition meet in this 1968 photo from Teresa’s early years as a singer in Taiwan. Source: <http://bit.ly/xiNSzD>.

by Taiwanese singer Jay Chou! The lyrics are quite simple, as its initial lines suggest: “You ask me how deeply I love you, how much I love you. My feelings are real, my love is real: The moon represents my heart.”⁵ The song, which exploits the traditional Chinese emphasis on the moon as an emotional symbol, provides excellent practice for a beginning student of the Chinese language and exists in numerous karaoke versions.

Teresa’s career reached an unanticipated turning point in 1979 when she was arrested in Japan amidst great fanfare for using a false Indonesian passport to enter the country (like other Taiwanese, she was coping with the ROC’s increasing diplomatic isolation). Following complex negotiations, she was freed to travel to the United States, where she spent the next year and a half. For most of this period, she maintained a low profile as an auditor of classes at UCLA. Nevertheless, near the end of her stay she performed popular solo concerts for predominantly ethnic Chinese audiences at New York City’s Lincoln Center and Los Angeles’s Music Center—the first Chinese singer to do so. Meanwhile, she learned of her popularity in an especially unexpected location: the PRC.

THE PRC AND ITS DISCONTENTS As the PRC entered its era of “reform and openness,” numerous Chinese became enamored with Teresa’s clearly enunciated Mandopop classics, which reminded them of ordinary feelings far removed from the grandiose political themes that had dominated their society. Although other Mandopop musicians’ songs likewise diffused in the PRC in this period, Teresa enjoyed an overwhelming popularity there.

When she returned to Taiwan in 1980, Teresa quickly became engaged in the ROC’s effort to exploit her popularity politically. She visited the island of Jinmen (aka Quemoy), an ROC possession directly off the coast of the PRC’s Fujian province, and sang her hit song “When Will You Return?” through giant loudspeakers—capable of blasting miles into the mainland—at the ROC government’s observation station there. The PRC, in turn, intermittently prohibited her music. However, Teresa—Deng Lijun—shared a family name with PRC leader Deng Xiaoping, and popular expressions of the



From a photoshoot promoting Teresa's 1987 Hong Kong album, "I Only Care About You."
Source: <http://tiny.cc/dj2ud>.

time played on this fact. One of these ran as follows: "In the daytime, Old Deng (Deng Xiaoping) rules China; at night, Little Deng (Deng Lijun) rules."⁶ Faced with this solid wall of popularity, the PRC government ceased its restrictions on her music from the mid-1980s onward.

THE ACME OF SUCCESS Back in Hong Kong, her career reached its crest at the end of 1983 with a series of sold-out concerts at the Hong Kong Coliseum that formed the kickoff for her Fifteenth Anniversary Concert Tour. These concerts broke all sorts of Hong Kong records and played to a combined total audience of about 100,000 people. Earlier in the same year, Teresa had released "Light Exquisite Feeling," an album of pop songs based mainly on Song dynasty (960–1279) Chinese poems. This album became her most critically acclaimed for its expert rendering of a classical lexicon and atmosphere within a modern musical context. A promotional booklet accompanying the album reinforced its image of Teresa as a traditional-style heroine by featuring photos of her dressed in fashions from the imperial era.

In 1984, Teresa returned to Japan for the first time in five years in what was effectually a comeback there. Her two main careers—in Japan and Hong Kong, respectively—henceforth intertwined, as singles she released in Japan scored a second time in Chinese renderings for her Mandopop audience. Teresa was also winning numerous Japanese awards in middecade and appearing—for a total of three times in her career—on "Red and White Song Battle," the nation's overwhelmingly popular New Year's Eve TV show.

ACCUMULATING SHADOWS Despite her successes, the '80s marked a period of intensifying sadness for Teresa Teng. First came her failed courtship. In 1982, at the age of twenty-nine, she fell in love with Beau Kuok, scion of the ethnic Chinese owner of an upscale hotel chain based in Singapore. However, Beau's grandmother imposed several conditions on their union, including that Teresa cease her career as an entertainer. When Teresa refused, the marriage was called off. This left her heartbroken in the midst of a career that maintained its breakneck pace.

After reaching her middecade pinnacle, however, Teresa toured far less, limiting her performances primarily to concerts for ROC troops. She also bought a house in a fashionable neighborhood on Hong Kong island, where she became something of a homebody. When a journalist asked Teresa's younger brother why she had slowed down, he responded that she had "a kind

of washed-out feeling" after her many years in the music industry.⁷ As she had already achieved virtually everything possible in the markets she had entered, she began to experience the disorientation familiar to entertainment stars the world over—What could fill the void that success had, ironically, created?

One possibility was a musical concert in the PRC, where Teresa's fans were especially ardent. After all, the PRC had removed its ban on her music, and the ROC was no longer opposed to her performing there. Although the PRC government sought to have her appear, however, she was concerned that it might allow only the country's elite to attend. Nevertheless, as signs of incipient democracy emerged, Teresa became excited, imagining even the possibility of a free mass concert for her fans in Tiananmen Square. With this mindset, the events of 1989 would be all the more agonizing for her.

The massive pro-democracy demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in Beijing began in April 1989. On May 20, the PRC government imposed martial law, signaling a crackdown. This directly frightened Hong Kong residents. In 1984, Great Britain had promised the PRC government that it would return Hong Kong in 1997. However, the PRC's harsh stance toward the Beijing demonstrations suggested that its future rule over Hong Kong would be equally repressive, prompting giant demonstrations in response. On May 27, an eight-hour marathon pro-democracy concert was held at Hong Kong's Happy Valley Racecourse. Although Teresa had not planned to attend, she belatedly appeared in protest clothing that she created herself, including a vest with the words "Down with the Military Authorities" written on it.⁸ On-stage, she appeared sans makeup—having cried for much of the day—and sang an anti-Communist song popular in the ROC. On June 4, the PRC government swiftly suppressed the Beijing demonstrations, killing several hundred protestors who had remained in Tiananmen Square.

This violent denouement greatly exacerbated Teresa's sadness. She became frightened that the PRC government might single her out for retribution after it regained Hong Kong. Late in 1989, she moved to Paris, France, so she could view China from a greater distance and absorb what she could from the city as an artist.

CODA In Paris, Teresa kept herself busy with (mostly futile) efforts to learn French and, increasingly, her relationship with an emotionally unstable French boyfriend. Starting in 1994, she spent most of her time in Thailand because its climate relieved her asthma, a childhood medical condition that had returned with a vengeance. On May 8, 1995, she collapsed in a Chiang Mai hotel from complications associated with an asthma attack, and died directly afterward at the age of forty-two.

As soon as news of her passing reached East Asia, her albums, CDs, videos, and cassettes sold out across the region. Moreover, her funeral in Taiwan became the largest scale state-sponsored funeral there since ROC leader Chiang Kaishek's funeral in 1975. Roughly 30,000 mourners attended the ceremony, and another 30,000 lined the thirty-mile route to the sprawling mountain cemetery where she would be interred. Interestingly, her burial site contrasts sharply with the somberness typical of Chinese graves, featuring an entry arch shaped like a CD that plays Teresa's hits when passed through, a giant keyboard that plays more hits when stepped on, and so forth. With faint shades of Elvis Presley's Graceland, it has become a regional magnet for pilgrimage.

The commemorations of Teresa Teng's life and music since her demise have been myriad—a Teresa-themed restaurant in Shanghai, a wax statue at

Madame Tussauds Hong Kong, museums in Gaoxiong and Beijing, memorial TV specials in several countries, etc.—and proliferate further with each new anniversary of her passing. Strikingly, she shows no signs of fading from the East Asian popular consciousness.

Her life story also raises issues for students taking survey courses to consider. For example, in what ways did her career conform to traditional Chinese expectations regarding women's behavior, and in what ways did it depart from those expectations? More broadly, many Chinese have viewed Teresa as representing the Chinese nation, which raises another question: Why are nations (as opposed to states) often regarded as feminine and symbolized by women?⁹ From a different angle, Teresa's later career highlights the challenge that fame can pose, namely, that it menaces the emotional stability of individuals who acquire it. How have stars in Asia and elsewhere responded to this dilemma? Unfortunately, literature in English addressing these sorts of questions with respect to Teresa Teng is quite limited. I am hopeful that as the twentieth anniversary of her passing approaches, academicians will examine her life in greater depth. In the meantime, her story and legacy should draw students' attention as they explore a region of the world that American popular culture all too often portrays as merely strange or imitative.

Author's Note: I have relied heavily on two Japanese biographies for much of the information contained in this essay: 1) Hirano Kumiko, *Teresa Ten ga mita yume: kajin kasei densetsu* (*The Dream Teresa Teng Dreamed: Legend of a Chinese Diva*) (Shōbunsha, 1996); and 2) Arita Yoshifu, *Watakushi no ie wa yama no mukō: Teresa Ten, Jūnenme no shinjitsu* (*My House is Across the Mountain: Teresa Teng, The Truth Ten Years Later*) (Bungei shunjū, 2005). Among numerous English-language sources I consulted, two provided particularly helpful background: www.graman.net/teresa/teng.htm (*Teresa Teng Forever*) and Mark Levin, "Death of Teresa Teng Saddens All of Asia: Singer's Popularity Spanned National Borders," *Billboard Magazine*, May 20, 1995, 3, 110. Year-by-year timelines of Teresa Teng's life appear in both the Hirano volume listed above and Zhao Jun and Shi Yonggang, *Deng Lijun quanzhuan: Deng Lijun cishi shizhounian diancang jiniaban* (*A Complete Biography of Deng Lijun: Treasury Memorial Edition on the Tenth Anniversary of Deng Lijun's Passing*) (Mingbao, 2005). Owing to its prevalence, I have chosen to use pinyin to transcribe nearly all Chinese terms besides a few that have become established in English in other forms, e.g., Chiang Kaishek and Hong Kong. ■

NOTES

1. Two figures who have been especially active in promoting Teresa Teng on YouTube are hkship (aka "George"; most recently submitting videos as HKships-ForTeresaTeng) and Masami Y. (submitting as Masami43A), respectively.
2. Titled *He ri jun zai lai* in Chinese, this song was originally sung by the popular Shanghai actress Zhou Xuan in 1936.
3. Performer Danny Yung as quoted in Hirano Kumiko, *Teresa Ten ga mita yume: kajin kasei densetsu* (Shōbunsha, 1996), 129.
4. Titled *Yueliang daibiao wo de xin* in Chinese, this song was originally sung by Chen Fenlan in 1972.
5. The translation is my own.
6. Arita Yoshifu, *Watakushi no ie wa yama no mukō: Teresa Ten, Jūnenme no shinjitsu* (Bungei shunjū, 2005), 91.
7. Hirano, *Teresa Ten ga mita yume*, 162.
8. Arita, *Watakushi no ie wa yama no mukō*, 162.
9. This important issue is discussed in Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Gender," *Re-inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation* (M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 110.

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