

# **“Forget He or She”: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in Hong Kong’s Cantopop**

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## **Introduction**

During his concert in 1997, the Hong Kong pop music icon Leslie Cheung put on a dark-red lipstick, wore a pair of sparkling red high heels and danced closely with a male dancer. At near the end of the concert, he dedicated a love song to two of his most beloved people, his mom and his partner Daffy Tong. Although Cheung did not claim his sexuality explicitly, his public confession of love to a man was seen as his “come-out manifesto.”<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, his acts did spark a lot of criticism in society, especially since this was at the time when the city was experiencing political uncertainties due to the Handover of Hong Kong to China. The scale of this controversy, however, is far smaller than that of his 2000 concert “*Passion Tour*,” for which Cheung was the first (and only) Asian singer who managed to invite the legendary French fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier to design all his concert costumes. With transparent tops, ancient Greek style short skirt, tight jeans, and other costumes of unclear gender coding with his waist-long hair, Cheung’s destabilized gender performance successfully displayed Gaultier’s androgynous fashion concept.<sup>2</sup> While some of the most prominent media in the world, such as the writers for *Time* magazine, highly regarded the concert, most local media critics ferociously disapproved of the performance.<sup>3</sup> Cheung was attacked as being a pervert, mentally ill, and even being “haunted by a female ghost.”<sup>4</sup> Gaultier was particularly enraged. He bombarded the Hong Kong media for being overly superficial and vowed that he would never design costumes for Asian singers again.

Although Hong Kong has long been considered one of the most developed and liberal cities in the East-Asia region largely due to its colonial history of westernization, the city, much the same

as most of its East-Asian neighbors, still holds on to a rather conservative ideal about sexuality.<sup>5</sup> For a long time, Hong Kong society generally believed heterosexuality to be a norm. Other sexual orientations are condemned for deviance from those norms. This belief has been further reinforced when Cheung committed suicide in 2003. Although it was obvious that he died of depression, the local media portrayed the incident as a negative act brought on by homosexuality.<sup>6</sup> As Travis Kong, professor of sociology in the University of Hong Kong, observed, the city's heteronormativity is a product from the British colonialism and is "maintain(ed) through post-colonial administration."<sup>7</sup> Thus, under this conservative cultural framework, the harsh criticism from the local media towards Cheung's performance was not incomprehensible.

Nevertheless, historical moments have undermined this set of conservative moral values from time to time. In 2012, exactly fifteen years after Cheung's came out, Anthony Yiu-Ming Wong, the leading singer of the legendary band Tat-Ming Pair, came out in his own concert. In the same year, the Cantopop queen Denise Ho announced her lesbianity during the Hong Kong Pride Parade. Despite the usual condemnation from several conservative parties, the public, especially for commentators of the local media, unlike Cheung's case, did not attack these popular artists. In general, society is becoming more supportive towards sexual minorities. As Ho stated during an interview with a local newspaper, she felt "the public is very positive about what [she has] done."<sup>8</sup> In fact, about the same time as Anthony Wong and Denise Ho came out, the Hong Kong University Public Opinion Programme released the massive 157 pages *Hong Kong LGBT Climate Study Report*. It found that 85% of the respondents agreed there is a need to increase the inclusiveness of the sexual minorities, while 10% held opposite view and 5% did not know what to say. This figure revealed that the society displayed more acceptance towards the sexual LGBT community in this period than it was in the 90s and early 2000s. Certainly, the Hong Kong society at this point

is still far from achieving the goal of sexual and gender equality, but the visibility of the LGBT community is emerging.

Many local social scientists, such as Natalie Chan, Ching Yau, Eva Li, have done comprehensive research focusing on the visible elements, such as the performances, the personal images, and the costumes of the openly homosexual singers. These visual stuns contribute greatly towards the drastic change of the LGBT acceptance in Hong Kong. Despite scholarly inquiries, the music of these singers has seldom been critically examined. One of the main reasons is that these scholars are mainly sociologists whose research interests lie in pop culture rather than the actual music. For musicologists, such as Wai Chung Ho and Eve Leung, whose primary interest is in pop music, they seldom dive in the direction of gender. This is due to the fact that music connects to other social contexts, such as the post-colonial identity crisis, which consumes Hong Kong society more than gender and sexuality at the time. However, as the national identity politics in the city began to settle down in the late 2010s, the problem of gender and sexual identification started gaining more attention. Local musicologists began to venture into the gender realm of the Cantopop. In this paper, I will substantially analyze the musical gender implication and its social influences to see how the music functions in negotiating gender and sexuality in Hong Kong.

### **The Gender Coding in Cantopop and the Local LGBT Movement**

In the history of Cantopop, music with hidden gender messages are not completely rare. Under a broad definition of Cantopop culture, which tends to include both visual and aural elements, the earliest explicit gender bending attempts can be traced back to the early 1980s, when Roman Tam performing on stage with campy costume, and Anita Mui (the mentor of Denise Ho) appearing androgynous on a CD cover. In terms of music, the very first song in the city that

addressed homosexuality came out in the 1988. It is the “Forbidden Color” by the Tat-Ming Pair. After the pair release the song, various singers had also released gender-negotiating works. The lyrics of these works were mostly written by the legendary lyricist trio, Lin Xi (Albert Leung), Chow Yiu-Fai and Wyman Wong. Although each song employs different tactics to deal with issues of gender and sexuality, they, as I observed, seems to follow a core formula. But in order for one to understand how these tactics they work, it is worth to mention the gender coding problem in the history of Cantopop.

Wong Jum Sum, better known as James Wong, the godfather of the Cantopop, mentioned in his doctoral dissertation that Cantonese Opera was once the main form of music entertainment in 1950s before the Cantopop dominated the market in the 80s.<sup>9</sup> This type of opera, similar to some other Chinese opera genres such as Peking Opera, usually employs two performers of the same sex to perform the male and the female protagonists. Back into the history, due to the gender inequalities in traditional Chinese ethics, females were forbidden to be on stage with males. Thus, male actors had to perform the female characters. They had to learn a special singing technique called “ZiHou” to perform the female voice in a high register. They were expected to act as feminine as possible to portray the image of a traditional female. This practice had continued long enough to be considered as a tradition. In the early 30s, when gender inequality was far less severe in the society, this practice still continued, however, with a twist. Female was allowed to be on stage. Therefore, not only male took the role of a female, female also tried to take the role of a male. In fact, the Cantonese Opera today is more common to have two females as main actors than two males. Similar to the male actors who performed the opposite sex, the female actors who performed the male role have to act as masculine as possible.

This tradition obviously projects gender fluidity. Although this practice emerged from historical moment, and is not an intentional act to challenge traditional gender norms, the Cantonese opera does point to same sex desires to some extent. This, however, does not mean the audience accepted homosexuality. The audience in the 1950s seemed to understand that the opera was just a performance. While they allowed the gender and sexual fluidity within opera, many of them disapproved of homosexuality in real life as they, according to Natalie Chan, still hold onto traditional Chinese values.<sup>10</sup> The Cantonese opera clearly is not the best vehicle to promote the idea of different sexual norms due to its acceptance of traditional Chinese ethics. But, it is at least a local artform that naturally offer gender fluid performances. It exhibits some possibilities for local music to be used as means to negotiate gender and sexuality within a right cultural frame.

In his book *A Concise History of Cantopop*, Yiu Wai Chu agreed with James Wong that European (mostly British) and American music such as rock and roll, jazz, blues, American country and others, took over the local market in the 60s after the Cantonese opera fever decayed.<sup>11</sup> Wong further elaborated that there was even a point that some music companies and radio stations realized there were no more Cantonese songs in the market.<sup>12</sup> Songwriters started to find new ways to combine local elements with the foreign genres as an act to re-enact the local identity. This is the time when modern Cantopop emerged. And it is also the time when gender coding in the local music became even more complicated.

Cantopop is known for its hybridity. Wai Chung Ho noted, this hybridity, similar to the case of East-West fusion cuisine, is a “symptomatic of processes of cultural assimilation.”<sup>13</sup> The genre includes some elements of western music as well as those from local music. This cultural amalgamation makes deciphering the gender coding of Cantopop particularly difficult. Imagine a song based on rock elements, but with a melody based on Chinese pentatonic scales, and the singer

performs the song with a tender tone that almost recalls the performance as a female protagonist in Cantonese Opera. How should one decode the gender implications in music like this? The rock elements could imply a sort of normative or aggressive masculinity. But for the Chinese elements, the gender implication is not clear. Some top singers, including Leslie Cheung, were profoundly influenced by Chinese opera and drew upon the gender fluidity of opera in their music. With this mix of musical and cultural meaning, the gender coding in Cantopop is often hardly definable. Nevertheless, the Tat-Ming Pair found a way to manipulate this un-definability into a powerful tool to discuss gender through its songs. Since then, other songwriters used similar methods to produce songs that challenge traditional gender norms. These methods will be further examined in the next section.

Speaking about the local LGBT movement, Hong Kong fell behind some other leading Asian cities and countries. Before 1991, same sex relations were still considered to be criminal. After 1991 the local LGBT activism boomed, but the society still held negative perceptions about the LGBT community. Even merely wearing a unisex outfit would be depicted negatively as “neither a male nor a female.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that the Tat-Ming pair tried to promote different gender and sexual norms through a series of songs in the early 90s, their influences were not as critical comparing to that of Leslie Cheung. Being the most influential artist not only in Hong Kong, but in the entire Asian region, Cheung had subverted the negative mainstream impression with his performances that pointed to his homosexuality. Cheung’s widespread popularity and commercial success allowed him to do what he liked to do without causing much damage to his career.<sup>15</sup> As Travis Kong described during an interview with the BBC, Cheung’s coming-out had an extremely positive impact to the society. He turned the public impression towards a homosexual person from “neither a male nor a female” to “become a man and a woman in simultaneously.”<sup>16</sup>

Because of his influences, BBC bestowed the title the “Asian Gay Icon” on Cheung.<sup>17</sup> In the 2000s, a number of songs, including themes about homosexuality, have been released and many of them quickly have become great hits. They included Denise Ho’s “Rosemary” (2002), “Rolls-Royce” (2005), Fiona Sit’s “A Boy like You” (2005), Juno Mak’s “Queer” (2008) and more. Among them, “Rolls-Royce” and “A Boy Like You” even earned the prestigious Jade Solid Gold Best Ten Music Awards from the TVB, the largest TV station company in the city that embraced conservative values. Wyman Wong, the lyricist of both songs, mentioned in his own concert in 2012, which he named as “Lyrics Exhibition”, that he was quite surprised by the fact that such conservative TV company would offer awards for both homosexual songs. He considered this instance as a “small revolutionary victory, unless the judging panel do not know how to read.”<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that the acceptance of LGBT in Hong Kong has grown and the society now is more concern about the sexual minority. While visual elements such as cross-dressing and gender-bending performances often ensure a direct impact on raising the awareness of this minority group, the influence of the music, although rather oblique, should not be undermined. The role of music in the terms of improving visibility of the LGBT community will be discussed in later sections.

### **Tactics of Expressing Different Gender Norms in Cantopop**

Among the songs that challenge traditional sexual values, some of them are apparently more successful than others. As I observed, those which deemed to be successful seem to have precise strategies to manipulate at least two of the following three core aspects — the relevance of the music, the lyrics, and the singer’s public image in relation to the gender and sexual narrative of specific songs. Note that these three aspects are not the only items affecting a song’s ability to discuss gender variance. Other aspects, such as the recording methods, the mixing preferences, the

marketing strategies, would also affect a song's gender expressing ability. However, the three core aspects have far more direct and significant influences to a song's gender narrativity than other aspects do. This is simply due to the fact that the core aspects are the most straightforward information that audience would first receive upon hearing a song. In this section, a few songs will be critically examined to reveal the different strategies of operating these aspects in order to negotiate gender. But before diving straightly into the song analysis, it would be helpful to illustrate the general style of Cantopop since the late 80s in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Cantopop landscape.

Starting from the 80s, the style of Cantopop became highly westernized. Wai Chung Ho further elaborated on the aforementioned James Wong's point about the western pop domination. She stated that the Cantopop since the 60s "has subsumed a range of influences from the USA, Britain, Japan and Taiwan."<sup>19</sup> She also mentioned a lot of local singers sang Cantonese cover version of western pop songs rather than the original English version as a "struggle for authenticity" and local identity.<sup>20</sup> Although her point here is not discussing about the style of Cantopop but suggesting the local identity crisis under the globalization of music genre, her observation does indirectly point out that Hong Kong audiences are accustomed to the "style" of western pop music. The "style" here does not mean a specific music genre such as rock or country. Instead, it implies the common music features, such as functional harmonies, regular meters, regular melodic phrasings, regular verse-chorus structure and more, that found in many western pop genres. Under the effect of globalization, the Cantopop industry actually realizes audiences' preferences of western music. The traditional Chinese and Cantonese opera elements are seen as, in James Wong's word, out of fashion.<sup>21</sup> For commercial purposes, the industry starts promoting songs that have lyrical tunes. Almost all of them are framed with conventional western harmonic structure of



I-IV-V-I and are in the conventional verse-chorus form. This westernized style has dominated the local market since the 80s. It is worth mentioning that the local Cantopop industry also depends on the market of Mainland China and Taiwan. In the late 70s to 80s, most westernized products were seen as highly fashionable in Mainland China due to the country's recent economic reform and opening up to the west. Cantopop was one of the westernized products that were more geographically accessible, thus it was largely consumed by Mainland Chinese even if they did not speak and understand the Cantonese language. This economic environment encouraged the local pop industry to produce even more songs in the westernized style. Eventually, this type of western influenced songs became overly commercial and lost their freshness as they flooded the Cantopop market. Yiu Wai Chu named this phenomenon as "the homogenization of mainstream Cantopop."<sup>22</sup> And Wai Chung Ho described these songs as "formulaic ballads and brain-dead dance tunes."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, songs in this style are still profitable due to their accessibility although the audience soon began to demand more varieties in music style.

In terms of gender negotiating, the highly formulaic Cantopop seems not unique enough to be relevant to gender implication. However, rather than taking the role of direct gender implicating, the tunes can make use of their commerciality and take on another role to spread the idea of sexual and gender variance. Its effect can be quite significant. This role will be further discussed later in this section. Furthermore, not every Cantopop song is composed in the formulaic style. The Tat-Ming Pair is one of the rare examples in the Cantopop circle in which the band produced non-mainstream music. Its songs could be considered some of the best music examples in negotiating gender by manipulating the three core aspects tactically. As the band that has created the first homosexual song in the Cantopop history, the Tat-Ming Pair basically established a model of blurring genders for songwriters of later generations. Their best-known song about gender and

sexual variance, besides the “Forbidden Color” (1988), perhaps should be the “Forget He or She” (1989.) Chow Yiu-Fai penned the lyrics for the song. As a veteran lyricist as well as a professor in creative writing and humanities, Chow acknowledged that he was aware of the sexuality discourse at the time and hoped to express his thought through songs.<sup>24</sup>

Forgot how “she” looks	忘記她 是那麼樣
Only remember in the air	只記起風裡淌漾
the rosy fragrance of the hair	玫瑰花盛開的髮香
Forgot how “he” looks	忘記他 是那麼樣
Only remember on the shoulder	只記起寬闊肩上
the livid tattoo of a portrait	紋上鐵青色的肖像

(Verse 1 from “Forget He or She”)

Who I love is “she”	愛上是她
It’s “he,” it’s “she” who gave me happiness	是他是她給我滿足快樂
It’s that beautiful sense	是那份美麗的感覺
Who “she” loves is me	愛我是她
What is “she,” I don’t care	什麼是她不理上演那幕
Forgot “he” or “she” unconsciously	忘記他是她不知覺

(Chorus from “Forget He or She”)

(Original Chinese lyrics)

Chow’s lyrics are always poetic and even sometimes abstruse. In “Forget He or She,” Chow tried to eradicate the line between a male and a female and illustrated a fluid gender situation. He said in an interview that everyone knew the world is complicated, so he would just embrace the complication and not try to pen a simple naïve love song.<sup>25</sup> In fact, when the album was first released, the CD booklet showed that Chow left all the pronouns blank in the verses of the lyrics. In Cantonese, the pronouns “he” and “she” are both pronounced as “ta”. By leaving them blank, audience would have no clue whether Chow was describing a male “ta” or a female “ta”. Therefore, Chow further liquified the differentiation between the two traditional genders. Indeed, Chow admitted he did not want to distinguish between male and female because the traditional definition of gender was not clear after all.<sup>26</sup>

Besides the lyrics, the music of this song is another artistic creation. The Tat-Ming Pair earned their place in the Cantopop circle as the only avant-garde electronica band. Heavily influenced by British trip hop bands such as the Portishead, its music is often considered as non-mainstream and experimental. Tats Lau, the other member in the Pair, composed the music for “Forget He or She.” Lau used a Chinese pentatonic scale for the melody but he structured the scale in a quasi-western way. The melody shows tonic-dominant relation of the western music theory. Quasi-cadences can also be found throughout the song. Wide and slow glissandi are also tactically employed in the music to weaken the “cadential” moments and to create uncertainties. This style of weaving between Chinese and Western music elements evokes instability which somehow resemble the characteristic of gender fluidity. Lau also made use of triplets to displace the natural accents in the Cantonese language to give the music eccentricity. Furthermore, the music is almost utterly situated in the mid to high register. The only bass part is the double bass line played entirely with pizzicato. By undermining the bass part, the music gives out a sense of floating in between masculinity and femininity. Lau’s compositional treatments to the music resonates with Chow’s fluid lyrics very well.

While the lyrics and the music are deliberately created to suit the theme of liquified gender, the public image of the lead singer Anthony Wong also contribute to this narration. The society was still very skeptical about homosexuality when this song came out back in the late 80s. Most male celebrities at that time displayed traditional masculinity. But for Anthony Wong, not only in this music video, but also in the real life, he demonstrated feminine masculinity. His shoulder-long hair, his soft speaking tone and his slim body shape defied the local understanding of masculinity under the traditional Chinese value. He projected an elegant temperament that was usually not

found in any other male celebrities (except for Leslie Cheung) at the time. This strangely unique image made him stand out from other singers and quickly rose to the top in the Cantopop circle.

“Forget He or She” is a very successful song in challenging traditional gender norms. The artiness of the lyrics and the music, and the singer’s unconventional masculinity image display strong connection towards the gender variance theme. These three cores aspects complement each other and they turn the song into a classic in the category of gender negotiating Cantopop.

Some songs take another strategy to manipulate the core aspects. For instance, Fiona Sit’s “A Boy Like You” (2005), another classic, only utilizes two of the three cores to imply gender. Wyman Wong penned the lyrics for the song. Wong is famous for his story-telling ability. In this song, he portrayed a teenage girl realizing a boy she loved did not love girls. It is in fact a clichéd puppy love story with a homosexual twist. The lyrics is nothing artistic compare to that of “Forget He or She.” However, it is down-to-earth and is straightforward. This story framed homosexuality in a normal daily-life setting, making the lyrics easy to resonate with the song’s target audience, which consists mostly of teenagers.

It’s like the worst love fantasy in the world  
I’m the one who match you the most  
If this means love we still  
be like sister and brother  
You said hanging or dining out with me  
is better than doing the same thing with him  
Why could he take the throne finally  
while I am the one who can only sit next to you

(Chorus 2 from “A Boy Like You”)

像個世上最壞 愛情童話  
最襯你那個是我  
就算都算相愛 仍然沒法  
比兄妹浪漫更多  
共我繼續約會 喝茶談天  
你說勝過了共他 一起消磨  
為何他會 得到寶座  
長伴身邊的卻是我

(Original Chinese lyrics)

Similar to the lyrics, the music of the “A Boy Like You” is not artistic at all. The composer Jones Chui is known for his talent to write commercial tunes. And in fact, “A Boy Like You” is obviously one of those written in the clichéd formulaic style. Jones Chui did not attempt to use any music elements to illustrate gender related theme as Tats Lau did in “Forget He or She.” But

this does not mean the music is not carrying any gender negotiating function. As mentioned above, the formulaic tune can take on another role to express gender variance. One should be aware that Cantonese is a tonal language. The special relationship between the Cantonese tones in the lyrics and the tune of the music makes the song a powerful tool in terms of spreading the idea of homosexual love. The nine tones in the language roughly resemble the tones in a western music scale. This means, for Cantonese speaker, one can approximately get the melody of music just by reading the lyrics. Likewise, listening to the music itself would also recall the lyrics. If the tune spreads very quickly across the community, so do the lyrics.

It is also worth mentioning that due to the tonal nature of the language, lyricists usually wait until the music demo is done before they start writing their words. They need to use the words and characters that fit the tones or intervals in the melody. Or else, the meaning of the lyrics would be altered if the words are assigned to wrong tones. Therefore, usually, most lyricists have to be aware of the artistic potential of the given melody. Their lyrics have to match the character of the music. For music that are more artistic, such as those from the Tat-Ming Pair, lyricist may have rooms to create more artistic works. For music that create for commercial purpose, such as “A Boy like You,” lyricists cannot write excessively artistic lines over the melody, or the song will lose its commerciality. In the case of “A Boy like You”, the cliché-ridden content of the lyrics works with the commerciality of the music very well. Not surprisingly, “A Boy Like You” quickly becomes a big hit after its release.

The establishment of Fiona Sit’s queer image is rather unusual. Her sexual orientation is not explicitly clear at the time she released “A Boy Like You.” In fact, Sit had publicly denied that she is a lesbian. However, there were a lot of rumors about her being very close to another woman at that time. These rumors were spread through local gossip magazines which were highly popular

and were widely circulated among local communities. For Sit, even though she did not actually come out, her situation could be, according to a local sociologist Denise Tang, “understood as a form of coerced coming out.”<sup>27</sup> Tang pointed out that local gossip magazines play a dual role in the society for “stereotyping and normalizing lesbian relationships.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in Sit’s case, it does not matter whether the intention of these magazines is to stereotype or to normalize her “lesbianity,” it does help to boost the queer image of Sit. Thus, her public image became relevance to the homosexual theme in song. This increased the song’s persuasiveness of homosexual love.

The three core aspects in “A Boy Like You” are operated in a different way than those of “Forget He or She.” While the lyrics and the singer’s image are operated as straightforward vehicles for implying sexual and gender variance, the music is not manipulated as a direct gender negotiation element. Rather, it is operated as a supportive agent to recall the homosexual lyrics due to its relation with the tonal Cantonese language. This song is now considered to be another classic in the gender discussion category. It demonstrates that by manipulating the three core aspects with precise strategies, even songs that are meant for commercial purpose can be turned into a successful gender negotiating tool.

Some songwriters and singers are quite ambitious to create great gender negotiating songs. However, due to untactful strategy employments, quite a number of their songs fail to offer a comprehensive gender challenging function. Juno Mak’s “Androgyny” (2010) is considered to be one of the unsuccessful attempts. Although this song gains some popularity, it never becomes a big hit. Even though Mak managed to ask Chow Yiu-Fai to pen the lyrics, the lyrics alone does not have enough convincing power to turn the song into a classic.

Lend me your high heels for two days  
then I hope I’ll have your though in my heart  
maybe even becoming transsexual  
if you come closer to me.

你的高踭 借給我踩兩天  
然後期望我心裡就有你的事  
或者會變性  
當你接近我一點

Lend you my beard for two days  
Is the only way to understand your thought  
is to change my sex?  
I'd rather being so closed to you  
until we don't have to speak to understand each other

(Chorus 2 from "Androgyny")

我的鬚根 借給你穿兩天  
難道要換性別  
至參透你思念  
寧願接近到  
不靠說話也知

(Original Chinese lyrics)

As usual, Chow's lyrics is highly artistic. Chow wants to express his thought of the unimportance of gender differentiation. The lyrics somehow recalls the theme of the "Forget He or She," which is also about eradicating the distinction between two sexes. In fact, Chow is rather consistence in maintaining the idea of gender undifferentiation. This theme has been recurring in Chow's other artistic works such as his own poem collection, which he also named it as "Androgyny." The lyrics of "Androgyny" obviously display Chow's another artistic approach to the gender variance theme.

While the lyrics is artistic enough, the music could not keep up with the artistry of the lyrics. This is not to categorize the music into one of those of the "brain-dead dance tune." Indeed, the composer Vicky Fung is known for her trendy touch in her music. The song relies heavily on unresting rhythmic patterns and electronic manipulation. The music style actually might be considered as non-mainstream in the Cantopop market when the song was released in 2010. But this style has already been quite common in the western pop, which could be easily accessed through various means in Hong Kong. By looking into "Androgyny" using Wai Chung Ho's idea of Cantopop glocalization, the music might not be deemed as authentic for local audience because it sounds entirely westernized and lacks localized elements.<sup>29</sup> It might also be seen as failing to realize the city's unique "heterogeneity [and] hybridity."<sup>30</sup> Thus, for local consumers, the music does not seem to be artistic enough to carry the complicated social meaning in the lyrics. In this case, the music loses its potential to act as a direct gender implication tool.

Note that the tune of “Androgyny” is not cheesy at all comparing to many other Cantopop songs. The melody, especially that of the chorus, consists of a series of rapid repeated notes with occasional large leaps. Though this type of tone setting is not explicitly rare in Cantopop, it is definitely uncommon. It can undermine the commerciality of the music. But at the same time, the music could also lose its catchiness. Since the Cantonese is a tonal language, a simple phrase in daily conversation might already contain 4 to 5 tones. Hence, the melody with a lot of repeated notes would sound a little unnatural for native speaker. Because of this, the music of “Androgyny” also loses its potential to become a strong supporting role for spreading the gender variance content.

Another bad strategy in “Androgyny” resides in Juno Mak’s public image. Mak was born in a wealthy family. His father is one of the most successful businessmen in Hong Kong. Since Mak had become a singer, he always got involved in negative incidents. Paparazzi continuously revealed his frequent changes of sex partners and girlfriends and shaped his image as a playboy. In this case, his utterly heterosexual image is completely out of sync with the androgynous image portrayed in the song. This hinders the song’s ability of convey gender fluid ideas in the lyrics.

Mak’s “Androgyny” actually has the potential to become a great gender negotiating song. Nevertheless, the singer or the producers did not make good decisions on the strategies of manipulating the core aspects. Two of the three aspects, the music and the singer’s image, did not cooperate well with the gender theme, leaving the lyrics alone to fulfill the gender negotiating role. The function of the song is thus sitting somewhere in between gender negotiating and merely profit making. The song’s goal of challenging gender is not promising. It is worth noting that despite its poor ability of displaying gender variance, “Androgyny” is in fact not a bad song. The music is very well structured and it serves the purpose of introducing the latest western trend into the Cantopop. It does not become extremely popular, but it is a game-changer for Juno Mak’s career.



After he released “Androgyny”, Mak gradually changed from being a singer of merely commercial tunes into a singer who can take on more artistic songs.

### **External Factors that Affect Cantopop Gender Expressing Capability**

Successful tactics of manipulating the three core aspects can ensure the gender negotiating ability of a Cantopop song. The effectiveness of this ability, however, not only depends on wise strategies, but also hinges on other external factors, such as social problems, marketing direction, political force, and more.

The social problems might be the most significant external factor of all. It can directly alter the effectiveness of a song’s ability to exhibit gender variance. In his book *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China*, Yiu Wai Chu subtly reveals that the nationality crisis emerged before Hong Kong’s Handover to China in 1997 could directly affect how the audience perceive the meaning of a song.<sup>31</sup> Searching for own identity was a big discourse in the society before 1997. If the meaning of a song could be potentially read as a sign of identity negotiation, the song would most likely turn into a big hit since it would probably resonated with the mass population. Such songs include the Anthony Wong’s “How Great Thou Art” (1991), Luo Dayou “Queen’s Road East” (1990), and more. Yet, at the same time Chu’s observation implies that a dominating social issue might mock the actual meaning of a Cantopop song. For example, if one re-analyzes the meaning of Tat-Ming Pair’s “Forget He or She” (1989) under the nationality framework, he would in fact find the song extremely relevant to the society’s nationality crisis. The “he” or “she” in the lyrics can be perceive as a metaphor for the Britain and the China. The constant weave between the Chinese and western music elements can also be read as the inconsistency or the uncertainty of local identities. Since the song resonates well with the current

social problems, its gender discourse might be mocked. Its gender relevance finally gets more attention after the city's nationality crisis faded away in the 2000s. If Chow did not explicitly explain his intention of the lyrics a few years after "Forget He or She" was released, this song might have a chance to become a classic of identity search rather than gender negotiation. Nevertheless, this phenomenon reveals that some songs, such as "Forget He or She," might have to wait for the fade of current social issues before they can serve their gender negotiating function.

Another external factor that hinders effectiveness of a Cantopop song's the gender negotiating ability would be the industry's marketing direction. As mentioned above, besides on the local market, the Cantopop industry also depends on the mainland China and the Taiwan market. While the Taiwan is more open to the ideas of gender variance, the mainland China basically bans all of those. In order to anchor in their positions in the China market, large Cantopop companies are usually not willing to take risk to promote gender negotiating songs. Even if they have to promote one or two of these songs, they would apply certain measures to dilute the homosexuality in the song. Take "A Boy Like You" as an example. Despite the song's obvious homosexual messages, the production company decided to suit the music with a music video that does not display any homosexual elements. The video only consists of two protagonists, Fiona Sit and another man, and the scenes only portray their romantic meetings. The content of the video is nothing exciting compare to that of the music. Its clichéd heterosexual setting mitigates the song's homosexuality.

The local political forces, though their significance is less than that of the social problems, still possess some indirect of influences to the effectiveness of gender challenging through a song. The two opposite political forces in Hong Kong are the pro-Beijing camp, which embraces the traditional Chinese value, and the pan-democratic camp, which are more open to liberal ideas,

including the idea of gender and sexual equality. In 2012 when Anthony Wong and Denise Ho came out, they quickly affiliated themselves with the pan-democratic camp, making themselves easy targets for the opposite party to attack. People who support the pro-Beijing camp would simply turn away from the singers' music. For the companies which signed these singers, they just canceled their contract because associating with the pan-democrats clearly means losing the China market. In this case, Wong and Ho lost a lot of audience. With much less audience listen to their gender-themed song, the effectiveness of the song's ability to spread the idea of gender variance would no doubt be lower.

These external factors can affect a song's capability to negotiate gender as much as a tactful strategy of manipulating the aforementioned core aspects can. One should not underestimate the influences of them. But, this is not to say that the external factors and the tactful strategy are on the same level of importance. It is because they are affecting a song on different levels. No matter how the external factors are manipulated, they cannot give a song the ability of negotiating gender. They can only affect the effectiveness of that ability. Thus, in order to discuss the effect of these factors on a song, the song must first possess the gender negotiating ability. In the other words, the three core aspects of that song must have been strategically manipulated on the first place.

## **Conclusion**

Until now, many local scholars have already demonstrated that pop culture can greatly influence the society's perception towards the LGBT community. Visual elements such as cross dressing often immediately stir up storms of controversies among the society and often receive immediate responses. For examples, Luo Feng stated in her book about Leslie Cheung that his cross-dressing performance in the concert in 1997 inspired other singers to imitate his dress code.<sup>32</sup>

Aaron Kwok and Nicholas Tse had worn a black dress in public events, and Andy Lau wore a traditional Chinese woman clothing in his concert.<sup>33</sup> These immediate responses suggested that visual element is a strong main force to negotiate gender and sexual identity through the Hong Kong society. Contrary, the Cantopop, which is the aural element, did not and could not stimulate immediate reactions. In fact, it seems to act as a strong supportive role and to aim for a long-term goal of gender or sexual equality. With the effects of some external factors, after a Cantopop song is released, no matter it is as artistic as “Forget He or She,” or as accessible as “A Boy Like You,” it has no doubt that the audience need time to explore the meaning in the music and the lyrics. Using music to mediate the idea of different gender and sexual norms into the society is also a slow and sustaining business.

Of course, only using Cantopop as a gender negotiating agent cannot pull Hong Kong towards the goal of achieving gender and sexual equality. Every device, such as gender bending visual element, and authority, such as LGBT activist group or political forces, has their own role in improving the visibility of the LGBT community. As long as all these forces are manipulated in a right way, the society will eventually achieve the goal. Until 2019, Hong Kong still have not established any anti-discrimination laws to shield the sexual minorities. But at least, the treatment towards LGBT community is a lot more positive that it was in the 90s.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Yan-Shan Xian. "Zhang Guorong Deng Bbc Bei Feng “Asia Gay Icon” Tongzhi Pianguan Xianqu Chongchu Guoji [Leslie Cheung Named as “Asia Gay Icon” by the Bbc, the Pioneer of Gay Rghts Activist Goes to the International Stage]." HK01 2018. Accessed 18 April 2019,

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<https://www.hk01.com/%E5%8D%B3%E6%99%82%E5%A8%9B%E6%A8%82/176799/%E5%BC%B5%E5%9C%8B%E6%A6%AE%E7%99%BBbc%E8%A2%AB%E5%B0%81-asia-s-gay-icon-%E5%90%8C%E5%BF%97%E5%B9%B3%E6%AC%8A%E5%85%88%E9%A9%85%E8%A1%9D%E5%87%BA%E5%9C%8B%E9%9A%9B>.

<sup>2</sup> Natalia Chan. "Queering Body and Sexuality: Leslie Cheung's Gender Representation in Hong Kong Popular Culture." In *As Normal as Possible*, edited by Ching Yau. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010. 144-6.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Corliss. "Forever Leslie." *Time*. 7 May 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Gwyneth Ho. "Leslie Cheung: Asia's Gay Icon Lives on 15 Years after His Death." *BBC News*. Last modified 2018. Accessed March 5, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43637749>.

<sup>5</sup> Josephine C.J Ho. "Edison Chen's Sex Photos and Internet Policing: "Society Must Be Defended?"". *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies* 70 (2008): 335-78.

<sup>6</sup> Chan, "Queering Body and Sexuality: Leslie Cheung's Gender Representation in Hong Kong Popular Culture." 148.

<sup>7</sup> Travis Kong. "A Fading Tongzhi Heterotopia: Hong Kong Older Gay Men's Use of Spaces." *Sexualities* 15, no. 8 (2012): 896-961.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Mok. "Life as a Rainbow: Canto-Pop Singer Denise Ho on Coming Out." *South China Morning Post* 2013. Accessed 27 April 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/1297720/life-rainbow>.

<sup>9</sup> Jum Sum Wong. "The Rise and Decline of Cantopop: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music (1949-1997)." PhD diss., University of Hong Kong, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Chan, "Queering Body and Sexuality: Leslie Cheung's Gender Representation in Hong Kong Popular Culture." 147.

<sup>11</sup> Yiu-Wai Chu. *Hong Kong Cantopop: A Concise History*. Hong Kong University Press, 2017. 31-3.

<sup>12</sup> Wong, "The Rise and Decline of Cantopop: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music (1949-1997)." 38-54.

<sup>13</sup> Wai-Chung Ho. "Between Globalisation and Localisation: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music." *Popular Music* V22, no. No. 2 (May, 2003): 143-57.

<sup>14</sup> Guilan Ho. "Zhang Guorong De Xingbie Yichan: 15 Nian Hou Rengran Lingxian Shidai [Leslie Cheung's Legacy: 15 Years Ahead of Time]." *BBC Chinese* 2018. Accessed 18 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-43593167>.

<sup>15</sup> Feng Luo. *Jinse De Hu Die: Zhang Guorong De Yishu Xingxiang* [Butterfly of Forbidden Colors: The Artistic Image of Leslie Cheung]. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.), 2008. 12-30

<sup>16</sup> Ho. "Zhang Guorong De Xingbie Yichan: 15 Nian Hou Rengran Lingxian Shidai [Leslie Cheung's Legacy: 15 Years Ahead of Time]."

<sup>17</sup> Ho, "Leslie Cheung: Asia's Gay Icon Lives on 15 Years after His Death."

<sup>18</sup> Wyman Wong. "Concert Yy." DVD. Hong Kong: Wyman Studio, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Ho, "Between Globalisation and Localisation: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music."

<sup>20</sup> Ho, *Ibid*.

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- <sup>21</sup> Wong, "The Rise and Decline of Cantopop: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music (1949-1997)." 38-54.
- <sup>22</sup> Chu. *Hong Kong Cantopop: A Concise History*. 119
- <sup>23</sup> Ho, "Between Globalisation and Localisation: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music."
- <sup>24</sup> Shuwei Zhang. "Zhuanfang Chow Yiu-fai: Xingbie Zhe Huati Jingran Hai Meiyou Guoshi [Interviewing Chow Yiu-fai: Gender Discussions Are Still Relevant Today]." Intium Media. May 11, 2017. Accessed March 7 2019, <https://theinitium.com/article/20170511-culture-gender-chowyiu-fai-mplus/>
- <sup>25</sup> Zhang, Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Zhang, Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Tang, Denise Tse-Shang. "An Unruly Death: Queer Media in Hong Kong." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 4 (2012): 597-614.
- <sup>28</sup> Tang, Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ho, "Between Globalisation and Localisation: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music."
- <sup>30</sup> Chu, Yiu-Wai. "Who Sings Hong Kong?" In *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China*, 121-49. New York: State University of New York Press, June, 2013. 148
- <sup>31</sup> Chu, Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Luo. *Jinse De Hu Die: Zhang Guorong De Yishu Xingxiang*
- <sup>33</sup> Luo, Ibid.

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