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Before and after the Fall: Mapping Hong Kong Cantopop in the Global Era

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Mapping Hong Kong Cantopop in the Global Era**

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**Abstract**

Cantonese popular songs (Cantopop) were once very popular not only in Hong Kong but also in the regions that neighbor Hong Kong. In recent years, however, it is generally agreed that Cantopop is fading away and being taken over by Mandarin popular songs. In this paper it is argued that the decline of Cantopop can be attributed not only to piracy and the downturn in the economy, but also to its loss of hybridity and the transformation of the Chinese music industry in the global era. Examining the developments in Cantopop throughout its history, this essay endeavors to map Cantopop on the new mediascape in the context of globalization.

**Introduction**

From the 1980s to the mid 1990s, Cantopop, a strange genre with lyrics written in standard modern Chinese but pronounced in Cantonese,<sup>1</sup> was so popular that it attracted those who do not speak Cantonese. Cantopop had developed into a highly profitable business with a quickly expanding market by the end of the 1970s, but in the 1980s, it developed further, into a multi-media industry. Throughout the 1980s, superstars such as Leslie Cheung, Alan Tam and Anita Mui surpassed their predecessors by developing Cantopop into a cross-media business that also straddled across borders to neighboring regions. These superstars staged more than fifty concerts in the newly built Hong Kong Coliseum, with a seating capacity of more than 10,000, which turned concerts into a highly profitable business.<sup>2</sup> Cantopop successfully helped Hong Kong establish its leading role in the multi-billion dollar idol

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the English term “Cantopop” did not come into existence until the 1970s when Billboard correspondent Hans Ebert, who first coined the term “Cantorock” in 1974, used it “to describe the locally produced popular music in Hong Kong” in 1978 (Lee, 1992: 14). For a more detailed discussion of the definitions of Cantopop, refer to Witzleben (1999: 242-243).

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed figures concerning the concerts held in the Hong Kong Coliseum in the 1980s, refer to Ho (2003: 147-148).

business of popular culture. While it was orchestrating a spectacle of consumerism, it was not hopelessly standardized: it was unabashedly commercial but vigorously hybridized. Not unlike Hong Kong, which assimilates different cultures, Cantopop's renditions of Euro-American, Japanese, Mandarin and even Korean songs made it a vibrant hybrid of different music cultures.<sup>3</sup> "In its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, Cantopop defined the look, feel and—with its lush, ultra-refined production values—even the sound of Chinese cool" (Burpee 1996). According to the *Baseline Study on Hong Kong's Creative Industries* conducted by the University of Hong Kong for the Central Policy Unit of the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2003: 114),

The music industry in Hong Kong is dominated by Cantopop in production and sales. It constitutes a major part of the entertainment business of the territory in terms of employment and contribution to GDP. It is also a major part of the popular cultural phenomenon of Hong Kong, which "has significant influence in the region and also a large market in every community overseas."

This was true until the mid-1990s. By the late 1990s, however, due to piracy and other factors, Cantopop had begun to decline in terms of its market share as well as, arguably, the quality of songs. In 1997, the eye-catching title of an essay in *Billboard*, "The Cantopop Drop" (Tsang & Campbell 1999), advertised the sad but all-too-true fact that the golden days of Cantopop had passed. It was perhaps no coincidence that James Wong used 1997 as the end boundary for the timeline of Cantopop in his doctoral thesis (2003) entitled *The Rise and Decline of Cantopop 1949-1997*. In the past decade or so, diminishing record sales have stimulated record companies and Cantopop singers to switch to the Mandarin popular songs (Mandapop)

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<sup>3</sup> That Cantopop reached its apex in the 1980s can be accounted for by its increased diversity. Up to that point, Cantopop itself had to be differentiated from the marketing economy that sold it. The city folk songs and band songs in the 1980s, among others, have proved that discursive space was not unavailable to non-mainstream attempts. The vibrant creativity of Cantopop lay in its hybridity.

market in Taiwan and mainland China, producing more Mandapop than Cantopop albums. It is not surprising that people tend to think that Cantopop has died.

In fact, the sales of Cantopop have dropped drastically since the mid-1990s. Overall, Cantopop sales plunged from 9.2 million albums in 1996 to 4.9 million in 1998 (Mok 2001), and, according to the statistics of the International Federation of Phonographic Industry (Hong Kong Group), Cantopop sales dropped by more than half, from 1.853 billion Hong Kong dollars in 1995 to 0.916 billion in 1998 (James Wong 2003: 169). Worse still, the passing away of Cantopop superstars Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui and lyrics masters James Wong and Richard Lam seemed to symbolize the end of the glorious era of Cantopop. When sales dropped, vehement criticisms of Cantopop surfaced: “People are getting tired of mainstream Cantopop because it rehashes the formula of big ballads and cheesy dance tunes year in, year out” (Samuel Lee 2002). The point is that even during its heyday, this kind of charge could be applied to Cantopop, which is famously commercial. However, despite criticisms, Cantopop fared well in the 1980s and early 1990s. There must be other reasons behind the fall of Cantopop.

It is widely believed that the fall of Cantopop was caused by a combination of a bad economy, piracy and file sharing. Nevertheless, when the rapid recovery of Mandapop is considered, this explanation is less helpful. After the Asian financial crisis, Mandapop, facing problems similar to those faced by Cantopop, rapidly bounced back and reclaimed its lost turf, and gained even more ground in the Hong Kong market. It is a common belief in the Hong Kong music industry that file sharing is the key reason for the drastic drop in record sales. According to the empirical study of Felix Oberholzer-Gee and Koleman Strumpf (2007), file sharing seemed to translate into an effect on album sales that was “statistically indistinguishable from zero.” In addition to explanations such as piracy and file sharing, which become less helpful in accounting for the recent vogue of Cantopop oldies,<sup>4</sup> there are other reasons behind the steady loss of the popularity of Cantopop.

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<sup>4</sup> Recently there have been quite a number of concerts with nostalgic themes that are performed by old-timers such as Paula Tsui, Johnny Yip and Teresa Carpio. Whereas Cantopop records have not sold well in the last several years, the sales of collections of golden hits are remarkable. Sam Hui, among others, came back after a

This essay tries to sketch the decline of Cantopop since the mid-1990s, placing Cantopop in the context of globalization and mapping the factors that caused its decline. Ho Wai-chung (2003) has provided a lucid account of the localization and globalization of Hong Kong popular music. In her essay, Cantopop is discussed in the context of localization while Hong Kong local popular music and its international exposure are discussed in the context of globalization. This essay focuses on Cantopop and looks at how the global-local dialectic can help explain the transformation of the Chinese music industry and the recent fall of Cantopop. Hopefully, this will stir up reflections on the rise and fall of Cantopop in particular, and what local popular culture has to face in the context of globalization in general.

**“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”**

In the early 1990s, the swift development of global media had a very significant impact on the Cantopop industry, which later proved to be a heavy blow to its operation. Charles Dickens’s famous phrase from *A Tale of Two Cities* perfectly describes the Hong Kong music industry at that time. It was the best of times in the sense that Cantopop further expanded its business in Asia and around the world. Cantopop stars continued to be the trendsetters of popular culture across Chinese communities. The rise of the “four heavenly kings,” namely, Andy Lau, Jacky Cheung, Leon Lai and Aaron Kwok, who dominated not only the local market but also almost all Chinese communities around the world, helped Cantopop to develop into a transnational business venture. Jacky Cheung’s Cantopop album *Overthrow of True Love* (1992) sold more than a million copies worldwide, which was totally unimaginable previously. The success of the “four heavenly kings” was not only in the realm of popular music. Like Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui, they also crossed over to wider audiences, through concerts, movies and, more importantly, commercials for artistic

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more than 10-year retirement to sing a song, “2004 Blessings,” to Hong Kong people. The blessings later turned into a series of comeback concerts entitled “Keep on Smiling,” which broke the record of Hong Kong concerts in recent years by selling out all tickets in a short while. It was unofficially reported that tickets were sold on the black market for up to four times the original price. All of a sudden, the good old days seemed to be back.

recognition and financial gain. Ironically, their multiple talents also contributed, at least partly, to the later fall of Cantopop.

It was the worst of times in the sense that music was no longer the central concern of these cross-disciplinary stars. Advertising is hardly new in a package society like Hong Kong, but when Cantopop developed into a cross-media transnational business, the scale of its production had to be much larger. To be profitable, mass production must be accompanied by mass consumption, which can be facilitated by the strategy of commodity fetishism and consumption. Thus, the music industry had to rely upon idol worshipping much more than it had in the 1980s. Moreover, the music industry had to work closely with the media to maintain the star system, and record companies had to spend huge amounts of money on marketing and buying time on television and radio channels. Star making, rather than record selling, became a record company's core activity (Frith 2001: 35). When the cost of production rose, sales of albums could no longer guarantee a good return for the record company's investment. The major incomes of record companies then turned from record sales to side products such as different forms of commodities related to the stars (Frith 1992: 73). In short, record sales were no longer the main source of income and the music industry became increasingly dependent commercially on media it did not itself control (Frith 2001: 44). For instance, Leon Lai's telecommunication commercial series won unprecedented success, and many of his greatest hits were in a way related to these commercials. The point of concern is that his image was more important than his songs. His songs were in a supporting role to his commercials and overall image, so to speak. As these "kings" had to create eye-catching and consistent images, their songs had to be standardized. In the meantime, B-list singers, regardless of their ability to act, also crossed over to movies, but most of them ended up without fame in either singing or acting. Many other "singers" relied much more on income from shooting commercials than from selling records.

Karaoke dealt another significant blow to the music industry. When the first karaoke box chain, Big Echo, was introduced to Hong Kong in the early 1990s, it created an unexpected impact on local audiences and the music industry. Later, a number of karaoke box



chains went into the market, completely altering the ecology of the local music industry. As claimed by the Asian regional managing director of EMI Music, one of the world's biggest record companies, "If you can't sing it in karaoke, it won't be a hit" (Taylor 1997: 200). In brief, the impact was at least two-fold: on the style of Cantopop and on the business ventures of record companies. As the popularity of songs in karaoke boxes could guarantee sales volumes, record companies tended to tailor-make "k-songs" that were not only easy listening but also easy singing, as people were to sing songs aloud in karaoke. Besides, as karaoke box chains are highly profitable, record companies have to work closely with them to make more money. The income from selling the copyright of a certain hit song to karaoke box chains is considerably higher than that from record sales. This caused a kind of structural change to the music industry to produce "k-songs" made for amateur singers rather than professional listeners. Closely related to karaoke is the production of MTV. Karaoke must come with MTV, and, as noted lucidly by Simon Frith (2001: 44), MTV in the 1980s was a hybrid of records, but in the 1990s, a hybrid of commodities. The record companies had to spend much more money on MTV than on the song itself. In a sense this can fascinate some audience members, but this will also chase away listeners who prefer songs of quality to flamboyant images.

If Theodor Adorno's criticism of popular music (Adorno 1990) was not applicable to the Hong Kong music industry in the 1980s, it was by the 1990s. Nearly all of the songs of the four kings were being produced in a similar way, rendering them vulnerable to Adorno's critique of standardization and pseudo-individualization. The trend of teenage groups after the unexpected success of Twins, including Cookies (and later Mini Cookies), 2R, Shine and Boy'z, is another typical example of how pseudo-individualization operates. This is not to say that there were no songs of other styles, but as the products of the kings were so profitable, record companies were more than happy to stick to the winning formula. The star system had existed in the past, but starting in the early 1990s it developed into a far more mature network. If in Leslie Cheung's and Alan Tam's albums eight out of ten songs were either wistful love ballads or dance-floor jingles, almost ten out of ten were so in the albums

of the four kings. Another point to note is that the star system even extended to the production team. Not only did managers change their roles (Frith 2001: 48), star producers, composers and lyricists were being marketed with the same operational logic as the singers. Since the mid-1990s star producers like Michael Au and Conrad Wong, composers like Mark Lui and Keith Fai-yeung Chan and lyricists like Lin Xi, Wyman Wong and Canny Leung have attracted more limelight than have commonplace singers. All these developments contributed to a stereotypical impression that Cantopop gave its audience in the 1990s — “the sentimental lyrics, the melancholic melody, and the banality of romance” (Erni 1998: 60-61). However, as mentioned above, if we pay closer attention to the Cantopop of the 1980s, we observe that Cantopop singers and songs with different styles once co-existed in the mainstream.

The situation would not have been so bad had it not happened at the dawning of the age of globalization. Steve Jones’s (1993: 94) account of American popular music can well be applied to the situation of Hong Kong: to achieve commercial success, the commerce of commerce is more important than the commerce of music. In the age of globalization, there arose an “empire” which, in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s (2000: xii) famous words, “is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers.” In this special context, the development of the Chinese music industry also became transnational and media consumption deterritorialized in the early 1990s, which led the Hong Kong music industry to face an irreversible structural change it did not realize at the outset. In the era of “Two Sides of the China Straits” (James Wong 1995: 166-167), this at first facilitated the success of the Cantopop kings in Asia, but later exposed the standardized Cantopop to harsh competition with Mandapop from different music cultures. In the new global cultural economy, the mediascape in Hong Kong transformed very rapidly in the early 1990s with the rise of transnational karaoke companies and broadcasters, and “the relocating of cores of production will... affect how widely consumed cultural forms are made” (Taylor 1997: 200).

The transformation of the mediascape in the early 1990s was also reflected in the deterritorialization of media consumption. Previously, Hong Kong, as a cosmopolitan city, was notorious for its small number of media channels: only two free television stations and three radio stations. In the past these few channels had a stranglehold on what audiences saw and heard. In the early 1990s the scene changed. The broadcasting of cable television and satellite television in the early 1990s multiplied the media channels by several times. While the localization of free television and the movie industry in the 1970s led to a glorious era of Hong Kong popular culture, the globalization of the mediascape in the early 1990s ironically led to its fall. As far as music is concerned, the channels provided by these new media were mostly Mandarin speaking as, obviously, the Mandarin market is considerably larger. The new choices did provide Hong Kong audiences with the chance to listen to Mandapop from Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and mainland China, but it seemed to have adverse effects on Cantopop. Record companies, with an eye to the growing Mandapop market, redirected resources to the production of Mandapop before long. At first the influence could be said to be mutually beneficial. Record companies such as Music Factory, which later turned into Rock Records, came to Hong Kong and released some excellent albums such as *Queen's Road East*, which mapped among the best post-1989 imaginings of Hong Kong's relationship with mainland China. However, it was very disappointing from the view of Cantopop lovers when Rock Records later shifted its attention to the market in mainland China and ceased to produce Cantopop. Hong Kong was just used as a springboard to the huge market in mainland China.

“Mandarin is an increasingly important language for music in the region,” said Greg Rogers, senior VP at MCA Music Entertainment International, Asia-Pacific. “That will probably accelerate somewhat, and then, for the Chinese repertoire at least, Hong Kong will become increasingly irrelevant to the equation” (Burpee 1996). The change of the mediascape lured Cantopop singers, including the four heavenly kings, to woo the Mandapop market. The rise of an international repertoire has profoundly influenced how record companies market their products: “It is those artists who have previously achieved

international success and who are releasing a new album who will have little difficulty attracting radio play and media coverage and gaining sales” (Negus 1999: 157). To court huge markets by thinking more “internationally,” record companies and Cantopop singers actively turned to Mandapop. Starting from the early 1990s, many leading Hong Kong Cantopop singers released more Mandapop than Cantopop albums. Worse yet, while Cantopop singers turned to Mandapop for more opportunities, Mandapop singers encroached into the Hong Kong market. Before the advent of Mandapop stars in the mid-1990s, Hong Kong audiences enjoyed the privilege of listening to Cantopop sung by Mandapop singers. In the beginning, Mandapop singers such as Nicky Wu and Jeff Chang still had to follow the successful cases in the 1980s, that is, to sing Cantopop to please the local audience. But it did not take long for Mandapop singers to gain the upper hand and enthrall Cantopop audience with their own Mandapop. Jay Chou, David Tao, Stefanie Sun and F4 overtook the four heavenly kings and Sammi Cheng in terms of commercial viability. Instant stardom was no longer the monopoly of the Hong Kong pop industry. “While Cantopop marches on in Hong Kong, Chinese pop has moved elsewhere, on to Mandarin singer/songwriters, Taiwanese folk artists, Beijing rockers, Singapore balladeers” (Burpee 1996).

### **After the Fall: Cantopop in the Global Era**

The Cantopop drop can also be interpreted as a side effect of the domination by the four heavenly kings of the market. In the 1980s, when Alan Tam and Leslie Cheung competed to be the King of Cantopop, singers with different styles and target audiences, such as George Lam and Michael Kwan, could also survive. While Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui captivated their fans with their fabulous stage performances, Michael Kwan and Johnny Yip made minimal moves when they performed on stage. Tina Liu, channel director at 104 FM Select, the Metro Station in Hong Kong, rightly pointed out that in the early 1980s, there was a better balance between pop idols and “non-idols” (Tsang & Campbell 1999). But in the 1990s, when the four heavenly kings overwhelmed the market, their market share was so large that singers with different styles had to look for opportunities elsewhere. For instance,

Alex To, known for his blues — which were not popular in Hong Kong, had to move to Taiwan, where he further developed his music career. The problem of standardization did not surface when business was running smoothly. Unfortunately, with the bursting of the bubble economy after the Asian financial crisis, Hong Kong's economic situation was thrown into unprecedented dire straits. The sales of Cantopop dropped drastically and were later taken over by Mandopop.

When the market for Cantopop shrank, record companies became more conservative. Instead of trying different tactics, they tended to play safe by distributing resources according to limited successful formulas.<sup>5</sup> Lachlan Rutherford, senior VP, Warner Music South East Asia, confessed that Warner had no choice but to channel its investment into its top-ranking artists (Tsang & Campbell 1999). For a long time, the Hong Kong music industry had overly relied on its four heavenly kings and “with [their] fan base ageing and no longer keen on pop music, sales of their albums have been affected” (Samuel Lee 2002). In the late 1990s, when the four heavenly kings were no longer guarantees of sales, no one was able to succeed them in terms of commercial value. Most of the rising stars failed to make significant sales, and a great many faded from the limelight before long. “It is terribly bad news for new artists and talent, but there is no commercial value in the new-artist business, and it's completely under threat,” said Lachlan Rutherford, senior VP, Warner Music South East Asia (Tsang & Campbell 1999). The fan base contracted and record companies decided to direct their resources to teenage fans. The Hong Kong music industry failed to figure out a post-four-heavenly-king tactic until the surprising success of Twins – a group of two teenage girls, Charlene Choi and Gillian Chung. The effect of Twins gave a new impetus to the Hong Kong music industry on the one hand and on the other hand exerted an adverse effect on it. The debut album of Twins showed that Cantopop had adopted a different strategy to market its products. Starting from the 1980s, record companies had invested huge resources in the

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<sup>5</sup> An interesting phenomenon to note is the so-called “new four heavenly kings.” Alan Tam announced recently that Hacken Lee, Andy Hui, Edmond Leung and Leo Ku have succeeded the four heavenly kings and become the new kings of Cantopop. The irony is that some of these new kings went into the music industry before the old kings. Andy Hui confessed, “Already 37, I'm no longer ‘new’.”

images of their singers and the packaging of albums. However, as long as the packaging was supplementary to the album itself, audience members also paid attention to the songs when they purchased a certain album. To lure the teenage audience, record companies looked for sponsors and packed, in addition to the disc, coupons and gifts geared to the taste of teenagers. When you bought a Twins album, you could get far more than what you paid for if you used all of the coupons. Followers of Adorno would say that these were false needs indeed. But the production of false needs was particularly useful for the teenage audience. I do not intend to dwell upon a discussion of whether these needs are false or not. The concern here is that this strategy crucially changed the age group of the Cantopop target audience. The target audience of Cantopop has become younger and younger. The lyrics of one of the greatest hits of Twins can best illustrate their target audience: "I haven't grown up yet, and so let me be shallow. I only know falling in love is all important to me." Obviously, this kind of song can hardly touch those above twenty.

Simon Frith (2001: 27) has astutely identified a very important point to note in popular music studies: "Popular music culture isn't the effect of a popular music industry; rather, the music industry is an aspect of popular music culture." In the 1990s, however, Hong Kong music culture was overwhelmed by a music industry that was complacent with its success in the good old days, not only sticking to the old formula but also further concentrating resources on those who were selected by the formula. In Hong Kong, concepts such as "mainstream," "oppositional" and "underground" have to be understood differently. The mainstream is so dominant that even rock is seen as non-mainstream music, which is unimaginable in most places. When the mainstream becomes excessively powerful, popular music culture is marginalized to the extent that it cannot make a healthy impact on the music industry. When the music industry is almost equivalent to music culture, the popular music in a certain place cannot but hopelessly go downhill.

According to a survey conducted by the City University of Hong Kong in 1997, more than half of the interviewees tended to think Hong Kong popular music had turned sour. Among the minority who opined that the music scene of Hong Kong was making progress,

“internationalization” was seen as a common factor behind the progress (Wong Shing Wing 1997). Internationalization is crucial in the age of globalization: “The economic and cultural dimensions of globalization have become determining factors on developments in Hong Kong popular music, especially the establishment of international Hong Kong popular artists, the internationalization of musical styles, and the instantaneous communication and interaction by means of electronic media” (Ho 2003: 154). But the irony is that if internationalization has helped the rise of local Hong Kong popular music, it has also arguably led to the fall of Cantopop.

Recent discussions on the globalization of culture have dwelled upon whether the global would erase the local. From the brief recapitulation of the development of Cantopop in the last few decades, it seems that Cantopop rose with the localization of Hong Kong popular culture in the 1970s and began to fade away in the dawn of globalization. To place the fall of Cantopop in the context of globalization, it is easy to draw the conclusion that it lost its local characteristics when it became global. The arguments presented above, however, point towards a different interpretation: Cantopop failed to retain its popularity not only because it became global. One could argue that Cantopop, not unlike Hong Kong movies, lost its authenticity as a local genre when it became global. This argument, however, has its detractors. Critics have pointed out that “local” has its own problems. In popular music studies, scholars have noted that the global-local dichotomy cannot fully capture the new cultural dynamics in the age of globalization (e.g., Negus 1999, Fairley 2001). As noted convincingly by Tony Mitchell (1996: 51), “Most Third World musics are already ‘contaminated’ by their own appropriations of First World musical influences, and most First World musics contain Third World influences, so relations between the two are never simple and always mediated by complex interplays of intercultural cross-fertilizations.” In light of these arguments, I would like to claim that the “local” Cantopop in the 1970s was hybridized from the outset. During its heyday in the 1980s, it was also hybridized, although it was highly commercial and began to cross borders. But in the 1990s, the globalization of the Chinese media changed the ecology of Chinese popular music industries. The shrinking of the

Cantopop market on the one hand and the rapid expansion of the Mandapop market on the other hand forced Cantopop to become less hybridized in terms of music style, lyrics and target audience groups, as record companies directed their resources only to those would-be winners. “Hong Kong’s music scene was dead and flat for so long because of Cantopop,” said Riz Farooqi of the Hong Kong hardcore band King Ly Chee (Mok 2001). With this I can only partly agree. This is true of the standardized Cantopop with its limited teenage fan base, but I beg to differ if he refers to Cantopop in general, as it was once an important part of Hong Kong’s music scene. As Lawrence Witzleben (1999: 241) rightly claimed, Cantopop is “a unique and often bewildering mixture of Chinese, other Asian and Western elements.” If we change “mixture” to “hybridization,” it would be even more accurate to describe the characteristics of Cantopop in its heyday. Hybridity, a term used by Homi Bhabha in postcolonial discourse to hint at the possibility of resisting the colonizer, is often believed to be a strategy to resist cultural imperialism (Mitchell 1996: 56-57). For instance, Ray Allen and Lois Wilcken (1998: 2) used the example of the music of Caribbean New Yorkers to illustrate how the hybridization of different music cultures can exert a dual function of “creating a dialogue across ethnic boundaries and helping to negotiate relations between different cultural groups or between a minority and the dominant culture.” Whether Cantopop is dead or diminishing is not the question, the crucial point is whether it can regain the vibrant hybridity it once had.

I argue that the recent decline of Cantopop can be primarily related neither to its being commercial nor to piracy or a bad economy. The rise of a global Chinese music industry and media and the subsequent loss of the hybridity of Cantopop, I propose, is the major reason behind its recent decline. Cantopop, some say, has been replaced by “local” pop — including Mandapop, Japanese, Korean and English pop songs (Witzleben 1999: 243). While I have no doubt about the possible hybridity of these genres, I think that the survival of a more diversified Cantopop can contribute to the development of Hong Kong and the Chinese music industry. In popular music studies in Western academies, Cantopop is often not distinguished from Chinese popular songs, and thus it is “poorly served in surveys of non-Western music”



(Witzleben 1999: 242-3). It is necessary to distinguish between Cantopop and Chinese pop. Too often the two are conflated, but clearly they are not the same. Despite its not being seriously considered by scholars outside Hong Kong, Cantopop once received great attention from audiences around the world. Cantopop, once very popular across Chinese communities, must have been doing something right. I do not deny that the possible interaction among different popular songs can generate a more energetic music culture for a cosmopolitan city like Hong Kong, but the point of concern is that this special genre sung in the Cantonese dialect has its own inherent hybridity which is not available elsewhere, not even in the so-called “local” pop.

### **Epilogue: Cantopop as Creative Industry?**

In the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, the bubble economy of Hong Kong burst and Hong Kong began to face an unprecedented economic depression. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government, notorious for its lack of inspiration, did nothing but voice the need for a so-called “transformation of the economy.” It is not surprising that in a global city that claims to be “Asia’s World City,” this transformation has led to an emphasis on high value-added industries. Unfortunately, one such industry, the cyber port plan, was widely criticized as a real estate development far more than as a high-tech project. The government, in the face of harsh criticisms, then brought forth the concept of “creative industries” to soothe the pain of Hong Kong people. Admittedly, culture industries are an important dimension that flourishes in the age of globalization. Different countries and regions have been distributing resources to develop culture industries, which, in a global informational city, are seen as being able to create a sizeable income with small investment. The United Kingdom, among the forerunners in developing creative industries, had a rather successful experience in the 1990s. As detailed in a report of the British National Music Council and its consultant, popular music brought a net profit of 519,000,000 pounds and created a total of 130,000 new posts (Kwok 2001). Popular music and many other

popular culture products, if properly managed, are highly profitable. More importantly, culture industries can also bring symbolic capital to a country and/or city.

In the midst of the economic depression, the HKSAR government put forward the idea of creative industries, and included popular music on its agenda. However, it seemed to have failed to observe that as an industry, popular music might not be creative. While no one can deny that popular music is a form of creative industry, the link between the two has yet to be established. In fact, the use of cultural policy to develop popular music into a form of creative industry is one of the major issues one has to tackle. Between creative industries and local popular culture is a gap that cannot be bridged without careful deliberation and solid research. Cultural policy is one of the significant issues that need to be examined. Recent discussions on cultural policies have focused on the issue of the challenge that is brought about by globalization and how to develop local cultural identity and preserve diversity in the homogenizing move of globalization (see, for instance, Adams 1998). While we have seen the swift growth of cultural policy studies recently, the study of the relationship between popular music and cultural policy is yet to be fully developed. Justin Lewis (2003: 227) points out in his introduction to the section on music in *Critical Cultural Policy Reader* that popular music has long been considered loosely related to cultural policy, and whenever the two are mentioned, people just think of censorship and/or warning labels on albums. Existing studies of Western popular music deliberate on the global/local dialectic, and critics tend to support local popular music to resist the hegemony of American popular music (Lewis 2003:228). The situation in Hong Kong seems more complex. In addition to popular songs from the United States, Mandarin, Japanese and Korean songs have also become more popular in recent years. Mandapop can only partly be considered as foreign as some of the songs involve Hong Kong musicians. Moreover, Hong Kong always takes pride in being a cosmopolitan city that celebrates the hybridization of different cultures. The Hong Kong music industry thus faces the complicated problem of both dealing with foreign popular songs and promoting Hong Kong music culture.

In 2002 the Hong Kong Central Policy Unit launched a project on creative industries, which takes reference from a similar study in the United Kingdom. Popular music is one of the creative industries that are examined in the study. According to the report of the study, *Baseline Study on Hong Kong's Creative Industries*, to develop the music industry it is necessary to consolidate copyright laws, to strengthen the structure of music production companies, to enhance Hong Kong's "star-making effect," to create and sustain local music talents and to develop the mainland China market (Centre for Cultural Policy Research 2003: 116-118). There should hardly be any objections to these suggestions. But it seems local cultural policy is no less important. Besides these long-term plans, a more immediate intervention through cultural policy might be more pertinent to the current situation. Recent debates on the thin line between cultural industries and creative industries (such as those of Hesmondhalgh 2002 and Caves 2000) have shown that the transformation of cultural industries into creative industries is far from problem free. According to the study of the "Original Songs Campaign" launched by the Commercial Radio of Hong Kong in 1995 (Chu 2004), which stated that no cover versions of popular songs were allowed to be aired on its Channel 2, the market's most-listened-to radio station, most if not all interviewees expressed their wish for Cantopop with increased diversity and choice. Simon Frith (2001: 50) predicted that world popular music will see three parallel music worlds in the near future. The first is the mainstream pop/rock business, the second, the essentially chaotic illegal business involving both straightforward crooks ripping off copyright holders by bootlegging as well as experimental and political artists who refuse to accept the constraints of copyright laws, and the third, genre music scenes in which semi-commercial local players are connected through websites and digital radio and who aim neither for fame or profit. While I believe that even in the worst of times, these three worlds do exist in Hong Kong popular music, my concern is that the Hong Kong Cantopop industry has become so strange that some mainstream music styles (such as rock) have become a kind of genre music. Creative industries, to borrow the title of Caves's book, involve "contracts between art and commerce." Theoretical reflections on how to develop creativity (art) are essential to make the industry flourish. As Frith

(2001:27) rightly notes, the music industry is only part of popular music. To enhance the development of local popular music, the construction of an aura outside the music industry is nonetheless important. What policies are to be implemented has yet to be fully assessed, but what is certain is that they are necessary, or else the transmission and transformation of Cantopop with increased diversity will become a dream that cannot be realized. In that case, Cantopop can no longer contribute its due respect to the global popular music industry.

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