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VISUAL CULTURES, SOCIETIES AND POLITICS



It's My Party

Tat Ming Pair and the Postcolonial Politics of
Popular Music in Hong Kong

Yiu Fai Chow
Jeroen de Kloet
Leonie Schmidt

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Yiu Fai Chow · Jeroen de Kloet ·
Leonie Schmidt

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PROLOGUE: HONG KONG AND TAT MING PAIR

<i>Hong Kong</i>		<i>Tat Ming Pair</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First authorised protest in three years' time - Hong Kong hosted the first Gay Games in Asia in November, together with Mexico City - According to <i>Independent Media</i>, 259 people were arrested under National Security Law during the first three years of its implementation 	2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anthony Wong cancelled his scheduled solo concerts after the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre withdrew its lease agreement - Anthony Wong held <i>SONG OF WANDERERS: ANTHONY WONG LIVE</i> 黃耀明邊走邊唱 in Taiwan and Europe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - John Lee Ka-chiu became the Chief Executive of Hong Kong - Education Bureau announced that a quarter of teaching time for primary education should be spent on patriotism and national security - Queen Elizabeth II passed away - Britain announced that any Hong Kong person born after 1997 is eligible to apply for British National (Overseas) passport on the condition that at least one parent already holds a BNO passport 	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online event <i>TAT MING PAIR REPLAY 1+2 WATCH PARTY</i> 達明一派 <i>REPLAY 1+2 WATCH PARTY</i> to celebrate Tat Ming's 36th anniversary - Tats Lau published his memoir

(continued)

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<i>Hong Kong</i>		<i>Tat Ming Pair</i>
– Tong Ying-kit became the first person convicted under National Security Law	2021	– Anthony Wong arrested for “corrupt conduct”; charges were dropped subsequently
– Education Bureau has announced new guideline about National Flag ceremonies to all Hong Kong schools		– Released the single “My Boyfriend 我的男朋友”
		– Released album <i>TM+M DECADE</i>
		– Held <i>TAT MING PAIR REPLAY LIVE 2021 CONCERT 達明一派 REPLAY LIVE 2021</i> to celebrate their 35 th anniversary
– COVID-19 outbreak	2020	– Held <i>TAT MING PAIR REPLAY CONCERT 達明一派 REPLAY LIVE</i> , at Queen Elizabeth Stadium
– National Anthem Ordinance came into effect		– Released the single “All Over the World 今天世上所有地方”
– National Security Law came into effect; Tong Ying-kit became the first person to be charged under the new law		
– Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests	2019	– In April, Tat Ming Pair’s music was removed from Apple Music and other music streaming sites in mainland China
		– Released the single “Memory Is a Crime 回憶有罪,” in conjunction with the 30 th anniversary of the student movement in mainland China. The song topped the iTunes chart in Hong Kong but was banned immediately in mainland China
	2018	– Awarded the Golden Needle Award in Top Ten Chinese Gold Songs Awards sponsored by RTHK as a celebration of their lifetime achievements in music
– Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor became the Chief Executive of Hong Kong	2017	– Held the concert <i>TAT MING PAIR 30TH ANNIVERSARY LIVE CONCERT 達明卅一派對</i> , at Hong Kong Coliseum
– Mong Kok civil unrest, also known as Fishball Revolution	2016	
– Pro-democracy protests known as Umbrella Movement to oppose the 31 August Decision made by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress	2014	

(continued)

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<i>Hong Kong</i>		<i>Tat Ming Pair</i>
– Leung Chun-ying became the Chief Executive of Hong Kong	2012	– Reunited for the single, “It’s My Party”, to celebrate their 25 th anniversary
– Anti-national education protests		– Held <i>ROUND AND ROUND 兜兜轉轉</i> 演演唱唱會, at Hong Kong Coliseum
– Donald Tsang Yam-kuen became the Chief Executive of Hong Kong	2005	– Released the album <i>The Party</i> for their 20 th anniversary
	2004	– Reunited for the single, “Blessed Are the Lonely Ones 寂寞的人有福了”
		– Held <i>SERVE FOR THE PEOPLE CONCERT 為人民服務</i> 演演唱會, at Hong Kong Coliseum
– SARS outbreak	2003	
– 500,000 citizens marched on 1 July to oppose the legislation of Article 23 of Hong Kong Basic Law		
– The First Interpretation of Hong Kong Basic Law due to the right of abode in Hong Kong	1999	
– Handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China	1997	
– Tung Chee-hwa took up the position as the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong	1996	– Reunion
		– Awarded with Song of the Year in Ultimate Song Chart Awards Presentation with “One Forbidden Fruit a Day 每日一禁果”
		– Release of seventh album, <i>Viva! Viva! Viva! 萬歲! 萬歲! 萬歲!</i>
		– Staging their first large-scale concert, <i>VIVA! VIVA! VIVA! CONCERT 萬歲萬歲萬歲</i> 演演唱會, at Queen Elizabeth Stadium
– Christopher Francis Patten took up the position of the last Governor of Hong Kong	1992	
	1991	– Suspension of Tat Ming Pair as a musical formation, and the two members continued their solo careers

(continued)

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<i>Hong Kong</i>		<i>Tat Ming Pair</i>
– The Hong Kong Basic Law was issued by the National People’s Congress	1990	– Release of sixth album, <i>Nerves</i> 神經 – Holding their first concert, <i>I LOVE YOU — TAT MING PAIR CONCERT</i> , at Hong Kong Coliseum
– Student movement in mainland China	1989	– Release of fifth album, <i>Fallen Angel</i> 意難平
	1988	– Release of third EP, <i>Tender Is the Night</i> 夜未央 – Release of fourth album, <i>Do You Still Love Me?</i> 你還愛我嗎?
	1987	– Release of second EP, <i>Tat Ming Pair Remix</i> 達明一派 Remix – Release of second album, <i>The Story of the Stone</i> 石頭記 – Release of third album, <i>I’m Waiting for Your Return</i> 我等着你回來
	1986	– Release of first EP, <i>Tat Ming Pair</i> 達明一派 – Release of first album, <i>Tat Ming Pair II</i> 達明一派II
	1985	– Tat Ming Pair was officially formed and signed to PolyGram Records Ltd. (Hong Kong) – Released debut single “Keep Searching 繼續追尋” in September
– Signing of Sino-British Joint Declaration over the future of Hong Kong	1984	– Tats Lau posted an advertisement on to recruit music partner. Anthony Wong responded and sang “Careless Whisper” and “Time (Clock of the Heart)” in the recruitment interview

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It is probably dangerous to write about anyone, about anything, that one loves.

In our case: Tat Ming Pair, and the city of Hong Kong. While we indeed dispend any claim to objectivity or critical distance, we do hope to convince you, dear reader, of our reasons to embark on a project that is so very close, and so very challenging, to us. There are so many reasons. It reflects our commitment to Asian music cultures. It underlines our paradoxical eagerness to trouble Eurocentric knowledge production and be part of it. It reiterates our trust in writing and in writing together. It cherishes and nourishes our stubbornness that we can still do something. Ultimately, it attests to our—dare we repeat the cliched word—love, quite simply, for the duo, for Cantopop, for music, for Hong Kong. But there is much more to this book than the band and the city, more than pop and politics, more than love. There is fear, anger, frustration, and also strength, hope, fun. This book is above all the outcome of a complex entanglement between sounds, images, words, places, and people. There are so many people we want to thank, without whom this book would not even have started.

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Yiu Fai Chow
Jeroen de Kloet
Leonie Schmidt

NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND ROMANISATION

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Chinese materials are ours. Chinese names are romanised conforming to customs in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. For consistency with conventions in English-language publications and to avoid confusion among non-Chinese speaking readers, these names are put down with given names first, followed by family names (although it should be the other way round in Chinese naming practices). Exceptions are made when the persons concerned are well-known and their Chinese names will be listed accordingly, such as Wong Kar-wai (family name first, in this case).

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Documenting the Past, Sustaining the Present, Making the Future

Dear Tats, dear Anthony, how are you?

We've been listening to the new CD of Tat Ming. With intense feelings. Different from the full, conceptual albums of *Viva! Viva! Viva!* released in 1996, and of *The Party* in 2005, the 2021 *Decade* has only five tracks. Also, the styles of the song have changed. From satire in "It's My Party",¹ to heaviness in "Memory Is a Crime 回憶有罪"² and "All Over the World 今天世上所有地方."³ And in Anthony's solo number "Super-duper 誇啦啦,"⁴ you can't even say anything. What we can do is to chant "lalala".⁵ It's like, if we follow the timeline of these songs, we can see clearly what has happened to Hong Kong, what has happened to Tat Ming, in the past ten years. On the backside of the lyrics sheet, we see Anthony's photo, and an emergency stop. Sometimes, we just hope that Hong Kong has such an emergency stop.

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJgMDxVPfbU>.

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZaE6jAwOM4>.

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twWaDCM9WgU>.

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGsnerouLM8>.

⁵ Instead of words, parts of the lyrics are sung with sounds: "lalala," suggesting the impossibility of speech.

This CD is titled *Decade*, we feel that it's the best irony Tat Ming could give to this era. Within one decade, they could only release five songs. But we are still willing to call it Tat Ming's decade, a difficult decade. Anthony said he would love to sing till he's eighty. We wish Tat Ming could sing even when they are older than eighty.

Two fans from Guangzhou, mainland China⁶

We begin this book with a remarkable episode, in April 2022. Tat Ming Pair,⁷ a Hong Kong electronic duo formed in 1985, was hosting an online screening of their two rounds of *REPLAY* concerts, in 2020 and 2021. After the screening, some fans were invited to join and welcome to chat with the duo's members, Anthony Wong Yiu Ming and Tats Lau Yee Tat. This event, overcoming the stringent entry and quarantine measures on both sides of the borders, attracted many VPN-savvy fans from mainland China, who would have liked to, but could not possibly come to Hong Kong, to attend the concerts in person. In fact, they have been missing Tat Ming not only due to COVID-19 barriers, but, more fundamentally and for a much longer period of time, to political duress. In mainland China, Tat Ming has been effectively banned from performing, their music erased from Chinese online platforms, and any social media posts naming them readily censored. Notwithstanding the potential risk, these two fans from Guangzhou decided to write a letter—via a route as circuitous as it is indicative of the urge to express themselves. They managed to get in touch with someone, in Beijing, whom they learned was among the few fans selected to join the chatting session. They passed the letter to him. There he was, from Beijing, reading out this letter to Tat Ming in Hong Kong, not in the official Chinese language of Putonghua, but in the local tongue of Cantonese.

We find this episode remarkable, and we cited the letter in full, because we believe they are gesturing towards the three striated—distinct and yet intertwined, above all, living—attempts in our writing of this book. First, as the fans note in their letter, to follow what has happened to the music

⁶ The letter was written in Chinese and translated by one of the authors, Yiu Fai Chow. Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this book were done likewise. Its full version was obtained from the Beijing fan mentioned later in the text, and the episode was reconstructed via private correspondences.

⁷ We will use Tat Ming Pair, the full name of the duo, the first time it appears in the chapter. Thereafter, we will revert to Tat Ming, the name usually and fondly used by fans.

of Tat Ming is to trace “what has happened to Hong Kong” at large. In this book, we attempt not only to document and scrutinise the history of a particular music formation; we attempt to write the history of the city itself, from colonial times, through the Handover from British to Chinese rule in 1997, to the current tension under the National Security Law (NSL) enacted in 2020, when acts of remembering may indeed, to cite the song title “Memory Is a Crime,” be a sinful act, a crime. Indexing the complexity of Hong Kong’s postcoloniality, in September 2022, Hong Kong people were seen as queuing up outside the British Consulate to pay their last respects to Queen Elizabeth II, sparking off “neo-colonial” accusations and defence for anti-establishment sentiments (Magramo 2022). We attempt to write the history of the city through the prism of popular music, focusing on one band. Second, our writing of Tat Ming, given its political sensitivity, is at the same time an attempt to write the present of Hong Kong, or to put it more accurately, to write the present in order to ensure the present remains present, not obfuscated, not obliterated. In their letter, the two fans posit a linear analysis of the changing styles of Tat Ming in the last years, from satire, heaviness to “you can’t even say anything.” We do not need to agree entirely with their analysis; suffice it to note that the need to find ways to write the unspeakable and the unspoken in the present conjuncture has become more urgent than ever.⁸ We, academics, are no exception as academic freedom is increasingly under duress (Davis 2022). The “lalala,” that part of the lyrics alluded by the fans, is hardly signifying nothing, definitely full of sound and fury. Third, while the fans have laid out a rather bleak scenario, bleakness alone does not do justice to the very act of writing the letter and the very eventuality that the fans have reached Tat Ming. Despite, or precisely because of, the “difficult decade,” the fans still urge Tat Ming to continue, as if their sadness in what politics has done to music evokes some kind of hope in what music can do to politics. We are reminded to write Tat Ming as an attempt to write the future, of themselves, of the city.

⁸ Just a few days before we wrote this part of the text, five speech therapists were sentenced to nineteen months’ imprisonment under the National Security Law. They were charged with publishing a children’s book series, between June 2020 and March 2021, depicting the struggles between a village sheep and a group of intruding wolves. The judge considered the book series a “brainwashing exercise,” indoctrinating children in separatist ideology (Wong 2022). The conviction was but a latest instance of a series of similar cases in Hong Kong.

Writing the past, the present and the future—that will be our remit in writing popular music and politics. We use the word “attempt” precisely for its indecisiveness; we know what we ought to do, but we know much less how. Central to this exploration is the nagging question: Why does popular music matter? Why does Tat Ming matter? Why does a book about Tat Ming matter? What follows in this book will be an elaborate exegesis of our curt reply for now: it matters in/to the past, in/to the present, and in/to the future—it documents the past, it sustains the present, it makes the future. Indeed, the verbs in this sentence can be mingled. We are attempting a way of writing pop, that is tried and safe, as the pop we are writing is embedded in a city whose politics demands increasingly ingenuity, experimentation, and risk-taking. In fact, we consider this book’s relevance and resonance beyond the city; we take it primarily as a project of studying Tat Ming as a case and mobilising Hong Kong as method, to rethink the intricate relationships between politics and popular music in the wider context of the globalised times where collective action and creative practices are increasingly connected and mutually constitutive. In other words, how (far) does music impact on politics, and how (far) does politics impact on music? Given the specific context of Hong Kong politics, we are at the same time probing: How (far) does writing on music impact on politics, and how (far) does politics impact on writing on music?

In the following, we will prepare readers who are not familiar with the pop scene in Hong Kong with a short biographical account of Tat Ming. We will then expand our ideas of writing pop and politics in tandem with writing the past, the present, and the future—interlaced with a colonial and postcolonial account of Hong Kong, a rally to resilience and activism, and a dialogue with hope and future, all very makeshift. We continue with situating the current inquiry in fields of popular music and cultural studies. We align the inquiry to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to de-Westernise popular music studies, a field of knowledge production persistently dominated by Anglo-Saxon experience and publications. Finally, this attempt to tease out the empirical and theoretical potentials of one single popular music formation in a book-length study, covering not only its creative output (music) but also the production and reception aspects, will be put forward as a methodological intervention, a possible alternative approach to study popular music. This introductory chapter ends with presenting the organisation logic of the book and the gist of the subsequent chapters.

TAT+MING

I started trying to be a solo musician. But at that time in Hong Kong, no one could only live on instrumental music. I wanted to try instrumental, but I realized there was no market here. There must be songs. So, it became Tat Ming.

Tats Lau

It feels strange, we never thought it would become like this when we started. We are not always together. Occasionally we would reunite. But then thirty-six years later, we are still releasing new songs, we are still staging new concerts. I have never thought about it... To me, it's already over-achievement.

Anthony Wong

It was in 1984, that the twenty-one-year-old Tats posted an ad in a music magazine looking for a partner. Anthony, two years older and working as a radio disc jockey, responded. Two years later, they signed with label Polygram and released their debut EP under the name Tat Ming Pair—a combination of Tats Lau Yee Tat and Anthony Wong Yiu Ming. While Tats would take better care of the musical side, Anthony would attend to concept, lyrics, and aesthetics of album cover and costumes. Their songs received critical acclaim and instant popularity. It was also the so-called Golden Era of Cantopop, abbreviation for Cantonese-language popular music produced in Hong Kong, where business was generally booming. “[I]n its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s ... [Cantopop] defined the look, feel and – with its lush, ultra-refined reproduction values – even the sound of Chinese cool” (Burpee 1996), not only in Hong Kong but practically Chinese communities around the world. Partly due to their own creative doing, partly due to the commercial affordance of their times, Tat Ming was given quite a free hand to craft their music aspirations. Since then, they have built a repertoire and reputation with—numerous number one hits, three EPs, six studio albums, nine compilation albums, more than ten rounds of concerts, and five concert recordings—what we elsewhere epitomise as “extravagant aesthetics, electronic sounds, and engaged lyrics” (Chow et al. 2020, 168). In 1990, the duo held their first, and at the same time farewell, concert in the Hong Kong Coliseum, with a seating capacity of more than 10,000 audiences. Tats and Anthony decided to go solo. During this phase of intensive collaboration, they released a number

of classics that evoke the pre-Handover sentiments of the city, appeal for gender and sexual diversity, and comment on popular music and culture itself. Their last album before splitting up was titled *Nerves*. Released in 1990, the album recorded a response to what took place in Tiananmen, Beijing, a year earlier.

Tats continued making music. For the larger public, Tats is best known for his comical portrayal of a monk in a series of, usually not related, local film productions. Anthony signed solo deals with a number of music labels, set up his own production house and label (named, after a Chinese proverb, People Mountain People Sea), and remains primarily active in making popular music. In 1996, Tats and Anthony reunited to host a series of 10th anniversary concerts. “For old time’s sake, for fun, we didn’t think too much why,” explains Anthony. Such occasional collaboration became a regular feature of Tat Ming’s life, resulting in live performances as well as album releases. In 2012, during one of their reunion concerts, which we analyse further in Chapter 5, Anthony came out on stage, announcing “I am gay,” delivering an important act in his and the duo’s performance of queer politics. Their next anniversary concert was in 2017, a year too late. “This time, it’s like, to put it rather melodramatically, it’s like a response to the call of our times,” says Anthony. He was referring to the city struggling with the suppression of the massive pro-democracy protests known as Umbrella Movement, in 2014 (Chan 2014). As Tat Ming’s music has documented “our times, our history,” Anthony considers their reunion concerts a historical responsibility. This became their last concerts staged in the expansive Hong Kong Coliseum. The above-mentioned *REPLAY* series were housed in much smaller venues, and the duo fears if they would be able to hire a place at all, as most concert venues in the city happen to be in public management.

Indeed, it was the Umbrella Movement that marked Tat Ming’s tension with the market-state nexus in mainland China, and more recently, with the other wave of social protests in 2019, in Hong Kong itself. Tat Ming’s musical disappearance from mainland China, and their increasing difficulty, if not impossibility, to secure concert sponsors and venues in Hong Kong, is allegedly the consequence of Anthony’s support to the protests. In 2021, Anthony was arrested and charged with “corrupt conduct,” for performing at an election rally for a pro-democracy candidate three years ago. Seen as “the latest official move against those who had been pushing for greater democracy in the semi-autonomous

Chinese territory,” the charge was later dropped. The prosecutor considered “a bind-over order – to prevent certain behaviour from occurring in future”—for eighteen months would suffice (Pang 2021; Staff and Agencies, the Guardian 2021). It was probably anticipated; in 2018 when the duo was presented with a lifetime achievement award from Radio Television Hong Kong, certain “sensitive parts” of their acceptance speech were censored. RTHK itself, a government-funded broadcaster but known for its artistic and political autonomy, experienced drastic changes since then, and has become, according to some critics, a pro-establishment propaganda apparatus (Chan et al. 2022b).

Tat Ming’s political engagement and social concerns have informed some academic attention. Most of the works focus on Tat Ming’s earlier music in a textual manner, analysing how it demonstrates the anxiety of Hong Kong people in anticipation of the Handover in 1997, and how it addresses social issues and raises social awareness such as gender and sexuality (Cheung 1997; Chu 2000; Lok 1995). The current authors have, in their earlier publications, extended the scope of inquiry, chronologically into Tat Ming’s more recent projects, and methodologically towards analyses of the production process of concerts (2020). This will be the first book-length treatise on Tat Ming. In a broader sense, it is our insertion to the research lacune in Chinese popular music in particular, and popular music studies as a whole. It is not exactly unexpected but nonetheless disappointing to note that our literature review confirms a stubborn power imbalance in knowledge production: this will be the first book dedicated to a single musical unit in the Chinese-language area in international, that is to say English-language, scholarship. In the introduction to an anthology on Hong Kong popular music, representation, or rather under-presentation, is foregrounded. The plea is to write more on Cantopop, not only as an under-represented stream in academic work, but also as under-represented voices in our midst (Fung and Chik 2000). This book seeks to redress this.

This book is dear to us, for different reasons. Yiu Fai has been involved with the band since 1988 as a lyric writer and continues to work with them to this date (Chow 2009). For Jeroen, during his PhD in the mid to late 1990s, Tat Ming’s music opened a new perspective for his writings on rock music in Beijing. This inspired him to further deconstruct the persistent pop-rock dichotomy and the related rock mythology (de Kloet 2010). For Leonie, the live concert of Tat Ming in 2012 was a unique entry into Hong Kong culture, and inspired her writings on Asian pop

culture (Schmidt 2017). Such positionality, one may argue, potentially clouds our writing. We are sure it does. We, like their fans, are fascinated by the music, the aesthetics, the performances, and the politics of Tat Ming. More poignantly, we also want to steer away from critique as the dominant modus operandi of academic writing. First, the current geopolitical situation of Hong Kong asks for moments of hope, for rays of light, for ways to stay resilient, and we aim to analyse some of these rays in this book. Second, we have become over the years increasingly sceptical about the academic virtue of critique.

Here we like to align ourselves with the work of Rita Felski; in her book *The Limits of Critique*, she wonders: “Why is critique such a charismatic mode of thought? Why is it so hard to get outside its orbit?” (2015, 3). Like her, we do not argue against critique. Like her, we are deeply influenced as well as inspired by the work of Foucault. Like her, we do believe: there is more than critique, there is more than a suspicion towards the texts we analyse, there is more that we can do. Critique may not be the best approach, at least not always. Felski is searching for a more open, empathetic, and appreciative mode; in her words, “works of art cannot help being social, sociable, connected, worldly, immanent—and yet they can also be felt, without contradiction, to be incandescent, extraordinary, sublime, utterly special. Their singularity and their sociability are interconnected, not opposed” (2015, 11). We thus engage with Tat Ming in what can be termed, again in her words, a post-critical way, in which we focus on what the duo and their music affords us and its audiences to do, to feel, to become, in how they are entangled with the city of Hong Kong, with mainland China, and with the world at large. “Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (Felski 2015, 12). It is such ethics of possibility we are invested in at the current geopolitical conjuncture of Hong Kong.

DOCUMENTING THE PAST

Fellow scholars in the so-called non-West, or more accurately non-US-UK-centric, fields of popular music studies are “catching up.” Admittedly championed by a metropolitan-based publishing house Routledge, the “made in” book series have released anthologies on popular music made in, among others, Spain, Japan, Korea, and Germany (2013; 2015; 2018;

2021). Regarding the Chinese-language area, the year 2020 saw the publication of two anthologies: one, as just cited, on popular music made in Hong Kong (Fung and Chik 2020), one on Taiwan (Tsai et al. 2019). At least one is in the pipeline, concerning Indonesian popular music. And “made in China” is also under preparation.

In terms of harvesting local or indigenous experiences and expertise, these anthologies can be considered acts of “musical nativism” (Ho 2020). At the same time, they share the urgency of remembering, documenting, and claiming their versions of history—claiming in the twin senses of appropriating and articulating. “*Made in Hong Kong* is perhaps the first project where local and international scholars have systematically documented and narrated the history of Hong Kong popular music and largely Cantopop,” write the editors at the very beginning of the book (Fung and Chik 2020, 1). They continue to note how this local brand of pop demonstrates its conspicuous presence by being absent in academic work, or governmental documentation, despite the so-called Golden Era of Cantopop and its persistent relevance to local audiences, cultural or otherwise. The editors also point out the marginalised position of Cantopop in local music education. Writing Tat Ming, for us, is the attempt to write the popular music history of Hong Kong, not systematic, not comprehensive, not definitive, but at least or above all, the versions we want to remember, document and claim.

It is of course not only about popular music history, but also popular music and history. In a manner reminiscent of Taiwan studies—that has somehow eclipsed with the Rise of China and the popular and academic attention thereby captivated (Shih and Liao 2014)—Hong Kong has long been kept on the sideline, after the Handover in 1997, the more dramatic historic event played out on global mediascape. It is almost ironic, if not tragic, that only with the turmoil in the last decade, that Hong Kong returns to the limelight, and the field of Hong Kong studies has grown and wedged open its space in international scholarship. The field remains, compared to say China studies, small, but the speed of its publications and development is impressive. The recent protests have inspired what Ching-Kwan Lee calls “an academic cottage industry,” connecting social movement theories to Hong Kong (Cheng and Yuen 2018; Lee and Chan 2010, 2018; Ma and Cheng 2019). Lee herself has written a short monograph musing on recent developments in Hong Kong in the wider context of China (Lee 2022). Two years earlier, Loong-yu Au published a book examining the protest movement and China’s future (Au 2020).

The publisher of this book Palgrave Macmillan commenced a Hong Kong Studies Reader Series in 2020. So far, five books have been out in the market, another one is scheduled for 2024. One of the books, on Hong Kong popular culture, by Klavier J. Wang, has two chapters on Cantopop. Her remit is to document the “origin” of the genre, and its overseas reach both commercially and culturally especially during the booming decades (Wang 2020). Taken together, these five publications, while assuming different foci of Hong Kong as a central subject of analysis, share what we feel as the same urgency to write Hong Kong, to write down what they want to—not (only) because they fear a certain future would wipe out a certain past, but, more importantly, to ensure the past does not pass, to ward off a future of fear. In the latest publication of the said series, on Hong Kong media, the editors employ military language to describe the local mediascape—“there is enough evidence and signs showing that the fundamentals of the politics of liberal exceptionalism have been under siege since the establishment of NSL” (Chan et al. 2022a, 31). They caution of a “paradigm shift” going on in the city. While they state that it is too early to say what this paradigm shift is, the very act of writing indexes their urge to add their weight to make, at least part of, the shift.

To us, this book on Tat Ming is our claiming and makeshift tactic. Almost a decade ago, two authors of this book published a collection of case studies troubling the dominant narrative of so-called death of Cantopop, arguing for the complexity demanded by the local music practitioners and industries’ “vibrancy to survive, to trick and ultimately to continue producing good music” (Chow and de Kloet 2013, 6). Now, perhaps we are writing Tat Ming to update this understanding of Hong Kong popular music as eagerly as to trouble the dominant anxiety of the disappearance of the city itself and argue for its vibrancy to survive, to trick, by the long-term persistence to continue producing good music, by Tat Ming and many others. This is also the theoretical and empirical insight posited by Ackbar Abbas in his influential work *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*, published in the same year as the Handover (Abbas 1997). There, he argues how the city appears precisely at the moment of imminent disappearance, how its culture and identity morph into being precisely under erasure. Hong Kong has just witnessed its 25th anniversary of changing from British to Chinese rule. It is under very different circumstances from then. If we can talk of a re-appearance, is it moving towards a re-disappearance? And how would this time go?

Tat Ming, to us, embodies the vibrancy, what we later would explain in terms of resilience that does not guarantee anything for the future, but insists on something from the past. When we trace the music career of the duo, we aim at tracking the memories, the histories, the alternatives—precisely as no alternative seems to be presented. In the words of Helen Hok-Sze Leung, “devoid of any political possibility of an alternative nationalist claim, Hong Kong’s self-narrative of difference is far more nebulous: it is often perceptible only as an undertow of unease that refuses to allow the surface calm to settle” (Leung 2008, 5). We are indebted to the thinking of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault on history, or in their refusal to allow things to settle, to accept history as it is. In his analysis of shopping arcades in 19th-century Paris and critique of bourgeois experience, Benjamin points at the ideological nature of history (1982/1999). His appeal, as we learn, is to “destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history’s continuum” (Buck-Morss 1989: 10). Benjamin’s history is a past with a narrative not whole, but with holes.

Indeed, rupture, refusal to see continuity, stability, inevitability, characterises Foucault’s take on history, or archaeology of knowledge, to use his favoured term (2013). Rejecting any wholistic version of history, understood as long, continuous stretches of a given period, Foucault calls upon us to look for and reveal “several pasts, several forms of connexion, several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies” (Foucault 2013, 5). Knowledge thus produced in the present may transform how we describe the past, how history is written. In Foucault’s remarkable formulation, “how the origin may extend its sway well beyond itself to that conclusion that is never given” (6). It is our hope that popular music, and in our case, Tat Ming, can be a site for exploring different pasts of Hong Kong, and to acknowledge the intertwining of past, present, and future. Striated, the word we used earlier, to underline not only the crisscrossing, complex nature of time, but also the liveliness of such. To us, that should be the politics of writing on popular music. Repertoires are reservoirs; we will use Tat Ming’s repertoire as reservoir, to tap, to fish out narratives of the colonial and postcolonial past, with the present city in our mind, feeding some future we are unable to name.

One note on disappearance before we end this section. When Abbas was observing and commenting, the city and the world were much less digitalised, virtualised. We want to revert to the digital, virtual disappearance of Tat Ming and their music in mainland China. In the field of popular music studies, processes of digitisation engender key concerns over platformisation, marketisation, aesthetic and stylistic impact, creative labour, gender politics and politics at large (see, for instance, Barna 2020; Brusila et al. 2021; Hanrahan 2018; Skoro and Roncevic 2019). These are important areas for inquiry. What we want to flag up is the music that is excluded in digital space, when part of musical history can be, and is erased with a simple technological procedure. Some popular music studies scholars share the concern of archiving, for instance, of analogue materials (Pretto et al. 2020). Our archiving concern is perhaps of a different order: how to archive music not allowed to be archived. For this brief discussion, we used the word “virtual” deliberately, as the digital erasure of Tat Ming, at least for now, is not complete. Our writing of Tat Ming, and of history, is to be done in this context.

SUSTAINING THE PRESENT

In 2014, many parts of Hong Kong were occupied by the pro-democracy Umbrella Movement, for seventy-nine days. In 2019, the first of a series of demonstrations took place to raise objections to the extradition law, culminating to a peak of two million people taking to the streets. What is left at the present moment? Perhaps silence? Or at best, chanting “Superduper”? Or rather the silence as analysed by Eva Meijer when the premise or core business of democracy is usually understood to be speech, or speaking up (Meijer 2022)? In her book, Meijer distinguishes four kinds of political silence, and one of which points the act of not speaking to the act of hearing—when it is silent, we may hear new things. Placed to the Hong Kong context, the new things may not exactly be new things, but things that are, that must be, articulated and circulated, in a new way, the unspoken and the unspeakable. Our study of Tat Ming is a study of such new ways.

We are indebted to the line of scholarship that seeks to grapple with how activism or political advocacy can survive and sustain itself in increasingly harsh circumstances. James Scott introduced the term “infrapolitics,” which refers to “low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name” (Scott 1990, 19). The term draws attention

to the cautious, subtle manner in which struggles continue to be waged when public, confrontational forms of resistance become impossible. His keywords are adaptation, flexibility, adjustment, and the attributes we will foreground in writing Tat Ming, thereby foregrounding the relationship between popular music and infrapolitics in general. Just as how these tactics of resilience could be located in the past—Tat Ming’s practices in the past three decades, particularly the last—their immediate concern is the present. Our aim is to write Tat Ming for their tactics to sustain their presence.

Here, we understand tactics in the way Michel de Certeau (1984) conceptualised them. He distinguishes between strategy and tactics. He writes: “I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power [...] can be isolated” (35–36). By contrast, “a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (36–37).

According to de Certeau, strategy is the purview of power, while tactics are the domain of the non-powerful. Tactics are then not a subset of strategy, but an adaptation to the environment that the powerful’s strategies have produced. A city planning commission may, for example, determine where the streets will be, but the local taxi driver will figure out how best to navigate the lived reality of those streets (Boyd and Mitchell 2013). Unlike in strategy, there is no assumption made about how things will turn out. For de Certeau, tactics “must play on and with the terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a [...] power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’ [...] and within enemy territory” (1984: 37). At the same time, tactics are marked by a kind of mobility “that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them” (37). Significantly, for de Certeau, cultural products are “part of the repertory with which users carry out operations of their own,” they are “the lexicon of users’ practices” (30–31). What tactics are mobilised by Tat Ming to sustain their presence in the current conjuncture? What tactics can be identified in their attempts to write the unspeakable and the unspoken? And how are Tat Ming’s cultural practices becoming a “tactical” lexicon for collaborators and (fans as) cultural intermediaries?

In Margaret Hillebrand's study on China's turbulent past and the persistent disavowal of that very past (2020), she singles out two dominant ways of thinking: first, the state and the (self-)censorship apparatus are efficient and effective in managing and controlling historical expressions; second, a corollary of the first, a discourse of collective amnesia has been in construction and circulation. Hillebrand calls this a "two-step story about why certain histories have such scant traction in China's present" (15).

In line with scholars who acknowledge the power of the state, but caution against its omnipotence, Hillebrand appeals to pay attention to what escapes such censorship, surveillance, and public secrecy, to what people, at least some of them, still remember. She argues that aesthetic works are perfect sites to listen to the unspoken and the unspeakable, not unlike Abbas who argues, in the case of Hong Kong, that cultural practices are key to avoid disappearance (1997). To our purposes, we do not only argue how the realm of activism, of political advocacy, crisscrosses with the realm of popular music; we want to learn more how such crisscrossing is done. At a present characterised by silence, secrecy, and disappearance, we are attracted to resilience. When it is not exactly realistic to talk about resistance, we find it more infrapolitically urgent and productive to look to resilience, "as emergent (not emergency), iterative (not rebound) and transformative (not back to normal)" (Yue 2022, 14). To us, if resistance is about against something, resilience is about against all odds. It relates to the multiple afterlives and traces of cultures of discontent. As Marchart argues, "popular uprisings do not end when most people think they end. Struggles continue on a latent, subterranean plane, and it is impossible to foretell their long-term effects" (2015, 108).

Resilient and non-confrontational cultures are not new, they have always played an important role in illiberal contexts. For example, in the former Eastern Bloc, *samizdat* publications were circulated illegally to critique the government while evading Soviet censorship, just as the writings of Vaclav Havel continued to find their readers through underground circuits (Haraszti 1987; Kind-Kovács 2014). In Syria, citizens developed a language to operate within the official rhetoric of the system, yet also always sought ways to undermine it (Wedeen 1998). In China, even during the Cultural Revolution, people managed to compose for and play the violin—an instrument deemed bourgeois by the authorities (Kraus 1989). That is, in addition to the photographs and memories surviving collective amnesia and political censorship surrounding Nanjing Massacre,

Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square protests (Hillebrand 2020). Despite the appearance of tight and solid control, cultural forces continue to exist and advance. What is unique in Hong Kong, at the present conjuncture, is the speed with which illiberal practices are unfolding. In the latest *Human Freedom Index*, Hong Kong continues to slide in its global ranking. Highlighted alarmingly in the report, “Hong Kong’s descent into tyranny is a tragedy” (Vásquez et al. 2022, 33). Putting aside the speed of change, Hong Kong’s case is hardly exceptional; it resonates globally. According to the latest annual report compiled by democracy watchdog Freedom House, 2021 marks a strong “anti-democratic turn,” the 17th consecutive year of overall decline in democracy, leaving the number of countries designated as democracies at its lowest point in the history of the report (Freedom House 2021). While scholars observe the changing styles of dictatorship or authoritarian governance (Guriev and Treisman 2022), analytical attention needs to be redirected to the changing styles of activism and political advocacy—the tactics of resilience.

Over the past decade, Hong Kong has witnessed an appearing demos (Pang 2021). And since the National Security Law was enacted, this demos—already engaged in creative practices (de Kloet 2017; Veg 2020; Wong and Liu 2018)—increasingly and resiliently appears in the realm of the cultural rather than the explicitly or strictly political. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, resilience has gained prominence in developmental circles. The term “was used to warn of a series of looming crises: ecological, demographic, technological, and pandemic. If our systems can and will fail, the warnings went, we better be prepared” (de Valck 2020, 9). Cities and people, as well as the ecology, are to become resilient, yet “in the realm of art and culture a similarly enthusiastic embrace of the term is yet to come” (ibid.). Resilience can be defined as “the active ability to rebound and spring back from deforming cultural, material, and economic forces” (Ieven et al. 2020, 3). The term thus refers to a cultural elasticity, also in the face of deforming authoritative forces. It comes as no surprise that the Hong Kong movement adopted Bruce Lee’s famous saying “Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend,” as its slogan, stressing the elasticity of the movement. The same slogan holds true for cultural practices (Deng 2020).

A note of clarification is required here, as the notion of resilience has been critiqued for its neoliberal and conservative undercurrents. It has

rightly been scrutinised for being part of a neoliberal logic in which the individual is being held responsible for their own fate (Rose and Lentzos 2017). For McRobbie (2020, 3), resilience is a mode of governmentality through which responsibilities are individualised; she connects this to the “loss of a compassionate welfare ethos.” What is more, the idea of “rebounding,” as part and parcel of resilience, runs the risk of promoting a return to a previous status quo (Scott 2013), which marks disruption, change, and vulnerability as being negative and something to be overcome (McGreavy 2015). Instead of linking it to the individual and the personal, we think of it as social and political resilience, with which Tat Ming tries to sustain and advance, in and in spite of a hostile context, their music and aspirations (cf. Hall and Lamont 2013).

It is of course not Tat Ming alone. There are other practitioners in Hong Kong popular music who are trying their ways to stay resilient. And it is not Hong Kong alone, either. A 2023 cultural studies conference in Taipei coined resilience as its central theme. After listing its psychological meanings and implications—risk avoidance and related choices, coordinating capabilities, self-protection, and self-recovery skills, the conference introduction draws on a linguistic pun—the Chinese equivalent of resilience sounds the same as the word denoting wilfulness, both pronounced as *renxing*. The introduction appeals for contributions that do not only study resilience in the sense of adapting to and protecting from structural hegemony and exploitation, but also examine the wilfulness to clash, to hit. We are intrigued by this playful extension of the word resilience into wilfulness, and we are tempted to do something similar. In our case, it is Cantonese. *Renxing* is the pronunciation under standard Chinese, whether Putonghua or mandarin Chinese as known, respectively, across the straits; but in Hong Kong the word resilience sounds like “un.”

We flag this Cantonese linguistic play to underline two features of our understanding of resilience. First, semantically, “un” needs something to refer to, to act on—to unsettle, unwind, undo, or un-what? The absence after the epithet “un” is precisely the presence of the unspoken and the unspeakable. The subtle and multiple ways to keep on resisting without appearing so is what resilience means and does, unto different times, different circumstances. Unto is perhaps the other layer of “un.” Second, the pronunciation of “un” also alludes to another Cantonese word denoting “move.” Resilience, in this sense, is about constant moving, exercising, practising, keeping in condition, and ultimately keeping a movement. For surviving more than three decades

of music market competition and specific political challenges, Tat Ming seems to us exemplary candidate for a study on resilience. Our study is to understand how they keep on opposing, keep on moving; by doing this, this book, ultimately, is to become as part and parcel of keeping it in the present, in the present tense.

MAKING THE FUTURE

I am pessimistic [toward the future]. Many friends of mine, especially those with children, have flown to the UK. We don't have children. Under the present economic circumstances, I don't have enough money to migrate. We have to stay in Hong Kong, to earn some more money.

Tats Lau

Sometimes I feel that the times are not with me. Do I belong to this era? But then I also tell myself, no need to think too much. Maybe the people of this era do not consider you part of them, but what you have done have impact, have made some changes. I think it's enough.

Anthony Wong

In different words, and with probably different sentiments, Tats and Anthony articulate a shared sense of sadness regarding what is happening in Hong Kong, that the times are changing so fast that they are no longer theirs. And yet, Tats is mentioning, earlier in the interview, his plans to do more music talent grooming projects, but they were thwarted by the protest movements and then the pandemic. Right now, he is posting biographical essays online. The idea is to collect and publish them as an NFT-based package of memoir and mementoes. The first was published by the end of 2022. Part two is planned for 2024. In addition to making money, the project is also intended to salvage vibrant stories from Tats' career development to empower those who cannot, or do not want to leave Hong Kong, like himself. Anthony complains about the lack of air play and mainstream media attention to his and their recent singles, wondering if it is worth the trouble at all. His articulation resonates with the "rumour" that the public-funded Radio Television Hong Kong—the same institution that presented Tat Ming a lifetime achievement award in 2018—has banned its DJs from playing music by allegedly pro-democracy artists (Tang 2022). Nevertheless, Anthony continues his music career both in terms of cultivating young talents, as well as making music. At

one point of the interview, he sketches a scenario where local music practitioners would shift their attention from the mainland Chinese market towards the world. He envisages a possibility where Hong Kong popular music should make a future in the non-Chinese-language world.

They are speaking in a historical conjuncture where Hong Kong has entered a radically different phase of integration with mainland China. The last decade was often seen as when the paradigm shift took place. Since 2010, Cheng et al. note the central Chinese government has been tightening up control over the presumably autonomous Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong (Cheng et al. 2022). Au describes Hong Kong as de facto an extension of Beijing regime (Au 2020). The present moment is configured by the ending of two massive waves of protests, in 2014, and in 2019, where “mistrust, anger, and even apprehension among the population” constituted, according to Wu, characterised the “public structure of feelings” (Wu 2020). When such large-scale mobilisations failed to achieve what they struggled to, the following year, 2020, witnessed a society beset by a deadly virus and the associated stringent measures, as well as the legislation of the National Security Law, that “raised serious concerns about how it could suffocate the expression of political dissent because of the scope of its coverage and the vagueness of some of its stipulations, such as what could be considered as inciting and abetting people to commit an act” (Chan 2022, 29). Researchers have drawn attention to the decreasing press freedom and increasing media self-censorship in the post-NSL city (Lee and Chan 2022; Lee, Tang and Chan 2023).

They are, therefore, speaking in a historical conjuncture where perhaps only one future is probable. Yet, Tats and Anthony are still imagining something, still taking steps, hoping for changes, however small, as Anthony says. Here, Tat Ming points us to what Appadurai calls “the politics of possibility,” as in contradistinction to “the politics of probability” (2013). In his early work *Modernity At Large* (1996), Appadurai reacts to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and puts forward a new world of open borders, free markets, and young democracies. What happened in the world thereafter confirmed his critics who find his work too celebratory. Appadurai, observing the other new world not the one he predicted, published *The Future As Cultural Fact*, where he posits an “anthropology of the future” that should not be dictated by what is probable, but by what is possible. Knowledge production should be a driving force

in reiterating that “the future is ours to design” (3). However improbable, it is not impossible. We learn from Appadurai’s act of academic resilience and take it upon ourselves to respond to our times, the historical conjuncture we are living in. We write Tat Ming to sustain this politics of possibility, the possibility not only of another future, but also of us being part of its making. Other thinkers have made similar calls. John Urry, in *What Is the Future?* (2016), urges us to reclaim the future, essentially a field of power contestation, as “a key element of power is thus power to determine – to produce – the future, out of the many ways it is imagined, organised, materialised and distributed” (2016, 17). Nick Montfort’s *Future* traverses the academic fields and business practices concerning the future, known variably as futures studies, futurology and scenario planning, to make a central argument: “The future is not something to be predicted, but to be made” (2017, xii). This may sound suspiciously upbeat, but Montfort’s point “is not because I believe things will necessarily get better, but because having *any* view that goes beyond stasis is necessary for getting to the idea of future-making” (2017, 27, emphasis in original). Marc Augé goes even further; while imaginations of a new world, a better future are vanishing, it may paradoxically offer us a real chance to devise changes based on concrete historical experience rather than some preconceived, ahistorical grand schemes. “Perhaps we are in the process of learning to change the world before imagining it”—that is, to do it, to take prudent steps into the unknown, according to Augé (2014, 83).

For many populations in the world, it is not so much a question of what future they are contemplating and making; the question is whether they can still be contemplating and making any future. In the late 1970s, Jean-Francois Lyotard announced the end of grand narratives, in the early 1990s, Francis Fukuyama predicted the end of history, and today, Amitav Ghosh even foretells the end of the world itself. How can we not rest in despair, or cynicism, and stay hopeful, that we can still be part of the future? Where do we harvest the resources for hope? If resilience is perhaps the best we can practise to sustain a certain past to a certain present to a certain future, hope is the other wing of the angel guarding the future. We put our hope on culture, or creative practices, we put our hope on the practices and social work of imagination. We want to locate hope in popular music, Tat Ming’s in our case. At the same time, we are aware of Ghassan Hage’s notion of hope distribution. In the context of rising “paranoid nationalism,” Hage cautions,

“it is always useful to remember that society not only distributes hope unequally; it also distributes different kinds of hope” (2003, 12). Chow, one of the current authors, supplements with the idea of hope management, as the techniques of distribution are closely connected to processes of management. “If we need to examine how hopes are being produced and distributed, we also need to examine which hopes are being produced and distributed in the first place, in short, an issue of management,” he argues (Chow 2011).

If hope is a matter of management, we pose the same question now: How do we manage ours successfully? When Mary Zournazi interviews Chantal Mouffe on the question of hope, Mouffe criticises “the Left” of being too right, or righteous, in the sense that their moralist and rationalist approach ignores passion: “we are clearly facing a difficulty in terms of the way passion can be mobilised” (Mouffe in Zournazi 2002, 129). This book aims to reiterate the importance of popular music in mobilising passion, in feeding and feeling hopefulness for a better future. The thinkers on future we cited above—Appadurai, Urry, Montfort, Augé—nod similarly to culture. In addition to its potentials in representing and constructing imaginations of the future, cultural productions are credited for their power to mobilise affectively, to provoke passion. Illustrating with popular music, Augé describes “the sudden bolt of instantaneous emotion, ephemeral but very real, which can pierce us on hearing one bar of a song we once liked but that now, far from awakening the past, liberates the faint, fleeting, tenacious suggestion that, whatever our age, whatever our problems, *something* is still possible; that life can be conjugated in the future sense” (Augé 2014, 26, emphasis in original). The pair of Guangzhou fans, in their letter, wishes Tat Ming to keep on singing, even when they are beyond the age of eighty. It is in their music as well as their lives that we will trace such dynamics of liberation, that something is still possible, that we remain hopeful, that we reiterate our place in the process of future-making.

POP AND POLITICS

Numerous scholars have published their works investigating the political potentials of popular music. In the past decade, two monographs dedicate themselves entirely to the topic of music and politics; in fact, both bear the title of *Music and Politics*, to be distinguished by the subtitle of *A Critical Introduction* in the later published book (Garratt 2019;

Street 2013). Readers interested in music studies are advised to consult John Street's and James Garratt's systemic and rich accounts of various philosophical notions of politics. What we want to engage with is their response to the challenging issue: Is all music (potentially) political? While both may follow the Foucauldian or Deleuzian understanding of politics and reply affirmatively, they offer their own takes. For Street, "it is only when musical pleasure (or musical displeasure) spills over into the public realm and into the exercise of power within it that it becomes political" (2013, 8). His is a more focused understanding of music and politics, where only music that inspires collective action and public deliberation will be counted as political. In his words, "it must be able to *do* things in the world" (2013, 162). Garratt's take is more, say, open and encompassing. In his general attempt to map out the field, Garratt finds it useful to make two specific distinctions to maintain some porous boundaries between music and politics. "The first makes a distinction between intra-musical politics (politics within rather than through culture) and direct interventions in the political field. The second distinguishes between art and music that is explicitly defined by its politics (whether interventive or intra-musical) and that which contains – or possibly conceals – more sedimented forms of politicality" (Garratt 2018, 36).

Our take on the politics of popular music is premised on the politics of the times. Put differently, we are guided not so much conceptually, as empirically. At this particular historical conjuncture of Hong Kong, Tat Ming and their musical life inspire, or perhaps interpellate, us to embrace both authors' takes and weave them into what we cited earlier, Appadurai's politics of possibility. Reverting to what we have written in the previous sections, we want to (re)formulate the relationship of music and politics, by way of a study on Tat Ming and Hong Kong, into pop's capacities—within and through culture, directly and indirectly, personally and publicly—in rewriting the past, the present, and the future, and in allowing us to co-write the past, the present, and the future, to locate the makeshift, the resilience, and the hope in the pop we study.

To flag up our empirical-cum-theoretical embedding in Hong Kong is to prelude our other engagement with popular music studies: its Western bias. Street's book includes studies primarily from the United States and the United Kingdom. Garratt acknowledges "the majority of examples and case studies are drawn from Western music or from cultures whose music and politics have been informed by Western practices" (2018, xiii). Our contribution is, in the first instance, to supplement experiences and

reflections from a non-Western case to the field of popular music studies at large. We aspire more. It is an attempt to decolonise popular music studies, sharply aware of the temptation to recolonise it. We see this inquiry not only as a supplement, but again we do not want to posit as a new paradigm. Between the modesty of a supplement and the hegemony of a new paradigm, we want to question the relevance of Western experience and theorisation in popular music studies to the rest of the world. Recalling the *Human Freedom Index* and Freedom House report cited earlier, we wonder: in this world of waning democracy and increasing illiberalism, the Hong Kong case of music and politics may actually be more applicable when compared to, for example, the kind of politics centring on collective action and public deliberation as theorised by Street.

Indeed, in Hong Kong, traditional forms of activism and political advocacy need to be reconsidered or even forsaken (Poon and Tse 2022). There are many parts of the world closer to the political reality of Hong Kong, at any rate closer than to the Western model of democracy. Here, we want to engage with the final part of Garrett's book. "We live in an age 'after the future'," Garratt writes in his postscript. He is referring to Franco Berardi's disbelief in the possibility of change—the other end of the politics of possibility—and he quotes, "the future no longer appears as a choice or a collective conscious action," but rather as an "unavoidable catastrophe that we cannot oppose in any way" (Berardi 2011). There is no alternative, as Garratt summarises the perspective of neoliberal theorists. With the last example of climate change, Garratt acknowledges the vitality of music in reinventing activism but is not exactly sanguine when he puts a question mark on academic writing itself: "Whether academic writing about music can usefully contribute to activism is a moot point" (199).

Perhaps there is no alternative. At the same time, we would rather paraphrase Stuart Hall: there is no guarantee of anything, of any political ideology, of any certainty including that there is no alternative (Hall 1986). If Tat Ming, the music and the lives we are studying, continues to reinvent their activism, to sustain their politics, we are encouraged to experiment with our form of "academic activism." The least, or sometimes the most, we as academics can do, to cite another thinker in cultural studies Larry Grossberg, is to tell better stories about what is going on (Grossberg 2010). As Devon Powers contemplates on a "futurist cultural studies," he stresses the discipline's orientation towards the future, and the necessary instigation of change. According to Powers, "[t] he duty

of cultural studies, for [Grossberg] and many others, is to effect change within and beyond the academy. To do otherwise is to become irrelevant or complicit” (Powers 2020, 452). While we understand or may even share Garratt’s hesitation towards academic activism, we conclude more affirmatively. To us, there is also no alternative, even when there is no guarantee. Earlier in his book, Garrett alludes to the present era as “post-political,” understood as no more confidence in progress and in the future. He asks: “how are the relationships between music and politics being reconfigured and reconceptualized” (2018, 15). In a place like Hong Kong, it is hard to frame it as post-political, without misconstruing the “post” as leaving politics behind, after politics. This is the city where a very mundane piece of music, the “Happy birthday” song, was mobilised during the Umbrella Movement politically.⁹ We begin to address Garratt’s question by reframing our times more as “sub-political”—even when we can hardly believe in progress, in a better future, there is always something going on, lurking, in subtle, subterranean, subliminal ways, waiting for us to conjure to politics. This is also where our Tat Ming project, located in popular music studies, encounters cultural studies: to insist on the political potentials of both popular music, and writing on popular music. That is why pop matters, this is where pop matters.

THE REST

To summarise, the rest of the book will be lynchpinned by a duality and a striation. Duality, in the sense that we see this book not only as academic project on popular music, perhaps an experiment in academic projects themselves. We experiment how to write on popular music, and a musical formation like Tat Ming, in our times. When we ask: How (far) does music impact on politics, and how (far) does politics impact on music?, we are also asking: How (far) does writing on music impact on politics, and how (far) does politics impact on writing on music? This duality is always there to guide our attempt. Indeed, attempt is also the keyword to our other thread of striation: the three striated traces of past, present, and

⁹ According to one news report, “Whenever someone tries to provoke an argument, the crowd begins clapping rhythmically and singing “Happy Birthday” to drown out their abusers. The “Happy Birthday” tactic emerged by accident. When a protester grabbed a loudspeaker to call for calm, the device began blaring a recorded version of the tune, and members of the crowd joined in spontaneously...” (Meigs and Fan 2014).

future, when we are writing on Tat Ming, on popular music and politics. In the chapters to come, we may place more emphasis on the past, or the present, or the future, but they must be understood as emphasis for analytical convenience, not historical reality. They are as distinct as they are intertwined, and they are unstable, changing, living, like the music makers we write on, like us.

The whole book can be loosely grouped into three parts. This and the ensuing chapter are dedicated to contextualisation and theorisation, with the aim of mapping out the location of the current study in the field of pop music and its intersecting fields. The current, introductory chapter argues for the urgency of taking Tat Ming and Hong Kong pop music as a unique case study in itself and for critical reflection on pop music and politics in general, positioning itself as an experiment in writing on popular music. Chapter 2, through a mix of archive research, document analysis, and interviews, tracks and analyses the emergence and development of Tat Ming in the larger geopolitical and geocultural context. Their musical engagements with a host of issues including sexual autonomy, gender equality, freedom of thoughts and speech, Sino-Hong Kong relationships, and so forth will be highlighted to prelude the more detailed analyses in the following chapters. At the same time, Chapter 2 aims at mapping out a history of Hong Kong in its colonial entanglements with the British administration, and its postcolonial entanglements with the Beijing regime. It will also seek to retell a concomitant history of Hong Kong popular music that is not dictated by the “Golden Era” logic, that is from its popularity zenith as the “global cool” to its alleged post-Handover decline or even death, but informed and inspired by the vitality and complexity of Tat Ming’s music and politics.

The following two chapters will zoom in on two specific understandings of politics, one pro-democracy, the other pro-LGBTQ+ rights, and how Tat Ming contributes in articulating, configuring, and promoting the longing for a better future for disenfranchised populations in contemporary China. Chapter 3 premises itself on the waves of protests during the last decade as a logical outcome of a much longer process of post-colonial anxiety. Popular culture, among which popular music, constitutes an important domain to narrate versions of the past, present, and future that present alternatives to the dominant ones. The chapter zooms in on the politics as practised through Tat Ming’s music, and explores how the (post)colonial past, present, and future of Hong Kong is imagined, negotiated, and contested. We do it by way of a textual analysis of a selection

of their music videos as well as their recent (2012 and 2017) concerts. Chapter 4 focuses on gender and sexuality. Since the beginning, Tat Ming has been famous, or, in some circles, notorious, for their gender and sexuality politics. In their campy, extravagant performances, the duo exudes a queer aesthetics, without ever coming out as such. This constant play with gender, with sexuality, this play with identity, of ambivalence and exuberance took a dramatic turn when Anthony came out on stage in 2012. Through an analysis of their songs, imageries, and performances, Chapter 4 probes into the politics performed by this male duo, and the possibility of a better kind of LGTBQ+, or queer politics.

The rest of the book will diverge to cover other components of pop music culture: concert production and (fans as) cultural intermediaries. Going beyond the more conventional, textual approach to studying pop music is at the same time our attempt of methodological intervention. The final two chapters will thus explore the complexity of pop and politics through production analysis and fan/cultural intermediaries studies. Chapter 5 investigates the considerations, negotiations, tensions, controversies, and compromises on the production side that underpin the narratives and aesthetics of Tat Ming's 2017 concerts. As such, the chapter aims to unpack the making of a political pop spectacle in a city that is struggling to survive the present for its future. To do so, the chapter conducts a twofold production analysis. First, the chapter builds on a discourse analysis of the reports that have emerged in different media platforms before, during, and after the concerts. Second, we conducted interviews with Tat Ming and their close collaborators, ultimately reflecting on the tension between political motivations and commercial considerations, between engagement and entertainment. Chapter 6, on Tat Ming's legacy, is informed empirically by the field observation that substantial number of (some now rather senior) workers in creative industries were/are Tat Ming fans. Learning from interviews with ten of them (eight in Hong Kong, and two in mainland China), we will show how these actors help to further open up a space for Tat Ming's politics, to continue articulating that what is not meant to be articulated. We argue that it is through these actors and their acts, and through the numerous afterlives and cultural translations, that Tat Ming survives and thrives in Hong Kong and beyond. We thus show how music is more than music, and how one musical unit in a rhizomatic way connects, lives on, has both effect and affect.

The book will conclude by giving a voice to Tat Ming fans worldwide. We quote from the fans who attended an online event with the duo during the pandemic. We let them speak and supplement their words with associative images we shot in Hong Kong. For us, this is an attempt to pay tribute to the affective, evocative, and future-making potentials of popular music. It is also an acknowledgement of the importance of fans for sustaining not only Tat Ming's legacy but also their present and future.

December 2021. During their last concerts, Tat Ming performed a song released in the early phase of their musical life, in 1987. Titled "That afternoon I burnt my letters in my old home 那個下午我在舊居燒信,"¹⁰ the song should be accompanied by a video, collaging historical moments of Hong Kong, including some recent images that eventually became too sensitive. The video did not get permission to be screened—in Hong Kong, any footage to be screened in concerts needs to be sent to censorship authorities for permission. In the absence of visual support, Tat Ming decided to dim the lights and perform the song in darkness. Audiences, after learning how and guessing why the video was made to disappear, responded to the darkness with a collective, resilient act of un-disappearing; they lit up their phones, raised their arms, and waved to the two performers on stage.¹¹

The show continues.

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¹⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AN6HDw-kUO4>.

¹¹ While the video was not allowed to be screened in the concert venue, it was played online when the concerts were available per streaming. Tat Ming was making use of a "loophole" of the censorship law, where online screening was not covered. The video included vintage photos of old Hong Kong, local artists' response to Tiananmen protests, the Handover, passing away of local pop icons, social protests, arrests of media tycoon Jimmie Lai and so forth. The images roll in one after the other, before it "dissolves" into nothing. At the beginning of the video, Tat Ming asks viewers to delete the message after viewing.

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Colonial Nostalgia and Postcolonial Longings

89.09.12.21

Munsang College, Kowloon City, 1989

Miss Man was our home room teacher at P. 3G

She taught English and Phys Ed

We thought she was the coolest

One morning in June, she cried in front of the class

And spoke a long time

We were old enough to know what happened

Back then, every once awhile, a classmate would vanish

Then it was my turn, soon after this photo was taken

Canada.

The exodus is on again

I write in English because my Chinese isn't that good.

Atom, 89.09.12.21

These are the verses that open a zine created by Atom, a self-proclaimed Tat Ming Pair¹ fan (Atom 2021). In the afterword, Atom explains the background of the project. He went to all shows of the *REPLAT* concerts in 2020. He “scribbled a lot” during the six nights of performance, but left his notes behind before picking them up a year later. He realised he should do something about it. He decided to integrate his notes with his

¹ We will use Tat Ming Pair, the full name of the duo, the first time it appears in the chapter. Thereafter, we will revert to Tat Ming, the name usually and fondly used by fans.

migration experiences into a zine publication. Primarily in black, the zine is supplemented with eight poems and short stories, each inspired by a Tat Ming song. The title of the zine, *89.09.12.21*, came to Atom quickly, except the last number. The first, 89, refers to the year when his coolest teacher cried in front of her class, when he and many classmates “vanished” from Hong Kong; he was referring to one of the migration waves in the aftermath of Tiananmen. That year, he was nine years old—the second number of the title. Atom was in touch with Tat Ming’s music before he left the city, but it was not yet the digital age where the Hong Kong diaspora could easily keep track of popular music from the city. In 2009, Atom decided to go to Hong Kong, and in 2012, the third number of the title, he went to his first Tat Ming concert, and after that he attended every one of their concerts. For the last number, Atom decided on 21, as he notes in the afterword: “I first went with 20 to mark the *REPLAY* that triggered most of the writing here, but then a new *REPLAY* is happening in ’21, with tickets going on sale just days from now, and it could be ’22 by the time this book reaches anyone. But then, really, since the end of 2019, I’ve had no sense of time.” Atom, on the other hand, has a very vivid sense of place. During an interview, when his zine attracted attention after Tat Ming showed it on stage, Atom says, Tat Ming “makes me feel I belong to Hong Kong” (Ling 2022).

Now a radio presenter and podcast creator, Atom continues to write stories in Hong Kong, and of Hong Kong. We will explore further Tat Ming’s legacy through people like Atom in Chapter 6. For now, we are cued by Atom’s affection for Tat Ming and for Hong Kong, by the intimate way he weaves the music of Tat Ming into his biography in pre- and post-Handover Hong Kong; we are cued to a discussion of the electronic duo in the intersection of postcolonial studies and popular music (studies).

POST AND POP

“[P]ostcolonial studies has often ignored popular culture and particularly popular music” (Lovesey 2017, 1). It is with this weird lacuna in mind that a special issue has been organised in the journal *Popular Music and Society*, and later published as an anthology bearing the same title—as late as 2017 and 2018 (Lovesey 2017, 2018). This is weird in at least two senses: first, the emergence of popular music itself, in the 1950s and 1960s, precisely coincided with the era of decolonisation;

second, the “popular” in popular music should suggest the importance of its connection to the popular, to the people, that should intrigue scholars interested in colonial and postcolonial issues, in power structures that shape how peoples long and belong. In this book, we use the unhyphenated term “postcolonial” to signal the continuation and the persistent effects of colonisation in our world today—instead of using the hyphenated “post-colonial,” which signifies a period that comes after colonialism.

Postcolonial studies, which theorises colonial logics, transnational disparities, and postcolonial rationalities, has made a name for itself in recent decades. One of its primary contributions has been to interfere with (Western-oriented) academia’s knowledge production in order to highlight “how many of its underlying logics of knowledge, established in various disciplines, have attempted to universalise themselves and their Eurocentric assumptions” (Shome 2016, 245). Despite being prominent in fields such as Anthropology, Geography, History, and English and Comparative Literature, postcolonial studies has paid minimal attention to the role played by popular culture in the context of nationalist, colonial, and transnational relations (245). It has given notably little consideration to the ways that popular music influences and intersects with many modern postcolonial sensibilities (245). Popular music can reflect, negotiate, and contest “racialised power relations, identity, belonging, the role of the nation-state, cultural imperialism and resistance” (Nayar 2015, x).

Oliver Lovesey nods to the founding thinkers of postcolonial studies, such as Franz Fanon and Edward Said, for a possible explanation of the scant attention postcolonial studies has paid to popular music. Their scholarly works focus on “literature, and yet more narrowly on late 20th-century Anglophone postmodern novels and a large handful of counter-canonical classics” (Lovesey 2017, 1). Said’s occasional and dismissive reflection on popular music, criticised as elitist, orientalist and universalistic, “creates a powerful dissonance with other, particularly post-colonial themes in his writing” (Capitain 2017, 57). We venture another factor, namely popular music has long been framed as something related to youth, and popular music studies thus to youth studies. Popular music is more readily analysed as an age inflection rather than, say, an ethnic or racial one, thereby yielding resources for postcolonial studies.

The collection of articles in the special issue and the ensuing anthology addresses this lacuna on two fronts. One line of scholarship (e.g. Brunner

2017; Inyabri 2013; Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005) seeks to understand the uses of popular music in the historical and ongoing processes of decolonisation, in the resistance against colonial rule as well as the colonial legacy in the post-colony. They mostly focus on the former European colonies in the African continent. The other line of scholarship (e.g. Huq 2006; Kim 2014, 2017; Sieber 2005) turns to the persistent “post-colonialisms” in Europe itself, situating itself in the intersection between popular music and “internal colonisation” issues of migrants and refugees in Europe. The insertion of Tat Ming here serves two purposes. The first is, quite generally, the lack of research in the Asian experience in English-language scholarship—save for some notable exceptions, among which a study of the Japanese colonial legacy in postcolonial Korean popular music (Lee 2017), a study of postcolonial nostalgia in Taiwanese pop music (Taylor 2004), and a study of music as youth culture in Bangalore (Saldanha 2002).

Secondly, and more fundamentally, we see Tat Ming and its politics as an “anomaly”—as much as the decolonisation of Hong Kong itself. Put simply, Hong Kong’s decolonisation proceeds in tandem with its re-nationalisation. While the former colonies in postcolonial studies became nations in their own right, Hong Kong became part of China after its sovereignty was handed from London to Beijing in 1997. In other words, if the decolonisation process is primarily a process from the native, the indigenous, and the local shedding the imperial and evolving itself to the national, the decolonisation of Hong Kong is a different narrative altogether. It remains the local, previously embedded in the imperial, now in the national. Our inquiry of Tat Ming is to supplement postcolonial studies with a unique case of decolonisation, probing the local in the process.

This in-betweenness is always there, historically. As Stephen Chiu and Kaxton Siu remark: “Hong Kong was haunted by not just one spectre, but two since the early settlement years after the Unequal Treaties, as it has stood at the fringe of two empires, the British and the Chinese” (Chiu and Siu 2022, viii). This “double marginality,” in Klavier Wang’s words, is also one major source of its hybridity, the alleged signature of Hong Kong popular culture when it emerged and developed to its Golden Era during the 1970s and 1980s (Chu 2020; Wang 2020). Surviving the Sino-British Joint Declaration over its future, the Tiananmen protests, and finally the Handover, Hong Kong experiences the first two decades

of post-Handover period, arguably and decreasingly, through the politics of “liberal exceptionalism,” understood as an exceptional degree of freedom in Hong Kong, indirect rule through agents and brokers, respect for professionalism, and dominance of liberal-democratic values in public discourses (Chan et al. 2022).

At the same time, in the context of renationalisation, and the attempt to reintegrate Hong Kong to the mainland, not only politically but also culturally, tension has been mounting between the local and the national. Almost like a defence mechanism, especially with the suppression of the Umbrella Movement, a strong force of localism, what Mirana Szeto called, as early as in 2006, a “petit-grandiose Hong Kongism” (2006, 269), is gaining grounds in the city that is caught in the multiple claims of its identity and affinity, its longing and belonging. With increasing Sino-Hong Kong contacts, the city has witnessed discriminatory practices that cast the mainlanders as primitive, predatory, and the term “locusts” was circulated to refer to immigrants, traders, and tourists from mainland China—what John Lowe and Eileen Tsang call “racialisation of Chinese mainlanders in Hong Kong” (2017, 137). In other words, sometimes, the nation and its nationals become coterminous, as a common reflector and receptor of local sentiments.

Such are the deep-seated conflicts that China will staunchly support the Special Administrative Region government of Hong Kong to solve, according to the speech President Xi Jinping delivered at the opening of the once-in-five-year Communist Party congress in Beijing, in 2022. In the wake of the social movement sparked off by the proposed extradition legislation, 2019, and its suppression, China, as pointed out by Xi, has achieved comprehensive control over Hong Kong, turning it from chaos to governance, and from governance to prosperity. This three-step trajectory is remarkably reminiscent of the simplified colonial narrative itself. The following incident is illustrative of the complexity of Hong Kong. It took place in the autumn of 2022. Dozens of Hong Kong people now residing in the United Kingdom were protesting the same congress outside the Chinese consulate in Manchester. A group of masked men came out of the consulate, destroying the protestors’ placards and a clash followed. One protestor was reported to be dragged to the consulate and beaten up. “As we tried to stop them, they dragged me inside, they beat me up,” he said. He was then pulled out by the UK police. Angry protesters shouted at the men from the Chinese consulate and the British police, arguing they could have done more. In a statement following the

incident, the consulate said the protesters had “hung an insulting portrait of the Chinese president at the main entrance,” adding “[t]his would be intolerable and unacceptable for any diplomatic and consular missions of any country” (Lee and Maishman 2022). For such complexity of the local, the imperial, and the national—Hong Kong’s positionality vis-à-vis the United Kingdom and mainland China—we need to think beyond the usual parameters of modernisation, decolonisation, and colonial legacy when we think about the relationship between its music and politics (Chiu and Siu 2022).² This is what we are going to do in this chapter.

When we discuss the postcolonial and pop, it is not only about what pop can contribute to the postcolonial, but also what the postcolonial can contribute to pop—and the concomitant academic practices of knowledge production. We echo Anja Brunner and Hannes Liechti in their introduction to a collection of articles: “The (post)colonial heritage of popular music and the related need to decolonise the field have not been considered widely in popular music studies” (Brunner and Liechti 2021, 10). They are not the first, or the only ones (see for instance Born and Hesmondalgh 2000; Ewell 2021; Lovesey 2018; Radano and Olaniyan 2016), but their appeal to decolonise academic practices—to critically examine, through a postcolonial lens, the “hierarchies, asymmetries or restraints”—in popular music studies, remains poignant (Brunner and Liechti 2021, 14). Any casual observation of any popular music journal will suffice, to underline the stubborn dominance of studies based on Western experience employing Western approaches. Among the minority of inquiries on pop music outside the West, the paradigm does not necessarily shift (Lund 2019). Routledge’s Global Popular Music Series, as we mentioned in Chapter 1, is at once a response to and a confirmation of the hierarchies, asymmetries, and restraints in popular music studies. Since its first publication in 2019, the series has gathered 21 titles, guided by the series’ mission: “Written by those living and working in the countries about which they write, this series is devoted to popular music largely

² Chiu and Siu have marked “the Hong Kong story” into phases: birth of modern Hong Kong beyond a harmonious encounter (1830s–1890s); the regional: Chinese nationalism and decolonisation (1870s–1967); the local: the rise of Hong Kong (1950s–1990s). Their historical account also nuances the key features of its colonial period—rule of law, an efficient civil service, open economy, and fair opportunity, freedom of speech—generally assumed to be the colonial legacy of Hong Kong (Chiu and Siu 2022).

unknown to Anglo-American readers.”³ This is also what we want to do in this chapter—although, we hasten to add, the three current authors are not *always* living and working in Hong Kong, and such living-cum-working prerequisite strikes us as nativist and essentialist. But first, we will explain our methodological choice, and sketch the scholarship on Hong Kong popular music this inquiry builds on.

METHOD

For this chapter, we have drawn primarily from the interviews with Anthony Wong and Tats Lau in 2022. One of the authors, Chow, has been writing lyrics for Tat Ming since 1988, and has also published academic work on Tat Ming. It is in his duality as long-term collaborator and pop music scholar that he initiated and conducted the interviews. The interview guide was a collective effort of the three authors. Chow met the two separately, to reduce the sociality of the occasion, to minimise the likelihood of them offering socially desirable answers, to maximise the chance for them to speak up freely. The venue was their choices. The interview with Anthony took place in the office-cum-studio of an indie music collective and label he set up called People Mountain People Sea. The one with Tats took place in his home that also serves as his studio and office, and was joined by Tats’ wife Agnes who also functions as his manager. The purpose of the interviews and the book project were explained and their explicit consent was obtained. Lasting roughly an hour, they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up questions and replies were exchanged per mobile communication apps.

That we have privileged the subjective accounts of Anthony and Tats for this chapter on the history of Hong Kong and its popular music is informed conceptually and empirically. On the conceptual front, history, as we understand it, is always already a field of contestation, fragmented, and pending. To harvest from Tat Ming’s recollections and reflections of their own past and to trouble thereby certain colonial and postcolonial narratives is concomitantly an attempt to let singularity interrupt homogeneity, to let biography prevail over history, to weave a “somewhat

³ See <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Global-Popular-Music-Series/book-series/RGPMS?publishedFilter=alltitles&pd=published,forthcoming&pg=1&pp=12&so=za&view=list>.

humbler quilt of many voices and local hopes” (Pollock 1998, 18). Paradoxically, it is an act of singularity and humility that aspires more. We want to see if the personal accounts we collected from Anthony and Tats may open up alternative paths of knowing, of understanding something more general. In Lauren Berlant’s words, “the personal is the general” (Berlant 2011, 12). Our aim is to mobilise the subjective against the dominant for another, more tentative, general. This is also why we refrain from giving a general historical account of Hong Kong’s modern cultural and political history—others have done so already, and in a way much better than we ever could (see, for example, Carroll 2007; Ingham 2007; Ku and Pun 2004; Mathews et al. 2008).

Empirically, our preference for interviews gestures towards the importance, or perhaps urgency, of obtaining oral histories from practitioners who have accumulated first-hand experience through the decades of the city and its culture making. To put it bluntly, research into Hong Kong popular music, and Hong Kong history at large, is confronted with the passing away of people and their subjective accounts, who may be the only voices to question what is preserved in official annals and archives. To collect is to recollect. What they remember at present shapes constructions of the past, as its participants and witnesses, as its texts and authors (Bornat and Tetley 2010). A reminder at hand is the massive exhibition *Hong Kong Pop 60+*, held at the Hong Kong Hermitage Museum in 2021. Focusing on the development of Hong Kong popular culture from the end of the Second World War to the early 2000s, the exhibition features more than 1,000 exhibits with introductory texts regarding their social backgrounds and artistic features. In the section on music, there was merely one small screen showing “oral histories” by older generation of practitioners. According to one of the researcher-cum-producers of the project, these recordings would not be put to further use.⁴ According to latest media reports, the Hong Kong government is planning to shut down the Heritage Museum to make way for the existing Science Museum, whose prime site in the city would be repurposed to house a new museum “celebrating national achievements” (Li 2023). The future of the Heritage Museum remains uncertain. Our interviews with Tat Ming serve as a call to collect oral histories while we can.

⁴ Private correspondence with Chi Chung Wong, October 5, 2022.

HONG KONG POP

Given the “general neglect, if not marginalisation, of pop music in Hong Kong’s academies,” Anthony Fung and Alice Chik note a dearth of systematic works on Cantopop (2020). As far as book-length treatises are concerned, Fung and Chik’s list includes a cultural, historical inquiry on the relationship between South China culture and the early formation of pop music in Hong Kong (Wong 2018); a comprehensive study of Cantopop lyrics (Chu 2017); and two books on selected histories of Cantopop (Fung 2009; Fung and Shum 2012). In the anthology edited by Fung and Chik, sixteen contributions are gathered into four sections—ranging from studies of celebrated artists to language use in local pop—concluded with an interview with a veteran radio presenter reminiscing the heyday of Hong Kong pop serving as coda to the book. In its first section, dedicated to “Cantopop, History, and Legacy,” the two editors point out the significance of tracing pop music history as an act of recuperating the voices of Hong Kong people. According to them, this is “particularly meaningful for Hong Kong because according to official records, its history usually consists of colonialism and the consequences of China’s Opium War” (Fung and Chik 2020, 5). This is also a departure from a number of publications that seek to construct a historical account of how Hong Kong’s popular music has originated and developed, often in connection with the alleged demise of Cantopop (Wong 1990; Wong 2003; Wong 2007). Two of the current authors, Chow and de Kloet, have chosen in their book to revisit Hong Kong pop not so much in its historical or cultural context, but as an important nodal point in the global flow of sound and image (Chow and de Kloet 2013).

In a similar but more historically oriented manner, Klavier Wang presents her “worlding” accounts of Hong Kong film, television drama, and popular music, mapping out “a historical and sociological development of Cantonese popular music in Hong Kong and beyond” (Wang 2020, 27). Wang, similar to Stephen Chu and Eve Leung (2013), attributes the Golden Era of Cantopop to the genre’s and the city’s unique brand of hybridity. Unlike the other authors, Wang does not consider the hybridity “contemporary” (1970s and 1980s). Instead, she traces the “continuous inbound and outbound flux of resources, staff and values”—often shorthanded into the cliché “east-meets-west”—to the post-Second World War years that enlivened the city and its music with migration influx and global economic and cultural flows (Wang 2020,

23). In terms of Chinese-language studies on Hong Kong pop music, publications usually follow the tradition of Chinese literature studies and take lyrics as its main paradigm of inquiry, sometimes in the context of a specific period of pop history in the city (see for instance Chu 2004; Chu and Leung 2011; Chu et al. 2010). Stephen Chu, a prolific writer on Hong Kong popular music and culture, has enabled a series of Chinese-language books, each devoted to a selected lyricist.

Our lyrical engagements will appear in ensuing chapters. What follows is our supplement to the line of scholarship that connects Hong Kong popular music to Hong Kong history. We do it by way of Tat Ming's subjective accounts of more than three decades of music-making in a city that went through its colonial period to the contemporary post-Handover conjuncture. In addition to what we can learn about the post-colony of Hong Kong, we will tease out what Tat Ming can contribute to decolonising popular music studies.

HONG KONG

“[Tat Ming] makes me feel I belong to Hong Kong”—this is how Atom, someone who left Hong Kong together with his family when he was nine and returned to the city a decade later, summarises his fan experience. Cited at the start of this chapter, this remark, from a member of Hong Kong diaspora in Canada, indexes the intimate relationship between popular music and the city. Especially in the so-called Golden Era of Cantopop (which we will discuss later in this chapter), where easy-to-sing-along love songs dominated, Tat Ming's repertoire in colonial Hong Kong, to use an analogy we used earlier, is a reservoir collecting, keeping afloat, replenishing memories of the city, sounding out some collective murmur when confronted with the city's imminent disappearance, sending ripples or even waves interrogating the city's affinity. The six studio albums released from 1986 to 1990, arguably the most influential of their music, contain songs that document the urban and the cosmopolitan (where are we), that questions history (what are we left with), that ponders identity (who are we) during this colonial phase of Hong Kong. It should be noted that following the release of their latest, 1990, album, including politically sensitive songs in response to what happened in Beijing in 1989, that Tat Ming was not invited to perform in the mainland in the coming years (Chow 2009).

We are surely not the first to take note of Tat Ming’s engagement with the city’s longing and belonging. Fung Lok, in her book on Hong Kong popular culture (1995), devoted one chapter to Tat Ming’s “social consciousness,” foregrounding the sense of uncertainty and melancholia in their music as evocative of living in the pre-Handover Hong Kong, “the fin de siècle city,” in the author’s formulation. Similarly, Esther Cheung (1997) deploys the term “end of the world” to refer to the feelings of anxiety in Tat Ming’s music. Stephen Chu (2000) discusses how Tat Ming connects to local culture. Placing their music in the larger historical context, Chu points out that songs concerning Hong Kong’s future started to appear and their number increased substantially, when the Sino-British negotiations over the colonial city’s future began (Chu 2000, 238). Aside from our already published pieces, academic treatises discussing Tat Ming—and Hong Kong popular music at large—in the post-Handover context are lacking (Fung and Chik 2020).

The duo suspended themselves after the six albums and their first major concert, in 1990. Going through the relatively calm transition, with the Handover being *fait accompli*, Tat Ming released two more albums in 1996 and 2005, as well as staged two concerts, to mark their 10th and 20th anniversary. Illustrative of the more relaxed manner the city was finding its way in the new configuration with the nation, 2006 saw Tat Ming host their first ticket-selling concert in mainland China, in the city of Shanghai. Their 2012 concerts, on the other hand, took place amidst turmoil. As the post-Handover Hong Kong found itself increasingly wrestling with the new political reality, the concerts were staged to audiences when the government announced—and subsequently had to withdraw due to massive protests—its plans to introduce “national education” to local students.⁵

A local commentary, written in the wake of the 2012 concerts, highlights the sensitivity of Tat Ming’s music. Released in the city that was counting the number of its colonial days, according to its author Shu Lan, their earlier popular songs express the collective anxiety and confusion of Hong Kong people—“they must acknowledge their identity as Hong Kong people, but will Hong Kong be the same Hong Kong as before?”

⁵ The government plans re-emerged and found their ways gradually into local education system. In 2022, for instance, the Education Bureau announced that a quarter of teaching time for primary education in Hong Kong should be spent on patriotism and national security (Ng 2022).

(Lan 2014). The concerts, the commentary continues, are not merely an affair of nostalgia; the Tat Ming concerts baptise their classic numbers with new political meanings, sharing collective memories and expressions of longing (Lan 2014). A mainland Chinese weekly published a report on Tat Ming's 2012 concerts. Describing them as "Hong Kong people who can think," and "the legendary formation that sings the anxiety of Hong Kong people," the report cites a Facebook post to summarise the concerts: "This is not a concert, this is a revolution" (Chai 2012). This series of concerts had a re-run in Guangzhou. Chapter 3 will present a detailed analysis of this concert series.

While the concerts and their media coverage were still possible at that point, the situation changed soon with the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and Anthony's involvement. Remembering their 2017 concerts, Anthony says, "it's like a response to the call of our times." In fact, all the challenges Hong Kong have gone through have given Anthony inspiration to create; he considers this a historical mission. Tats expresses a related sense of gratitude; after all the ups and downs, he is happy that he is able to say what he wants to say. In their more recent music releases and concert performances, Tat Ming has continued to ponder and offer commentaries of Hong Kong living under the two larger power configurations. Especially in their shows, which often took on a theatrical format, the sense of urgency, of being in a predicament, of the need to re-articulate the local has been accentuating, as we will discuss further in later chapters. Writing on the 30th anniversary of Tat Ming, local essayist Rudi Leung recalls what their music means to him personally. In 1990, when the album *Nerves* was released as a response to what happened in Tiananmen, Leung was a bachelor student. "It offered an outlet for my own anxiety." The review essay similarly refers Tat Ming's music to collective memories of many generations of Hong Kong people. "If we take 1997 as a watershed, and if we want to write a history of Hong Kong pop music ten years before and ten years after the Handover, and of the city itself, Tat Ming is indispensable" (Leung, n.d.).

Another essay, published after the first series of *REPLAY* concerts, in 2020, bears a title "All the Hong Kong people, in the world, today" (Liu 2020). Paraphrasing Tat Ming's latest single,⁶ the writer Wai Tong Liu relays the decades of Tat Ming music to a historical recurrence: the

⁶ It is titled "All Over the World 今天世上所有地方," composed by Anthony Wong and Tats Lau, with lyrics by Calvin Poon.

sentiment enshrined in Tat Ming's earlier music resurges in their new song. From Tat Ming's music, Liu turns to the city, linking the current migration wave to the pre-Handover one, posing a question as rhetoric as it is melancholic: "Can we still find Hong Kong in Hong Kong?"⁷ While the city is disappearing, the music remains; the writer still has Tat Ming, the concerts, and all the Hong Kong people wherever they are. At least, "that night we were all Hong Kong people." Fung Lok, in a more recent publication focusing on the works by one of the long-term lyricists of Tat Ming, cites Simon Frith's understanding of pop music experience as identity experience (2022). Lok analyses Tat Ming's as well as Anthony's music in terms of Hong Kong's collective, cultural identity, as lived in the geopolitical context of 1989 and 1997. While Tat Ming should not be considered the exception in this wave of making politically engaging pop, the duo became exceptional in its persistence in doing so during their occasional reunion projects.⁸

Spanning more than three decades from colonial Hong Kong to the current bewilderment, of searching for Hong Kong in Hong Kong, Tat Ming's music continues to connect strenuously with the city. Arranged in sophisticated electronica and articulated with complex lyrics, they are not protest songs, as such; they project, they protect, they procrastinate—they project Hong Kong and its longing and sense of belonging as a dot, perhaps a stain, onto the larger, much larger map of geopolitical formations, they protect its identity, they procrastinate whatever seems to be coming. They are not protest songs, but they may well be protestant ones, spreading messages like a prayer, hoping. Perhaps between belonging and longing, it is "be," their being there, Tat Ming's being there all the time. As Fung Lok writes, "with the passing of time, thirty years, the performers and the audience age together, some have left, some continue" (Lok 2022, 28). It is not only what they sing, what they perform, what they mean to Hong Kong people at any point of time; above all, it is about the very fact that despite and because of all the vicissitudes during three

⁷ In the wake of a series of regulation changes that, presumably, facilitate people from the former colony to gain rights of abode, Britain announced in 2022 that any Hong Kong person born after 1997 is eligible to apply for British National (Overseas) passport on the condition that at least one parent already holds a BNO passport (Ming Pao 2022).

⁸ In Fung Lok's book, several local pop acts including Tai Chi, Beyond, and Softward (contemporaries of Tat Ming), and LMF, RubberBand, and My Little Airport (more recent than Tat Ming) are cited as performing similar function as Tat Ming in working out the Hong Kong sentiments in their music (Lok 2022).

decades of Hong Kong history and popular music, they are still singing, performing, meaning something.

To conclude this section on Tat Ming and Hong Kong, we underline their resilience and relevance with a recent piece of news, an update of the national education controversy in 2012. Ten years later, we are writing the day after a secondary school in Hong Kong suspended a group of students allegedly having breakfast, thus not showing respect, during a ceremony when the national Chinese flag was hoisted. The school authorities were applauded for defending the ceremonial and national dignity as well as criticised for imposing a penalty out of proportion to the offending act, let alone that they did not actually take the trouble to confirm the act. The students concerned claimed their innocence for not hearing the anthem, thus not being alerted to the start of the ceremony (Ming Pao 2022). This incident follows a controversial regulation presented by the Education Bureau a year earlier, that starting from the following academic year, Hong Kong schools must fly the Chinese flag daily and conduct weekly flag-raising ceremonies “to promote affection for the mainland’s people and a sense of belonging to the nation.” Hong Kong’s own city flag may be flown next to the national flag, that is if the schools have enough poles (Cheung 2021).

GOLDEN ERA

1984. A year impregnated with destiny and cacophony. This is the title of George Orwell’s novel depicting a dystopian near future, where totalitarian rule, omnipresent surveillance, and brain control threaten society and humanity. This is also the year when the destiny of Hong Kong was written in the Sino-British Joint Declaration, when the Chinese and British leaders put their signatures down to confirm their agreement to hand over Hong Kong from the colonial administration to Chinese sovereignty. In the anthology *Made in Hong Kong*, Stephen Chu pinpoints 1984 as a pivotal year for two reasons: the emergence of super venues, super industry infrastructure and ultimately superstars; heightened diversity of musical styles and song topics due to heightened hybridity of Hong Kong culture itself (Chu 2020). If a decade earlier, 1974, marked a watershed in the history of Cantopop (Wong 2003), 1984 saw “its spectacular surge in Asia” (Chu 2020, 22). In 1984, however, there was another occurrence largely undocumented, uncited when the city or its culture is discussed—it was the year Tats decided to

look for a musical partner and thanks to a magazine advertisement, Tat Ming came to being two years later.

We are inserting this occurrence less because of its historical importance, more for its possibility to question how certain history is bestowed with certain importance, and how certain occurrences, meanings, and readings remain excluded to enable one narrative. We are thinking of the Golden Era narrative. It remains amazing to us, perhaps with hindsight, how the Orwellian scenario, the Joint Declaration, the popular music that took place outside super venues and beyond the superstars—how all of these do not prevent the emergence and persistence of the Golden Era narrative of Hong Kong popular music, from its resounding birth in 1974, culminating to a new chapter in 1984, and expanding its global dominance through the early 1990s. Three decades later, this narrative dated in the colonial time of Hong Kong remains very much alive, perhaps even more when the good old days are evoked to offer both consolation and condemnation. It is in popular as much as in academic discourse that this particular period was defined with and as success. Stephen Chu, for instance, builds on the pivotal year of 1984 into a book discussing the popular culture of Hong Kong of the 1980s. He calls it, in the subtitle of the book, “a decade of splendour” (Chu 2023). While Chu “aims to show how the 1980s was a critical and transitional decade for Hong Kong, in terms of not just politics and economics but also culture and lifestyle,” he explicitly declares his personal belonging, and his affinity as a veteran fan of Hong Kong popular culture.

This qualitative narrative of splendour, legacy, and success is intricately woven in the quantifiable framework of magnitude, number, and money. The Golden Era, like many other golden eras in histories, is primarily defined by its commercial success. Thus its flip narrative, the demise of Cantopop, is also sketched with business performance. Late lyricist and composer James Wong, in his doctoral thesis, marks 1997, the year Hong Kong was handed over from London to Beijing, as the end of the Cantopop era (Wong 2003). His argument is supported quantitatively: in 1995, Cantopop sales reached HK\$1.863 billion; in merely three years’ time, in 1998, it dropped by half, to HK\$0.916 billion (Wong 2003, 169). We want to trouble this narrative of success in pre-Handover Hong Kong by way of Tat Ming, at least on two accounts: creative freedom, and creative policies.

While Tat Ming, especially in its early days, benefitted from the Golden Era and enjoyed the space opened up by the generally booming industry,

they also underlined the less desirable facets, certain articulations and issues not readily included in the more harmonious, successful narrative. If we recall how Tats, more interested in becoming a solo artist making instrumental music, had to change his mind as he saw no future should he pursue, the Golden Era might be much less golden for many music genres and practitioners. The decade of splendour was also the decade of many possible creative outputs being overshadowed or simply pre-empted. For Tat Ming who decided to follow the dominant practices, signing a major label Polygram, producing songs rather than instrumental music, they needed to embrace an arrangement not always conducive to creativity. Talking about Tat Ming's latest CD, an independent release as they no longer belong to any major label, Anthony expresses a process of deliberation and decision between the two of them, with a high degree of control and autonomy, not only creatively but also accentuated by technological affordances. "Our mode of operation now is very different from that of the 1980s. To begin with, we don't have any contractual restrictions. We don't have to fulfil certain duties."

If the good old days might have been less exemplary or celebratory in terms of generic diversity and label practices, of creative freedom at large, we want to draw attention to another lacune in popular and academic discourse surrounding the Golden Era: what the colonial administration failed to do. When the pre-Handover days of Hong Kong popular music continue to be told and retold as a narrative of splendour, legacy, and success, when the Handover year itself is alluded as the end of Cantopop or the decline of its commercial performance, we are essentially hearing a reiteration of the story about colonial Hong Kong, that of an economic miracle. It is a story that is depoliticising and politicising at the same time; depoliticising when it eclipses political critique with economic success, and politicising when it highlights achievements during colonial Hong Kong over its inadequacies. We are nodding towards the absence of creative policies, directives, planning, not only to promote popular music but also to take care of its practitioners, not only to ensure continual commercial success but also to deal with issues of diversity, precarity, and true sustainability. We echo Klavier Wang's critical remark, when she writes "public policies in this domain were barely included on the governmental agenda despite the global influence Hong Kong popular culture" (Wang 2020, 27). That it was consistent with the generally laissez-faire way of running Hong Kong lays bare precisely the radical question posed to colonial administration: What does it care? It was only in 2009, more than

a decade after the Handover, that CreateHK, a culture-specific department, was set up, ironically, as Wang points out, under the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (Wang 2020, 27–28).

In that sense, one wonders if the post-Handover government is equally mystified by the very problematic idea of the Golden Era. The difficulty, or perhaps refusal, to look beyond and through the Golden Era narrative and to recuperate alternative histories and creativities is underlined by the maiden policy address of John Lee, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. Evoking similar logic of splendour and good old days, Lee proposes to organise an annual “popular culture festival” with the stars from the 1960s to the 1990s as its theme (Lee 2022). “Again the same old stars,” sighs Anthony in hearing the news. While he does not deny the contribution and significance of the Golden Era, Anthony considers the current government’s take on Hong Kong pop “ironic.” The postcolonial government seems to pay more, if not exclusive, attention to what took place during the colonial time of Hong Kong, while ignoring the continued liveliness of local popular music after the Handover. Although local pop was increasingly marginalised with the Rise of China, Anthony notes the emergence of new stars in the decades after 1997. In particular, the last ten years witnessed, in Anthony’s words, a diversity of genres and new music makers, that were unheard of in the Golden Era. The readiness to reiterate and reify the achievement during the colonial period is not only indicative of the complexity of post-Handover culture and politics; it fails to acknowledge what Anthony calls a “renaissance” of Cantopop in precisely the time when culture is threatened by politics. “Just take this year [2022], concerts keep coming up, and mostly by new artists. It’s not only pop music, but also film, I think this year’s box office of Hong Kong films is the best in the past two decades.” Resounding the pre-Handover past, Anthony reminds us, may be one way to silence the post-Handover present.

MULTIPLE-MEDIA PRACTICES

Given the inclination of academic and popular attention to the Golden Era, it is hardly surprising how Cantopop stars remain in the centre stage even when they have receded from the limelight. They continue

to shine in policy directives, in public imaginary.⁹ In the few major exhibitions involving local popular music, we see primarily representations of pop stars in their magnificent performances in films, in television shows, in music. This understanding of multimedia practices as embedded in stardom is itself historically grounded. As illustrated by Klavier Wang's book, the emergence and increasing dominance of Hong Kong popular culture in the global Chinese communities facilitated not only the circulation of Hong Kong stars or superstars, but also the production of a distinct mode of practice: the crisscrossing and imbrication of genres and generic work (Wang 2020). To contextualise the “extraordinarily shiny part of the city's signature,” that is the good old days—and stars—of the 1970s and 1980s colonial Hong Kong, Wang posits two historical developments. “First, [Hong Kong film, television drama and popular song] are strongly interrelated in terms of exchange of talents and cultural symbols... Second, the interchange of talents across these three industries and the mutual reliance among these cultural forms contribute to the synergy effect of Hong Kong popular culture” (Wang 2020, 48).

This “multi-media stardom,” as Wing Fai Leung calls and argues in his book, is a distinctly Hong Kong mode of practice (Leung 2015). Leung, similar to Wang, attributes this multimedia stardom to historical and cultural traces in the colonial time and place, a local way of making stars. By local, Leung means that it does not find any counterpart, in the major star-making machine in the world, Hollywood—at least not in the same manner and to the same extent. It is here that we want to insert a note to popular music studies—outside the metropolitan centres of pop production, particularly in the United States and in the United Kingdom: quite simply, there are other ways of doing things. Put differently, while knowledge on popular music continues to be produced and claimed to be globally relevant, local practices from the peripheries of the pop world must be acknowledged and included if pop music studies is to be decolonised. In this case, multimedia practices of pop music practitioners. We dropped the word “stardom” deliberately as we want to borrow from the experiences of Tat Ming to complicate the narrative of lubricative and lucrative convergence termed “multimedia stardom.”

⁹ These stars usually include the so-called Four Heavenly Kings—Jackie Cheung, Andy Lau, Leon Lai, and Aaron Kwok—as well as Alan Tam, Leslie Cheung, and Anita Mui. The passing away of the latter two superstars in the same year of 2003 sounded, to some Hong Kong people and music commentators, the death knell of Hong Kong pop.

It is not our intention to disqualify the duo as stars; what we want to do is refocus on the first part of the term “multimedia stardom,” to take multimedia work, as more mundane practices, necessary and perhaps precarious. Before Tat Ming, Anthony was a graduate of a talent training programme operated by a major television station and worked for some time as radio DJ. It was not unexpected that following his musical popularity, thanks to Tat Ming, he acted in a number of television dramas and feature films, not always in major roles or productions. His last acting involvement dated 1995. Since then, Anthony has been focusing on music. Tats’ multimedia trajectory, on the other hand, commenced arguably in 1996 when he was invited to play a comical side role. While we will elaborate on his entry into the film industry in the following section, we confine ourselves here to remark on Tats’ prolific film career—since 1996, Tats was cast in at least one release per year, reaching the height of eight films in the year 2004.

It was in 1996 that Tats realised he had problems with his mental health. While later we will note Tats’ allusion to the cultural difference between Hong Kong and mainland China when his other music partner Lu, an artist from Guangzhou, could not cope with the stressful way of Hong Kong life and pop music industry, Tats explains his breakdown in 1996 not differently: “The pressure was too much.” Instead of, or in addition to, a geocultural consequence, the challenge may well be a work- or industry-related one. The demand to perform so much, so well, takes its toll. That year, Tats was preparing his own album, involved in the Tat Ming reunion concerts, and acting in the film that ushered many more to come. It was a dramatic evening, and since then Tats has been managing his mental health with the help of medication. “The worst was whenever I needed to see people, to join meeting or to work, I must take meds. If not, I would be very depressed.”

The reframing of multimedia engagement from stardom to practise is precisely to take such experience seriously. They may be celebrities, adored by fans, stars, but they are also workers. In that sense, we may find a rich array of scholarship on creative workers relevant, and our understanding of stardom enriched. Immediately, we think of the important inquiries explicating the lives of creative workers as “precariat,” Guy Standing’s neologism integrating “precarity” and “proletariat” to foreground the experience of exploitation and the possibility of a new subjectivity (Standing 2011). Creative workers, for their passion in their

work, for presumably “doing what I love,” are often sacrificing the security and stability offered by “regular” jobs, confronted with more risks, struggles, demands, easily demoralised and exploited (see for instance Miller 2009; Ross 2009). This urgency to be creative, to do creative work, is as beautiful as it is ugly, “a potent and highly appealing mode of new governmentality,” and “a general and widespread mode of precarisation” (McRobbie 2016, 14).

If we are to decolonise popular music studies in the sense of learning from experience from outside the West, or even more pointedly the Anglo-American context, we may learn from Tat Ming, two multimedia stars in the Chinese-language world, to study pop stars not only as stars, but as workers wrestling with multiple demands and with multiple challenges to the intricate and delicate mix of financial and mental health, through their multimedia practices. Popular music researchers may, for instance, not only study the impact of a singer-songwriter’s melancholia on the music, but also locate such mental issue “back” in problems of the music industry and larger society. This can also be placed in the contemporary “convergence” context that practitioners in different popular culture sectors are increasingly taking on a multiplicity of roles. Multimedia stardom might be something unique to Hong Kong (Leung 2015); multimedia practice is becoming increasingly common in other localities.

Nancy Baym has shown how social media demand a lot of what she calls relational labour on the shoulders of the musicians, as they have to spend a lot of energy not only making and performing music, but also maintaining a good contact with their fanbase, more so than before the time of social media. In Baym’s words, “musicians are engaging in a sort of labour that the many terms used to modify contemporary labour—immaterial, affective, emotional, venture, cultural, creative—speak to but do not quite capture. In addition to all of these things, musicians are involved in relational labour, by which I mean regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work” (2015, 16; see also Baym 2018). What Tat Ming tells us, is that this form of labour is not confined to, or new in, the digital era, before which musicians also had to juggle with multiple roles and multiple demands. Furthermore, the kind of stardom commonly associated with either the United States and Britain, or, more recently, Japan and South Korea, may work very differently in other contexts, where stars may remain creative workers, struggling to survive.

RISE OF CHINA

Whether as stars or as creative workers, practitioners in popular music must stay alert to what is happening around them. We are shifting our attention from the micro to the macro—in Hong Kong’s case, it coincides with the radical change of its political destiny, from a colonial city to be realigned to the nation—a nation quickly on the rise, to be specific. In fact, it is not only Hong Kong, but the world at large, that needs to deal with a new global distribution of power, what is loosely called the Rise of China. In 1993, Nicholas D. Kristof, Beijing correspondent for the *New York Times* between 1988 and 1993, posited the term “rise of China,” as probably the most important global trend in the century to come (Kristof 1993). At that point, Kristof observes shrewdly and with a sense of disbelief and perhaps caution, that only the business community seems to be paying serious attention to the mounting economic power of China. Since then, many publications, academic or otherwise, devote themselves to various implications of this seismic shift in world order to the extent that China Studies now stands in tandem with Global China Studies—an investigation of what is happening in China is never sufficient without examining its global practices and impact. The latest academic treatise is contributed by Frank Dikötter who chronicles “the rise of a superpower”—the subtitle of his book—and concludes with a new “ideological cold war” between China and the democratic part of the world (2022, 292). To revert to the early 1990s, after China and the world, i.e. by and large the Western capitalistic world, survived the initial shock of what transpired in Tiananmen, it was its staggering economic growth that captured attention and delivered opportunities.

Hong Kong was no exception, but with an additional dimension of the postcolonial. The years surrounding its Handover exuded a sense of necessity, of acknowledging the process of renationalisation—many local people chose to migrate, many more stayed. Those years also exuded a sense of expectation, of confronting something big in the making. For the pop music industry in Hong Kong, and for the practitioners who stayed, it was a matter of acclimatising to, and hopefully benefiting from, a new economic landscape where the mainland market dominates. “Local pop idols could not rely on the older position of Hong Kong as the nodal point of global Chinese youth culture. They need to establish local popularity and extend it to the mainland to be real stars,” notes Chow out of his experience in the industry (Chow 2009, 555). In this context, we

are not only talking about the unique experience of Hong Kong vis-à-vis China; we are also arguing for certain missing domains in popular music studies at large. We are referring to inquiries unpacking the dynamics between the local and the national, and perhaps more fundamentally between the minor and the major—not unlike the Deleuzian conceptualisations of minor literature, or minor cinema in literary and cinema studies. As Deleuze and Guattari write, “Minor authors are foreigners in their own tongue. If they are bastards, if they experience themselves as bastards, it is due not to a mixing or intermingling of languages but rather to a subtraction and variation of their own language achieved by stretching tensors through it” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 105). The minor is a movement that takes a major voice—here “Western pop music”—to articulate a preferred identity. “[A] minor movement is not dialectically related to a major movement: the minor does not arise ‘apart from’ or ‘outside’ the major but is the result of a movement produced within the major” (Frangville 2016, 107).

Tat Ming is a kind of minor music that deterritorialises not only Anglo-American sounds, but also those from mainland China. The case of Tat Ming, of Hong Kong pop music engaging with a much more powerful context, of China, should remind popular music studies of the specific struggles, issues, and challenges of many practitioners and practices that do not operate in the centres of pop and may have to formulate different tactics to survive and thrive. The centres can be Anglo-American; they can also be the regional capitals that provincial musicians have to meander their way in.

From the case of Hong Kong, we distil three dimensions: political, capital, and cultural. We must first insert a caveat: it was of course not only market expansion that was the motive; Anthony recalls fondly his encounters with fans in mainland China. “I felt that they needed me, and there was communication.” What our narration highlights is the historical conjuncture of the early 1990s, a new scenario where Hong Kong singers started releasing songs in putonghua, the national language, while many ventured northwards with varying degrees of success. Increasingly, however, the primarily economic move becomes a political challenge. While some Hong Kong pop artists start to concentrate their efforts on the Chinese market, others may aspire to manage their popularity and business opportunities in both Hong Kong and the mainland. For the latter group, it is always a balancing act. Particularly in the last decade when Sino-Hong Kong relationship becomes increasingly political and

nervous, when local and national sentiments easily lead to fierce collision, when social media readily breed polemic and acts of mud-slinging, quite a number of Hong Kong singers are forced off balance; they must, or they must be seen to, choose sides. The demand to renationalise is seen, felt, and expressed as the command to delocalise. You are either Hong Konger or Chinese.

A recent case is superstar Eason Chan. After achieving his popularity as a Cantopop singer, Eason followed the footsteps of many local stars to further his market and career across the borders. He succeeded but he has continued to attend to his home base of Hong Kong. In 2021, a number of global brands were accused of using Xinjiang cotton in their products. For the cotton's alleged association with coerced labour, the brands, including Adidas, issued statements and announced their decision to change their sourcing practices. As a counter-offensive to defend the "innocence" of Xinjiang cotton, more than forty Chinese celebrities declared the end of their commercial relationship with these global brands. Eason, a long-term ambassador for Adidas, also withdrew his collaboration. His act was seen as a sort of declaration of allegiance in the eyes of Hong Kong people; he was attacked maliciously online and had to stay out of public attention for an extended period of time (Up Media 2021). Another Hong Kong pop star Miriam Yeung posted on her IG account "R.I.P." regarding the death of a protestor during the anti-Extradition Law demonstrations in 2019. Amidst allegation of her sympathy with the local demonstrations and thus antipathy to China, Miriam issued a statement announcing "I was born and grew up in Hong Kong. I love Hong Kong, but I also love my motherland" (TOPick 2019). Following some other similarly controversial acts, Miriam has lost most of her local fan support.¹⁰ It is not only pop singers that are caught in such political whirlwind. In September 2022, well-known Cantonese

¹⁰ Eason Chan broke his hiatus in 2022 when he announced a series of concerts by the end of the year. They were immediately sold out. Additional shows were swiftly offered, ending in a total of twenty-seven concerts. Miriam Yeung has been rumoured to stage a "comeback" show in Hong Kong on several occasions, but so far always met with negative response. Not long after Eason's announcement, Miriam also disclosed her plan to host two concerts by the end of 2022. Cynical comments ensued, including distribution of complimentary, essentially unsold, tickets to pro-establishment schools. Regarding commercial sponsorship, Eason's concerts were supported by a major insurance company, while Miriam's were without any. The gendered dimension of such fan and sponsorship response deserves more attention, but is quite beyond the remit of this book.

opera singer Law Ka Ying went to the British consulate in Hong Kong to pay his respect for the late Queen Elizabeth II. His condolences were seen as colonial and attacked by mainland netizens. Law had to post a short video conveying his apology publicly (Ming Pao 2022).

Anthony and Tats, as a duo or as solo artists, also started cultivating their presence in mainland China, like many of their contemporaries. “For a long time before 2014, before the Umbrella Movement, I worked a lot in the mainland,” Anthony says. One of Tats’ tactics was to find a mainland partner; in 2006, he recruited a female artist to form a duo called Tats and Lu. The collaboration lasted for one album release, mostly songs in putonghua. Tat Ming itself, as mentioned earlier, made use of the timely mix of more relaxed political climate and booming music market, hosting their first major concert in Shanghai. For that concert, they needed to adjust their rundown at the last minute “just to play safe,” as advised by the organiser (Chow 2009). The duo managed to enhance their profile in the mainland market, despite and perhaps also because of songs that continued to deliberate on the dynamic between the local and the national. The coming out of Anthony—the first of its kind in the national context—was celebrated among the Chinese queer populations, and among young people who embraced counter-cultures as such. He performed with rainbow flags waving in the audience, in Beijing. It came to a halt in 2014. Following the Umbrella Movement, “me and Tat Ming are on the so-called ‘blacklist’,” Anthony says.

What would be considered political is often intertwined with capital. While Anthony might see his banishment as a response to the Umbrella Movement, Tats experienced a drop of film and commercial jobs. It could have been capitalistic decisions, but the “excuses” they were given for last-minute withdrawal of commissioning, or sudden cessation of communication, suggested to Tats and Agnes “it must be politics.” The difficulty, in fact impossibility, to find commercial sponsors for their 2017 concerts (which we will discuss further in Chapter 5) was another instance to affirm the operation of the state-market nexus. Particularly in China, where the state and the market are so intimately connected, popular culture does not need to be managed, controlled, censored directly by political organs; the nexus ensures what appears in the market is to serve the interests of not only the capitalistic, but also the political elite (Fung 2007). The clients who continue to invite Tats for their commercials are companies that focus on branding their products with local, Hong Kong favour.

Finally, culture. “They talk about *guanxi*. And we don’t have *guanxi* there, because we are not big labels,” Tats says. *Guanxi*, understood as a peculiarly Chinese way of building and mobilising personal connections, becomes quite a different cultural challenge to people from Hong Kong who are, at least allegedly, more accustomed to systems, regulations, and a clear set of practices. It is supposed to be about how you do it, rather than who you know, meritocratic not cronyistic—occasionally extrapolated to Hong Kong’s colonial legacy, the rule of law cherished as the British way of doing things, presumably unlike the Chinese, especially their alleged cultural penchant for corruption.¹¹ Tats also acknowledges other related challenges of doing business outside his home base of Hong Kong. “You need to socialise a lot.” Tats recalls having late night supper after a gig in Shenzhen, “I really can’t drink it.” He is referring to a strong Chinese liquor with alcoholic content around fifty per cent. The different drinking culture indexes the basic challenge of cultural difference when Hong Kong practitioners need to socialise, to network, to work with their mainland counterparts. Agnes, wife and manager of Tats, comments on the unfortunate development of Tats and Lu, noting two issues: the artist management and contractual practices in the mainland that seem unusual to her; and Lu’s inability to adapt to the stressful way of Hong Kong life and pop music industry when she was required to do promotion stay in the city. In short, “the mainland Chinese culture and our culture are so different.” Whether such cultural framings are true or not is not our point here. While we acknowledge the possible problematic reification and stereotyping of cultural differences, it is through such narratives that the artists articulate their struggles with and in China, a rising China.

CONTINGENCY

In their study on the development and success of K-pop, Solee I. Shin and Lanu Kim examine the three decades (1980–2010) where this local-cum-national genre emerged and captured Asian and then global popularity (Shin and Kim 2013). In addition to cultural factors, government support, and technological development, the authors draw attention

¹¹ For a discussion of *guanxi*, see Chen, Chen, and Huang’s overview article (2013). For a discussion of “rule of law” as Hong Kong’s colonial legacy, see Chiu and Siu (2022).

to the systemic strategies and organisational aspects of three big entertainment houses in Korea. In their study on singing contests and talent shows, Stefan Lalchev and Paul G. Oliver zoom in on their increasing importance in delivering new artists to the pop music industry (Lalchev and Oliver 2021). As the authors demonstrate, these contests and shows, driving on a synthetic approach (for instance between television, music, and online platforms), geared towards high exposure and instant fan base, have become music labels' favourite strategy to minimise risk and to maximise marketing success. Formula and format. These are but two of the long lineage of inquiries that seek to find out the factors, the logic, the mechanism, to address one fundamental question: how the industry works.

It is in this context of seeking to explain that we make the final point informed by a sense of something unpredictable, inexplicable, shambolic, what we contingently called contingency. If we recall Tats and Anthony's reflection on their music careers, as cited in Chapter 1, we need to admit another logic that operates in contradistinction from that of the two aforementioned studies: a logic of its own, a logic that makes one wonder how the industry works, at all. As Anthony recalls, "we never thought it would become like this when we started." And Tats was planning to be a solo musician, to do instrumental music, but then "it became Tat Ming." The very existence of the duo was an affair of contingency. It was an advertisement put up by Tats in a music magazine, in 1984, and among all the advertisements in all the magazines, this particular one caught Anthony's attention. He responded. It was not a "love at first sight" incident; Anthony recalls "a matter of months" before he heard any update.

Anthony also recalls two more "interesting coincidences"—first, among those responding to the ad were those who later formed themselves into a formation called The Grasshopper ("What if they, instead of me, were selected")¹²; second, although Tats' ad was posted in the name of "an electronic musician," Anthony had an inkling of who the person was and if that was the case, Anthony, then a disc jockey, would have played two of his tracks from a compilation album whose title was

¹² The Grasshopper consists of Edmund So, and the brothers Calvin and Remus Choy. Strong in dancing, they were presented as a form of boy band when they released their first album in 1988.

uncannily telling or foretelling (“The album title is *Xiang Gang*”). Incidentally the following year was the 10th anniversary of *Breakthrough Time*, a radio programme created by Christian volunteers, among which was Anthony.¹³ The need for a theme song to celebrate the occasion led to Tats’ first collaboration with Anthony—Tats wrote the melody and did the musical arrangement, Calvin Poon who became a long-term partner of Tat Ming wrote the lyrics, and Anthony was the vocalist. Such was the list of credits when the song “Keep on Searching 繼續追尋” premiered in public.¹⁴ One year later, it became Tat Ming’s first single. No one knows what would have happened if Tats did not post the advertisement, if Anthony did not respond, if *Breakthrough Time* was not celebrating its 10th anniversary... As the cliché goes, the rest is history, or, shall we say, history is the rest, the remainder, the residue of something uncompleted, unsettled, chaotic. As much as Tats and Anthony seem inseparable, a solid entity to many of their fans and to the popular music history of Hong Kong, its solidity hinges on one chance encounter, one contingent act by Tats, then by Anthony.

Events that look well planned are not planned at all. That may be something we learn about the industry, listening to the memories of Tat Ming. Take Anthony’s on-stage coming out during Tat Ming’s concerts in 2012. The event that attracted much publicity and created much impact not only to Anthony, but also to Tats, the queer communities, and the public at large was a decision at the spur of the moment, prompted, impromptu. The concerts were employing LED visuals to, among other functions, pose questions and poke fun at the identity and identification of public figures in Hong Kong. When the final show was about to open, Anthony started thinking about his own identity and identification, in this case, sexuality. Without telling anyone but his manager and close friend Wallace Kwok, Anthony made his decision, and announced on stage “I am gay.” Tats confirmed the spontaneity of the coming out—he was backstage to change costume and heard Anthony come out on stage through the monitor. Tats knew he had to respond when he re-entered the stage. Agnes, sitting next to him during our interview, admired Tats’ quick wit: “He reacted real fast, that’s quite something.”

¹³ Anthony was then a Christian, although he started questioning his faith in institutional Christianity when he started exploring his sexuality, as a teenager. He will not consider himself a Christian now. Tats, on the other hand, became a Christian in 2008.

¹⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kht4AzQZsYY>.

Tats' latest project, an NFT-based memoir of his musical life, is another instance of contingency. While the project takes the current, clearly defined form of documenting Tats' career as a music practitioner and the intention is—in Tats and Agnes' formulation—to empower Hong Kong people who cannot leave, who do not want to leave, and yet are confronted with negative news when they stay, the project's origin was anything but planned. "It was you," Agnes pointed at Chow, one of the authors doing the interview, also Tat Ming's long-term lyricist. Some time before Tats and Agnes commenced the memoir project, Chow posted an image of a shopping mall in North Point where he visited for another project. Someone sent Tats and Agnes the image, asking if Tats was teaching music in the mall during his pre-Tat Ming life. Indeed, he was, "in shop number 57." They brought this up to their team and started recalling "many beautiful stories in the shopping mall"—and the 1980s by and large. Thus was the incidental beginning of a series of essays culminating to the memoir project.

It is of course not only into music that we need to reassert contingency. Tats' entrance into the film industry, in the mid-1990s, for instance, is emblematic—he was invited to create the sound track. During one of the meetings where the director also joined, the director looked at Tats and asked him to try one of the minor roles.¹⁵ Little did Tats know it marked the first step to his widely recognised film career. This sense of uncertainty, of acknowledging the contingency of things, is summarised by Anthony when he reflects on his career and his life. He does not want to think too much of himself, of himself making big impact; reality itself does not allow him to think in that direction. "But then, even if we are not making big changes, does that mean we should stop doing things? No, however small the things we do, we should do them." Because, one never knows.

We hasten to add that we have no intention to discredit all the scholarship that seeks to explain; what we try to do here is flag the notion of contingency, acknowledge something that may not be explained, and bear in mind its possible contribution to our understanding of popular music, and of politics—especially in the conjuncture where managerial, technological, meritocratic, and perhaps even political determinism seems

¹⁵ The director was Stephen Chow, already a well-known actor and filmmaker by then. Titled *Forbidden City Cop*, the film was released at the lunar new year period in 1996. Chow also starred in this film.

to be more plausible and audible. We will come back to this later in the book.

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CHAPTER 3

The Worst of Times, The Best of Music

We must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion.

José Esteban Muñoz (2009, 1865)

Allow us to start this chapter with a personal anecdote. One of the authors, Jeroen de Kloet, was having dinner with Anthony Wong on Sunday, September 28, 2014. Anthony was visiting Amsterdam. We were about to go to a concert of Sinéad O'Connor in De Melkweg, a major music venue in the heart of the city. Anthony was incredibly restless. Just a couple of days ago a movement started gathering momentum in the streets of Hong Kong. Why stay in Europe, when something so unprecedented and indeed unexpected is unfolding in Hong Kong? He felt out of place in Amsterdam, and decided to rebook his ticket, and fly back to Hong Kong as soon as possible. The next day, after a rather mellow concert of Sinéad O'Connor, he returned, and soon became a key player in the movement itself.

This chapter includes extensively revised excerpts from Leonie Schmidt, Yiu Fai Chow and Jeroen de Kloet, “From handover to leftover—Tatming, Umbrellas, and the postcolonial ruins of Hong Kong” in *Situations* 10.1 (2017).

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On September 26, thousands of people started occupying different areas of Hong Kong, demanding “true democracy,” ushering in what was known as the “Umbrella Movement.”¹ The popular protests might have taken the world by surprise; for us, as we have described in the previous chapter, they presented a logical outcome of a much longer process of postcolonial anxiety of which the rainy Tuesday of July 1, 1997 was just one turning point of a much longer trajectory that started in 1841, if not earlier. The protests were generally framed as pro-democracy in Western media. “A closer look reveals, however, that this framing ignores the multiple aims articulated during the protests; aims that were directed against, among others, the increased precarity of labour in Hong Kong, the unbridled power of real estate developers, and the increasing levels of inequality characterizing the city,” according to one of the authors (de Kloet 2018, 151).

These issues are not new, nor are they necessarily connected to Beijing’s rule. For decades, Hong Kong has been a city with serious class and income inequalities, staggering real estate prices, limited respect for cultural heritage sites, and a lack of democracy, to list the most contentious issues. In many ways, Hong Kong is a city that is ruled more by real estate developers and business tycoons than by politicians (Poon 2010). The Handover does, however, mark a crucial point in the history of the city; it propelled a fear of disappearance, a fear that paradoxically stimulated an appearance of a “local” Hong Kong culture in the decades prior to the handover.

In his reflections on the cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong, Ackbar Abbas describes how in the period after the Joint Declaration, something called “Hong Kong culture” appeared. Hong Kong culture “was a hothouse plant that appeared at the moment when something was disappearing: a case of love at last sight, a culture of disappearance” (Abbas 2000, 777). This disappearance, however, does not signify the end of an appearance. In Hong Kong culture, attention was directed back to the city’s local peculiarities, in order to reinvent the city one last time even as it disappeared. Filmmakers, for instance, focused on local issues and settings, “but in such a way that the local was dislocated” (Abbas 2000, 777–78). Hence, rather than indicating the end of an appearance,

¹ The term was inspired by protesters using umbrellas against police pepper spray and later tear gas.



Fig. 3.1 The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, October 18, 2014 (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

Abbas' notion of disappearance refers to a different appearance, a “disappearance,” i.e. a transformed, dislocated, and disfigured appearance of the city of Hong Kong. And indeed, the city did not disappear after the Handover. But the years after witnessed this continuous struggle over the identity of Hong Kong. As Stephen Chu argues, in the post-Handover period, Hong Kong's culture is “lost in transition” as Hong Kong tried to affirm its international visibility and retain its status quo. According to Chu, this struggle is reflected in popular culture (Chu 2013, 15).

Let us briefly recap the events that took place after Tat Ming Pair's² 2012 concert series which form the main part of our analysis in this chapter. Hong Kong's struggle gained global attention with the “Umbrella” protests. On August 31, 2014, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) announced its decision on electoral reforms in Hong Kong. Disallowing civil nominations, the NPCSC

² We will use Tat Ming Pair, the full name of the duo, the first time it appears in the chapter. Thereafter, we will revert to Tat Ming, the name usually and fondly used by fans.

stated that Beijing would vet candidates for the 2017 Chief Executive elections in the city before the general public can vote. Following this decision, thousands of students boycotted classes. Feeling deprived of “true democracy,” they protested outside the government headquarters and occupied several major city intersections. As other citizens joined them, massive protests claimed the streets of Admiralty, Central, Mong Kok, Tsim Sha Tsui, and Causeway Bay. Protestors demanded universal suffrage, the resignation of Chief Executive C.Y. Leung, the withdrawal of the NPCSC’s decision, and a new electoral reform plan that includes civil nominations. The Umbrella Movement lasted until December 15, when the last site was cleared. By then, the protests had outlasted the 1989 occupation of Tiananmen Square, Occupy Wall Street, and Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement of Spring 2014. Laikwan Pang reads the protests in a rather sanguine manner, observing a demos that is struggling to appear in Hong Kong, signifying a somewhat unexpected emergence of a strong and multivocal political consciousness (Pang 2020). In other words, the protests challenge the stereotype of Hong Kong as a highly commercialised and depoliticised place.

In February 2016, on the first day of the Lunar New Year, a violent confrontation between police and protesters took place in Mong Kok. It prompted the police to fire shots in the air and led to the arrests of sixty-one people. Initial blame for the riots was placed on the radical localist group Hong Kong Indigenous. Although they themselves denied taking part in the protests, they suggested that Leung’s leadership style was the root cause behind the radicalism among people who felt frustrated (Lau et al. 2016). The last episode in this series of protest and resistance took place in 2019 following the announcement of the National Security Law. The protests became marked by blackness and ninja-like outfits—not yellow umbrellas—transforming the city into a grim battleground. For Pang, the escalation of violence during the 2019 protests should not be read as a failure of the movement. In her words, “As shown in the 2019 protests, it is not the unity of the Hong Kongers as such, but the multileveled yet uncoordinated collaborations across social sectors that demonstrate how this people is capable for co-rule” (Pang 2020, 5), which we would like to ponder if the actual implementation of the law in 2020 signifies its end. The crackdown of the movement, including the subsequent trial against the so-called Hong Kong forty-seven (a group of pro-democracy legislators, journalists, politicians, activists, and NGO workers), is proclaimed by some observers as a death warrant of the city’s

civil society (see, for instance, Yu 2023). We contend, however, that with the movement itself in abeyance, there may be different afterlives, probably if not predominantly to emerge in the cultural rather than strictly political field. The future remains embodied by a generation that experienced the occupation of streets, the struggles with the police force, and the desire for social and political change.

Rather than looking at the future, we choose to move backwards in this chapter, at least chronologically. When going back to the Tat Ming concert series *ROUND AND ROUND AND ROUND* 兜兜轉轉演演唱會 from 2012, we somehow saw, felt, and heard something tumultuous foretold. And five years later, and in the *TAT MING PARTY 2017* 達明卅一派對演唱會 2017 concerts, we witnessed an increased anxiety over the state of the city and the invasive technologies of surveillance. In both concerts, we also experienced, albeit temporarily, a utopian longing to jointly make and shape a different future. In this chapter, zooming in to both concerts, we analyse reflections on the past of Hong Kong, on its present condition, as well as articulations of hope in tandem with anxiety towards the future.

Rather than analysing the protests themselves see (Au 2020; de Kloet 2018; Pang 2020; Veg 2015), this chapter explores how the music, and in particular the performances and visuals of Tat Ming, serve as a domain for articulating not only a sense of discontent with Hong Kong's political status quo, but also for exploring possible different futures. Tat Ming, we want to show in this chapter, constitutes a platform that has afforded imagination, iteration, and interpretation of possible street politics, the kind that took over Hong Kong in 2014 as well as of the events unfolding after the Umbrella Movement. To be clear, we are not trying to prove any causality here; nor can we. Our intention, on the other hand, is to acknowledge, and examine, the possible resonances between the concerts and the protests, and thus between music and politics at large. We draw on a Gramscian understanding of popular culture as dynamic and political, as a site of constant struggle between the resistance of subordinate groups and the forces of incorporation that operate in the interests of dominant groups (Gramsci 1971). As John Frow and Meaghan Morris note, popular culture is not an imposed culture, nor a spontaneous oppositional culture of the people, but rather a terrain of negotiation and interaction between the two. It is “a contested and conflictual set of practices of representation bound up with the processes of formation and re-formation of social groups” (Frow and Morris 1996, 356). The

popular cultural field is marked by a struggle to “articulate and disarticulate” specific meanings, ideologies, and politics (Mouffe 1981, 231). For us, as we theorised in Chapter 1, popular culture is a political practice because it reflects and operates within broader socio-political conditions, transports political ideas that support or contest ideologies, and forms a space where identities are imagined, negotiated, and contested.

In 2012, two years before the Umbrella protests, Tat Ming vented their worries and frustrations over the future of the city. Two concerts, entitled *ROUND AND ROUND AND ROUND*, were initially announced for April. When they sold out almost immediately, two more concerts were added, with equal commercial success. The concerts were lauded with critical acclaim. Calling the concerts “stunning,” two commentators noted that “from social media to newspaper columns, everyone is reading the concerts in their own ways. And what struck a common chord among us is that the songs miraculously correspond to what’s happening now” (Au and Ko 2012). Another columnist referred to the concerts as “the theme song of the city” (Leung 2012).

Pointing at the concerts’ “almost reckless way” of confronting the “collapses” in Hong Kong, a poet-writer described the “shocked” state in which he remained long after the concerts and concluded: “We don’t want to stay unchanged for fifty years. We must change, for the better” (Liu 2012). Tat Ming fans reacted similarly. Spark’s blog posting was typical of the kind of sentiments invoked by the concerts: “In this city where the principle of ‘one country, two systems’ no longer applies, where white terror and self-censorship reign, such a concert, especially in the mainstream music industry, is so precious” (Spark 2012). These post-concerts writings articulated a sense of empowerment amidst the fear of disappearance.

In 2017, Tat Ming performed another round of three reunion concerts in the Hong Kong Coliseum under the title *TAT MING PARTY 2017*. Compared to 2012, this reunion was (even) more dystopian. The concerts took the classic novel *1984* by George Orwell as the lynchpin, referencing to the increasing influence of authoritarianism in post-Handover Hong Kong and the world at large. The concert is structured into three themes and sections: surveillance, brainwashing, and suppression. From suppression, the performance morphs into resistance, then back to the harsh “reality” where the “failure of the Umbrella Movement” is featured, lamenting on the people who are defeated, ultimately leading to the evocation of David Bowie and his songs “Under Pressure” (1981[2017],

performed with guest Denise Ho)³ and “Heroes”⁴ (1977[2017]). Again, like in 2012, the concert series received critical acclaim from both critics and audiences.⁵ “This was probably the only Coliseum show that directly engaged with the Umbrella Movement,” writes Lam. In a lengthy essay built on interviews with crew members, the commentator offers a detailed analysis on how the concert series reconstructed the movement—“stripped of political symbolism, presenting the truest memories” (Lam 2017). Another critic Hui points at the sense of powerlessness in post-Umbrella Hong Kong. Compared with five years ago, Hui does not feel particularly empowered by the end of the show: “These days, with our injuries, it is not enough just to express ourselves, perhaps a performance that is reflective and sensitive is more inspirational” (Hui 2017). Poet-writer Liu updates his commentary published five years ago. While the earlier concerts started exposing the collapse of the city, Liu observes a full-scale revelation of the “utter darkness.” On the other hand, “all the friends who should be here are here”, he writes. “Under the current political climate, we have opted for Tat Ming, and Tat Ming has opted for reinterpreting *1984*, it’s an act of courage, and wisdom” (Liu 2017). In the next chapter, we will analyse the production logic of the 2017 concert and explore how, in both concert series, Tat Ming’s sound and aesthetics are deeply political.

We therefore shift our eyes and ears from the tumultuous and politically explicit street protests to the aestheticised show of popular sentiments: the 2012 and 2017 Tat Ming pop concerts. How does Tat Ming’s performance imagine the postcolonial city and its histories?⁶ How does it

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVuG0t18zNc>.

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RNTp40daBY>.

⁵ There are also commentaries that are less enthusiastic about the 2017 concerts, for their overly political tones, and simplistic political messages. See, for instance, Cheung 2017.

⁶ It is surely not our intention to dichotomise or hierarchise street protests and stage performances as forms of politics. In fact, it will be interesting but beyond the scope of this inquiry, to examine their imbrications. For our purposes here, we just want to take note of two points. First, despite their highly political contents and popularity, Tat Ming’s songs are seldom used during street protests, quite unlike their contemporary, rock band Beyond, whose number “Under the Vast Sky 海闊天空” is frequently mobilised, also during the Umbrella Movement; see Jonathan Wong, “Music of the Umbrella Revolution” (2016). Second, while Tat Ming’s physical and musical presence is largely missing in street protests, Anthony Wong, the other half of Tat Ming and in his capacity as solo pop artist,

negotiate Hong Kong's current socio-historical moment? And what kinds of futures does it fantasise for Hong Kong? And what differences can we distinguish between both concerts, one before and the other after the Umbrella Movement? For both concert series, rather than taking the entire performances on board, we zoom in onto three songs: "Today Could Have Been a Happy Day 今天應該很高興,"⁷ "Tonight the Stars Are Bright 今夜星光燦爛,"⁸ and "It's My Party."⁹ These three songs present different articulations of temporality, we start with reflecting on how the (colonial) history of Hong Kong is represented, we then move on to analyse how Hong Kong's present-day predicament is articulated, finally to probe into imaginations of the future in the concerts. These three temporalities, in conjunction with the two different moments the concerts took place, 2012 and 2017, are always already implicated with each another. Following our introduction in Chapter 1, they allow us to study how the constructs of the past, the present, and the possible futures of the city, are woven into the fibre of the concerts. The selected songs also occupy special positions in the duo's repertoire; while the former two hit songs have become classics cherished for their sharp insights into pre-Handover Hong Kong, the third song was created specifically for the 2012 concert series, for the post-Handover Hong Kong of now. As if to underline their significance, they were staged during the concerts with very elaborately designed visual supports.

To analyse these three songs, we conduct a close reading of the song lyrics and a visual analysis of the graphics that were shown on a large screen behind Tat Ming during the performances (Mirzoeff 1999). Visual analysis takes the image as its primary object of study. It studies "the functions of a world [...] through pictures, images, and visualisations, rather than through texts and words" (Mirzoeff 1999, 8). As a method, it lays bare how "the visual" constructs and conveys meaning. "The visual" is here always seen as polluted by "the non-visual": by power structures, beliefs, cultural sensibilities, discourses, and ideologies. Visual analysis

has become increasingly involved in public rallies. He did not only participate, but was also instrumental in creating a "theme song" for the Umbrella Movement; see Wong, "Music of the Umbrella Revolution" (2016).

⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gbLFsIsx7w>.

⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02vms3Eokz0>.

⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJgMDxVPfbU>.

unpacks these processes, interrogates the image, and shows how the image is a socio-culturally specific construction enmeshed with power.

THE PAST: GEOPOLITICS AND THE EVERYDAY

The song “Today Could Have Been a Happy Day,” released in 1988, is drenched in nostalgia for a past when families and friends still lived in Hong Kong to celebrate Christmas together. That it is Christmas and not Chinese New Year already hints at a nostalgia written in colonial times, in 1988, when Hong Kong was on the verge of disappearance. Driven by an anxiety over Hong Kong’s post-Handover future, many people migrated. Or, as the lyrics, written by Calvin Poon, go, “Wai-yip is now in the USA, on his own, making many plans / Mary is living in Australia, where it is warm every day / When I look at our old photos, memories rush back / That particular cosy Christmas Eve reappears.” Consequently, families as well as friends became increasingly dispersed all over the globe, triggering even stronger feelings of anxiety and loneliness among those who stayed behind in Hong Kong. The above-cited lyrics and the song’s title refers to that anxiety. In a city that is on the verge of disappearance, we hear Anthony Wong sing: “Today could have been a happy day / Today could have been a cosy day / As long as we are willing to imagine that we are still together / I look at those old photos, on my own, remembering those years.”

In the 2012 concert, the personal narrative of the song is linked to a grander construction of the geopolitical history of Hong Kong. The version of history now inscribed in the song is a version that does not express an anxiety over the Handover as such, which, after all, is a *fait accompli*; instead, it articulates an anxiety over the rise of China. This anxiety, furthermore, is linked to a critique of the erstwhile imperialist expansion of the United Kingdom. In the opening scene of the video projected onto a huge screen at the back of the stage, the world is caught between two forces—on the one side, that of China, symbolised by the face of Mao Zedong onto which the sign for the Chinese currency, the Yuan, is projected; on the other side, that of Queen Elizabeth II, with the English pound sign. Slowly this world is taken over by the English pound, pointing at the imperialist expansion of the United Kingdom, and more generally of the West, in the nineteenth century (Fig. 3.2). Simultaneously, a brief historical account is projected, starting with the First Opium War in 1842. What follows is an abstract overview of numbers and years,



Fig. 3.2 The world as controlled by the British Pound (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

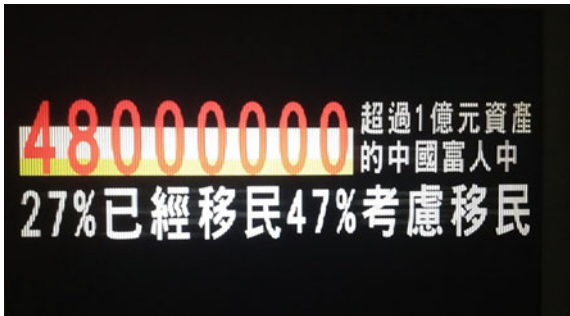


Fig. 3.3 Numbers and flowcharts on the rise of China and the movements of Chinese people (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

in which the rise of China and the changes of Hong Kong are translated into numbers of people migrating to and from Hong Kong, numbers of babies from the mainland born in Hong Kong, and so forth (Fig. 3.3).

The video showed that the population in Hong Kong increased from 1.86 million in 1949 to 5.1 million in 1980, that 300,000 mainland Chinese fled to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution, that 10% of its population migrated in the years around the Handover and that in 2012, almost half of the 48 million rich Chinese on the mainland planned to migrate and 27% have done so. The constant flow of figures

performs, graphically and visually, the steady global rise of China. At the same time, it shows the rise of Hong Kong and the flows of its people in and out of the city since the 1980s. At one particular point, the flag of the United States morphs into the Chinese flag (Fig. 3.4). By the end of the song, Chairman Mao and Queen Elizabeth appear again, but now it is the Chinese Yuan that starts to take over the world (Fig. 3.5).

We are thus presented with an arguably modernist construction of the history of Hong Kong, from imperialism to the (alleged) rise of China.



Fig. 3.4 The Chinese flag supplanting the US flag (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

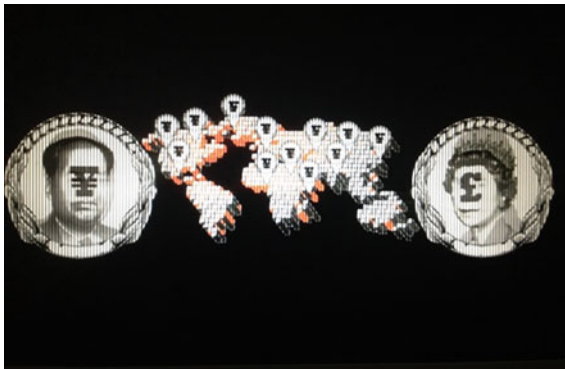


Fig. 3.5 The world as controlled by the Chinese Yuan (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

The modernism of this construction is further accentuated through the abundant use of numbers and figures. The numbers project a world in flux, in which fears over the loss of the postcolonial city are reflected. The fears as expressed through numbers are related not only to a global rise of China, but also to the takeover of Hong Kong by China, invoking a fear of Sinification. The latter does run the danger of conflating with the increasingly anti-mainlander sentiments that we witness in Hong Kong over the 2010s and 20s, resulting at times in clashes in the online and offline worlds. This influx does cause real problems for Hong Kong, as Veg remarks, “with over 50 million visitors a year in 2013, comparable to 29 million for a city like Paris, Hong Kong’s infrastructure is stretched to breaking point” (2015, 68). But these infrastructural problems are mapped onto a civilisational discourse in which the mainlander is portrayed as the Other that lacks manners.

What is more interesting than the actual numbers being on display is the juxtaposition of a nostalgic, personal song about migration with crude facts, years, numbers, and flow charts. The history as constructed during the show tells a story of both Western colonial aggression and Chinese regional and global expansion. It does so in a modernist, neoliberal, quantitative language, in which people are reduced to numbers and historical changes are projected as flow charts and fancy moving figures. This is a language of global capitalism, in which people are abstracted into numbers, and inequalities are transformed into neat and colourful graphs.

What the audience is confronted with is nostalgic, melancholic musings over lost friendships as vividly as reflections on, and, above all, a performance of global geopolitics. In combining the histories of nineteenth-century colonial expansion and twenty-first century global Sinification, and translating both to the abstracted lingua franca of global capitalism—numbers—the song forges a connection between everyday life and the rise and fall of Empire—be it British or Chinese. It contrasts the global geopolitics with a much smaller, more personal story of loneliness in a time when people are always on the move. Rather than condemning a century of humiliation and celebrating the subsequent rise of China, “Today Could Have Been a Happy Day” interrogates any claim on global hegemony and directs our gaze back to the lived, everyday implications of such geopolitics. The schism between a nostalgic song—nostalgic in its lyrics as well as its sound—and the question of imperialism and expansion not only poses questions concerning the current rise of China, but also refuses to univocally celebrate its colonial past. The nostalgia is as cosy

as ambivalent, when situated in the wider context of British imperialism, acknowledging that the Christmas tree is after all a hegemonic object.

Five years later, the larger geopolitical references are not that conspicuous anymore. It is now Tats, instead of Anthony, who starts singing the song with a somewhat broken, shaky, and vulnerable voice. The audience members hold their phones with the lights on, creating an atmosphere of intimacy and community, an atmosphere that is sustained throughout the whole song. For most of the time, the screens present live images of Tat Ming on stage, dressed in spectacular outfits, seemingly made from newspaper clippings, both in English and Chinese. The outfits make it look as if they are literally wrapped in history (see Fig. 3.6). Sustaining the motif of historicity, the musicians are dressed in army-like uniforms that are reminiscent of the Communist Youth League, or of its popular representations. Such outfits correspond with the central theme of *1984*, that of authoritarian politics, as does the whole show in itself—as explained earlier in this chapter when summarising the main thrust of the concert (see Fig. 3.7). At the start of the concert, the musicians enter the show marching, as if they were an army.

However, aside from the outfits, the performance of the song itself is much more intimate and much less political when compared to that of 2012. It becomes a song to sing together, more than a moment to reflect upon global geopolitics. The togetherness is further enhanced by Anthony who moves towards the audiences, touches them, and accepts



Fig. 3.6 Tat Ming in newspaper outfit (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)



Fig. 3.7 Musician's outfits (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

a bunch of flowers. Towards the end of the song, we observe some change: the screens start depicting streets of Hong Kong, with cars, and an empty footbridge, all in black and white. In our reading—and we refrain deliberately here from connecting this reading to the intention of the artist, as we want to read the performance as a text in itself—these were the places in Central that were occupied in 2014. Places that at that time were turned from a matter of fact—a highway denoting high capitalism—to a matter of concern—a highway as a place to camp, to sleep, to fall in love, and to protest (cf. Latour 2005; Fig. 3.8). Instead of the Grand History evoked in the 2012 rendition of the song, we are confronted here with the local history of Hong Kong, albeit in an opaque, indirect way. The images of the streets of Hong Kong morph into old photos of Tat Ming, from their early days in the late 1980s. These images evoke a sense of nostalgia, of a colonial time past, a moment when the Handover was approaching, and the future unclear and undecided.

We read these images of the old Tat Ming as a form of nostalgia. But what kind of nostalgia is this? Svetlana Boym distinguishes two forms of nostalgia: the restorative and the reflective. Restorative nostalgia refers to a desire towards the past, a restoration of a real home, a purer and more innocent culture. Reflective nostalgia “explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones. It loves details,



Fig. 3.8 The non-occupied streets of Hong Kong (Screenshot from concert recording)

not symbols. At best, it can present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholies” (Boym 2001, 30). As Boym concludes, “restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, just as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment, or critical reflection” (200, 141). The compilation of past images ends with an old photo of Tat Ming sitting on an empty highway. It is here that the past connects to the present—there may be no occupation of the streets anymore, but there they are: Tats and Ming are still sitting on the streets, claiming their sonic right to the city (Fig. 3.9). It is thus an act of reflective nostalgia, in Boym’s terms, as the past is connected to critically reflect upon the present status of Hong Kong.

The old photo, like the past, is not static; it morphs. Here, we see the disappearance of the highway, the context, leaving behind the duo, persistently present. With the disappearance of the highway, the poem



Fig. 3.9 Tat Ming on the street (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

“Slightly Bright, the Sky” by the celebrated Hong Kong literary figure Xi Xi is presented on screen.¹⁰ There we can read:

So clean, so clean
as if nothing has ever
happened
we hear
your crying
we fall down together
then we stand up, holding again
the hands that got lost
igniting
a torch
hoisted up even higher
[...]
All the injuries
let them stay on the surface of the skin
we are so beautiful
nothing could ever

¹⁰ Xi Xi was the penname of Shanghai-born and Hong Kong-based poet and novelist Ellen Cheung Yin (1937–2022). The poem was translated by the authors for the citation here.

hurt us.

The song's performance, as well as the poem, evoke an intense sense of melancholia; things are scattered, it is hard to stay up, but in togetherness there may still be resilience. Geopolitics is replaced by local history.

THE PRESENT: CITY OF POSTCOLONIAL RUINS

The song "Tonight the Stars Are Bright," written by Keith Chan and composed by Tats Lau, was first released in 1987, three years after the signing of the Joint Declaration, at a moment when life in pre-Handover Hong Kong was marked by fears of disappearance and feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, and melancholia. The annual protests on the anniversary of the Handover and the Umbrella demonstrations of 2014 show that these narratives were still present in Hong Kong. In what follows, we suggest that in Tat Ming's 2012 performance of "Tonight the Stars Are Bright," these past but persistent (post)colonial narratives of the city are resituated in the present, questioning and (re)constructing the postcolonial city. In doing so, the performance alludes to Walter Benjamin's idea of history as fragmented. In the 2017 concert, as we will show later, the song is visually less embedded in the cityscape of Hong Kong than in the global brands that occupy its shopping malls, indexing less local politics than global capitalism, as it were.

In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin analyses the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris to critique the bourgeois experience and reveal the history hidden under its ideological mask (Benjamin 1999). Benjamin's aim is to "destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history's continuum" (Buck-Morss 1989, 10). For Benjamin, it is dangerous to see the past as a narrative that is whole. Instead, we should see the past as fragmented. Fragments of the past must be resituated within the present.

The first fragment is embodied by the song itself. The song, produced in the late 1980s, inevitably carries traces of that historical moment. In Tat Ming's 2012 performance, the meanings that the song constructed in the past are rearranged in the present. In the performance, the pre-Handover narrative of the fear of disappearance and the desire to reinvent the city—through which the city ultimately "dis-appears"—is first constructed

through its lyrics. The song tells the story of an electrifying nocturnal exploration of Hong Kong. As Tat Ming sings in the opening lines: “Neon lights have made a bright night, a bright city / Hesitating on the road, we just want to find a new way to go, in this midnight / In the park where the Queen’s statue stands, lights gather / On the other side of the harbour, thousands of lights, beautiful and tragic.” In the song, this encounter with the city is constructed as if it were a passionate encounter with a lover, as Tat Ming continues: “Following the street lights, she is getting closer to me / No need to ask her name, I just want her to abandon herself, with me, in the starry night.” This encounter is marked by a zealous desire to love and take in the city, coupled to the fear that Hong Kong is disappearing, as Tat Ming sings: “Dashing through the bright lights are the lost children / Please take a look at this bright city / Dash again, and I wonder, I fear, that the brightness of this city stops, now.” Tat Ming’s nocturnal venture through Hong Kong is thus an attempt not only to take in, but also to reinvent the city one last time before it disappears.

As suggested earlier, this narrative of the fear of disappearance is still present in postcolonial Hong Kong. Hence, this fragment of the past is (still) part of the construct(ion) of the present and as such defines how the history of the present (city) is written. Tat Ming’s 2012 performance, however, takes up this narrative of the fear of disappearance and ends it remorselessly. In this endeavour, the performance also imagines taking down two other powerful and dominant narratives underwriting Hong Kong’s present: Chinese capitalist authoritarianism and global neoliberalism. Under British rule, Hong Kong was recognised not simply as a neoliberal capitalist economy, but as one of the freest market economies in the world. The Joint Declaration called for Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region to retain its capitalist system and a measure of political autonomy for a period of fifty years (Ren 2010, 5). Today, within this special zone where a private market is endorsed, the Chinese government operates effectively through state enterprises. Major state-owned companies, such as the Bank of China and China Travel Service, have appropriated Hong Kong’s free-market system to enhance their status as super firms exactly as neoliberals expected them to (Ren 2010, 15). Global neoliberalism and Chinese capitalist authoritarianism are in effect heavily entangled with each other.

“Tonight the Stars Are Bright” imagines ruining these three narratives through the use of the large video screen behind Tat Ming. The

visuals shown on this screen construct a bipartite tale of the city. At the start of the performance, Hong Kong's iconic skyline as seen by night from across Victoria Harbour appears on the screen (Fig. 3.10). Anthony Wong holds up his hand as if to cover his eyes from the city's brightness (Fig. 3.11). The skyscrapers' contours are demarcated by colourful lights that cheerfully start to dance to the song's tunes while laser beams light up the sky, creating a visual spectacle that resembles Hong Kong's touristic Symphony of Lights show. Simultaneously, with animation effects, the city is flying towards a bright light as stars from a vivid centre-point are passing by at high speed (Fig. 3.12). In this way, an optimistic tale of the city is constructed. This part of the performance must then be read as representing the period before the declaration when Hong Kong's population was enjoying increasing economic growth and self-confidence. What is ignored or downplayed in this imagery are the grave income inequalities that characterise the Hong Kong of past decades.

The optimistic tale is challenged, however, by the second half in which Hong Kong turns dystopian. On-screen fireworks start to light up the sky (Fig. 3.13). Although the fireworks seem to add to the celebratory atmosphere, it soon transpires that Hong Kong's skyscrapers are starting,



Fig. 3.10 A video screen displaying Hong Kong's skyline (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)



Fig. 3.11 Anthony Wong's pose at the beginning of the performance (Screenshot from concert recording)



Fig. 3.12 The Backdrop to the performance (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

one by one, to collapse (Fig. 3.14). At the end of the performance, what remain are the ruins of the city (Fig. 3.15). These leftovers are then blown towards the audience (Figs. 3.16 and 3.17). It is here that the performance ends the narrative of “the fear of the disappearance of the city”; it finishes this past but persistent narrative by finally letting the city disappear in its totality.



Fig. 3.13 The fireworks light up the dark sky (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)



Fig. 3.14 The skyscrapers begin to collapse (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)



Fig. 3.15 The city is left in ruins (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)



Fig. 3.16 And the leftovers start to fragment (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

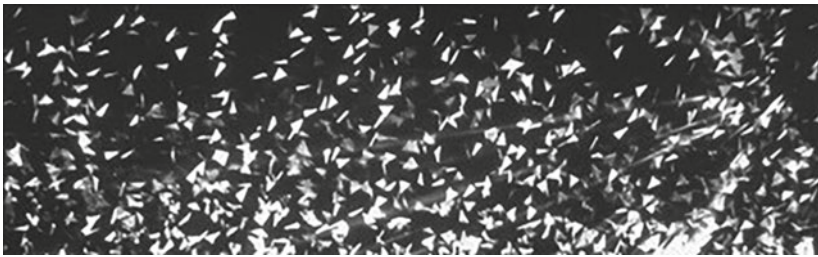


Fig. 3.17 The fragments disappear as they are blown towards the spectators (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

In the way the city is disappearing, the performance manages to dismantle two other “truths” of Hong Kong’s present—global neoliberalism and Chinese capitalist authoritarianism. As Figs. 3.13 to 3.17 show, it is through the demolition of a myriad of skyscrapers—the ultimate symbols of both “truths”—that postcolonial Hong Kong collapses. What in the end is left over from the Handover are the city’s ruins. Although these leftovers point to an apocalyptic end for Hong Kong, they also clear the ground for some new and different beginnings. Tat Ming’s performance (re)constructs the history of Hong Kong. This history starts in optimistic pre-Declaration Hong Kong, moves to an anxious pre-Handover Hong Kong, and ends in a present dystopian postcolonial city. At the same time, the performance shatters this history; it ruins three powerful (post)colonial narratives that are part of the construct(ion) of Hong Kong’s present.

Whereas the (fear of) disappearance of Hong Kong is symbolised in 2012 by its ruinification, the city is absent in the 2017 performance of the song. Instead, for most of the time, we see the band performing, with Anthony walking restlessly on the stage. The stage consists of a big

road, a passage, a bridge in the middle of the Coliseum, with the audience seated around it. Lights make patterns on the road, in red, yellow, blue, or white, as if the band is under constant surveillance. Anthony's walking around can be read as an attempt to escape from that surveillance, but to no avail. Towards the end, the screens are filled with brand names, with recognisable logos but deliberate misspellings, like KIEA instead of IKEA or KENNO instead of KENZO, either to make fun of such naming and branding, or simply to avoid legal claims (Fig. 3.18). While a handful of emerging Chinese brands are alluded to (e.g. Taomo hinting at Taobao, a Chinese online shopping platform), most of the brands are not local ones but Western and Japanese brands—gesturing more clearly towards the surge of global neoliberalism and less towards Chinese capitalist power.

Slowly the brands catch fire, being burnt away (Fig. 3.19), and finally taken over by a hellish fire. We are actually hesitant in using active or passive voice in describing the fire and the brands: are the brands burning, or are they being burnt, or does the visualisation hint at both scenarios? What we witness in the end is fire. This ending obviously resonates with the 2012 performance; back then it was the skyline of Hong Kong—symbolising not just locality but also global capitalism, or more precisely, global neoliberalism and Chinese capitalist power—that crumbled down,



Fig. 3.18 Display of brands (Screenshot from concert recording)

while this time global brands that occupy the numerous shopping malls and streets of Hong Kong, a city with the highest density of shopping malls in the world (Stefan 2016), that are burning and burnt. In both cases, it is global capitalism and its related conspicuous consumption that is smashed into pieces, an act of destruction to itself and to everything else. Towards the next song, the on-screen fire transforms into a giant real ball, burning like a sun, around which the band members play. Is it a new start, after the collapse of the system? But it can as well be read as the end of times, given the radiant light of the ball. What remains is a fragmented history and a precarious present of Hong Kong, which opens up the possibility for the performance to fantasise more histories and different futures for the postcolonial city.



Fig. 3.19 Brands slowly burning down (Screenshot from concert recording)

THE FUTURE: IT'S MY PARTY

It is this insistence on the possibility of more histories and futures that Tat Ming iterates when Anthony Wong sings, repeatedly, the last couplet of another song: “Dust from the past is yet to settle, we must continue our party / For years and months, I dance what I dance, it’s called life.” If Hong Kong has become a dystopian postcolonial city, Tat Ming’s concert sends out not so much a call to arms, but a call to feet: the utopian act in town is to party, to dance in this landscape of ruins. Composed by Tats Lau and lyrics written by co-author Yiu Fai Chow, “It’s My Party” is the only single Tat Ming released before the 2012 concerts were staged.¹¹ While major parts of the lyrics are written in Cantonese Chinese, the title is in English and whenever the same line appears in the song, it is also performed in English. Playing on the double meaning of the English word “party,” the performance cues us to the politics and poetics of partying in Hong Kong’s current historical juncture—for all the enactments of the festive and the subversive in this popular performance, Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of one particular manifestation of folk culture is helpful: the carnival (Bakhtin 1984).

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin connects Rabelais’ Renaissance novels to the attitude towards laughter in the Middle Ages—laughter as therapeutic power and as freedom of speech and freedom of spirit (Bakhtin 1984). Tracking this medieval tradition of folk humour, Bakhtin conceptualises the carnival and the carnivalesque literature as means to create a world upside-down where everyday hierarchies and official truths are, albeit temporarily, mocked, disrupted, and overturned by an eruption of laughter, of fun, of voices, of energy normally contained by fear and authority (Stallybas and White 1986). As a form of resistance admittedly licensed by that very fear and authority, the carnival actualises, according to Bakhtin, “a victory of laughter over fear [...] a defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death” (Bakhtin 1984, 90–91).

Bakhtin’s work must be read in dialogue with the specific circumstances of his time. Bakhtin was writing in Stalin’s Russia where authoritarian commandments and prohibitions were imposed on writers. The satiric

¹¹ For the 2017 concerts, Yiu Fai Chow also wrote a new song, titled “1 + 4 = 14,” the title itself already pointing at the importance and urgency to read reality against the grain.

genres of fun and laughter were particularly rejected. In other words, if Rabelais' novels enact the medieval carnival to initiate a power struggle with the state and the church, Bakhtin's study of Rabelais is doing nothing less. As formulated by Michael Holquist, "Bakhtin, like Rabelais, explores throughout his book the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial" (Holquist in Bakhtin 1984, xvi).

Like Bakhtin's writing on Rabelais, Tat Ming's 2012 concerts took place precisely in this interface between above and below, between heightened national control from Beijing and intensified local, popular longing to break free.¹² Mobilising the global form of entertainment called partying—note the use of the global tongue of English in the song—the Tat Ming concerts evoke, in Bakhtin's terminology, a generally popular-festive atmosphere, during which the performance of "It's My Party" is one of the loudest and queerest proclamations of laughter and freedom. In the song's opening couplets, Tat Ming sings: "The mad makes a date with the mute / To take over the mission of the entire city / You dance a striptease, I dance naked / Come come come, let's shout once more what we shouted then. [...] Join the party with a different biography / You wear the costume of the big bird, I that of a rabbit / Let the grown-ups take control of all the beasts, but youth belongs to me." Semantically, the song is thus a call to join the party—"Come come come"—and those who are called may be socially undesirable or morally dubious, but they share one thing in common: they are not the "grown-ups" who would

¹² A quick search over the political news in Hong Kong during the months before the concerts would suffice to indicate the kind of jittery state the city has been going through. For instance, in March 2012, an essay penned by a veteran political commentator Yui-sui Lau was found to be doctored and its stance changed to be supportive of the government. Lau protested and shortly his column was scrapped. This incident took place when the local government was accused of appeasing Beijing and rushing through a new legislation ostensibly in protection of copyrights but widely seen as undermining local people's possibilities of running political commentaries not to the liking of the authorities. Earlier on, alarm over Hong Kong's long-cherished freedom of speech and of news was raised when two critical talk shows of Radio Television Hong Kong were "re-organised." This unanticipated change took place just months after Yan-kwong Tang was appointed to head the government-funded but traditionally independent media organisation. An administrative officer himself, Tang's appointment was widely perceived as another step Beijing took to tighten its control over RTHK. In the years after 2012, much more like-minded cases of course happened, reaching a peak with the termination in 2021 of both *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, a newspaper and online news provider deemed too much anti-establishment.

spend their time and energy to control “the beasts.” Those who party are the young ones who would rather be beasts themselves, by wearing animal costumes or dancing naked. Or, they are “fairies” who look for each other to “continue the revolution,” as Tat Ming continues: “We continue to look for fairies to continue our revolution / Simply because we want to be happy / Jump into the empty city, and the streets will promise.” If the Beijing regime that seeks to intensify its control over the postcolonial city is a fact, the dancing party interrupts with a fantasy; if their identity is increasingly a top-down campaign, the party is a bottom-up invention of the people.

On stage, we see Anthony Wong and Tats Lau dressed in outlandish silver outfits with protrusions from their back resembling broken wings or multiple legs. Their eyes are adorned with large oval-shaped patches of heavy black mascara (Fig. 3.20). Such travesty is an indispensable element of the feast of fools described by Bakhtin. “The renewal of clothes and of social image,” is intimately connected to “a reversal of hierarchical levels” where jesters are proclaimed kings and clowns elected abbots (Bakhtin 1984, 81).

Such an interruption of authority is not only semantic, sartorial, and symbolic; freedom is actualised, on at least two levels: freedom of speech and freedom of spirit. First, freedom of speech. During the entire performance of “It’s My Party,” short messages are projected behind the duo. Written in a satirical manner, these messages poke fun at institutions and persons in power, including political parties (“Communist Party, how

Fig. 3.20 Anthony Wong in costume
(Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)





Fig. 3.21 “God loves Hong Kong” (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

are you?”), leaders (“Is C.Y. Leung a comrade?”—the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong was criticised as a puppet leader installed by the Beijing authorities), God (“God loves Hong Kong”—a sarcastic gesture to the colonial anthem “God Saves the Queen,” and a grim reference to the increasing influence of certain fundamental Christian faiths in the city), and Tat Ming themselves (“God loves Tats Lau”—Tats is a self-proclaimed Christian). While the Chinese characters continue flashing in red and white, what they are articulating becomes less spectacular than the performance of the very possibility of doing so. In the fifteenth year after the Handover, the postcolonial city was increasingly concerned about losing its freedom, and increasingly fearful of Beijing’s influence and intervention in local affairs. But there, despite all these doubts and fears, in demonstratively huge messages spanning the whole breadth of the stage like an electronic banner, Tat Ming and their fellow Hong Kong people are still able to express themselves, to assert once again the freedom of speech they were used to and guaranteed under the “one country two systems” principle (Fig. 3.21).

Second, freedom of spirit. A party will never truly become a party if it is not a collective and collaborative affair. While Tat Ming is performing and the messages are flashing, the audience cheer and clap their hands. Among the messages that elicit the loudest response is: “Is Anthony Wong a comrade?” (Fig. 3.22). Given the Communist deployment of the term “comrade,” this is a question about the performer’s allegiance to the Beijing regime, a question constantly posed to the local population ever since the Handover in 1997. Next to its Communist deployment, the Chinese word “comrade,” or *tongzhi* in putonghua, has long been appropriated by the gay population to refer to themselves. The message is a queer allusion to Anthony’s political and personal connection with something revolutionary, subversive, but not exactly of the Communist kind.

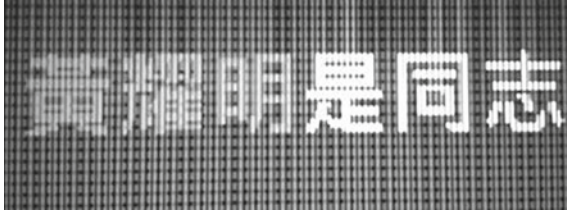


Fig. 3.22 “Anthony Wong is tongzhi” (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

Although gay practices are legal in Hong Kong, the society remains by and large hostile towards homosexuality. The audience members, aware of the rumours, if not anticipation of Anthony’s homosexuality, obviously enjoy it; they applaud in high spirits. During the final concert, Anthony Wong came out. It was hardly coincidental that Helene Iswolsky actually used the English word “gay” in her translation of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque: for instance, “gay parody of truth” (Bakhtin 1984, 95). In a party, everyone should be gay, should be a comrade, should be joining a revolution to laugh at the authoritarian voice and set their spirits free—like the beasts or fairies.

The performance of “It’s My Party” constitutes the quintessential carnivalesque moment, when those who answer the call and stand up to dance, to party, experience themselves in a collectivity that defy the dominant boundaries of the powerful and the powerless, above and below, national and local. At that moment in the Hong Kong Coliseum, they are ready to “take over the mission of the entire city” and occupy the Central District (where the Hong Kong administration is), the Western District (where the Beijing representative office is), and wherever else they want, as Tat Ming sings in the third couplet: “Central district is mine, Western district is mine / They are all mine, they are all I want.” It was during the party, as in the medieval feast, that “[f]or a short time life came out of its usual, legalised and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom” (Bakhtin 1984, 89). Such freedom, however ephemeral, is actualised and experienced by all those partying in the Coliseum; it is possible now and it must still be possible in the future.

However, when we move five years forward to the 2017 performance, the freedom of speech has become even more under duress. As we will explain in the next chapter, commercial sponsors did not dare to commit their names to the concerts anymore. The band had to walk on an even flimsier tightrope than in 2012, when so much more could still be articulated. It is hardly surprising that there are no slogans projected during the

2017 performance of the same song. Given the context and the general ambiance of the concerts as a whole, the song itself, however, serves as a moment of release. When this song is being performed, the audience has spent almost two hours as part of a spectacle in which surveillance, brainwashing, and suppression are the key ingredients. The sun described earlier becomes occasionally a huge eye ball, as if it were watching over both the band and the audience, indeed like the surveillance technologies and the censoring apparatus—just as multiple references are drawn to George Orwell's *1984*. This asks for a moment of release. An escape. This necessity of release, of escape, is further enhanced by the chronology of the song, itself being part of a musical sequence that has started earlier, that has used David Bowie's slogan as its motto—"I don't know where I'm going from here, but I promise it won't be boring."

At the start of the song, Anthony arises from the floor, in yet another spectacular outfit, this time white with many red stains. Referencing David Bowie's makeup—a lightning bolt with his eye in the centre, both Anthony and Tats have a big star surrounding their eyes (Fig. 3.23). The screens are used to magnify the band and the many dancers on stage. These dancers are clothed in colourful hoodies with corresponding jogging trousers. Written on the front of their hoodies is the lyrical line taken from David Bowie's song—"We can be heroes"—an utterance alluding to an ethics of possibility, gesturing towards the future. The slogan can also be read as predicting Tat Ming's later performance of that song "Heroes", in what can be seen as a tribute to David Bowie who had passed away more than a year earlier, and with whom Anthony collaborated earlier. In addition to the dancers, there is a drum band, similarly dressed, turning the stage indeed into a youthful and highly carnivalesque space (Fig. 3.24). Everybody dances around cheerfully, free and unconstrained. The faces of the dancers remain invisible, as they all wear masks, consisting of extremely pixelated faces that render all of them unrecognisable and highly similar. While one could argue that the masks refer to the totalisation of power, turning people into masses, we may also read the same masks as a tactic of disguise and invisibility, a way to play with surveillance, necessary to become more free in the current situation. We can be heroes, indeed, provided we remain unseen, unnoticed, and barely recognisable. In such extraordinary times, the faceless, the anonymous have become the heroic. Then we can party, together. And, to paraphrase Holquist, Tat Ming's performance, of the song both in 2012 as well as



Fig. 3.23 Tat Ming performing “It’s My Party” in 2017 (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)



Fig. 3.24 The carnivalesque stage (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

2017, “carnivalises the present because it is a hope for the future” (in Bakhtin 1984, xxii).

RUMINATING ON THE RUINS

In *The Future As Cultural Fact*, Arjun Appadurai moves from seeing the social world as an informational space towards a more pressing concern with time (2013). Appadurai’s book, and also our analysis, can be seen as replying to Jane Guyer’s call for an anthropology of the futures that people posit, fantasise, fear, await, or dissolve (2007, 410). Appadurai puts an “ethics of possibility” in stark contrast with an “ethics of probability.” In the former, a diversity of collective goods is imagined. The latter is the ethic of the contemporary financialised economy and its impulse is instead to control and manage risks. Both ethics work simultaneously in popular culture. On the one hand, popular cultural products give way to an ethics of possibility, providing tools to imagine, fantasise, and stimulate the coming into being of a desired future for Hong Kong. On the other hand, these constructions are never free from relations of power. They are subject to an “ethics of probability,” which works to diminish risks and which seeks to control what kinds of future are envisioned as right and wrong.

Tat Ming’s performance demonstrates how popular culture gives way to an “ethics of possibility” (Appadurai 2013, 188). But in their performance of numbers about the rise of China (in “Today Could Have Been a Happy Day”) and the influx of mainlanders coming to Hong Kong, in their quite uncritical celebration of the economic prosperity of Hong Kong before the Handover (in “Tonight the Stars Are Bright”), they also articulate an ethics of probability. They do so by mobilising numbers, graphs, and ideas of growth and prosperity, presenting the influx of mainlanders as a risk, a flow that demands control. This does not only attest to popular culture’s alliance with power; it also runs the danger of siding uncomfortably with rising anti-mainlander sentiments that characterise today’s Hong Kong.

The queerness of Tat Ming and the performance puts into sharper relief their articulation of an ethics of possibility. It is a queerness that resembles that of the Pet Shop Boys, with fluid gender and sexuality performances, spectacular visual aesthetics and a continuous change of costumes. In Chapter 4, we will further explore the queerness of Tat Ming. Following José Esteban Muñoz, such performances and aesthetics gesture towards a potentiality, a utopian longing (2009). In his words,

“We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (Muñoz 2009, 1). When Tat Ming celebrates the banality of the everyday in “Today Could Have Been a Happy Day,” when they cheerfully turn the city into ruins in “Tonight the Stars Are Bright” and end up with a call to party beyond the regulations set by the authorities, what they do is, to paraphrase Muñoz, “dreaming and enacting better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately [imagining] new worlds” (Muñoz 2009, 1).

They did so in 2012, and in 2017. What we have witnessed, however, is that the words have become less explicit, just as the underlying narrative of the concert has become gloomier, darker. This is not surprising, given that the latter concerts took place after the end of the Umbrella Movement, and in a context of rapidly intensifying political pressure and control. This may explain why the geopolitics of “Today Could Have Been a Happy Day” have made way for a much more intimate, connective, and nostalgic approach. The fear for the disappearance of the city, its imminent reunification, remained present in the 2017 rendition of the song “Tonight the Stars Are Bright,” albeit more indirectly, through the prism of global capitalism. And it may explain why the critical wordings during “It’s My Party” have transformed themselves into a colourful carnivalesque performance of many young dancers, radiating whatever hope there is towards the future.

The queer aesthetic “frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity” (Muñoz 2009, 1). The performance of “It’s My Party” and the politics of Tat Ming were not only symbolic. During the concerts of 2012 and 2017, authority was interrupted and freedom of speech and freedom of spirit were momentarily actualised. The carnivalesque spirit remained, even if momentarily, in tandem with a politics of invisibility and disguise. Two years after the 2012 concerts, that potentiality transformed, if not exploded, into a carnivalesque street protest, when students, workers, and other Hong Kong citizens took over the streets. Their claim was a claim to the right of the city, of its present and above all its future. In its aesthetics with yellow umbrellas, protest songs, and street lectures, in its cheerful atmosphere, it is as if Tat Ming’s call for a party has been heard widely. The Umbrella Movement became history. A couple of years after the 2017 concerts, the streets of Hong Kong became the arena for another series of protests, another occasion of carnivalesque freedom and interruption. The protests were suppressed, soon to

be overwhelmed by an intense concern over the COVID-19 pandemic. One wonders if Tat Ming may perform again in the Coliseum at all; if they do, and if they do perform these songs again, how would they?

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CHAPTER 4

Forbidden Love, Forgetting Gender

We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.

José Esteban Muñoz (2009, 1)

How to suspend the very *idea* of endings? How to maintain the space of exception without blind optimism? How to prolong the inhale of collective breath for as long as possible? How to tell a story while holding your breath?

Elvia Wilk (2019 online; emphasis in original)

Let us move briefly from Hong Kong further up north, to Beijing. The MAXX music festival that took place in Beijing on May 1, 2012, felt even more regulated than other music festivals in the capital city, such as the Strawberry Festival. There were multiple mill barriers surrounding the stage, where we and other audience members stood, and the *gongan* (police) presence was palpable. Anthony Wong was the closing act of the

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Fig. 4.1 Rainbow flags at the MAXX music festival, Beijing (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

day. When he entered the stage, rainbow flags, large and small, here and there, were hoisted, waving and celebrating a sense of queerness in the Chinese capital (Fig. 4.1) (Lo 2012). The performance was just a few days after Anthony Wong's coming out, also on stage, in Hong Kong, which we also analysed in the previous chapter.

Whereas lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+¹) communities and practices have been increasingly active in Beijing for the past decades, they remain by and large invisible to the public eye. Gay and lesbian film festivals are held discreetly and sometimes are disrupted, while a number of bars and discos have rapidly opened, closed, or changed location to survive (Bao 2018, 2020, 2021; Kong 2015, 2023). Destination, a gay club north of the Workers' Stadium, is still operating in 2023, almost twenty years after it opened in 2005. Nevertheless, rainbow flags in a public space, at an event not linked to queer culture, with

¹ Different acronyms are being used, some also including asexual and intersex persons (LGBTQIA+), see Mauriello (2022) for a further discussion on the politics of such acronyms.

all the police officers around—that moment in 2012 felt as if mainland China had entered a new phase. It is indicative of the queer possibilities of popular music. We hasten to add, however, that in the early 2020s, such waving of a rainbow flag in a public crowd has become again politically sensitive in mainland China, pointing sadly at the instability and fragility of the increased freedom for LGBTQ+ cultures. For our purposes here, we want to note the striking occurrence that it takes a pop singer from another locality, Hong Kong, to facilitate that queer expression in public space in Beijing. Moreover, Hong Kong is not and has never been the queer centre of East Asia. In the Sinophone world, Taipei has been considered the capital of queer politics and pink money. Hong Kong, a British colony for more than 150 years, is haunted by a disturbing mixture of Victorian and Confucian values that has for a long time limited sexual expression.

Indeed, before the public coming out of Anthony Wong and other celebrities in 2012, queer culture in Hong Kong was characterised by a playful politics of invisibility, opacity, and ambivalence, which several scholars have proposed as a queer alternative to the confrontational, identity-based politics often advocated in the West. Helen Hok-sze Leung, for example, claims that the queer undercurrent of Hong Kong ran against the grain of “the ‘global gay’ narrative that assimilates non-Western queer expressions into its own trajectory and image” (2008, 4). We witness here a curious and productive alliance between postcolonial Hong Kong and queer theory. Sudeep Dasgupta aptly describes the theoretical zeal of the latter, saying that “the discursive production of the homosexual subject, queer theory argues, is marked by incompleteness, ambivalence, and instability precisely because of the inability of representation either to adequate the object it refers to, or to control the discourse-effect it engenders” (2009, 3). With hindsight, queer theory’s poststructuralist mistrust in identity and representation corresponded neatly with Hong Kong’s ambivalent and multivocal queer politics. This is what Leung refers to as Hong Kong’s queer undercurrent, inspired by the pop lyrics written by Lin Xi (“In this city / It is not possible / To love without undercurrents”) (2008).²

² The song, titled “Undercurrents 暗湧,” was first performed by megastar Faye Wong end 1996. Anthony Wong created a cover for the film *Hold You Tight 愈快樂愈墮落*, directed by Stanley Kwan and released in 1998. The film was a rare instance of Hong

But then, as an unexpected blast that cracks open the undercurrents of queer invisibility and unrepresentability, reality overtook theory, and surprised and challenged it, in the year 2012. The coming out of Anthony Wong during a Tat Ming Pair³ live performance, that we have analysed in the previous chapter as a carnivalesque act, marked the turning point. This act was soon followed by similar acts of coming out of other pop stars. This chapter investigates the articulation between sexuality and popular music, in particular Tat Ming, in the context of Hong Kong and mainland China. In doing so, we will trace the emergence of a Chinese movement to find indigenous ways of understanding sexual diversity. Interwoven with such resistance against dominant Western theories and practices, particularly the politics of visibility, is a local cultivation of ambivalence and invisibility, itself a complex manifestation of the ongoing interaction between queer identity and Hong Kong identity. Reflecting upon the events in 2012, we will come back to—and try to make sense of—the disruptive surprise of public figures coming out, apparently in accordance with Western models and in contrast to earlier local sexual politics of ambivalence and invisibility. However, as we will finally show, in the years following 2012, the potentiality of this disruptive surprise has shifted and has been, sadly, pushed back. First, by national policies against effeminate masculinities and sexuality- and gender-related activism at large. Second, by increasingly strict policies towards NGOs and social movements. Paradoxically, and again sadly, the political activities of Anthony Wong in and after the Umbrella Movement may have further jeopardised the potentialities of queer politics. Ironically, these political developments may well inspire a strategic move back towards a politics of invisibility and ambivalence.

In short, this chapter presents an inquiry into global queer theory and local popular music cultures and aims to show how the latter holds the potential to upset, or at least surprise, the conceptual premises of the former. Given the developments since this moment of surprise, we are bound to be ambivalent about its political implications. Before going there, let us revisit briefly the queer history of Hong Kong, particularly

Kong films built on gay themes. It won the Alfred Bauer Award and the Teddy Award at the 48th Berlin International Film Festival.

³ We will use Tat Ming Pair, the full name of the duo, the first time it appears in the chapter. Thereafter, we will revert to Tat Ming, the name usually and fondly used by fans.

the city's intersection with its "colonisers" and the intersection of queer politics with popular culture and music.

ON TONGZHI AND KU'ER

As we hope to show in this book, Hong Kong occupies a special place in the recent history of China. Once part of the British Empire, Hong Kong lives on with a legacy of morality and laws deeply influenced by Victorian values that, in their validation of family, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, sit comfortably with hegemonic understandings of Confucian values. The postcolonial condition of Hong Kong is highly ambivalent. Not only does Hong Kong lack a strong precolonial history—it was a small fishing village rather than a city—its "return" to the mainland was and is still severely contested. Rather than branding it as the place where East meets West, as the local authorities do (Chu 2011), it makes more sense to read it as a place that is always already in-between, impure, and incomplete—a place where neither East nor West suffice, where both constructs are characterised by a lack rather than substance.

For most of the time during British rule, male homosexual acts were illegal in Hong Kong and subject to the maximum penalty of life imprisonment. In 1980, the police inspector John MacLennan was found dead under suspicious circumstances in his apartment after charges of gross indecency. The controversial incident and an ensuing official inquiry stirred up heated debate in Hong Kong, leading to the subsequent decriminalisation of sexual acts between men in 1991 (Ho and Tsang 2000). With the forthcoming return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, the British colonisers demonstrated a slow but perceptible change of attitude and policies, arguing for more freedom, democracy, and individual (including sexual) rights. Such a turn provoked scepticism and downright criticism, attributing the outgoing administration's change to geopolitical agendas (namely, imposing "Western" notions of democracy and human rights upon Chinese territory), rather than genuine concerns.

Regardless of the colonisers' intentions, the result was that it allowed more legal, discursive, and performative space for sexual rights. The years surrounding the Handover—the 1990s—were also the years when processes of globalisation went into full swing, allowing a global proliferation of discourse on LGBTQ+ rights. The reappearance of Hong Kong culture hence came with a surfacing of sexual cultures that had remained

until then largely hidden and censored. One key moment in this proliferation of emerging sexual cultures in Hong Kong was the organisation of a recurring gay and lesbian film festival, the first of its kind in the Sinophone world, beginning in 1989. Remarkably, this festival appropriated an important communist term, “*tongzhi*” (meaning “comrade”), as a label for gay and lesbian populations. The fact that it takes a film festival to claim a new category attests to the importance of cultural productions for the negotiation of sexuality.

Since then, the term “*tongzhi*” has circulated widely among Chinese-speaking communities with reference to gay and lesbian people and cultures. Some authors have pointed at a friction between these labels, arguing that *tongzhi* stands for a Chinese articulation of “homosexuality” that is decidedly different from the Anglophone term “gay.” One important advocate of the assumed virtues of *tongzhi* is Chou Wah-shan. In two book-length treatises, *On Tongzhi* and *Postcolonial Tongzhi*, Chou argues that the Chinese attitude towards sexuality, including same-sex acts, has always been tolerant, nonstigmatised, and nonstigmatising (Chou 1995, 1997). He mobilises essentialist notions of Chinese culture to make his point, claiming that so long as family obligations (notably reproduction) are fulfilled, sexual enjoyments of all kinds are permitted in traditional Chinese culture. For Chou, Chinese culture is “a crystallisation of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, all of which do not consider sex shameful, nor is homosexuality treated as a perverted, sinful act” (1997, 322). He consequently argues for a model that is non-confrontational, non-verbal, and non-sex-oriented, thrusting forward *tongzhi* as a rejection of Western nomenclature and his model as a postcolonial one transcending the categories imposed upon China by the West. In other words, calling oneself *tongzhi* is a political act that radically reroutes homosexual practices and identifications from the gender and the sexual—as prescribed by dominant Western forms of gay politics—to the more tolerant, if only discreet, Chinese culture of sexual enjoyment and beyond. Being *tongzhi* underlines solidarity, community, and politics of a certain kind—a comrade of an unannounced revolution. According to Chou’s theorisation, “‘*tongzhi*’ is not defined by the gender of one’s object of sexual desire. It represents the political choice of one’s (sexual) identity” (1995, 363).

The problems with such an argument are manifold; not the least of these is the reification of a monolithic reading of Chinese culture and

the potential conservative implications. The non-confrontational, non-verbal, and non-sex-oriented model that Chou proposes corresponds, for instance, to a conservative preference for harmony, for the status quo, which continues to privilege certain classes. After all, those who were allowed to enjoy their sexual freedom so long as they did not disturb the familial, patriarchal system were men with good backgrounds. Nevertheless, Chou's gesturing towards the possibility of an articulation of sexuality that does not rely on fixed identity positions like "gay" or "lesbian," and one that integrates local traditions into globalised narratives, remains valuable. We witness here a friction between the postcolonial desire to resist the disciplinary hegemonic workings of labels that have a specific history in the West, thus pointing at the need to provincialise notions like "gay," "homosexual," and "queer," and the critical urgency to resist any form of cultural essentialism, as can be traced in a call for indigenous theory with culturally specific labels. This requires walking on a conceptual tightrope. Others, including Hongwei Bao (2021), Chris Berry (2001), Lucetta Kam (2013a, 2013b), Travis Kong (2012, 2023), Helen Hok-sze Leung (2008), Song Hwee Lim (2006), Fran Martin (2003), Jia Tan (2023), Denise Tang (2011), and Audrey Yue (2000), have pursued that postcolonial direction, but in more critical and promising ways, as we will show later when reflecting upon the work of Leung.

Before we move on to discuss Leung's mobilisation of another term, we want to underline the circulation and mutation of *tongzhi* in the Sino-phone world; the amplification of its meanings and associations that often contradict and contest Chou's conceptualisation. Indeed, the popularity of the term *tongzhi* has helped to shape the gay community in the Sino-phone world over the 1990s and 2000s. It provides a tongue-in-cheek twist to communist jargon, making fun of a political system that has for a long time denied the existence of homosexuality. However, while the term continues to offer an indigenous, ambivalent alternative to homosexual people, it has also paradoxically lent itself as a postcolonial label to the pursuit of an LGBTQ+ identity politics not unlike its counterpart under the Western model.

Leung observes how the notion of *ku'er* (literally "cool child") proliferated in Taiwan in the 1990s. She argues that "[*k*]u'er was conceptualised in explicit contrast to *tongzhi*: while the former approximates the theoretical and deconstructive stance of 'queer,' the latter is associated with LGBTQ+ identity politics" (Leung 2008, 3). Leung argues against

the universality and linear progression of gay and lesbian liberation that she aptly labels “the global gay narrative” (3–4). To steer away from that narrative, she proposes to “look for stories half-heard and dimly remembered that circulate in the nooks and crannies of daily life” (Leung 2012). Postcolonial Hong Kong, to Leung, is a city whose story is difficult to tell, a city whose claims for sovereignty are difficult to make; it is a city that borders on the unrepresentable while being on the verge of disappearance. This, in her view, is what makes it so suitable for queer stories, as these are the stories that cannot quite get told. For her, “it is perhaps no coincidence that some of the most creative tales about the postcolonial city, and the most visionary stories of survival under its crisis-ridden milieu, are told through a queer lens” (Leung 2008, 6).

QUEERING TAT MING

A queer lens hints at the importance of queer cinema, which has received considerable scholarly attention (see Chao 2020; Lim 2006; Pecic 2016)—but what about queer sounds? Few scholars have probed the connection between sexuality and Chinese popular music. This is striking, as numerous pop stars in the Sinophone world, among them Faye Wong, Anita Mui, Leslie Cheung, and Anthony Wong, have transgressed gendered and sexual boundaries for decades. They did so not in an open and loud voice; on the contrary, like the queer undercurrents that Leung claims to be emblematic for Hong Kong cinema, their voices whisper, giving an almost inaudible twist to the heteronormative flows and sounds of the city.

De Kloet shows in his work on Chinese popular music how Anthony Wong, in his music, lyrics, and imagery, plays a multivocal game with gender and sexuality (2010). For instance, for one of his album cover images, Anthony, striking a reptilian, narcissistic pose, adorned his face and his hands, the only exposed and readily gendered parts of his body, with thousands of crystal beads (Fig. 4.2). As we analysed in the previous chapter, during the concert that became the occasion for his coming out, Anthony wore heavy mascara, a thick moustache, a phallic hat, and an outfit with protruding flashlights circling and flickering at himself, a comment on celebrity and paparazzi culture (Fig. 4.3). On the huge screen behind him played a video of Anthony acting as a man and a woman flirting with, chasing, and finally embracing each other. His campy

outfits, the ambivalent and at times sexually evocative lyrics, his audacious stage performances, and the electronic soundscape all evoke sexual ambiguity and fluidity. This can be read not so much as a hidden claim on identity, but rather as a resistance to surrendering to fixed identity categories.

From the start on, Tat Ming's music and aesthetics have always had a distinct queer edge. In their 1989 song "Forget He Is She 忘記他是她," for example, of which the lyrics were written by co-author Yiu Fai Chow, the band sings:

Do I remember whom?



Fig. 4.2 Anthony Wong posing for one of his album cover photos (Courtesy of Wing Shya)



Fig. 4.3 Anthony Wong in his “coming out” concert (Courtesy of Dan Ho)

Only a lock of hair fragrant as thousand roses in bloom
Do I remember whom?
Only a broad shoulder and a dark green tattoo
Do I remember whom?
Only a pair of welcoming eyes in the living room
Do I remember whom?
Only a neck bending to some sexiest routes

I'm in love with him or her or him or her or whoever makes me happy
Or is it the sensation of beauty?
I'm in love with him or her or him or her or whatever is happening
Or is it the luxury of forgetting?

Do I remember whom?
Only the tender smiles that lead me through a deserted wood
Do I remember whom?
Only a passion that burns down all soul's roof

The song deliberately plays with the linguistic fact that in Chinese, one cannot hear the difference between him (他) and her (她), thus stressing the ambiguity in gender as afforded by the language itself. This ambiguity is further strengthened by the line “I’m in love with him or her or him or her or whatever is happening.” The MV of the song is shot in a Wong Kar-wai-esque style. This is not surprising, given that cameraman Christopher Doyle and director William Chang are also collaborators of Wong Kar-wai. The MV further amplifies the dreamy, ambivalent, and melancholic atmosphere the song evokes.⁴ Shot in a shaky, dreamlike, and sluggish style, the camera time and again zooms in on body parts, often blurry, at times behind glass. Body parts are touching one another; at times the bodies are clearly gendered. The clip seems to feature two men and one woman, but at other moments they are not what they appear to be. The body is turned into a fluid, amorphous, and porous being; the singer stands behind window grilles, watching two other people making love, being excluded, an outsider. As if love and desire remain unattainable. But later it is the singer Anthony Wong whom we see with the other man, leaving the woman behind, who looks bewildered, gazing upwards in the stairways, feeling abandoned. Towards the end of the clip, we see the woman returning to the other man, but then, in a short shot, we see the two men walking away in the street, with Anthony looking anxiously backwards over his shoulder, as if he is chased by someone, or haunted by this conservative mix of Confucian and Victorian values. In blurry, reddish, and chimerical shots, the woman runs around in despair in the apartment, with a knife in her hands. She looks straight into the camera, bewildered, as if asking the audience, “Why is this happening to me? What is happening to me?” But in the end, we see Anthony sitting in a bathroom, with the woman made visible through the mirror, indicating that the three lovers remain entangled with one another, however fragmented, however shaky, however fluid (Fig. 4.4).

“Forget He Is She” can be read as Tat Ming’s response on its earlier song “Forbidden Colours 禁色,” the lyrics of which was written by another long-term collaborator Keith Chan. When the former song lodges an opaque appeal for the fluidity of gender and sexuality, the latter is a darker complaint, well-nigh requiem, about oppression and its injuries. Together, they formed a loud and clear statement of Tat Ming’s

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLbCquGX5gM>.



Fig. 4.4 Shot from MV of “Forget He Is She”

queer aesthetics and politics in a time when such issues remained largely in a stigmatised silence and invisibility. “Forbidden Colours” was released a year earlier than its sequel, in 1988, lyrics alluded to the 1951 novel *Forbidden Colours* by the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. The character for colour, 色, also stands for erotic love in both Japanese and Chinese. The corresponding clip is far less explicit when compared to the song we just discussed.⁵ We see Anthony and Tats sitting in an ethereal landscape, a somewhat Orientalistic setting, a pavilion, overlooking. They are often rendered blurry by the camera, evoking a misty, dreamlike atmosphere that corresponds with the melancholic sound of the song. We see Anthony singing in nature, in a park, his face and figure slowly dissolving in the bright backlight of the sun. Aside from his long hair and feminine look, the imagery is more opaque than it is queer.

As this brief analysis of the two Tat Ming songs attest to, Anthony Wong’s choice not to come out, nor to align himself to labels such as *tongzhi* or *ku’er* until 2012 can be read as an act to remain deliberately ambivalent, as a queer escape route out of fixed identity politics. To borrow Daniel Williford’s words, Anthony can be read as practicing a politics of invisibility, given that “the visible, sayable, and doable, are the possible aesthetic enunciations that circulate in a social world which is already the realm of the political, and every aesthetic gesture is either allowed or must insist upon its legibility” (2009, 13). Hence, a politics

⁵ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkrVqjBJ_HQ.

of the invisible, of the undercurrents, may constitute a stronger vantage point for queer cultures, particularly in the postcolonial context of Hong Kong. Anthony's choice to remain silent, of course, can also be read as a marketing choice, driven by a desire not to alienate Anthony's female fan base and possibly lose money-making opportunities.

In many ways, what Anthony did was not unlike the ambivalence that some Western performers cultivated; Neil Tennant, Michael Stipe, Boy George, and George Michael, for instance, all evaded questions about their sexual identity until, starting in the mid-1990s, they explicitly came out as gay or queer, invariably after their music careers had reached their peaks. Some celebrities of the younger generation still went through a period of unclarity before coming out, such as Mika and Sean Hayes. What differentiates Anthony's performance and politics from his Western counterparts, however, is precisely the distinctly local context—the postcolonial underpinnings of the reluctance or refusal to do the same as the West, which is always there. And his coming out in 2012 was also embedded in another local condition—that of paparazzi culture.

We will discuss that point later in this chapter. For now, it suffices to note that Tat Ming's as well as Anthony Wong's music resonates clearly with a queer aesthetics, whether in terms of lyrical content or musical style—for instance, in one of his songs, “How Great Thou Art 你真偉大,” Anthony Wong twisted the Christian hymn of the same title into a critique of Chinese patriarchy, releasing a version in a remix of tango and house styles subtitled “Tango in My Father's House.”⁶ Tat Ming has often been compared to the Pet Shop Boys, both for their common roots in electronic music and their penchant for satirical commentaries on heteronormative society and culture. Nevertheless, Anthony's opaque identity politics rendered impossible a clear-cut articulation between the star and his sexuality.

Among the few studies on queerness and pop music in the Chinese context, Helen Hok-sze Leung has devoted one chapter to Leslie Cheung, the singer and actor who committed suicide on April 1, 2003, in her book focusing on cinema. In the chapter, titled “In Queer Memory,” Leung explicates the ambivalence of Cheung's sexuality that, in her view, precisely constitutes his queerness. His refusal to come out, like the pre-2012 Anthony Wong, and his reference to his partner as a good friend are

⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9R-8soXIEZ8>.

indicative of another kind of sexual politics—the opaque, the playful, and the ambiguous kind. After his death, the gay movement in Hong Kong hailed him eagerly as their icon; yet in Leung’s view, “Cheung’s life and work tell a story that is much less about pride and courage, as the eulogies emphasized, than about negotiation and foreclosure” (2008, 88). The ambivalence of Cheung’s sexuality allows for multiple readings and identifications; it encourages a queer audience to look for queer meanings, and as such engage in a hidden, secret play of queer decoding. For Leung, it “seems fitting to honour his life’s work not with what we think we know of him but precisely with what he so persistently compelled us to *not* know about him” (2008, 105; emphasis in original). In short, as with Anthony Wong, it is a politics of invisibility and opacity that, in the context of postcolonial Hong Kong, allows for queer undercurrents in popular music culture.

In her book-length study on Leslie Cheung’s “artistic image,” including a chapter on his gender representation in Hong Kong pop music, Fung Lok rebukes the media in Hong Kong for its negative coverage of Cheung’s suicide and obsession with his sexuality (2008). On the other hand, as Leung argues convincingly in her book chapter, the queer undercurrents of popular music may also be enabled, if not amplified, by Hong Kong’s gossip and paparazzi culture. Cheung’s assumed “gender insubordination” was not so much a lone battle, as Lok claims, but rather “part of a local/global trend whereby artists’ gender experimentation on stage could be widely accepted in the mainstream, while their sexual preference off stage remained ambivalent” (Leung 2008, 90).

Gossip, in this sense, can be considered constitutive for self-making and queer culture, rather than oppositional or antagonistic—in particular, for a dialectical politics of invisibility and (spectacular) visibility, which is what keeps Hong Kong’s queer undercurrents going. According to Leung, gossips are ambivalent, as they are always haunted by the possibility of dishonesty, deceit, or fabrication. In other words, they may “disclose” a pop star, be it Leslie Cheung or Anthony Wong, to be gay, but such disclosure, given its gossipy nature, is never totally trusted. It is in this representational insecurity and eternal deferral of meaning that the potential for self-making and queer culture lies. As such, Hong Kong queer culture can serve as a salient case of the unrepresentableness of queer identity, as a possible alternative to LGBTQ+ identity politics, and ultimately as an alternative to the Western way of coming out and claiming a sexual self. In other words, the case of Hong Kong pop stars in such a

reading corresponds closely with the poststructuralist theoretical zeal of queer theory. But then, in 2012, this queer ambivalence was suddenly interrupted by Anthony's public coming out on stage.

ON THE YEAR OF COMING OUT

If, following Leung, ambiguity, the playfulness of not knowing and of ignorance, has been the legacy of Hong Kong's queer icon Leslie Cheung, and "undercurrents" the running theme of the city's queerness and music, we saw breaking waves in the year 2012. In that year, to refer back to the song "Forbidden Colours," it did seem that the moment had arrived to paint dreams with all the forbidden colours of the rainbow. During the concert staged by Tat Ming on April 23, Anthony Wong announced to an audience of almost 10,000 in the Hong Kong Coliseum: "I am a *Geilo*." "*Geilo*" is a Cantonese term circulated in local vernacular. Used initially and derisively by the larger society against gay men, the term is appropriated by gay men themselves, sometimes defiantly, sometimes jokingly. "*Gei*" is the sound translation of the English "gay," and "*lo*" denotes "man" or "guy."⁷

Almost half a year later, during the closing performance of the annual Hong Kong Pride Parade on November 11, another pop star, Denise Ho Wan-see, came out, proclaiming: "I am a *tongzhi*." These two pop music celebrities were not the only ones who came out in this historical year. In September, politician Ray Chan Chi-chuen came out after he was elected to the city's legislative body, becoming the first publicly gay political figure not only in Hong Kong, but also in the Chinese-speaking region as a whole. In the same month, Gigi Chao Sik-chi, a businessperson and daughter of a local tycoon, "admitted" to the press that she and her female friend were married in France earlier that year. Her father, Cecil Chao, in a gesture evoking both patriarchy and global capitalism, made a public offer of \$65 million to any man who could woo and marry Gigi (BBC 2012). Surfing on these waves of coming out, a number of Chinese-language LGBTQ+ websites ran feature articles listing public figures who came out and the ways that they did it (King 2013). Then,

⁷ When we asked Tats Lau, who is a devoted Christian, about the moment of coming out, he expressed his solidarity with homosexuality. He admired Anthony for this act, and when it happened, Tats, who was taken by surprise and unprepared, went on stage and said "God loves people, God loves homosexuals."

on April 1, 2013, Anthony Wong, Denise Ho, Ray Chan, Gigi Chao, and some of the other public figures concerned established a group called Big Love Alliance to pursue LGBTQ+ rights in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong-based gender studies scholar Lucetta Kam calls 2012 “the year of coming out” (2013a). *Time Out Hong Kong* writes that “this year has seen gay issues placed firmly on the table in our generally conservative city” (Tam 2012). Another highlight was the February 2013 issue of the local signature lifestyle and intellectual magazine *City*. Displaying the words “Gay & Proud” prominently, in English and in rainbow colours, the cover featured the four public figures mentioned previously, as well as Joey Leung Cho-yiu, an actor who had staged several gay-themed performances. *City*’s then chief editor, Tieh-chih Chang, in his editorial commentary, foregrounded the disenfranchised position of people with alternative sexualities: “Even though they have come out of the closet, even though they are high-profile political figures, stars and celebrities, they still do not enjoy the same rights as heterosexuals” (Chang 2013, 24). In conclusion, he said, “We are *tongzhi*”—yes, in the campaign for equal rights, no matter you are heterosexuals or homosexuals, no matter Hong Kong, Taiwan, or mainland China, walking hand in hand, we are *tongzhi*” (Chang 2013, 24). Here, Chang used “*tongzhi*,” a term that is indigenous, ambivalent, non-sex-oriented, presumably more inclusive than the Western “gay” or “queer,” to rally support for the politics that he and his magazine were championing. Put differently, Chang’s reference to heterosexuals and homosexuals in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or mainland China underlines the discursive space opened up by the linguistic shift from “gay” or “queer” to “*tongzhi*.”

What does the year 2012 tell us? If the metaphor of undercurrents was useful in helping us understand, to repeat Leung’s words, “the story that cannot quite get told” (2008, 6), or the queer story of Hong Kong, what was going on that seemed to have broken the undercurrents into high-profile waves, to have told the not-quite-told? More specific to our purposes, how can we make sense of these waves of coming out when we continue our thinking on pop music and queerness in Hong Kong? In the following discussion, we offer an initial attempt, by mobilising three themes: stardom and gossip culture, queerness, and Hong Kong, to revisit finally the central issue of knowledge production in queer studies in general.

First comes stardom and gossip culture. When asked subsequently if he had contemplated his action at length before his coming out, Anthony

Wong replied that it was more like a decision made on the spur of the moment. “I only told my manager minutes before the concert started and he said ok,” Anthony explained during a private conversation with Yiu Fai Chow. In particular, Anthony was fed up with all the stalking and interrogation by the local paparazzi. When Denise Ho came out, she offered a similar line of thought.

Their statements, while not necessarily undermining their politics of resistance to the heteronormative order, underscore a personal act against infringement of their privacy by radically going public. That very act itself was queer. The argument that we want to make here is: While Anthony Wong and Denise Ho, not unlike Leslie Cheung, had long been performing with ambiguity and playfulness, literally and figuratively, what compelled them to assume a different practice, tactic, and politics of their queer identity was violence of a different order: that of the tabloid press. In other words, it took another popular medium—popular at least in the sense of its correspondence to democratic fantasies and capitalistic logic—that evoked the limits of the politics of ambiguity. Whereas gossip can be productive for self-making, the public gossip culture of Hong Kong apparently reached its limits for these stars and required a whole different act of self-making. In fact, the doggedness of the local paparazzi and the popularity of tabloid press in Hong Kong earned this group of entertainment journalists the name of “doggies.” Recall Anthony’s outfit with flashlights during the “coming out concert?”

Shelving the moral issues brought forward by the tabloid press and paparazzi practices, what we want to contend is this: Insofar as these coming out stories were embedded in multiple intersections among the celebrity, entertainment, music, and queer cultures, the Hong Kong experience reminds us that it is not enough to investigate the music and the extramusical styles of Anthony and Denise, for example, as queer pop stars and Tat Ming as a queer pop formation. In a local context like that of Hong Kong, we argue, the study of queer practices in pop music must also be situated in the fields of celebrity and entertainment culture, which themselves are situated in related and larger issues of capitalism and democracy.

Second comes queerness. Allow us to continue the narrative—or one version of the narrative—about the tabloid and paparazzi culture in Hong Kong. While Anthony Wong and Denise Ho reacted against these voyeuristic attempts by coming out themselves, it should also be noted that the same media seemed to be reporting their coming out rather

kindly, sometimes even positively. According to Hong Kong-based music scholar Paris Lau, it is the same logic of gossip fabrication that drives these media to expose, scandalise, and ultimately silence queer existence, and at the same time to report the coming out moments as “another hot gossip of popular culture.” In his paper on media representation and coming out politics, Lau continues to compare the situation of Hong Kong to the much harsher media representation of sexual minorities in mainland China, and finally to “rethink gender politics and the progress of democracy in Chinese societies” (Lau, forthcoming). It is the reference to Chinese politics that this particular queer experience in postcolonial, or some would say renationalised or recolonised; Hong Kong seems to continue to insert.

Lucetta Kam also connects the stories about the coming out (of Anthony Wong and the others) and the coming home (of Hong Kong to Beijing rule, at least in dominant official discourse) and reflects on the connection (Kam 2013a). Unlike Lau, Kam is not comparing mainland China to Hong Kong; instead, she alludes to the imbrication of the local to the national and contemplates identity politics, both as a queer person and a Hong Kong-Chinese person. While coming out may be an act to actualise the agency of sexual minorities, coming home or the assumption of a fixed national Chinese identity, Kam argues, should not become the hegemonic interpellation among the people living in the postcolonial city. Quite aside from Kam and Lau’s arguments, what we want to foreground is that discussions of local queer politics in any historical conjuncture of Hong Kong always already interact with national, postcolonial politics. As Kam writes at the very beginning of her piece, “This essay was written in a chaotic time in Hong Kong. Or, to put it more accurately, it was written in one of the chaotic times in Hong Kong” (2013a, 152).

Indeed, interviews and commentaries on Anthony Wong’s coming out are similarly embedded in the postcolonial context. Speaking to a reporter from a mainland Chinese website, Anthony gestured to the increasing Beijing domination of local affairs and said, “My coming out represents Hong Kong’s tolerance and freedom” (Wong 2012). To another mainland Chinese magazine, he said, “Hong Kong always cherishes this: freedom. This city has many valuable things, like its openness and tolerance. But at the same time, it is always confused about its identity” (Lee and Wu 2012). Anthony’s utterance led the interviewer to comment:

For many Hong Kongers, Wong's coming out is not only his coming out. He is coming out for Hong Kong. His identity confusion is just like Hong Kong's identity confusion now. He is speaking on behalf of Hong Kong. Anthony Wong = Hong Kong. (Lee and Wu 2012)

In another interview with Radio Television Hong Kong, Anthony pointed more specifically to a thorny political issue between Hong Kong and Beijing: direct election. Connecting the issue of LGBTQ+ rights to direct election, he said, "To me, they are the same. If we don't have a representative legislature, no one will fight for our rights. Our current administration doesn't have the mandate to represent the people" (RTHK 2013).

If Anthony's personal identity confusion is thus conflated with the city's identity confusion, queer politics as manifested in Hong Kong in the year 2012 must be understood via its intersection with the city's other politics, postcolonial, and national. Queerness, in that sense, is not "only" about sexual minorities of any locality, but about that locality being a minority as well. Queer studies of pop music should also be informed accordingly. Following this line of thought, the coming out narratives of these Hong Kong pop stars should be seen as a counternarrative to Hong Kong's political and economic marginalisation. Right after Anthony Wong's coming out, news immediately circulated in and dominated the media and queer space in mainland China. As we already mentioned, rainbow flags were waving at a music festival in Beijing, presumably the first time in a public space in mainland China (Lo 2012). To quote Aaron Lecklider's introduction to a special issue of *Popular Music Studies* dedicated to queer studies of popular music, the fundamental question is "how 'queer' is defined by performers, audiences, and the academics writing about them" (2006, 120). The Hong Kong experience defines "queer" as a practical and analytic category always and already enmeshed in the matrix of the local, national, and postcolonial.

Following his critique of subcultural theories, Jack Halberstam spells out four considerations that need to be taken into account when studying queer subcultures. One of these is to rethink the relationship between theorists and subcultural participants (Halberstam 2005). While we do not necessarily subscribe to the notion of subculture, we align ourselves with such a call to rethink, particularly now that so much happened in 2012 in Hong Kong. Before this "year of coming out," as we have

shown earlier, theorists on queer culture in Hong Kong, like many other colleagues operating in fields dominated by “Western” nomenclature, concepts, and practices, have made many attempts to oscillate and reconcile between Western theories and what was happening locally. Queer politics in Hong Kong, as noted by Cheuk Yin Li, is historically different from its European and American versions. Citing three major disciplinary discourses on sexual cultures in “Hong Kong as an East Asian locale”—residual Chinese ethics, the British colonial legacy, and the growing influence of rightist Christian influences and nongovernmental organisations—Li predicted a continuous “absence of voices demanding institutional and confrontational queer politics” (2012). What took place in the year of Li’s publication, 2012, rather, was precisely the emergence of such voices. If the relationship between theorists and queer subjects in Hong Kong has been characterised by understanding (i.e., the theorists trying to understand their subjects), 2012 witnessed a shift towards surprising (i.e., the subjects surprising their theorists), towards a need to reunderstand after the surprise.

This obviously engenders a series of questions and attempts: What is the “new” queer politics in Hong Kong, in the larger Chinese cultural context, and even in the East Asian locales? While ambiguity is not sufficient to understand local queer practices and politics, how should the coming out of these local pop stars be understood? Instead of coming out, would it be more meaningful and productive to talk of “breaking open,” as some commentaries have done (Kam 2013a; Leung 2012)? Amidst the earnestness to reunderstand, we believe that we need to refer to Halberstam’s plea again, not to reunderstand the queer subjects *per se*, but to rethink the relationship between them and their theorists. It is, in other words, about production of queer knowledge as much as about queer production of knowledge. If “the bizarre, the unusual, or the transgressive” is the vernacular expression of queer (Lecklider 2006, 120), we want to add “the surprising.” As informed by the Hong Kong experience, we who work on queerness and popular music queerness and film, or queerness and whatever, either in the West or elsewhere, must allow ourselves to be surprised. If queer studies, like any other mode of knowledge production, will become normative and thus expected, then such surprising moments are the moments that the queer subjects are queering the queer studies that we are doing.

AFTER THE SURPRISE, HOLDING OUR BREATH

We are now writing more than a decade after that year 2012, a year that with hindsight seems pregnant with possibilities, or, in the words of Muñoz, cited at the start of this chapter, “imbued with potentiality.” The word “surprise” seems to be far too frivolous to capture the developments since 2012. In the first few years after the “year of coming out,” we observed two intertwining strands of queer politics and practices in Hong Kong. First, almost as expected as it was once surprising, the pop stars who came out in 2012 have transformed rather smoothly and swiftly from queer celebrities to queer activists. As soon as January 2013, Anthony Wong and Denise Ho joined with Gigi Chao, Ray Chan, and some other sympathisers to form a new organisation called Big Love Alliance. Their objective, according to their website, is “to promote the equality of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals, and queers and their liberation from all forms of discrimination.” Most of the activities organised by Big Love can be characterised under the kind of identity-driven politics known in the West, such as lobbying and fighting for antidiscrimination and gay marriage legislation.

Given the high profile of these pop stars and Big Love, the post-2012 queer landscape of Hong Kong saw an increasing alliance between this group and other organisations already active in the city. Anthony and Denise have become indispensable rallying figures for such campaigning events as the Gay Pride, Pink Dot, Pink Season, and IDAHOT HK, attracting thousands of participants, claiming a new visibility for queer people and issues in the community at large.

Second, the decade following 2012 has also witnessed an increasing and increasingly visible participation of queer activists, as well as an insertion of queer politics in the “larger” struggle for democracy and freedom in Hong Kong. Following his long-term engagement with issues concerning the future of Hong Kong and the city’s relationship with Beijing, Anthony Wong became a logical ally for pro-democracy and anti-establishment forces, especially in his capacity as one of the figureheads of Big Love. It was hardly surprising, then, that he placed himself at the centre of the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Looking back to his coming out more than 10 years ago, Anthony Wong said in his interview with us in 2022:

Like after coming out, we have set up Renaissance Foundation, and Big Love Alliance, and two years later, it's the Umbrella Movement, and then it's a road of no return.

For him, this coming out is closely aligned to his identity as a Hong Konger:

The coming out in 2012 made me realise, right, if you stand up, you need to be honest to yourself, and it's important... You start to think who you are as an individual, or as a Hong Kong person. You want to find out and preserve your identity.

Slightly less expected was Denise Ho's involvement, as her music has never really dealt with political issues like Anthony's and Tat Ming's. Nonetheless, as visibly as they joined hands in queer events, they occupied the streets with the Umbrella supporters, stood on the main podium to speak to them, and disseminated messages on their social media platforms—to the extent that both Anthony and Denise were put on a blacklist compiled by authorities in mainland China.

While Beijing would not confirm the existence of such a blacklist, it became apparent that both artists stopped receiving invitations to perform in mainland China. Anthony told the authors how his contract negotiation with a Beijing-based record label came to a suspiciously abrupt end when he took a high-profile position with the Umbrella Movement. In 2016, Denise Ho found her concert sponsor, L'Oreal, retreating from the Hong Kong project, as mainland consumers were reported to be angered by the French cosmetic concern's support of such an anti-Beijing artist, threatening to boycott L'Oreal. The intricate overlapping of queer and pro-democratic politics and activism became one of the “chapters” in Evans Chan's 2016 documentary *Raise the Umbrellas*. As we discussed earlier, after the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020, the political powers became more visible and tangible, and both Anthony Wong and Denise Ho faced charges. The queer move towards “real” politics has been costly, not only literally—in losing the mainland market and (partly, but certainly not entirely) audience—but also in partly losing one's freedom of speech within the context of Hong Kong. As for the mainland market, Anthony explained:

I could still work in the mainland after my coming out, it's only after the Umbrella Movement that I couldn't. (...) I think it's a loss. Whether to them or to us, it's a loss. But that's life, there's nothing we can do. (...) It's not like I choose not to go to mainland, I can't. If I can be assured of my safety and freedom, I am most willing to.

As we already alluded to and will further elaborate in Chapter 6, a ban can never be complete; the influence of Tat Ming continues to resonate, also in mainland China. Even the act of banning itself is paradoxical, as it alerts audiences to the sensitivity of the object or subject being banned, thus possibly triggering their curiosity. And to satisfy that curiosity it only takes a VPN account. As Anthony asserts:

But then I also think even when I can't go to mainland China, I may still have my influence. People can't really be locked up, they will look for inspiration. I don't want to think too much of myself, but if I do have some influence, I would imagine the fact that I can't go there may have its impact as well.

Tat Ming has been at the forefront of a queer politics in Hong Kong, first in articulating a politics of invisibility, opacity, and ambiguity, and then, as by shock, moving towards a politics of visibility in the coming out of Anthony Wong in 2012. We read this as a powerful move in which queer theory is challenged by reality. But the years after do make us also more hesitant in univocally embracing this reading of Tat Ming's queer politics. An earlier version of this chapter, written around 2015, ended with our affirmative claim that the alignment between queerness and politics prizes open a promising LGBTQ+ space with clear direct political implications as testified by the Umbrella Movement. His subsequent move towards, for lack of a better word, "real politics" during the Umbrella Movement and afterwards, intersected with his queer politics. Lucetta Kam opens her article on the involvement of Anthony Wong and Denise Ho in the Umbrella Movement of 2014 and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement of 2019, with the 2020 Tat Ming concert she attended:

The Tat Ming concerts took place in a very depressing social atmosphere. They bore the burden of reigniting hope, of telling Hong Kong people to add oil. In a short span of three hours, the audiences and Tat Ming co-created a space for dissenting voices, at the same time opening up a

podium that doesn't forget queer politics and gender troubles (Kam 2022, 32).

Confrontational politics has moved backstage since 2019, and we agree with Kam, as this book attests to, that popular music constitutes an important resilient form of cultural activism. However, developments after 2019 force us to reconsider our hopeful conclusion. First, when we move back to mainland China, we witness increased control over the allegedly bad influence of K-culture, including its effeminate aesthetics. In 2021, both boy bands, as well as celebrity fan cultures, have been cracked down for being unruly and chaotic, and specifically, “effeminate men” (*niang pao* 娘炮) are deemed part of an “abnormal aesthetics.” Consequently, earrings worn by male celebrities were pixelised in entertainment shows (Sohu 2019; Song 2022). As Shuaishuai Wang writes (2021 online), “using the Chinese derogatory slur ‘*niang pao*’—literally, ‘girlic guns’—Chinese cultural authorities explained that they were rolling out a rule to purge ‘morally flawed celebrities’ in order to ‘correct aesthetics’ in ‘performing styles’ and ‘wardrobes and makeups.’” Second, whereas foreign NGO’s in the early 2000s paved a way for what is termed embedded activism (Ho and Edmonds 2007), their activities have been increasingly restricted since 2017, (Feng 2017). “The institutional environment for foreign and domestic civic actors in China has changed significantly over the past decade” (Holbig and Lang 2022, 595), making it more difficult for feminist and queer organisations to survive. These legal changes, in tandem with tightening censorship, radically reduce the space for public articulations of LGBTQ+ cultures and feed into an enhanced homophobia (Tan 2023, 148). While such overt regulations against effeminate masculinities and strict laws against foreign NGO’s are not (yet) enacted in Hong Kong, the National Security Law has effected a dramatically shrinking space for *any* kind of activism.

With hindsight the worries raised by Kong et al., in 2015, were justified, perhaps for different dynamics. In a review of activist practices in Hong Kong, which marks the post-2012 years tentatively as a new wave of *tongzhi* movement, their piece concludes that “[i]ncreasing queer visibility in the political arena may pose new challenges for Hong Kong and the *tongzhi* movement” (Kong et al. 2015, 200). They predicted a societal backlash from conservative religious communities; but what we have witnessed is more how “real” politics creeps back into queer politics. This

may, ironically, inspire a move back towards the opaque and the ambivalent, towards a politics of invisibility and disguise. Jia Tan refers to such politics as one of masquerade. In her words, “masquerade, with its connotations of disguise and performing, can be understood at once as both submission and disruption to the dominant social orders” (2023, 17). The ambivalent aesthetics of Tat Ming as analysed in this chapter can be read as articulations of a queer sonic masquerade. Hong Kong of the 2020s requires a different politics when compared to the 2010s. What and how these politics will look, sound, and feel like is unclear. But it will bear the traces of masquerade, of ambivalence, of coming out, of rebellion, of occupation, and above all, of resilience. For now, we are holding our breath, hoping for other times, hoping for better times.

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CHAPTER 5

“It’s My Party”

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.

Michel Foucault (1983, 231–32).

We sense that the world is collapsing, falling apart, and a new conservatism is rising up. People are not happy.

Wallace Kwok (2017, interview).

TAT MING PAIR,¹ POPULAR MUSIC, AND POLITICS

One can trace a clear history of the alliances between popular music and politics, ranging from protest songs and Band Aid and Live Aid to, arguably, the other end of the political spectrum, national anthems

¹ We will use Tat Ming Pair, the full name of the duo, the first time it appears in the chapter. Thereafter, we will revert to Tat Ming, the name usually and fondly used by fans.

This chapter includes extensively revised excerpts from Yiu Fai Chow, Jeroen de Kloet, and Leonie Schmidt (2020), *Performing the Political: Reflections on Tatming Meeting George Orwell in 2017*, In A. Fung, & A. Chik (eds.) *Made in Hong Kong: Studies in Popular Music*, Routledge Global Popular Music Series, London: Routledge: 168–180.

(Street 2012). In Hong Kong, despite its overwhelming capitalist logic, as we have shown in the previous chapters, makers of pop music have established a tradition of political engagement, stretching from the post-Tiananmen fury and fear and the anxiety towards the 1997 Handover to the more recent articulations against increasing intervention of the Beijing regime, often dubbed its new coloniser after the old one of the British Empire (Chow 1992). Such articulations are often linked to more indie genres; the local band My Little Airport, for example, preceded the Umbrella protests with their song “Donald Tsang, Please Die” (2009), riding on the popular discontent against the then Chief Executive of the city.

As already discussed in Chapter 3, Tat Ming staged a round of three reunion concerts in the Hong Kong Coliseum in 2017, the *TAT MING PAIR 30TH ANNIVERSARY LIVE CONCERTS* 達明卅一派對. This was five years after their *ROUND AND ROUND AND ROUND* 兜兜轉轉演演唱會 tour. Both the 2012 and the 2017 concerts created a great buzz around the city of Hong Kong and were applauded for their political, musical, and aesthetic standards, as we have shown earlier. By conducting interviews with Anthony Wong and his close collaborators, this chapter explores the production side of massive pop concerts, simultaneously reflecting on the tension between political motivations and commercial considerations, between engagement and entertainment.

As made known during the promotional phase, the concerts took the classic novel *1984* by George Orwell as the linchpin, referring to the increasing influence of authoritarianism in post-Handover Hong Kong and the world at large. More specifically, our preliminary interview with Anthony, generally seen as the main creative force of the concerts, informed us that the performance was structured into three themes and sections: surveillance, brainwashing, and suppression. From suppression, the performance morphs into resistance, then back to the harsh “reality” where the “failure of the Umbrella protests” is featured, lamenting on the people who are defeated, ultimately leading to the evocation of David

Bowie’s persona and his songs “Under Pressure”², performed with guest Denise Ho) and “Heroes”.^{3 4}

While it is too sweeping, perhaps, to claim that their latest reunion concerts were again foreshadowing street protests, the political ramifications of the performances were undeniable. In this chapter, we zoom in less on the aesthetics of the performance and more on the production of that spectacle. We will be drawing on production studies (Caldwell 2008; Corner 1999; Havens, Lotz, and Tinic 2009; Mayer 2011) to grasp the negotiations and tensions that take place behind the scenes in the making of an event that needs to sell 30,000 tickets, the most expensive of which costs HK\$980 (US\$125). We ask: How is the tension between the political and the commercial negotiated? How can the production avoid politics becoming too explicit (as this would run against the ambivalent aesthetics of the band, becoming too didactic, thus boring)? What kinds of considerations informed the use of costumes, dancers, visuals, and the sequence of the songs? How does such a sonic spectacle come into being in the first place? And what have been the consequences of such a political engagement? Instead of analysing in detail the different aesthetics mobilised to mark these different stages, we probe elsewhere and wonder what considerations, negotiations, tensions, controversies, and compromises underpin such narratives and aesthetics. As such, this chapter aims to unpack the making of a political pop spectacle in a city that is struggling for its future.

PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

In this chapter, we examine the production of the 2017 Tat Ming concerts, to shed light on how cultural producers negotiate the tension between political engagement, aesthetic spectacle, and commercial interests (see Fig. 5.1), to be read in tandem with the primarily textual analyses in Chapter 3. As early as in the 1980s, Simon Frith (1982) already bemoaned the fact that students would rather sit in the library and study popular music in terms of the appropriate cultural theory rather

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVuGOt18zNc>.

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RNTp40daBY>.

⁴ The preliminary interview with Anthony Wong took place in March 2017, shortly after the concerts.

than conduct ethnographic research which could highlight the complex negotiations involved in making and performing music (Cohen 1993; Frith 1982). Four decades later, the literature on popular music is still lacking in ethnography and production analyses, particularly of (mass) concerts. The lack is especially evident when compared to the abundance of inquiries anchored on textual (e.g., Harsono 2017) and fan (e.g., Jung and Shim 2014) analyses of songs and pop stars, as well as more macro-level industry research (e.g., Shin 2017).

To analyse the tensions, negotiations, complexities, and compromises that underlie the coming into being of Tat Ming's 2017 political and aesthetic spectacle, we use production ethnography (Caldwell 2008) as a method. In his book about the Hollywood film industry, John Thornton Caldwell (2008) makes visible how Los Angeles-based film and video production workers negotiate and assess the industry, its politics, and its policies from their own point of view. Caldwell did so by interviewing those involved in the production of film and television: the gaffers, assistants, post-production editors, camera people, and others behind the



Fig. 5.1 The 2017 Tat Ming concert (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

scenes, which allows for innovative and perplexing perspectives. Caldwell notes that "practitioners constantly dialogue and negotiate a series of questions" (p. 26), which partly determine (the look of) the final cultural product.

In this chapter, we investigate how on each level of the production (Corner 1999), makers and creative workers negotiate the tension between creating an appealing aesthetic spectacle on the one hand while trying to convey a political message on the other. We will engage with the four key production levels distinguished by John Corner (1999), which interlock and together create a specific production at a specific time and place: historical contexts (the socio-political moment), institutional contexts (the media sector and flows of financing), production mentalities (ideological negotiations by makers), and production practices (concrete practices on the production floor—for instance, a designer opting for a particular costume) (Corner 1999, 71). This also allows us to investigate how the context in which the concerts were presented matters. For instance, the concerts were produced by Universal Music alone without any financial sponsorship from the corporate sector—a departure from the usual practice. This was presumably because of the political sensitivity of Anthony Wong potentially causing complications for businesses, which do not want to risk angering mainland Chinese authorities and losing the mainland Chinese market. In addition to Corner's four levels of production, we propose that there are three additional aspects that play a crucial role in the production of the concerts: the contingent, the personal, and the calibrational.

We draw on interviews with three people involved in the making of the concerts: Anthony Wong (artist), Wallace Kwok (producer), and Duncan Wong (Universal Music). While the former two were known to us as the conceptual drive of the concerts, we included the managing director of Tat Ming's record label in order to probe the commercial dimension of the production. Given our interest in the concert production, we decided not to interview Tats Lau, the other member of the duo, as he was primarily in charge of the musical side of the concerts. When the duo started producing their first albums, according to Anthony Wong, Tats was already primarily charged with song composition as well as the recording work, leaving the conceptual and visual aspects of their music under Anthony's auspices. Later, such division of labour extended to concert production, including the concerts in the current study. Semi-structured interviews with Anthony, Wallace, and Duncan

were conducted in 2017 in Cantonese and English, here analysed using discourse analysis (Abell and Myers 2008).⁵ We supplement this main body of interview data with autobiographical reflection by one of the authors, Yiu Fai Chow, who, as mentioned earlier, has been writing lyrics for Tat Ming since 1988. Chow contributed the lyrics for the single that served as the theme song for the concerts under study—“1 + 4 = 14”⁶—and talked with Anthony throughout the concert production process. In this chapter, we do not want to trace the intention of the makers and then check if such intentions are finally realised. Rather, we aim at recuperating the considerations, negotiations, and complexities that underpin the production of Tat Ming’s political sonic spectacle.

In the following, we will first analyse how Anthony, Wallace, and Duncan talk about music and politics. Following this more general analysis, we zoom in on three key discourses that we find salient and helpful in furthering our understanding of a concert production. We call them the contingent, the personal, and the calibrational. They recur in the narratives of the three producers and are interwoven throughout the four production levels mentioned earlier. The making of such a show turns out to be a highly contingent affair in which many last-minute twists and turns affect the final outcome of the show. Second, personal relations, cultivated over decades of working and socialising together, also clarify how and why the show has become what it is. Finally, there is a constant calibration of politics with pleasure, of displaying and hiding a political message, of dwelling in narratives of doom and gloom calibrated with moments of joy, release, and hope. All three discourses help explain the production logic of the show and underscore how complexity, ambivalence, and constant calibration and recalibration define the final stage performance and its politics.

MUSIC AND POLITICS

Not surprisingly, the different actors talk quite differently about the relation between music and politics. Notably, the record company is keen to stress the distance between music and politics. In order to sustain their support for the concert, Duncan would reiterate that for him music and politics are separate domains. In his words:

⁵ We conducted interviews with Anthony and Wallace in May 2017, and with Duncan in July 2017.

⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3wuu4vKhSk>.

Many friends and media were like “Wow, Duncan aren’t you scared? Anthony’s political inclination...” I said, I’m running a record company, or entertainment company—let’s put it this way, because we no longer only sell records, so I never claim we are a record company. I think everyone can have his own inclination, or political stance, and this has nothing to do with music. (...) Because I do music, I don’t do politics, so I don’t worry or get scared.

It is this perceived disconnection between music and politics that allowed him to move on with the project. This disconnection can be connected to a “l’art pour l’art” discourse in which art is framed as something outside society. Dovetailing with this discourse is the idea of the artist as an independent and authentic creator, which Duncan indeed also articulates:

But the creative part, we didn’t involve much. Why? Because I very much believe in Anthony, also Tats. I think their team, including People Mountain People Sea, such as Gaybird being the band leader—I never had to worry, because the product must be of quality. Of course, someone said, “Wow, you should watch out! There might be political stuff!” I said, this was a concert, a show, and I always stress: wanting to work with Anthony again, I foresaw all those from the start. On the contrary, I don’t think I should prohibit someone else’s creative work. Again, I say this once more, we Universal do music, we are a record-entertainment company, and we have a firm standpoint that we do not meddle with politics. But I cannot stop artists from having their own inclination, this is unfair.

Throughout this book we show how music is connected to politics. But the perceived incompatibility, which has its roots in a discourse in which art is considered separate and independent from society, enabled the record company to move on with the project, despite its risks. When we asked Duncan if there is anything more he likes to add to the interview, this is his response:

I really do hope—for fans or the media—I hope they can try to be more open-minded. I mean, politics is one thing, music is another. I hope they don’t mix the two together when they go to see Tat Ming Pair. This is my wish.

Which again attests to his strong wish to disentangle music from politics.

For Anthony and Wallace, there is no need to differentiate music from politics. Especially given Anthony’s role in the Umbrella Movement, it

would be quite impossible to ignore the connection, just as their 2012 concert series was already profoundly political, as shown in Chapter 3. In their narratives, they continuously discuss how they want to balance the political with other dimensions, which we will return to when we discuss the importance of calibration. For example, Anthony explains:

I had to do a lot of thinking and re-thinking about how it should be presented. How political should it be? How social should it be? And how personal should it be? And I wanted to look different from the others. So it was a long process. So I was very anxious.

Anthony would frequently comment on the importance of Wallace in the preparation of the concert, and how he would also aspire after a clear political narrative; in Anthony's words:

Of course, he's the one who also wanted the show to be very political actually. He wanted it to be very political, because I think he had something... I always thought maybe he is not in the front line. He is not the performer, but still he has something he wanted to say too. He was so frustrated by what happened in Hong Kong.

Whereas both Anthony and Wallace, as we will show later, time and again reflect upon the question of how far they could go in articulating a political message without alienating the audience, for Duncan, music is simply not a political matter. The latter position comes with a more contradictory narrative, as Duncan would at the same time express his awareness of the financial risk of the show, given Anthony's overt political stance. However, as we will show later, he explains his commitment to the show much more in terms of a personal involvement with the history of the band, which enables him to side-track the issue of politics as much as he can. The commercial logic of the music industry helps explain, or perhaps justify, this positioning.

Our analysis thus far presents the more general reflections upon the connection between the Tat Ming performance and politics. In what follows, we are harvesting from the interviews certain salient features that guide us to map the three discourses underpinning the production logic of the show: the contingent, the personal, and the calibrational. These discourses, we argue, present an important explication and extension of Corner's production practices and mentalities.

THE CONTINGENT

We start with probably the most counter-intuitive of the three discourses: the contingent. For a series of concerts of such a scale (catering to more than 10,000 people per show) and complexity (to be entertaining as well as engaging), one might expect a scenario of meticulous planning and seamless orchestration. We did hear that, but we also heard more. While we were impressed, indeed, by the hard work put into the preparation of the concerts, we were also surprised to find out how much was unprepared. Put differently, one logic we learned from the three key persons producing the Tat Ming concerts is paradoxically the lack of logic, and one needs to recognise and acknowledge the importance of the contingent, the ad hoc, in projects like this. How things just happen and rather haphazardly become something that may not appear haphazard at all—this was what we learned from the production interviews. This permeates various levels and stages of the production process. We also see Corner's (1999) four levels of production interlocking in the production process. Take one major theme of the concerts as example: surveillance, which seemed to be the starting point of the stage design. There was actually no stage as such, but a long corridor, or "a road" according to Anthony Wong, stretching from one side of the Coliseum to the other and serving as the main space for performance to audiences on four sides of the venue. This atypical spatial arrangement (the typical being a centre stage with audiences seated on three sides of the venue) contributed to the panoptical effect of surveillance, that the performers were intensely exposed, extensively watched. However, contrary to our expectation that the stage setting was a consequence of key thematic deliberation, it was first and foremost a commercial consideration. According to Anthony:

Having all four sides open, was because we tried to sell as many tickets as possible. That's one of the reasons. The second was, because we did three or four shows already in the last years... so how do we make it different this time? If we put the stage at the end of the arena, it will look the same. So, let's try to do it differently...we did not think about surveillance yet. But I told the producer I wanted a road."

Universal's Duncan Wong confirms this when he tells us the proposal to have the audience on four sides came to him shortly after the project started:

I believe it's based on two reasons. First, they met with the production people and stage designer, and they said it's possible. Second, they wanted to help the organiser sell more tickets.

The institutional context (Corner 1999, 71)—that is, the commercial logic of the pop music sector and flows of financing—was thus an important factor in the stage setting. Here, we want to clarify that we are not arguing for a form-first or money-first logic in this concert production; what we do want to foreground is the complexity with which a concert, both its form and content, is produced, and contingency is often part of this. Wallace Kwok offered us many instances of such contingency; for instance, regarding the rundown of the concerts. While we, as well as other audiences and critics, may continue to ponder why they opened with a sequence featuring a boy and a girl walking with a uniform(ed) “procession” or “march,” Kwok’s explanation is mundanely pragmatic:

[Anthony] said why don't we have a little boy and little girl ... I think it is ok, so let's settle it, but we have to make sure that that part is not too late. Because they have to leave the stage earlier according to the regulations of Hong Kong.

It was true that the mobilisation of children—in a sequence generally perceived as a comment on Beijing’s attempt to push forward patriotic education, some would say brainwashing, in Hong Kong—was Anthony Wong’s idea and creatively driven. However, their appearance and its specific timing, and thus the impact on the entire show, was determined by something external and uncontrollable: local laws concerning child labour. Here, four levels of production interlock to create this segment in the concerts: the decision to cast children (production practices), who as participants are restricted by labour laws (institutional context), the ideological consideration of using children to comment on patriotic education in Hong Kong (production mentalities), and all of this taking place and gaining significance in the current historical moment of Hong Kong (historical context).

Another example of contingency comes from the dance choreography. At his earlier performing career, Anthony, and through him also Tat Ming, collaborated frequently with Zuni Icosahedron, an experimental theatre company founded in 1982. Wallace recounts how they would always hang out together in the 1990s, and how Zuni joined their shows.

Given their older age, they now opted for a different dance group, but still wanted a similar Zuni-like style, as Wallace explains how he discussed this with the choreographer, with whom they worked for the first time:

We told him, your dancers, they can dance, but make sure that they don't dance... So we asked him, "Do you have any idea of Pina Bausch?" He said he knew about Pina Bausch, he watched a little bit about Pina Bausch, and also that movie by Wim Wenders. But he never watched a real performance by Pina Bausch. And then accidentally, Pina Bausch's company came to Hong Kong, for the arts festival performance. I think just one and a half month before the show.

Here, it was the contingency of a Pina Bausch show happening in Hong Kong just before the performance that helped inform the show's choreographer what kind of style Tat Ming was looking for in their performance.

The parallel, if not paradox, of always preparing and always needing to respond to things that cannot be prepared for is a recurring motif of the three key producers of the Tat Ming concerts. Already the choice for *1984* was ridden with coincidences, as Wallace explains:

When we first talked about the show, we actually talked about how we met and when we met. And then we said, "Oh, *1984* is also a book. This book was published in 1949. What??" Then we talked [more] about it, and it is so interesting. Everything starts to come together. (...) So I talked to Anthony, a real super-state, and a functional one, at the same timing! It is very interesting! Then everything comes to pieces... We start with 1949, we start with communist China, and then George Orwell, and then another super-state was established at the same timing. When the book was written, predicting the future 1984, and then at that year Anthony and Tats met. They formed Tat Ming Pair. And in the year 1984 was the year the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed, in the same year.

Although Anthony and Wallace thus thought of using *1984* as one major inspiration, they could hardly anticipate the resurgence of interest in the dystopic novel prior to their concerts. As Wallace continues:

We used the book *1984*. After a while, after two to three months, after Donald Trump got elected, after *1984* became the bestseller in Amazon...Anthony told me that "Ahh! It is too popular! It looks as if

we are just copying...” We were not happy about that, but it couldn’t be changed back. We had to continue with what we started. But then Anthony told me something, he said, “Have you read [Haruki Murakami’s] book *IQ84*? The Japanese novel?” “Yes,” I said I read the book.

In the end, they kept *1984* in, but with the important supplement of *IQ84*. Sometimes, it was not a big international event like the presidential election of the United States that generated additional contingency that the production team had to deal with; other times it was something highly individual. For instance, the dazzling, almost hallucinating four-minute animation accompanying the song “Undercurrents 暗湧”⁷—morphing from different body parts to thousands of replicas of Anthony’s and Tats’ heads—turned out to be less a controlled matter than a last-minute rush characterised by surprises and a sense of helplessness and resignation. The production team only got to watch the rough cut of the clip two days before the concerts began, and, according to Wallace:

The day that we watched [the finished version was] the day of the rehearsal in the Coliseum. So the first time we watched, it’s not on the computer, it’s already on stage. We were just ... WOW ... It’s more than we expected.

The most dramatic contingency we heard from the producers concerned another central symbol of the concerts: a massive ball hanging over the “road,” alluding to the moon imagery used in *IQ84* (see Fig. 5.2). Like the animation, it almost failed to make it to the stage. As usual, these days in Hong Kong, many props are ordered from mainland China for delivery to the city, for the speed, the lower price, and the wider spectrum of choices. This ball was no exception. It was supposed to be on its way to Hong Kong, but the delivery went missing as late as the night before the rehearsal. The production team was not able to track it. According to Wallace:

The night before the rehearsal, the producer told me that the ball went missing. “We don’t know where it is now.” We contacted the company and the driver, who was supposed to have it delivered to the Coliseum on that day, was missing! Also, the company concerned told us that they were still looking for the driver, they couldn’t find him. We were very

⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1paU4hmKYDI>.

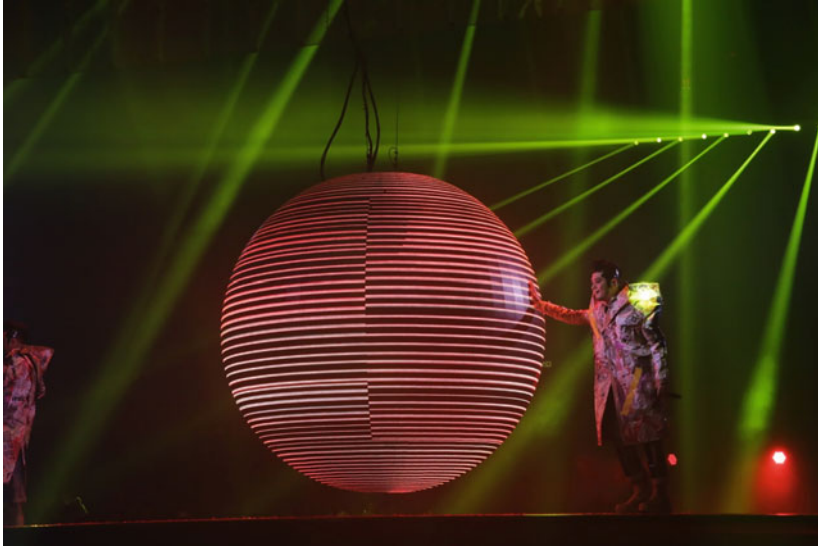


Fig. 5.2 The *IQ84* moon (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

worried, because the item was supposed to be very important, but it went missing. What could we do? The following day, the producer informed us that they found the driver. Somewhere in the highway of China, the driver was found dead... maybe working too hard or something... He died, with the ball in the back of the trunk.

It took much effort and time to deal with this unfortunate turn of events, to the extent that when the ball finally arrived, it was already late into the first show day. Wallace:

It already passed our rehearsal time. It was after midnight. After midnight we could not move anything inside. So they had to move it early the following day, and the whole rehearsal schedule was delayed. Drastically! Then we didn't have the time to do the right rehearsal and all the sound check and everything! But we couldn't tell people about that, because it was our fault... that someone died...the day the show started.”

This incident attests to the contingent character of the preparation of such a music spectacle; that what seems carefully planned and thought

through often turns out to be the result of ad hoc planning and last-minute decision-making.

THE PERSONAL

When Wallace told us about the heavy delay of the animation clip, he was not really grumbling about or even upset at the waiting and waiting; at most, he had a hint of anxiety and probably a sense of amusement. To be able to maintain this kind of poise was not only a matter of Wallace's experience in the pop music industry, but also something personal. After all, he and Anthony had known the animation video artist, Tobias Gremmler, for quite some time; they got to know each other when Anthony performed in Berlin two decades ago. It was not the first time they collaborated, and the production team knew very well that the artist might be late, but would always deliver (Fig. 5.3).

This kind of rapport, understanding, and trust, a general sense that something personal counts more than anything calculating, controlling,



Fig. 5.3 Video image of Tobias Gremmler's animation during the show (Photo by Jeroen de Kloet)

and managerial, forms another important production logic, what we call the "personal." When Anthony invited Yiu Fai Chow to write the theme song for the concerts, he hardly needed to offer any more briefing than the simple fact that the concerts would be loosely based on *1984*. Knowing Anthony, and having collaborated with Tat Ming for decades, Yiu Fai relied on their mutual understanding to contribute to the creative process. Without further discussing with Tat Ming, he delivered the song titled "1+4=14". Looking back on the concerts, Anthony reiterates how often he just left the tasks to the production team members concerned. "Perhaps I was right in trusting the right people; they did deliver the goods," he says.

Even when Duncan, of Universal Music, had to think professionally and commercially about the concerts, he refers fondly to his personal relationship with Anthony and his respect for Tat Ming as the decisive factor in his support for the project. He calls his decision "irrational," considering all the risks involved, especially the probable impossibility of securing sponsorship given Anthony's political stance. Duncan admits he would still consider the "P&L" (profit and loss) prospect, but commercial consideration was always secondary. "It's like seeing my own wish come true, to do the 30th anniversary concerts," he says, going on to recall how happy he was listening to all those hit songs from the 1980s and the 1990s. As he explains:

I have a bit of emotional connection, I personally really like Anthony, and I think Tat Ming Pair plays a very important role in the entire Cantopop scene. I also knew that 2017 would be Tat Ming Pair's 30th anniversary, so in 2016 I arranged to see Anthony. It was early 2016 when we began to discuss their reunion, their 30th anniversary concert.

And the personal connection was not only about Anthony or Tat Ming, but also Duncan's own biography in the field he joined years ago. Recalling his experience of the concerts, he says:

All the beautiful memories of the entire recording industry or the music scene suddenly crashed into me. ... It came to me that Tat Ming has been around for thirty years, and the fact that they have so many hit songs is touching to me.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that the production process was characterised by trust. “We got to know of the rundown very late, the floor plan also very late,” Duncan says. However, as he has accumulated years of relationship and collaboration with Anthony and Tat Ming, Duncan trusted their creative choices. “I was never worried,” he says. Again, shared history plays a role here:

[The production process] went smoothly indeed. Because firstly, I worked with Anthony before, whether at Polygram or Go East. We knew each other for a while because Wallace was a DJ at Commercial Radio. So it was smooth. Everybody knew each other as hardworking people.

Anthony felt this way too. And the personal trust made it much easier to deal with the political risks involved. When we ask Anthony about Universal’s support, he could only speak of the unspoken, the tacit understanding that things were understood. He says:

[Duncan] knew that I was sort of blacklisted in China. Sort of. Because it is never really official. So he knew that. ... And he knew our other concerts or albums are quite political. So he knew that already. So ... I didn’t really ask him. He was acting as if ... he never mentioned it.

While we are not assuming the importance of the personal in other productions, what we have observed time and again in this particular project—which, after all, was commemorating three decades of making music together—was the intimate way this group of colleagues, of friends, worked together. Sometimes, it was pragmatic, about how best to advance the project. Wallace, for instance, underlines his years of working with, and of knowing, Anthony, when he foregrounds the timing of their initial discussion surrounding the anniversary project. Wallace says:

After what happened in Hong Kong, I first sat down with Anthony like this. It’s very late, you know Anthony, usually he functions the best after midnight, we had a heart-to-heart talk before we met anybody else. It’s just Anthony and me, we sat down and said “Ok, we got the timeslot from Hong Kong Coliseum, and the Universal willing to invest. But what shall we do? What we want to talk about in this concert?” So we had a few sessions on that before meeting anyone else. We knew it’s going to be very difficult.

For Anthony, it is this personal network that makes the show:

I have a lot of meetings with Wallace... It sounds a bit unfair to the other [creative team members]. Of course we had a lot of creative meetings together, but I always.... The final decision always came back to just between me and Wallace. Or even sometimes just myself.

In addition to personal connection, personal interest also drives the show. Wallace, for example, has a strong interest in history. He is inspired by a specific period in Chinese history, the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (五代十國—906–979), during which what is known as China was radically fragmented, and war reigned. Wallace explains:

There was a group of people, they were scholars, writers, painters. They were so dissatisfied with what was happening in the country that they chose to escape from reality. So those people just went into deep forest, and they enjoyed a life of their own. They took marijuana or some kind of medicine (...). I also told Anthony not only Hong Kong was in that bad situation, the whole world was really bad. It was before Donald Trump got elected. It was before that. But we sensed that the world was collapsing, falling apart, and a new conservatism was rising up. People were not happy. I think that was after Brexit, before Donald Trump got elected. That is why we can see the new age philosophy is coming. Many people believe in the new age, and they want to do meditation, they want to get inside that.

It is this sense of doom and gloom, emerging from a personal interest in history that inspired the biggest part of the performance.

Sometimes, it is not only through the personal that the production is actualised; it is also through the production that the personal is celebrated and consolidated. The two feed into each other. Wallace is visibly thrilled when he recalls how he and Anthony share the same artistic taste and creative direction:

In the book *1Q84*, it talks about two parallel universes. The difference in the two parallel universes is: One, with one moon, but the other one, with two moons. Anthony just mentioned to me, why don't we put *1Q84* inside the concert too. I was so excited because I liked that book a lot! We talked about 1984, Communist China, and also the parallel universe about the book *1984* by George Orwell... Now we have a book influenced by *1984* written by Haruki Murakami. And then that book is talking about parallel universes, and then we have two moons and one moon... And then I said,

“Ok then, the ball can become the moon, and then we can have one more moon in the LED.” When we talked to the producer, he was so excited, because he liked the book too.

And finally, Wallace also got to know more about Anthony. When they were quite at a loss as to how to conclude the concerts, Anthony suddenly recalled he had written a letter to David Bowie.⁸ Anthony found the letter and read it to Wallace. Deeply touched, Wallace told Anthony, “It was so beautifully written.” Immediately, Wallace knew how precious such a letter was.

You know, Anthony seldom writes anything. He is not a man of words. Even though he is very articulate, it is so hard for him to sit down and write something. But he has written this letter with all his heart. ... And I think, wow, this is so good.

They knew they had found the perfect “final statement” to end the concerts. The part with David Bowie, as we have shown in Chapter 3, functions as a release, a sign of hope gesturing towards the future. Wallace explains how they connected Bowie to the show, how Anthony read out the letter right after singing “Under Pressure” with Denise Ho:

They sang this song together, and yes, we are under pressure! What shall we do? And then Anthony read out the letter to David Bowie. At that part, the eyeball became the dark planet. Because all through the history of David Bowie, there is always the place called “the dark planet.” We always say David Bowie is someone from another planet, not from this earth. He is not a human being.

And it is David Bowie to whom Anthony turns for help:

That part was so personal because as a big fan of David Bowie, Anthony was singing a song in Hong Kong, and asking someone who just died last year... Talking to the dark planet, that “David Bowie, you are on that planet. You are not on this planet anymore. Bless us!” It is a very emotional

⁸ In 1997, David Bowie released a Mandarin version of the theme song for the film *Seven Years in Tibet*. The lyrics were written by Lin Xi, a long-term collaborator of Anthony Wong, and the demo version was performed by Anthony. It was under these circumstances that he wrote the letter; David Bowie has been a major source of inspiration to Anthony.

and very personal touch of this concert. He is trying to ask someone who just died, the great legend in pop music history, David Bowie, to help us.

It is through a shared personal connection and admiration towards David Bowie that the final part of the concert is given shape and meaning.

THE CALIBRATIONAL

Amidst contingency, and driven by long-term personal connections, the concert came into being. Its political zeal was the result not merely of the personal histories of the producers; it involved, above all, a careful process of checking and balancing pleasure with politics, which we term "calibrational."⁹ Acknowledging that this was above all a pop music spectacle, the makers were constantly trying to avoid projecting too direct a message in the show. We see here a careful negotiation of production mentalities and ideological considerations. The previous concert series from 2012 was also a point of reference, as the makers wanted to pursue something different, out of a fear for doing something repetitively. Anthony alludes to this balancing, calibrating act, and how he would constantly discuss such matters with Wallace:

He would play different roles. Sometimes he would push, he said "Yeah you should touch on these subjects, these topics." And I would be the one who said, "Oh no this would be so... This is so obvious. I don't want it to be so obvious. I want it to be more subtle." And then we agreed that it wouldn't be like the one five years ago. Five years ago is more like... It has more satire. Political satire. And you laugh about the current situation, the current affairs. You make fun of the public figures and politicians. This time I didn't want that. In the end, we both agreed on "okay we won't repeat that." It was fun, but it should be done only that once.

⁹ Another form of calibration concerns the financial risks involved, as Duncan explains, "[The risk in the mainland is] absolutely calculated! Due to Anthony's situation, I think it is more than difficult to go to mainland. But I don't mind it. Of course the mainland is a huge market, everybody wants a share. But facts are facts, so we hope to target Hong Kong, Macau, and look at opportunities in Taiwan and Singapore. This is what we think." Same for the risk of not attracting any sponsor, which in the end proved to become a reality, also this is reflected upon by Duncan: "I thought if we didn't have them, so what? The show must go on. With sponsors, I thought it was a good incentive; without them, did it mean the show would be cancelled? May not be. So I have been very clear about the situation, and also very... 'stubborn.'"

After 2014, the situation became more grim, but it was also a manner of expectation management. This subsequently made Anthony look for other ways to express his view, as Anthony explains:

After what happened in Hong Kong, I don't think we should just laugh about it, and then forget it. No, I don't just want to laugh about it. I think maybe we should have a... Ok we make it more... how do you call it, introspective? Maybe provoking your thought. You may not laugh, but it will make you think. We hope that is what it turned out to be.

Wallace also refers to the difference from the 2012 concerts, when the choice to be more directly political was triggered by the context:

For the 2012 shows, the creative concept of the concert was relatively... a very direct one, because we wanted it to be very political. Since there was so much happening at that particular timing in Hong Kong, so you could just pick any elements from what's happening around you. You could just pick any images... because at that time, even you just post a picture of C.Y. [Leung, the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong] on stage, people would respond emotionally. (...) Especially in 2012, you had that anti-national education background (...). So we invited Scholarism, Joshua Wong and thirty secondary school students at the age of fifteen or sixteen, to come on stage and sing "we don't need no education." So it was a very clear political statement on stage.

The new show asked for a different approach, both to prevent repetition, and to acknowledge the more stringent political climate since the Umbrella Movement. As Anthony Wong was a key figure in the Umbrella protests, it was expected that he would include the visually spectacular imagery of the movement in the show. Not doing that would have been disappointing to the audience, if not considered an act of abandonment or even betrayal. At the same time, Anthony tells us how hesitant he was about delivering the expected, stating the obvious. From his creative point of view, he wants to approach the movement in a more indirect, opaque, and thus calibrated manner:

You see the occupied areas [of the Umbrella Movement protests]. So we take that back from the fiction to the reality, and then you see the reality of failure. So that part is not the fiction anymore; it is the reality we are

facing. The so-called failure we are facing. That part is the failure or the fatalism of the city.

What was shown during the concert was a video of nearly empty streets, devoid of people, and life. Which resonates with our analysis of the images in Chapter 3. For the audience it should be clear these streets signify the end of the occupation, a stark contrast to the time when the streets were teeming with people, when students were camping and studying at the occupation sites, when Anthony was performing on the centre stage of the occupied area. In its indirectness, in its subtle manner of conjuring presence through portrayal of its very absence, the clip clearly avoids representing the protests directly and instead recalibrates them towards a more opaque reference. Nevertheless, to explain this merely by way of politics is insufficient. Such ambiguity is in line with the aesthetics of pop that are characterised by a transient, intertextual, and multivocal opacity, in which meanings are always rendered ambivalent and under negotiation—in contrast to a rock aesthetic where meanings are generally more explicitly and more univocally articulated (de Kloet 2010).

But this choice to gesture towards reality was also borne out of an act of calibration between Wallace and Anthony. For Wallace, he liked the show to be surreal; in his words:

When I talked to Anthony about the book *IQ84*, I also mentioned that one thing... In Chinese, it is 虛 (*xu*). It is like reality is 實 (*shi*). Surreal is 虛. I always said I wanted this concert to be 虛, to be surreal. I didn't want it to be 實, not something realistic, but something surreal. I thought it was more interesting to play something surreal all the time, but I also asked Anthony, "Can we be surreal throughout the show? Will we have the chance to go back to reality? You want to touch on Umbrella Movement, or not? Do we need to go back to reality?" Then Anthony... after a while and after some thoughts, he told me, "I decided to go back to reality."

The choices made during the production process are—when they are driven by deliberation rather than contingency—the result of a process of lengthy discussion between the key makers. It takes a close personal connection to make this work.

Another example of such calibration between politics and pleasure related to the timing of the concert series, and thus the historical context (Corner 1999). The concerts took place just before the election of a new Chief Executive in Hong Kong, an election that pro-democracy critics

considered a mockery of real democracy, one based on a system of voting so distant from most Western forms of democracy that, three years earlier, its introduction ignited the Umbrella protests. Such a coincidence of timing made it rather inconceivable not to integrate the election motif into the concert, but the production team decided differently, as Wallace Kwok explains:

So when we were first given the time slot, because the last day would be one day before the election, we thought that, wow there are so many elements in the election that we can use for the concert. But after a few sessions, when we kept on talking to Anthony, we thought: it is too easy, it is so boring. I don't want to see C.Y.'s photo on the screen again.

Again, the producers opted for a more indirect, more opaque approach towards politics. Another example comes from the rendition of the song "Road Angel 馬路天使,"¹⁰ that was supposed to connect to a protest song during the Umbrella Movement. Again, to calibrate the political with the subtle and the opaque, Anthony and Wallace decided to obliquely refer to the protest song, and to let the tune morph into "Road Angel." That Tat Ming song is about youth gangs in the street, or more generally young people who do not want to go home, Wallace explains, so they occupy the road and become the "angels of the road." Wallace recounts:

[Anthony] said, "I don't want to avoid the Umbrella Movement. I want the song, but it is so cliché to sing the song on stage." So we rearranged a little, and the song became a rendition of whistling. We only whistled the lead lines, the melody lines of the Umbrella song. Then it led to the song "Road Angel." So that song was dedicated to all those who participated in the movement. The original version of "Road Angel" is a powerful song, with guitar lead line and everything. But the version we played in the concert, was very slow, with a guitar introduction by Tats. So it was a very moody one. The song was dedicated to all those who participated, and shared that kind of helplessness and hopelessness, for those who suffered that kind of post-trauma syndrome.

¹⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzb3O1Xybg>.

This calibration was not only related to the way they navigated through the questions of representation; it also concerned the affective management of the concert. They were aware of the considerably gloomy framing of the concert, with its triple theme of surveillance, brainwashing, and suppression. Some affective calibration was required to make sure audiences would also have a good time. In Anthony's words:

Even though it is very heavy, and you feel very emotional, ... I think if you really get what I mean, you will not feel like totally ... I hope you get empowered. After seeing the show, you are empowered, and you don't feel like you are beaten. That's what we tried to convey in the end.

This process of calibration also explains why, towards the conclusion of the show, it morphed into a somewhat unexpected tribute to David Bowie—it allowed Tat Ming to articulate a more hopeful ending, away from surveillance and control, as Anthony explains:

When [Denise Ho] came on stage to sing a duet with us, "Under Pressure," it's like the answer. The song "Under Pressure" was the answer to all those frustration and fatalism. Then I sang another David Bowie song. That part became a David Bowie tribute. It's like David Bowie became the salvation. So it's really funny, it's like music and art was our salvation.

The tribute foregrounds music and art as a way to escape from the controlling society. In a time when Hong Kong is moving through a gloomy period, struggling with the perceived failure of the Umbrella protests, with the demands posed by the National Security Law, witnessing its freedoms being challenged, music and art are celebrated as possible escape routes.

CONCLUSION

We have shown how the concert makers talk about the relationship between politics and music. For the music label that sponsors the concerts, music and politics should be seen as two totally separate realms, and connecting them can be harmful for the performance. The discrepancy or incongruity with the actual performances of Tat Ming is telling. On the other hand, for both Anthony and Wallace, the driving question of the show is not whether the two are linked, but rather, how to

balance politics with pleasure, gloom with fun. This difference is hardly surprising, as the record company's stake is to produce a successful show, and the question of politics has become a thorny one in the context of Hong Kong.

Our subsequent production analysis of the 2017 Tat Ming music extravaganzas revealed three recurring discourses—the contingent, the personal, and the calibrational—that help explain the production logic of the show and which we can add to Corner's (1999) four levels of production as playing a crucial and defining role in how the concerts are produced. First, much was decided in a rather haphazard and ad hoc way due to the contingency of the production process. Video materials were only delivered at the last minute, the truck driver that carried the key prop for the show passed away on his way from mainland China to Hong Kong, children could not perform after a specific time slot—all these contingent factors shaped the end result profoundly. What struck us as a meticulously planned and executed spectacle turned out to be, at least partly, the outcome of a messy and highly contingent production process. Second, personal relations played a key role in the making of the show. It was the long and solid friendship between Wallace Kwok and Anthony Wong that guided them through the demanding fabrication of the narrative, visual, and sonic structure of the show. It was Duncan Wong's fond memory of Tat Ming, memory that partly defined his past, that inspired him to engage his music company, Universal, into such a risky financial enterprise. Risky given that due to the political sensitivity surrounding Anthony Wong, investors might not want to invest in the show—and indeed they did not.

Such sensitivity became evident during the controversy regarding the concert poster. Modelled on the iconic cover of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, it included figures deemed influential in contemporary Hong Kong, among which Jay Chou. The poster was soon withdrawn, and media reports pointed to Chou's management as the reason. Allegedly—Universal never officially admitted the truthfulness of the allegation—Chou's management considered the use of his portrait on the poster as copyright infringement and threatened legal action. Although, as Anthony tells us, they had secured all the rights involved in the poster design via proper channels. Universal decided to play safe

and stop using this version of the poster.¹¹ This incident testifies to how much the show, whether in terms of production or promotion, was like playing a tug of war between multiple interests and considerations.

Finally, we have shown how the show involves a constant calibration between what to show and what not to show, often steering away from a direct articulation of politics towards a more opaque and ambivalent mode of performance. The calibration not only involves issues of representation, but also concerns affective management; a David Bowie tribute to conclude the show helps evoke a more positive, upbeat, and hopeful ending. Salvation comes from music and the arts, culminating into forces of imagination that produce lines of flight out of the society of control that Hong Kong is increasingly morphing into. Such lines, however, emerge, in a quite haphazard manner, driven by personal relationships and involving a constant calibration and recalibration of both form and content. To paraphrase John Lennon, music concerts are happening while people are busy making plans.

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¹¹ A later version kept all the portraits but replaced the faces with Tat Ming’s face. For the poster incident, see: <https://ol.mingpao.com/php/showbiz3.php?nodeid = 1,487,255,239,913&subcate = latest&issue = 20,170,216>.

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CHAPTER 6

1 + 1 = ?

Dylan, who began working on the book in 2010, offers his extraordinary insight into the nature of popular music. He writes over sixty essays focusing on songs by other artists, spanning from Stephen Foster to Elvis Costello, and in between ranging from Hank Williams to Nina Simone. He analyses what he calls the trap of easy rhymes, breaks down how the addition of a single syllable can diminish a song and even explains how bluegrass relates to heavy metal ... *The Philosophy of Modern Song* contains much of what he has learned about his craft in all those years and, like everything that Dylan does, it is a momentous artistic achievement.

Amazon's introduction of *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, by Bob Dylan

This Is What It Sounds Like is a journey into the science and soul of music. It's also the story of a musical trailblazer who began as a humble audio tech in L.A. to become Prince's chief engineer for *Purple Rain* and one of the most successful female record producers of all time. Now an award-winning professor of cognitive neuroscience, Rogers takes readers behind the scenes of record-making and leads us to musical self-awareness. She explains that everyone possesses a unique 'listener profile', shows how being musical can mean actively listening, and encourages us to think about the records that define us.

Penguin's summary of *This Is What It Sounds Like*, by Susan Rogers

Acclaimed music biographer James Gavin traces Michael's metamorphosis from the shy and awkward Georgios Kyriacos Panayiotou into the swaggering, dominant half of the leading British pop duo of the 1980s Wham!; he then details Michael's sensational solo career and its subsequent unravelling. With deep analysis of the creative process behind Michael's albums, tours, and music videos, as well as interviews with hundreds of his friends and colleagues, *George Michael: A Life* is a probing, definitive portrait of a pop legend.

Goodreads' introduction of *George Michael: A Life*, by James Gavin¹

Reviews of these three new books surrounding popular music were published on the same day in the Dutch quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*.² We read them during the time when we were preparing for this chapter, on Tat Ming Pair's³ legacy. We thought a book about Tat Ming would never be complete without zooming specifically in onto the influence and impact they might have. But how? This chapter concerns Tat Ming's legacy as much as the more fundamental question of how to investigate legacy. The chapter title is not only an admittedly self-indulgent twist of a title of Tat Ming's song "1 + 4 = 14"⁴; it necessitates thinking on how to discuss the legacy of music practitioners in general. Shelving the titular reference to $2 + 2 = 5$, the Orwellian dystopian caution of brainwashing and thought control, we are wondering how much Tats + Ming amounts to. $1 + 1 = ?$ The three books, not explicitly deliberating on popular music legacy, have dawned on us as pointing to three ways, three questions, to address this mysterious equation called legacy. What to study? Whom to study? Where to study?

¹ The three excerpts are taken from: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Philosophy-Modern-Song-Bob-Dylan/dp/1398519413>; <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/442453/this-is-what-it-sounds-like-by-ogas-dr-susan-rogers-and-ogi/9781847926555>; and <https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/59742373-george-michael>.

² It was the October 28, 2022, edition of *NRC Handelsblad*. The reviews were written by Wilfred Takken (George Michael), Hester Carvalho (Rogers), Lucky Fonz III (Dylan).

³ We will use Tat Ming Pair, the full name of the duo, the first time it appears in the chapter. Thereafter, we will revert to Tat Ming, the name usually and fondly used by fans.

⁴ The title of a song written by co-author Yiu Fai Chow, for the MV, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3wuu4vKhSk&t=174s>.

WHAT TO STUDY?

Let us begin with the two books associated with the two legends: Bob Dylan and George Michael. Dylan's own book collects his writings on what he considers good music, eventually condensing to become his "philosophy" not only on music but also on the human condition at large (Dylan 2022). Gavin tracks George Michael's life and traces its imbrications to the creative process of Michael's music. In these two publications, music and life are the key terms—also the two lynchpins for a handful of studies on legacy of major music practitioners (Gavin 2022). Some would have a stronger emphasis on the musical dimensions—even on one musical release, for instance, Russell Reising's anthology on the legacy of Pink Floyd's album *The Dark Side of the Moon* (Reising 2005). Just as Jennifer Shryane's monograph on the German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten explores their experiments with sound and music, and the ways they search for independence (Shryane 2016). Others explore music in conjunction with life—Brocken's book-length study of the Beatles, or what the author calls "the Beatles story" (2016, 6), investigates the narratives surrounding their Mersey Sound and Cavern Club, and how they eventually feed into the Beatles' heritage and popular music tourism in Liverpool (Brocken 2016). Stretching beyond the confines of popular music, works on legacy in the domain of classical music follow a similar framework. Jann Pasler's overview of research on Debussy's legacy distinguishes scholarship focussing on the man, and on the music (Pasler 2012).

While we orientate our study of Tat Ming's legacy towards this music-life spectrum, the radically different route taken by Rogers in her study of musical impact lulls us to organise with an additional parameter (Rogers 2022). In her book, Rogers enters the brain to see what music does to us and tells about us. A music practitioner herself, Rogers' inquiry seeks to explain why and how one falls in love with music, by way of neuroscience and what is commonly called emotion. Here we are reminded of the "bias" of legacy studies, in which the effective is highlighted—in the sense of how the "man" and/or the "music" have effected into something, the legacy. The analyses lean towards the rational. What Rogers persuades us to pay attention to is precisely the emotional, what we will call the affective, side of any influence and impact any music practitioners may exert, whether we are drawing from their music or from their biography. We do not have any training in neuroscience, and we gauge the

affective legacy through what people experience, or more accurately, what they tell us how they experience.

WHOM TO STUDY?

We just wrote the word “people”—who are they? Dylan inserts his voice, not only through the music he makes, but also by way of prose writing, to elucidate his craft, and his ideas of living—his philosophy, from which we may draw inspirations, and thus part and parcel of his legacy. Throughout this book, we have made our own attempt to let Tat Ming speak for themselves. We should include some other people, perhaps like what Gavin does in his work on George Michael: to talk to Tat Ming’s colleagues. We do it in a very broad sense; that is to say, we include people who work with Tat Ming directly, and indirectly, or in our terms, tangibly and intangibly, as we explicate later in the chapter. There is another departure from Gavin’s biography—while his book, understandably as a biography, takes George Michael’s colleagues as some maelstrom whirling towards the spectacular centre sustaining the pop star, our book is imbued with an urgency to map out how the pop stars send out ripples to the world. This chapter on Tat Ming’s legacy may be seen as the culmination of such attempt, and we focus on the ripples to the cultural world.

We move our gaze towards cultural intermediaries, whose affinities with Tat Ming enable numerous afterlives and cultural translations of Tat Ming’s music and life—put differently, their aesthetics and politics—to send further, wider ripples to other localities, other people. By “cultural intermediaries,” we borrow loosely from the working definition offered by Julian Matthews and Jennifer Smith Maguire, in which two dimensions are highlighted. “First, cultural intermediaries are market actors who construct value by mediating how goods (or services, practices, people) are perceived and engaged by others ... Second, cultural intermediaries must also be defined by their expert orientation and market contexts” (Matthews and Maguire 2014, 2). In that sense, one major function of cultural intermediaries is to construct legitimacy, through their own cultural works, for the cultural products. Phrased in Bourdieusian nomenclature, they are to distinguish good taste. Thus understood, the cultural intermediaries we have included are not limited to the “typical” practitioners, such as radio DJ’s, music writers, and event organisers; they are also music practitioners themselves. Throughout this chapter, we are mobilising this broader conception of “cultural intermediaries.”

In addition to, or perhaps in tandem with, defining good taste, our inquiry surrounding legacy puts into relief another function of cultural intermediaries, as we learn from their experiences of Tat Ming: defining good work. Amidst the body of critical scholarship on creative work (exploitation, precarity, and so forth), David Hesmondalgh and Sarah Baker foreground the need to pay attention not only to the bad side, but also to the good side, of creative work (2013). They question the “seeming impossibility of any hope of good work in capitalist modernity,” as contended in the critical scholarship of creative labour (Hesmondalgh and Baker 2013, 47). While the authors propose their conception of good work as involving “autonomy, interest and involvement, sociality, self-esteem, self-realisation, work-life balance and security” (Hesmondalgh and Baker 2013, 36), we will distil what the cultural intermediaries have adopted as good work through their effective and affective encounters with Tat Ming.

WHERE TO STUDY?

The three books that we have appropriated as incidental index to our investigation of legacy do not specify where they are located; the contexts are assumed. The sixty-six songs Bob Dylan have selected to ponder are predominately from the United States (“spanning from Stephen Foster to Elvis Costello, and in between ranging from Hank Williams to Nina Simone,” mostly male, for that matter). Gavin’s biography of George Michael covers the global reach of George Michael’s stardom, but essentially informed by the experience in the English-speaking pop music world. Rogers starts her book with a memory of a Led Zeppelin concert in Los Angeles, and stays in a specific, Western context, again claiming universal relevance, especially when she operates from another universally claiming field of neuroscience. Dylan does not call his book “the philosophy of modern songs in the United States.” This bias for the United States, for the English-speaking pop, for the West, permeates studies on legacy of music and music practitioners. Take another legend, the Sex Pistols. Their punk legacy is examined in terms of social and political impact as in the seminal work of Jon Savage (2011). It can also be calibrated in terms of cultural and economic impact as in Paula Guerra and Andy Bennett’s study (2015). Both works, however, take a certain context of state and market as granted, those operated in the West. To make it

explicit, the music and music practitioners are often assumed to influence and impact in a context that can roughly be described as democratic and capitalistic, or in Hesmondalgh and Baker's formulation, in "capitalist modernity" (2013, 47).

As an integral part of our project to decolonise popular music studies, this chapter on legacy challenges this assumption by way of Tat Ming and Hong Kong. We are no longer in the so-called Golden Era of Cantopop, where similar context as those in the West could be identified. The post-Handover Hong Kong may remain capitalistic, but the contemporary conjuncture of the postcolonial city is hardly democratic. As evidenced by the cultural intermediaries' talk on Tat Ming, the specific geopolitical dimension must be taken into account when questions surrounding music legacy are posed. We interviewed eleven cultural intermediaries in 2022, two years after the National Security Law came to effect, and freedom of speech as cherished by creative workers can easily become a clear and present danger to the workers themselves. These cultural intermediaries we conversed with do creative work, and they speak of Tat Ming and their influence, explicitly or otherwise, in connection to this post-NSL political conjuncture. And for those who have been operating in mainland China, we learn how they have taken the political—and politically sensitive—context as given, and continue to meander their ways to sustain themselves, the music they love, and the future they believe in.

INTRODUCING THEM

In 2022, we invited eleven people to share with us Tat Ming's influence and impact on them. Most of them are working in popular music, and a few in related fields of music and culture at large, such as podcast-making, DJing, writing, and music event organising. To probe into the border-crossing as well as diasporic dynamics, we have included two who grew up in mainland China and one who was born in Hong Kong and migrated to Canada, now based in Hong Kong again. For logistic reasons, these two intermediaries were approached by email and the interviews were conducted in written form. The rest of our interviewees would be considered locally Hong Kong. They were interviewed by a research assistant with our guidance, lasting from an hour to three, in a location chosen by them. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Given that Tat Ming is censored in mainland China, we have used pseudonyms

for the two interviewees from mainland China as chosen by themselves. Here they are, in alphabetical order.

Atom Alicia C (Atom Cheung, b.1980), as we introduced in Chapter 2, migrated with his family from Hong Kong to Toronto, Canada when he was nine. Two decades later, in 2009 he returned to Hong Kong, initially planning to do some networking with the local indie music scene. Atom wanted to start a Hong Kong indie music programme for a Toronto-based radio station. His interest gradually morphed to creative writing, aspiring to write in and on the city he was born. He decided to move and stay in Hong Kong. Atom publishes works of fiction and poetry; his penname underwrites the gender fluidity he is experiencing. He is also hosting experimental podcasts. He is currently a radio presenter on Radio Television Hong Kong, a local public broadcasting service.

Chi Chung (Chi Chung Wong, b.1965) became a radio DJ when he was still a university student. His signature show *Chi Chung's Choice* was celebrated as an important platform to introduce quality, alternative pop music to the Hong Kong audience. He also formed an indie music group in the 1990s. For more than three decades, Chi Chung worked in different media capacities and shared his passion for popular music to younger generations in the city. He still does. After obtaining his PhD in pop music culture in the digital era, Chi Chung took up a teaching job in a university. He then moved on and stayed in charge of a cultural literacy initiative in another university in Hong Kong.

Eman Lam (b.1982) formed the pop duo at17 with Ellen Loo in 2002. Signed by the indie production house People Mountain People Sea founded by Anthony Wong, at17 quickly established themselves in the local pop scene, gaining mainstream success, thanks to their refreshing electronic folk and all-female youthfulness. They also hosted television and radio shows and participated in musicals. In 2010, at17 announced their suspension; Eman and Ellen went solo. They continued, however, to stage anniversary reunion concerts in the years to follow. In 2018, Ellen was found dead at the age of thirty-two; she was known to be dealing with mental health issues for quite some time. Eman's solo career reached new heights after joining a television show coaching new generation of music performers. She composes, arranges, produces, and writes lyrics. In 2021, she opened a music school for children. In the same year, her appearance in a pro-establishment television station sparked off heavy criticism. In 2022, on July 1, the Handover anniversary day, Eman released a song, that, in her words, was acknowledging her long-standing affection for

Chinese music, but was seen as kowtowing to mainland China by some of her local fans. We will come back to this when we end this chapter.

Funkie (b.1979) describes himself as a collector and promoter of Cantonese-language culture. Growing up in Beijing, he has worked in various media platforms. Since 2018, Funkie, as a party DJ and promoter, has been curating dance parties featuring Cantopop. He is also hosting radio shows on online platforms, serving the same purpose of promoting popular music from Hong Kong. Extending from his passion for music, Funkie has developed events integrating electronic music with a diversity of sports, such as yoga, skiing and jogging. His “official” employment is a manager at a Beijing-based cultural investment company.

Gaybird (Keith Leung, b.1972) released his first album with his band Multiplex, produced by Tats Lau. It was during his undergraduate years at the Academy of Performing Arts in Hong Kong. Later, as composer, arranger, and producer, Gaybird joined Anthony’s indie production house People Mountain People Sea. Since then, he has collaborated with many mainstream artists in the Chinese-language pop world. In recent years, Gaybird has been experimenting music with technology, staging installations and performances usually regarded as artistic projects more than commercial undertakings.

Jason Choi (b.1968) started making music while following his legal training at the University of Hong Kong. For some years, Jason balanced himself between legal and musical practice, until 1999. It was the year Anthony set up People Mountain People Sea and Jason decided to quit his lawyer job to join the music company and become full-time music practitioner. Since then he has worked with many artists as composer, arranger, and producer. For a short span of time, Jason also formed his own duo called Pop Pop, and released their own songs.

Jan Curious (b.1984) was the lead vocalist of indie rock band Chochukmo formed in 2005. After winning a competition organised by *Time Out* magazine, the band was offered the opportunity to produce and distribute an album, which became their debut in 2009 titled *The King Lost His Pink*. Highly experimental, the band released songs in the English language and participated in music festivals in and outside Hong Kong. Chochukmo decided to disband in 2010 after an intense tour in mainland China. The following year, however, band members regrouped themselves to record a song as part of a fund-raising project for tsunami victims in Japan. Jan Curious continued releasing music in the name of Chochukmo, as well as started collaborating with other artists, some

mainstream. In 2016, he started another band R.O.O.T. (Running out of Time) experimenting with Cantonese-language songs. In 2019, Jan Curious and tombeats released two electronic EPs. In 2021, Jan Curious added solo releases, with the artist name of Ah Sui, to his variety of music practices, with his debut single titled “Welcome to This City 歡迎嚟到呢座城市.”

Lam Ah P (Pang Lam, b.1981) formed the indie pop band My Little Airport with his journalism classmate Nicole Au and released their first album in 2004. While Ah P is responsible for the musical and lyrical sides of their songs, Nicole is the usual vocalist. Eclectic in styles, Ah P’s lyrics engage with politics, gender, and sexuality, as well as a host of issues confronting younger generations of Hong Kong people. In 2015, My Little Airport was invited to perform their song “Beautiful New Hong Kong 美麗新香港,” nominated at a film award presentation ceremony. When Ah P added, in an improvising and discordant manner, the British anthem to the end of the song, the live broadcast in Hong Kong was curiously interrupted with a commercial break. Since 2019, their music has been banned in mainland China, allegedly for their involvement with the social movements in Hong Kong.

Number 6 (Hou Cheong Mau, b.1980) was born in Macau and moved with his family to Hong Kong in 1988 when he was eight. He is the lead singer of the four-member rock band RubberBand, formed in 2005 and debuted with a major label in 2008. Since 2016, RubberBand has operated as an indie band, with increasing popularity and critical acclaim, above all, for their resonance with social developments. Number 6 is involved with musical production and occasionally the lyrical contents of their music. Tim Lui, the lyricist of RubberBand, was Number 6’s girlfriend and later his wife. In addition to music, Number 6 is also working for film, television, and theatre projects. With training in film making, he also (co-)directs many of the band’s MV’s. The latest award-winning hit “Ciao” is inspired by the current migration wave, with a six-minute-and-a-half MV that functions as a short film narrating the struggles of a young family about to move out of the city. “We say, till we meet again, then we will meet again,” write Number 6 and Tim Lui.

Passer-by (b.1974) started listening to popular music from Hong Kong while growing up in Guangzhou. He built up a circle of friends on online forums, sharing and co-constructing their passion for Cantopop. Later, he tried to create his own music with—in his own words—no

success. Passer-by took up music-related work at various media institutions, including writing music reviews and features. He was also responsible for curating special issues on Tat Ming, and organising their concerts in Guangzhou and thereabouts. More recently, he also started his own music label. While Passer-by has engaged himself with a diversity of cultural projects and enterprises, his career, as he sees it, is to promote Cantonese-language popular music.

Serrini (Ka Yan Leung, b.1990) is one of the most iconic indie singer-songwriters in the past decade of Hong Kong popular music. Debuted in 2012, Serrini has enabled a spectacular rise in popularity with her performance as a fearless, down-to-earth, at the same time larger-than-life diva. Always outlandish in her stage attire, Serrini was seen flying on a giant tampon during one of her concerts. Conversing with what is going on in the society, Serrini's music is peppered with local slang and phenomena. In 2019, when Serrini received a music award in Taiwan, she mentioned the social movement then unfurling in Hong Kong. She was attacked by some online users in mainland China and had to cancel her mainland tour. In addition to her music career, Serrini has obtained a PhD degree devoted to the study of popular music. For her experimental writing on the music award experience, see Leung (2022).

ENCOUNTERS

As expected, these eleven cultural intermediaries had their first encounter with Tat Ming's music through what would now be called legacy (pun not intended) media: on radio, on television. Most of them were growing up when Tat Ming was making a name for themselves, thus enjoying good airplay. Even when they did not choose to listen to their music, they would be exposed. For those born later (for instance Serrini), or somehow not particularly drawn to Tat Ming's songs on radio or television, they would recall more vividly other forms of encounters, illustrating the convergence affordance for the circulation of music (Jenkins 2004). For such convergence occasions, Tat Ming's music was played for purposes beyond music, and the duo was not even present. Some of our interviewees gathered their first memories of Tat Ming's music not when they performed in music shows; specifically, they refer to appropriation of their music, for fun, and more. For their striking image when Tat Ming started (Anthony wore long—unusually long for a man—hair and

Tats short, with distinct sartorial coupling), they were imitated for caricature, comical, and generally amusement effects in variety shows. The other often cited way of encountering Tat Ming is the long-running show *Headliner*; a television programme that delivered social and political critique and occasionally appropriated Tat Ming's songs, among others, for their satirical clips. "They always used the song, what's the title? The one with Deng Xiaoping," Serrini recalls. Produced by Radio Television Hong Kong, the city's public broadcaster, the show started in 1989 and stopped in 2020, presumably due to political pressure and government intervention.

Music promotes itself, and at the same time, we learn from our interviewees that music appropriation, for fun or otherwise, is also an important way to gain more exposure and encounters. In addition to such mediated forms of music encounter, a personal, human thread must be woven into our understanding of how people get to listen to certain music. Indeed, people: either people who knew Tat Ming and would introduce our interviewees to Tat Ming personally, or people who liked Tat Ming and would continue listening to Tat Ming together with them. For instance, a church friend of Chi Chung's was involved in the same radio show, *Breakthrough Hours*, as Anthony. She connected Chi Chung to join the show, eventually leading to his intimate acquaintance with Tat Ming's music, starting from the very first single. "Anthony would bring their demos back to the station and let us listen to them," Chi Chung remembers fondly. Apart from friends, classmate is the other category that is often mentioned as instrumental to musical exposure and affirmation of musical taste. Ah P started listening to Tat Ming when he was a teenager. "I was already interested, and then I found out a classmate sitting next to me was also listening to Tat Ming," Ah P says. It was incidentally the year when Tat Ming held their 10th anniversary concert, and they went together. Jason was introduced by a classmate to Tat Ming's debut release, then "it was a path of no return," he jokes. Jason tells us he met this classmate not so long ago, and they recalled this connection to Tat Ming, "We both found it so amazing."

Whether mediated or personalised, such encounters might not have ushered in and sustained a more enduring relationship with Tat Ming, should there be no further occasions to intensify the encounters. For those working in the music industry, one common way was collaboration. Jan Curious and Eman both explain how they came to appreciate Tat Ming's music much better when they performed backing vocals at

Tat Ming's concerts. They needed to learn the songs word by word, note by note. "I had to study the two albums we were performing [at the first *REPLAY* concerts] – I guess I was too young when I first listened to those songs, I didn't know they were doing such things so many years ago," says Jan Curious. Passer-by, not a music practitioner but a cultural worker, then for a news medium in mainland China, became more involved with the duo when he was editing an anniversary feature. Later, he helped organise gigs for Tat Ming. During such collaboration, it was not always only about music, but also the personal. Jan Curious: "I could study him [Anthony] so closely, not only his works, but also himself."

For those who did not have the chance to collaborate so intimately, or so intensively, they cherish their special moments shared with Tat Ming. Atom remembers how, after moving to Toronto and forgetting the pop songs he listened earlier in his life in Hong Kong, he came across Cantopop in a local public library. He also remembers the moment when Tat Ming was acknowledging his fanzine on stage, "for me, an emotional moment, seeing my writing struggles and my diasporic English voice validated." Funkie tells us a similar moment. He brought a special, vinyl edition of Tat Ming's to a concert; he managed to bring it to the front and hand it to Anthony. "He raised it up to let the entire audience see, and he was very surprised how someone would have this record."

CAVEATS

Before we move on to discuss the legacy of Tat Ming, a few notes are in place to prepare readers for the following analyses of the cultural intermediaries we have talked with. We are sieving through the interview transcripts and attempting an account of their legacy that does justice to Tats and Anthony as well as to these people who talked about their influence, impact, and legacy. We realise that we run and take the risk not necessarily of erring, but probably in the nature of simplifying, flattening, amplifying, and, above all, wanting. We will make it explicit by way of four caveats.

First, as mundane as it sounds, life is complicated. It is difficult, if not at all impossible, or even desirable, to filter out other factors at play in one's life. It is perhaps not how one lives out one's life in real. We are referring to what the cultural intermediaries mention as Tat Ming's impact on them, and one wonders at the same time if this is Tat Ming alone that

enables it. For instance, when Jan Curious speaks on the close relationship between politics, life, and popular music and his “hard core” attitude towards music practice, how far is it inspired by Tat Ming and how far is it an inflection of his class background (which he occasionally alludes to in the interview)? We need to shelf this vexing question for another inquiry over, say, class, and pop; for the current purpose, we are investigating how Tat Ming’s effect and affect are embodied in Jan Curious, with all the biography he has brought with him. But we do want to acknowledge the complexity of legacy, and the very impossibility to single out Tat Ming’s influence in anyone’s life, musical, or otherwise.

This brings us to the second caveat. While biographical categories—class, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth—should nuance our recuperation of Tat Ming’s legacy, we must also acknowledge the daunting task of combing the musical pasts of our cultural intermediaries and identify the running threads, for our purposes, those of Tat Ming. We have invited these interviewees as guided by their connections with Tat Ming. We presupposed their legacy, and we confirm it by and large. We hasten to add, however, that these people working with culture have inherited much more. Serrini cites Paul Wong of Beyond, a popular rock band contemporaneous to Tat Ming. Jason recalls how he was also inspired by Kubert Leung, of another contemporary electronic formation Ukiyo-e.

Relatedly, the third note we insert concerns Tat Ming themselves. Put it simply, even when we could trace any articulations in the interviews to a single source of influence, namely Tat Ming, we are occasionally not sure if they mean the duo as a duo, or about Anthony, or about Tats. Or, as Number 6 points out, sometimes it is the group of music practitioners under the indie production house People Mountain People Sea founded by Anthony that has impacted on him as a whole.⁵ Given the higher profile Anthony has been enjoying whether as the front person of the duo, as the more articulate member, or as the one who came out as a homosexual, who has been activating his politics in a public manner, our

⁵ In 1999, Anthony Wong established People Mountain People Sea with several fellow music practitioners. Originally an indie music production house, it started handling commissioning work from other pop stars, and later signing their own artists. The name of the company came from the title of one of Anthony’s solo work, in turn a traditional Chinese idiom denoting huge crowds of people, evoking the power of collectivity.

interviewees refer more often to Anthony. We will explicate in the subsequent account as clearly as the interviews allow us, but the conflation of the two music practitioners is unavoidable.

Finally, we thank the trust of these eleven people who conversed with us. They have been telling us how they experience Tat Ming, at the time Tat Ming was releasing their major hits, and how they themselves work as culture workers and makers, in the current conjuncture they are situated. In the following account, we need to omit certain utterances, examples, and stories that we consider “better” not to cite in details, if at all. When a music practitioner is inspired by Tat Ming and creates a song that has coded in some items too sensitive to be done otherwise, we do not see the point of spelling out the coding, and the coded message. We draw attention to the coding practice, as it were, as part and parcel of Tat Ming’s legacy. We must be forgiven that if we are sometimes less specific than we would like to, we do so for the sake of those who put their trust on us, and for ourselves too.

LEGACY

Effect

We have talked to eleven people about Tat Ming—eleven people who work, like Tat Ming, in music creation, or who do cultural work, such as radio programmes, cultural events, and creative writing. They have similar and different experiences when they mention Tat Ming’s influence, with similar and different intensity—some claim a more opaque, circuitous, messy affinity, while some say very specifically, explicitly, and emphatically how Tat Ming has left a mark on them. Gaybird and Jason agree: “Tat Ming is in our blood.” In this section, we will first discuss Tat Ming’s legacy in terms of effect, of how Tat Ming as music makers have effected—entailed, enabled, brought about—cultural productions in music and wider cultural scenes. We borrow—perhaps more accurately, paraphrase—the nomenclature from cultural heritage discussion to frame our analysis, into tangible and intangible effect, essentially to distinguish between the more concrete and the more abstract.

Tangibly

The most palpable of which is the role Tat Ming plays in the very burgeoning of an interest, a passion, and a dedication to a career in music.

Gaybird embodies this form of musical influence the most dramatically. Referring to his enrolment in the music department of the Academy of Performing Arts, in Hong Kong, he says: “It’s because of Tat Ming that I wanted to study music.” Gaybird recalls watching Tat Ming perform in a television show, in the 1980s, when Hong Kong popular music was churning up a wave of band sound. “It’s probably their first TV appearance, and I saw Tats play out everything a band did, just with his keyboard. It’s simply amazing!” He told himself one day he would become like Tats. That’s how he started learning electronic keyboard himself, then composing and music theories, finally to the Academy of Performing Arts. It is therefore as anticipated as it is miraculous that the debut album of his band Multiplex was produced by Tats, introduced to him by someone who knew both, alluding again to the importance of the personal in cultural work (Konrad 2013).

There are a few other less dramatic cases, but equally effectual in launching them into a music career. Jason, like Gaybird, was invited to join Tat Ming shows, and later People Mountain People Sea. Jason was already preparing for this rather radical step of leaving his lawyer job to practice music on a full-time basis. At the time when Anthony was setting up the production house, Jason believed he had saved enough money. “It was timing,” so he quit. Serrini, before she was known as Serrini, participated in the first summer camp, in 2013, organised by Renaissance Foundation Hong Kong, an NGO co-founded by Anthony in nurturing new generations of creative talents. The same year she joined a trip RFHK organised and performed in Yunnan, mainland China. During her earlier musical life, Serrini continued to join music events hosted by RFHK. Serrini received the Renaissance Award in 2018 and joined a mainland China tour in 2019 sponsored by RFHK.⁶ Eman’s music career commenced when she formed the duo at17 with Ellen Loo, she at the age of eighteen, and Ellen fourteen. They were signed by People Mountain People Sea in 2002. “Anthony was there very early, on the signing day. He

⁶ Founded in 2012 and based in Hong Kong, the Renaissance Foundation is a non-profit charitable organisation, dedicated to nurturing upcoming generations of young creative talent. As introduced in its website: “It sponsors independent creation and incubates new networks of cultural industries, establishing a professional platform to facilitate entry into international markets.” The Foundation aims to promote the development of independent music, film, creative writing, and multi-disciplinary arts. Its mission: “Promoting Cultural Diversity Through New Waves Of Young Creatives.” See <http://rfhk.org.hk/en/>.

wanted to get to know us, and he chatted with us, telling us what music release means, and about our aspirations for a music career,” Eman recalls. Her first commissioning as a composer was through Anthony, when he asked her to write a song for a theatre project. “Ok, I will give it a try,” thus marked a significant milestone in Eman’s musical life.

Another tangible effect Tat Ming has is their own music; we are referring to two specific manners. On the one hand, quite a few of the music practitioners have covered Tat Ming songs, in that sense a clear continuation and consolidation of Tat Ming’s musical legacy. Number 6 mentions a performance of his RubberBand at an official Handover show in 2013. While the show was supposed to celebrate the return of Hong Kong from colonial rule to Beijing, they sang “Don’t Ask the Sky 天問,” a Tat Ming classic that, as cited earlier in this book, was released in 1990 as a critical response to what happened in Tiananmen the year before. In addition to such individual projects of Tat Ming covers, some of them have taken part in the two compilation albums with covers contributed by various musical units as a tribute to Tat Ming. On the other hand, there have been new creations directly inspired by Tat Ming’s earlier numbers. Number 6 quotes a RubberBand song titled “Black Chicken 黑雞,” intended as a musical and lyrical response to Tat Ming’s hit “The Ten Young Firemen 十個救火的少年,”⁷ also released in 1990. In the latter song, the ten kids disappear one after the other while the fire is raging on, alluding to the dire political situation and the urgent need for perseverance. In the RubberBand recreation, the “chicken” is the local slang term for whistle, and a football game is evoked to articulate social injustice when the footballers disappear one by one from the field.

Crossing the borders to mainland China, Funkie and Passer-by supplement our research, noting that many of the mainland music makers listen fervently to Tat Ming and would draw reference from their music. They cite a few well-known Chinese bands, mainly the generation right after Tat Ming. As for themselves, they are inspired in their own ways to partake in the world of music production. Passer-by has created his own music label and has organised throughout the years events connected with Tat Ming. Funkie, as DJ and radio host, plays their music as much as he can in such public spaces as party venues and online shows. “I will also mash up and mix their music with others, and upload covers of their songs

⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALMEyL94738>.

to online platforms,” adds Funkie. Like Passer-by, he does what he can hoping more people will be able to listen to Tat Ming’s music, albeit in recent years his podcasts have been facing increasing surveillance and censorship. Referring to his experience as part of the Hong Kong diaspora, Atom has been publishing creative writing inspired by Tat Ming. Atom has also published flash fiction pieces and other poems, as well as curated an exhibition in Toronto, inspired by individual Tat Ming songs. At the point of our writing, he is about to complete a collection of prose poems, in English, mobilising as their starting point the song “Don’t Wait 別等”⁸ he saw Tat Ming perform in the 2021 *REPLAY* concerts. “The sheer beats and momentum ... the words and imagery of the song.” To Atom, “Tat Ming provides the imagery that fuels my creative output.”

Intangibly

Sometimes, the music practitioners who talked to us draw a specific, tangible link from their own creation to Tat Ming’s songs, like Rubber-Band’s cover of “Don’t Ask the Sky” and their original number titled “Black Chicken.” More often, they attribute their music indirectly to Tat Ming, nodding to what we call Tat Ming’s intangible effect. We are referring to the effect Tat Ming has on the yardstick these later generations of music makers employ to evaluate their own music: Tat Ming’s impact on what counts as good pop. They mention a host of qualities—innovative (Jason: “The sound of the songs must excite the audience, must be provoking their usual way of hearing”; Gaybird: “It’s like it didn’t exist in the world, and then all of a sudden, it’s there, for instance, their Chinese version of electronic music”), aesthetics (Passer-by: “The way they bring the old and the new, the Chinese and the West together ... and the literariness of their lyrics”; Ah P: “I listened to quite a few bands and singers when I was young, and they were all influenced by the aesthetics of Tat Ming, rather dark”), showmanship (Serrini: “I won’t usually loop their music, but I will always watch their live shows”); Eman: “I am always amazed, how can someone become such a totally different person on stage?”). There should be a research project on Tat Ming’s music, as suggested by Eman, to give full recognition to their musical trajectory, achievement, and contribution. We agree; however, given our lack of music or musicology training, and the general thrust of this book,

⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpV9m-2UqBY>.

we must confine ourselves to the above sketchy remarks regarding Tat Ming's musical impact. Instead, we turn to other parameters, than the strictly technical and musical, that the eleven people also mention when they talk about the musical influence of Tat Ming. In fact, these parameters are what they elaborate the most, and the most passionately: popular music has to be relevant and urgent, subtle and nuanced, honest, and alternative.

Let us begin with a song written by Jan Curious released under his band R.O.O.T.: "Sixty Seconds in Africa 非洲的60秒." After stressing Tat Ming's and Anthony's impact, especially after his collaboration as backing vocalist at the Tat Ming concerts, Jan Curious cites this song to illustrate the connection. Unlike RubberBand's "Black Chicken," this song does not claim to be a continuation of any specific Tat Ming song. In Jan Curious' own explication, "Hong Kong is small, and densely populated. Farms are very small too. You will find chickens being crammed to such an extent that they can't even move. It's like they can't even have the fantasy of flying." Jan Curious extrapolates the Hong Kong spatial politics to that of a different locality, the African continent, with the well-nigh cliché imaginary of vastness, and spatial possibility. "Probably the song is saying even in Africa, chickens want to fly, and they can try, and they won't give up trying." In the end "Sixty Seconds in Africa" is about freedom, the insistence on as well as the persistence of imagining freedom.

Which guides us to the first term often cited during our interviews: *relevant*. In Jan Curious' sharp formulation: "We have a lot of musical products in Hong Kong, but what Tat Ming has done is art, it's relevant." All of the eleven people we talked with foreground this particular quality of Tat Ming's songs; they refer primarily to the lyrical contents, but also to their concert renditions, occasionally in connection with musical arrangements. Many of Tat Ming's hits are retrieved in their articulation of what matters in pop, such as their earlier songs about being young in the fast-changing, consumerist, and nihilistic society; about the shock of 1989 and the anxiety of pre-Handover Hong Kong; about choices to leave or stay; about gender and sexual equality; about life itself. Ah P calls it "a Tat Ming way of making music," always combining something apparently private with societal issues. In their earlier years of making music, Tat Ming was releasing songs with a "concern about our future," which, to Ah P, remains as relevant as ever. "They really use their heart in connecting with what is happening," thus summarises Number 6 Tat Ming's social, political, and humanitarian relevance. Such relevance is,

however, always already intertwined with a sense of urgency in the post-National Security Law Hong Kong. As Gaybird reflects, as creator, as artist, one has to deal with issues that matter, that concern life and living, “but that may get you imprisoned.” They feel, at the same time, a stronger sense of vying for time, for what they cherish, and believe to be a better city, a better life. Tat Ming’s music is, in that sense, not only influential for its relevance, but for the urgent mission of, in both Jan Curious’ and Number 6’s words: “against forgetting.”

Reverting to the song “Sixty Seconds in Africa,” Jan Curious points to another feature of Tat Ming’s songs: *nuance and subtlety*. That the song is written in the form of a political parable, a twisted fairy tale, a piece of text open to multiple readings, is paradigmatic of the aesthetics of Tat Ming’s own creations, both their lyrical contents and other manifestations. It has become Jan Curious’ own thinking of good music: “I never like making things very explicit.” Funkie is equally impressed by what he calls the “spatial affordance” of Tat Ming’s music, that their songs would always give him and other audiences space to think, to feel, to respond in their own ways. The preference for nuance and subtlety is, however, not only an aesthetic goal in itself; it may also be a tactic to survive political interference, in Tat Ming’s early days, and particularly now. Gaybird continues, after explicating the danger of creative work in contemporary Hong Kong, “So how to express yourself and don’t get yourself into prison, that requires wisdom.” This wisdom, according to what the cultural intermediaries talk about Tat Ming, is writing in a more nuanced, more subtle way. “A circuitous route,” summarises Jan Curious. Which is perhaps not only the better, but also the richer route, for this conjuncture of Hong Kong. It is the politics and aesthetics of speaking the unspeakable. Serrini says: “If I don’t spell things out clearly, they need to guess. The more they guess, they may get something. But then if I say it directly, they may become lazy, they don’t think and they may get it wrong.” Believing in nuances and subtlety is also believing in the audience. Serrini has noted a sense of maturity among the audiences in Hong Kong—despite of and because of the challenging situation in the last years. “They are looking for deeper sentiments and reflections.” Jan Curious goes further and thanks the current political stringency. He comments, half sarcastically, half seriously, “Our creative space has become bigger, because the audience is getting smarter, they think more. We may get less physical space to present ourselves ... but now people pay more attention.”

It is a long-term affair. That is how Jan Curious talks about his music, about Tat Ming's music. In this temporal perspective, what matters is *honesty*, or the courage to speak honestly. When talking about "Sixty Seconds in Africa," Jan Curious mentions the pleasure of writing nuances and subtlety in his song, and above all, his admiration of Tat Ming's honesty. "They spoke a lot of truth in the 1980s and 1990s," comments Jan Curious. "Even when you were born after that, or after the turn of the century, and when you realise there is not much honesty going on in the world, you will look for it." That is why, according to him, younger generations of audience keep on listening to Tat Ming. Many of the interviewees place their honesty against a backdrop where the opposite may well be safer, or smarter. "Speaking up is extra important in a place like Hong Kong," remarks Atom, when he observes mainstream artists usually do not have the courage to speak up, in a society that is biased for the status quo, for the established order. Relatedly, Ah P extends the parameter of honesty to a very concrete question he poses to himself before creating a new song: does the world need such a song? Ah P stresses that any music practitioner must have something that he truly wants to express. This something is, for almost all of the cultural intermediaries we talked with, the readiness to use music and other cultural productions to challenge mainstream ways of thinking and doing things, "something rebellious," thus says Atom.

Words like "honesty" and "authenticity" have a long and complicated history in popular music studies. In his earlier work on rock music from China, co-author Jeroen de Kloet goes at length to explain how different music scenes in Beijing use different tactics to create a genre-specific construction of authenticity (2010). This ranges from the boy-next-door aesthetics in folk music, to the spectacular exaggerations of masculine aesthetics in heavy metal. Such studies follow in the slipstream of a move towards poststructuralist theory, in which notions like honesty, authenticity, or alternative, are by default being placed between parentheses. The key question is not whether they are, but how they are constructed, with what kinds of effects, and what is being left out, or ignored, or excluded. In de Kloet's case study of rock music in Beijing, it was pop music from Hong Kong that served as an important constitutive outside that was looked down upon as too commercial and too slick.

We are living in different times now; as Bruno Latour already observed in 2004, the critical tools of deconstruction have somehow run out of steam, now that they have been appropriated by the far right (Latour

2004). It is predominantly from the far right that the “truth” of climate change is being questioned, just as the harm done by the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas his solution to this problem is, unsurprisingly, a move towards his Actor Network Theory, and, thereby, a promotion of a paradigmatic shift from Foucault to Latour, we are less keen to position ourselves firmly in specific schools of thought. But we do acknowledge that to question and deconstruct the vocabulary used by our cultural intermediaries is not the way we want to go in this chapter. In other words, while we are aware that notions like honesty and authenticity are ideological constructs, we prefer to read them in this chapter, instead, as ideological anchor points through which the intermediaries make sense of their work as well as of their life. In a time and place when work and life has come under so much pressure, such as contemporary Hong Kong, to question the construction of, say, authenticity, or hope, seems like a much less urgent task than to look for the affordances of authenticity or hope. It is the latter we are interested in.

Another keyword, equally prone to deconstruction, they often use to describe Tat Ming’s music is *alternative*. The term is applied to the manner the duo has been making music, as much as to the attitude such music embodies. Gaybird epitomises Tat Ming’s music—how they present it, how they visualise it, how they stage it—with this sense of epiphany: “They tell me, the world is more than it is.” In almost identical wording, Chi Chung recalls his DJ years, still bewildered by the world view, the possibility to look at things with alternative perspectives that Tat Ming enabled. “You would start wondering why their music is arranged like this, how do they use their lyrics, why do they appear like that?” The concrete instances Jason gives to illustrate how Tat Ming offers alternatives include his own biography. He refers to Tat Ming’s invitation to him, an inexperienced musician, to collaborate, underlining their refusal to follow established industry practices. In Serrini’s words, “They never please.” Citing his mainland Chinese background, Funkie notes his conservative upbringing, both in terms of education and family. “We would start having more and more doubts about things, but we are not supposed to talk about it.” By bringing, for instance, homosexuality, Tiananmen, and the Handover into their music, Tat Ming, to Funkie and many other interviewees, holds up honesty as the fundamental alternative in the world, to the world, and from the world.

Affect

If we take the people we interviewed—whether as music practitioners, radio DJs, writers, and other forms of cultural producers—first and foremost as audience, of Tat Ming in our case, then we are acknowledging and building on the line of audience studies that has long been taking affect seriously (see for instance Papacharissi 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). Put differently, we contend for the necessity to recuperate and include the personal, affective experiences of cultural intermediaries into any investigation of influence, impact, and legacy. It would be tempting, indeed, to focus on the strictly speaking musical, professional influences of Tat Ming as deserved by their musical and professional contribution. We have documented an abundance of evidence in the last section surrounding what they have effected. However, it will be inadequate, especially when we try to do justice to the interviews—they talk enthusiastically about Tat Ming’s music, but they talk even more poignantly, passionately, and personally about the way they experience them as persons. Their narratives could have resourced so much more, but we follow three protagonists: as good mentors, as good Hong Kongers, and as good human beings.

1. Good Mentor

Serrini mentions the first time she met Tats, at a music festival. She did one of the acts, and Tats was the guest performer. She took the occasion and gave him her CD. He returned the favour with his. “It’s heart-warming,” she says. This affective reference resonates in the interviews when they talk about Tat Ming; they are affected not only by the musical practices, but also, if not more so, by the various ways Tat Ming relate to them on a personal level—in this case, as mentors, as someone more senior in the profession, taking care of the younger ones, affectionately, and engagingly. When Serrini first met Anthony, at the summer camp organised by Renaissance Foundation, she witnessed how Anthony, “already a successful artist, dedicates himself to grooming the younger generation.” This pleasant surprise underlines hierarchical and generational distance as often experienced by more junior practitioners; it also betrays the fierce competition and the sense of precarity in the creative industries. Put bluntly, why should someone help you at all? To Serrini, these personal anecdotes, their readiness to teach the young people, evokes confidence in younger creators. It may not be the teaching

itself, but the act thereof that touches her, and them. “We all need a nice uncle or auntie along the way,” says Serrini with a smile.

“Uncle” is also the term of endearment used by Eman when she refers to Tat Ming’s long-term collaborators. It was Anthony who introduced this group of experienced practitioners to her, and to her they felt like family, a form of kinship. Passer-by describes Tat Ming as “my brothers and sisters who hold up a torch in front of me.” A mentor, an uncle, a family member, rather than a didactic teacher; a spring of care and attention, rather than a source of authority. So it works, affectively. Number 6 feels Anthony’s affection, when he received “Add oil!” messages from Anthony before his performance started. Jan Curious exudes a sense of admiration and gratitude when he recalls how Anthony would always tell him: “Let me know if I can be of help.” Expressing her resistance to a more authoritarian way of coaching—“I don’t like someone holding my hand and teaching me how to write”—Eman recalls that she and her partner Ellen, of at17, would receive a pile of CDs from Anthony every two to three months; the playlists of which were compiled by him for the young duo to listen and get inspired. “This gesture left a big impact on me,” she says.

2. Good Hong Konger

What we are about to tease out from the interviews can be read in tandem with the intangible effect they have inherited from Tat Ming, the parameters to what constitutes good music, especially that of relevance, that good music must be relevant. Supplementing this musical side of legacy, the following analysis zooms in on the affective dimension. Placed under the specific circumstances that these cultural intermediaries are producing culture, they often accentuate the Hong Kongness of Tat Ming, as affective bonding, support, and empowerment. That Tat Ming continues to release songs and stage concerts relevant to the city and its politics, particularly in the post-National Security Law time, attests to their affinity with Hong Kong, their identifications, their sense of belonging and longing. Some of the people we talked to experience this continual engagement, warmly and movingly, as in the presence of some good Hong Kongers.

What Tat Ming and their music mean to Number 6, if he must summarise, is this: don’t forget which city you are from. Number 6 would

hesitate to call his RubberBand a successor of Tat Ming, but the “sense of mission” transpired from their decades of work should continue to empower him not to leave Hong Kong behind. “To continue writing stories about the city is to continue breathing with the people here.” Jan Curious’ linguistic choice for his music underlines his earnestness to connect with Hong Kong, to stay relevant, just like Tat Ming. When he started, in 2005, creating music with the rock band Chochukmo, English was the medium, and the message was: English should continue to exist in Hong Kong. Later, in 2016, when Jan Curious began another band R.O.O.T., the songs became Cantonese, the native tongue of Hong Kong. “We have already lost the battle regarding English, now what I am trying my utmost is to protect Cantonese.”

For Atom, a diasporic Hong Konger: “Tat Ming reminds me of how lucky I am to have lived the Hong Kong 80s.” He was quick to distance himself from the trite simplification of the decade as the “Golden Era.” Tat Ming’s music embodies the “real” Hong Kong, and this sense of realness is cultivated by the feelings Tat Ming invest in their creative work, the feelings for the city, for the society, for the people living here. Tat Ming speaks to Hong Kong people, according to Atom. “Tat Ming’s music reminds me that there were lots of social issues that were not addressed by the mainstream artists of the day.” That is the reason why Atom was, and still is, deeply moved by the occasion when Tat Ming took a moment on the Christmas show of the 2021 *REPLAY* to acknowledge his work in 89. 09. 12. 21. “While on stage, Ming Gor [Anthony] said to me, ‘Thank you for loving Hong Kong.’” It was an utterance, a linguistic hug, by someone intimately bonded with the city, someone who has been singing the city’s destiny through the decades, by a good Hong Konger. “Hearing this ‘thank you’ made me feel that my efforts were validated – my efforts in cultivating this near-and-far relationship with Hong Kong by way of writing in an expat tongue,” says Atom.

For Funkie and Passer-by, Tat Ming *is* Hong Kong, and increasingly, the defiance of Hong Kong that defines the city. They speak in the context of Tat Ming, their favourite music makers, being banned in mainland China. Many of the interviewees partake in this chorus of defiance. Gaybird feels sorry for the mainland audience. Jason believes the ban speaks volumes about the impact of their music. Serrini recalls a remark by a mainland Chinese writer: don’t call yourself a writer if you don’t have at least a couple of works banned. Chi Chung is sure it will only make people more curious. The political cancellation of Tat Ming’s music in mainland

China, according to Funkie, is in effect a “rite of coronation”; many of the younger generation of Tat Ming audiences in the mainland, those born after 1995 or 2000, started searching for their music only after it was banned. Another manifestation of such defiant attitude is not so much about the audience, but about the cultural intermediaries themselves.

“Limitation is another creation,” is Gaybird’s motto, gesturing to Tat Ming’s decades of music making. For him and many others, they experience Hong Kong at a very difficult time of its history. What they have learned from Tat Ming is to turn all the limitation into sources of creative energy, not only in making music, but also in how to continue being able to make music. “We will find a solution when we see a problem,” thus characterises Gaybird a way of working and living in the city shared by many of other people we talked with. In any case, he cannot just lie down there and do nothing. They are worried, they may do adjustments, but they will continue, like good Hong Kongers. Referring to the Golden Era of the 1980s, which we discussed in Chapter 2, Jan Curious echoes Atom’s reflection and contextualises the dominance of love songs in Cantopop in the spectacular economic growth in Hong Kong. “What Tat Ming has been doing all the time is tell us: don’t become a pig,” Jan Curious says. As a Hong Konger, Jan Curious’ aspiration is to write some songs, and survive this difficult time with his fellow Hong Kongers.

3. Good People

One of the most powerful lessons Serrini has learned from Tat Ming is indeed the consistency, and their manner of surviving and thriving in both the music industry and the city itself. “They have been true to themselves, they are happy about it, and they have followers. They inspire me to try as well.” She calls Tats and Anthony a “beautiful team,” and their power “religious.” Jason also describes Tat Ming as a “religion,” while Atom’s word is “movement.” Whether as a religion or a movement, what the people we interviewed tell us about Tat Ming is fundamentally the story of staying human. Indeed, they often do so in connection with Tat Ming’s past, and Hong Kong’s present. In the current conjuncture, it is not only, or even no longer, about how to make music, but how to stay human. As expressed by Jason, what he takes from Tat Ming is their humanity, their awareness, and their preservation of certain values.

In almost identical wording, Jan Curious says: “This is more than music; this is a lifestyle, an attitude, a spirit.” Nodding towards Tat Ming’s decades-long musical career, Jan Curious asks a rhetorical question: “How many people have managed to stay faithful to their beliefs?” In particular, Anthony has become a role model for him, not merely as an artist, but more fundamentally, as a human being. At one point during the interview when the conversation hovers around Tat Ming’s music, Jan Curious narrates animatedly how he was touched when he saw Anthony cry: “He will let the world affect him, and he will cry for all its injustice.” After explaining in detail how his first album was heavily influenced by Tat Ming, Gaybird hastens to add that more often than not, the influence is less specific, more osmotic. “It is in your blood,” he says. So claims Jason. And Chi Chung shows similar respect for Tat Ming, especially when he has grown up to become a teacher, and a father. “Slowly and gradually, I realise that this duo, that featured prominently in the early part of my life, has supplied me so much blood and oxygen, enough for the rest of my life.” Nodding again to Tat Ming’s history, and their age, Atom admits the humanitarian impact they have on his life this way: “I believe they’re both in their 60 s. They’re my role models. They show me how to grow old with style and grace, while remaining on the human side of the fight against the system.”

TOGETHER

“You can kill a fucking person, but you can’t kill a fucking idea,” says Jan Curious, in English, during our interview. The idea of making music and culture, the idea of being a mentor, a Hong Konger, a human being, is what we have outlined as Tat Ming’s influence, impact, and legacy, both effectively and affectively. Some of the interviewees mention “religion,” or “movement”; we venture the term “community.” If a religion or a movement would predicate on certain sets of values and destinations, and certain forms of organisation and direction, Tat Ming afford a more open, spacious world of how to do and live—indeed, some ideas, that people may embrace as Tat Ming’s legacy to define and decide how do and live. The analogy with religion and movement is perhaps more indicative of one important manifestation of Tat Ming’s legacy: the collectivity, the togetherness that they do and live, with Tat Ming and with one another. To recall another analogy, “blood and oxygen,” they may be the nutrients Tat Ming supply to individuals, and it may also be the brick and mortar

Tat Ming supply to give rise and shape to a community. A community of care (Lorey 2015).⁹

We see correspondence with the notion of community Richard Sennett discusses in his book *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2013). Drawing from his childhood memories of living in a disenfranchised neighbourhood in Chicago, Sennett foregrounds three interwoven threads that sustain a community and that a community sustains: morale, conviction, and cooperation. We begin with cooperation. In the Chicago neighbourhood, Sennett describes how young people would need to find ways to stick together, to avoid being drawn to the bad side of the world. More concretely, he refers to a “place of refuge” where they can talk and work together. We see how Tat Ming have opened up and left behind such a place of refuge for the interviewees we talked to, mostly figuratively and sometimes literally. Then the conviction. In this connection, Sennett refers to the church affiliations of the neighbourhood residents. He hastens to add, however, that “rather than moralising, people think flexibly and adaptively about concrete behaviour” (2013, 249). To us, this is reminiscent of the conviction that Tat Ming inspires, both professionally and personally, and the equally open and individual manner for how to implement and actualise such conviction—the similar, religious dimension of Tat Ming that some of the interviewees articulate. Finally, and probably the most important when we discuss Tat Ming’s legacy, the issue of morale. Put simply, cooperation and conviction will collapse without morale, or in Sennett’s words, “the matter of keeping one’s spirits up in difficult circumstances” (2013, 248). Recalling how his ghetto neighbours would have every reason to succumb to low spirits, Sennett observes the necessity of “lifting the poor from dwelling on their weakness” (2013, 253). While Sennett’s point is essentially economic, we extrapolate it to the political, to contemporary Hong Kong and the demoralising effect recent political developments may have exerted. What we hear from the eleven people is how Tat Ming, and their more than three decades of music making, serve as a continuous

⁹ It should be noted that Isabelle Lorey’s notion is situated in what she calls a “care crisis,” our contemporary condition, where she pleads for more time and effort to care for others, to build up a “care community.” Lorey’s work is inspired by practices she observes in a feminist political resistance movement *Precarias a la deriva*” (Lorey 2015).

and timely booster of morale when Hong Kong people and culture practitioners, like the ghetto dwellers in Sennett's book, have every reason to succumb to low spirits.

Tat Ming's effective and affective legacy can be understood in myriad ways; what we propose here is to consider it eventually as a community, a community of morale, conviction, and cooperation, and above all a community that should nurture its own resilience to go on, to sustain itself, to grow—even when the “pioneers” are gone. A community of care. That is also what Jan Curious loudly proclaims; it is what is left behind that matters. We are clearly not the first to heed the communal side of music practices. Veteran music professional Brian Eno, for instance, presents a neologism “scenius” as a response, a challenge, to the dominant celebration of “genius.” According to Eno, “All these people that we call genius actually sat in the middle of something that I call scenius. Just as genius is the creative intelligence of an individual, scenius is the creative intelligence of a community.... Intelligence is created by communities, by a cooperation of some kind” (Eno 2015). This conception rejects the “lone genius myth” or the “Great Man Theory,” namely that great works are delivered by great talents working in solitude.¹⁰ Instead, the new term is meant to acknowledge the creativity groups, places, or scenes can generate.¹¹ Our discussion of Tat Ming's legacy in terms of community, however, is not only interrogating the notion of individual genius, but more fundamentally a reversal of how we look at the influence of any individual creator. While “scenius” focusses on how community enables creativity, our discussion of legacy zooms in on how creativity enables community. The community thus enabled may go on enabling—more music, more culture, and more of itself.

We will end with a note of caution. In our discussion of Tat Ming's legacy, we have included our interview with Eman, who started her music career as part of a duo at17 signed with Anthony's production house People Mountain People Sea. As noted earlier, Eman released a song on

¹⁰ On a related discussion on the notion, or what the author calls the myth, of “mad genius,” see Tarvis (2015).

¹¹ Eno's idea of “scenius” has been taken up in some studies on popular music, for instance Smith (2021). On the front of popular publication, Austin Kleon builds on Eno's idea into his bestselling book *Show Your Work!* (2014) highlighting what he calls “ecology of talent,” similarly taking issue with the individualistic bias in thinking on creative work and workers.

July 1, 2022, the 25th Handover anniversary, that has churned up fierce controversy. She was attacked for currying favour with mainland China, craving for Chinese jobs and money, and betraying her mentor Anthony. We conducted our interview before the controversy, and we do not want to speculate on what is happening. Suffice it to note that our account of Tat Ming's legacy is grounded in the set of interviews taking place by a certain point of time. In that sense, it remains an endeavour validated to that point of time. The sense of community is fragile at best, and who is included or excluded can change fast, especially in the current period where one is either yellow or blue, either pro-China or against China, rendering any space in-between nearly impossible. Our analysis is as tentative and fragile as the legacy we are presenting; it is contingency with its many faces. Nevertheless, we plead, it is the best we have.

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CHAPTER 7

We Think We Should Stop Now

I think I should stop now.

Last line of Tat Ming Pair's¹ “High-flown 天花亂墜” (1989)

How do we end this book on Tat Ming Pair? Hit by a flush of sentimentality, we wonder if we should mention any sense of an ending at all. In Chapter 1, we called this publication our Tat Ming project, and we located it in the intersection of popular music studies and cultural studies. That is why pop matters, this is where pop matters, we wrote. While we are wrapping up ours, the Tat Ming project at large, as launched and sustained by Tats Lau and Anthony Wong, is still going on. The previous chapter is a testament to the resilience of this electronic duo, established more than three decades ago, in a city that has been through so many vicissitudes. As we are updating this coda, in January 2024, Tats is planning two concerts in Hong Kong the coming month following the publication and success of his memoir He also did a promotion tour in Taipei. Anthony is planning a tour later this year to Australia and Taiwan, after his Hong Kong concerts, scheduled for August 2023, were cancelled shortly after they were announced. The venue, the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, informed Anthony they “are not in

¹ We will use Tat Ming Pair, the full name of the duo, the first time it appears in the chapter. Thereafter, we will revert to Tat Ming, the name usually and fondly used by fans.

a position to proceed” and returned the deposit received.² Last year he completed a tour to London, Manchester, Amsterdam and Berlin.³ Tat Ming themselves plan to continue the *REPLAY* series of concerts, in whatever form.

We think we should stop now. And we are reminded of Tat Ming’s hit song “High-flown” released in 1989. A Hong Kong pop song critiquing Hong Kong’s popular music, its lyrics can readily render a typical Frankfurt School reading of popular culture. It laments on the monotony, emptiness, and omnipresence of popular music, ultimately sounding a death knell for authentic feelings of the people. When the song ends, the music fades away and Anthony starts speaking: “I think I should stop now.” Literally, the Cantonese phrase he uses reads “withdrawing one’s voice.” We think we should withdraw our voice now—in the previous six chapters, we have been speaking. We have also, of course, made an attempt to let Tat Ming speak, as well as their works—their songs, their MVs, their concerts. We have invited the voices of those who, more or less intensely or immediately, were inspired by Tat Ming in creating their own cultural products. Occasionally, we have included the voices of fans. It dawns on us that perhaps we should dedicate this coda to this purpose, to include more of their fans. We do it via two paths of contribution.

In 2022, Tat Ming staged their second series of *REPLAY* concerts in Hong Kong. In addition, they organised an online event, especially for fans who could not be there—it was still in the midst of pandemic and the stringent travel regime. Using the song “High-flown” as prompt, they asked fans to send in how Tat Ming’s music has felt for them. Fans would be selected, upon their submissions, to converse directly with Tats and Anthony during the online session. We have secured a copy, with courtesy of Tat Ming, and made our own selection to be included here. The other path that contributes to the coda is visually driven. As we think we

² Anthony broke the news on his social media with a photo of the withdrawal letter. See <https://www.facebook.com/AnthonyWongYiuMing/posts/pfbid0229tPi5MJ1XsJHx95zKZgH1LqS2PKPJjBHjDPTqRUi6ihZ4JmXftAjZLGYxZGjeT8L>.

³ Given the ongoing migration wave of Hong Kong people, as discussed earlier in the book, increasingly more Hong Kong bands and solo artists go on overseas tour, particularly in the United Kingdom. Just in 2023 alone, RubberBand (whose front person Number 6 who was featured in Chapter 6) performed in the same cities, shortly before Anthony. Singers Jason Chan and Hins Cheung were scheduled for later in the year. The relationship between Hong Kong popular music and its diaspora is a timely issue, which, however, is beyond the remit of our current book project.

should stop now, we are referring to the probable saturation of text, of written text, to be specific. Thus, we have decided to complement the fans' responses with images we deem befitting, conversing, resonating.⁴ It is perhaps also our manner to pay tribute to the affective, evocative, and future-making potentials of cultural productions we discussed in Chapter 1. This is a coda crafted to linger, to move, to be reminiscent.

With due respect for one subject matter of this book—music—we have chosen the understanding of coda in the musical sense. We love this dictionary meaning, i.e. “a more or less independent passage, at the end of a composition, introduced to bring it to a satisfactory close.”⁵ We hope we are doing it, together with the fans.

⁴ All the photos in this chapter were taken by Jeroen de Kloet.

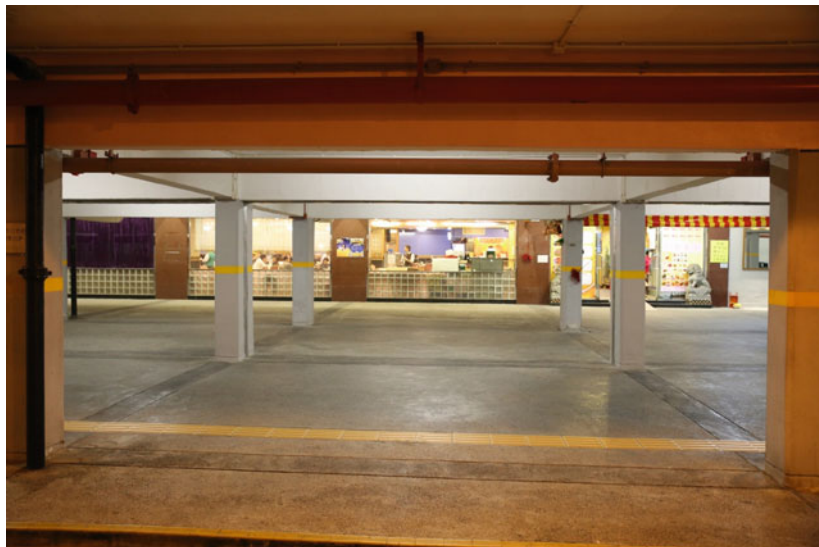
⁵ See <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/coda>.



“In 2016 I started listening to Tat Ming. I was 14. To someone growing up in mainland China, your songs made a huge, lasting impact on me. I would never forget the shock the fire-fighting song ‘The Ten Young Firemen 十個救火的少年’ gave to me. Since then I started paying attention to society and politics. That was also why I left for the United Kingdom to study political science and sociology. During the lockdown in the winter of 2020, here in the UK, I was on my own, trapped. I watched the video of *REPLAY* concerts again and again. I kept on crying when I listened to the song ‘Love in the Time of Cholera 愛在瘟疫蔓延時.’ I don’t want to cry on my own, in the time to come” (from the United Kingdom).



“So opaque, so real. Boundaries between memories and experiences so porous. I am so intricately engaged with things I have never been through, places I have never been, people I have never met. I am baffled” (from the United States).



“I grew up in mainland China. During my teenage years when I felt enraged by the society and by the world, I came across Tat Ming. Then I discovered, you have shed all my tears, and you have expressed all my anxieties. With love and gratitude, I went to Hong Kong to study, simply because this city has Tat Ming. I am so grateful to have you in Hong Kong, to make me realise how powerful music could be. I am grateful that you feel how I feel” (from Hong Kong).



“One evening in January I was on my own in a strange and yet familiar foreign city. I was hanging my laundry, while listening to Tat Ming’s new songs. Then I caught the words ‘bed sheets’, ‘chopsticks’, ‘where are you’. They corresponded so intimately with that very situation I was in. I became absolutely quiet, and I stopped everything else till the song ended. Yes, I ‘woke up in my new home’, but it’s too cold. I didn’t open the curtains” (from the United Kingdom).



“I started listening to Tat Ming in 2017, when I was preparing for DSE [a pre-university public examination]. It was also the year when I suffered from serious depression. I felt like being devoured by the nihilism of living, losing the capacity to feel. Like Anthony said, the world is cruel to the young ones. Your songs have accompanied me through these lost days, returning the sensation of life to me” (from Singapore).



“Your songs are prophetic. They seemed to be running ahead of history. They demonstrated the possibility of music” (from Hong Kong).



“I am 20 and living in mainland China, while Tat Ming started in the last century, Hong Kong. But it didn’t affect how they managed to make me feel. The complexity of their lyrics made me realize the power of music, and the reach of music... Whenever I feel darkness and helplessness, their existence is like an umbrella, protecting me” (from mainland China).



“It’s my fifth year of loving your music. Not really long, but long enough to, through your music, understand the world more, enough to open up my mind, enough to get in touch with my heart, finally enough to be led by your music to enter humanity” (from Hong Kong).



“I always tell people I grew up with nutrients supplied by Tat Ming. Your music, lyrics, album covers have impacted on my entire life. Especially the song ‘Forget He Is She 忘記他是她’, of 1989, I was 15 then. And the song made me realise love should be beyond gender. During puberty, I gathered the courage to start exploring love and sexuality with people of my own gender or not. I had my struggles, fear, critiques, hesitations, but in the end I realised love is love...” (from the United States).



“Thank you for the songs and what you’ve done to remind all the scattered souls we’re not alone!” (from Canada).

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APPENDIX: TAT MING PAIR'S MUSIC HISTORY

STUDIO ALBUMS

- Tat Ming Pair II (26.09.1986)
達明一派II



- The Story of the Stone (09.04.1987)
石頭記



- I'm Waiting for Your Return (17.12.1987)
我等着你回來



(continued)

(continued)

- Do You Still Love Me? (21.06.1988)
你還愛我嗎?



- Fallen Angel (02.05.1989)
意難平



- Nerves (12.01.1990)
神經



- Viva! Viva! Viva! (01.10.1996)
萬歲!萬歲!萬萬歲!



- The Party (01.07.2005)



(continued)

(continued)

- TM + M DECADE (NCE) (20.12.2021)



EPs

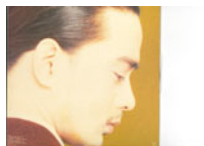
- Tat Ming Pair (27.03.1986)
達明一派



- Tat Ming Pair Remix (22.07.1987)
達明一派Remix



- Tender Is the Night (05.1988)
夜未央



CONCERTS

I Love You—Tat Ming Pair Concert (26–28.10.1990)
我愛你達明一派演唱會



達明與夢 321 Unplugged Concert (21.03.1993)



Another Tat Ming Pair Concert (07.06.1996)¹
達明又一派音樂會

(no photo)

Viva! Viva! Viva! Concert (11–16.10.1996)
萬歲萬歲萬萬歲演唱會



PMPS X TMP 903 Concert (10.09.2004)²
拉闊人山人海包圍達明一派音樂會



(continued)

¹ There is no official English titles available, it is translated by the authors.

² There is no official English titles available, it is translated by the authors.

(continued)

Serve For the People Concert (9–12.12.2004)
為人民服務演唱會



Tat Ming Pair x Nicholas Tse (21.08.2005)
新城唱好謝霆鋒x達明一派同場異夢音樂會



Serve For the People Concert in Shanghai (29.04.2006)
為人民服務上海演唱會



Round and Round and Round (20–23.04.2012)
兜兜轉轉演演唱會



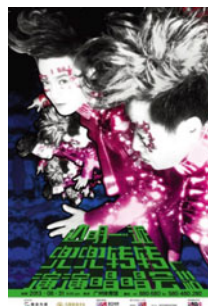
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Round and Round and Round Part 2 (18–19.08.2012)
兜兜轉轉演演唱會 part 2



Round and Round and Round in Guangzhou (31.08.2013)
兜兜轉轉演演唱會廣州



Tat Ming Pair 30th Anniversary Live Concert (23–25.03.2017)
達明卅一派對



(continued)

(continued)

Tat Ming Pair Thanksgiving Concert in Reno (25.11.2017)
達明一派感恩節演唱會



Tat Ming Pair REPLAY Concert (13-15, 17-19.11.2020)
達明一派REPLAY演唱會



Tat Ming Pair REPLAY LIVE Concert 2021 (20-22,
24-26.12.2021)
達明一派REPLAY LIVE 2021演唱會



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