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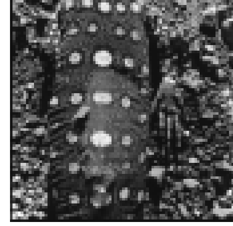

The anomalies of being Faye (Wong)

Gender politics in Chinese popular music

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ABSTRACT • Building on previous research regarding popular music and the culture industries, this article examines the intersection between gender politics in Chinese societies and the musical success of Faye Wong, the reigning diva of the Hong Kong-based pop music industry. Influential among adolescents and young women, she has not only become a figure for textual identification but also a polysemic icon for cultural aspirations and feminist projects throughout Greater China. Unlike earlier female singing stars, Faye's music and public persona explicitly defy standard market practices and conventional representations of femininity. Yet, paradoxically, these unconventional qualities have contributed to her sustained success over the past 10 years. Thus, Faye's star persona operates both as a marketable commodity and as a site of significant cultural work in the realm of gender politics. Using Bourdieu's distinction between economic and cultural capital, our analysis shows how music companies enriched Faye's cultural capital as part of their promotional efforts and how she in turn exploited that very capital in unconventional ways. •

KEYWORDS • Chinese media • cultural capital • culture industries • Faye Wong • feminism • popular music

Although Faye Wong is the reigning diva of Chinese popular music, she is perhaps most familiar to cultural critics around the world as the actress who plays the quirky, free-spirited attendant at a sandwich shop featured in Wong Kar-wai's 1994 film, *Chungking Express*. Seemingly addicted to the song 'California Dreaming', which she listens to at full volume, Faye's character is romantically obsessed with a police officer who frequents her shop. Unable to realize her dreams under current circumstances, she fantasizes about their romance, stalks his apartment and, when discovered, ultimately takes flight – literally – by signing on as an airline attendant working the trans-Pacific routes to California. Willful, romantic and alienated, Faye's character represents the antithesis of the traditional young Chinese woman. Neither dutiful nor filial, she is motivated instead by her own passions and desires. Her character seems mobile, protean and imaginative, which at the time was most likely perceived by many fans as a case of art imitating life. For *Chungking Express* was released when Faye was in the midst of reconstructing her star persona so as to challenge conventional characterizations of female pop singers. She openly described this transformation as an important personal and artistic decision aimed at freeing her from the shackles of industry calculations and audience expectations. Yet, just as importantly, Faye's professional metamorphosis became the site of voluminous public discussion about femininity, artistic independence and the Chinese pop music industry.

Such public discourse was especially significant in light of the fact that gender inequalities and occupational discrimination are common in Chinese communities around the world. Not only do many women work long hours at domestic chores and outside labor, but they also assume primary responsibility for complex family obligations that range from organizing festivities to caring for elderly people. Moreover, discussion of feminist alternatives is often squelched by opponents who invoke Confucian-based 'Asian values', which are commonly portrayed as the antithesis of western

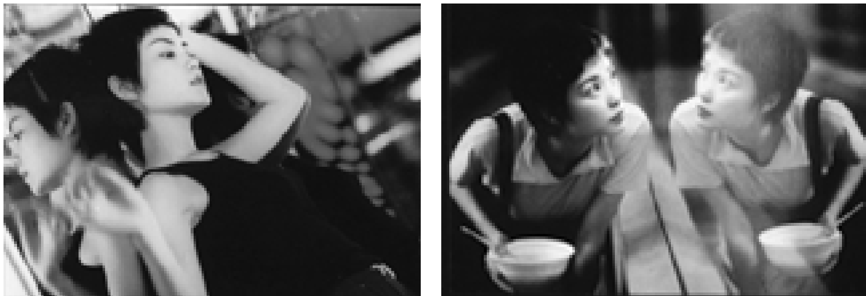

Figure 1 Publicity photos of *Chungking Express* (1994)

decadence and familial disarray. Opposition to feminism emerges in both personal and institutional settings. Chinese companies, governments and community organizations tend to embrace traditional gender roles, and even transnational corporations that operate in Chinese contexts tend not to question such norms (Cheung et al., 1995; Cheung, 1997). Alternative values, when they are voiced, most often arise as an unintended byproduct of commercial popular culture (Fung, 2000). Yet Faye Wong represents one of the first artists to unequivocally challenge conventional gender roles as well as the commercial logic of the industry. Although she does not explicitly represent herself as a feminist or social critic, Faye[1] deftly navigates a complex terrain of institutional forces, political identities and cultural conventions.

This essay fits into an emerging body of scholarship that shows how popular media texts around the world increasingly feature female characters that resist or reformulate conventional gender roles. The so-called 'Madonna phenomenon' in the United States and the culture of 'girl power' spawned by the Spice Girls in the United Kingdom are two of the more visible manifestations of this trend. Moreover, J. Lawrence Witzleben (1999) has argued that Hong Kong pop music, which is largely dismissed by western scholars as saccharine and overly commercial, has on occasion been the site of significant challenges to patriarchal values, most notably associated with the career of Anita Mui Yim-fong. Witzleben shows that as early as 1986 Mui was shaking up the musical establishment with songs like 'Bad Girl'. Although the song's suggestive lyrics are comparatively tame by western standards, he points out that, at the time, 'it was almost unheard of for a young Chinese woman to sing about sexual desire with such frankness' (Witzleben, 1999: 247). 'Bad Girl' not only raised eyebrows in the Cantonese pop (Cantopop) music industry,[2] it was also branded as 'spiritual pollution' by officials of the People's Republic of China, who forbade Mui to perform it during concert tours of the mainland. Indeed, a series of 35 concerts in 1995 was abruptly cancelled when Mui broke into a seemingly spontaneous rendition of 'Bad Girl' during one of the early performances of her mainland tour. Although Mui's motivation for defying Chinese authorities has never been clarified, she nevertheless has cultivated a reputation for behavior that seemingly transcends the excessively commercial logic of the Cantopop industry, which is largely dominated by companies affiliated with major transnational media conglomerates.[3]

Contrary to scholarship that suggests that homogenization and depoliticization of popular culture are the inevitable outcome of the globalization of media industries (Fukuyama, 1992; Banks, 1996; Herman and McChesney, 1997), Witzleben contends that the careers of Chinese popular music performers deserve more careful scrutiny and that the industry itself operates according to logics that significantly diverge from its western counterpart. Writes Witzleben,

> Despite the obvious Western origin of the instruments, many of the musical styles and some of the music itself [Hong Kong popular song], is a medium produced, controlled, and consumed almost exclusively by Chinese people, with foreign songs transformed into things Chinese. (1999: 252)

Moreover, major Chinese stars such as Anita Mui and Faye Wong are almost completely unknown to Anglophone music fans. In fact, concert tours to cities such as Toronto, New York and Sydney regularly draw huge crowds of adoring fans, even though the local media and the general public seem completely unaware of these sold-out performances.

This parallel world of Chinese popular music reminds us that, as Keith Negus (1992) contends, the dominant powers in the global music industry have been – and continue to be – in the United States, western Europe and Japan. Nevertheless, it is important to examine local and regional culture industries because they are currently growing at a rapid pace and because they are participating in complex processes of social transformation with far-ranging implications. Brian Longhurst (1995) shows, for example, that some of the fastest-growing markets now lie outside the historically dominant industrialized nations, including such countries as Bolivia, Chile, Poland, Hungary, Nigeria, Israel and Taiwan. Moreover, careful analysis of music industries outside the West helps to elucidate the contradictory forces at work in the increasingly transnationalized music and video industries, especially when it comes to the representation of femininity. In this regard, Michael Curtin (1999: 57) contends that 'the changing discourse and structure of the culture industries actually accommodate, nurture, and even benefit from the circulation of transgressive images of feminine desire'. As a result, popular music has created spaces in which it is possible for women in many parts of the world to imagine alternative social roles and opportunities.

In light of this growing body of scholarship, this article explores the historical development of Faye Wong's career, examining various signifying practices and texts in relation to conventions of femininity in modern Chinese societies. We suggest that Faye Wong's status as the reigning diva of Chinese popular music is crucially linked to public fascination with the controversial values she represents and the mythology of self-discovery that has grown up around her. Even though at the peak of her career Anita Mui implicitly subverted gender roles and at times deviated from commercial conventions of the local industry, Faye Wong *explicitly* challenges these norms as part of her public persona. Unlike Mui, whose career in the mainland suffered as a result of her run-ins with Chinese officials, Faye Wong has proved exceptionally popular throughout China, East Asia and among Chinese communities around the world. One recent measure of her popularity is the leading role she played in 'Lies and Love' (Tat Wah Yan Yuen) as the fictional character 'Ah Faye' – embodying essentially the same

independent values and strong character as her pop singer persona. Remarkably, the Japanese-produced primetime drama series scored a ratings success when simultaneously telecast in both Hong Kong and Japan during the 2001–2002 season.

Using Bourdieu's (1984) distinction between economic and cultural capital, our analysis shows how music companies enriched Faye's cultural capital as part of their promotional efforts and how she in turn exploited that capital in unexpected ways. In doing so, Faye not only altered the standard practices of the music industry but also subverted traditional notions of femininity in Chinese societies. We link these phenomena with the appearance of a 'new generation' of women in Hong Kong society (Kwok et al., 1997), but, more expansively, Faye's popularity has implications for the development of gender politics throughout Greater China, since Faye's fan base stretches across Asia and to overseas Chinese communities around the world.

De-sinicizing an aspiring Cantopop star

The emergence of Faye Wong as a pop icon is rooted firmly in the capitalist logic of the music industry and its institutional imperatives. Following the path of other superstars, Faye migrated to Hong Kong from her native Beijing in 1987 and was spotted by music executives during a singing contest in which she won third prize. Although enthusiastic about her talent, executives at CinePoly, a Hong Kong subsidiary of a multinational music company, began to refashion her singing style, her physical appearance and her personal biography so as to render the aspiring star less distinguishable from the other young singers. It was a double self-negation exercise: a rejection of Faye's distinctive musical style and a denial of her cultural roots in mainland China. During the late 1980s and early 1990s mainland Chinese singers were stigmatized by Cantopop industry executives and music consumers as lacking the fashionable and cosmopolitan qualities of their Hong Kong counterparts. Faye's first album, 'Wong Ching Man' (1989), sold well, but the singer was nevertheless criticized for coming across as too much of a bumpkin – that is, as a mainlander in need of refinement. Yet noting both buoyant album sales and positive critical reviews, CinePoly hired an image consultant for Faye and began to escalate its investment in her career. Consequently, Faye faced numerous challenges. Not only would she have to change her look and her singing style, but she also was pressed to learn Cantonese – the variety of Chinese that is prevalent in Hong Kong – and to become part of the promotional machinery that deploys young pop artists on a relentless schedule of TV appearances, concerts and public events. Thus, Faye's cultural capital with Hong Kong audiences – the epicenter of the Chinese pop music industry at that time – was crucially reliant on erasing traces of a past that might, in the minds of

listeners, evoke allusions to mainland politics or to the social realities of that developing country. As with its other stars on the pop music scene, CinePoly strategically capitalized Faye as an embodiment of cosmopolitan modernity and traditional Chinese femininity. In the eyes of industry executives, it was a combination that would resonate with the lifestyles of music listeners in primary markets like Hong Kong, Singapore and London, as well as feed the fantasies of fans in emerging markets in mainland China.

Thus, Faye was transformed according to an industry formula that deliberately localized her as a Cantopop star. She adopted the Cantonese pronunciation of her name, Wong Ching-Man, appropriated an English pseudonym, Shirley (both of which are commonly used names among Hong Kong Chinese), and she was assigned to a famous vocalist who taught her how to sing in the Cantopop style of the late 1980s. She quickly broke

Figure 2 Album cover of 'Shirley More' (1991)

through her initial 'Sino-girl image', establishing herself as a local star in the capital of the Chinese music industry. By the early 1990s, the transformation was complete and few in the local entertainment press made note of the fact that the emerging young star had migrated from mainland China.

Moreover, promotion and advertising campaigns traded on images of Faye as a traditional Chinese woman with a modern look – qualities that were widely promoted in commercial images in Hong Kong during the early 1990s. Her large, almond-shaped eyes, tall stature and lanky gait exuded the air of a runway model for the globally renowned Hong Kong fashion industry. In front of the camera, Faye came across as both diffident and alluring, projecting a feminine persona that conformed to industry conventions for female pop stars at the time. Paradoxically, these star images were meant to evoke fantasies of erotic fulfillment within the highly conventional context of marriage and family. Thus, Faye's persona was constructed as that of a modern woman who would nevertheless find true fulfillment in the context of heterosexual romance and conventional domesticity. Embracing this imagery, Faye's music albums, television performances and promotional appearances were as resolutely commercial as those of other aspiring Cantopop stars.

Big profits from a fragile woman

The song that best represents this moment in Faye's career is 'Fragile Woman' (or, literally, 'Woman Prone to Hurt'), a 1991 release that was remarkably popular, winning many of the coveted music awards that are considered so important for career advancement on the Cantopop scene. The song conveys a fantasy of feminine fragility, vulnerability and devotion to romance:

> It's hard to control love.
> In fact, I'm a fragile kind of women.
> Don't, don't, don't, go away.
> Please appreciate my heart.
> If you understand me,
> Please be willing to love this fragile woman.

Love in this song is fetishized in a commodity form as embracing patriarchal power relations. Love is indeed hard to control, but it is the woman's inability to take positive action in a relationship that is naturalized as a fundamental quality of feminine romance in Chinese heterosexual relationships. The lyrics suggest that beneath the veneer of the modern woman (embodied in the persona of the singer) one finds the very insecurities that make men so necessary and women so fragile.

'Fragile Woman' was named the favorite song of 1991 in Hong Kong, no doubt re-affirming tenets of the superstar formula in the minds of industry executives. Faye's success furthermore resonated with stereotypes of the ideal Hong Kong woman that were circulating widely in other media – outwardly career-orientated while inwardly still serving the family (Fung and Ma, 2000). Like others of her generation, Faye was framed as someone willing to devote her life to loving her partner, and this echoed in many of her songs even as she later began to take charge of her career and deviate from industry norms. This passionate devotion to one's lover is perhaps best conveyed in 'I Do', when Faye sings:

I do it for you. I do it for you.
For you I forget my own name.
Even if there is but one more second to stay in your embrace,
Losing the world causes me no remorse.

The marketing of Faye Wong as a devoted romantic partner delivered the sorts of returns coveted by industry executives. The singer became a major hit in concerts and on television, as well as one of the leading stars of recorded music. High-volume music sales (legal and pirated versions) in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taipei solidified her status in East Asia and opened the door to distribution in overseas Chinese communities. Cantopop executives often stoke the fires of popularity by organizing fan clubs in key markets, but, in Faye's case, fan activities spread rapidly on their own. Given the broadly dispersed geography of her following it is perhaps no surprise that Faye became a pervasive presence on the Internet during the 1990s. Faye Wong web pages were a source of information, interaction and adulation among fans in such widely dispersed locales as Toronto and Kuala Lumpur.

Yet just as industry executives had carefully managed the cultural capital of Wong Ching-man so as to leverage it into an economically profitable brand name, Faye ultimately became conscious that her rising status allowed her to reclaim some control over her music and public persona. Borrowing Bourdieu's (1984) concept of two capitals, economic capital and cultural capital, we might explain how her struggle for control could still be tolerated and even absorbed into the institutional logic of the popular music industry. Whereas economic capital corresponds to the financial resources invested in the diva, cultural capital is relatively autonomous from the former. That is, Faye's persona, gestures and attitudes were legitimated as they circulated through numerous communication channels and performance venues, which in turn enhanced both her market value and her cultural capital. As her popular status grew, this cultural capital provided her with the capacity to produce even more economic profit for her music company, but it also provided her with a set of cultural reserves that could be deployed for other purposes. At this juncture, even though there was intense pressure to sustain the inertia built into her original commercial image, Faye could

now move her star persona beyond the formulaic constraints of her image consultants. Yet the move from stardom to superstardom is rife with its own uncertainties. To defy the prevailing 'common sense' of the music industry, one must take considerable risks. But at the same time, such risks might engender a distinctive star persona that would stand out from the crowd of competitors in the world of Cantopop.

Reconstructing Faye

In 1991, Faye decided to take a break from the hothouse environment of the Hong Kong pop scene and go to New York to study music. Yet, interestingly, she justified the decision as both professional and personal. 'Although [I] want to learn music in New York,' she explained, 'going abroad is also aimed at understanding myself. . . . Only by acting on my own can my life be powerful' (cited in her biography edited by Wong and Shue, 1998: 47). At the time of her departure, the press and the public reacted with astonishment to her announcement, many speculating that she was giving up her career. But, in fact, she never gave it up and no doubt was placed under intense pressure to return to work as soon as possible. Nevertheless, Faye's public statements suggested that she was intent on acquainting herself with both western musical influences and liberal, cosmopolitan values during her stay in the United States. 'I wandered around, visited museums and sat at cafes,' she recalls.

> There were so many strange, confident-looking people. They didn't care what other people thought of them. I felt I was originally like that too, independent and a little rebellious. But in Hong Kong, I lost myself. I was shaped by others and became like a machine, a dress hanger. I had no personality and no sense of direction. (Spaeth, 1996: 65)

When she returned to the Hong Kong music scene after a six-month hiatus, she began to transform her star persona by embracing a singing style inflected by American rhythm and blues and soul music. She furthermore rejected her performance name Shirley Ching-man Wong in favor of Wong Fei, which was romanized with phonetic fidelity as Faye Wong. 'It was the most successful re-invention in Cantopop history,' according to Hong Kong entertainment reporter Winnie Chung. Faye 'brought a whole new experimental alternative blend . . . by covering singers such as Bjork, the Cranberries, and the Cocteau Twins, who until then were largely unheard of by local Chinese audiences'[4] (W. Chung, 1997: 3).

No longer the dutiful daughter of music business executives, she became more outspoken, assertive, and even contentious in her relations with industry personnel, news reporters and even fans. 'I'm lazy,' she confided to one reporter.

> I started jogging and then gave up after two days. I smoke, even though I know it's harmful to my health. I'm straightforward and I often offend others. I tend to lose my temper and am not good at controlling my feelings. I lack patience, especially with things I have no interest in. I'm confident as well as diffident, which is quite contradictory. I always feel embarrassed facing my fans . . . I am not a docile daughter and my parents can do nothing with me. (*Oriental Daily*, 18 October 1995: C3)

Interestingly, this new persona seemed to resonate with audiences, if marketing statistics are any indication of popular acceptance. Album sales for 'One Hundred Thousand Whys' (1993) and 'Stubborn and Regretless' (1993) exceeded 300,000 in Hong Kong alone, an astounding figure given the territory's population of only six million. With popular singer awards in 1993 and 1994, Faye had unquestionably achieved superstar status as well as a growing reputation for controversy. She not only courted an image at odds with the prevailing logic of the industry but she also began to openly criticize the hyper-commercial aspects of music production and promotion in Hong Kong.

As part of this personal and professional transformation, Faye began to reclaim her mainland identity and adopt a more international image and musical style. She also began to take a more active role in artistic decisions by starting her own production company, collaborating with composers, and even writing some of her own songs. In one of the songs, entitled 'Please Myself' (Tao Hau Ji Kei, 1994), she explicitly declares that '[I sing] only to please myself and not to please the market'. The popularity of the song led the entertainment press to write in Chinese characters about 'The Voice of Faye's Mainstream' (Faye Chu Lau Tze Yam), which, when spoken in Hong Kong Cantonese, literally means 'The Voices of the Non-mainstream'. In 'Stubborn and Regretless', one of her most popular songs – which she composed herself – Faye summarizes her attitude toward her career, audiences and the media.

> This time I stubbornly face [the problem].
> Inadvertently indulgent.
> I don't care whether it is correct or not.
> Even if it is a trap, I dare to [face it].
> Even if it is stubbornness, I am still stubborn and regretless.

Distorting market logic

Although she now seemed defiantly independent, Faye's actions did not generate negative consequences for her career or her music company. CinePoly enjoyed strong sales and began to cultivate the very images that only a few years earlier would have been considered suicidal – images of

Figure 3 Album cover of 'Stubborn and Regretless' (1993)

Faye's offbeat personality and obstinate attitudes. Moreover, Faye's star persona had begun to transform the market logic. Her oppositional posture proved not only to be attractive to fans, but also to advertisers seeking cross-promotional opportunities. Virgin Airline, Just Gold and Motorola Mobile each negotiated contracts with Faye that brought her well over US$1 million in payments for her appearances in print and television advertisements (*Disc Jockey*, Issue 82, October/November 1997; *Tu Weekly*, Issue 73, 1 October 1997).

Faye's now legendary transformation has at least two implications for the study of gender and commercial music in Chinese societies. First of all, by defying the market, battling the entertainment press and asserting her independence, Faye enhanced her mystique, making her more newsworthy and

more popular. This in turn transformed her into something of a popular heroine, especially among young women seeking lifestyle alternatives and fantasizing about gender relations outside the well-worn conventions of the pop music industry. This, however, did not incur any monetary losses for CinePoly or for the entertainment press that reported on her activities or for the advertisers who hired her for cross-promotional appearances. On the contrary, media and record companies became active and rational forces seeking to further commercialize and recommodify Faye's uncompromising image. It was precisely her rejection of prevailing institutional practices that brought her public attention as something of a novelty and in turn brought lavish economic returns.

Second, Faye herself was able to become an active agent in shaping her public image in the context of the music industry. For feminists and young women seeking alternatives to traditional Chinese gender roles, her actions implied that the commercial sphere might offer opportunities as well as constraints. Thus, her deviance had a double valence. On the one hand, commercial music provided a site for her to interrogate Chinese gender roles. Whereas on the other hand, her challenge to those very roles allowed her to transform the institutional practices of the industry. These circular dialectics blurred the boundaries between dominant and oppositional (cf. Chaffee, 1985: 416). In fact, for media executives, whether Faye is regarded as mainstream or alternative is not important as long as she continues to demonstrate her popularity. Once an alternative is popular, it is absorbed into the mainstream despite the fact that it may destabilize or transform specific values or conventions (Goodwin, 1992; Tetzlaff, 1993).

Return to China

Faye's project was not limited to Hong Kong, however. She prevailed in Asia, and finally re-engaged with China, leading to another wave of semiotic and commercial turmoil. The process was non-linear, however, for initially she seemed not to realize that she could target the mainland market. After Faye's initial success in Hong Kong, her music spread to other Asian countries and to overseas Chinese communities. Her international presence expanded significantly in 1994 with her starring role in *Chungking Express*, which earned her nominations for film awards in Hong Kong and Taipei, widespread recognition in Japan, as well as a best actress award in Sweden. Shortly thereafter, she did a world tour that included the United States and Canada, as well as Asia. These were stepping stones that set the stage for her return to China, an under-exploited market that industry executives believed would be of increasing importance after 1997, when the British relinquished control over Hong Kong to China (Enright et al., 1997). Thus, the international detour and eventual return to China may have been a

calculated attempt to enhance her attraction to mainland audiences (Chow, 1998: 117). Here again, Faye's strategy departed from industry norms, because most music companies in Hong Kong will market their stars in China as distinctively Hong Kong stars, believing this associates the star with professionalism, cosmopolitanism and the lavish production values of Cantopop music. Faye, however, used her growing international acclaim to gain more creative leverage with her music company. In 1995, she released 'Faye Beautiful Music' in which she performed cover versions of songs made popular by the late Theresa Teng (Deng Li-jun) during the 1980s. Teng was the first Chinese pop singer to win passionate acclaim among Chinese audiences around the world, regardless of national boundaries or political ideologies. Faye's album was therefore sure to succeed in markets throughout Asia and around the globe. Yet whereas Teng's success was very dependent on her identity as a modern woman with traditional Chinese values, Faye embraced Teng's music, but seemed nevertheless intent on shaking up things in the mainland as much as she had in Hong Kong.

After her musical homage to Teng, Faye began to circulate among rock musicians in Beijing such as Hai Bao, Heu Yeung and Cui Jian who were renowned for a loud, contentious and emotionally evocative style. In an autobiography posted on an internet website, Faye wrote of her collaborators:

> They planned parties together, playing rock and roll music, stirring up youths, daring to question the times. Living with wearisome and discontent emotions, they used the wildness of rock and roll to release pressure. Everything was done according to emotion and personality, not by economy or to earn money. Especially now that China is becoming more capitalist, who can ensure that music will not be compromised? Living in the middle of this, I never felt happier or more relaxed. ('Faye's Story', 1997)

Faye jointly produced her next album, 'Wu Shi Lun Shung' (Thinking Here and There, 1994), with two other leading musicians from the alternative Beijing music scene, Dao Wei and Zhang Yatung. The album brought Faye home to the mainland in a way that challenged the music establishment in both Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China. Yet, at the same time, she was clearly trading on her Hong Kong reputation, her Chinese identity and her global status in the music industry. The response of mainland audiences was remarkably enthusiastic, leading to sold-out concerts in Guangzhou, Chengdu, Beijing and Shanghai. The circuitous trajectory of her professional career – almost all of it spent outside the mainland – ironically made her by far the most popular singer in the People's Republic of China.

Her exemplary success turned Faye into something of a legend for Chinese youths dreaming of future goals and ambitions. Pepsi-Cola has traded heavily on these fantasies. An advertising campaign launched in

1999 features a music video set in an empty old school in Beijing where Faye browses through a classroom as she muses on memories of her past. Scanning pictures on the wall, she locks her gaze on a photo of herself as a young pupil in a Mao-era school uniform, which brings the classroom back to life with the teacher calling Wong Fei to the piano to play a musical exercise. As the young Fei strikes the first chord, the screen explodes from muted realist images of the classroom to a color-saturated, high-contrast shot of the adult rock star adorned in dreadlocks and a flowing dress dancing in a computer-animated surf with a bright orange sky behind her. In typical Faye style, she frolics like a flower child rather than dances – rejecting the slick choreography of Cantopop concert performances. She flings her arms, legs and body in seemingly spontaneous fashion, showing little regard for her image as either a pop star or as an object of desire. Returning to the schoolyard, the young Fei gives flight to a small bird nestled in her hands, while the older Faye writes on the classroom blackboard in Chinese characters that the condition of success is 'Limitless Desires' (Hoi Mong Mo Han). She finishes the commercial in direct address to the camera, inviting the audience to 'make a wish'.

In no uncertain terms, the video suggests that mainland Chinese must imagine and desire in order to realize their dreams, a process associated, of course, with the consumption of Pepsi. The commercial invites comparison to previous Pepsi ad campaigns, most especially the 1989 Madonna campaign. In both ads, the movement back and forth between generations is connected to notions that one might dream outside the boundaries of convention and beyond the narrow scope of one's everyday world, while at the same time both commercials indulge in nostalgia for a simple, pristine past. In essence the ads suggest that young people grow out of their little worlds to encounter the more complicated challenges of modern life in a global era. In post-Mao China, as the power of the state continues to recede by fits and starts, such an ad participates in a process of encouraging viewers to break away from conventions and norms in order to follow their desires. It furthermore constructs Faye's success as the product of such desires and, quite crucially, as an outcome of her sojourn through Hong Kong to the outside world. Her Chinese superstar identity is thus rooted in the mainland, transformed in Hong Kong and ultimately constituted as global before it returns to the mainland as an emblem of the next generation.

Turn to motherhood

The nostalgia and homecoming featured in this video seem also to be connected with Faye's expressed desire to trade the highly commercialized music scene in Hong Kong for a return to her hometown, Beijing. Since 1993, she has made frequent visits to the city where she spends her time

hanging out with musicians who experiment with various musical styles from around the world in a less commercialized environment. One of those musicians, Heu Yeung, started a controversy in the entertainment press during 1995 when he referred to Hong Kong's leading male vocalists – the four 'heavenly kings' – as clowns ('Stars', 1995). Although Faye Wong agreed, she nevertheless tried to cool the controversy, stating:

> Realistically, we who work in the entertainment industry often have to use phony emotions. [A singing] idol is in itself a fake image, but many people make a big deal of idols. When there is a need for a certain image demanded by the fans, the entertainer must portray that image and become that fake person. Heu Yeung and them are different in that they use music to arouse people. They are very real. If you like them, then so be it. If you don't like them, forget it. They have no need to smile for you, no need to play games. I understand that attitude because I also experienced these things that make you feel miserable. ('Faye's Story', 1997)

Faye seemed to thrive during her frequent trips north, declaring 'Beijing is my home; Hong Kong is the office' (Levin, 1994). In Beijing she said she felt more at home, more anonymous and more relaxed. 'I am tired of extravagant images,' she explained. 'I don't want to change my style, don't want to keep changing. I only want to be myself' (Wong and Shue, 1998: 57). The illusive 'myself' to which Faye refers is a figure that has rarely been articulated by female Chinese singers of previous eras. In the past, female singers were either packaged in a new persona that erased their origins or, in Teresa Teng's special case, promoted as a dutiful, filial woman who embraced traditional Chinese family values that were supposedly accepted by audiences around the globe. Even controversial stars such as Anita Mui never publicly expressed a desire to cultivate an 'authentic self' or to pursue alternative musical styles that transcend the commercial calculations of the music industry. Prior generations of Chinese divas publicly eschewed explicit social ideals and distinctive local identities, but Faye's new persona is that of a Beijing woman who is independent, assertive and capable of constructing alternative social roles.

In many ways this new persona is a product of her return to China. Among her new acquaintances in the Beijing rock scene in the mid-1990s was Dao Wei, whose song 'Don't Break My Heart' was widely seen as emblematic of the anger and energy among young Chinese in the post-Tiananmen period. Even though his lyrics didn't explicitly challenge the system, Dao was seen as uncompromising and stubborn, and his private life was rarely mentioned in the press. Yet his budding romance with Faye was soon discovered by paparazzi and splashed across the entertainment tabloids. The media quickly lost interest, however, as Faye publicly acknowledged their liaison and pleaded for discretion among the press. Just as coverage of their romance began to subside, the couple returned to the

Figure 4 Album cover of ‘Faye Beautiful Music’ (Fei Mei Mei Chi Yam) (1995). Faye performed Teresa Teng’s old songs on this album

headlines again in July 1996 as Faye filed for a marriage license with Dao Wei and, five months later, the couple delivered a baby daughter, Dao Jingtong, once again generating extensive and sensational coverage in the entertainment press despite elaborate efforts to hide from reporters and fans. Although the couple’s romance was unconventional by the standards of the Hong Kong entertainment industry, media portrayals increasingly emphasized the more or less perfect match between the two talented, if somewhat eccentric, Beijing musicians. The relentless press coverage both piqued the interest of fans and generated even more mystery, especially when Faye dressed in disguises to avoid the paparazzi during her visits to the hospital.

Ever since her image transformation in the early 1990s, Faye has had a contentious relationship with the press. Intent on protecting her privacy, she also struggled against press attempts to portray her according to the conventions of female Cantopop stars. Among those conventions was the representation of stars as unmarried and romantically available. Marriage often marked the end of a singing career and motherhood was not considered part of the celestial universe of pop stardom. Nevertheless, the cover on Faye's next album, 'Toys' (1997), featured a grainy photograph of the singer – as if shot from a distance through the inquiring camera lens of a member of the paparazzi – in the final stage of pregnancy, perhaps expressing Faye's pleasure about her new status in life and capitalizing on the enormous press frenzy surrounding her pregnancy.

Figure 5 Album cover of 'Toys' (1997)

After the birth of her daughter, Faye seemed to cooperate more with the Hong Kong media. She patiently let press photographers take snapshots of her with her husband and newborn daughter – a remarkable event, because never before had Faye obliged the press with access to such an intimate sphere of her life. Likewise, her music seemed to become more personal as she began composing songs about her daughter. In 'You Are Happy (So I Am Happy)' she publicly expresses passionate affection for her daughter, singing 'Your eyes open, so I laugh; your eyes turn red, my sky turns gray'.

At the apex of her career, Faye's family life, having long been mystified, suddenly entered the arena of entertainment discourse in unprecedented fashion. Never before had a Chinese pop star integrated motherhood into her music, concerts and public persona. The folk wisdom of the industry had always been that female stars lose their allure when they are married and even more so when they have children. But perhaps the press frenzy leading up to the birth of Faye's daughter may have alerted music company executives of the potential marketability of motherhood. Or perhaps her new music company, EMI, which reportedly paid a record-breaking HK$10 million for her contract, simply reasoned that Faye had too much cultural capital for it to risk challenging her explicit desire to bring family relations into the scope of her star persona. At a contract-signing ceremony that attracted more than a hundred journalists from Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and Japan, EMI's Asia vice-president noted that Faye's unique style had contributed to her initial success and now she would carry the distinction of being the first major pop star publicly to embrace both career and motherhood (*Oriental Daily*, 27 May 1997: C2).

In Faye's 1998 concert tour, the closing musical numbers of each performance featured her daughter on a big screen video while Faye sang 'You Are Happy (So I Am Happy)' on stage and her husband played drums in the back-up band. In some ways, commercialization of family life was an effective strategy to broaden Faye's fan base and indeed, a broad range of spectators attended the 1998 concert in Hong Kong. Although adoring young fans still constituted the core audience, middle-aged women and men (some still dressed in business attire, having apparently just left work) and families with children were commonly seen among the crowd. By blurring the boundary between private and public life, Faye's music seemed to articulate issues and concerns that crossed gender, generational and class boundaries (cf. Denisoff and Levine, 1970; Christenson and Roberts, 1998). Some of her songs such as 'Xiang Nai Er' (2000) are clearly vague and polysemic, which enables audiences to access a variety of listening perspectives. In this one, she draws on Chinese legends to develop characters associated with different perspectives, such as daughter, mother, lover and lesbian. Each character's name symbolizes different traditional roles – with 'Xiang Nai Er' perhaps for a princess, 'An Qi Er' for an angel and 'Mo Ter' for a pretty model – yet each of these appellations is imbued with a sense of uncertainty

and openness, thereby allowing audiences to multiply their interpretations of the 'Legend' (2001), which is the album's title.

The prince picks up Xiang Nai Er
A jacket finds its own model
There are too many glass shoes
Which many people can fit into
There is no uniqueness . . .
I am whose 'angel' (another girl named An Qi Er)?
You are whose 'model' (another girl named Mo Ter)?

Many of the recent songs of Faye – in particular, those written by the renowned lyricist Lin Xi – are charged with metaphors and allegories.[5] Faye's fans can capitalize on the rich yet obscure meanings embedded in these texts by considering, for example, 'models' of femininity and 'questions' of uniqueness. These imaginings fall outside conventional notions of Chinese femininity because they do not situate a woman's identity within the context of conventional romance, filial duty and domesticity.

Domesticity and romance

At this point in her career, Faye had traveled a tremendous distance since her first arrival on the pop scene in Hong Kong. She had achieved musical success, taken control of her career, managed her popular image against the grain of industry convention, experimented with various musical styles, and returned to China as a global star to reclaim her roots. She had now found love and family life with an alternative rock musician who circulated in the counterculture scene in Beijing. Yet even though Faye had taken command of her career and cultivated an alternative star persona, her most popular albums still included fairly conventional love songs. And this contradiction implied that, like most Chinese women, values of patriarchy still played a large role in her domestic relationships. One of Faye's most popular songs, 'Chess' (1994), conveys some of these tensions:

While intending to escape from your trap,
I am entrapped by another predicament.
I don't have the courage to decide to win or lose;
Neither have I the fortune to escape.
I am like chess.
Your decision controls my next move.
In your eyes, I am not your general,
Only a little solider.
I am like chess.

In this song, Faye explicitly interrogates the power dynamics of romantic

relationships and family life from a woman's perspective. No matter how the protagonist of the song positions herself, she is still operating in the context of patriarchal Chinese societies. Rather than challenge patriarchy, the song is surprisingly resigned to a traditional play of power in domestic affairs. Yet when interpreted against Faye's star persona, an intertextual reading might suggest that modern women separate their domestic and professional roles. At the same time that a Chinese woman may resign herself to traditional love relations, she nevertheless finds possibilities for achieving control over certain aspects of her working life, suggesting a slippage between the public and private realms of experience. In 'Exit' (1994), an apparently autobiographical song incorporating rap influences that might be traced to Faye's sojourn to the United States, she wrote:

> It is said that 1999 is the end of the world.
> Till then, we must get married and also have a child . . .
> I have many problems, many irresolvable problems.
> I don't have patience; nothing can satisfy me.
> I always irritate others; this seems to be my talent.
> I hate being a superstar, but I want to get attention.
> I only believe in love, eager to have a joyful family . . .
> But fate tells me that our marriage won't be so smooth.
> It is said that you will have an affair in your 40s.
> I am worried . . . I want to find an exit . . .

The exit from this dilemma is unclear and undefined. And maybe there is no exit at all. On the one hand the song can be interpreted as a fairly conventional love song, even within the context of the commercial Chinese music industry. But on the other hand, the lyric's explicit reference to Faye's star persona and the complications of family life evoke a set of tensions that transcend tradition and speak to the dilemmas confronted by many working women in Asia. Faye's dilemma shows that even a successful woman with tremendous reserves of cultural capital in her professional life still confronts the challenge of subordination in non-working spaces – at home and in love relationships.

Yet perhaps what continues to make Faye the object of public fascination is that her acknowledgement of this dilemma was accompanied by yet another dramatic turn in her saga. After the family concert tour in 1999, tensions in Faye's relationship with Dao Wei continued to show up in press accounts of her career and, two years after the birth of their daughter, the couple divorced. News of the split rippled around the globe via the Internet within hours of the announcement. Although not unexpected given Faye's persona, this new development fueled popular speculation about the price of female independence and success. In a recent public response to comments about whether the sacrifices she made for her ex-husband might have jeopardized her career, Faye said,

> I don't think so. People just have different perspectives. I completely disagree. Marriage, birth, divorce, all these do not influence my career. I think those who love me and those who love my songs won't think that this will influence me. My music fans and I interact only in the realm of music. If some people don't feel happy about that, I don't care. (*Ming Pao Weekly*, 14 April 2001: 72)

Throughout her relationship with Dao Wei, Faye expressed intense dedication to her partner and to romantic love. In interviews with female fans in Hong Kong, they often describe this dedication as Faye's core personality and as a fundamental quality that all Chinese women share despite the demands of public life and the workplace (Fung and Tse, 2001). Faye's fans presumed that her troubles often stemmed from her inherent goodness – her rejection of commercial hype and her explicit desire to satisfy artistic and emotional needs. The image of a desiring, adventurous and provocative Faye is acceptable because she remains committed to a romantic vision of love and family. She is at once a bohemian, a professional and a traditional woman. What reconciles these seemingly contradictory qualities is her explicit subjectivity, her active desire. Defiantly seeking love, professional success and artistic satisfaction, Faye's persona seems to resonate with the 'limitless desires' of young Chinese women. In a series of focus group interviews with Hong Kong women, one participant expressed a commonly shared belief that Faye's negotiation of gender roles lies at the core of her appeal, even among those who don't explicitly identify themselves as feminists:

> I admit that I'm a traditional woman. But I also aspire to the qualities of modern women. I'd like to fulfill my desires, and I believe that I'm doing that through my work. So-called modern women have to defend not only our traditional moral [or] family values but also our careers. We need to exercise a dual care. . . . It's not an easy job. I like Faye. [Besides having a family,] successful women have to be independent, and should have economic achievement and personal careers and so forth. I think her 'Stubborn and Regretless' makes a point. Many people say that Faye is too stubborn [about her career]. . . . The lyrics hit my heart. I want to be like her. Then I can fulfill my desires, buying and possessing whatever I want with no burden on my family. (interview, November 1998)[6]

The topic of family responsibility looms large in focus group discussions of Faye's star persona. Is she a devoted wife, daughter or mother? Can she be dutiful and professional at the same time? Such considerations have played a central role in fan discourse and they certainly escalated at the time of her pregnancy and later her divorce from Dao Wei. Press accounts of Faye's words and actions don't provide answers to these complex questions so much as they provide a space for women to reflect on their own circumstances.

That space opened even further in 2000 when Faye broke convention yet again as she started dating Nicholas Tse, a rising music and film star who is 10 years her junior. Fittingly, Tse's persona is somewhat unorthodox and very much geared to the tastes of young audiences. In *Gen-X Cop* (1999) he played a rebellious young officer who, along with several colleagues, is on the verge of being expelled from the Hong Kong police force for insubordination. Set at the time of Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty, the film conveys the emotional and moral turmoil confronting the younger generation at a time of political transition. Yet despite their marginal status, these Gen-X cops use maverick techniques to rescue the city from an assault by international terrorists. Troublesome and unconventional, they nevertheless proved to be principled heroes by the end of the movie. Likewise, in *Metade Fumaca* (1999), Tse plays the role of a streetwise young hustler from a broken home. Although independent and abrasive on the outside, the core personality of Tse's character is honest and emotionally sensitive. The young hustler befriends an elderly gangster who has returned to Hong Kong in search of his lost love from many years past. As the older man recounts stories of his youthful adventures, a personal bond is formed between the two outcasts that bridges across generations. Like Faye Wong, Nicholas Tse's star persona revolves around the contradiction between his brash public persona and his sensitive core personality. Although both stars challenge gender and generational norms, audiences seem to interpret these behaviors as signs of the stars' honesty and integrity. Press coverage of the couple has been relatively sympathetic and many recent reports emphasize Faye's family time with her daughter, apparently showing that she can manage motherhood, career and romance all at the same time. What would have been considered outrageous less than 10 years ago has now become acceptable discourse in the entertainment sections of major Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong and around the world.

Faye's significance

The controversial turns in Faye's star persona over the past decade have produced a massive amount of media reporting and speculation. This semiotic excess has been further fueled by Faye's reluctance to publicly discuss her work or her image. 'I'm not good at communicating to people,' she claims, 'especially to those I'm not familiar with. Besides, I'm straightforward and emotional. . . . Whatever I say is totally different from what is reported. I can't control the journalists, so the only way out is to avoid them'. Even when she does choose to speak in front of the media, her answers are often piecemeal and she sometimes retorts impatiently, preferring perhaps to offer a final rejoinder through her actions or her music

instead of her words. Indeed, her reluctance to accommodate news reporters and the promotional machinery of the industry fosters a mystique that is at once alluring and aloof. This most likely explains why Faye's persona is embraced and appropriated by diverse audiences in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the PRC and overseas Chinese communities.

Faye is especially popular among educated women and those who have traveled overseas, notes Kimberly Choi of the Association for the Advancement of Feminism, based in Hong Kong. 'She alone staged a high-profile rebellion against social norms and traditions,' says Choi. 'She has special appeal to people who are looking for something more than the homogeneous pop culture. She makes us realise that everything is possible if only we feel comfortable with our own selves' (P. Chung, 1997: 1). This appeal is especially important for young women because Faye's independence suggests alternatives to existing social constraints. Indeed, Chien-I Chow's (1998) study of the popularity of Faye's music in Taiwan reveals a diverse range of fans, including feminists, lesbians and traditional women, each appropriating Faye's music as basic texts for building group solidarity. Chow (1998: 131) claims that 'for the heterosexual (female) music fans, internalizing Faye's persona serves to oppose their gendered position in patriarchy; as for lesbian fans, however, appropriating Faye's qualities enhances survival resources and enriches lesbian culture'. Consequently, the significance of Faye's persona lies in its polysemic richness. Her reluctance to interpret her actions or her music merely reinforces the ambiguity of her image and this in turn helps to attract more supporters who interpret Faye's imagery within their own social and cultural frames of reference.

The relevance of Faye's persona is perhaps seen most clearly in Hong Kong and Taiwan, both of which have large populations of middle-class women with modern aspirations who are nevertheless still fettered by traditional norms. 'Most local women grew up in a very traditional social framework,' says Wah-shan Chow, a former professor and expert on gender, gay and lesbian studies at the University of Hong Kong. 'They are getting more in tune with feminist ideologies, but in reality, they might be facing oppression from their own fathers in their own household. Faye shows them there's a way out of the traditional framework' (P. Chung, 1997: 1). Clearly, it would be unrealistic for many of Faye's fans to appropriate her persona in the hopes of leading an independent life, overtly challenging patriarchy or defying constraints in the capitalist workplace. Most women simply do not possess the cultural or economic capital to follow her lead so emphatically. Still, the open interpretation of Faye's persona provides rich symbolic resources that help to mark out a new social terrain for women who have become a significant factor in the workplaces and the market economies of Chinese societies. As their status in both of these realms increases, a cultural imaginary of 'limitless desire' helps to foster a reconsideration of patriarchal relations within the domains of work, romance and family. Furthermore,

such trends in Hong Kong and Taiwan may be exemplary of similar developments in Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai, as well as other locales across the sweep of Greater China.

Yet it would be folly to suggest that Faye is at the forefront of a feminist revolution. Instead, she shares with other singing stars like Madonna an image that at once signifies the empowerment of women and the flexibility of capitalist culture. Neither superstar poses an immediate threat to established economic imperatives and, quite to the contrary, their counterculture images boost album sales in the service of global media conglomerates. As long as they continue to capture media attention, lure audiences to purchase their CDs, and generate some of the highest profits in the music industry, they can maintain a rebellious image that allows for multiple imaginations of femininity. Tetzlaff (1993: 240) explains that the 'secret of success' of such 'deviant' female stars lies in the fact that their images 'ensure that anything even loosely related to [them] will attract enough interest to make a bankable product'.

In the political economy of music, Faye challenges, distorts and transforms the prevailing market logic, and by that twisting, she further commodifies her image and her music while at the same time enhancing her cultural capital. The largely unintended outcome of her insistent efforts to craft an image at odds with institutional and cultural conventions is that Faye's ambitions seem to resonate with fans who are negotiating tensions between their own public personae and the traditional expectations of women in Chinese societies. This process of identification has produced a fandom around which homologies of public discourse crystallize, unexpectedly providing semiotic resources for feminist and proto-feminist ideologies (Shepherd, 1991; Shepherd and Wicke, 1997; Kumar and Curtin, forthcoming). Moreover, the richness of this semiotic terrain engenders multiple appropriations of Faye, which also open possibilities for other movements, such as queer and masculine struggles (Chow, 1998).

This intricate dynamic provides insights for understanding how particular audiences coalesce around images that foster a subtle but insistent feminist movement in Chinese communities (for example, Straw, 1997). However, there is a price to pay for cultural work that takes place in the context of capitalist institutions. Faye's successful negotiation of the possibilities and constraints of her star persona suggests not only that her music may in many ways be connected to complex processes of social change but also that the music industry – even the very conservative Cantopop industry – has learned to accommodate such tensions in its pursuit of ever-larger profits.

Notes

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1 From this point, all references in the text to Faye refer to Faye Wong.
2 English-language publications have for some time referred to Hong Kong-based Cantonese pop music as Cantopop. The industry emerged in conjunction with the introduction of television to Hong Kong during the 1970s, and record sales – stoked by popular TV variety shows – grew rapidly. Over time, global music companies bought into the industry and ultimately took a dominant position in the market, even though the regional offices of such leading companies as EMI and CinePoly (a subsidiary of Polygram) continue to be staffed by local Chinese. Hong Kong became the center of commercial Chinese pop music and singers throughout Greater China migrated to the territory to advance their careers. Until the late 1990s, most of the songs produced by the industry were sung in Cantonese. But with economic growth in Chinese societies and political transitions throughout Asia during the 1980s and 1990s (such as the lifting of martial law in Taiwan, the relaxation of government controls in the PRC and Singapore, and the transfer of sovereignty in Hong Kong), singing stars and industry executives have begun paying greater attention to the production of Mandarin pop songs (sometimes referred to as Mandapop). Over the past five years, even major Cantopop stars, such as Sammi Cheng, have begun to release Mandarin versions of their latest work in an attempt to cater to broader audiences.
3 Since the early 1990s, Hong Kong has also witnessed the appearance of alternative musical groups, such as LMF and Tat Ming Yat Pai, and even – for a time – the use of explicit pro-democracy song lyrics that challenged the PRC government's position regarding the Tiananmen uprising and the transfer of sovereignty from British colonial rule to an unpopular territorial administration appointed by the leadership in Beijing (see Lee, 1992; Ho, 2000; and Ma, 2001). In this article, however, we focus our attention on commercial Chinese pop music that is widely circulated throughout Asia and around the world.
4 Faye has covered songs by the Cranberries and the Cocteau Twins, and has even recorded a number of songs with the latter, thereby associating herself with alternative/mainstream music in the West. And although it has been widely remarked that Bjork has had a strong influence on Faye's music and star persona, so far Faye has not covered any songs by the Icelandic singer.

5 Interestingly, the characters 'lin' and 'xi' when read together as 'lin-xi' could be translated to English as the word 'dream'.
6 Interviews were conducted with five focus groups and a total of 44 participants. One group was composed of high school girls, another of university students, a third of young working women, a fourth of women in the 25–49 age range, and a fifth group of males in the 18–49 age group. Discussions were open-ended, but each session covered a standard group of questions that were specifically focused on gender roles, images of femininity and personal preferences in popular music.

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