

## CANTOPOP RENEWED: IDENTITY POLITICS IN POST-2019 HONG KONG AND THE RISE OF MIRROR

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### Abstract

*Post-2019, Hong Kong has witnessed an increased interest in Cantopop. While the genre peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, pop music sung in the local language became popular again, as seen in the rise of the band Mirror. As political upheaval after the protests restricts political expression through selective depoliticization, this paper argues that the resurgence of Cantopop is indicative of a growing interest in local expression and the protection of local identity. By interviewing ten Hongkongers, the paper argues that Mirror's success lies at the intersection of local identity, consumer culture, and pan-East-Asian cultural trends.*

**Keywords:** Hong Kong, Local Identity, Mirror, Cantopop, Hybridization, Depoliticization.

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## I. Introduction

Since 2018, Hong Kong has witnessed a change in its musical tradition, which critics call a revival of Cantopop.<sup>1</sup> While the genre peaked in the 1980s and started declining in the early 2000s, recent years have seen a growing interest in local music sung in Cantonese. This change comes at the crossroads of several elements: political changes following the 2019 protests, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, music hybridization, and pan-East-Asian pop influence. Moreover, the revival comes as a quest for solidifying what seems to be an endangered cultural and social identity of Hongkongers. Examining whether music is inherently political, the ascension of the Cantopop band Mirror illustrates the intersection of identity, hyperconsumerism, and political change.

Taking this into account, this paper aims to shed light on the rise of Mirror as an element of reinforcing the Hongkongese identity after political upheaval. The main research question posed is “Why do we witness a revival of Cantopop amid the 2019 protests, and how does Mirror’s popularity relate to the preservation of the local identity?”. To answer this twofold question, one must address the role of music in the expression of identity, particularly in the local language, the political transformation between 2019 and 2024, as well as the concomitant depoliticization and hyperpoliticization of the city. The paper argues that the popularity of the band is due to the need for a local pop cultural icon. In addition to this, public identification with the singers has been since the members started as young people with regular jobs<sup>2</sup>, singing in the local language and appealing primarily to a local audience.

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<sup>1</sup> “Cantopop: Why Hong Kong is seeking solace in local music”, *BBC*, 2022, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-60735794>>, accessed 12 Jan. 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Interviewees comment on the identification of the young fanbase with Mirror due to the public perception of young people as “廢青”, meaning “useless” or “garbage youth”. Due to the competitive environment, societal pressure is a psychological burden on young people since school days, and stereotypes portray young people, or “Hong Kong kids”, as lazy, overly reliant on their parents, and irresponsible. See Hazel Parry “Hong Kong kids need to learn self-care skills”, *South China Morning Post*, 2013, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20220115085917/https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/family-education/article/1231489/hong-kong-kids-need-learn-self-care-skills>>, accessed 12 Jan. 2025.

The study follows a qualitative approach by interviewing ten Hongkongers. They were selected to be representative of Mirror's fanbase, predominantly women and young people. Therefore, the respondents are between the ages of twenty and fifty, six of whom are women and four men. Two female and one male respondents are from mainland China, having lived in Hong Kong for over three years. Moreover, the interviews are semistructured and conducted between January and April 2024, and the respondents' names and identifiable information are confidential.

## II. Cantopop, Nostalgia, and Hybridization in the 20th Century

Cantopop rose to fame in the second half of the 20th century with figures such as the Four Heavenly Kings, concomitantly with the creation of a local Hongkongese identity. Ho marks the interplay of globalization and localization that made the genre popular in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>3</sup> pointing to the hybridization of the genre, including covers of Japanese songs, Mandarin, Euro-Atlantic, and local elements. Ho argues that this is representative of the city's status at the time, moving from being a British colony to an international financial hub, blending stereotypically Western and Eastern influences in its art and, implicitly, its local identity.<sup>4</sup> From a postcolonial perspective, hybridization is a vital element pertaining to Hong Kong's transition, as it allows an interchange between conflicting heritages,<sup>5</sup> which can be argued to be what brought Cantopop its success. Ortiz's concept of transculturation is relevant here as it provides further analysis of the creation of the new genre: "the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something

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<sup>3</sup> Wai-Chung Ho, "Between Globalisation and Localisation: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music." *Popular Music*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2003, pp. 143–57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Hon-Lun Yang, "Music, China, and the West: A Musical-Theoretical Introduction", in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, ed. Hon-Lun Yang and Michael Saffle, University of Michigan Press, 2017, pp. 1–18.

of both parents but is always different from each of them".<sup>6</sup> Therefore, by blending elements of the Cantonese opera, string elements, an emphasis on lyricism, and Western pop, it can be argued that at the height of its fame, Cantopop was highly hybridized and thrived in the context of creating and emphasizing the local cultural identity.

After noting the hybridization of the genre, it is imperative to analyze the role of music in political processes and identity actualization. Goehr rightfully points out the line between art and the political, "between the desire to reduce music to politics, on the one hand, and to preserve the purity of music, on the other",<sup>7</sup> while others claim that music is inherently political.<sup>8</sup> There is extensive literature on the role of music as propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party, with songs such as "The East is Red" or "Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China".<sup>9</sup> In Hong Kong, however, music remained mostly above politics in the colonial era due to state and self-censorship. Some exceptions to this are songs and concerts dedicated to Tiananmen's Incident, with stars such as Anita Mui performing "Brave Chinese" or Lowell Lo composing the song "All for Freedom". Generally, Cantopop was a success in the 1980s and 1990s beyond Hong Kong's borders, in Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the mainland. Fosler highlights the non-political element of it, leading to its success at the end of the last century: "Many mainland Chinese regarded Hong Kong's Cantopop as modern, in part because of its association with Western pop music, and they found its nonpolitical qualities safe and appealing."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Mirror's

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<sup>6</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1947), tr. Harriet de Onis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 102-103.

<sup>7</sup> Lydia Goehr, "Political Music and the Politics of Music" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 52, no. 1, 1994, pp. 99-112.

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Green, *Music on Deaf Ears: Musical Meaning, Ideology and Education*, Manchester: University Press, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Ho, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

<sup>10</sup> Danielle Fosler-Lussier, "Music and Media in the Service of the State" in *Music on the Move*, University of Michigan Press, 2020, pp. 120-148.

music and its themes, with its indie undertones and gender fluid aesthetics, is apolitical as well, although its popularity is due in part to political reasons. With covers of Japanese and Western songs, love stories, and common-life topics, Cantonese became a tie of a common identity. For instance, Stella Lau, staff at the Hong Kong Palace Museum, mentions the “rich repertoire of Cantonese songs that conjure up memories of the wave of emigration in the 1980s and '90s”.<sup>11</sup> Most respondents revert to this era with a sense of nostalgia. Maria<sup>12</sup>, a journalist from the mainland, relates her and her friends' memories of Hong Kong pop culture in their childhoods:

“All of us miss Hong Kong pop culture, dramas, and singers from the last century. If you ask me if I like anything from pop culture recently, I would say no. Even for those visitors who city-walk around Hong Kong, they like sites from the last century that are correlated to our childhoods. Those dramas, songs, movies, and other cultural products shaped our first impressions of Hong Kong.”

Kate, a law student in her 20s, recalls with nostalgia some of the old Cantopop artists and movies from the last century:

“There are many popular Cantopop artists, the ones from the older generation that I listened to when I was little, like Leslie Cheung and Danny Chan, an even older artist. Older Hong Kong movies, like Wong Kar-wai, and the ones starring Leslie Cheung. Nowadays, there are more and more independent Hong Kong movies that people are paying attention to.”

### **III. The Rise of Mirror. Local Identity, Consumerism, and Depoliticization**

The popularity of Cantopop declined at the beginning of the new millennium due to a series of factors: the rise of the internet, streaming services, piracy, the rise of Mandopop, J-pop, and eventually

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<sup>11</sup> “Cantopop: the glorious years”, *ChinaDaily*, 2022, <<https://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202206/17/WS62abe3b9a3109375516eceff.html>>, accessed 2 Feb. 2025

<sup>12</sup> All names are changed to protect the respondents' identities.

K-pop.<sup>13</sup> Despite the loss of popularity, particularly abroad, a new wave of Cantopop can be seen with the change of the socio-political milieu in recent years. Its role in identity formation, however, cannot be understated. Li, a musicology professor, notes that “Hong Kong people often forget that Cantopop is an art because they lack distance from it. (...) Cantopop carries with it a distinct value of everydayness — in the form of slang, jokes, and identity — that derives from local people’s active participation in the art, consciously and unconsciously.”<sup>14</sup>

Following the pan-East-Asian formula for creating bands, Mirror was formed by the finalists of a reality show, *Good Night Show- King Maker*. Ninety-nine contestants proved their skills in singing, dancing, and performing, and the ten finalists formed the band Mirror with Keung To as leader, which rose to fame in a few years. Mirror’s popularity lies at the intersection of a few elements: the need for local musical production in tune with the protection of the local identity, consumerism and fan culture, the COVID-19 pandemic, pan-East-Asian influences, and the relatability for young people. Each of these elements is worth further exploration, as Yang notes: “The intercultural flow of music is involved with global capital, local economies, international relations, cultural diplomacy, national identities, cultural politics, representations of peoples, commodification, cultural hegemonies, imperialism, hybridizations, and consumer cosmopolitanism.”<sup>15</sup>

First of all, there is a consensus amongst the respondents that Mirror was propelled to fame by the need for local talent to showcase the Hongkongese identity. Local media marks Hong Kong’s “idiosyncratic cultural milieu” and Cantopop’s “nostalgic retro aesthetics”, which makes Mirror “an obscure

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<sup>13</sup> Yiu-Wai Chu and Eve Leung, “Remapping Hong Kong Popular Music: Covers, Localisation and the Waning Hybridity of Cantopop.” *Popular Music*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2013, pp. 65–78.

<sup>14</sup> Bradley Faye, “Equal music”, 2023, *China Daily*, <<https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/353837>>, accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Yang, *op. cit.*, p 7.

niche act and a distinctly local phenomenon".<sup>16</sup> Laura, a journalist in her 40s, comments on the local element of their success:

"They are completely Hong Kong; that is why they can succeed here. Through their songs and what they say, they create a lot of resonance with Hongkongers. Mirror is definitely one of the icons, they try to create a complete Hong Kong style of entertainment culture. They reflect a type of local culture; we can get our emotions out through them, and this is one reason why the people are so crazy for them. They are *intentionally made to grow in line with the entire city's thought on preserving Hong Kong things*, that's why they are so successful." (emphasis added)

Mirror intentionally sings in Cantonese and targets a local audience, with modest popularity outside of the region. Most respondents note that Mirror is not promoted on the mainland,<sup>17</sup> while respondents from the mainland comment on the perception of the band as old-fashioned or even provincial. Emma, a student from the mainland, mentions:

"Chinese people, especially younger generations, have a lot of options; they feel like there are other bands more good-looking who sing better than Mirror. Hong Kong is not familiar, in my opinion, with new entertainment trends; they are more traditional. The film industry in Hong Kong was very popular and was leading in the last century. In recent years, they have not changed to follow the world trends as fast as China."

Another factor that adds to the identification of the band with the local culture is that the members are perceived as ordinary young people who happened to become famous through hard work rather than as industry-made celebrities. Lisa, a journalist in her 30s, comments on the relatability of young people:

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<sup>16</sup> "The Mirror phenomenon: Why this boy band is a uniquely Hong Kong sensation", *DimsumDaily*, 2023, <<https://www.dimsumdaily.hk/the-mirror-phenomenon-why-this-boy-band-is-a-uniquely-hong-kong-sensation/>>, accessed 2 Feb. 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Peggy Ye and Kensaku Ihara, "Hong Kong boy band Mirror reflects city's identity in mainland shadow", *Nikkei Asia*, <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Media-Entertainment/Hong-Kong-boy-band-Mirror-reflects-city-s-identity-in-mainland-shadow>>, accessed 2 Feb. 2025.

“The rise of Mirror is due to the people wanting a sense of identity, something local that they could understand. These boys were good-looking. I wouldn’t say necessarily that they sing well or dance well, but they were local. They were people from Hong Kong, born and raised in Hong Kong. Because it was a reality show, people saw them grow, people saw that they were normal students; they were nobody back then, but they had talent and sort of had the star factor. In reality shows, you see people developing character, and they like to follow their growth. When these boys were made into a group, people were like “Oh, my favorite is in there, my top three are in there”, so they followed them to see what kind of music they would release, what kind of dramas they would do in the future.”

The 2019 protests are a pivotal moment in the growth of the band’s popularity. When the people felt their identity under threat of mainland interference, they prioritized non-political resistance. The threat of “soft resistance” manifested itself in the promotion of local shops, restaurants, bookstores, and entertainment. This refers to the “yellow economy”, taking after the yellow umbrellas used in the 2014 Umbrella Movement. This support is combined with the COVID-19 pandemic, when the public was indoors, and the online environment facilitated the rise of this entertainment segment.

Other than the local aspect of Mirror, the second element worth exploring is the hyper-consumerist environment that facilitated its rise, tied in with fan culture, and the pan-East-Asian cultural milieu. Most respondents, irrespective of whether or not fans of Mirror, mentioned the strong fan culture attached to it,<sup>18</sup> as well as the monetary success of the band. Individually or in the band, the twelve members witnessed success as actors, singers, TV personalities, and brand ambassadors. They advertise a wide

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<sup>18</sup> It is beyond the purpose of this paper to analyze the psychological attachment of fans, especially teenagers, to the band. For examples of obsessive behaviors see: “Hong Kong Mirror fans’ excessive admiration: alarming signs of escalating spending raise concern”, *DimsumDaily*, 2023, <<https://www.dimsumdaily.hk/hong-kong-mirror-fans-excessive-admiration-alarming-signs-of-escalating-spending-raise-concern/>>, accessed 10 Jan. 2025.



range of products, from luxury brands such as Gucci, Dior, YVS, Cartier and Longchamp to fast food chains such as McDonald's, streaming platforms such as Disney, mobile phones, electronics, or everyday necessities such as skincare and hygiene products,<sup>19</sup> which correlates to the region's emphasis on materialism and consumerism.<sup>20</sup> Respondents note how one cannot escape the billboards with Mirror advertisements in the city, from skyscrapers to neighborhood stores. Additionally, this popularity translated into record-breaking streaming wins on music apps and TV programs such as ViuTV.

The debate on the role and function of music in late-stage capitalism is beyond the purpose of this paper. Nonetheless, Shan and Kung's observations on performing in "the age of banality" are relevant, as they point on the one hand to the accelerated rhythm of creating and consumption of art and on the other to the potentiality of activism of the arts as performance:

"As a resistance against preoccupation with 'nothingness', we have continuity of 'happening', with all kinds of overloaded infotainment under the umbrella of the 'creative industry'. 'Art and culture' seems ubiquitous and, to a certain extent, has become a sort of 'decoration' for shopping malls, that's one aspect of 'performativity in the age of banality'. And 'performativity' is, on the one hand, designed to catch 'attention' among banality, or, on the other extreme, staging 'performance' is a kind of activism."<sup>21</sup>

Performativity is a characteristic of the pan-East-Asian pop culture current trends, which tie Mirror in a larger tradition of K-pop, J-pop, and Mandopop. The majority of respondents drew parallels between Mirror and

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<sup>19</sup> "Mirror: all you need to know about the Hong Kong Canto-pop boy band, and how they compare with BTS", 2022, *South China Morning Post*, <<https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/entertainment/article/3187266/mirror-all-you-need-know-about-hong-kong-canto-pop-boy>>, accessed 5 Feb. 2025.

<sup>20</sup> There has been a debate since the early 2000s on the traditionally low political engagement of the HKSAR to the detriment of economic emphasis, particularly on the post-material wave following the 2003 SARS crisis. See Ma Ngok, "Value Changes and Legitimacy Crisis in Post-Industrial Hong Kong" in *Asian Survey*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2011, pp. 683–712.

<sup>21</sup> Lo Yin Shan *et al.*, "'Performativity' in the Age of Banality" in *Boredom, Shanzhai, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China*, edited by Jeroen de Kloet *et al.*, Amsterdam University Press, 2019, p. 142.

other pop groups in neighboring countries, particularly South Korea, while addressing the differences between the two genres. Li marks the difference between the highly stylized Korean industry and the local Cantopop as:

“K-pop is a Michelin-starred, multicourse meal: The music, videos and choreography are all carefully crafted and fantastically presented, and its success is also partly tied to the internationalization of multiple Korean drama series” (Cantopop is like) “a bowl of homemade soup ... nothing particularly fancy, but it grounds its listeners in a place they call home”.<sup>22</sup>

Sarah, a student in her 20s, comments on the fact that the band is often compared to pan-East-Asian pop trends, although it is often perceived as more amateur than its South Korean counterpart:

“A lot of Hong Kong people like K-pop or J-pop, and they feel like Mirror is a cheap copy of foreign bands. Their main audience would be housewives. Those who like Mirror do so because there is a monopoly on boy bands in Hong Kong. Once there is a local version for people who like K-pop, they will fixate on it, it becomes very attractive to them. Some members release their own music, some of which sounds really good. People like them because of the boyband effect, and because they don’t have many competitors.”

Thirdly and lastly, the band’s success can be attributed to the selectively depoliticized environment in Hong Kong after 2020. Given the changes in the post-National Security Law era, freedom of speech has been impacted in the region, while both censorship and self-censorship have become commonplace in the political, academic, or online environments.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, if self-reflection and expression are restricted, it can be projected on non-political figures, such as those in the entertainment industry. Three respondents mentioned that they witnessed netizens debating whether Mirror and its members supported or not the 2019 protests. Jessica, a journalist in her 30s, mentions:

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<sup>22</sup> Faye, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> “We Can’t Write the Truth Anymore”, *Human Rights Watch*, 2024, <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/09/24/we-cant-write-truth-anymore/academic-freedom-hong-kong-under-national-security-0>>, accessed 10 Jan. 2025.

“Nothing was happening when they were introduced in 2018. There was interest in them, but not as big. Then in 2019, because of the protest, some of the members spoke about that, and people were very touched that “Oh, even stars with fame and a fan base would actually care about social issues.”

On a similar note, Mark, a student in his 20s living in the UK, comments on the phenomenon as follows:

“Hong Kong people tend to politicize entertainment figures rather than politicizing the politicians, who should be politicized. There are also huge debates in online media platforms on whether Mirror is pro-democracy or pro-China, and there's no point in discussing if they're pro this or that; you can just like them because of their music, dance, or looks. This is due to the changes in national security law, because you can't openly discuss if someone is accusing someone of being pro-China or for democracy, so people turn their projections to singers.”

Media reports show a group member shouting “Add oil”, a common phrase of encouragement during the protests, while their lyrics “Never give up, I got it, I've got a warrior heart” from the 2021 song *Warrior* are interpreted as a tacit support of the pro-democratic camp.<sup>24</sup>

In 2022, Mirror suffered an incident that left a mark on the band's progression. During a concert at the Coliseum, an LED screen fell from the ceiling, seriously injuring two performers, which led to a government investigation and the cancellation of the band's tour. Despite returning on the stage months later, Mirror's popularity dimmed after the incident. Mark, the expatriate living in the UK, comments on the future direction of Cantopop beyond Mirror:

“Back in the day in Hong Kong, I saw my friends competing for their concert tickets, but it's not happening now at all. Even though Mirror might be the first big rising star of Cantopop, the trend of creating more pop bands did not die because of the

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<sup>24</sup> Mary Hui, “Never give up:” A Hong Kong boy band has emerged as the voice of a city under crackdown”, *Quartz*, 2021, <<https://qz.com/2010206/hong-kong-boyband-mirror-is-the-voice-of-a-city-under-crackdown>>, accessed 10 Feb. 2025.

popularity of Mirror. A lot of people in the UK watch the Music Award Ceremony of Cantopop in Hong Kong; they watch it through VPN, so the trend of cherishing your culture via Cantopop is alive and popular, even if Mirror is not anymore.”

After 2023, the group started promoting their music abroad, touring and promoting their music in Australia, the UK, and the US. Global popularity is indicative of the reinforcement of the Hongkongese identity, albeit not tied to the SAR’s geography. Whether in Hong Kong or abroad, Cantopop continues to thrive and promote cultural products made in Hong Kong.

## **Conclusion**

The role of music and other artistic expressions is crucial in identity building and conservation, particularly in societies where political expression is limited. Given a plethora of socio-cultural factors, as well as the political development following the social movement in 2019, Hong Kong’s local identity manifests itself in the creation and promotion of local cultural products, as seen in the rise of the band Mirror. While the band was formed in 2018, its popularity is due to its local identity preservation role after the protests. Moreover, its pan-East-Asian pop influence can be seen in the genre’s hybridization, an aspect that made Cantopop popular in the second half of the 20th century.

While Mirror’s popularity decreased after the 2022 incident, the trend of Cantopop resurgence continues. Future research should follow the role of Cantopop in identity preservation, moving from established bands such as Mirror to other bands such as My Little Airport and individual artists such as Terence Lam, Tyson Yoshi, Hins Cheung, or Panther Chan. The trend in preference for local music over Mondapop is indicative of soft resistance. Additionally, from an intangible heritage perspective, Cantopop is invaluable to the future of the Hongkongese identity. As more Hongkongers moved outside of the city following 2019, the identity is no longer limited to a geographical space. Rather, it creates new physical spaces and communities

that carry their heritage with them. From this perspective, future research should focus on the role of Cantopop in identity conservation for the diaspora. Mirror's concerts in the US, the UK, and Australia are indicative of this cultural continuum.

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