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Frivolous Discords: Politics of Musical Aversion in Contemporary Hong Kong

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Sum Ming Samuel Chan

Committee in charge:

Professor Sarah Hankins, Chair  
Professor Amy Cimini  
Professor Nancy Guy

2018



The Thesis of Sum Ming Samuel Chan is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Frivolous Discords: Politics of Musical Aversion in Contemporary Hong Kong

by

Sum Ming Samuel Chan

Master of Arts in Music

University of California San Diego, 2018

Professor Sarah Hankins, Chair

In recent years, the forming, sharing, and debating of personal opinions through ridicule and distaste has been noticeably intensified in Hong Kong. As multicultural engagements and clashes between local citizens, mainland Chinese tourists, and new immigrants proliferate in the city, music and politics are increasingly intertwined in contemporary listening practices through aversion. This thesis explores how the hyper-politicized society in contemporary Hong Kong necessitates exploring new approaches to inquire how music, sounds, and politics continuously function, or equally importantly, continuously fail to

function. Through examining the proclaimed aversion towards, on the one hand, public singing and dancing performances by middle-aged ladies in urban Hong Kong and, on the other, a specific vocal technique that is ridiculed through viral memes, I articulate the political labor that the related operations of mockery and hatred perform in contemporary Hong Kong listening practices, both online and in real life. Why do some sounds, despite being viewed and listened to by many as undesirable and thus failed their intended function, nonetheless get constantly replayed, re-ridiculed, and re-hated? How do the persistent circulation, ridicule, and criticism of these sounds intersect with, reinforce, and challenge existing political contestations in Hong Kong? How do the dynamic interactions between the ephemerality of sound and the enduring existence of both physical and digital spaces produce intriguing new meanings? Why is it that auditory perceptions, envisioned in different contexts as sound, music, or noise, lend themselves particularly well to the politicization of the listening public?



## INTRODUCTION

For the past five years or so, my Facebook newsfeed has been rather cacophonous. From my friends sharing viral memes about popular singers' latest failed performances, to comment wars about Hong Kong's current political situation on digital journalism pages (Lee et al. 2017), to articles ridiculing the latest gaffes of government officials and popular singers, to real-time updates on social movements: if disagreement is one of the principal ways by which human relationships develop, then this particular modality of forming, sharing, and debating personal opinions through derision and dissent has been noticeably amplified in Hong Kong on social media platforms, online forums, as well as public and private conversations, on topics as different as popular music and politics.

However, is this co-presence of cacophonous interchanges on these seemingly unrelated topics merely a coincidence? With time, I began to observe increasing nodes of connection between how popular music and politics are discussed in these affective modalities of aversion. Alternative and parodic journalism like 100Most and key opinion leaders (KOLs) like KingJer not only ridicule a singer in one post, and government officials in the next; more often, their sarcasm traverses both topics seamlessly. This is not only to suggest that the way people perceive and respond to information on both topics are similarly filtered through multiple layers of sarcasm and criticism—though that is certainly the case—but also that such interactive exchanges blur the perceived boundaries between popular music and politics.

Put another way, perhaps the prevalence of teasing and loathing popular music and politics could be, and has to be, examined together in order to make more sense out of both. Thus, an underlying claim in this thesis is that the hyper-politicized

society in contemporary Hong Kong necessitates exploring approaches of inquiring into how popular music (or music, or sounds in general) and politics, together, continuously function, or equally importantly, continuously fail to function.

Snickering and hating are hardly new ways to interact with cultural objects and political entities. On the one hand, oppressed individuals and communities have long resisted against their oppressors, empowered themselves, and revolutionized by making fun of and being angry at their situation, their tyrants, and themselves. Yet, on the other hand, those in power have also utilized similar tactics to belittle and patronize those with whom they disagree, to take away their dignities of existence, and to deny them legitimacy in participating in the social sphere. In both cases, music is instrumental, both as the target of ridicule and critique, and as the medium by which these sentiments are expressed, as documented in scholarship on protest music, propaganda music, and music censorship (see Manabe 2015; Fung 2007; Scherzinger 2007).

Against the backdrop of these numerous instances of frivolous discords, my aim here is simple: Through examining the proclaimed aversion towards, on the one hand, public singing and dance performances by middle-aged ladies in urban Hong Kong (Chapter 1) and, on the other, a specific vocal technique that is ridiculed through viral memes (Chapter 2), I articulate the political labor that the related affective operations of mockery and hatred perform in contemporary Hong Kong listening practices, both online and in real life.

## *Motivations*

The following three motivations drive my pursuit of this project. First, I want to explore approaches to think and write about musical aversion—the ingredient *par excellence* for achieving virality in contemporary circulations on social media and in real life—which remains relatively under-examined in music scholarship in Hong Kong and beyond. In particular, I focus on how these two undesirable musical instances that I discuss are repeatedly listened to through the specific, complementary, and overlapping pair of affective modalities: ridicule and distaste. Because I am primarily interested in musical aversions as expressed by listeners, this thesis begins as a study on the politics of listening, instead of the politics of musical creation. Of course, as unfolded in subsequent chapters, these two modes of musical engagement often overlap in practice—especially, as I discuss in Chapter 2, on digital media platforms, where the lines between encountering, disseminating, and creating cultural objects are not always easy to define. Aversion, then, might actually function as a fertile source for creative engagements.

Second, I want to investigate the political valence of popular music without turning to lyrics. This is, to a certain extent, my attempted response to Stephen Chu's (1998, 192) call for music scholars to articulate the musical aspects of Hong Kong popular music to provide a counterpart to the overwhelmingly lyrics-centric Hong Kong popular music studies. Moreover, I wish to bring in the concerns raised in Anglophone popular music scholarship that the intended meanings of the lyrics do not always account for how popular music is perceived in the processes of circulation, perception, and interaction. This point is perhaps especially pertinent in the current political climate in Hong Kong, where deliberate and accidental mishearing,

misreading, and misunderstanding underlie much of our verbal, sonic, and, of course, musical (mis)communication.

Third, although lyrics is not my principal concern, I do not, then, intend to closely analyze melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, or other musical parameters that might be of interest to fellow music theorists. Instead, I focus on how the mechanisms of circulation that these musical entities take part in provide affordances and pose limitations on such politicalized listening practices, as well as how the boundaries between music, sound, and noise are effectively blurred in these processes. Here, I respond to Michele Hilmes' (2005) call for sound studies to expand beyond its American focus, and ask what this East Asian city has to offer in terms of its distinct modes of listening. My approach in searching for the types of questions that we can productively ask of these situations, rather than in attempting to propose definitive analyses of texts and musical pieces, resembles what Jann Pasler (2008) calls "question-spaces": a deliberately "soft-focused" methodology that seeks to write *through* music, rather than write *about* music per se. For Pasler, such spaces of inquiry escape from "laser-beam narrowness" by embracing the richness that comes from the complexity of reality, which, in turn, "[unveil] interactions and networks of connection between people, practices, and art works" and "allow for multiple linearities, nonlinearity, and simultaneities" (9).

Taken together, these three motivations account for the subject matters of my two chapters. Because both are situated in complex networks of sonic, musical, political, and affective interchanges, yet do not rely on overtly political lyrics (or, in the case of Chapter 2, do not contain lyrics at all), they provide rich contexts for inspecting how listening to such frivolous discords in contemporary Hong Kong

carries mounting political valence. Before I unveil the two cases towards the end of this introduction, I provide an overview of how politics has been addressed in Hong Kong popular music studies, and highlight several recurring issues that are prominent and relevant to the present thesis.

### *Politics in Hong Kong Popular Music Studies*

Politics has, in fact, never been peripheral to either Hong Kong popular music or its scholarship, but a central theme that has received persistent academic attention. The reason is rather simple: Hong Kong's 150-year colonial history under Britain's rule (1842–1997, minus five years of Imperial Japanese occupation during World War II) culminated in what is known as the “1997 issue”—the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong from Britain to China in the year that acts as a historical watershed—has loomed over much of the city's recent four decades of public consciousness. As such, the uncertainties surrounding Hong Kong's political present and future, as well as its citizens' political identities, have been consistent themes explored in local popular culture (Abbas 1997, 4–6; Chan 2001).

Since much of the academic writing on Hong Kong popular music and culture is produced in departments of cultural studies and literature, this prominence of politics as a guiding factor has been reflected primarily through reading cultural objects as texts—and in the context of popular music, its lyrics (see Chu 2009; Wong and Chu 2011; Chu and Leung 2011). For instance, when overviewing the diversified political sentiments conveyed in song lyrics since the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, Wai-chung Ho asserts that the genre “can be described as a history of political and

cultural accommodation between the political ideology of the state and the political meanings expressed in song” (2000, 349–50).

A significant amount of such publications focus on the issues of postcoloniality, hybridity, and in-betweenness as exhibited in Hong Kong popular culture in the related and often overlapping forms of film, television drama, and popular music, as well as to what extent these concepts actually apply to the specific context of the city. In particular, scholars often reveal a persistent sense of melancholy towards Hong Kong’s always-already lost identity amidst its constantly shifting political situation. For instance, Ackbar Abbas describes pre-postcolonial (that is, before 1997) Hong Kong as having a “culture of disappearance, whose appearance is posited on the imminence of its disappearance” (1997, 7). Similarly, Stephen Chu is concerned with the “cultural and political ‘non-position’ that Hong Kong occupies” (1998, XI); Anthony Cheung describes how the city “has been embroiled in an identity crisis, self-pity and nostalgia for the prosperous past” (2008, xv), while Natalia Chan laments on how the history of Hong Kong has always been “‘nonexistent,’ ‘repressed,’ and often erased, deleted, and misunderstood” (1995, 2–3). By capturing the existential angst of the city as it approaches its 1997 handover, these scholars provide important and powerful theorizations and depictions of Hong Kong culture’s convoluted relationship with its political instability.

These depictions are often extended into the realm of popular music, expressed as a lament for the death of the genre in the year 1997, presumably along with the death of the city as it enters a new political era under Chinese rule, as the popularity of the city’s music and the influence that its singers once had in the East Asian region is being gradually taken over by those in mainland China, Taiwan,

Korea, and Japan. For instance, renowned lyricist James Wong (2003) titles his widely cited doctoral dissertation “The Rise and Decline of Cantopop: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music (1949–1997)”; Stephen Chu (2017) ends his recently published monograph, *Hong Kong Cantopop: A Concise History*, with the tellingly titled chapter, “After the Fall: The New Millennium,” followed by an epilogue titled “Cantopop in the Age of China”; journalistic sources now adopt this narrative of death as one of the defaults when discussing Hong Kong popular music culture. In other words, Hong Kong’s political situation and its popular music has always been simultaneously explored, but mostly in terms of how singers, lyricists, and listeners have struggled to adopt certain political identities and to perform forms of resistance to the status quo through their musicking practices, perhaps to not much avail.

Some scholars, however, have begun to propose alternatives to this prevalent academic narrative of Hong Kong popular music’s current and future directions. In *Sonic Multiplicities: Hong Kong Pop and the Global Circulation of Sound and Image*, Yiu-fai Chow and Jereon de Kloet (2013; 2015) respond to these pessimistic analyses, historiographies, and predictions of the genre, and rightfully redirect our attention to various mechanisms of circulation that underlie our attempts in closely reading audiovisual objects as texts. They stress how the interactive structures that enable our seemingly transparent perception of cultural artefacts must be taken into account. Not merely posing as a methodological corrective, Chow and de Kloet’s argument also challenges this well-intentioned yet limiting narrative of death that has, over time, bled out of the academic sphere and entered into public consciousness. Granted, public nostalgia—be it towards a bygone political era or a bygone cultural epoch, or, in this case, both—exists regardless of academic publications; yet, such sentiments

are supported and thus perpetuated by the mutual construction by scholars and journalists alike. Apart from lyrics and music video analyses, Chow and de Kloet explore how comparative fandom studies, venue studies, and media circulation studies can offer useful, alternate frameworks which, by repositioning Hong Kong popular music within the global network of sonic and visual flows, frees the genre from the crushing pressure posed by the rise of China, and recognizes the persistent vitality that fuels this music culture to the present.

Building on valuable insights by scholars who have studied the important role that lyrics play in the political effects of popular music, I continue Chow and de Kloet's endeavor in this thesis by emphasizing areas other than lyrics to examine moments of intersection between politics and popular music. Moreover, in subsequent chapters, I highlight how taking undesirability into account might productively add to this framework of musical circulation by necessitating other kinds of questions: Why do these musical examples, despite being viewed and listened to by many as undesirable and thus failed their intended function, nonetheless get constantly replayed, re-ridiculed, and re-hated? How do the persistent circulation, ridicule, and criticism of these sounds intersect with, reinforce, and challenge existing political contestations in Hong Kong? How do the multilateral and dynamic interactions between the ephemerality of sound and the enduring existence of both physical and digital spaces produce intriguing new meanings? Why is it that auditory perceptions, envisioned in different contexts as sound, music, and/or noise, lend themselves particularly well to the politicization of the listening public?

As a preliminary project on musical aversions in Hong Kong, I do not intend to provide conclusive answers to these questions, but merely to carve up question-



spaces for thinking about distaste, sounds, and politics in the city together— conversations that I believe to be timely and necessary in response to the present political situation. However, in order to effectively connect political and musical aversions, it might be worthwhile to first ponder why aversion, undesirability, and hatred has not traditionally been at the forefront of humanities scholarship like music studies.

### *Studying Musical Aversion*

Time and time again, scholars write about musical traditions, works, genres, composers, and performers that they love and adore: whether in the supposed “canon” of Western European Art Music, or in the copious and absolutely indispensable ventures, starting from the final decades of the twentieth century, in interrogating this canon through writing reparative and alternative histories that diversify music studies by incorporating more music cultures, communities, and individuals. As our field encompasses an increasing number of scholars working on more musicking practices that they are passionate about or find fascinating, or as David Blake (2017) puts it, our field becomes more “omnivorous,” various subfields also began to interrogate methodologies and assumptions in how they study their own musical affections (see Cook and Everist 1999; Stobart 2008).

Stephen Chu, in his endorsement for Chow and de Kloet’s *Sonic Multiplicities*, directly encapsulates this sentiment by suggesting that the authors’ “every word bespeaks their deep, affectionate love for Hong Kong popular music” (Chow and de Kloet 2015, back cover). Such proclamations of musical love— whether for oneself or for others, in Hong Kong popular music studies or music studies more

generally—are certainly paramount in providing continuous momenta and driving forces to continued academic pursuits. This is why Vivian Luong contends that we need to rethink music studies as repeated “love-making or discourse-making,” and carefully consider how they “lead us to new ways of doing and holding ourselves accountable in the world” (2017).

However, as Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno point out in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, “we tend to write about the music we value, simultaneously serving as critics and advocates, while avoiding that which we disdain or take for granted. . . . Academic inquiry, then, has rarely addressed this vast body of ‘bad’ music (simultaneously unwanted and desired) which permeates modern society” (2004, 3). In this thesis, I follow these scholars’ endeavors of theorizing music loving through discourse making, and ask how negative musical sentiments might introduce intriguing dissonances into this polyphony of affections.

In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai (2007) examines an assemblage of negative and “nasty,” yet “weak” and “nonstrategic” affects—including envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia, and others—and argues that their very ambivalence straddles between aesthetics and politics, and, as such, necessitates theorizing both in relation to each other. This academic endeavor is a pressing one because, in a rather intriguing reversal, “the very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together—a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in an increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society—is a prime occasion for ugly feelings” (3).

More precisely, the historical preference among scholars in theorizing attraction over repulsion, for Ngai, is because the very process of studying ugly

feelings challenges the “hegemonic pluralism” that is “simply more *concordant*, ideologically as well as aesthetically,” with studying desire, rather than “the fundamentally exclusionary idiom of disgust” (343). If this is the case, then theorizing that which is *discordant* is a productive yet urgent task in Hong Kong, where multicultural encounters, collisions, and syntheses between Chinese new immigrants, Chinese tourists, and local citizens happen on a daily basis, underlie much of prevailing political debates, yet remain effectively unresolved on governmental, societal, and individual levels.

Ngai contends that, when compared to the vagueness of our objects of desire, disgust has the intriguing characteristic of “never [being] ambivalent about its object” (335). This is because, to her, disgust functions precisely as the demarcation and maintenance of the boundary between the subject and the object; furthermore, it “finds its object intolerable and demands its exclusion” (337). Writing from a complementary direction, Wendy Brown makes a similar point in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* that, even in societies where the rhetoric of tolerance is at play, it nonetheless “takes shape as a normative discourse that reinforces rather than attenuates the effects of stratification and inequality,” because “tolerance is necessitated by something one would prefer did not exist” (2006, 45). However, in the case of musical aversion through listening—whether one chooses to tolerate the sounds in concern or not—things are not always that clear-cut.

Sounds capture us, but we also try to capture sounds. Rey Chow and James Steintrager describe sound objects as “points of diffusion that in listening we attempt to gather” (2011, 2). However, due to the seeming ephemerality of sound, our

listening practices tend to remain “the capture of that which is lost” (4). Thinking of sounds as perennially undergoing yet escaping our attempts of capture strikes a resonance especially in our age of digital mediation: as listening becomes increasingly “fragmented, interactive, dynamic, reflexive and distributed” (Koutsomichalis 2016, 26), articulating what exactly we listen to and despise also becomes a complicated endeavor. While we can think of musical aversion in terms of our negative affective responses to specific genres, songs, or singers, with each transmission of such aversions between individuals, these entities themselves prove to be unstable: they readily morph into each other, as well as bleed into other entities—for instance, political controversies—that also incite aversions. The result is that affects of aversion themselves become foregrounded, while their supposed targets are rendered elusive.

One thing is far from elusive, however: people are still actively listening. If this is the case, then a fruitful approach is to foreground various negative affects that emanate from these listening practices, while trying to articulate the elusiveness of their targets along the way. This is what I would like to achieve in this thesis. In each of the two chapters, I begin with a musico-political contestation in contemporary Hong Kong, in which the object of aversion seems readily identifiable. Yet, as I examine how aversion develops, sustains, and propagates in each phenomenon, I seek to unravel the complexities of pinning down exactly what the supposed targets of such negative affects are, and instead, see them as aggregates of related sonic phenomena that germinate from specific listening strategies.

## *Two Aggregates of Elusive Targets*

In 2000, the Hong Kong government began implementing a policy that limits vehicle usage on the busiest streets in its urban city center, Mong Kok, by turning them to pedestrian-friendly walking spaces. The subsequent proliferation of middle-aged female street performers, however, not only failed to reduce traffic-induced noise pollution in these areas, but led to violent political conflicts that became internationally reported. In Chapter 1, I explore why these episodes unfolded, and how they continue to unfold today. My primary goal, however, is not only to provide a specific instance of musical-political contestation in contemporary Hong Kong, but more importantly, to introduce the recent political tensions between Hong Kong and China through such sonic aversions. How can Chinese ladies, singing and dancing in public to oldies that they enjoy, become an issue worthy of political controversy? How do the inharmonious affective responses to these unsolicited performances demonstrate the intertwining processes of envisioning, constructing, and disciplining sonic territories on private, public, and governmental levels?

Here, I explore the politics of sonic and physical territorialization in this particular locale through the axes of tensions across overlapping borders: the political divergence between new immigrants, pro-China citizens, and anti-China protesters; the generational and cultural gaps that manifest themselves as antithetical aesthetic and musical tastes; and, most importantly, the Hong Kong–China border, which is physically distant, but nonetheless maintains an implicit, haunting existence in the central area of this politicized, postcolonial city. In the dense urban space of Hong Kong, these performances act as microcosms in which such emerging, existing, and entangling borders can be traversed and theorized through competing sounds and

movements. What can these dancing ladies tell us about the political labor of negotiating cultural assimilation, multilingualism, and sonic/physical urban space, so as to complicate our conceptions of political art as either propaganda or resistance? How can sounds discipline, yet at the same time be disciplined by, physical and political movements?

In this political climate, where citizens became concerned about interventions from the Chinese government on local politics, contemporary modes of listening are not just passive aesthetic appreciations or emotional immersions. Instead, the mechanisms for the public circulation and reception of popular music and sounds are intricately weaved within the larger fabric of mass political engagement, in which the communal nature of social media, forums, and parodic journalism offer a powerful counterpart against official political narratives. This new mode of listening—with an acute political awareness—blurs the boundaries between receptors, mediators, and creators, as the act of listening is not only accompanied by political commentary, but is itself a form of political engagement. To illustrate this, I turn to the digital world of Hong Kong in Chapter 2 to explore how a short excerpt in a popular song was memefied and politicized within the past decade.

When this song was first released in 2009, the excerpt—a wordless vocalization merely seconds in length—was seen as a showcase of the singer’s technical proficiency; yet, in recent years, it is ridiculed as a “fucking howl.” What triggered this turn from admiration to abjection? By analyzing several of the many methods that this excerpt has been memefied, I sketch out how this network of memetic comprehensibility is formed through inspecting the listening strategies that each reveals. By deliberately choosing a wordless vocalization, I argue that, to study

contemporary modes of critical and creative musico-political engagements in Hong Kong and beyond, we have to not only analyze the semantic content of lyrics, but also examine the mechanisms of circulation and reception.

In both chapters, then, I foreground how the mechanisms of circulation and broader social structures are important in understanding how musical undesirability is manifested through the affective modalities of ridicule and dissent without overt political textual content. If popular music is really a commodity that global conglomerates produce for the numbed mass to uncritically consume and indulge in, then these moments of musical disjuncture, failure, and undesirability that I explore in this thesis suggest that micro-resistance might still be possible. Or, in response to the pessimistic but dominant narrative that Hong Kong popular music is dying—or already dead—I hope to point out places where listening is still very much alive and thriving, albeit in affective modalities other than straightforward enjoyment and fondness. This thesis might then be read as my attempt in articulating the inherent tensions within overarching narratives, both of an entire scale and type of musical production, and of one of its specific local manifestations.

Let us enter the intriguing world of these frivolous discords.

## CHAPTER 1

### DANCE

Wandering around Mong Kok—one of the most densely populated and noisiest urban districts in Hong Kong—is a multisensory feast. The impenetrable walls of timeworn residential buildings not only trap excruciating heat, humidity, and pollutants during the summer, but also amplify the numerous sonorous entities on these busy streets. Chattering pedestrians try to make sense of each other. An ongoing chorus of engine sounds from buses, minibuses, and taxis is interspersed with aggressive honks. Electronics, cosmetics, and jewelry shops play music and offer the comfort of strong air conditioning to lure potential customers inside. Street food vendors rhythmically hit their woks and yell both in Cantonese and in English to compete with each other. The low-rumbling air conditioners in the residential apartments above leak condensate water onto the heads of unsuspected passersby, creating dripping sounds that only they can hear in their skulls. Seemingly never-ending road constructions add periodic piercing drills to the mix. But for some, these are merely acoustic backdrops.

For more than a decade or so, groups of middle-aged ladies gather on Sai Yeung Choi Street to add joyful singing and dancing to this cacophony every weekend. On temporary street stages demarcated only by laying plastic cloth on the ground as carpets, they set up microphones, electronic amplifiers, and sound systems to perform oldies that they like, usually attracting an audience of both tourists and local, mostly-male citizens around their age. The noisy acoustic backdrop seems to make no impact on the spectators' ability to enjoy themselves, as these impromptu audience members sometimes dance alongside, or even on stage with the ladies. In a



video interview on this phenomenon, British tourists Heidi and Jess make the following comments:

Heidi: I think it was really enjoyable. We both liked it. It's very happy, like, very lively. It's really nice.

Jess: (nodding in agreement) Yea, nice to see on a night out.

Heidi: It's nice that there's this more Hong Kong tradition and, like, it being a tourist attraction.

[Heidi dances along, while Jess takes a video of the ladies.]

Heidi: We wanna dance with them! People do what they do.

Jess: And it's Hong Kong. (Feicung 2017)

For tourists, encountering these public dancing and singing performances by locals in an urban district can be a pleasant surprise. The fact that these middle-aged ladies are enjoying their weekends in each other's company, while providing entertaining spectacles for others on these busy, crowded streets in an international metropolis seems, logically, to inform their conclusion that this a distinctly Hong Kong tradition that should be preserved. Singing and dancing ladies in "Asia's World City"—what other cultural phenomenon can be more intriguing, endearing, and inoffensive than this?

These tourists might, then, be surprised to learn that their opinion lies in the minority. If they took a moment to look at the facial expressions of passersby in their surroundings, they might notice that many local citizens loathe these performances: from eyerolls and headshakes of disapproval, to covering their ears with their hands, to making regular noise complaints to the authorities. Not only is this type of performance not generally considered a "Hong Kong tradition," but is identified by many as a mainland Chinese one that should be eradicated. On June 28, 2015, a violent outbreak occurred in response to these dancing ladies between anti-China and pro-China groups, the former of which saw these musical performances as a sign of

cultural and political infiltration by mainland Chinese immigrants. The *TIME* article on the next day succinctly captures this incident:

Trouble began when so-called “localist” groups—many members of which argue for Hong Kong’s independence from China—staged a rally in the densely crowded Mong Kok district of central Kowloon to protest the presence of mainland Chinese street musicians. The performance of Mandarin-language songs in a Cantonese-speaking, working-class area like Mong Kok is regarded by many localists as culturally and politically provocative. (Plucinska 2018)

The subsequent arrest of five of the protestors by the Hong Kong police demonstrates that this phenomenon, to many local citizens, is no laughing matter. In this chapter, I explore various reasons behind the aversion that such seemingly innocuous performances have provoked, as well as the nature of these antagonistic responses. By examining the different ways that this phenomenon has been discussed, portrayed, and received by journalists and internet users, I argue that the hatred towards these dancing ladies—known colloquially as *dama*—should not merely be read as a musical counterpart of the existing political conflicts between Hong Kong and mainland China. Instead, I propose that the public distaste towards them should be understood in terms of various boundaries—political, sonic, class, generational, and gendered—that are being envisioned, maintained, and traversed. My aim is to demonstrate that “*dama* dance” is not an easily identifiable, singular genre. Instead, it exists as a constellation of related and mutually influential activities and social issues, each highlighted by different journalistic accounts. What can these *damas* tell us about the performative political labor of negotiating cultural assimilation, multilingualism, and sonic-physical urban space?

### *Singing and Dancing Damas*

It all started in 2000, when the Transport Department of the Hong Kong government began to implement a pedestrianization scheme (TD, n.d.). Under this scheme, specific streets in nine busy urban districts—including Mong Kok—are designated as pedestrian-only zones to encourage walking as a means of transport, as well as to improve the safety and comfort of doing so. Although pedestrians, which in Cantonese literally means “walking people,” lie in the center of this policy, many street performers and buskers took this as a welcoming gesture from the authorities to start regular, stationary public performances in these zones. Among them are these dancing ladies, who took Sai Yeung Choi Street, a part-time pedestrianization zone in Mong Kok, as their stage.

Such public dancing is not a new phenomenon arising out of the availability of space. Instead, many citizens immediately associate it with an activity popular in mainland China: square dancing. The trend of middle-aged ladies—known colloquially as *dama* (literally “big mother,” but connotes an “auntie” more than one’s own mother)—who dance to loud music in public areas around mainland China has caught the attention of journalists both in the country and around the world. Having lived through the Cultural Revolution in their formative years, the large-scale unemployment in the 1990s, and the Chinese government’s fitness promotion initiatives in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, *damas* see group dance as an affordable form of exercise and entertainment that reinforces a sense of safety through practicing collectivism (He 2014). The influences of their close bonds and collective actions extend beyond music and dance: as the *Wall Street Journal* reports, even

fluctuations in the global gold market can also be partially attributed to their unpredictable group purchasing power (Yap 2013).

Dama dance, in its Hong Kong manifestation on Sai Yeung Choi Street, does not completely resemble the this mainland Chinese square dancing culture. Instead of playing songs through loudspeakers as a background for group dancing, damas in Hong Kong tend to focus on singing and treat these pedestrianized streets as some sort of public karaoke. When they dance, it is rarely as highly choreographed and coordinated as square dancing, but more like what one sees on a dance floor. However, despite these apparent differences, they are connected by Hong Kong citizens by virtue of their participants' identities: dama dance, as its name suggests, is primarily seen as an activity performed by female immigrants from mainland China. They are identified as such for two reasons: they are thought to perform Mandarin songs instead of Cantonese ones, and they often speak Cantonese with a Chinese accent. This, in turn, politicizes such public performances by connecting them with existing political tensions between Hong Kong and mainland China.

Decades before the 1997 handover, Hong Kong citizens have already been anxious about transitioning from a British colony to a Special Administrative Region of China, despite the latter's promise of preserving the city's autonomy for fifty years. Brian Fong (2017) argues that the officially proclaimed "One Country, Two Systems" model—under which Hong Kong's autonomy is supposedly preserved—in reality, functions under two contradictory nationalisms. On the one hand, in light of the rising antagonisms among Hong Kongers against mainland China, the Beijing government increasingly adopts an "assimilationist state-building nationalism" that aims at eventual economic, ideological, and political subsumption of Hong Kong. On the

other hand, Fong observes that Hong Kong citizens turned from the pre-1997 Hong Kong identity formation—a mostly *positively* constructed identity based on its unique socioeconomic, cultural, and political status—to a recent peripheral nationalism that defines itself mainly as a *counteraction* against China. To Fong, this shift is indicative of the public awareness of the blatant political interference that Beijing is asserting in the local political sphere. As he puts it, mainland influence in local elections “is now an open secret,” which was what triggered the Umbrella Movement in 2014.

This distrust of mainland China led to the rise of anti-China localism as one of the dominant political ideologies in Hong Kong in the recent decade, which Yun-chung Chen and Mirana Szeto succinctly refer to as “the anti-China path” (2015, 38–39). Protesting against pregnant Chinese women who come to Hong Kong to give birth, Chinese tourists, and Chinese immigrants, this anti-China localism defines itself on a rejection of anyone and anything Chinese that tries to seize resources in Hong Kong (Yip and Yick 2014). It labels Chinese people as “locusts”—pests which come in swarms and eat all crops on their way—due to “their moral and cultural inferiority to the Hong Kong ‘humans’” (Chen and Szeto 2015, 451n8). This oppositional stance against mainland China, along with the continuous search for other individuals, institutions, and things that could be marked as Chinese, though most obvious in the political sphere (i.e. the Chinese government and pro-Beijing local politicians), also exhibits itself in linguistic, cultural, and musical dimensions.

### *Complicated Flows*

In the case of these singing and dancing ladies, the hatred that some local citizens have towards them stems from a fear of the infiltration of cultural practices

brought by this demographic influx, and the longing for returning to the urban soundscape before these immigrants appeared. This fear of Chinese immigrants across the border reveals itself to be a fear for this inflow to become stasis, settling into continuous and never-ending reality. In other words, this is a fear of this cultural “contamination” becoming the future status quo, rather than of any individual events of sounding. These ladies’ public creation of sounds and display of movements as none other than singing and dancing, then, has a significant consequence. Previous outrage towards border-crossing Chinese nationals tended to be related to the in- and outflow of commercial goods and daily necessities (Laidler and Lee 2014); but if musicking is not essential to human survival, then the hatred towards these *damas* is perhaps not so much a noise complaint, but a fear of these immigrants not only *taking root* in Hong Kong, but so comfortably so that they *even* have the leisure to sing and dance. This adds a cultural dimension to the common fear of the “mainlandization” process that is thought to eventually change the core values and identity of Hong Kong (Yan 2015, 94).

A documentary video titled “Chinese-style Street Dancing Is A Nuisance” (2015) by OutFocus Productions—a studio formed by students from the University of Hong Kong after the Umbrella Movement—captures the protest mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Although this incident was framed by the localist protesters as a response to these *damas*’ performances, many of the slogans that they shouted and displayed were not explicitly about singing or dancing. Among them were anti-China Communist Party (CCP) (“Down with CCP!” and “Rubbish commies”) and anti-Chinese immigrants (“Barbarian Chinese [Shina] go back to China!”) using the controversial term “Shina”: this was a derogatory name used by the Japanese on the

Chinese during the Second Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s and has, since then, become obsolete. However, “Shina” has been revived by some Hong Kong localists amidst increasing political tension between Hong Kong and China. By telling these ladies to go *back* to China, these protestors assume these damas of being new immigrants from mainland China.

The middle part of this video shows local police officers using pepper spray on the localist protestors during their physical confrontation. A protestor is heard warning fellow anti-dama participants: “So that’s why the Hong Kong police [*gong’an*] is here, to protect [the damas]!” The use of pepper spray here stirs up disturbing *déjà vu* of similar scenes of police control of anti-Beijing protestors during the Umbrella Movement in 2014—the use of umbrellas as makeshift shields to prevent pepper sprays was precisely how this movement got its name. As Michael Adorjan and Maggy Lee (2017) point out, the relationship between the Hong Kong Police Force and local citizens after 2014 has become increasingly frail as the former is seen as mere puppets, or “streetcorner politicians” (Muir 1977, as cited in Adorjan and Lee 2017), “criminalizing and controlling dissent” for the pro-Beijing local government to maintain its authority. This is why anti-dama protestors refer to them as *gong’an*: the name of the mainland Chinese police force, here used as a derogatory term. As such, it is not only that citizens, and these protestors in particular, see dama dance as a political issue, but also that the police implicitly confirms this in the form of disciplinary measure they choose to use.

The behaviors of localist protestors, the pro-Beijing counter-protestors (who are seen in the video waving the Chinese national flag), and the law enforcement thus all seem to point to this being a political matter about multicultural clashes between

Chinese immigrants and locals. However, when we turn our focus onto the damas, things are not that clear. In an interview, local street singer Ching Ching states that, like many locals, she initially assumed that these damas seldom perform local Cantonese songs (Beauty Exchange 2018). But as she began actually listening to them and avoid “seeing them through colored lenses,” Ching Ching realized that they have been performing many Hong Kong classic hits all along, but that people—herself included—simply never bothered to stop and listen. A cursory glance at the numerous related news coverage and interviews confirms that, although some damas do sing Mandarin songs, many in fact perform songs from the golden era of Hong Kong popular music by local artists like Anita Mui. In generalizing an activity with a diverse demographic to a particular group because of repertoire and perceived accents, while maybe strategically indispensable to raise public awareness, effectively blurs other sonic nuances by simplification. The difficulty in identifying who these damas “really” are lies in the semantic ambiguity of the term “new immigrant” itself (Yip and Yick 2014, 161): at what point is one no longer considered “new,” and thus an irreconcilable other?

### *Sonic Territorialization*

To be sure, many local citizens interviewed in these news segments do not specifically complain about the language in which these damas sing, or where they are from. For the residents living upstairs, their request is simple: they just want tranquility at home. As a significant number of comments on these videos show, many see the problem of damas as primarily adding to the area’s existing noise pollution. Mong Kok is in the Yau Tsim Mong district, which, out of the eighteen



districts in Hong Kong, has the highest percentage of its population exposed to over 70 decibels of traffic noise alone (EPD 2015). Adding to this are dama performances in pedestrianized zones, measured by various news outlets to be 96, 101.5, and even 115 decibels, which can cause permanent hearing damage within a minute (“Damas emerge” 2017; Cheung 2018; “Dama singing reaches” 2015).

That this pedestrianization scheme, which supposedly improves urban environment, led to this much noise from street performers is a curious outcome, because, although the Transport Department does not state this policy as related to noise reduction, the Environmental Protection Department does (EPD n.d.). However, despite the government’s initial expectations, the pedestrianization time on Sai Yeung Choi Street was actually shortened three times in 2010, 2012, and 2014, and as of July 29, 2018, was ended completely (Ng and Kao 2018). These changes were in response to the noise complaints, media accusations of governmental inaction, as well as the acid bombs dropped on this street from above in 2008 and 2009—which criminologist Ding-kee Lai speculates are linked to the offender(s) being emotionally disturbed by prolonged noise exposure in the area (Ng and Law 2018; “Criminologist” 2009). What makes these sounds so powerfully experienced as invasions?

In *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence*, Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan argue that musical violence is not limited to political torture and governmental disciplinary measures, but is more pervasive in our everyday lives than we tend to think. Specifically, they caution against the oversaturation of popular music, in part “driven by the fetishization of individual rights” in creating one’s preferred acoustic environment, which has “destabilized the relationship between public and private space.” To them, much of popular music’s bass-heavy sonic profile

renders it particularly susceptible to such misuses, in which seemingly innocuous “[music] preferences become sites of conflict within and between communities, between state and citizenry, between hegemonic and subordinate blocs” (2009, 186).

They present this telling thought experiment:

You are in a building which you must occupy at certain times. While there you are randomly assaulted by music over which you have no control. You do not know when it will start—it may be when you are asleep—nor when it will end. It could last seconds or days. It may be a type of music which you actively dislike. Or it may be of a form which you like, but come to detest through repetition. You are powerless. This scenario is not drawn from the experiences of ‘detainees’ in Iraq or Guantanamo Bay, but from ordinary homes. We are all detainees of the soundscape. (163)

They posit that music, due to its intimate associations with “finely discriminate markers of social difference such as taste, class, race, age and gender,” has immense potential of being utilized, on the one hand, as weapons to inflict sonic violence and, on the other, as triggers of reciprocal (often physical) violence in response (163). Against prevalent assumptions of the inherent “good” in music, then, Johnson and Cloonan conclude that music should not merely be considered as one of the components in contemporary urban soundscapes, but “potentially one of its most ubiquitous and damaging” (174).

This damaging effect multiplies when it concerns the space that one calls home. Sophie Arquette notes how, as societies become increasingly mobile and city spaces are opened up for fluid interactions, seemingly intangible sounds have, ironically, come to “represent the physical presence of home territory” (2004, 164) precisely because they do not have to “follow the same rules as physical space” (166). This encapsulates the fundamental tension at play here: the local government might conceive of a fluid, interactive, and open pedestrian space in Mong Kok, but this must

take into account the fact that numerous citizens' residence and area of activity superimpose—both sonically and physically—upon this space. People are not necessarily resisting against the idea of having a diverse community co-exist in their sonic *space*, but things become more delicate when it concerns their *place* of dwelling, especially if some individuals, consistently and regularly, produce earsplitting sonic intrusions only for the enjoyment of their in-group without concern for those also occupying the same common space, effectively performing the social exclusion of residents from their own homes through sonic means.

### *Commoning and Exclusion*

Such social exclusion through self-enjoyment manifests itself in yet another dimension. A video assignment by college student Sum Yi Lam (2018), titled “Mong Kok Street Tyrants,” recently became viral because it unveils the economic transactions that underlie these street performances. In this video, Lam goes undercover with friends as buskers on Sai Yeung Choi Street, but was informed by certain individuals that they have to follow the “rules of the street”: no one can sing on this street unless they pay a certain fee, and that this is an open secret. Passersby advise the students that trying to compete with these groups is “not their game to play.” What is supposedly the opening up of a common space as enabled and envisioned by a governmental policy, in turn, establishes new rules over time that results in the closing off of this urban common through economic exclusion.

In *Rebel Cities*, David Harvey argues that the common is not a stable entity but “an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or

physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood” (2013, 73). This is created by the social practice of “commoning,” in which individuals and communities create an urban space “within which all can dwell.” However, Harvey notes that such commons are “easily be capitalized upon” and, ironically, “radically diminishes rather than enhances the potentiality of commoning for all but the very rich” (75).

Who can dwell on Sai Yeung Choi Street? Electronics shops invite people by their open doors with strong air conditioning; salespeople from telecommunications corporations urge people to join their cell phone plans; upstairs, working-class wage earners try to have a good night of rest in the tiny apartments that they rent with a large proportion of their salary; and then, there are these damas, who sing and dance for each other’s enjoyment, while monopolizing the physical and sonic space for economic benefit at the expense of others’ sonic wellbeing. Though not resembling the level of global and institutional privatization with which Harvey is concerned, the crux of the problem here is nonetheless still related to and depends on the transaction of one’s power over others’ inability of defending their own private sonic enclave. Harvey asks, “who has the right to the city?” Here, we might ask, “who has the right to the city soundscape?”

Taking yet another twist, Yip and Yick (2014, 160–61) remark that “new immigrants” are usually treated as an “equivalent term” with low-income groups to form what they call “the Other of *homo economicus*” under neoliberal localism—individuals who live “outside of ‘normal’ Hong Kong cultural and economic life.” These economic, sonic, and political conflicts about the dama phenomenon must then be read beyond the level of localized anti-China localist activism, but instead considered on the governmental level in terms of what societal issues these

stakeholders collectively face. Even citizens living in districts with higher average household income, though exempt from these specific sonic contestations, nonetheless endure the same high living cost in the city due to real estate hegemony. Kwok-kui Wong (2014) argues that these unaddressed basic issues span across population policies, immigration policies, land resource and economic distribution, urban planning, as well as Hong Kong's political relationship with mainland China, all of which we should urge the government to resolve but are veiled by the surface discords in whether localism should progress as a politics of nationality or of class oppression.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

The sounds that different actors produce are far from mere components that weave into a common urban sonic fabric. Instead, each sonic action must be understood in terms of the relative goals and aims that the participants intend and the corresponding results, especially in terms of the social process of commoning. In this urban space, who is producing sound for commoning, and who is not? Which sounds aspire to this commoning goal, and which ones (intentionally or not) prove to be exclusionary?

One final thought: if we see noise as sound being out of place, then where is the correct place for these dancing ladies? For the protesters, their request for these ladies to "go back to China" seems straightforward enough, and supposedly solves both the immediate sonic problem but also addresses the root of these localized issues of assimilation and immigration. However, even if these ladies do return to China, are their performances actually welcomed? The answer is no.

In fact, immediately after this violent incident between anti-China and pro-China groups broke out, many Chinese internet users actually sided with Hong Kongers, posting comments like “These big mamas deserve to be beaten! Can’t you dance in your own hometown? You just have to go to Hong Kong to dance—isn’t this provocation? Best if one of them is beaten to death as deterrent!” and “This is the consequence of not obeying the law, breaking local customs, disturbing local environments, and not trying hard enough to assimilate into local society.” Hong Kong internet users noted this as a rare Hong Kong–China alliance over the mutual hatred and distaste over dama dance among the younger generation. Simply put, there is no place in the public sphere, whether in Hong Kong or in China, where postmenopausal ladies are welcomed to display how they move their bodies in ways that are considered unattractive and embarrassing for the young.

This case of musical aversion then reveals itself to be increasingly complicated as we peel its layers off one by one. This sonic battle between damas and residents, then, is not simply a matter of political affiliation, citizenship, volume, or aesthetics. Rather, these discords reflect concerns that the public has towards governmental policies regarding space, land, property, population, culture, and more. The rage that people have is not only against the sights and sounds of these unsolicited performances, but the fact that the rise of immigrant population has not been accompanied by a simultaneous effort in reconciling issues of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and other pressing social problems that are triggered, confirmed, and sustained by our daily sonic and kinaesthetic engagement with the cityscape. This is an *amplified* version of people’s daily numbness towards housing privatization, extremely high real estate price, and the fact that many have no choice but to live in

sonically and visually polluted districts like Mong Kok. The story of dama dance, as it is still developing today, might be more complicated than we might think.

## CHAPTER 2

### HOWL

When Hong Kong singer G.E.M. released “A.I.N.Y.” in 2009, it became an instant hit. Quickly garnering critical acclaim, this romantic ballad about a bad breakup became her signature piece and remains in her regular repertoire, ten years after its release. Part of its appeal lies in the vocal power G.E.M. displays: the most climatic moment happens right before the final chorus, where the music pauses momentarily, and G.E.M. belts out a wordless vocalization as an expression of her despair. This phrase, only a few seconds in length, stands in stark contrast to the softer vocal style in the rest of the song. When this song was released, this excerpt was seen as a showcase of her technical proficiency due to its high register and explosive intensity.

However, this three-second vocalization became memefied in 2014. Notably, internet users transliterated it onomatopoeically into four Cantonese characters *jijejije*, and ridiculed this vocal style as *gaugiu*, “fucking howl.” These textual manifestations of the excerpt caught on and entered the common digital lexicon for deriding G.E.M.’s distinct singing technique, as well as the aesthetics of strong belting considered to be popular in mainland China. Apart from stage performances, then, this excerpt lives numerous second lives as a constellation of related memes that showcase different memefying strategies. What triggered this turn from admiration to derision? My focus here is on how we can study the politics of listening when lyrics are irrelevant, or simply unavailable. In light of the recent political upheavals in Hong Kong, studying how people listen to a wordless vocalization carries significant explanatory power and offers a window to explore musico-political interactions through technology.



Such memes could be dismissed simply as senseless wordplay, or if we take the violent power of anonymous crowds seriously, *ad hominem* cyberbullying. Indeed, from the sustained fat-shaming of singer Joyce Cheung to the deliberate propagation of the false death news of singer Ken Hung, the activities of some Hong Kong internet users, like those from other parts of the world, could be effectively described as trolling (Leaver 2013; Tkacz 2013). While this theory has its merits, it nonetheless considers these actions as somehow meaningless and anarchic. Instead, I take another approach to this phenomenon. I see internet users as genuinely engaging in political critique through creating, disseminating, replicating, and adapting these memes related to G.E.M.'s notorious howl.

In other words, I want to ask how we can productively listen to this virally circulated howl. I argue that this cluster of memes related to the howl must be read in light of their layered sonic and textual re-inscriptions. Specifically, these sonic and textual entities perform the political labor of hatred and ridicule by functioning, perhaps inadvertently, as didactic and pedagogical apparatuses. In other words, by circulating textualized sounds, one is effectively practicing, sustaining, and promoting specific strategies of (virtual) listening with certain political effects.

I hope to achieve the following in this chapter. First, I rearticulate that memes are not a monolithic category of digital genre, but consists of numerous moving parts; moreover, memes that combine sound and text are among the ones that deserve more scholarly study. Second, memes as well as their scholarship currently demonstrates a primarily anglophone tendency, but by focusing on memes that function through sound and text in a city like Hong Kong, we can articulate the specific cultural and linguistic nuances in their mechanism. In other words, we can interrogate how we

think memes work by looking at examples from non-English speaking places. Third, I suggest that memes are not individual entities, but rely on connections, allusions, references, and interactions with other memes in order to be comprehensible as a meme. If that is the case, then our scholarship needs to reflect the networked nature of this digital genre.

### *Memes as Networks of Memetic Strategies*

What is a meme? Meme scholar Limor Shifman asserts that “[a] core problem of memetics, maybe the core quandary, is the exact meaning of the term” (2013, 366). Biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) is usually accredited as having originated the concept of meme in his book, *The Selfish Gene*. Considering memes as “small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, which are spread from person to person by copying or imitation” (Shifman 2013, 363), Dawkins explains how cultural practices and trends are not only capable of self-replication and mutation, but, crucially, also “[respond] to evolutionary pressures, including selection, competition, and extinction” within given communities (Ross 2017, 289). Susan Blackmore clarifies Dawkins’ concept by stressing that the imitation that defines memetics must be taken in the broad sense: “Everything you have learned by imitation from someone else is a meme” (1999, 6).

Since then, the internet has borrowed and popularized this concept, albeit to mean a much more specific digital genre. Meme scholars carefully point out that, although they both display self-replication, mutation, and competition, what people colloquially refer to as internet memes decidedly diverge from “serious” memetics in two important ways: first, internet memes, thriving in the perpetual hype of the

present, have a shorter “shelf life” than that the ones studied in memetics (Knobel and Lankshear 2007, 199); second, unlike more abstract and general cultural phenomena, the “object of analysis” in internet memes tends to be considered as relatively identifiable, or at the very least nameable (Shifman 2013, 364).

This seeming nameability of internet memes can be understood in two ways. When one speaks of “a meme,” one might refer to an individual meme (one specific image file), or a memetic trend that consists of numerous possible instances of derivation (say, the Y U No Guy meme). The latter relies on what Sean Rintel calls templatability:

The memetic process is a product of the human capability to separate ideas into two levels—content and structure—and then contextually manipulate that relationship. Templating is the practical, methodical and material process by which this contextual manipulation is expressed. (2013, 256)

In the Anglophone world, this is usually achieved by superimposing new text on existing (though the corpus is always expanding) image macros enabled by the availability and accessibility of online meme generators. Moreover, the overlaid text is often written in formulaic text structures called “snowclones” (Whitman 2004; Pullam 2004). Only by relying on these somewhat standardized image-text combinations can memes be recognized as memes.

This templatability has a crucial ramification: memes should always be considered as multiple. On the one hand, their very existence is the direct result of rearranging, readapting, and rearticulating preexisting memes and image-text templates. On the other hand, even when we only focus on how one particular meme is created, shared, and reposted, each of its reiterations renders new relationalities in its local context, a process that is set into motion by its surrounding paratextual

materials—captions, comments, likes, view counts, and so on. Memes are therefore multiple on two levels: they rely on other memes to function, and they are incessantly recontextualizable. The inseparability of memes, both from each other and from their contexts of (re)presentation, implies that attempts in foregoing a thorough analysis of one single meme as a distinct entity will likely be an ineffectual, or at least incomplete, endeavor.

It is thus imperative to attend to the digital, cultural, and social landscapes from which memes are created, circulated, and mutated to unravel how networks of memetic materials arise. Due to practical limitations (most prominently, in length and in size) for effective viral circulation, internet meme is a succinct digital genre that captures—akin to taking a multidimensional snapshot—the, say, musical and political issues that a given community takes to be salient for critique in particular moments in time. At the same time, as discussed in subsequent paragraphs, the strategies by which such issues are captured by memes also reveal the dominant communication modalities that thrive in the community. Comprehensibility, replicability, and modifiability, then, are necessary but insufficient factors for memes to be successful; relevance, both in terms of subject matter and in approach, is just as important.

As expected when studying any cultural practice, theories of memes are not universally applicable—despite the seemingly globalized nature of the internet. For one, the image marco memes discussed above, while prevalent both in Anglophone cultures and in meme scholarship, remain uncommon in Hong Kong. In fact, “meme” does not even have a Cantonese equivalent (one simply uses the English word “meme” when referring to this type of image-text memes). However, this is not to suggest that the concept of memes or memetic content is nonexistent in Hong Kong.

Instead, we must expand our analysis of the memetic landscape from the memes' immediate surroundings to the local digital culture in which they are situated, so as to delineate the specific memetic practices that best represent this broader context.

Among various distinctive properties of Hong Kong meme culture, I focus on two. First, compared to Anglophone meme cultures, it focuses more on identifying strategies of (re)creation, rather than naming specific templates themselves. This does not imply that templatability is not applicable; rather, templatability here must be reformulated: rather than particular combinations of image macros and textual snowclones, it refers to mutually referencing methods, techniques, and practices for creating new materials. In other words, what is templatable in Hong Kong is *how* people make memes. This is why, in this chapter, I will examine memes as networks of memetic strategies.

For instance, the Chinese term for digital parody is *egao*, which literally translates to “malicious deed/doing.” Defined as “an online-specific genre of satirical humor and grotesque parody circulating in the form of user-generated content” (de Seta 2016, 227) in which its “satirical and ludicrous effects” are “usually achieved through ‘recontextualization’ and by ‘treating a low subject with mocking dignity’ and, conversely, ‘handl[ing] serious situations in a trivial manner’” (Gong and Yang 2010, 12), *egao* foregrounds the participants' pernicious intentions, rather than the content or format that the product takes (be it videos, images, or words). *Egao*, by qualifying the verb *gao* (doing/making)—which already has connotations of mischievousness—with the adjective *e* (malicious), groups together a limitless range of creative practices by the very fact that each “playfully subverts a range of

authoritative discourses and provides a vehicle for both comic criticism and emotional catharsis” (4).

Second, in contrast with the ocularcentricity in their Anglophone counterparts, memetic strategies in Hong Kong are more textually oriented. Without the visual grounding of identifiable image macros, common local memetic genres—including viral essays, viral keywords, onomatopoeic posts—are often just words, thus foregrounding strategies of textual manipulation through listening and “sound writing” (Kapchan 2017), making Hong Kong meme culture especially suitable for studying how sound and textuality interact in digital genres. In the following sections, I explore some of these sonic strategies through a network of related memes which coalesces around G.E.M., her singing voice, and the changing political situation in Hong Kong in which she is situated.

### *From Vitality to Viscosity*

Entering the music scene with the self-titled album *G.E.M.* (2008) at the age of 17, this young singer-songwriter immediately caught the eyes and ears of the local audience. Compared to the softer singing style used by most contemporary Hong Kong singers, her powerful voice led the media to introduce her as a “17-year-old king of impressive vocals,” “17-year-old king of singer-songwriters,” and, most prominently, “little diva with huge lungs.” This final moniker makes reference to, as well as presents her as the latest successor of, the generation of “divas with huge lungs” active in the 1980s—the Golden era of Hong Kong popular music—who were all superstars in Hong Kong, East Asia, and ethnic Chinese diasporas renowned for their superb vocal techniques.

G.E.M.'s success was quickly proven at Ultimate Song Chart Awards (USCA). As the youngest and first underage female awardee, her explosive voice—exemplified in “A.I.N.Y.”—was celebrated as a new force in the industry, like the cry of a newborn baby—pure, innocent, yet powerful—providing hope amidst the prevalent narrative that “Hong Kong popular music is dead” (Chu 2015, 48). This narrative is often credited to James Wong, who faults three technologies that has led the genre to dwindle: the popularity of karaoke led to songs with a narrower vocal range, the reliance on autotune software led to the decline of singers’ ear-training, and music videos shifted the industry’s focus to visual marketing through which, Wong laments, “music became cultural products for eyes to watch” (2003, 173).

Media portrayals of G.E.M. at the time seem to exemplify Wong’s concern for this burgeoning visual emphasis. They focused on the curious juxtaposition between, on the one hand, her extraordinary lung capacity and vocal technique and, on the other, her young age, as indicated by her lisp, youthful features, and the fact that she just graduated from high school. By framing her as a prodigy, such portrayals echoed the sense of juvenile vitality in her stage name G.E.M., an acronym for “Get Everybody Moving.” However, this emphasis on her large lungs, supposedly as the reason for her powerful vocal delivery, carried sexual undertones. Lungs are, of course, behind breasts. She was often referred to as “impressive person” (*jauliu zi jan*, literally “person who possesses good qualities”): a Cantonese double entendre originally used for talented or knowledgeable individuals, but also frequently used as a euphemism for female celebrities with voluptuous bodies. Thus, G.E.M.’s voice was marked by textual re-inscriptions in deliberate conflation with her physical body and vocal mechanism.

Public opinion on G.E.M. began to diverge in 2012, when she criticized USCA in a YouTube video (G.E.M. 2012). In turn, several hosts at CR2, the radio station that organizes this award, suggested that she has overlooked the support and publicity that CR2 has given her in her formative years, leading to the popular assertion that G.E.M. does not “remember the origin of the water she drinks,” a local idiom about remaining thankful of others’ nurturing and providence when one prospers in life. It later turned into a general criticism towards her disregard of Hong Kong as the place—the “water source”—that nurtured her formative years and paved the way to her subsequent fame in mainland China. Her young age was no longer seen as a positive trait, but indicative of her immaturity, solidifying her new image as a young brat who does not know her *place*: both in terms of her neophyte status within the industry, and her origins from Hong Kong.

Two incidents intensified and politicized this public distaste. In an essay about the younger generation, G.E.M. disapproves of the anti-government sentiment in Hong Kong society and wishes good luck to the Beijing-appointed Chief Executive C.Y. Leung (Tong and Luk 2013, 8–9). Her vocal support for this publicly denounced politician was allowed the public to map her onto the pro-China side in the increasingly polemic Hong Kong-China political relations. (“G.E.M. Criticized” 2013). In 2014, G.E.M. got second prize in *I Am a Singer*, a singing contest show in China for established singers. Since it aired, she gained over three million followers on Weibo, while her belting technique and powerful vocal delivery, once again, became the primary focus of the mainland Chinese audience and media, resembling the initial perception of her in Hong Kong.



At the same time, however, her image in Hong Kong reached a new low. All local newspapers—regardless of their stance on the Hong Kong–China issue—attacked the singer’s disregard for her Hong Kong origins and her egotistical personality (Hojanho 2015; “Becoming Notorious” 2015). Along with her career shift to mainland China, her seemingly ever-expanding ego gained her the nicknames “International G.E.M.” and “Universe G.E.M.” Later, her name was simply replaced by the similarly sounding Cantonese character *zoeng*, which means “slime.” It is then combined with existing derogatory labels for Chinese people—as mentioned in Chapter 1—like “locust,” resulting in names like “Crazy Locust Slime.” The stark contrast from vitality (Get Everybody Moving) to viscosity (Slime) could not be more telling.

Here, we begin to see how templatability offers endless recombinant potentialities. Although these nicknames are not necessarily considered memes, they nonetheless offer an aperture into discussing memetic strategies and characteristics. With each new iteration, existing templates are mutually overlaid to create a constantly developing network of reinforcing comprehensibility. Each of these new semantic bonds, in turn, strengthens the referential network, making it more difficult for cultural outsiders and especially non-Cantonese speakers to fully grasp, even with elaborate explanation. Instead of attempting a comprehensive overview of this specific cultural landscape, then, I turn to these memetic strategies.

### *Jijejije, Acoustic Palimpsests, and Pedagogic Strategies*

As G.E.M.’s public image became contentious, the famous vocalization in “A.I.N.Y.” was isolated as a derogatory nickname for her. Since Cantonese is a tonal

language, internet users could onomatopoeically represent the pitch relations in this vocalization by eight gibberish characters:

Character:	兒	夜	姨	野	以	夜	儀	野
Meaning:	child	night	aunt	wild	by	night	manners	wild
Pronunciation:	ji4	je6	ji4	je5	ji5	je6	ji4	je5

This practice of transliterating sung text into another language by ear is called *soramimi* in Japanese (literally, “air ears”). This conversion from sound to text enables the phrase to be readily insertable into internet posts and comments as typed text with a much more efficient replicability than embedding an audio track. This process of turning a wordless vocalization into writable text also renders the former into a nameable entity, encapsulating what Ana María Ochoa Gautier identifies as “the moment that ensonification is accomplished through inscription into writing” (2014, 42). The ensuing term, often shortened to *jijejije*, is documented in *The Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities in Hong Kong* as a metonym for G.E.M.:

*Jijejije* originated from an emotional, expressive cry towards the end of the song “A.I.N.Y” by singer G.E.M. and is one of the most notable examples of “onomatopoeic posts.” Because it is very pretentious, many internet users jokingly refer to it as “song-shouting” and “fucking howl,” and these phrases became synonymous with G.E.M. Since G.E.M.’s participation in *I Am a Singer* in 2014, *jijejije* has been described as the act of seeking attention and recognition by shouting. (“Jijejijejijejije” n.d.)

There is a caveat: unlike the songs that *soramimi* is usually used on, the original here does not consist of lyrics that has semantic meaning, but only vocables. In contrast, the writable sonic “nonsense” that it is converted to nonetheless carries unintended yet relevant connotations: “child” can be read as referring to her immaturity, “wild” to her explosive vocal style, “manners” to her rudeness, and “aunt” to her fashion sense—she was mocked for dressing like a dama since entering

the mainland Chinese market. When read together, this sonic re-inscription curiously resonates with prevalent critiques of G.E.M. as well as of the mainland Chinese that she has since then been associated with. This, in turn, makes the writable substitute an even more effective means of ridicule than the mere isolation of the wordless vocalization itself, in which semantic meanings return in haunted ways.

Martin Daughtry (2017) introduces the metaphor of “acoustic palimpsest” to describe layered sonic re-inscriptions. He asserts that palimpsests, on the one hand, reveal the uncanny intimacy between multiple texts and, on the other, exhibit the transgressive violence that acts of overwriting and silencing predicate. Viewed through this lens, the imposition of *jijejije* over the original vocalization could be thought of as deliberate textual reinscriptions that function as minimal units for the digital propagation of ridicule and distastes. What is being propagated here, however, extends beyond such textual relationalities and intentional reinterpretations; importantly, textual memes like *jijejije* serve as a pedagogical tool for spreading specific strategies of listening with clear political motivations.

In one of the early forum posts in which *jijejije* emerged, user “Tiunaamo” (2014) simply typed “*jijejije*” without any explanation, and asked whether other users can “hear” the sound of this transliteration. Minutes later, several users already figured out what this refers to, while other users attempted to transliterate other parts of the song by the same method of *soramimi*. In about an hour, user “Cup Noodles without Cup” posted a transliteration of the entire song. Finally, “Zedaalofu” connected this thread to G.E.M.’s political stance, arguing that, despite the number of awards she has received, her support of the pro-Beijing Chief Executive “is already morally corrupt, a crime worthy of the death penalty.” This user then embeds a

YouTube video of a relyricized version of “A.I.N.Y.,” retitled “G.E.M.T.T.T.” (Get Everybody Moving to the Trash). The comment ends with the phrase, in large, bold, red font, “The ambush operation has be escalated,” signaling that the online ridicule and mockery of G.E.M. will intensify.

I want to raise four points here: First, this kind of arduous parodic practice is not uncommon on these online platforms, where the motto of “doing frivolous things seriously” underlies much of the humor. Second, these are usually collaborative efforts, which means that one has to understand the post, discover the strategy of listening that it entails, and then replicate its strategy as participation. The imaginative listening that is required to comprehend *jijejije* is thus an entrainment of the ear to allow the pattern-searching brain to realize its creative potentials. Third, by foregrounding the circulation of memefication technique, one relates these specific sonic reinscriptions of “A.I.N.Y.” with the popular digital genre called “onomatopoeic posts.” This kind of posts, utilizing the tonal nature of Cantonese, consist of onomatopoeic words that evoke an audio or audiovisual image. Here, we see how the network of memetic comprehensibility is continuously reinforced through the propagation of strategies of listening. Fourth, the different memetic strategies of *soramimi* and relyricization are combined here to achieve a snowballing effect within a single forum post. This exponential affective escalation, from seemingly innocuous mockeries into an intimidation of death, epitomizes the violent transgression that these acoustic palimpsests can bring forth.

*“Fucking Howl,” Timbre, and Technique*

Apart from *jijejije*, which almost applies exclusively to G.E.M., her singing style also acquired a new name: “fucking howl” (*gaugiu*). As an adverb and a curse word that literally means “penis,” *gau* can be readily combined with most verbs to create a cluster insult. Through this templatability, *gaugiu* is connected by its linguistic formation to other political memes like *onggau* (“fucking stupid”) and *gauwu* (“shopping”). The choice of *giu*, which means to howl, to yell, or to scream, instead of the contextually appropriate *cheong*, which means to sing, is a deliberate caricature and monstrification of G.E.M.’s singing technique. Unlike *jijejije*, which merely imitates the sound of her signature vocalization, “fucking howl” is a criticism of both her technique (means) and the resultant vocal timbre (ends)—the latter which can be applied to other singers with a similar sound. On the one hand, this strong belting style is seen to diverge from the soft, breathy sound of most other Hong Kong singers and, on the other, it is believed that this timbral aesthetic caters the mainland Chinese audience, who is thought to be spectacle-loving without much care for artistic balance. “Fucking howl,” then, serves as a strategy of capturing timbre.

Observing how timbre often “proves resistant to inspection and intervention,” Anthony Gritten considers timbre as the onset of sonic perception: it is “what begins sounds,” “what is heard first” (2017, 532), and—following Jean-Luc Nancy (2007, as cited in Gritten 2017, 538)—what “opens up” the listening ears. This accounts for timbre’s peculiar temporality in relation to and distinguishing it from the sonic event:

[T]imbre is the means by which sound presents itself, by which sound is made present, and how sound’s futurity comes about. . . . It is mere experience, insofar as that phrase means anything, hence the fact that recognition of musical sounds is based centrally on their timbre. Timbre points to its own future, spirally back into itself, into the attach

portion of its spectral envelope. Lacking duration, evading measurement, it is the start of sound, and can only start again and again. (535)

Timbre tends to get forgotten and covered over by sound objects and listening regimes (a.k.a. musical discourse), despite the fact that it is actually timbre that forces the ears to engage with music in the first place. (538)

Considering timbre as initiation allows us to consider how it colors our auditory experience of the subsequently constructed sound object. “Fucking howl” is the conscious framing of a specific timbral expectation before the listening event takes place—if it ever does at all. It operates by magnifying, capturing, and then generalizing the performing moment, extracting the timbral quality of a particular instance of G.E.M. singing “A.I.N.Y.” into a writable, circulatable, and abstracted concept. To Gritten, timbre works because it is “unpredictable” and “surprising” (538). What happens when it becomes overly—or even entirely—predictable? “Fucking howl,” rather than being used to describe actual performances, becomes a malleable proxy, a substitute of (the need of) listening: people always-already know how she (as well as other mainland Chinese singers) is going to sing.

Isabella van Elferen (2017) contrasts timbre’s sublime ineffability with its material production. While the former often falls into the perennial search for suitable adjectives, the latter could be studied and re-presented by numbers, figures, and physical attributes of both sounds and their generating mechanisms. To theorize timbre, asserts van Elferen, we have to embrace this “timbral paradox” by acknowledging the simultaneity of timbre’s immaterial and material components. By foregrounding timbre, “fucking howl” assumes its material, physiological foundations: a particular kind of singing technique, produced by a particular body. Here, we can recall that the initial attempts by the media and the public to rationalize

G.E.M.'s exceptional voice was by emphasizing her physical attributes, namely the size of her lungs and the implied size of her breasts. When her belting technique turned into a “fucking howl,” however, this material emphasis also acquires the immaterial dimension of musico-political aversion: the idea that only mainland Chinese singers produce these kinds of (bad) sounds, and that only mainland Chinese audience finds these sounds to be pleasant or consider them to be singing at all.

Shawna Ross (2013) attributes the rising popularity of memes to their successful combination of frivolity and amateur intellectualism: it is precisely by ridiculing its subject that satirists and meme sharers—showing that they get the joke—demonstrate and reaffirm their knowledge and inclinations. In the case of “fucking howl,” it is precisely by mocking this particular vocal style that one reestablishes one’s ability in distinguishing between tasteful and tasteless artistic judgments. As Hong Kong singers, journalists, and the public begin to normalize using “fucking howl” as a catchall critique of the aesthetic decision of the mainland Chinese popular music industry, we can observe the metonymical substitutions and imaginative associations between vocal technique, political affiliation, and market hegemony through this strategy of capturing timbre (“In Support of” 2015; Bitkiu 2015; Tsang 2015; Loud 2014).

### *Concluding Thoughts*

The memetic strategies I explore in this chapter exemplify what Deborah Kapchan (2017) calls “sound writing,” in which the practice of “writing *about* sound,” which sustains the subject-object binary, is replaced by “writing *sound*”: “the writer listening to and translating sound through embodied experience, the body

translating the encounter between word and sound, sound translating and transforming both word and author” (12). Furthermore, if we consider the constellation of memes surrounding G.E.M. and her vocal style as intimately interconnected and multiply templatable, we can observe that the immense potentialities that come from sound writing, especially in its digital, memetic manifestations.

Knobel and Lankshear argue that online memes can be used to carve out specific “affinity spaces,” in which members can both communicate and reaffirm what they share “by semiotic nods and winks to those ‘in the know’.” The flip side of the coin, however, is that this practice is by definition exclusionary, since “[outsiders]’ to these spaces will often have difficulty seeing the humor in or point to many of these memes” (2007, 217). This is not a structural flaw: in the memetic processes examined in this chapter, such exclusivity is precisely the point. The linguistic gymnastics used to create these memes, which require native proficiency in Cantonese as well as sustained engagements with local culture, are not just randomly selected tools that happen to be available for constructing clever memes; rather, the possession of these very tools (for creating and understanding these memes) constitute an essential part of these participants’ political identities. In other words, these memes give them opportunities to prove, time after time, that they are truly from Hong Kong.



## CONCLUSION

If I have to choose a sentence to summarize this thesis, it would be this: people are still listening, but in captivatingly new ways. In response to the continuous worries that the musical landscape of Hong Kong is withering in light of China's rise in soft power (Chu 2013, 19–20), we can productively turn our focus onto the continuous vitality exhibited in citizens' listening practices as ways of navigating this political context. Specifically, I have chosen to concentrate this project, on the one hand, on how musical aversions have recently been amplified and how they intersect in digital media and, on the other, on the elusive quality of their musical targets. To conclude, I highlight several threads that I believe to weave throughout this thesis.

The targets of aversion—be it political, sonic, musical, or otherwise—are increasingly elusive. Or, put another way, a wider variety of interrelated but distinct events, entities, and phenomena are pragmatically grouped in what Yip and Yick (2014) call “equivalent terms.” In such linguistic groupings, affective responses frequently become foregrounded, and easily overshadow any sustained analysis of the supposed targets of critique themselves. Particularly, the digital platforms on which affective responses are circulated afford and even encourage such modes of engagement by their characteristic prioritization of brevity and efficacy. In response, I have attempted to approach these aversions by studying both this affective foregrounding as well as by delineating wherever possible their layers of complexities. It is my belief that our negative reactions deserve as much in-depth inquiry as what we consider to be noble and desirable.

In the context of contemporary Hong Kong, Wing-sang Law (2014) asserts that the city's current political uncertainties necessitate a critical reevaluation of how

localism has come into being through its intimate historical connections with Hong Kong's colonial experience. The miscellaneous aversions based on simplified rejections of Others that dominate the current political discourse, to Law, should be replaced by "healthy forces" that search for a historical subjectivity through disentangling our complicated past, as well as its accompanying "affective structures." The site where the active circulation and modification of these structures can be most easily observed is none other than the internet in the overlapping platforms of digital journalism and social media, which is where I chose to begin my share of theoretical disentanglement.

Because I am a digital native, a screenager (Rushkoff 2006), and a member of the networked public (boyd 2008), digital platforms has been my primary avenue and source of musical and political listening for a considerable portion of my life. My mode of online cultural engagement—which uses the multi-channeled attention (Crawford 2009) required in the fragmented listening practices in the age of big data (Koutsomichalis 2016)—has led me to explore ways of understanding my experience other than the analysis of cultural artefacts like lyrics as texts. In particular, I value "taking frivolous things seriously," a Cantonese digital idiom that points the act of studying seemingly silly and trivial things, because these attempts often reveal multi-layered machineries of humor and derision in the recombinant culture of the internet. At the same time, however, I do not wish to overstate the impact of these seemingly novel ways of being-in-the-world as unprecedented technological feats.

David Buckingham (2008) cautions against two theories of technology that he considers to be "wishful thinking": technological determinism—that technology has inherent qualities which exert unilateral effects on the society—and its opposite—that

technology is value-free, and that its effects are entirely determined by how society uses it. Instead, he focuses on the interdependence and co-development between technology and the society, maintaining that one must strike a balance between these two extremes. This is especially relevant when accounting for how the internet influences our behavior: despite the persistence of both technophilic and technophobic predictions, internet usage is actually quite banal. As Buckingham describes, “most young people’s everyday uses of the Internet are characterized not by spectacular forms of innovation and creativity, but by relatively mundane forms of communication and information retrieval” (14).

Things might change less than we think, but attuning to the subtle ways that they do is paramount. This is to say that, returning to the context of popular music, while songs might remain our primary unit of appreciation, the affective net that spirals out of each song takes increasingly diverse configurations that, in turn, change how we think about sonic objects themselves. To be specific, one must not overstress the novelty of the emergence of the “fucking howl” meme constellation or the virulent critique and media coverage of dama dance. These kinds of ridicule and distaste, though noticeably magnified due to the networked culture of digital platforms, predate social media and has been the staple of grassroots production of social commentary for decades. What is more important is the extent to which such ideas are “spreadable” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) in the digital world by boyd’s (2008) “invisible audience,” as well as the specific and ever-changing forms that they take.

The enthralling world of frivolous discords, then, invites and awaits our continuous, meticulous contemplations.

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