

Popular Culture in Hong Kong After the National Security Law, 2020–2022

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Chapter 1

New Reality, New Communities, New Identities

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1 New Reality, New Communities, New Identities

Wailou Ceoinyun 圍爐取暖 Huddling Together Around a Stove for Warmth

The 2 years after the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) on June 30, 2020, were long and dreary by any definition. As they came to the end of their dreams for democracy, Hongkongers had to learn anew their relationship to the city and how to live a normal, if not happy, life in the suddenly altered reality. The saying, “*wailou ceoinyun* 圍爐取暖 (to huddle together around a stove for warmth),” entered the popular lexicon and became a catchphrase in conversations. Originally used negatively to describe small, exclusive circles for mutual political or financial benefit, it had come to be redesignated as a kind of positive communitarianism. In a society torn apart by political differences, when overt criticism of the government or support for alternative political causes could bring the National Security police to one’s door, and when neighbors and family members were encouraged to report on each other’s political improprieties, understandably, many people tried to find refuge among the like-minded. As many of the old institutions that had defined the everyday life and values of the city succumbed under the new law, there was a need to find new ways to restore a sense of civil society and social belonging. The notion of “huddling together,” reflects this effort to create closeness and revive communal spaces in the midst of recriminations and loss.

Even though many traditional media and groups had shut down because of the NSL, new kinds of communities were also formed. Many different social media groups were created where large numbers of individuals could gather virtually instead of at physical meeting places. Several YouTube channels quickly gained prominence and functioned to sustain the intellectual and collective space of the city. A couple of reality shows from ViuTV, a new television platform, managed to capture the zeitgeist of the period and by fulfilling certain social needs, generated an immense response and conversation in Hong Kong. The synergy created by the many different groups and organizations sparked the beginning of 2 years of cultural innovation and regeneration.

The Losses

Government figures showed that by January 2021, 10,277 persons had been arrested for their participation in the 2019 protests. Among them, 2820 had been charged and 1158 had been indicted. The longest sentence for the convicted was 12 years. By February 2022, 166 persons had been arrested for violating the NSL. A hundred of them had been charged.¹ At the same time, the Census and Statistics Department recorded a net outflow of 75,300 persons from mid-2020 to mid-2021. In 2022, 60,000 more emigrated from the city. Hong Kong's total population shrank from about 7.5 million in 2019 to 7.19 million by the end of 2022.²

In 2021, close to 60 large and small civic, political, and community associations, professional and student unions, and international and local NGOs were pressured to disband or move out of the city. These included the Amnesty International's Hong Kong office; Wall-Fare, a local prisoners' rights organization; the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions; and the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, a pro-democracy advocacy group initially founded to support the students of the 1989 June Fourth student democracy movement in China, and later known for organizing annual commemorations in Hong Kong of the Tiananmen massacre; etc. Numerous grassroots political and community organizations that sprang up in Hong Kong's two-decade-long democracy struggle also broke up. They had once been places for not just political discussions and organizing but also community mutual aid and social gatherings. The loss of these groups spelled the end of civic activities in Hong Kong.

The implementation of the NSL also resulted in dozens of opposition politicians being jailed or disqualified from public office. Many judges were cleared off the bench. Many retired; others were reassigned. Pro-democracy teachers and professors lost their teaching contracts. Books with "sensitive" contents or written by pro-democracy activists and politicians were removed from public library shelves and schools. Even though there was not an overt ban, many books on taboo topics or penned by "problematic" writers were no longer available for purchase in the major bookstores.

News media considered critical of the government shutdown one after another. Several editors and journalists were arrested and prosecuted, charged under the new NSL for collusion with foreign powers, promoting secession, or fanning hatred of the government. However, long before the implementation of the NSL, Hong Kong's flamboyant media had already been reigned in. Mainland interests had started to take over Hong Kong's major media soon after the "Return" of Hong Kong to China in 1997:

Chinese businessman Wang Jing became the largest shareholder in Asia Television in 2000, Ku Zhouheng bought up the daily paper *Sing Pao* in 2014, media tycoon Li Ruigang took over the majority of shares of the dominant broadcaster Television Broadcasting (TVB) in 2015 and Jack Ma, CEO of e-commerce giant Alibaba, bought up the largest English-language daily paper in

Hong Kong, the *South China Morning Post* in 2015, among other high profile cases...

The actual owners of the media company, including TVB (Hong Kong's primary television station), 星島日報 Singdao Daily, and the Hong Kong Economic Journal (信報 Xin Bao), are now all members of the local or national Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Beijing saw to increase Chinese investment in Hong Kong's media. By the end of 2017, about 40% of Hong Kong's primary media was controlled by the Chinese government or Chinese stockholders.³

In other words, "Media ownership in Hong Kong is largely concentrated into the hands of a group of businesspeople sharing the same basic interests of pleasing or at least not provoking China."⁴ Hong Kong's media had been rendered toothless, even becoming mouthpieces of the ruling power.⁵ The disappearance of Hong Kong's famously boisterous print and media culture had significant implications for the continued flourishing, not just of civil society but also of local culture, as Baat-Maau 八貓 points out,

Hong Kong's media had for a long time, carried out a "*surrogate democracy function*" in place of the city's lack. They provided a venue for the discussion of politics and current affairs, transmitting public opinion, and acted as government watchdogs. After Hong Kong's Return, China immediately began to tame Hong Kong's media.⁶ (Original in English in italics.)

The closing of *Apple Daily* 蘋果日報 *Pingguo jatbou*, one of the last remaining and the most prominent oppositional voices in the city, on June 24, 2021, was deeply mourned by the Hong Kong public because it signaled the beginning of a new level of intolerance and repression. On the last night of the newspaper, a large crowd congregated outside its headquarters, shining their cell phone lights at the offices, shouting their goodbyes and gratitude to the staff inside. Long queues of people waited patiently in front of newsstands around the city for the delivery of the last edition of the newspaper early the next morning. By 8:30 AM, all one million copies printed were sold out. *Apple Daily* was the first media platform to fold as a result of the NSL. As one of the most-read news media in Hong Kong, *Apple Daily*, also known for its exhaustive coverage of local entertainment and pop culture, had an important place in the city's daily conversations and stories. By the time *Stand News* 立場新聞 *Lapcoeng Sanman* decided to shut down in December of the same year, people were saddened, but no longer shocked. When *Citizen News* 眾新聞 *Zong sanman* also announced its termination a couple of weeks later, they were numb, understanding this continuously narrowing civic space had become the new reality.

At the same time, the once beloved Radio Television HK (RTHK) was "restructured." The public broadcaster, established in 1970, was known for thoroughness and objectivity in its current affairs and news programs, their effectiveness as a government watchdog, as well as for the high quality of their educational

and cultural programs. The RTHK's flagship program, the news and current affairs show, *Hong Kong Connection* 鏗鏘集 *Hungcoeng zap*, which began broadcasting in 1978, underwent major revamping. Not only were a large number of the editorial staff and journalists purged from the station, but all the episodes of the program prior to 2021 were scrubbed from RTHK's online archive and from its YouTube channel. This multiple award-winning program had been reduced to reporting on innocuous issues, such as government tree-planting schemes, recycling, or other government-sponsored social and cultural programs, many produced by sub-contractors. The loss of these media platforms meant diminished space for rational discussions of social and political issues.

It is not surprising that news analysis, current affairs programs, and political satires would be considered sensitive in the new Hong Kong. However, even certain cultural and educational programs were deemed unacceptable. A series of programs called *RTHK Talk Show* that hosted nightly discussions by academics and public intellectuals on subjects like Philosophy, Literature, History, Society, and Science and Technology were terminated without explanation, and apparently without forewarning the presenters. Despite the academic nature of the discussions, these late-night shows were surprisingly popular. They were all canceled as if intellectualism was an affront to the new political regime.

***Wailou zeong zisik* 圍爐長知識 Huddling Around a Stove, Cultivating One's Knowledge**

For a brief period of time, before its own demise, *Stand News* attempted to fill in the cultural and social, if not psychological, lacuna created by the shutdown of *Apple Daily*. It launched a podcast and YouTube series that offered a variety of content, from political and social analysis to discussions of popular culture. Called *Wailou zoeng zi sik* 圍爐長知識 (huddling around a stove, cultivating one's knowledge), the program demonstrated another crucial dimension to the new kind of communitarianism, which was to extend the public sphere and to encourage *zoeng zisik* 長知識 (cultivation of knowledge).

Just before its closure, *Stand News* started to broadcast a series of three short documentaries on its YouTube channel: *Farewell to 2021*, that recorded the experience of Hong Kong people in the first year after the enactment of the NSL. The first of the series, "2021 *Gaaitai: Neimun waan hou ma* 解體: 你們還好嗎 (Dissolutions: Are you still alright?)," interviews the organizers of several grassroots community groups, humanitarian organizations, and professional unions that disbanded in the year. The second film, "2021 *Gamjyu zi nin* 禁語之年 (The Year of the Forbidden Words)," on censorship enumerates the books, movies, and the different kinds of media and cultural productions taken off public circulation, and tallies the words and phrases that could no longer be uttered in public in the city. The final film, "2021 *Syu dong* 樹洞 (Tree Hollow)," is a reading of letters from readers sent anonymously via secure social media, describing their experiences and emotions during the difficult year. These documentaries, together with *Stand News'* YouTube channel and website, were all wiped from the internet when it terminated

operation after the editor, assistant editor, and a number of the trustees (including the pop singer mentioned in the Introduction, Denise Ho) were arrested.

As the major news and media platforms disappeared, many less formal, grassroots *gwan zyu zou* 關注組 (interest or concern groups) sprang up in their places. However, most of these were resolutely apolitical. These groups were organized through social media, through which members connected with each other, sharing information and opinions, allowing those with similar interests to *wailou*, even as COVID rules made actual social gathering impossible. A Facebook group on the topic of picnicking unexpectedly exploded in popularity as the use of the government contact-tracing app, “Leave Home Safe,” became mandatory in the city. Through almost 3 years of COVID control in the city, this app doubled as a vaccine pass required for using the public transportation system or entering stores, restaurants, and all public or large facilities, such as markets and shopping malls. Where large parts of the city are connected by arcades, malls, and interior walkways, this essentially meant movement around the city required official permission and submission to constant surveillance.

The picnic Facebook group was originally organized by a few friends who resisted the use of the government app. Instead of going into the malls or to restaurants, the group advocated dining *al fresco*. Members of the group exchanged information about the best picnic spots around the city, made recommendations for socially responsible take-out businesses (*loengsam siu dim* 良心小店 small businesses with a conscience), and introduced picnic paraphernalia and know-how.

Many other Facebook groups popped up one after another on many different aspects of life in the city. There were a few evaluating “Two-dish meals”⁸ from different takeout places, especially after sit-down meals in restaurants were banned. Some were organized around a single food item, the best *shumai* in the city, for example. Organizers of these social media groups often took care to explain that their aim was simply to *wailou* with people with similar interests and concerns. These groups might seem silly. However, in the midst of collective despair as Hongkongers witnessed, not only the defeat of their political aspirations but also the rapid erosion of their way of life under COVID, they provided an important sense of community and social, if not emotional, support.

A popular philosophy study group, Corrupt the Youth 好青年荼毒室 *Houcingnin touduk sat* (a reference to Athenians’ charge against Socrates), quickly gained prominence, taking over an important intellectual space left vacant after the cancellation of RTHK’s talk shows. The group was established in 2016 by 13 graduate students and academics in Philosophy. On their Facebook, they explained, “The founding aim of the group is to ‘to huddle around a stove for warmth,’ and to spark a sense of existence among ourselves.”

Corrupt the Youth started posting talks and lectures on YouTube in 2017. However, it was not till 2020 that they started to actively expand their online activities. By 2021, their YouTube channel had accrued over 90,000 subscribers. The group’s activities were multifarious. Aside from public lectures, on their YouTube channel, they offered a variety of programs, from formal discussions and presentations to interviews, live shows, games, and even dramatic skits. They

posted lectures and discussions on podcasts; they presented essays on their website; they published their writings in several volumes of *Corrupt the Youth Reader*. (The *Corrupt the Youth Reader* Vol. 3, which includes chapters on artificial intelligence, nationality, democracy, and political struggle published in 2020, was removed from public library shelves in November 2021.) They offered online courses and hosted intellectual and cultural events around the city. They had several sold-out live shows and even participated in a dance performance. Gradually, the group also branched into discussing different aspects of the city's popular culture. They provided analysis of films and dramas, interviewed pop singers, lyricists, actors, and directors of current popular TV shows and films, etc. The members also often collaborated with other Hong Kong-based YouTube channels, even those with content totally different from theirs.

Sei-go 四哥, a member of the group, spoke of their desire to create community through their different endeavors: "I have always hoped that Corrupt the Youth is more than just the ten or so of us, and that [the audience members] would hang out with each other, go paint pictures or sing and form a real community."⁹ Another member, Gam-zai 甘仔, pointed out that after the protests, "[t]he social bonds that we built are fundamentally disintegrating." Groups like theirs functioned to assuage the feelings of powerlessness, because "the feeling of powerlessness comes from the feeling of aloneness."¹⁰

Indeed, one of Corrupt the Youth's most popular programs was their Friday night live-streams, which often lasted for 4–5 hours each time, during which, members, sometimes special guests, would sit together to discuss anything that struck their fancy, ranging from the silly to the profound. There was usually much drinking, heated arguments, joking, laughing, and swearing. Tens of thousands tuned in every Friday night to join in, laugh along, and occasionally learn new things or be inspired by the conversations. The journalist, Leung Jyut 梁越, explains the importance of these programs:

[Many Hongkongers] do not want to feel alone anymore. They are also looking for truth...In Corrupt the Youth's live streams, the members would go off on anything. Sometimes they would seriously discuss philosophy. They'd talk and drink. When they get drunk, they might get angry or cry, revealing their true personalities. Many audience members have shared with them how much their discussions resonate with them. Corrupt the Youth has filled the emptiness in their souls.¹¹

By March 2022, Corrupt the Youth had become so popular that they were referred to as the boyband of philosophy.

After the devastating protests and changes under the NSL, Sei-go believes the entire cultural terrain of the city was facing collapse. As far as communities are based on these cultural and historical foundations, he said, "We are forced to save ourselves," through the reinvention of a new culture, new stories, and new identity.¹²

***Zei mung* 追夢 Chasing Dreams: Self Re-creation**

Singing or talent contests are stories of self-invention. To the contestants, these are opportunities to *zei mung*, to chase his or her dream, to become someone. The audiences feel as if they are witnessing and are even a part of the birth of something significant—a new star. In this context, one of the most talked-about television reality shows in these years was ViuTV's flagship program, the *King Maker* 全民造星 *Cyunman zou sing*, an annual talent competition show first aired in 2018.

ViuTV was the most significant new presence in Hong Kong's entertainment landscape in the last years of the 2010s because it was the biggest in scale. Established in 2016, it was part of a large streaming media corporation that provides (OTT) streaming services in Asia and the Middle East. However, the local ViuTV, a free broadcast station in the city, produces programs specifically for the Hong Kong audience. This new station has broken up years of near monopoly of the city's entertainment industry by Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB). Unlike TVB, which has been diligently cultivating the mainland audiences since CEPA in 2003 (see Introduction), ViuTV professed no ambition to expand into the Chinese market and had no obvious political affiliation or leaning. Its youthful image, local-centric productions, use of diverse and new talent, and simply being an alternative to the much more established and now, Chinese-owned, TVB, made it an appealing contender for the city's viewing audience, especially younger Hongkongers.

Hong Kong has a history of talent shows. In fact, some of Asia's top artists, especially from the 1980s and 1990s, came from Hong Kong's talent contests. In these early contest shows, usually only the finals would be broadcast. Recent contest shows, however, have been produced in the format of a reality show in which the audience witnesses and experiences vicariously the transformation of ordinary individuals into stars. The competitions of the earlier generations were about uncovering "real talent." These programs operated under the assumption that the truly gifted would be "discovered," in a fair system in which everyone was judged equally and rewarded accordingly. This kind of story had no appeal to the new generation of viewers in Hong Kong, who had discovered that society could be fundamentally unjust. (These issues will be further explored in Chapter 3.) The producers and judges on the *King Maker* selected those with potential through open auditions and then winnowed the contestants down through rounds of competition while offering them some instruction and training along the way. Sometimes, the "injustices" of the process were deliberately revealed. The best singer might be eliminated; the mediocre performer might get through. Producers could resurrect a contestant they favored, overriding the judges, etc. The show was often more about the "authentic" personalities of the competitors, together with their backstories or personal struggles.

What gripped the audience of *King Maker* was not necessarily the performances, but the narrative of "becoming," especially through the competitors' perseverance through all the discouraging moments and obstacles. Many of the contestants gave up stable jobs to participate in the show even though the odds of winning were low.

Others endured grueling schedules as they tried to accommodate practice and performance while working, often low-paying jobs, to sustain their livelihood.

Much of the show also focused on the backstage drama that revealed the “honest” emotions and “genuine” personalities of the participants. The contestants worked together in teams to plan their performances and learn new songs or dance routines. They had to help and support each other because winning as a team allowed them to advance to the next level of the contest. However, ultimately the contestants had to compete against each other. Many would be eliminated in the advance toward the finals. There could only be one champion. The program often showed how the contestants were torn between the desire to win and loyalty to their teammates. The most emotional moments were when some managed to advance to another level while others were eliminated.

As the viewers followed the participants’ long journeys in the 60 episodes of the first season, they became more and more emotionally invested in them. This was manifested in increasingly heated nightly commentaries and discussions on the show’s social media throughout the broadcast. By showing what many young people were willing to do and sacrifice to achieve their dreams, the program also helped change social attitudes toward them. It was not uncommon, at the beginning of the program, to hear criticisms of the contestants as vain or out of touch with reality, dreaming of being famous instead of seriously earning a living. However, whether successful or not, the contestants gradually gained respect from the viewing audience by their sheer persistence.

At the end of the first season of *King Maker*, ViuTV absorbed a number of the contestants as their own in-house artists. In 2019, ViuTV introduced to the Hong Kong audience two male performance groups, the 12-member idol group, MIRROR, and the four-member, ERROR, all selected from the contestants in the show, including many of the finalists. Many young people found these young men inspiring because they fought hard against immense odds and made real sacrifices for their dreams.¹³ In a survey conducted in 2022 among young people of an average age of 21.7, it was found that even though over 80% of those surveyed said they were not MIRROR or ERROR fans, 84.5% of them said they admired how the members of these groups actively pursued their dreams. Of these, 49.8% agreed that their stories, “encourage me not to give up my own dreams.”¹⁴

When MIRROR and ERROR were first introduced to the general public, however, they were much maligned. No one expected the groups to last, let alone become significant cultural forces in the city 2 years later. The members’ transition from amateur contestants to professional performers began with appearances in yet more reality shows, in which they were asked to play games and perform tasks that were sometimes humiliating, sometimes repulsive, or even terrifying, from walking around in embarrassing clothes to eating unsavory foods like insects or worms, for comic effect. It appeared as if their management was expending as much money and effort in destroying idols as in creating them. In unguarded moments during these games or other exercises, the unedited reactions and facial expressions of the young men in the groups broke through their otherwise constant camera-ready images. In effect, what these shows destroyed was the old Hong

Kong notion of idols—two-dimensional perfections with flawless looks, impeccable behavior, and coached to always make appropriate, if innocuous, statements and responses in interviews. The new idols had real personalities. They had likes and dislikes. They made mistakes, said the wrong things, could feel hurt, or be ill-tempered. They sometimes showed impatience or distraction or looked tired. Audiences felt that they were “real” flesh and blood, troubled by the same hurts, navigating the same difficulties, and trying to survive in the same social and political conditions. According to a report on the effect of MIRROR on young people in Hong Kong:

[Reality] shows like *Tiu gaau nei MIRROR* 調教你MIRROR (Educating MIRROR) also let people see the more personal side of the MIRROR members, including their inner struggles, allowing audiences to understand more how they seek to continue to improve themselves. These all become a connection between MIRROR and their supporters.¹⁵

In a reality where truth was in short supply, these young men laid bare their true selves to the world, and in return, they received fierce devotion and support from their growing fan base.

The Social and Economic Effects of MIRROR Fans

By the end of 2020, MIRROR fever gripped the city. Consumer products that the MIRROR members endorsed or magazines in which their images appeared sold out instantly. Advertisements with their images dominated the city’s public spaces. Their ability to sell products led commentators to marvel at the MIRROR economic miracle in the midst of Hong Kong’s COVID-induced economic recession. Others worried about their fans being taken advantage of.

Unlike the fans of previous generations who collected paraphernalia, participated in the occasional meet-and-greets with their idols organized by the artists’ management, or who waited patiently outside their stars’ performance venues for signatures, the new fans that emerged in Hong Kong, facilitated by social media, took an active role in cultivating their idols. They used their power in numbers to advocate for them.

Indeed, MIRROR fans played an enormous part in the group’s success. They were indulgent in their stars even when some of them were still struggling to perfect their skills. They tolerated flaws while pushing them toward continued growth and innovation. They supported them by buying the goods the group members endorsed, so brands would continue to hire them to promote their products. They rented huge outdoor advertisements, electronic boards, signs on bus stop shelters, and any public surface available for hire, to publicize the group’s work. In this way, Galbraith argues, “this is not to say that consumers and fans are duped or exploited, which assumes passivity and weakness. On the contrary...fans are active and empowered in their support for idols.” Fans comprise a “collective force” or a “collective force of desire,” which can be both economic and political.¹⁶

While this kind of fan culture is common in the world of Korean pop, it was relatively new and was particularly poignant in post-NSL Hong Kong. Even though it seems that the fan's free economic labor was being taken advantage of by corporations, Galbraith argues that the convergence of the market interests of corporations and the fans' emotional interests was mutually beneficial. He calls this a "labor of love:"

[The fans] labor doing what they love and labor for love. Corporations act as apparatuses to capture some of the value generated by fans, who labor for love in relation to idols; idols, fans, and their relations are supported by corporations, which they in turn support.¹⁷

This labor of love cannot be separated from issues of the city's identity. The fans understood that Hong Kong was a very small market with a population of less than 7.5 million. In order to have a viable career many performers had no other options but to cultivate the Chinese market. However, these fans wanted to prove that Hong Kong people could afford to have their own stars. The economic effect of the fans' activities was so significant that it created what was called a MIRROR *gingzai hyun* 經濟圈 (MIRROR economic circle).

By embarking on what might be called "affective activism," the fans' activities turned pop culture from an economic activity to a form of social conversation and transformation.¹⁸ MIRROR and ERROR fan clubs organized events to support their idols, but there were also continuous exchanges on social media among the fan members themselves, discussing topics sometimes beyond their fandom, and supporting each other in their daily difficulties. The performers too often interacted with the fans directly on social media. The relationships were more immediate and more intimate than those between the older generations of artists and their fans. The MIRROR and ERROR fan clubs became important spaces for a much-needed sense of community in a society fragmented by distrust and political recriminations. They offered opportunities to not only gather together but also, to *coei nyun*, to spread warmth and nurture among each other. According to Chan Zi Wan 陳子雲,

Following idols offer the fans emotional connection with each other. The crowds reappropriated public space in the name of entertainment to preserve and continue Hong Kong's unique entertainment culture (including MIRROR's particular position in Hong Kong at the present). Although not every fan is cognizant of this, their collective activities allow each broken and weary soul a new place of reprieve.¹⁹

In a sense, the new idol culture was a form of *wailou* on a societal level.

These fan clubs opened a new kind of civil space in Hong Kong. Ze Hoi Jan 謝愷忻 points out, "these large-scale fans activities attempt to blur the boundaries of reality, allowing fans to connect with society. They are no longer marginalized and invisible. Their activities allow them entry into public sight, to be part of the public culture."²⁰ Organized through social media, MIRROR fans engaged in charity work

and public services in the name of individual MIRROR members they supported, extending the relevance of their organizations to the greater society. For example, they organized clean-up campaigns in the country parks and beaches, arranged for food delivery to shut-ins during COVID, and volunteered at animal shelters. To celebrate their idols' birthdays, they organized festive activities, purchased free rides for the public on various forms of public transportation, and raised money for different charities in the city. Ze describes how the fans extended their influence on the cultural and social life of the city.

[T]he fans attempt to turn social media expression into actual social experiences. At the same time, in the process, they insist on explaining the creation of their organization, asserting their right to criticize and construct cultural ideals, and to participate in influencing social culture.²¹

Through fan activities many became re-engaged in the city, suggesting that these idols not only offered comfort and company through their songs and performances but motivated their fans to become again, full-fledged citizens, not just through their economic participation but also their intervention in the life of the city. Fan activities became a form of social power.

The birthdays of popular idols became alternative, city-wide celebrations, more eagerly anticipated by their fans than any public holiday. Each of the large fan clubs took turns to celebrate their idols' birthday around the calendar in different areas of the city. The bigger the star, the bigger the festivities. On April 30, 2022, tens of thousands gathered in Causeway Bay, jokingly renamed Keung To Bay, after the idol who lived there, to celebrate his birthday. Buses, trams, billboards, digital boards, and every available public surface were emblazoned with Keung To's image. Coinciding with the easing of COVID restrictions after a couple of months of lockdown caused by a particularly virulent wave of infections, ecstatic crowds packed the streets, joined the carnival, enjoyed free rides on the "Keung To" trams, took photos, and reveled in the general festivities. It was a happy family day that lasted into the night. Images of the huge crowds that packed the streets in Causeway Bay were reminiscent of the once familiar scenes of the now-forbidden annual July 1 demonstrations that also used to be held there. Jenkins et al. point out that this kind of "participatory audience" is a form of grassroots mobilization.²² These birthday celebrations had become an alternative civic participation.

In contrast, during the celebration of the 25th anniversary of "The Return" of Hong Kong to China two and a half months later, on July 1, the police closed off long stretches of roads, even whole districts, to the public. Thousands were stuck for hours in traffic jams all over the city amid road closings, roadblocks, and re-routings, with thousands more pressed into overcrowded subway trains, trying to make their way home before the stations were shut down for the day. Social media was filled with angry comments from infuriated commuters. This was all to secure the city in preparation for the arrival of the Chinese premier, Xi Jinping, for the official ceremonies.

MIRROR might not be the best performers in the city, but they were elected by many to be their stars. While Hong Kong people may have been politically disenfranchised, they were able to vote for their favorite performers on *King Maker*. They were of course keenly aware of this irony. The success of the group as new home-grown performers was personal for many Hongkongers, having invested in them symbolic significance far beyond that of any other performers. They felt proud every time the group or the members achieved any kind of international attention. As Hong Kong's status as an international city and its cultural and political relevance in the world began to shrink under China's increasing control, external recognition made many feel the city had not yet completely disappeared. More and more, the new Cantopop audiences in Hong Kong refused the role of mere passive consumers of entertainment content. Even as some commentators had decided that Hong Kong music and cinema were in irrevocable decline, many believed that if they could be resurrected, the city might survive the forces of "mainlandization." The more Hong Kong was able to resuscitate its pop culture, the less likely its culture and identity would be lost. It was also ultimately about rebuilding and remaking a new Cantopop culture that belonged specifically to the city, one that was not created solely by large multinational entertainment corporations, but to a large extent, pushed into prominence by the general public. Large fan clubs boisterously cheered on the new Cantopop performers and groups. Rallying around MIRROR, in particular, had become an important collective project in these years.

In return, MIRROR was steadfastly committed to its audience in Hong Kong and to expanding the local Cantopop scene. They often collaborated with different Hong Kong-based independent musicians and artists, promoting new sounds for the new generation. MIRROR and ERROR represented a new cultural force in the city, leading the way to a broader recovery of Hong Kong's culture. Because they were products of ViuTV, the TVB alternative, they were embraced as local heroes, if not local hope. (See Chapter 4 for further discussion of MIRROR's music.)

Without a doubt, popular songs as commercial products are often created for mass entertainment and consumption. The performers or the cultural industries might not have any particular intention or meaning in their products other than to appeal to their market. A performer's decision to cultivate the Chinese market is often purely based on strategic consideration of where his or her fanbase might be. However, as Maase points out,

[though] popular culture is not produced or controlled by 'the people,' but rather by the culture industries; yet the consumers of such culture have considerable room of action in their individual and collective appropriation as in the actual attribution of cultural value to such goods.²³

The different political tribes engaged in bewildering interpretive battles and semiotic wars, each side rallying behind or promoting their chosen idols and stars while denigrating those from the other side.

Piloting ERROR

While MIRROR is unambiguously an idol group, ERROR is more difficult to define. ERROR was made up of a group of four men, also from among the *King Maker* contestants in 2018. However, except for one or two of them, they were not particularly good at dancing or singing, nor were they all conventionally good-looking. However, they were beloved for their personalities, attitude, wit, lack of inhibition, and comic abilities, all fully on display in their reality shows. They sprinkled slang, suggestive inferences, sexual innuendos, and crass jokes in their conversations, and scandalized the self-appointed moral guardians of society. They mostly made fun of themselves but didn't shy away from disparaging anyone they deemed undeserving of their respect—usually figures of authority or influence who were critical of them. In the world of idol culture, they did seem like an error. They were the obverse of MIRROR, an identity they happily embraced. Their first song was the same as MIRROR's but with different lyrics. MIRROR's song was called, "*Jatmiu gaan*—一秒間ASAP"; ERROR's was called "404." While poking fun at themselves, ERROR parodied MIRROR's "perfection," and even the whole idea of idols.

ERROR's explosion in popularity in 2021 can largely be attributed to the reality show, *ERROR Selfish Projects* *ERROR 自肥企画zifei keiwaak*, produced and directed by the same team responsible for the 2018 *King Maker*, the self-styled Infinite OT Production Battlegroup 無制限OT編集団*mouzaihaan OTpinzaaptyun*, a ViuTV production unit helmed by director, Mike Lau (Lau Lok Hang 劉諾衡), and the screen writer, Mak Ho Fai 麥可暉. *ERROR Selfish Projects* brought much-needed hilarity. However, in all its apparent silliness, the show raised some fundamental issues, not just of the strangeness of ERROR's existence in the world of idols, but how their existence itself reflected the absurdist condition of the city itself. The show created a stir in Hong Kong when it was broadcast in June 2021.

ERROR Selfish Projects opens with a direct reference to the iconic Japanese anime, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a series about a teenage boy charged with piloting a "bio-machine," the "Eva," to fight against the "Angels," an alien force that is trying to destroy the Earth. The ERROR members open the show dressed in the costumes of the anime's characters. In a direct quote of the anime, ERROR member, Ah Dee, is asked to pilot a bio-machine, the "Error," to save the world. (Because of the lack of fricatives in Japanese pronunciation, "Eva" often becomes "e-wa." Cantonese does not have labialized "r." As a result, "ERROR" in Cantonese pronunciation often also becomes "e-wa," a pun of "Eva" in Japanese.) However, Ah Dee resists this mission. Leaving this storyline hanging, the show switches abruptly to a more familiar vein—a game show, in which the ERROR members are to compete against each other for prizes. In the disordered and upside-down world that ERROR inhabits, the distinction between winning and losing in the games is ambiguous at best. Winning and receiving prizes could sometimes feel more like a punishment. (In one of the games Ah Dee received a literal ton of canned beer for winning, which was then filmed being delivered to and overwhelming his family's tiny apartment.) The greatest enticement for them to continue participating in the

games in the show, other than avoiding penalties, was the promise that they would be given resources and assistance to complete a project of their choice, whether it was to make a short film, a short documentary, a music video (MV), or to learn a new skill—things not available to them in their career trajectories.

The games to which the members of ERROR were subjected had preposterous premises and blatantly unfair rules. They responded by trying to outsmart the production team by flagrantly cheating and flouting the rules, which meant their behavior in the show was often unscripted, disruptive, and chaotic. It also means the production team often lost control of the situation to the delight of the show's writer, Mak Ho Fai. Why wouldn't one rebel, he asked, if the rules were meaningless and unfair? He continued,

Think about it. Your opponent is the designer of the game. The referee is also the designer of the game. The natural positioning of the game is one that is tilted against the player. You would be a bit foolish if you play by the rules honestly. Breaking the rules is one thing. Being wrong is another. These are two different things. However, there are people who always link them together. It's a weapon they frequently wield. Whereas, ours is the spirit of 'ERROR x *mouzaihaan* 無制限 (Infinite [possibilities]).'²⁴

While the ERROR members' strategies to thwart the rules were often more quixotic than effective, they created endless comic catharsis for their viewers. If their uncompromising but impotent antics (as futile, for example, as giving the corporate ViuTV mascot, a man in a bear suit, a swift kick) are painfully funny to watch, it is because they provoke in many, a recognition of their own impotence when confronted with the banal absurdities and injustices of everyday life.

The games that form the bulk of *ERROR Selfish Project* accentuate the uneasy balance between hilarity and discomfort. In their previous shows, the ERROR members either worked as a team or took turns tackling difficult or unpleasant tasks with the others cheering them on. In *ERROR Selfish Projects*, they are required to compete against each other. The members try to best each other, not because they want to win, since winning could bring its own headaches, but losing means punishment. The show also constantly tried to sow dissonance among the ERROR members. In one game, they are asked to pick each other out from groups of heavily disguised people as a test of their "true friendship" with each other. While it is a ridiculous premise, when one member fails to identify his teammate, the camera catches the irritation on his teammate's face. Even the name of the show, *zifei* 自肥 (for selfish gains), suggests that it is on some level about negating camaraderie. This show forces the ERROR members to be competitive, devious, and even selfish, situating them in an environment where "truth" is not always true, rules are capricious, and rewards and punishments are not commensurate with effort. The ERROR members' banter back and forth, their self-mockeries and taunts of each other, and the punishments and prizes they receive, while uproariously funny, also leave the viewers unsettled. If MIRROR's glittery and beautiful world is a fantasy

and brings pleasure and relief to the daily grind, ERROR's world feels very real. It is the viciously competitive reality and the poisonous politics of the city writ small.

In the last episode of *ERROR Selfish Projects*, the show returns to the opening storyline left hanging in episode one, when Ah Dee was asked to pilot the "biomachine," "Error." Back in their *anime* costume, surrounded by his teammates, Fatboy, Poki, and 193, Ah Dee is in a surreal, liminal space between the completion of the entertainment in the program, and the end of the broadcast. Ah Dee asks his teammates, "Why do we have to make the program and pilot 'Error?'"

Fatboy: The point of entertainment is purely to entertain—to amuse. It is to provide companionship and comfort.

Poki: These are difficult times.

Fatboy: ERROR is a sign that there aren't many constraints in the world after all.

Ah Dee: But there *are* lots of constraints.

Fatboy: ERROR is a sign that there isn't much pain after all.

Dee: But there *is* actually so much pain that one feels one could die from it!

193: Even in the most painful moment, we can still laugh joyously and deliriously. This is what ERROR projects to the world. This is an ability that everyone needs now.

Poki: It is also an ability you need to have; you are a part of everyone.

The *Infinite OT Battlegroup* has addressed Ah Dee's question in different ways in different shows with different cast members—*Mountain Girl* 美女郊遊遊 *Mei Neoi Gao Jau Jau* (2020), and *Let's Sea* 大海男兒 *Dai Hoi Naam Ji* (2020). Why do something foolhardy, such as trying to generate joy in a bleak reality, or find meaning within absurdities? Why persist in doing something even when the obstacles seem insurmountable and moving forward seem so impossible? Or as in the case of *King Maker*—why insist on one's dream when the conditions are so hopeless?

Like the ERROR members, the participants of all the other *Infinite OT Production Battlegroup's* shows are made to undertake tasks that challenge their self-presumed physical and mental limitations, from abseiling down sheer mountain cliffs to free-diving into the ocean, to eating things that are normally considered inedible. The actors from these shows now all show up to help Ah Dee in his moment of crisis:

Shirley Sham (from *Mountain Girl*): Don't run away from what you see. No matter how powerless you feel, you must keep going, keeping your eyes open.

Ah Dee: Mountain Girl?

Shirley Chan (from *Mountain Girl*): Do not allow yourself to be constrained by the so-called conventions of the battle. Better yourself every day; you will find strength in the end. Wait peacefully and patiently.

- Marco (from *Let's Sea*): To overcome absurdities, you must first accept that absurdities are inevitable.
- George (from *Let's Sea*): Light and reason will always win! This is our belief.
- Ah Dee: *Let's Sea?*
- Phoebus (from *Let's Sea*): Believe in something, because we are the ones who determine the value of things.
- Ah Dee: More and more people I don't know have shown up!
- Fatboy: None of them is just sitting around waiting for doom.
- Poki: Even if you are imperfect...
- Marco: Even if there are people who despise you...
- Ah Dee: Don't run away!
- Phoebus: Even if nothing goes your way, you must remember what you have to offer. Don't negate what you have always believed in.
- Ah Dee: Don't run away!
- Shirley Sham: When you have doubts, ask yourself, why I am here, and what I can do here.
- Shirley Chan: If you still don't have an answer, try again. Never stop trying.
- Ah Dee: Don't run away! I get it now!

Finally, Ah Dee realizes:

ERROR are not the only ones fighting in this battle. As long as one remains in this place, one must use one's own method to fight from within one's position. One won't succeed by oneself. But if everyone does his or her best...

This segment ends with everyone applauding and cheering, while Ah Dee makes an affirmation of collectivity by exclaiming, "*Min-na* (Japanese for 'everyone')!"

This show, especially this last segment, resonated powerfully among its viewers. Immediately after its broadcast, the various social media platforms in Hong Kong were filled with tens of thousands of comments and discussions. *Stand News*, still operating at the time, published the entire last part of the script, verbatim. Many young people loved ERROR because of their improbable existence in a world that valued conformity at the expense of individuality. Moreover, many identified with ERROR because, like them, they too had been designated as aberrations by the authorities in the city, to be disciplined and punished (see Chapter 3).

The *Infinite OT Production Battlegroup* often strove to tell an alternative narrative, especially about the young people in the city, through their programs, whether it was in *King Maker* or *ERROR Selfish Projects*. These programs celebrate their determination and hard work, countering the established view of them as spoilt, useless, and self-indulgent. They asserted that individual effort, supported by the collective, could eventually bring about great things. After the experience of 2019, the message held enormous consolation to those trapped in hopelessness.

The two performance groups, MIRROR and ERROR, rose to prominence for many reasons, but without a doubt, the popularity of their music and TV shows reflected a longing for connectedness in Hong Kong. The song that MIRROR released at the end of 2020, “We are one and all,” for the second anniversary of their formation extolled community, ending with the words: “Whatever tomorrow brings, in this place, I am not alone. I have never been alone.”²⁵ ERROR also pledged in their song, “I Promise” (2021), to give hope, companionship, and love in a broken world:

Oh Oh baby, for all my love, I promise...In this still bustling city but now besieged, who will make mischief with who? In this now voiceless and besieged city, who will make vows with who? Who will keep company with who in this tumultuous dusty world? In this prosperous, but besieged city, who will be decadent with who? In this wordless and besieged city, who will make vows with you? Loving forever, kissing you, kissing forever...²⁶ (Words originally in English in Italics.)

The song’s promise of permanence offered comfort in a year of separations and loss when everything might at any moment disappear. Would this new boisterous pop culture be considered unacceptable and be disciplined one day? Would all the social media groups and programs on YouTube and other online platforms that have offered so much wisdom, encouragement, and companionship in these years be shut down because they threaten the new *status quo*? This uncertainty was expressed by Yau Hawk-Sau 游學修, one of the founders of the influential YouTube channel, Trial and Error (more on this group in Chapter 2). Responding to the news that Trial and Error was the most viewed YouTube channel with creative content in Hong Kong in 2021, Yao wrote on his social media,

We are first this year, but we might not even be on the list next year. We might disappear; we might go out of business. I don’t know how far we can go, but I will do my best before the world comes to an end. *Prepare for the worst and hope for the Best!* (Last sentence originally in English).²⁷

It was partly this sense of the fragileness of what had collectively been created that led to, not only intense support and fandom for the various groups in entertainment but also a general rallying around Hong Kong’s newly re-made popular culture, especially Cantopop, as we will see in the following chapters. It was this collective mission to nurture and protect what was deemed valuable and vulnerable that contributed to a new sense of community in the city.

The disappearance of grassroot groups, labor and professional unions, and rights groups under the new NSL was deeply mourned. However, individuals found new ways to *wailou*, finding warmth and strength among each other. These new networks helped resist the corrosive social fragmentation and sense of hopelessness permeating the city in the years after the protests.

Notes

- 1 Jip Gaa Jeon 葉家潤, “撕裂與鬱結: 從「林鄭語錄」看特首5年任期歸家路 (Tearing apart and causing despair: a look at where the last of the five years of the Chief Executive led through ‘The Recorded Words of Carrie Lam’),” *The Initium*, April 8, 2022, <https://theinitium.com/article/20220409-hongkong-carrie-lam-five-year-term>.
- 2 William Yu, “Hong Kong’s population drops for third straight year while city posts net outflow of 60,000 residents in 2022,” *South China Morning Post*, February 16, 2023, www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3210429/hong-kong-emigration-wave-net-outflow-60000-residents-2022-marking-09-cent-population-drop-3rd. “Mid-Year Population for 2022,” The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Press Releases, August 11, 2022, www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202208/11/P2022081100393.htm.
- 3 Baat-maau 八貓, “扎進清零漩渦的港府: 香港抗疫治理矛盾, 從「中港」到「央地」的模式轉變 (Falling into the vortex of Hong Kong government’s Covid Zero: Contradictions in Hong Kong’s pandemic policy—the changing mode from ‘Chinese Hong Kong’ to ‘a place controlled by Central’),” *The Initium*, February 16, 2022, <https://theinitium.com/article/20220216-opinion-hk-govern-covid-tension-bj?inviteToken=uyHfHoYgdu>.
- 4 Quoted in Macabe Keliher, “Mass protests and the structure of power in contemporary Hong Kong,” *China Review International* no. 1/2 (2019): 1–37, <http://doi.org/10.1353/cri.2019.0000>.
- 5 Joseph Chan and Francis Lee, “The primacy of local interests and press freedom in Hong Kong: A survey study of professional journalists,” *Journalism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 89–105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884910385189>.
- 6 Baat-maau 八貓.
- 7 *Syu dong* 樹洞 (tree hollow) is a popular usage to represent a secure receptacle for one’s secrets or an a trusted person in whom one could confide.
- 8 *Loeng sung faan* 兩餸飯 (two-dish rice) was a culinary phenomenon that appeared in Hong Kong during the pandemic when eat-in service in restaurants was suspended. These are economical prix fixe take-out dinners that allows one to choose two from a range of ready-to-serve meat or vegetables dishes to go with rice.
- 9 梁越 Leung Jyut, “專訪好青年茶毒室: 沉默的一年, 哲學還有甚麼用? (Interview with *Corrupt the Youth*: The silent year; Is there still any use for philosophy?),” *The Initium*, February 9, 2022, <https://theinitium.com/article/20220209-hongkong-corrupttheyouth>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 “八成半受訪青少年欣賞MIRROR ERROR追夢 從男團追夢經歷中產生「共悟感」 增強追夢熱誠 (85% of interviewed youths admire MIRROR, ERROR chasing dreams. ‘Empathy’ toward the boybands’ process of chasing dream, led to increase in passion for chasing dreams),” Breakthrough.org, July 5, 2023, www.breakthrough.org.hk/en/press/八成半受訪青少年欣賞mirror-error追夢-從男團追夢經歷中/.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Patrick W. Galbraith, “Labor of love, on the convergence of fan and corporate interests in contemporary idol culture in Japan,” in Galbraith and Karlin, *Media Convergence in Japan*, (Kinema Club, 2016) 232–264: 253. Galbraith also quotes Marshalls’ argument that celebrities embody audiences and social power, work at an affective level,

- and represent “the potential for societal transformation.” Galbraith argues that although, “[t]here are structural limitations and seldom ‘a clear social movement,’ but Marshall is prescient in connecting the social power of celebrities with politics. One might take this in the direction of a politics of moving bodies, supporting life, and forming new collectivities.” Galbraith, 252–253. See also P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- 17 Galbraith, 234.
 - 18 Anne Allison, “The cool brand, affective activism and Japanese youth,” *Theory Culture & Society* 26, no. 2–3 (2009): 89–111, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409103118>.
 - 19 Can Zi Wan 陳子雲, “2021年的香港人怎樣笑: MIRROR 同 ERROR, 緣何在崩壞時代迷狂全港? (How did Hong Kong people manage to laugh in 2021: MIRROR and ERROR: how did they captivate the entire city in an era when everything has collapsed?),” *The Initium*, <https://theinitium.com/article/20210527-culture-mirror-and-error-hk-new-entertainment>.
 - 20 謝愷忻 Ze Hoi Jan, “‘姜濤灣’及應援活動: 淺記香港公共空間下的粉絲文化 (‘Keung To Bay’ and fans activities: brief record of Hong Kong public space under fans culture),” *P-articles*, May 30, 2022, <https://p-articles.com/critics/2936.html>.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
 - 23 Kaspar Maase, “Popular Culture, ‘Resistance,’ ‘Cultural Radicalism,’ and ‘Self-Formation’ Comments on the Development of a Theory,” in Butler, Mecheril and Brenningmeyer, edits., *Resistance: Subjects, Representations, Contexts*, (Bielefeld, Germany: 2017), 46–7, accessed June 28, 2024, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxrtf.6.
 - 24 Quoted in “無制限OT編集團「理性軍師」28歲麥可暉: 如果你還老老實實地玩, 未免有點笨實 (Infinite OT Production Battlegroup’s rational strategist—28 year-old Mak Ho Fai: If you are still playing the game honestly, you are a bit stupid),” *Next Magazine*, May 18, 2021, archived in [https://web.archive.org/web/20210519111725/https://hk.nextmgz.com/article/2_786791_0?utm_campaign=hknext_social_nextmagazinefansclub&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_content=link_post&\\$web_only=true&_branch_match_id=916679296855033148&fbclid=IwAR2ECb78HreKR65AcZYyIPX-TPFRWX6TjWmCPrGOJqW75XQ-_919izMLwR4](https://web.archive.org/web/20210519111725/https://hk.nextmgz.com/article/2_786791_0?utm_campaign=hknext_social_nextmagazinefansclub&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_content=link_post&$web_only=true&_branch_match_id=916679296855033148&fbclid=IwAR2ECb78HreKR65AcZYyIPX-TPFRWX6TjWmCPrGOJqW75XQ-_919izMLwR4).
 - 25 MIRROR, “One and all,” music by Ng Lam Fung, lyrics by T-Rexx, Music Nation, 2020.
 - 26 ERROR, “I Promise,” music by Kenneth Tse, lyrics by Chow Yiu-Fai, Music Nation, 2021.
 - 27 Trial and Error, “Channel 得個吉 *dak go gat* (The channel got zilch),” December 13, 2021, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xq6ifbX4p10.

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