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Miao Siu Mei MIGNON

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**A Reading on Ultimate Song Chart Awards show hosted by Commercial Radio—
how pop music is being represented in the shows and how it is made**

Miao Siu Mei Mignon

For almost every December during my years working at Hong Kong Commercial Radio (CR), I got very busy with answering calls from people listed on my phonebook, people who never made it to my phonebook and people I don't even know about their existence. They all share one purpose. They'd call me for the tickets to Ultimate Music Awards Show on the New Year's Day hosted by CR. "The show is so much fun and full of surprises", "I got to see my favorite singers all in one show", "I don't have enough rewards points to redeem the show tickets" These are one of the few reasons I had been told for asking my help getting the tickets. I understand their anxiety of wanting to go to the show because, simply, I have been one of them. I could identify myself in them as an audience. I could identify myself with the show as an on-show staff. I could identify myself as a canto-pop music fan. Pop music is, as a form of pop culture under the mediation process, more than just a piece of pop song in recent music history. Pop music has included elements of the physical and musical presentation of the performer, the amount of press coverage on the performer and the song, the record selling figures, the amount of awards being received for the song or for the performer, and how many times the song has been sung at the karaoke bars. On the other hand, if pop music is regarded as a form of commodities, who is there to determine which style of music will be the big hit of the year or what kind of singing style would absolute help the performer to be awarded as the singer of the year. It is all about under the process of mediation in which various parties in the music industry and the media are the key players. In this paper, I will examine how pop music is being

represented in this particular music award shows and how music and sincerity is being mediated in it.



(Source: <http://m2.21cn.com/news/china/2010/12/27/8022660.shtml>)

Brief history of Ultimate Song Chart Awards Show (USC)

The annual award show has been hosted on New Year's Day since 1988 by CR. The Top Ten songs are resulted in the annual accumulative numbers of airplay at CR 2, a pop music channel of CR. "My favorite awards", including "my favorite male/female singer", "my favorite group" and "my favorite song", are all resulted in the both online and on-site voting from the

audience. “Year of Singer-Songwriter” award would go to the one who writes and sings his/her songs and his/her songs have the highest airplay in CR 2 throughout the year. The on-air promotion of the show usually would start in November to boost up the atmosphere of the local music awards season (which is usually sometime between late December to mid-January for the past decade).

The show is a community

The Top Ten Song Awards are based on the 10 most played songs by DJs at CR 2 through the year. They emphasize that these 10 songs are being awarded for being more superior to the other songs based on their professional knowledge and judgment as DJs on local pop music scene. The DJs are the ones who use the radio as media to introduce songs to the public and music fans. They send out their musical beliefs and preference to the audience through their choice of music. If the audience likes what he/she is listening to then he/she would start to develop the similar set of music preference with the DJs. The show is there to display the sense of sharing same beliefs, values and taste, or identity in short, between the DJs and the audience throughout the year. The sense of identity and belonging between the DJs and the audience are constructed by radio through choice of music. The community is built upon imaginary as the DJs and the audience never constructed their face-to-face relationship. The awards show here is display the shared values and ideas and beliefs among the ones who share the same set of values, beliefs and identity of being fans of canto pop music. The show here is an activity for these people get together, they are being at the show to act out and act upon as music fans. On the other hand, being recognized by receiving awards creates a sense of recognition and belonging as well. Juno Mak, a canto pop singer, once said in his speech after receiving a song award at USC

in 2009 that ¹“If I could receive just one music award this year, I would want it from CR. I thank CR for never giving up on me, letting me to be very creative in my music and being recognized by this award. Thank you CR.” His music was recognized by the DJs and his music was being identified as a good piece of music recommended by the DJs at CR 2. The award show is a public display on the recognition of this piece of music as well as the performer. The award serves as the sign of shared values among the agreed ones and the award makes the song or the performer different from the ones without receiving the award. The award defines the good quality of the music which is well received by the DJs and music fans and the show is a place or a location of displaying their shared values and music taste and receiving recognition given by CR. Community, as Roger Silverstone once suggested that, shares meanings and symbols which helps to represent the community itself as well as have the powerful role in defining it.

The show is a public display of sincerity

The USC awards show probably is the show with most (joyful) tears among the other local awards shows if I may say so. This show is rather known for seeing the award recipients having a moment of their true self, a moment of display their emotions on stage, a moment of sincerity extend outside of his/her piece of song. A pop song singer expresses his/her sincerity through his/her music but he/she may not actually have the same experience as he/she describes in the songs if the lyrics are written by someone else. If a listener listens to the song and feels moved by the performance, a sense of intimacy is being built between the listener and the performer. If there is any part of the song that touches the heart of the listener, or the listener is

¹騰訊微博(2011), 叱咤樂壇頒獎禮, clip from 2009, http://my903.qq.com/index.php?m=video_player&year=2009&id=8, the speech was originally conducted in Cantonese (last accessed on December 17, 2011)

being stung, in Roger Silverstone's word, by the performance, the level of intimacy would go deeper between the listener and performer based on the personal experience of the listener. Sincerity can be projected through songs as well as the behavior of the performer. The awards show, then, offers a public space for displaying sincerity and authenticity of the pop song singers.



(Source and MV : http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URUIcYDq3_I)

I wouldn't address myself as a fan of Eason Chan, but I like his song and I like how he represents himself in front of the public. He speaks his mind and he doesn't deny that he smokes and drinks, unlike many other pop singers in HK who says one thing but does the other. To me, he is authentic as himself as well as in his performance. He has a song called ² "Tourbillon" (陀飛輪) which it simply moves, or stings me, in Roger Silverstone's interpretation, from my very own experience and interpretation of this song. My impression of him as himself reinforces my appreciation about his music and vice versa. I like the way he expresses his emotion in this song.

² It is a song about using buying luxurious watches as an metaphor of money can't buy the actual time.

His authenticity appears to me. When he was on the stage receiving an award for this song, he said that he felt for this song and by hearing him saying that created a deeper intimate moment between me and him, my own punctum moment on him, on this song and at this show. The whole atmosphere of show, with surprises and enjoyment, helped to deepen the level of intimacy and sincerity for me about the performer and the song he sings. The show is there to create a more direct and in person experience of experiencing sincerity outside of the personalization of listening experience and offers a public sphere to display such emotions and feelings. For those who believes in a performer's sincerity both in his/her performance or his/her projected image of his/her own would be able witness the actual reaction of the performer while seeing him/her receiving the awards at the show and that particular reaction is there to display to the fans deepen the sense of intimacy and authenticity.

Before getting the tickets to the show, get a credit card first

The tickets to USC are not sale... sort of. The only way to get the tickets is through credit card reward points redemption if you don't have any inside connections with CR for getting around for it (actually asking people working at CR may even worse because, from my own experience as a former employee there, there were no complimentary tickets for staffs.) Moreover, the best seats are only offered to the credit card holder who will be willing to redeem the tickets by using their credit card reward points. The more you spend, the more points you would get. If I want to go to the show this year, I would have to get ³10000 points minimum for one ticket to the show. If I want better seats at the show, I would then have to have 20000-30000 points for that. If I am being chosen by the bank to be THE preferred card holder (which means

³ According to the website of Manhattan Credit Card, HK\$1=1 point for every new purchase or cash advance. <http://www.manhattancard.com/19.html> (last accessed on December 19, 2011)

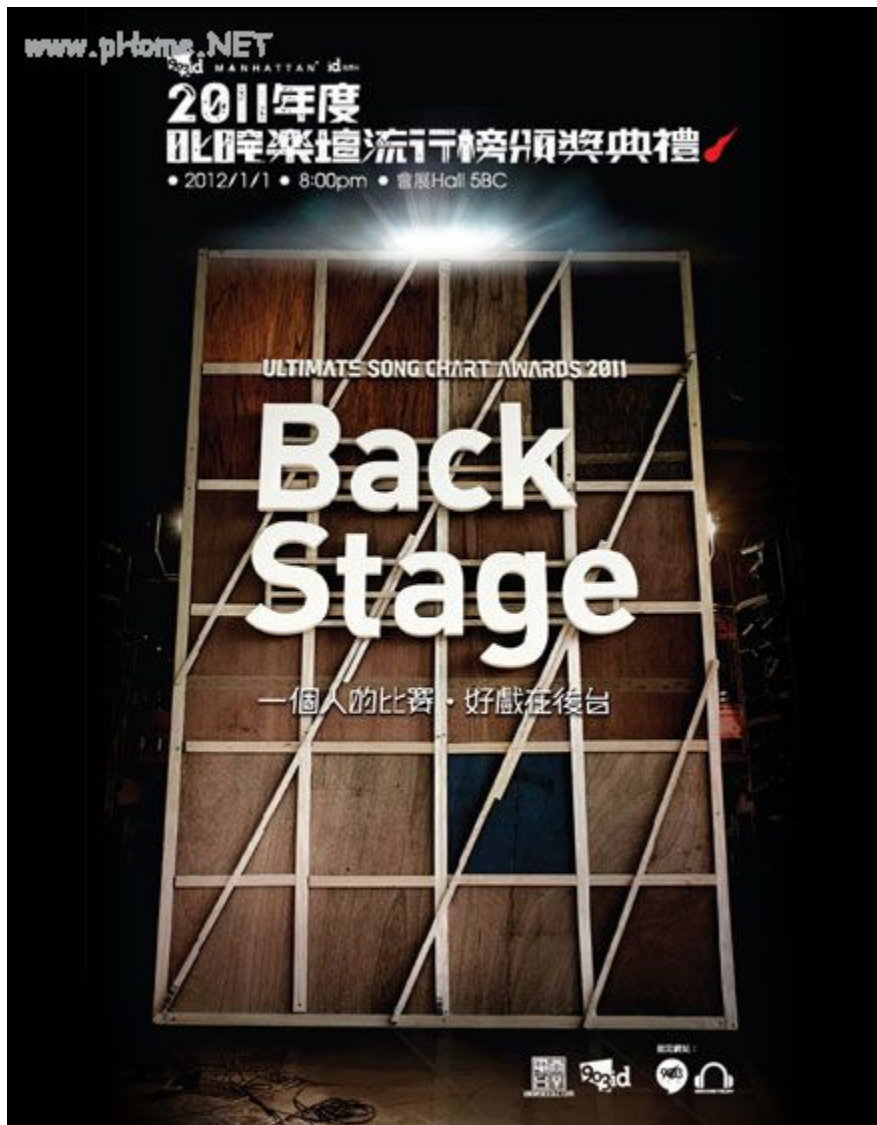
I have done some major purchases by using their credit card), then I would be able to get the exclusive priority redemption period only available for their preferred customers. We are being encouraged to spend a lot in order to earn enough reward points for the show's tickets. We are being encouraged to spend a lot for the sake of getting as many reward points as possible to achieve the goal. The show, in a way, encourages us to spend more so we can go check out the annual music awards show. The good seats are only available for the ones who spend their way to be their preferred card holders. Is it all about spending your way to the show, or there is a show for you to go and all you need to do is to spend? What about the consequences of paying the credit debt? All the promotion and advertisements about the show won't remind you that the aftermath of overspending out of your own ability. All they want you to hear is "spend more so you can get more reward points". They even welcome you to spend as much as possible so you could be their preferred client for any further exclusive rewards coming from it. They address you as their preferred client without concerning your actual financial ability.

Consumption, in Roger Silverstone's words, is a dimension of experience on commodities in the capitalist system where ⁴"we are being asked to see customers as the kings and the queens of the market place, but this is a delusion that expresses the anxieties of a system unable to claim the necessary control over consumption decisions rather than the realities of economic powers." Music has clearly being a form of commodity here in this case. You would hardly have a chance to experience the music award show in person unless you use a certain credit card to collect reward points through consumption, then you may able to get the tickets with certain amount of reward points. The ongoing promotion from radio, magazines and the

⁴ Silverstone, Roger (1999) *Why Study the Media?* London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 80

bank about the show is not about the show anymore, it is about spending instead. They would consistently remind you few months prior the show that the redemption period is coming or there are only few rows left before the end of redemption period so you'd better act quickly. If you miss your chance, either you don't have enough points to redeem or too late to act upon. You just miss your chance to experience the extravaganza of the show. Redemption period is an example of commodified time, which, in Roger Silverstone's word, is ⁵“the time which regulates consumption is “. The redemption period ends once all the tickets are being redeemed, so there is never a fixed end date for such redemption. People would just have to act fast. The radio promos, print ads and promotions from the bank would constantly remind you that you need to act quick or you will miss your chance. The promotions are acted as the media which are there persuading the interested parties to increase the intensity of their spending behavior by using the music awards show as the bait without reminding of the possible consequences of maxing out on the credit card. The music awards show is one of the mediated events which require consumer's action to consume so they would have enough reward points for redeeming the tickets to the show.

⁵ Silverstone, Roger (1999) *Why Study the Media?* London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 83



(Source: <http://www.huabei.org/ent/music/hyqg/2012-01-01/13838.html>)

The mediation process of pop music at the music awards show

The USC awards show is a show about rewarding the great pop music performer for their great work in the past year based on the amount of frequency being played on-air through CR 2. The DJs are the ones who choose which song to play and which song they want to introduce to the audience. The DJs are the gatekeepers for the show. They have the authority to pick which songs to play and the frequency of playing those chosen songs based on their music preference,

music knowledge, relations of music production, and the tone of his/her program. The ten most played songs announced in the show are the ones highly recommended songs by the DJs. The DJs become the producer of encoding the set of ten songs as their picks of this year. They help to produce meaning for those ten songs as the best ones to the audience, or the receiver of this particular message. As the production circuit is an open system which the audience also contribute the encoding process as the consumers. The production and reception of the message are not necessarily identical but very much related as in Roger Silverstone's view on mediation process. The awards show itself is a form of media in the mediation process. The meanings of the pop music are first being constructed by the people at the record companies. When the DJs know more about the background of the song and maybe the performer him/herself along, it certainly would help him/her to decide if the song would be played and being introduced to the audience. The music awards show, on the other hand, is another media which is there to help producing more meanings for the songs. The song would be then known as the awarded piece of music which may help to boost the record sale. The circulation of mediation is an open system. The meaning moves from one text to another. The meanings are constantly changing and moving in the circuit of mediation. The audience at the show may start to see the songs which are being awarded differently. They may like the songs more if they already have. For those who never heard the song before the award show, the show creates an opportunity for the people to hear the song for the first time. They may start to pay attention to the song which they never did before. If they like it, they may go purchase the album. This is what the record companies want the most by having people to buy records. The circulation of meanings, or mediation, doesn't stop at one dimension. Actually, it would never stop as the meanings move from one text to another.

“See you next year”

For sure, the USC awards show doesn't represent the entire group of canto pop music fans, nor they claim to be. Their show is all about the songs which the DJs in CR 2 think are the best one among themselves, but still, the show has been able to attract people of wanting to go to the show. The show offers them surprises, being able to witness the real emotions from the recipients and share the atmosphere of the extravaganza of the awards presentation. Pop music is no longer just about the music itself. It is all about the presentation of the performer, the singing style and skill, his/her authenticity as a performer in the songs or in front of the audience and the amount of awards being received over the song or/and the performer. All the elements are there to make different meanings which affect pop music in terms of musical style as well as the music industry. The awards show itself is here to serve as another type of media offering and transforming different meanings to the pop music scene. It brings people together to celebrate pop music by creating a sense of community, by having them to admitting to the show by using credit card points for ticket redemption and by letting the fans to experience the real emotions from their favorite performers. The mediation process doesn't end with the show. It continues by affecting pop music in the terms of the people at the music industry, the people at the radio station and the people who are out there buying albums and the circuit doesn't end there. After picking up the awards, the people at the music industry would start to work around it for producing more products to emphasize the winning and hoping the awards would help them to make more noise and bring in more cash. The banks are more than happy to organize the show again as they are the only one who can grant you the tickets to the show by having to use their credit card. The fans are there to experience the winning moments along with the performer together at the show. What you choose to listen, what you choose to buy with your credit card,

and who you choose to cheer for at the show are all involved in the part of meanings making. Music certainly is an agent of it. It can be your identity; it can be your consumption behavior; it can be your definition of authenticity. All we need to do is to participate in it. We are all in the meaning making process.

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