Contemporary Christian Music in Hong Kong:

Mediating Religion through Song, Performance and Stardom

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ABSTRACT

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For 30 years, the local CCM production community has been trying to find the right mix for the genre and push the music to a secular audience since CCM took shape in Hong Kong in the 1980s. CCM is more widely known as gospel music or contemporary hymnal songs in Hong Kong. This study examines the past and present shape of the local CCM scene to provide a historical perspective for interpreting its trajectory. This study sketches a brief history of local CCM in Hong Kong from the late 1960s to 2010 which helps to understand how local CCM has interacted with the commercial music scene including popular music trends and the pop industry environment throughout its development as well as church responses along the evolution of local CCM.

This study investigates how the local CCM production community grapples with the complexities of fusing religion and media and negotiates the tensions and opportunities that arise between media conditions and assumptions and the religious sensibilities of CCM. By doing so it also engages in a current theoretical discussion about mediation and mediatization in the field of media and religion. This dissertation approaches CCM production as part of the process of mass mediation of religion, through which religious meanings are constantly constructed, negotiated, and reconstructed as practitioners negotiate the multiple conflicting, integrating and interpenetrating forces. In specific, this study addresses practitioners' negotiations between the media-based orientation frame, which include such factors as commercialization, industrial norms, cultural values in the media environment, and the religious orientation frame, which include a range of symbols, moral codes, doctrines, and resources that are religiously meaningful to individuals.

Practitioners' negotiations in CCM production are discussed on three dimensions: song text, performance and stardom. Each of these dimensions highlight common and unique opportunities and tensions in the mediation process, including commercialization, creativity, entertainment, hyperindividuality, evangelism, ministry efficacy and religious piety. Practitioners' negotiations between these interpenetrating and contesting elements shape CCM on the three dimensions.

Finally, this dissertation connects practitioners' autonomy in the production process to the independent production mode of local CCM. Although this production mode presents practical obstacles for local CCM practitioners, it has also allowed practitioners relative autonomy in their decision-making. This thus also bears implications for local CCM's contingent future including the possible scenario of mainstream co-optation.

撮要

自現代基督教音樂於 1980 年代在香港成型，過去 30 年，本地現代基督教音樂的製作群體一直在探索該音樂類型的方向，並嘗試將之推廣至普羅觀眾。現代基督教音樂在本港多被稱爲福音音樂或現代詩歌。本文檢視本地現代基督教音樂界的過去與現在，提供一歷史視覺以理解並發展軌跡。本文扼要描繪本地現代基督教音樂自 1960 年代至 2010 年的歷史，以助理解本地現代基督教音樂在其發展中與商業音樂界，包括與音樂潮流和流行音樂工業之間的互動，同時亦理解現代基督教音樂在本地教會間帶來的迴響。

本文研究本地現代基督教音樂製作群體如何與結合宗教和傳媒的複雜性角力，在傳媒環境與宗教情懷兩者之間產生的機遇與張力中作出協商。由此本文亦進入傳媒與宗教跨界研究中的理論對話，討論媒介化(mediation)與媒介併吞(mediatization)的理論地位。本研究視現代基督教音樂爲宗教的大眾媒介化過程之一部分，在製作人員協商種種相互衝突、結合及滲透的力量的過程中，宗教意義被建構、協商與重構。具體而言，本研究闡釋製作人員如何在其傳媒導向框架，諸如商業化、行業常規、傳媒環境中的文化價值觀等因素，以及信仰導向框架，包括各種對個人具信仰意義的符號、道德標準、教義與宗教資源間協商。

本文從歌曲文本、表演，及明星現象三個層面討論現代基督教音樂製作人員的協商。這些層面各突顯媒介化過程中一些共通或獨有的機遇與張力，包括在商業化、創意、娛樂、高度個人化、傳教、事工效能和信仰忠誠等元素之間的機遇

與張力。製作人員在這些相互滲透和衝突的元素間協商，構成現代基督教音樂的三個層面。

最後，本文將製作人員在製作過程中的自主性連繫至本地現代基督教音樂的獨立製作模式上。雖然獨立製作模式爲本地現代基督教音樂製作人員帶來實質障礙，但同時這亦帶來他們在決策上的相對自主性。這亦對本地現代基督教音樂的未來，包括商業吸納可能帶來的效應方面帶來啓示。

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Contemporary Christian music (CCM) in general refers to a music genre that carries Christian messages with popular music styles. Emerged out of the Jesus Movement in the 1960s to reach the drop-out youths, CCM in US has evolved into a genre that has its own magazines, charts, awards as well as being listed as multiple Grammy categories, and certainly also making good sales today. In Hong Kong, for 30 years, the production community has been trying to find the right mix for the genre and push the music to a secular audience since local CCM took shape in the 1980s. Today, it is at a critical point where it may or may not be co-opted by the mainstream music industry. How the game would play out is yet to be seen, but even before business turns big, there is enough for the production community to wrestle with as they navigate through contrasting expectations for a culturally relevant expression of the religious message. As the first study of CCM in the sociocultural context of Hong Kong, this dissertation focuses on its production as part of the process of mediation of religion. It examines how the local CCM production community grapples with the complexities of fusing religion and media and negotiates the tensions and opportunities that arise between media logics and the religious sensibilities of CCM.

In the following, I will introduce this dissertation by, first, establishing the objective and significance of the study; second, giving a background of the problem; and third, previewing the other chapters in this dissertation.

Objective and Significance of Study

The objective of this study is to document as well as to theorize the CCM phenomenon in Hong Kong. Despite its 30 years of existence and development, local CCM has not been documented and studied in a scholarly manner. This dissertation records the past and present shape of the local CCM scene to provide a historical perspective for interpreting its trajectory whatever the future might hold for it. This is particularly important for the local CCM scene at a time in which a second wave of movement to take the genre to the mainstream is underway and a contingent watershed for local CCM is in sight. By focusing on local CCM in Hong Kong, the study also provides a contextualized understanding of CCM outside the US context. As much as local CCM practitioners aspire for the local genre to flourish like its US counterpart, an understanding of local CCM is crucial.

This dissertation also engages in a current theoretical discussion about mediation and mediatization in the field of media and religion. A theoretical shift from the concept of mediation to mediatization to capture the interrelations of media and

religion has taken place in the field in recent years. "Mediation" in the field of media and religion addresses how the mediation of religion through contemporary media reconfigures a particular practice of religious mediation and recognizes the process involves constant construction, negotiation and reconstruction of religious meanings. Mediatization of religion refers to the process that "religion is increasingly being subsumed to the logic of the media, both in terms of institutional regulation, symbolic content and individual practices" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 11). While mediatization seems to have become a buzz word in the field of media and religion in the last couple years, this dissertation seeks to recover "mediation", the concept prematurely considered obsolete, in the field. It seeks to contribute to the current theoretical conversations through the contextualized development of CCM in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, this dissertation enriches the understanding of mediation by locating possibilities of agency in the process of production. While "mediation" addresses the interplay between human agency and material factors, the possibility of agency is often assumed to be activated only in the process of reception and consumption. This dissertation extends the possibility of agency into the social process of production. This study approaches CCM in terms of a community, as suggested by Howard and Streck (1999):

> Contemporary Christian music is an artistic product that emerges from a

> nexus of continually negotiated relationships binding certain artists, certain corporations, certain audiences, and certain ideas to one another. It is the art produced by an art world that surrounds a heterogeneous grouping of sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, and sometimes unrelated discourses concerning moral values, artistic values, commercial values, social values, and religious values. (p. 14)

This study focuses on the CCM production community to illustrate how social actors exercise their agency against the structural factors in the production process. It thus widens our thinking about the possibilities of agency in the mediation process.

Finally, by drawing on a range of concepts and resources from media and religious studies, cultural studies, popular music studies, performance studies, this dissertation examines some of the under-researched dimensions of CCM, such as dimensions of performance and stardom, thus adding more angles to understand the CCM phenomenon.

Background of Study

To understand CCM in Hong Kong, a general picture of Christianity in Hong Kong is needed. The presence of Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) in Hong Kong dated back to 1842, the very early history of the city. In this dissertation

Christianity will be used to refer to Protestant Christianity specifically. Protestant Christianity in Hong Kong was first established by missionaries from America, Britain, Germany, and other countries who considered colonial Hong Kong as a hub for missions into mainland China. For a century these churches were mostly subsidiaries of missions in South China. During and after the Sino-Japanese war and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, a large population as well as mission churches fled from China to Hong Kong. Amidst the refugee society in 1950-60s, Christianity took up a significant role as social service and education providers and that explains the strong presence of Christianity in the social structure and culture of Hong Kong ever since, even though believers are of a small proportion. As of year 2004, 3.2% of the local population are Protestant Christians, coming from as many as 67 denominations. Hong Kong Christianity is highly denomination-intense, yet denomination barrier is minor in general and a strong para-denomination awareness exists among believers (Ying, 2005).

Given this historical grounding, it is not surprising that church music in Hong Kong largely owes its inheritance to the Western traditions. Translated Western traditional hymns[1] were sung and privileged as the orthodox "sacred music" for decades. The emergence of CCM was frowned upon and regarded as a disgrace to

[1] Of course "traditional" and "contemporary" are relative concepts. Hymns written by famous church music reformers at their times like Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, had come to be considered as "traditional" church music as history progressed.

church music by church leaders although it was well-received among the younger generation (K. Lee, 1984; So, 1986). Over the years, controversies over CCM are recurrent. Advocates consider the genre a culturally relevant and effective way to profess the Christian faith; skeptics denounce it as a compromise to secular values and standards; while in between there are numerous debates as to the right mix of religious and popular elements. CCM struggles its way through these conflicts and possibilities to exist as a genre that is at once both similar to and different from its surrounding culture. The following is a brief sketch of the music and people in the CCM scene in Hong Kong. Early local CCM took the form of folk music, whereas today CCM presents itself in a wide range of music styles including folk, Canto-pop, R&B, hip-hop, R&B, rock, jazz, among which Canto-pop would still be the most common. The CCM production community includes songwriters, lyricists, producers, performing artists, artist managers, publicists, promotion and other production crew. There are both professional musicians and amateur artists who work full-time jobs apart from their engagement in CCM production. Recording companies of local CCM operate as small labels or ministry organizations. None of them is owned by a mainstream recording label. As a result, most of the recording companies and artists in the CCM scene have to work within major financial constraints. This is a crucial feature that distinguishes the current shape of local CCM from its US counterpart,

where all Christian labels are owned by mainstream music labels.

The first major contribution of local CCM to the advance of Christian music was introducing new songs with compatible words and tunes as an alternative to translated hymns. The translation of hymns was a hindrance to early church music in Hong Kong. Due to an incompatibility of the syllables of the Cantonese dialect and the melodies, most of the translated hymns were incomprehensible just by listening to what was sung. Thus CCM offered not only new music styles but songs that were more comprehensible to listen to. Over the years, there have been two waves of crossover movement to introduce CCM to the mainstream audience in Hong Kong. The first wave was in the 1980s and was rather short-lived. The second wave is taking place right now (since 2007 till the writing of this dissertation in summer 2010) and as mentioned, this is now a critical point where the genre might be co-opted by mainstream music labels. This is thus a crucial moment to tap into the moves of the genre and its production community.

Chapter Preview

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 gives a review of the literature that helps to frame this study. Then I will develop a theoretical framework for this dissertation and present my research questions. I will also explain the research design

and methodology in the chapter.

Chapter 3 gives a historical account of the development of local CCM in the last 30 years to illustrate the divergent religious logics reflected in the interactions between the CCM production community and different church parties, as well as the ways media logics have come into play as the production community attempted to take CCM to the mainstream audience over the years.

I will examine the production of CCM on three dimensions from Chapter 4 to Chapter 6. Chapter 4 focuses on the dimension of CCM song text. The chapter examines the ways practitioners negotiate between commerce, evangelism and creativity in organizing stylistic and lyrical choices of CCM songs. A musical landscape of CCM that is parallel to the local pop musical landscape and the varying representations of the Christian message in CCM song texts will be discussed.

Chapter 5 focuses on the dimension of CCM performance. The chapter examines the ways practitioners valorize, design and manage live performances and how these performances reconcile entertainment and ministry effectiveness.

Chapter 6 focuses on the dimension of CCM stardom. The chapter examines the ways practitioners evaluate the power and threats of stardom for CCM. It also examines the tensions and negotiations in terms of commerce, the cultural value of individuality, and religious piety, as manifested in two related projects of CCM

stardom – a star-breeding project and a star-domesticating project.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation by linking up the previous chapters in the conceptual frame of mediation. It also highlights the independent production mode as a defining feature of the current shape of local CCM and addresses the issue of mainstream co-optation. The dissertation closes by addressing the limitations of the current study and pointing to areas for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, Research Questions and Methodology

In this chapter I will first review the literature in the field of media and religion and previous CCM research that would help to frame this study. Then I will develop a theoretical framework for this study and present my research questions. Finally, I will explain the research design and methodology of this study.

Literature Review

The general question this dissertation addresses is the relationship of media and religion. It is therefore crucial to define this conceptual field and identify the theoretical currents therein. I will first outline the general direction of the field of media and religion, then move to discuss a specific theoretical debate about the concept of mediation and mediatization in the field and how my study relates to that debate. Then I will review the different approaches in previous CCM research as references for the current study.

The field of media and religion.

Until the early 1990s, the study of media and religion could hardly be called a

field and was largely the domain of historians of Christianity, Christian communicators, and seminary professors, aiming at the improvement of church communication policy and practice, education, evangelism, and preaching (Morgan, 2008b). The most common approaches were religious critique or theological reflections of media content and values, and effect studies of religious uses of media, including the uses of religious programs and effectiveness of religious media in propagating a particular message (eg. Parker, Barry & Smythe, 1955; Marty, 1961; Horsfield, 1984; Fore, 1987; Arthur, 1993). Whether religious communication was effective was evaluated by the extent to which the changes in behavior intended by the communicator happened or not, as media were simply seen as instruments or channels for carrying religious message to the intended audience (Horsfield, 2008).

Since the mid-1990s, the study of media and religion has begun to shift to a cultural approach deeply informed by James Carey's (1975, 1989) call for the cultural approach to communication. This has changed the whole research paradigm of media and religion from the transmission and institutional model to framing both religion and media as culture (Morgan, 2008b; Zito, 2008b), a concept approached as *both* the *meanings* people assign to make sense of and reflect on their common experiences and the *practices* through which these meanings are constructed. Culturalism recognizes meaning making is shaped by social forces and seeks to integrate human

agency with material factors that condition experience. It essentially investigates what people do to negotiate their relationship to social and economic realities (Morgan, 2008a). At this cultural turn, the research impetus of media and religion has been shifted to understanding media as sites of religious experience and meaning making. Media is conceived as "sites where construction, negotiation, and reconstruction of cultural meaning takes place in an ongoing process of maintenance and change of cultural structures, relationships, meanings, and values" while religion is seen as "a social construction that originates, develops, and adapts itself through the same mediated process of...negotiation *within itself and in relation to its wider environment* that all of life participates in" (Horsfield, 2008, pp. 113-114, italics added). The study of media and religion thus becomes concerned with the constant negotiation and construction of religious meanings through mediated processes in which communicative, cultural, material, and political interests and practices intersect.

Popular culture, as "the primary medium for the construction of self and community and for the ongoing human processes of meaning making", has also gained weight in the research agenda of the field (Journal of Religion and Popular Culture, 2006). Much of the study of media and religion today recognizes popular culture as the common culture and the everyday practices and artifacts that mediate the ideas and feelings concerning identity and social life, whereby religious

consciousness is formed (eg. Romanowski, 2007; Santana & Erickson, 2008).

Situated in the field of media and religion, this dissertation seeks to investigate how religious meanings are constructed and negotiated in the sites of media and popular culture in which both structural factors and human agency are at work.

Mediation or mediatization?

A theoretical shift from the concept of mediation to mediatization to capture the interrelations of media and religion has taken place in the field in recent years and this dissertation seeks to engage in that theoretical discussion. For a decade the concept of mediation has been a central framework in the field of media and religion, investigating mediated religion in a mediated culture (Lundby & Hoover, 1997). Recognizing that religious institutions have always had to rely on mediation through various media to communicate within their cultures throughout history, media and religion scholars asserted that modern media offer unprecedented possibilities for symbolic representations of the religious. Attention was drawn to the process of mediation, rather than media per se. In the early formulation of this approach, Martín-Barbero's (1993)'s notion of "mediation", which was used to characterize a set of more specific cultural processes involving social movements – "the articulations between communication practices and social movements and the articulation of different tempos of development with the plurality of cultural matrices" (p. 187) –

guided scholars of media and religion to give considerations to the many conflicting and integrating forces involved in the mediation process of religious meanings. Mediation was seen to be a central process that has opened up "a new dimension to religious contact, religious celebration, and personal religious experience" (Martín-Barbero, 1997, p. 109), while a theory of mediated religion was preliminarily foresighted to be collaboratively built on structural analyses of changes in communication technologies and their consequences, signification practices of religious texts within symbolic universes, and the symbolic interpretation of meanings (Lundby & Hoover, 1997).

Media and religion scholars have since pursued the relations of media and religion along the line of mediation. For example, Horsfield (1997) explored how mediated communication might challenge religious establishments on ideological, institutional and practical fronts; Landres (2002) located the "ongoing production of the sacred" (p. 97) in the contested practices in public mural arts; and Winston (2002) traced Salvation Army's outreach efforts through popular performance styles in its early history; each investigating the connection and contestation of different forces in the mediation process. However, not all subsequent studies that claimed the mediation approach lived up to the task of inquiring the process of mediation. Some studies slipped by only addressing the "mediatedness" of religion (for instance, that religion

is televised) or the media saturated environment as a research backdrop, which to a certain extent weakened the concept of mediation. Yet, mediation has been an unquestioned approach in the study of media and religion (eg. Hoover & Lundby, 1997; Hoover & Clark, 2002; Mitchell & Marriage, 2003)[2] until recently.

Scholars in the field of media and religion have recently attempted to reformulate theoretical understanding with mediatization as a key concept, which has rendered the concept of mediation obsolete in a way. They largely draw on Hjarvard's conceptualization of mediatization which emphasizes that "the media have developed into an independent institution in society and as a consequence, other institutions become increasingly dependent on the media and have to accommodate the logic of the media in order to be able to communicate with other institutions and society as a whole" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 11). The mediatization of religion refers to the process that "religion is increasingly being subsumed to the logic of the media, both in terms of institutional regulation, symbolic content and individual practices" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 11). Hjarvard specifically differentiated mediatization with mediation:

> Mediation concerns the specific circumstances of communication and interaction through a medium in a particular setting. In contrast,

[2] *Rethinking media, religion, and culture* (1997) could be considered the first fruit of the collaborative efforts in the shaping of the field. Mediation was the central process the writers of the articles investigated in this book. In subsequent books, for example, *Practicing religion in the age of the media: Explorations on media, religion and culture* (2002) and *Mediating religion: Conversations in media, religion and culture* (2003), the "mediatedness" of religion was still the key, as reflected by the editorial approaches of these books. However, the process of mediation was less intensively discussed and mediated religion was simply treated as a given in some articles.

> mediatization is about the long-term process of changing social institutions and modes of interactions in culture and society due to the growing importance of media in all strands of society. (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 14)

As such, he doubted mediation could have any profound impact on the social institutions such as politics or religion. This view has then spread around the field of media and religion. Mediation as a concept is also dismissed because it is considered too general and even confusing to an extent, as it carries a different connotation of conflict-reconciliation alongside its conceptualization as processes and changes within the modern media (Lundby, 2009a). Scholars thus argue that the changes and transformations previously articulated in the concept of mediation are better grasped with the concept of mediatization. Mediatization becomes a new orientation in media and religion studies (eg. Clark, 2008; Hjarvard, 2008; Hoover, 2009).

In this dissertation I intend to recover the importance of the concept of mediation in media and religion studies, while implications might be considered for media studies at large. In the following I will assess the theoretical status of the concepts of mediation and mediatization in a broader area of media studies (for example, I use broader terms such as "other institutions" instead of specifically "religion") in order to widen the implications of my theoretical discussion. I will steer the discussion back to the specific scope of media and religion after such implications are illuminated.

"Mediation" and "mediatization" for media studies.

Despite the widespread favor for the term mediatization nowadays, some scholars have continued to stick to "mediation" as the key term for tensions and transformations, and with reasons. In comparison of the two concepts, Couldry (2008) noticed that "mediation" could better capture the heterogeneity of the transformations to which media have given rise across a complex social space while "mediatization" tended to emphasize a single media logic that was simultaneously transforming the whole of social space at once. In other words, the problem with the concept of "mediatization" is its stress on "one single type of media-based logic that supersedes older logics across the whole of social space" (p. 378). "Mediation", on the contrary, could be more productive as it acknowledges the non-linear dynamics and contingent factors within media flows.

Lundby (2009b) recognized that the general and vague idea of "media logic" could weaken the argumentation of "mediatization", so he attempted to remedy the concept by clarifying it in terms of what media logic is according to various scholarly understanding as well as downplaying the importance of media logic in the concept. In Hjarvard's (2009) formulation, media logic refers to the institutional and technological modus operandi of the media, including the ways in which the media distribute material and symbolic resources (e.g., according to ratings or reading

figures) and operate with the help of formal and informal rules (e.g. news criteria). Alternatively, media logic could be conceived as the combination of a commercial logic, which involves the commercialization of both the media institutions and society as a whole, an industrial and technological logic, and a cultural logic (Mazzoleni, 2008). Lundby admitted that the concept of mediatization becomes vulnerable if media logic is assumed to be coherent, and asserted that media logic should be understood as multifaceted, refuting Couldry's challenge that the usefulness of the concept of mediatization is limited by its stress on a single media logic and linear process. Furthermore, in defense of "mediatization", Lundby maintained it to be "fully possible" to make arguments and analyses about mediatization without applying the concept of media logic, in case this is the term that renders "mediatization" vulnerable.

I beg to differ with the idea of dropping the concept of media logic, because it is core to the argument of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008, 2009; Mazzoleni, 2008). Lundby (2009a) himself noted that media logic is a driving mechanism of mediatization understood by contemporary scholars of mediatization. Mediatization argues that other institutions in the society are changed by accommodating or subsuming to media logic – that is, the commercial, industrial, technological and ideological logics of media operation, as clarified above – thus omitting the concept

of media logic does not help our theoretical understanding of mediatization at all.

Instead, I wish to extend and elaborate Couldry's critique of mediatization based on its linearity, which I consider more a challenge to the claim of other institutions' *subsumption* to the media logic(s) than a complaint of the conceptual clarity of the term "media logic" itself. In Couldry's (2008) critique, he was not so much concerned with the loose definition of media logic, which he interchangeably referred to as a "type" of media-based logic, media "logics", or a "mechanism". The linearity he criticized is related to the assumption of change "operating from a single source and in a common direction" (p. 376). Therefore, Lundby's counterargument for the multi-facets of media logic does not seem to have refuted the critique of mediatization theory as linear, or, unidirectional. To reiterate, the problem Couldry suggested with mediatization theory is "its tendency to claim that it has identified one single type of media-based logic that *supersedes* older logics" (p. 378, italics added). However it is termed, be it *a* media logic, media logic*s*, or a media mechanism, Couldry argued that this logic does not necessarily supersede older logics and thus mediatization might not be as pervasive as theorized. He maintained that "media logic" and logics from other realms are possibly interpenetrating instead of simply binary oppositional and substitutable for each other. The concept of mediatization, stressing a process in which other institutions are subsumed to media logic, is constrained in capturing the

dynamic and heterogeneous forces in the shaping of social life.

The concept of mediation, on the contrary, is designed to address contradictions and tensions. It describes the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which the media is involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life (Silverstone, 2002). Silverstone further illustrated the concept as follows:

> Mediation [...] requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environment that supports them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other. At the same time it requires a consideration of the social as in turn a mediator: institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption. (Silverstone, 2005, p. 189).

Mediation thus addresses how actors shape and are shaped by their social environment; how actors and social environment change and are changed by each other. Studying the processes of mediation reveals changing relations among social structures and agents (Livingstone, 2009). Zito (2008b) also acknowledged that "mediation" exemplifies a dialectical model of the construction of social reality and allows the possibilities of agency. Couldry (2008) loosened the "dialectical" feature in the concept and rather saw it as capturing a variety of non-linear dynamics involving

different actors within media flows, thus opening up the concept to address interpenetrations in addition to contradictions. Anyhow, the concept illustrates a process in which multiple factors interact and work in multi-directions.

Recovering "mediation" in media and religion studies.

"Mediation" thus characterizes dynamic and dialectical processes of communication and social transformation, whereas "mediatization" embodies the media's annexation of the power of other institutions, or the other way round, other institutions' subordination to media (Livingstone, 2009). Now, coming back to media and religion studies, could we still say that "mediation" is an obsolete concept in view of the above theoretical conversations? I suppose not. However, the mediation approach could advance the field of media and religion only if the mediation process is properly problematized in research. As mentioned earlier, over the years some media and religion studies that claimed to take the mediation approach had failed to engage in significant theoretical questions because they had lost sight of an inquiry about the *process* of mediation. For the concept of mediation to be meaningful to the field of media and religion, scholars must recast the mediation process as the central inquiry of research.

Meyer and Moors (2006) made an insightful comment on what I call "a meaningful reorientation to the mediation process" in media and religion studies:

> There evidently is a need to shift from a presentist focus on the mass media and their reception as such to a focus on broader, historical processes of mediation, that is, on how the media operate as intermediaries in processes of communication, affirming existing links and creating new ones between people and expressive forms. (Meyer & Moors, 2006, p. 7)

Meyer and Moors did not deny the fact that religion has always claimed to mediate the transcendental and spiritual and make these accessible for believers in one way or the other, and the ensuing doubt that "if practices of mediation, rather than (mass) media per se, are taken as a point of departure, it appears that there is nothing entirely new about the link between religion and the media" (p. 7). As a response, they suggested viewing religion as a practice of mediation to be the starting point of the mediation approach to media and religion studies, and the task of the mediation approach to be exploring "how the transition from one mode of mediation to another, implying the adoption of new mass media technologies, reconfigures a particular practice of religious mediation" (p.7). This new mode of religious mediation through the mass media might be called a "mass mediation" of religion (p. 15). Zito also (2008b) affirmed that the particular nexus of religion and media can especially benefit from the concept of mediation, with mediation conceived as a materializing process of "making the invisible visible" (p. 77), in which people constantly engage to produce

their social reality, even as they are, in turn, produced by it. "I find it important to station an analytic between embodied actors and the things of the world, grasping their mutual constitution as a process of mediation, always giving sufficient attention to possibilities of agency," noted Zito (2008a, p. 727).

It is the aim of this dissertation to recover "mediation" as a theoretical tool in media and religion studies through the contextualized development of CCM in Hong Kong as an empirical phenomenon. As pointed out by scholars (eg. Livingstone, 2009; Zito, 2008a), "mediation" addresses the relations between structure and agency. However, often times, the possibility of agency is assumed to be activated only in the process of reception and consumption, as demonstrated in Silverstone's (2005) definition of "mediation". It is therefore another aim of this dissertation to address the possibility of agency in the social process of production. Focusing on the CCM production community, this study will illustrate how social actors exercise their agency against the structural factors in the production process.

Approaches to CCM research.

This study is the first research about CCM in Hong Kong, and most of the previous studies that it can reference on come from US. Although many of the previous CCM research could be characterized under a cultural studies tradition, I further differentiate the approaches of these studies into the political, the industry, the

discursive and rhetorical, the subcultural, and the functional approaches, according to the emphases of these studies.

The political approach.

The first approach is a political one. CCM has been studied as an extension of the Evangelical fundamentalist movement for the maintenance of a political fundamentalist ideology. For example, Giagnoni (2007) attributed the growing success of CCM in the mainstream music industry to the increased political power of conservative Evangelicals in the US. The ideology of CCM, and that of the Christian popular culture altogether, was seen to be connected to the affective and therapeutic rhetoric as mobilized by the Bush administration for moral politics. Christian rock thus represented less a sub-cultural force to resist the dominant culture than an attempt to penetrate its parent culture of the evangelical Christian, which was also the dominant culture in the US context, to all aspects of life. Finally, she argued that CCM has become hegemonic as its musicians, probably unconsciously, reproduce the dominant conservative ideology while the resistive potential of Christian rock has been neutralized. In a less extended account, Anderson (2009) echoed Giagnoni in considering Christian rock the opposite of the subversive sensibility of rock. He measured Christian rock against the liberating, humanist nature of rock music and disapproved Christian exploitation of rock to assert conservative power. In fact, the

political approach is not uncommon in studies of media, popular culture and religion in the US, given the thriving fundamentalist Christian movement in its context. Christian's engagement with the media and popular culture are critiqued in these studies for their political agenda to sustaining the impact of Christian fundamentalism (eg. Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009).

The industry approach.

CCM as a commercial success in the US has apparently stimulated research from an industry approach as well. Since his essay "Contemporary Christian music: The business of music ministry", Romanowski (1990) has insisted that CCM is a commercial phenomenon. In this essay, he traced the initial problems of CCM including the lack of audience acceptance, technically inferior record production, limited radio exposure for artists, and the small and inefficient network for distribution. He explained the resolution of these problems in terms of increased budgets as mainstream labels started exploring the Christian market by establishing their own Christian division or acquiring existing Christian labels in the early 80s. Since the success of the crossover artist Amy Grant[3], the ongoing interest in CCM by secular recording companies has caused CCM to achieve "full commercial status", observed by Romanowski (1990, p. 162). While Romanowski addressed a more

[3] Amy Grant is one of the first and most successful artists to cross over from gospel music to the mainstream in the US. She had the first Christian song to score Billboard No.1 and the first Christian album to go Platinum in the 1980s.

complex synthesis of ministry and commerce in CCM in a later essay "Evangelicals and popular music: The contemporary Christian music industry" (2005), he still concluded that CCM represents "the gospel industry's co-optation by the mainstream recording business", where "evangelistic ideals were eclipsed by business imperatives" (pp. 105-107). The argument of co-optation assumes the concentration of ownership among a few major labels which control access to the means of music production tend to absorb and "co-opt" any critical or creative (and in the case of CCM, ministry) possibilities of the music (Negus, 1997, p. 40). From the economic approach, CCM is geared toward the goals and strategies of the commercial world – industrial growth, increased market share, greater profits, better marketing and management whereas the evangelistic goal has lost its edge.

The discursive and rhetorical approach.

The discursive approach analyzes how people talk about CCM. Howard and Streck's (1999) *Apostles of rock: The splintered world of contemporary Christian music* focused on the public discourse of the CCM art world, emphasizing the publicly negotiated social realities that surround and define CCM. Through studying the public discourse of CCM – "what the art world says to itself in the light of day" (p. 14), they presented various rationales for the existence of CCM: as ministry (evangelism; worship facilitation; and exhortation); as a sanctified entertainment (a

positive alternative; articulating a Christian worldview; witnessing to the music industry); and as an art (art for art's sake; revealing truth and presenting possibilities). From these rationales, they further conceptualized a typology of CCM: Separational CCM, Integrational CCM, and Transformational CCM, each of which corresponding to one or more of the positions in Richard Niebuhr's theological model of "Christ and culture": Separational CCM (Christ against culture); Integrational CCM (Christ of culture); Transformational CCM (Christ above culture/Christ and culture in paradox/Christ the transformer of culture)[4]. The attempt was to offer a mapping of the CCM art world based on the available public discourses.

The rhetorical approach studies rhetorical strategies in the way CCM is presented to the audience. Hendershot (2004) analyzed the rhetoric in CCM in her piece "Why should the devil have all the good music? Christian music and the secular marketplace". She identified an "evangelical therapeutic rhetoric" crossover CCM artists are using to align to the secular culture they want to speak to (but without linking it to the therapeutic rhetoric of politics as asserted by Giagnoni). The therapeutic rhetoric in CCM was identified to be diluting the evangelical sentiment by

[4] Theologian Richard Niebuhr (1956) theorized five ways to represent how believers approached their relationship to Christ and culture (conceptualized as the plural and social values of human world and their material manifestations) and his theory has been influential in theological thinking. However, I consider a direct transplant of the theory in the field of media and religion, presuming it was a theory of "religion and culture" or "religion and media", to be counter-productive. First, it is apparently inappropriate to equate the position of Christ in theological discussions with the concept of religion (or even Christianity) in religious studies or studies of media and religion. Second, Niebuhr himself conceded it was confusing to define culture as though it excluded religion, so the theory could not be simply reformulated as a theory of "religion and culture". It is also problematic to assume Niebuhr's sense of culture could be conveniently chopped down to refer to media or popular culture specifically.

switching the focus from salvation to a relationship with God, from the binary of the "unsaved" and "saved" to people "searching" and "walking the walk", and from music-making for converting to the humble purpose of "sharing" and "seed-planting" (pp. 60-61). Gow (1998) also studied Christian music videos from a rhetorical approach to show the ways lyrics and visuals are managed to appeal to both Christian and secular audience. Three rhetorical strategies emerged in his analysis of Christian music videos: unequivocally religious (explicit Christian signifiers in lyrics and visuals to appeal to Christian viewers); moderately religious (religious lyrics combined with non-religious visuals to appeal to both types of viewers); and ambiguously religious (both lyrics and visuals are open to interpretation with regard to religion, to appeal to both types of viewers).

The subcultural approach.

The subcultural approach examines whether and how CCM might serve to express a sense of identity and difference vis-à-vis the dominant culture, thus embodying forces of resistance and transformation in social life. Through a textual analysis of CCM lyrics, Howard (1992) argued that CCM could act as an avant-garde subcultural force in the society. He argued for redemptive possibilities in CCM as its lyrics pose radical critiques that challenge modern capitalist ideology as well as the church's ignorance to social justice. Another study that also treated CCM as a

subculture that attempts to resist against a dominant culture was done by Gormly (2003), who argued that CCM represented Christians' appropriation of secular music and its symbols from a subordinate position in the secular society of America. CCM was regarded as an attempt of evangelical Christians to take possession of a dominant cultural form and reclaim it as their own by moving into and occupying the mainstream, rather than bringing the cultural symbols out of its original context. Through CCM, Christians could establish their evangelical identity in as well as resistance against a prevailing culture perceived as hostile.

The functional approach.

The functional approach diverges from the cultural studies approach of the above reviewed work. For example, with the uses and gratifications theory, Reid (1993) examined the functional purposes for religious youth group members to consume Christian rock music. He found that Christian teens use Christian rock to reinforce spirituality, solidify important peer group relationships, and reflect on their faith. The youth group members were also found to gain gratifications through a sense of spiritual dedication, identification with an alternative form of music, and positive reinforcement from authority figures. As audience research is seriously lacking in CCM, Reid's study contributed to an understanding of the value of Christian music to its audience.

The approach of the current study.

In the broad terms, the concern with the mediation process and its implicated possibilities of agency in this dissertation indicates its cultural studies approach, which takes into account historical, political, economic, cultural, and everyday discourses and focuses on questions of community, identity, agency and change (Grossberg & Pollock, 1998). The approach of this study also has relation to some of the approaches reviewed above, such as the industry approach and the discursive and rhetorical approach, since it touches on the interaction between CCM production and the mainstream music industry as well as certain discursive practices within the CCM production community. However, I would not characterize the approach of the current study as an industry one or a discursive and rhetorical one, since neither of those characterizes the main thrust of my argument. Instead, the current study centrally inquires the process of mediation in CCM and I would call this a mediation approach. The following theoretical framework will further illustrate how I approach this study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is designed to examine the "mass mediation" (Meyer & Moors, 2006) of religion. To distinguish whether local CCM production supports a mediatization theory of religion or a mediation theory of

religion, the crux is whether media logics are shown to be subsuming religious logics, or rather, media logics and religious logics are intertwined in production, constantly negotiated by social actors. This framework creatively borrows the language of the mediatization theory – the concept of "orientation frame" – to illustrate a process of mediation. The concept of "orientation frames" was suggested by mediatization scholar Schrott (2009, p. 48) to better conceptualize the so-called "logics". To juxtapose media and religion, the orientation frames considered are the media-based frame and the religious frame. The framework then suggests that the CCM production community applies and negotiates between these orientation frames in the production activities in three dimensions of CCM: song text, performance, and stardom. The formulation of the theoretical framework is further explained in the following.

Orientation frames: Media-based frame and religious frame.

The analytic concept of orientation frame is borrowed from Scrott (2009) who understood media logic as an orientation frame that informs and organizes action patterns. I apply the concept of orientation frame because the term "logic(s)" is somewhat confusing. First is the issue of singularity or plurality of "logic(s)". It is problematic to refer to one overall media logic, as Lundby (2009) already pointed out, but to speak of multiple media logics, which could mean a commercial logic, an industrial logic, a technological logic, a cultural logic, or any combinations of those

(Mazzoleni, 2008) is equally unclear. We should also note that strictly speaking, media logic is not a "logic", in the sense that "logic" implies a kind of reasoning conducted according to strict principles of validity (Lundby, 2009). Therefore, instead of talking about "media logic(s)" and, for the concern of this study, "religious logic(s)", I turn to use the "media-based orientation frame" and the "religious orientation frame". The concept of orientation frame invites us to think of practitioners' decision-making criteria as sets of conditions and assumptions. The language of "frame" also suggests that the resources in the frame could be used for interpretation of events.

In the media-based orientation frame, the most important element is commercialization, as pointed out by Mazzoleni (2008): "[the] most important element is commercial logic, which involves the commercialization of both the media institutions and society as a whole". Although he still used the language of "logic", I translate this element into commercialization and standardization of mass media products and contents, which he subsequently referred to. Other elements Mazzoleni pointed out include the industrial, technological, and cultural criteria, which he elaborated less precisely. I understand these elements as industrial norms, technological capacities, and cultural values propagated in popular media. For example, what Hjarvard's (2009) counted as "media logic" – "the ways in which the

media distribute material and symbolic resources (e.g., according to ratings or reading figures) and operate with the help of formal and informal rules (e.g., news criteria) – could be understood as the industrial norms in the media-based orientation frame.

To capture the religious sensibilities in CCM production, a religious orientation frame is identified in this theoretical framework. In light of the contemporary religiosity of "reflexive spirituality" (Roof, 1999) – a situation that encourages a more deliberate, engaging effort on people's part for their own spiritual formation, the religious orientation frame contains cultural resources for people to relate to religion for personal meanings. As Roof suggested, reflexive spirituality exists in contexts in which religious idioms become highly textured and multilayered. Responsibility falls more upon the individual to cobble together a religious world from available cultural resources including images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful. As practitioners relate to these religious resources for decision-making and interpretation of events, they apply the religious orientation frame. I tend not to reinforce the bifurcation between "religion" (as institutional) and "spirituality" (as personal and experiential) in relating the religious orientation frame to reflexive spirituality. As Besecke (2001) suggested, the dichotomy failed to capture "religion's non-institutional, public, *cultural* dimension" (p. 379, italics as original). Individual,

institutional, and cultural resources that are used for shaping religious meanings are included in the religious orientation frame in this study.

Next, I also identify three dimensions to analyze CCM. The theoretical framework suggests that the orientation frames penetrate into the three dimensions of CCM, namely song text, performance, and stardom.

Dimensions of CCM: Text, performance, stardom.

Since CCM presents itself in popular musical forms, the three dimensions of CCM are developed based on important concepts of popular music theories. The significance of the three dimensions: song text, performance, and stardom, is supported in the way they are organized as topics and theories in anthologies in influential popular music studies (eg. Frith & Goodwin, 1990; Frith, 1996, 2004).

The first dimension is song text. CCM texts have been studied through textual or content analysis of lyrics. For example, Howard (1992) assessed CCM as transformative texts through a textual analysis of its lyrics; Livengood and Book (2004) identified a tendency towards a less theologically explicit vocabulary through a content analysis of CCM lyrics. These studies tend to refer the text of a song to its lyrics, like a great deal of popular music analysis does. It seems convenient to assume for the CCM genre that lyrical analysis would locate the meaning of a song, because

many believe that there is no such thing as Christian *music* per se and it is Christian lyrics that define songs as Christian. But can the meaning of a song be simply read off from its words? Frith (1996) argued that song words are only remembered in their melodic and rhythmic setting (p. 160), thus song lyrics must be approached in relation to the melody and rhythm of songs. Shepherd (1999) further suggested that the distinctive timbres of performers' vocal and instrumental playing as perhaps the most important textual elements in popular music. Therefore, the song text dimension of CCM in this study takes into account the combination of the words and sounds of the songs as texts in which meaning might be suggested. Radwan's (2006) textual-musical analysis of a CCM song in the US is similar to this approach. By studying not just the lyric of the song but also its developmental pattern along with such variables as form, dynamics, texture and timbre in musical arrangements and harmony, this type of "textual-musical analysis" can produce more comprehensive "mediated and presentational 'proof'" (p. 1) to account for the message in CCM.

The second dimension is performance. Popular music performance on stage has value in its immediacy – "it is not merely a repetition of the studio recording" (Shumway, 1999, p. 188). Singers' performance on the stage involves the performer's "double enactment" (Frith, 1996, p. 212) of the star personality and the song personality which can bring on new meanings to the music. Therefore, live

performance might bring out a different set of opportunities as well as tensions for CCM. Perspectives from contemporary performance studies also enrich our understanding of CCM by directing attention to embodiment, sensory experience, liveness and presence (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). While studies of religion and popular music have tended to neglect the performance elements of the music (Journal of Religion and Popular Culture, 2006), this dissertation will take up the performance dimension of CCM.

The third dimension is stardom. Hong Kong CCM's growing affiliation with the local star culture has given particular salience to the star dimension of the genre. Stardom is a crucial element in the culture and music industry to minimize risk and enhance predictability (Hinerman, 2000). Stars function to "introduce, glamorize, focus and stabilize new cultural commodities, as well as media and cultural production itself" (Hinerman, 2000, p. 206). Besides economic benefits, stardom also bears social and cultural implications. Celebrity culture is "the consequence of a public recognition of some qualities that a person possesses or is deemed to possess"; it is "about meanings, where some individuals command the attention of large numbers of people, who seem to find special qualities or meanings in them" (Nayar, 2009, p. 4, italics original). Stars have a "cultural pervasiveness" as their actions can generate emotional effects on a large number of people (Nayar, 2009; Turner, 2004).

For popular music, the personality or persona of stars – "the character of the singer as star, what we know about them, or are led to believe about them through their packaging and publicity, and then, further, an understanding of the singer as a person, what we like to imagine they are really like" (Frith, 1996, p. 199) – attach meanings to the music they present, and this could be a desirable attribute of stardom to CCM. Previous CCM studies seem to lack any in-depth analysis of stardom apart from some descriptive or journalistic accounts of the careers of CCM artists (eg. Alfonso, 2002; Romanowski, 2005) and this study will serve as supplement.

In fact these three dimensions are themselves not separated but interlinked. I should reinforce the conceptual difference between text and performance as I use them as different dimensions in this study. For analytic clarity, the text dimension as used in this study will specifically refer to the text of *recorded songs*. As such, I treat it as a relatively permanent form. Although a given text does invite different readings viewed from the audience perspective, the recording itself is relatively static over time. Moreover, while one might argue that a live performance could also be read as a text, I tend to distinguish the two and treat live performance as a different dimension - the performance dimension – in order to highlight liveness and the stage-audience connection made in a specific time and space. While live performances are related to song texts, because artists are performing those songs in live occasions, they are more

than just the repetition of studio recordings (Shumway, 1999). Thus the performance dimension as used in this study will specifically refer to *live performances*. In so doing I exclude artists' "vocal performance" in their recordings from this dimension, in order to maintain a clearer boundary between the text dimension and the performance dimension. The third dimension, stardom, is also related to the other two dimensions, since it is the sum of an artist's songs, performances, as well as other qualities of their persona and private lives. Specifically, this dimension will illustrate the importance of the ongoing management of CCM artists' personal traits.

Research Questions

The proposed theoretical framework is used to address the mediation process in the production of CCM, in order to illustrate the relationship between media and religion. The primary research question is how the CCM production community negotiates between the media-based orientation frame and the religious orientation frame in producing CCM. In specific, the following questions would help answer the primary question:

1. In the development of local CCM in the last 30 years, how have interactions between the CCM production community and different church parties illustrated divergent religious assumptions and interpretations? In what ways have the

production community interacted with mass media as they attempted to take CCM to the mainstream audience?

2. How are song texts, performances, and stardom of CCM shaped by the intertwining religious and media-based orientation frames? What are the opportunities and tensions that arise in the entanglement of these orientation frames and what is the degree of ensuing negotiations for the practitioners?
   - On the dimension of CCM song text, how do practitioners organize stylistic and lyrical choices based on the orientation frames?
   - On the dimension of CCM performance, how do practitioners valorize, design and manage the performance based on the orientation frames?
   - On the dimension of CCM stardom, what is the value of stardom based on these orientation frames? How do practitioners organize activities that construct and manage CCM stardom based on the orientation frames?

Research Design and Methodology

To investigate the historical development as well as the various dimensions of CCM, multiple methods are used in this research. The use of multiple methods recognizes that social life is enacted, encoded, or embodied in a wide array of forms and media, and no single form of analysis should be treated as a privileged way in

which to approach all of social life. Rather, the forms of analysis should reflect the forms of social life, and the diversity of methods should mirror the diversity of cultural forms (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005).

To address the first question about the historical development of local CCM, a chronicle is constructed through the abstraction of fragmented moments and periods in the inception and evolution of CCM. This historical account is based on archival research and interviews with CCM practitioners who had been involved in the historical moments of CCM. This account is constructed as *a* history of local CCM (implying there could be other histories) rather than *the* history of local CCM.

For the second set of questions, various methods are used to address the different subsets of questions. Interview with practitioners in the CCM production community is the common method used to understand how the orientation frames guide the practitioners' perspectives and practices in CCM production for all three dimensions. Besides, I also rely on informal interactions with CCM practitioners and discourses collected through participant observation in various CCM-related functions such as conventions and seminars, as well as archived interviews to understand practitioners' perspectives and experiences.

For the dimension of song text, textual analysis of CCM songs is used to identify their music styles and theme categories. Although I examine the textual arrangements

and religious representations in CCM songs, I stress that they can only suggest meanings but not determine meanings. For the dimension of performance, participant observation at live performances including gospel events, CCM album releases, concerts, and their rehearsals is used to understand performance design, concerns, expressions and to some degree audience responses. Recordings, including DVD and online videos, of some of the events with or without my own physical participant observation, are also used in the analysis of performative expressions. For the dimension of stardom, an account of a local star-breeding project is constructed from newspapers, the singing group's albums, their blog, in addition to interviews.

In the following, I will explain each of the methods used in this study.

Archival research.

I used archival research to gain an understanding of the history, debates, and changes in the local CCM scene over the last 30 years. I consulted two major sources:

1. *Christian Weekly*: It was the only local Christian press until 1987, published by The Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union. I consulted the weekly issues from 1964 (first publication) to 2004.

2. *Breakthrough (Bimonthly / Monthly)*: A Christian magazine for local young adults. I consulted the bi-monthly and monthly issues from 1974 (first publication) to 1999 (last publication).

Instead of a rigid formulaic or content analysis, I basically skimmed each issue for materials I felt would be relevant to the study. They include announcements, advertisements, and reports of CCM related events, features of CCM organizations or ministries, as well as opinion pieces that help to identify trends and tensions in the local CCM scene. I was also able to find a few videos of CCM crossover singing groups/bands in the 1980s through keyword search on youtube.

For documents of more recent periods, I also used several keyword searches to find relevant articles from mainstream and Christian press and websites. These articles include CCM-related features, interviews, and commentary. Again, keyword search on youtube has led me to videos of CCM performances. Moreover, archived interviews were accessed from a few major archives including *rthk.hk* (Radio Television Hong Kong – RTHK), *881903.com* (Commercial Radio – CR), *1G Music*, *Vine Media* and *GNCI*. I also used the blog of the crossover singing group Eternity Girls, which contains 392 blog entries by the four artists and their artist manager during February 2007 to May 2008, as my source. Unlike in the established markets, there are no trade journals for CCM in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, I have not been able to identify statistical information about local CCM through archival research.

Interview.

Interviews were conducted to gain a historical knowledge of CCM as well as to

understand practitioners' assumptions, interpretations, decision-making criteria and experiences related to all the three dimensions of CCM investigated in this study. I interviewed 27 practitioners during August 2009 to May 2010. The interviewees were selected based on the criteria of being *key players* in the scene. Most people who were selected display one or more of the following characteristics (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 177). First, they might have long experience in the scene and thus can serve as reliable sources of the local scene memory. Second, they might have served the scene in many different roles and thus can speak knowledgeably about diverse roles and experiences and how the social parts work together. In fact most of my interviewees have served in more than one of the following roles in the CCM production community: (professional and amateur) composer, lyricist, arranger, producer, singer, artist manager, host of Christian music programs and record label executive or director. Third, they might be well respected by their peers, superiors, and/or subordinates, and are plugged into one or more key social networks (e.g. working both in the mainstream music scene and CCM scene). At the same time, I also included a couple of "new comers" to the CCM production community, who are "not yet fully enculturated" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179) in the field, to allow variation. I used an interview guide to organize the topics and questions to be asked (see Appendix A). The interview guide allows flexibility to adjust the order of questions

and add optional questions according to interviewee background and interview dynamics.

My methodological position to interview is leaning toward an active interview approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). I am aware of the subject positions I bring into the interview and interactional contingencies are possible influences of the meaning produced in interviews. The primary subject positions I brought into the interviews in this study, besides a researcher in the field of media and religion, are: a Christian believer and an active user of CCM who is interested in understanding CCM practitioners' perspectives and practices and in making sense of the CCM phenomenon. Sometimes I mentioned I am an amateur musician in a Christian band when interviewees asked further why I was interested in the research topic. CCM practitioners tended to respond to this set of subject positions positively because, first, that gave them a sense that the generally marginalized CCM scene was finally getting some kind of attention, especially as survival in the scene and of the scene itself had proved to be difficult due to financial shortage. One respondent said to me, "Finally there's someone researching this topic!" when I first approached her for an interview by presenting my identities. Second, respondents also anticipated the knowledge production is valuable for the CCM community as a whole. My subject positions have both allowed the respondents to articulate their religious orientation frames with less

reservation and fostered a level of rapport based on our religious common ground. That said, respondents still talked about their media-based orientation frames such as commercial considerations quite freely in the interviews. The interview contexts in this research worked more as communion (mutual recognition of simultaneous sameness and difference) rather than conquest (Ezzy, 2010) and served as productive dialogical contexts for the co-production of social meanings (Tanggaard, 2009).

Textual analysis.

I conducted a textual analysis on 91 CCM songs. This sample was combined by two sub-samples. I started with the local CCM albums that were shelved in secular record stores during the time I started my research (summer 2009) as the initial sample, because I would like to investigate what kind of music and messages were represented in CCM products that were meant to face the mass audience. But then I wanted to compare these songs with a second sample. The sampling pool of this second sub-sample is *IG Music*[5], a weekly local CCM TV program. As the only CCM program on secular TV channels, this program again represents the face CCM shows to the mass audience (even though it might not have a high viewership indeed), but in fact some of these songs were produced a few years back and have been circulated within the Christian community only. All the local CCM songs in episode 1-125 (from

[5] *IG Music* (which literally means "1 gig of music") has been broadcasted on the ATV Cantonese Channel on Saturday late night since 2007.

the first broadcast of the program to summer 2009) were included in the second sub-sample. Initially I wanted to examine if textual differences exist between these two sub-samples, but no such difference was found to be apparent. Then I decided to merge the two sub-samples to form a larger sample. I listened to each song repeatedly and transcribed[6] the vocal and musical characteristics in order to identify their music styles, theme categories, and patterns in their textual (musical and lyrical) arrangements.

Participant observation.

Participant observation was primarily used for understanding the live performances of CCM, so common sites of participant observation are gospel events, CCM album releases, concerts, and their rehearsals. Additional sites include seminars, workshops, conventions, and informal interactions (e.g. meals with practitioners). I collected discourses in the production community during these occasions in addition to the personal interviews I conducted. I adopted two types of roles during participant observation, depending on occasions. Many of the live events are free-access settings, and at these occasions I adopted the role of a complete observer, mostly as one member in the audience, without being "present" to the practitioners. I observed the performance setting, rundown, design, performers' expressions and to some degree

[6] The majority of the songs included in this study are Cantonese. I based my analysis on transcripts in Chinese. When translating the lyrics into English for the writing of this dissertation, I have tried to balance the style of translation with word choices that best resemble the original lyrics. Nevertheless, certain stylistic and linguistic features might be inevitably obscured or lost in translation.

audience responses. In the other settings, I adopted the observer-as-participant role. My role as a researcher was known to (sōme of) the practitioners at these occasions and casual interactions with the practitioners were maintained, for example, discussing the live events I just saw/they just performed. Some of these casual interactions were brief and some others were more extended. I consider these roles sufficient for the purpose of my observation and recognize the data collected might bear the mark of my perspectives because "a participant observer is not a neutral eye but an individual positioned in and engaged with an event" (Fonarow, 2006, p. 16).

The above methods are designed to address the research questions in this study. My analysis will be presented starting from the next chapter.

Chapter 3

A Brief History of CCM in Hong Kong

In this chapter I track the development of local CCM in Hong Kong, in order to provide some implications for understanding the current shape of local CCM as well as its future trajectories however that might look like. I will start with the Western and regional influence of gospel folk received by the local church community in the late 60s and 70s. Then I will progress to the year 1980, the watershed that gave rise to local gospel folk, as well as local CCM. I will also look at the two significant singing groups and bands – Equator and Citybeat – that defined the first wave of CCM crossover between 1986 and 1991. The local Christian music scene was swept by praise and worship music in the 1990s, and the momentum of taking CCM to the mainstream audience had not been regenerated until the 2000s, in which the second wave of CCM crossover is also situated. I will discuss why now is a critical moment in local CCM history that might send the development of CCM to one way or the other. Readers might want to follow two threads to understand local CCM history in this chapter. The first is how local CCM has interacted with the commercial music scene including popular music trends and the pop industry environment throughout its history. The second is church responses throughout the evolution of local CCM.

Western and Regional Influence

Before local CCM actually took shape in Hong Kong, CCM from Western or other Asian countries had been introduced to the local congregations in the late 60s and 70s. At the time, CCM that came to be known by the locals was mainly in the style of folk song – known as "folk hymns" or "gospel folk". One of the earliest visiting teams was Certain Sounds, reported to be "renowned all over the America" ("Organized by Baptist Convention", 1968), that came to Hong Kong in 1968 on a self-financed mission trip throughout Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Philippines. One of their performances was at the City Hall and the music they played included soul and American folk hymns. The team was also scheduled for music outreach to various sectors of citizens including college students, students of roof-top schools (the lower class), as well as soldiers[7].

A couple of ministry organizations such as Asian Outreach Hong Kong (AOHK) and Youth for Christ Hong Kong (YFCHK) were active in hosting overseas mission teams including music ministries that had brought folk hymns to Hong Kong in the 70s. Both of these organizations are transnational. AOHK was founded in Hong Kong in 1966 and has envisioned for Christian outreach to developing communities in Asia, whereas YFCHK has been connected to a global youth Evangelical movement Youth

[7] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], June 13, 1968, p. 8.

for Christ. Some of the teams that had visited Hong Kong in the 70s through these organizations included Living Sound Mission Team[8] from the US, Sweet Scent Folk Group[9] from the US, Winds of God Choir from the US, New Zealand Outreach Choir, Youth World from Australia, and Gospel Soldiers Choir from the Philippines[10]. Between the years 1974-1976, YFCHK hosted 10 visiting music teams for around 50 crusade meetings in Hong Kong[11].

Another event that merits attention is the Contemporary Sacred Music concert organized by the Education division of the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union in 1975. Over a thousand of church leaders, choir members and youths attended the performance by the Song of Songs Youth Choir[12] from the Philippines. The purpose of the event was to introduce contemporary church music to local churches, and a prominent figure in local church music Heyward Wong[13] spoke at the event to "assert that the new contemporary sacred music were hymns that were simple

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[8] Living Sound Mission Team was a music mission team that was reported to be highly recommended by evangelists Billy Graham and Oswald Smith. The team was hosted by AOHK and took part in 11 crusade meetings at venues including the Statue Square, churches of the Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal denominations and Ling Liang churches (founded by revival evangelist Zhao Shi-Guang) in December 1973 and January 1974. See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], December 23, 1973, p. 8.

[9] Sweet Scent Folk Group (translated title), based in Chicago, was invited by YFCHK to visit Hong Kong and take part in 3 crusade meetings in 1975. See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], March 16, 1975, p. 1.

[10] Winds of God Choir, New Zealand Outreach Choir, Youth World, Gospel Soldiers Choir (all titles translated) had been invited by YFCHK to take part in crusade meetings in Hong Kong. See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], January 2, 1977, p. 3. For more visiting gospel folk performers, see *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], April 28, 1974, p. 1; September 29, 1974, p. 2; July 31, 1977, p.6; November 5, 1978, p. 3.

[11] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], January 2, 1977, p. 3.

[12] Title translated. See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], June 1, 1975, p. 1.

[13] Heyward (Wing-Hei) Wong (1917-2003) was a key figure in Hong Kong church music history. One of his major contributions to local church music was his editorial input for the *Revised Edition* (1977) and *New Revised Edition* (2006) of a classic hymn book *Hymns of Universal Praise*.

and easy to follow, rather than the unacceptable rock 'n' roll music" ("Organized by the Union", 1975). Again, this event shows that overseas music teams were an important source in cultivating the local taste for CCM. The organizer of this event, Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union, and the above quoted speaker Heyward Wong, were both active in improving local church music and one of their major roles was to preserve traditional church music. The Union was the organizer of an annual mega church choir singing event as well as the promoter of the annual Sacred Music Sunday in local churches. Wong was the chief editor of a classic hymn book, *Hymns of Universal Praise (Revised Edition)* (1977). Yet at the same time, both the Union and Wong seemed to hold an open attitude to gospel folk at the time. In 1978, the Union invited another team from the Philippines to perform folk hymns in its Sacred Music Crusade[14]. Gospel folk was thus qualified as a form of sacred music worthy of being educated to local churches and used in crusade events. Wong's speech at the 1975 event illustrated a disapproval of rock 'n' roll music though. Gospel folk were accepted in contrast to gospel rock.

Western gospel folk were also promoted through other channels in addition to the visits of overseas music teams; for example, through magazine features, radio broadcasting, and audio products. For example, *Breakthrough Monthly*, a magazine

[14] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], November 5, 1978, p. 3.

published by the Hong Kong Fellowship of Evangelical Students (HKFES), featured an article "Listen to the secret in the wind – Contemporary gospel folk singer Linda Rich" that introduced the US gospel folk singer in its 1974 May issue[15] and another article "Mr Sacred Music – Ralph Carmichael" that introduced the pioneer innovator in US CCM[16] in its 1976 November issue[17]. For audio products, AOHK was the distributor of *Folk Hymns*, an English Christmas folk hymns cassette, in the year 1979[18].

Under the influence of overseas gospel folk, local young Christians began to form their own folk singing groups. In the 1970s, Breakthrough Folk Singing Group, Good News Messenger (GNM, or Good News Folk Singing Group), and The Sound of Joy[19] were some of the most active local groups that sang gospel folk, although most of the songs they sang were still Western gospel folk in those days.

Breakthrough Folk Singing Group.

Breakthrough Folk Singing Group was formed in 1974 as its members considered "contemporary folk song a good medium to convey messages and express ideas to contemporary youth" ("The energetic", 1976). Its mother organization

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[15] See *Breakthrough Bimonthly* [in Chinese], May 15, 1974, pp. 8-10.
[16] Ralph Carmichael was a renowned writer, arranger, and producer who had been a pioneer innovator in the Christian music field since the late 40s. He also owned a Christian label Light in partnership with Word, the largest Christian music company in US during the 60s to 80s. He was inducted to the Gospel Hall of Fame in 1985. See Cusic (1990) pp. 134-138.
[17] See *Breakthrough Monthly* [in Chinese], November 15, 1976, pp. 30-31. The article described the setbacks Carmichael as a pioneer in CCM encountered and the eventual success brought by his undefeated dedication.
[18] See the advertisement of this product in *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], December 9, 1979, p. 6.
[19] Title translated, see *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], January 2, 1977, p. 3.

Breakthrough, founded as a "youth movement to counter culture and reflect on culture" in 1973 (Introduction to Breakthrough, n.d.), had been active in making an Evangelical impact in local media culture, mainly through print, radio and music back in the 70s and 80s. The folk singing group's debut performance was "A Mid-Summer Night of Contemporary Folk Song", before an audience of over 1300, in July 1974[20]. In the year that followed, the folk singing group even drew an audience of about 6500 in Breakthrough's annual show[21]. Apart from these annual performances, Breakthrough Folk Singing Group also performed in schools, churches, youth centers for both evangelistic and Christian events in the 70s and the 80s. The group consisted of 11 young adult members including guitarists, pianists, vocalists and a harmonica player as of 1976. They also played folk songs and folk hymns in a weekly radio show *Breakthrough Moment* aired on Commercial Radio channel 2 (CR2).

Good News Messenger (GNM).

Good News Messenger (GNM, or Good News Folk Singing Group) was part of a local non-profit organization, Good News Communication Company Ltd., established in 1975 for evangelism through the mass media, primarily TV and secondarily radio broadcasting. GNM was a very active group in folk singing in various Christian and crusade events in the 70s and 80s. For instance, at the city-wide Hong Kong Youth

[20] See *Breakthrough Bimonthly* [in Chinese], May 15, 1974, p. 11; September 15, 1974, p. 46.
[21] See *Breakthrough Monthly* [in Chinese], November 15, 1975, pp. 45-48.

Crusade 1976, the group was invited to perform at an additional music section at each of the three nights. Singing a different set of folk hymns for each night, the group was well-acclaimed for their performance[22]. It also performed folk hymns in many youth crusade events co-organized by Good News Communication and local churches or schools[23], as well as in the Sunday radio show *Good News Weekly*, produced by Good News Communication, at Radio Television Hong Kong channel 2 (RTHK2)[24].

The Sound of Joy.

The Sound of Joy was a youth band formed in YFCHK in 1976:

> Given the effectiveness in evangelism with overseas visiting bands previously observed, [YFCHK] formed a youth band called "The Sound of Joy" in Hong Kong in the last April. The band has 9 members...they are ready to perform for evangelism in places such as Hong Kong, Kowloon, New Territories, Macau and Taiwan upon invitations from churches and schools. (Gao, 1977).

Folk singing groups also began to be formed in some local churches in the 70s, such as Pentecostal Tabernacle Kowloon[25], St. Barnabas Church (Anglican)[26], but the formation of folk singing groups caught on a wider range of local churches only in the 80s.

After the rise of local CCM in the 80s, overseas CCM singers or groups still came to perform in Hong Kong from time to time, such as the Grammy winning CCM

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[22] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], September 5, 1976, p. 3.
[23] For example, with Kowloon City Baptist Church in March 1977 (see *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], March 13, 1977, p. 6); with Evangelical Free Waterloo Hill Church in September 1977 (see *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], September 11, 1977, p. 6); North Point Methodist Church, The Church of Christ in China Wanchai Church, etc. in 1978 summer (see *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], June 4, 1978, p. 6).
[24] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], June 4, 1978, p. 6; September 2, 1979, p. 6.
[25] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], September 25, 1977, p. 2.
[26] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], November 19, 1978, p. 2.

artist Sandi Patti who came through AOHK in 1982[27], the Carpenter's Tools which came through YFCHK in 1983[28], the pioneering US CCM group The Imperials which came through AOHK in 1985[29], as well as the gospel folk singer Lily Chung who came in both 1982 and 1985[30].

1980: The Beginning of Local Gospel Folk

In the 70s, the gospel folk sung by both visiting music ministries and local groups were mainly English ones and local CCM did not take shape until the 1980s. The rise of local gospel folk in the Christian music scene in the early 80s indeed overlapped with a period during which "urban folk" emerged as a niche style in the mainstream music scene and as a label widely used by record companies, radio and print media in promotion (E. Wong, 2007; Y. W. Chu, 2009). Both the influence from Western gospel folk and the local music trend facilitated the rise of local gospel folk. The beginning of local gospel folk thus signaled Christian music's adoption of its

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[27] Sandi Patti won her first Gospel Music Association Dove award (the national CCM award of US) for artist of the year in 1982. She has won several Grammies since 1983. See Alfonso, 2002, pp. 217-220. For her tour to Hong Kong, see *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], December 5, 1982, p. 6.

[28] The Carpenter's Tools (title translated) consisted of 9 US teenagers. They were said to have performed in multiple states in the US, as well as Australia and Asia. "The music skills of Carpenter's Tools are of international standard and they were highly favored by teenagers", said the advertisement. See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], September 18, 1983, p. 2.

[29] The 1985 visit was the first time The Imperials had ever come to Hong Kong. The group was a very renowned CCM group in the US. The advertisement for the 1985 concert advertised the group as avant-garde, highlighting their achievements of winning 13 Dove Awards and 4 Grammies. See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], March 3, 1985, p. 2.

[30] Lily Chung came to Hong Kong for a gospel folk night with Breakthrough in 1982 and another folk crusade night with YWCA and an Evangelical Free church in 1985. She was a gospel folk singer that was born in Hong Kong and raised in the US. See *Breakthrough Monthly* [in Chinese], July 15, 1982, p. 30 and *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], August 11, 1985, p. 2; August 25, 1985, p. 8.

contemporary music style in the 80s, also marking the beginning of local CCM. A defining event in the history of local CCM was the "Hong Kong Contemporary Folk Writing Contest" in the year 1980, as recollected by my interview respondents.

Hong Kong Contemporary Folk Writing Contest (1980).

The contest was co-organized by *Breakthrough Monthly* and Hong Kong Arts Center and accepted songs for both the common folk (open/student) categories and the "Modern Folk Hymn" (open/student) categories. The contest differentiated itself from other folk contest as it was a folk writing rather than singing contest, and it addressed the lack of local folk songs while most other folk contests were still dominated by Western folk. The purpose of the contest was thus to encourage local youths to "uniquely reflect this era, this society, its sensibility and mentality through the writing of contemporary Chinese folk songs", and one of the rules stated that "entries has to be contemporary, reflecting modern Hong Kong society and Hong Kong people, or expressing the writer's values" ("Hong Kong Contemporary Folk", 1980). Entries in either Cantonese or Mandarin were accepted. The judging panel included Heyward Wong, famous local music educator Yip Wai-Hong, and the then famous performing artists Ruth Chen and Sunny Wong, combining classical and contemporary music tastes. The award ceremony of the contest was held in November 1980, and the response was so overwhelming that the organizer had to re-run the

show in January 1981[31]. Breakthrough released a cassette audiotape *Songs for the City* in 1982. With the promotional tagline "Singing out the dreams of the youth; Music that belongs to the youth; Pieces from the Hong Kong youth", it collected 13 local folk, including some of the award-winning songs in the 1980 contest[32].

Though there had been another hymn writing contest a few years earlier – the Chinese Hymn Writing Contest organized by Gospel Communication Center, which included a contemporary evangelistic hymn category that encouraged folk entries[33] – the contemporary folk contest in 1980 was far more influential for local CCM in comparison. The significance of this event for local CCM was three-folds. First, it encouraged a number of young Christians, who would later become the first generation of local CCM practitioners, to create CCM for the first time. Second, it provided a meeting place for these people which led to further collaborative efforts in the popularization of CCM in the years to come. Third, the cassette audiotape *Songs for the City* following the concert was the prototype of a later influential CCM series *Let's Sing a New Song*.

Let's Sing a New Song.

In 1982, a few months following the release of *Songs for the City*, Breakthrough released another cassette audiotape *Let's Sing a New Song* (Vol. 1), which became a

[31] See *Breakthrough Monthly* [in Chinese], October 15, 1980; November 23, 1980; January 15, 1981 pp. 26-28.
[32] See *Breakthrough Monthly* [in Chinese], January 15, 1982.
[33] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], April 17, 1977, p. 6; August 28, 1977, p. 1.

widespread "contemporary local Christian songs movement" (Gao, 1987). The advertisement said:

> Yet another breakthrough after *Songs for the City*
>
> A newly created contemporary Cantonese Christian songs cassette tape
>
> With the sensibilities of thankfulness, joy, offering, and sharing,
>
> *Let's Sing a New Song*.

The tape contained 13 contemporary Christian songs, mainly in the form of folk, some of which featuring well-known folk artist Ronald Tang, folk artist/DJ Ruth Chen and kid song artist Sunny Wong. Side B of the cassette was the MMO of all the 13 songs on side A, so that users could have ready-made music accompaniment when they sang these songs at church meetings.

The production and publication of *Let's Sing a New Song* shifted from Breakthrough to the newly established Hong Kong Association of Christian Music (ACM) in 1983 and has become a core part of ACM's work since then. The founding members of the association were the musicians and singers who met each other at the 1980 contemporary folk contest and also became the first generation of CCM production community, including Ben Ng, Edwin Chan, Yung Wai-Wun and others. ACM released seven volumes (Vol. 2 to Vol. 8) of the *Let's Sing a New Song* series in the 1980s, each release including live concerts that would help promote the songs.

Some of the songs in the series were aired by Christian DJs working in secular radio stations in their programs, although none of the songs had ever reached the radio song charts.

Responses from church traditionalists.

Local gospel folk soon took over the young generation in church. More local churches had their own folk singing groups in the 80s. Folk evangelism also became a fashionable way to reach out to youths and many "folk gospel nights" were held across churches in the early 80s. As local gospel folk and CCM became a more widely circulated form of music among church youths, to an extent challenging the privileged position of traditional hymns in church music, some church leaders began to voice their concerns. Traditionalists wrote articles in *Christian Weekly* to assert the value of traditional church music, while criticizing the music styles, accompaniment, lyrics, and performances of CCM, reminding believers must be cautious of the trend.

For example, one writer considered CCM a manifestation of a "fast-food culture". The rise of CCM seemed to be alarming for traditionalists. The writer expressed his/her disdain of the CCM phenomenon and the way it threatened traditional church music:

> Since a certain organization began to encourage Christians to create Chinese hymns, the whole Christian music scene has been led to move away from the realm of the sophisticated classic sacred music towards contemporary hymns and songs in simple melodies [... Church choirs] shifted from traditional

> hymns to contemporary folk or hymnal songs accompanied by guitar or other instrument (that are not piano). In churches, [youth] formed their own folk singing groups, writing their own hymnal songs for the annual folk writing contest. In some churches, the youth would rather form their own folk singing groups than joining the church choir [...] so church choirs are having fewer members, but there are more and more folk singing groups! [...] Sometimes I feel that these modern pieces do not have beautiful melodies, and the lyrics do not make sense either. ("Contemporary sacred music", 1986)

This writer's criticism of the music (melodies and instruments "that are not piano") and the lyrics of CCM was common at the time. For example, church music composer Yeung Pak-Lun's article summarized the major criticisms against CCM at the time in a few sentences:

> As for the modern sacred music, using popular music styles in combination with heavy rhythms, amplified sound systems and provocative moods, could it bring believers to God to enjoy the love, joy and peace of God? In terms of presentation, are they showing off their singing skills? (Yeung, 1984)

In general, CCM was criticized for using popular music styles, which was seen to be compromising the sacredness of church music. The choice of musical instruments in CCM was under heavy attack too: from guitars that were commonly used in gospel folk, bass guitars that produced "heavy rhythms", to the "'night-club-styled' synthesizer" and "night-club-styled drums"[34]. The use of microphones and amplifiers were also criticized because they destroyed vocal harmony, or basically rendered the music too loud. In terms of performance, stage effects such as lighting effects were rejected and presentation styles that resembled

[34] For example, see *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], November 4, 1984, p. 5; April 13, 1986, p. 7.

popular singers were undesirable. Furthermore, the lyrics of CCM were also criticized as superficial. For example, one of Gabriel Chi's articles (1986) specifically critiqued the grammatical and theological problems of one CCM song at the time.

There were also the neutral opinions. For example, K. K. Lee (1984) analyzed the reasons for the popularity of CCM among church youths and pointed out a few principles in the use of CCM, attempting to balance the perspectives of church youths and church music traditionalists, in his article "Contemporary Cantonese hymns and church youths". Heyward Wong (1984) also rectified the overwhelming criticisms against CCM with neutrality, reminding church leaders that "as the music environment of Hong Kong is gradually improving today, we must not let local sacred music ministry fall behind, nor let church music fall as second grade music". As a moderate voice, He concluded:

> Jesus...wanted to show them, [the place of worship] was not the most crucial issue. Today, if he was talking among us, he might as well say, "...For you to sing praise to God, it's not about the grand classical music, nor contemporary folk style music. God is a spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." (H. Wong, 1984)

A couple of articles in *Christian Weekly* defended CCM in general or ACM in specific. H. Lee (1983) expressed an optimism about the rise of local gospel folk and advocated folk evangelism as "one of the most 'advanced' and effective ways for evangelism". A local pastor, Mary Y. K. Au, defended ACM in particular:

> These hymnal songs have brought dawn light to modern music, countering the

> unhealthy popular songs and regenerating hope, energy and courage. I regret for not having supported [ACM] wholeheartedly in the past, so now I urge Christian musicians to grasp the opportunities of offering. Do not despise them. Lay aside prejudice. Bless the committed, but do not curse! (Au, 1985)

Apparently this was written in a time when traditionalists' opposition against ACM and its work was high. However, such oppositions had not stalled the development of local CCM. On the contrary, the CCM production community was preparing for the first wave of crossover to the mainstream music scene.

1986-1991: The First Wave of CCM Crossover

Equator.

After six volumes of *Let's Sing a New Song*, ACM personnel felt they had accumulated certain experiences in music production that would enable them to take CCM one step further into the mainstream scene. Their move was to promote a singing group Equator to the mainstream music scene with the debut album/cassette *A Compassionate World* in 1986. Equator initially consisted of five members, four female (Florence Ng, Sarah Yeung, Dorcas Kwok, Tam Pui-Fun[35]) and one male (Lau Heung-Wing). The group made three albums between 1986 and 1989 (see Appendix B). The former director of ACM described Equator's mainstream entry as a "groundbreaking move" (Personal interview, March 9, 2010). Unlike songs from the

[35] Tam Pui-Fun was later replaced by a male member Cheung Chung-Hon.

Let's Sing a New Song series, Equator's songs were aired in radio programs by non-Christian DJs such as Candy Chea, Eric Ng and Ngai Ping-Long. Some of their songs including "The Speechless", "This Song" and "Through Wind and Sand" went up the music charts of RTHK, CR and TVB, which was unprecedented in local CCM history. The following achievements of Equator were listed in a feature article in *Christian Weekly* in 1987:

> Since the release of Equator's *A Compassionate World* (gospel outreach albums and cassettes) in October 1986, Christian production has entered Hong Kong (local) popular music scene for the first time. The songs therein were listed on the RTHK's Chinese Song Chart and CR's Chinese Song Arena. One of the singers of Equator was nominated for The Most Promising New Talent of 1986. Besides, Equator has been extensively invited by radio and TV stations for performances and interviews.
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> [ACM was] often mentioned by radio hosts during broadcasts: "The first time for Christians to take part in constructing local popular music culture..." and its work has been well-acclaimed. (Gao, 1987).

However, the production team soon realized financial shortage to be a major problem in the crossover act. The local popular cultural scene in the 80s was defined by image and packaging (Chou, 1990; E. Wong, 2007). The success of the local pop stars such as Anita Mui and Leslie Cheung in the 80s could be attributed to their record companies' substantial investment in their image building. It was impossible for ACM to invest a comparable amount for Equator's image building and promotion. Although ACM tried to adopt the same strategies to promote Equator, the scale of their investment was incomparable with mainstream labels, as the former director

said:

> In terms of image design and stuff, we hired people for that at the time, but still, I mean we didn't have enough money to hire the best people, right, then, we just got the second or third tiers. So, when you stand side by side, or compare with the other stars with all those packaging, I mean, people would think, what are you? Right, so. (Personal interview, March 9, 2010)

The production team understood the importance of media exposure and promotion in the mainstream scene only after they had embarked on the project. The media exposure of Equator was clearly inadequate for them to be widely recognized. Little could be done given their limited promotional budget, so they were at a disadvantage in the show business culture in the 80s. The former director of ACM said:

> Turned out [the norm was] to minimize the production cost and maximize the promotional budget. Well, all we could do was to treat the DJs for dinners, I mean, at the time we hired a company to do promotion for us, an artist management company, and they spent us four hundred thousand, while our production cost was two hundred and some ten thousand. But that was just a small sum, compared with Anita Mui at the time I think, I mean for Mui it was not four hundred thousand for promotional budget. It's over a million, two million, three million just dumping in [...] and then, others treated people with abalones, while we could only pay for sweet corn soups, hahaha, you know what I am saying? Well so, it's way different, right, way different. I mean this was a pressure for us at the time. (Personal interview, March 9, 2010)

Equator did not have the wholehearted support from within the church community either. If ACM's *Let's Sing a New Song* series was something the church traditionalists could not put up with, it was not surprising that Equator's crossover act was even more controversial in the church community. Religiosity was often hidden

in Equator's songs and this was a problem for traditionalists. In 1988, a 10-part article "My opinions on popular hymnal songs", in critique of CCM (and implicitly the work of ACM), was published in *Christian Weekly* over a 2-month course. CCM continued to be criticized for its popular styles and accompaniment, lyrics, and performances. Although CCM practitioners would defend that their songs served the function of "pre-evangelism", in other words, preparing non-believers to be open to the gospel, the writer simply dismissed it as a "soft gospel" that would not lead to true repentance. The writer complained that "the insolent and wild sentiment of popular hymnal songs could only lead people to move their bodies along with the music", while the religious ambiguity in lyrical content was said to be "the most peculiar" property of CCM. Considering CCM as a "contamination of sacred music", the writer concluded: "I urge sacred music practitioners to stand as one to counter those unholy hymnal songs. Don't let them rule the church" (S. Y. Chu, 1988).

The harm done by discursive oppositions could not compare with practical boycott actions though. After Equator's crossover, Christian bookstores boycotted ACM and stopped shelving their albums – both Equator's albums and the *Let's Sing a New Song* series, as recollected by the former director:

> The Christian bookstores refused to order [Equator's] album. They refused, well, like that. Not only did they refuse to order that, but they said they wouldn't order *Let's Sing a New Song*. Boycott. They said you're not evangelizing any more. I mean at that time the church people's view about

> evangelism was really really narrow [...] such a pity. In the end it took us a lot of efforts to convince them to order those albums again. (Personal interview, March 9, 2010)

In face of oppositions from the traditionalists, there were also defenders for Equator and ACM. Eric So wrote three articles in *Christian Weekly* in favor of Equator's debut album *The Compassionate World* and CCM in November 1986[36]. In a feature article in *Christian Weekly* in 1987, ACM also defended itself by listing its achievements (partially quoted above) as well as highlighting the philosophy of the association as follows:

> (1) Demonstrate the creative nature of God through creating and performing music.
> (2) Make an impact in constructing culture in the society through music media.
> (3) Music is neutral. The division of sacredness and secularity depends on the motive and attitude of the user.
> (4) The influential power of music is affected by cultural background.
>
> (Gao, 1987)

The listed philosophy could be regarded as a response to address the debates about the value of CCM and the work of the association.

Unfortunately, after producing three albums for Equators, ACM had exhausted its financial resources and even accumulated a deficit of over two million. The Equator project thus had to be terminated.

Citybeat.

CCM's mainstream presence in the 80s also included the band Citybeat, which

[36] See *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], November 9, 16, 23, 1986.

was "best known as the first foreign band to record in Cantonese" in Hong Kong (Hong Kong pop, n.d.). The band consisted of four North American missionaries, John Laudon, Daryl Ching, Jym Kay and Jerry Marshall, who came to Asia through Youth with a Mission (YWAM) and eventually formed a band in Hong Kong for music outreach. They started out playing in schools, prisons, refugee camps and on the streets for outreach since 1985. Every Friday and Saturday night they played at the Star Ferry in Tsim Sha Tsui and in Tsim Sha Tsui East, and they started singing Cantonese songs in order to connect to the audience. The band got discovered by Armando Lai (a.k.a. Wai Yin), a lyricist in the mainstream music scene, who helped them record an album and passed on to Polygram which then signed the band and got them into the mainstream. The name of the band was to match with the atmosphere of Hong Kong – an urban environment with fast rhythm. Citybeat released four albums between 1988 and 1991 (see Appendix B). One of their greatest hits "Watching You", written around the parable of the prodigal son[37] from a father's perspective but had no religiously explicit words, stayed on the radio charts for nearly six months.

The band and the crossover act were treated as a ministry rather than a career, as a former member said: "We didn't really know where we were going with it, you know, just felt called to use music to share the gospel" (Personal interview, September

[37] This is a parable in the bible which describes God as a loving father who patiently waits for his runaway, prodigal son (metaphorical for the non-believers) to come home (Luke 15:11-31, NIV).

24, 2009). Compared with Equator, Citybeat's crossover journey seemed to be not as rough. Being a group of "Western" singers gave the band flexibility in the relationship with both the record company and the church community. On the one side, the record company did not impose many constraints that got in their way with evangelism; on the other, the church community seemed to have shown the band more tolerance despite their rock sound and image because of their Western background. When asked whether the recording contract with the mainstream label had caused the band any difficulties and constraints, they said,

> Not really, becoz we aren't, we weren't local, Chinese, Hong Kong kind of singers, so, [the record company] didn't really know what to do with us, so we just kinda do what we wanted, and they just, basically, you know they would set up a lot of promotion things, concerts, and then at the same time we still did other of the stuffs that we set up ourselves. (Personal interview, September 24, 2009)

The band still enjoyed the freedom to continue their ministry, while their mainstream exposure in fact became helpful for them to connect with their targets. The crossover did not compromise the ministry but complemented it, as a former member said:

> We played in a lot of schools, you know, played in prisons, we played on the streets. You know, we kept doing that. It didn't really change. We just got more exposures so more people kind of noticed us coz we were on TV up there a bit back then, [*Enjoy Yourself Tonight*][38] you know, like [*Jade Solid Gold*][39] you know that kind of stuff. So that was a really good exposure. So when we go to the school, we were already known by the kids and so, made it

[38] *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* (EYT) was a very popular live variety show of TVB in the 70s and 80s.
[39] *Jade Solid Gold* (JSG) was and is a weekly pop music program of TVB.

so much easier to share and stuff. So yea it worked very good, perfect actually. (Personal interview, September 24, 2009)

Citybeat did not have to face the same level of confrontations from the church as Equator did either, even though their music should have been even more unacceptable to traditionalists. The band's cross-cultural background had exempted them from direct confrontations. Since they did not grow out of any local church, few accusations were directed to them from local churches. Had the same kind of Christian rock been played by local church youths at the time, they would have been severely condemned by church leaders. The former lead singer of Citybeat said:

> [There's] never been much of a rock scene [for Christian music] here. They wouldn't accept it, I don't think. Then Citybeat came along. We were able to get away with it. We played in churches and we had long hair, but it was okay because we were Westerners. (Hong Kong pop, 2008)

Citybeat stopped playing as a band in 1991 as the members moved onto different stages in life or decided to go for new directions. In retrospect, the former lead singer concluded the experience with a very positive tone:

> It's almost like, like you know you always dream when you're a kid as a musician, play in a band, make CDs, big audiences, you know that's all kind of dream stuff, and it all, kind of happened and yet we were still able to use it to share the gospel, so you know, it's just so, one of the most exciting times in my life I think. A lot of fun. (Personal interview, September 24, 2009)

In terms of ministry, he assured that the project had achieved their ministry goals, even beyond their expectations:

> [It had done] more than we could have thought actually. Yea, more than we could have, I mean we weren't looking at numbers, how many people got saved, I mean, that's, that's so human actually. Jesus didn't seem to be

> concerned with numbers you know. [...] so for us it wasn't, you know oh we had how many thousands of people got saved, blah blah blah, but it was more than what we thought we would, God would use us. We were able to do far more than we thought, you know from when we started out you know. It was beyond our expectation, yea, we were thrilled, ha ha ha. (Personal interview, September 24, 2009)

Concluding the first wave of CCM crossover.

The first wave of CCM crossover took place at a period when band/group was a trend in the local pop music scene (E. Wong, 2007), and both Equator and Citybeat captured that current to present CCM to the mainstream audience in a band/group. The songs of both groups tended to be implicit with religion, not using Christian vocabularies in the lyrics but at times organizing the themes around the meaning of life or social commentary. The social consciousness of local CCM in the 80s was also demonstrated by Equator and Citybeat's participation in the Concert for Democracy in China, an all-star cause event to support the Beijing student protest, at Happy Valley Racecourse on May 27, 1989. In front of an audience estimated at 200,000, Equator sang their song "The Hidden Sun" and one of the vocalists Florence Ng also sang "The Speechless", whereas Citybeat performed an English song "Standing as One" that was written for the event.

While both groups/bands only lasted for two to three years in the mainstream music scene, they seemed to have gone through very different paths. Burdened by church oppositions and operated under an independent Christian label with relatively

limited financial resources, Equator's crossover became an under-achieved project; whereas Citybeat, backed by a mainstream label, had fewer strategic concerns and managed to over-achieve in their ministry riding upon their mainstream exposure.

At the turning of the decade, the first wave of CCM crossover came to a crossroads as the CCM community assessed the prospect of CCM crossover. In September 1989, a roundtable seminar titled "Gospel Pop Music and the Gospel for Pop Music" was held for the CCM community to discuss the future directions of gospel pop. In June 1990, another roundtable seminar "Gospel Singer – Where to Go" was organized. With Equator's project frozen, Citybeat stepping down, and a new trend of praise and worship music arriving Hong Kong to grab the attention of local churches, the first wave of CCM crossover came to a close as it entered the 1990s.

1990s: Praise and Worship Music

Praise and worship music swept the local Christian music scene in the 1990s and has cast a lasting impact in church music. Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) is contemporary music used for communal worship, and is sometimes discussed separately from the broader CCM genre (eg. Ward, 2003). In the late 1980s AOHK began to introduce praise and worship through albums titled *Songs of Praise* and contemporary worship events "Night of Praise", but it was in the 90s that praise and

worship became the central motif in the local Christian music scene. Since the early 90s there were more and more praise and worship nights, praise and worship training and seminars, praise and worship ministries, and praise and worship albums. Debates and discussions about the value of CCM also shifted to debates and discussions about CWM and the appropriate form of communal worship[40]. As the Christian community was so occupied with developing praise and worship, less effort was put in promoting CCM to outsiders in the 90s, although praise and worship events tended to mix in both gospel and edification elements from time to time.

CWM has impacted the local Christian music scene in at least two significant ways. First, as more local churches adopted CWM as the mode of worship, the demand for CWM would remain high and CWM products began to dominate the local Christian music market to a certain extent. Second, as local churches developed their contemporary worship ministries, more Christian musicians have been trained up which would help advance not only CWM but CCM in general.

2000 Onward: Some Developments and the Second Wave of CCM Crossover

As contemporary worship had stabilized as a legitimate mode of worship in local churches, the momentum for taking CCM outside the church community gradually

[40] For example, see *Christian Weekly* [in Chinese], April 19, 1998, p. 4; December 27, 1998, p. 5.

came back in the 2000s.

Technological development and multiple outlets.

In the previous decade, technological advancement has significantly lowered the cost of music production. It became possible for amateur and independent Christian musicians to produce their songs and albums at an affordable cost. The rise of CWM in the 90s had also encouraged more local Christians to take part in Christian music making. Church singing groups and/or bands as well as para-church music ministries flooded in the Christian music scene in the 2000s, and many of them would produce their own CCM albums.

As Evangelical media further developed and sought new forms and channels to speak to believers and non-believers, CCM has had multiple outlets in the 2000s. CCM continued to be sung and heard in large and small church events and crusade events, while one particular crusade format – the locally developed stand-up comedy crusade – has caught city-wide attention and also became one of the major occasions for CCM to be heard by a non-believing audience. The first stand-up comedy crusade, innovated by Enoch Lam and titled "The Brother Jesus Show", was organized by the local Evangelical media company, Media Evangelism, in 1999. Since 2003, Network J International organized the stand-up comedy crusade under the new title "Yeah Show" (pronounced similarly to "Jesus" in Cantonese) annually. Many Christian

performing artists have starred in Yeah Show and CCM has also been promoted through the show/crusade.

CCM has also been cross-marketed with Evangelical movies in the 2000s. The most prominent example was the song "Unreserved Love" that was promoted through the movie *The Miracle Box* (2004). Following the sacrifice of the local medical doctor Joanna Tse[41] during the SARS outbreak in 2003, a Mandarin CCM song "The Vow beneath the Rainbow", known as Tse's favorite song, circulated widely in the city. Filmed after Tse's story, *The Miracle Box* was the most successful local Evangelical movie, grossing over 6 million in local box office and ranked the 46th in the top box office record among the films that were shown in the same year. The theme song of the movie, "Unreserved Love", recorded by Samantha Lam (well-known local singer in the 80s) at the time, has become one of the most well-known CCM songs among the non-believing audience nowadays. The original soundtrack of *The Miracle Box* (distributed by EMI) sold 38000 copies, and "Unreserved Love" and "The Vow beneath the Rainbow" were the first CCM songs available in local karaoke lounges, opening up a new promotional channel for CCM.

Other media outlets for local CCM include the Creation TV channel (produced by Media Evangelism since 2003) on cable TV, the radio program *Music Passion*

[41] Tse became a widely respected figure in the city after her death and has been known as "The Daughter of Hong Kong" thereafter.

(produced by Door Ministries from 2004 to 2009) on Metro radio, and a Christian music video program *IG Music* (produced by CBN since 2007) shown in Saturday late night on ATV. Even though these programs have hardly been aired on the most popular channels and hours, they represent the continual endeavors of the CCM production community to break its music to a wider audience. Nonetheless, the new media have also made CCM more accessible through online music sharing platforms such as Youtube and online Christian radio.

The second wave of CCM crossover.

A second wave of CCM crossover could be spotted since the year 2007. A local church singing group Eternity Girls entered the mainstream music scene with their debut song "Home Sweet Home" in their gospel album *Eternity Girls*. Unlike their predecessors Equator and Citybeat, Eternity Girl's debut song was explicitly Christian. "Home Sweet Home" was originally the theme song of The Artists' Home, a local performing artist fellowship, and its religious orientation was obvious. It did receive fairly favorable airplay among the four major electronic media channels in Hong Kong however. Eternity Girls also received the Metro Radio Award for New Group Singers in 2007. Despite their brief mainstream career, Eternity Girls' crossover marked the beginning of the second wave of the CCM mainstreaming movement.

The mainstream music business in the 2000s is no less obsessed with image and

packaging than it was 20 years ago, so even though technological advance has lowered the production cost, Eternity Girls was still entering an investment-intensive business. The socio-cultural environment has changed in another way though. The secular media in general have become more open and tolerant to topics or discourses related to religion. In recent years religious references or metaphors could be found in some secular pop songs (though often as mockery of religions). Nowadays it is also much more common than in the 80s for performing artists to talk about their religious beliefs in the media. Some attribute this to the late Ray Chiao, a well-respected local actor, who was the first to address the Christian God in his acknowledgement speech when receiving his acting award in the 1990s. To a certain extent this cultural shift has created a favorable environment for the second CCM crossover movement.

The CCM production community also recognizes the pioneering contributions of the first generation CCM practitioners. The first wave of crossover served as examples and provided signposts for the late comers. What the first generation did was not only to take CCM to the outside audience but also to diffuse the idea of CCM crossover within the Christian community. In a way they had absorbed the initial oppositions and thus the second wave of crossover faced less resistance within the church circle. The creative director of Eternity Girls mentioned his indebtedness to Ben Ng, the chief of the Equator's project, in his recent interview with Ng:

> As we strike out again at the mainstream music scene nowadays, after some ten twenty years, what I felt was, we've seen what you had done at that time, we would know what and where things could go wrong, and we would know how to avoid them. [...] It seemed like you guys were, like defeated, but in fact no. You were the pioneers to show us how to do it. [...] The co-ordination from churches is already so different nowadays. You've sparked the discussion and in-depth reflection on the matter. They've thought over it, and after so many years, [...] when [Eternity Girls] came forward, everything was ready. People would work together, they would pray for you, and even organize events to work with you. So it's a great scenario. Though it was painful in the past, it's valuable. We have benefited from your fruits indeed. (Lau & Ng, 2010)

Although Eternity Girls left the popular music scene shortly, various pop artists have released their CCM albums in recent years, including *Never Say Never* (Peco Chui, 2008); *Tats Lau @ Love Mission* (Tats Lau and Love Mission, 2009); and *Shine* (Jade Kwan, 2009). These albums were released under independent music labels or the artist's own production. Some local pop artists who have a recording contract with secular music labels like Zac Koo and Sherman Chung also included some CCM songs in their pop albums.

Sammi Cheng's *Faith* album.

The best-known and best-selling gospel album in 2009 has to be Chinese pop diva Sammi Cheng's *Faith*. The album sales hit 150000 copies within 3 months since its release in December 2009, cutting across Christian and non-Christian audience alike. Sammi Cheng's reversion to Christianity was widely reported in the local press in 2007 and she was known to have become a committed believer since then. *Faith*

was a much anticipated project for the CCM community in 2009, although it soon proved to put the CCM production community in a peculiar situation. With Sammi's star status and the very pop style of the album, *Faith* has shown a wide audience a very edgy face of Christian music. The CCM production community has generally welcomed this changing perception for Christian music the album has generated in the local media and audience. However, *Faith* was produced and marketed in a very different capacity from other CCM projects. Unlike other CCM albums produced by independent Christian labels with an all-Christian crew, *Faith* was produced and marketed by a large mainstream label East Asia and the composers and lyricists of its songs were not necessarily Christians. Therefore, technically, *Faith* was not a product or achievement from within the CCM production community. This became the reason why the CCM production community could not wholeheartedly celebrate the success of the album although they would very much love to share its positive effects. The album has stirred up certain rethinking about definitions and principles in CCM production among the practitioners, as well as the future directions of CCM production.

In chapter 1 I pointed out that it is now a crucial moment to tap into the moves of CCM and its production community because it has come to a critical point where the genre might or might not be co-opted by mainstream music labels. In the US,

mainstream labels' involvement in the Christian market has had a decisive role in CCM development. It significantly increased the production budgets and quality of CCM to overcome some of the problems that haunted CCM in the early years, such as technically inferior record production, limited media exposure and poor distribution network. All of the successful independent Christian labels were eventually acquired by mainstream companies in the US. The US gospel industry is thus considered to have been co-opted by the mainstream recording business (Romanowski, 2005).

The case of Hong Kong might look quite different in this regard. This is not to say that local CCM has been immune from commercialization so far, but in the history of Hong Kong CCM, secular music labels have never been a driving force in the development (perhaps with the exception of Citybeat being affiliated with Polygram). The recent interest of recording companies in CCM is directly related to the business success of Sammi Cheng's gospel album. After the success of *Faith*, mainstream music labels came to recognize the business potential of CCM as a new niche market, which they are willing to explore given the shrinking record sales nowadays. Whether local CCM will allow secular co-optation to take place is yet to be unfolded, but the question signals a contingent future for local CCM.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I tracked the development of local CCM in Hong Kong from the late 60s to date. I started with the Western and regional influence which introduced local church youths to gospel folk in the late 60s and 70s. Then I examined the year 1980, the year that marked the beginning of local gospel folk, as well as local CCM, and observed that the local music trend for urban folk was a factor that gave rise to local gospel folk besides overseas influence. Although local gospel folk had not been a concern for church leaders as it first evolved, increasing resistance from traditionalists was met as it circulated more widely among church youths. I then looked at two significant singing groups and bands, Equator and Citybeat, in the first wave of CCM crossover between 1986 and 1991. I also talked about the 90s briefly, during which the local Christian music scene was swept by praise and worship music. Finally I talked about some recent development, including technological advance and the multiple outlets for CCM since the 2000s, as well as the second wave of CCM crossover starting 2007, marked by the crossover of Eternity Girls and complicated by the possibility of business co-optation.

Throughout the chapter we could see that church oppositions had heat up as local CCM evolved but then cooled down in the last decade. In the church community today, CCM basically exists alongside with traditional church music and CCM

practitioners generally face much less church resistance as long as they do not directly challenge the traditionalists. As for the interaction between CCM and the popular music scene as well as commercial practices, it might have grown increasingly complex over time. In the next few chapters, I will continue to show the dynamic interactions of the religious and media forces in the text, performance and star dimensions of CCM, before I come back to the question of mainstream co-optation in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 4

Mediating Religion through CCM Song Text:

Commerce, Evangelism and Creativity

> "...[U]ltimately you want more people to hear it. That's the bottom line, you know, whatever it takes to help, to have more people hear it, and then, as long as it sounds good, and it says the right thing."
>
> (Personal interview, September 24, 2009)

The above excerpt is taken from my interview with a CCM musician and it succinctly summarizes CCM practitioners' general view about their songs. This comment also points us to some fundamental questions about CCM songs: What should CCM sound like? What is the right thing to say in CCM? The music styles and the messages of CCM songs are my entry points to the text dimension of CCM. To answer the question how CCM song texts are shaped by the intertwining media-based and religious orientation frames, this chapter describes the characteristics of local CCM songs and discusses the ways practitioners organize stylistic and lyrical choices based on the orientation frames. In terms of music styles, I will present a mirroring of the local popular musical landscape in CCM's adoption of music styles, through which CCM indirectly deploys the commercial understanding of the general market to maximize the reach of its message, but at the same time I will also show that the musical decisions of CCM musicians are often faith-informed. Next, I will present the

typical textual arrangements of a few CCM theme categories to explicate the kinds of representation of Christian messages that are being created as Christian musicians negotiate their lyrical choices. I will also discuss the implications of the orientation frames for stylistic and lyrical creativity and ambiguity.

This chapter approaches CCM song text as the combination of the lyric and the musical properties of the song through which meaning might be suggested, rather than examining song lyrics alone like most textual analyses of songs do. My approach to song text is based on the assertion that song words must be understood in relation to the music setting (Frith, 1996). For example, music suggests meaning by creating rhythmic stress on certain words but not others. A lyrical line might be heightened in its intensity when its musical rhythm departs from its "natural" linguistic rhythm. Frith thus asserted, "the song becomes the preferred reading of the words" (p. 181). Similarly, the sound of music is heavily implicated in meaning construction. Shepherd (1991) drew our attention to first, music styles as iconic of social meanings, and second, meaning articulation through a significant but understudied musical parameter – timbre. He stressed timbre as "the tactile core of sound" and "the texture or grain without which sound cannot reach us, touch us or move us" (p.90). Thus the distinctive timbres of performers' vocal and instrumental playing must be addressed as important textual elements of songs. This being said, the study of lyrics should not

be dismissed in the textual analysis of local CCM for two reasons. First, the CCM production community maintains that lyrical content is often what sets CCM apart from secular music, given the increasing convergence in music styles. Second, while there is a certain level of doubt in Western popular music studies as to whether listeners actually pay attention to pop lyrics, pop music consumption in Hong Kong has been predominantly tied to song lyrics (Witzleben, 1999). Thus, CCM song text is best treated as the combination of the lyric and the musical properties of the song, with an awareness of the complementary relation of music/words where music interacts with words by "eliciting dimensions of the meaning of words which are often not explicit" and enabling listeners to "participate...in ways not possible through words alone" (Begbie, 2003, p. 102).

The Parallel CCM and Popular Musical Landscapes

CCM is adaptive to the music styles of its time. The musical landscape of CCM basically mirrors its mainstream counterpart. Given the small music market in Hong Kong, genre labels are not used in popular record selling, music charts or awards. Instead, local pop albums often represent bodies of work assembled from a wide repertoire and local singers are to develop their music on a pastiche of styles (Witzleben, 1999). Likewise, it is hard to speak of different music styles as sub-genres

in local CCM although CCM tends to adopt different styles to maintain cultural relevance. Today, CCM has adopted a wide range of music styles, from Canto-pop, to R&B and hip-hop, to blues, jazz, bossa nova, reggae, to rock, to waltz, to retro, etc. Certainly, adoption concentrates more on certain styles than others.

As CCM production involves more professional musicians who are also working in the popular music industry, its sounds become increasingly indistinguishable from popular music. As one of the professional musicians I interviewed said, "there's not a huge difference musically anymore [between CCM and popular music...] the music side is not a huge difference" (Personal interview, September 24, 2009). Composers tend to consider any song they compose equally appropriate for Christian music as it is for the mainstream. To counter the demonization discourse of popular music as "devil's music" in the Christian community in the past, they tend to neutralize popular music: music is neutral; what matters is the lyrical message it carries. In the following I will map out the local CCM landscape that has developed parallel to the pop landscape.

CCM x Canto-pop: Targeting the mass.

To appeal to popular taste and align itself with the kind of music most commonly heard by local listeners in their everyday life, the majority of Hong Kong CCM is written in the form of Canto-pop, which is also the dominant music style in the Hong

Kong popular music market. In general, Canto-pop is a sound that combines the influences of Western pop music with Chinese elements such as Chinese folk songs, the use of pentatonic scales, traditional Chinese musical instruments, and Chinese literature and poetry (E. Wong, 2007). The music style of Canto-pop has been described as that of "contemporary soft rock", "pop ballad sung in Cantonese", and what would be commonly known as "easy listening" in the West, whereas its lyrics are "almost exclusively of an amorous nature", and singers normally do not write their own music or lyrics (Brace & Friendlander, 1992; J. Lee, 1992; G. Lee as quoted in Witzleben, 1999).

Since the emergence of karaoke in Hong Kong in the late 80s, Canto-pop is more and more associated and at times synonymous with "K-songs", whose common features are a slow tempo, a piano dominant and strings accompanied arrangement and an AABA structure with incessant repetitions of the chorus part (E. Wong, 2007). Most local CCM songs resemble this type of music structure and arrangement. Most of them are within the slow to medium tempo range of 60-85 beats per minute and follow the AABA structure (some with additional pre-chorus or bridge sections). Musical arrangements of local CCM are usually characterized by sparse piano or guitar plucking accompaniment in the beginning, rhythmic instruments such as bass and drums that soon enter, and most noticeably, excessive use of strings and/or

(sometimes overdriven or distorted) electric guitar for dynamic building. Also, it often features an electric guitar solo section in the interlude to boost power, and mark the most powerful section of the song (usually the last chorus) with intense strings accompaniment (eg. moving to a higher octave; rich bowing) and/or increased effects with the electric guitar. As I discussed the themes of CCM songs with more specific examples below, it will become obvious that these typical Canto-pop musical features are found in many local CCM songs. The CCM production community has also managed to liaise with local karaoke groups for including CCM songs in the song list at local karaoke parlors.

Canto-pop is said to provide a crucial escape and fantasy function for local people in this stressful city (Witzleben, 1999) and significantly delineates a local Hong Kong identity (McIntyre, Cheng & Zhang, 2002). It is the music style a majority of local audience finds most accustomed to in their everyday life. For CCM to reach a large local audience, it goes beyond doubt to concentrate its adoption on the Canto-pop style.

CCM x R&B: Christian music is chic.

Rhythm and Blues (R&B) is another popular music style CCM has adopted, paralleled to the increasing recognition of R&B in the local pop music scene. Since the late 90s and early 2000s, R&B has been regenerated and cast a remarkable

influence to the global pop music market, and a similar trend is taking place in Hong Kong. R&B has become the most common music style next to Canto-pop in the local pop music scene in recent years[42], with great hits such as Hins Cheung's "Cool Love" (2007) and Khalil Fong's "Love Song" (2008). Well-known music critic Elvin Wong (2007) has also identified R&B as a flourishing music style in the Hong Kong pop music scene in recent years. R&B is consumed as a sound for the trendy who generally pride themselves in a more advanced musical taste compared with the mass which is weak in telling different music styles apart. To pose itself as trendy, local CCM has followed suit in adopting the R&B style, which is marked by emphatic backbeats, heavily syncopated rhythms, and improvisatory vocal expressions. While R&B is also known for its sexual suggestiveness, this does not seem to bother the CCM community that assumes content could be detached from form. Adopting the R&B style is acceptable as long as no erotic lyric is used. Christian singers might adopt the sensual singing voice as they sing R&B songs to retain the genre's flavor but this is usually considered only emotionally expressive but not sexually suggestive. In local CCM, both smooth R&B that expresses the enjoyment of life (Charlton, 2008) and fast-paced R&B that signifies emotional intensity are used. For example, as a smooth R&B, Good News Messengers' "Journey" (2009, tempo: 60), articulates life

[42] Fifty-nine most popular songs compiled from the Best Songs of the Year Category in the local music awards of RTHK, CR and TVB in 2007-2009 are coded by music style.

as a journey on which one embarks and eventually discovers God's ever abiding love. The general chill-out and layback mood of the smooth R&B style goes well with the journey metaphor. Another example is the rearrangement of a song "Without You" originally published in the '90s. Rearranged into a 72-bpm smooth R&B and recorded by Jade Kwan (2009), the song both gains a hipper touch and articulates the Christian commitment to the service of God not as a burden but as a natural expression of life. In terms of the stronger sounds, another song by Jade Kwan, "In the Beginning" (2009, tempo: 80) addresses the fall of human kind in general and the drug problem in the society in particular through the style of a heavier R&B and techno fusion with rap interludes.

CCM x hip-hop / rap: The cool, the rough, the creative ground.

Local CCM has also adopted the hip-hop style, another increasingly influential music style in global music as well as in Hong Kong. Rap music was originally formed as an expression of urban African Americans' existential concerns, but today rap and hip-hop artists are united by their urban experience rather than by race (Detweiler & Taylor, 2003). In Hong Kong, a local rap music has evolved in the pop scene (E. Wong, 2007) and its presence is represented in local music awards[43]. Local CCM adopts the hip-hop style, first of all, because it has a sense of "coolness" that

[43] Three out of the 22 songs that were named Best Songs of the Year in 2008 were rap songs. Sample same as above.

appeals strongly to the young audience. At a CCM live performances I attended, the young audience's attention was instantly grabbed by the stage as soon as two performers started rapping in a song. Some of the young audience started standing up to catch sight of the stage, so did a few teenagers sitting in front of me, who had been privately mocking some other CCM performances not of their tastes. They also moved their bodies along with the strong beat during the song. It shows that hip-hop has a strong appeal to capture the attention of the young audience. Second, as an expression of collective urban experience, hip-hop is well-suited for confronting the reality of life, which the Christian message fundamentally seeks to address. Again, CCM's adoption of rap detaches the music style from its notoriety such as offensive language and sexism, but retains the grass-root language in general. In the local Christian music scene, hip-hop music tends to synthesize rap with religious references such as biblical scriptures and familiar tunes from traditional church music. The following are three examples of the local Christian hip-hop.

The first example is Angela Au's "The Blessings of God" (2006), a song written for the Chinese New Year occasion, which articulates the Christian view of blessing through the urban collective experience of New Year greeting. In the beginning of the song, a rapper raps a range of auspicious greetings locals commonly address to each other during the New Year, but then he seems to realize these greetings could all be

fable. Next a vocalist enters to sing of the blessings from God as the source of her strength in life, using the tune from the famous hymn "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" as part of the melody and quoting from the scripture "The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it" (Proverbs 11: 5, NIV) in the lyrics. Musically, the song also fuses Chinese and Western tunes and musical instruments.

A second example is Peco Chui's "His Will" (2008), which synthesizes rap, the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6: 9-13) and the tune of "The Common Doxology". The song starts with the rapping of a grass-root illustration of the Lord's Prayer, followed by the first chorus – the repeated singing of "God listens to prayers every day". In the second rap section, a frustrated middle-aged male character expresses his plight and a suicidal attempt, which was interfered by God as the rap develops, followed by the second chorus – the repeated singing of "He will make a way every day". The final chorus section uses a call-and-response form to combine the singing of the Lord's Prayer with the rapping of a man's hopeful foresight. The song ends with a piano solo of the last line of "The Common Doxology".

Another song, Henry and Roger Chung's "To Do Justly, To Love Mercy" (2009) uses the rap style for social commentary. The title of the song is directly quoted from the scripture "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"

(Micah 6: 8). The phrase "To do justly / To love mercy / To walk humbly with God" is repeatedly rapped and sung in the song while the singers' vision of Christian citizenship as inspired by that scripture is also elaborated in the rap in a reflective and satirical manner. The song is remarked as featuring "Da Fishamen", which at once parodies the local hip-hop group FAMA (whose Chinese name literally means farmer) and makes reference to Jesus' disciples, among which include fishermen who left behind their original tracks of life to follow Jesus.

As shown in these examples, CCM's adoption of hip-hop captures the essential rawness of rap to express and confront the reality of life or to make critical social commentary. Rappers take it for granted for being confrontational, as a rapper featured in one of the rap songs said, "It's a bit blunt. But I only know how to rap in a blunt way. Sorry. I just say what's on my mind."[44] Christian rap is not necessarily written by experienced rappers though. Rather, some of it is work of experimentation by CCM musicians who are simply trying their hands in different styles. For example, the writer of the aforementioned "The Blessings from God" explained the experience of stepping out of his usual style to learn writing hip-hop:

> If I'm not familiar with [the music style], I'll learn. Well, like for [the song] "The Blessings of God", like I said, I really knew nothing, man, how would I know about hip-hop? I don't even really like it. But then I thought, wait, if I had to write a song for non-Christians, and say to send it out for them to play it

[44] "The making of 'In the Beginning'" [video]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRD44eQ8zog&feature=related

> in their cars, or just send it out for them to listen. One song. It's just one song. One chance only. Then what would be that style. Well then let's take it to the far end. That's why I learnt hip-hop coz it's something way far, it's really fun. It sounds like that kind of song, like rap, it's something I want for the song. So I started to learn. Listening to on-line hip-hop channel for weeks, which was in Korean. I don't even know Korean. Well, it's a bit of a dread indeed. (Personal interview, September 8, 2009)

This musician's account once again highlights the cultural power of hip-hop, particularly among non-believers, which makes it worth the effort to go extra miles in experimenting style adoption. The above examples also show that hip-hop is arguably an area where music appropriation by CCM is most creatively taking place.

CCM x rock: The under-developed zone.

While CCM is also known as Christian rock in the US, rock, and even just pop-rock, is not an active music style in Hong Kong CCM. This is connected to the fact that rock is not a mainstream music style in Hong Kong, in contrast to its US counterparts, but only has appeal to a niche audience (or the city's small minority of Western inhabitants, as observed by Witzleben, 1999) or the underground scene. The rare examples of Hong Kong Christian rock include Sonsetfree's "Who Can Help Me" (2005) in which the frustrations of the song's "I"-character are expressed through the metal sounds and the shouting by the strained vocal. While this band plays some of the loudest music in the local CCM scene, they said their sound is already very gentle and they addressed the obscurity of rock culture in Hong Kong: "ours is melodic rock, just a little, slightly rock. The dirtier sounds, I think Hong Kong people seldom hear

them. I mean when you go to the clubs, those at the underground scene, those are really dirty" (1G Music # 46).

Love Mission, a Christian band put together by a famous rock player Tats Lau, also released a few rock songs including "Great Power and Love" (2009), which celebrates the power and love of God as the resources for one to run the "race of life", and "Walking With the Lord" (2009), a rock ballad that hails God's salvation. As the local audience does not have a taste for rock and its rebellious attitude, musical accommodation is made in CCM to avoid agitation. In order to increase the penetration of the Christian message, rock artists have to adjust their sound for the mass. In fact, Lau has been very well-known for his rock and electronic talent in the popular music industry, but he felt that he needed to tone down the rock sound as he started making Christian music since his conversion to Christianity in recent years. He explained the music style of his Christian band:

> Well, our style is [rock], but, there'll be more pop elements. [...] The reason why we form this band is to evangelize, therefore, musically we can't be too, well, um, I mean we have to be more aware of both the avant-garde and popular tastes. I mean we don't want to divert from the mass so much, that way the receptivity would be higher. And, when they are receptive, they like our songs, then we can penetrate more through the content, I mean show them more about our Lord or his messages in the content then. (Personal interview, February 4, 2010)

It shows that evangelism overrides rock artists' musical preference. In his live performances, this musician has been very conscious in monitoring the acceptance of

his music in the audience. He generally issues "warnings" or "disclaimers" to the audience that his music might be a bit loud and rock before he actually starts playing, and regularly checks on audience tolerance between songs.

Another young singer who is developing her career in the mainstream music scene with a rock sound said she would also love to develop her Christian rock sound, as she referenced the multitude of Christian rock music in the West:

> I listen to lots of Western gospel songs, actually a lot of them are rock. And I'm like, ah! I love it! I mean once I listen to more gospel songs from the West, I would feel, wow. Actually the gospel songs in Hong Kong, I mean they're all like kind of easy listening, very slow, or just a little brisk, I mean they seldom go really loud and really rock. [...] So actually I'd thought of [recording Christian rock], well this is something that could be done. (Personal interview, February 10, 2010)

Making reference to "Western gospel songs", this artist reckoned that rock as a CCM style is not without potentials. However, the sonic preference is different in Hong Kong after all. This artist's first CCM recording was a regular ballad and her rock potential has yet to be utilized. Rock thus represents an under-developed zone in local CCM, which again parallels the local pop music landscape.

CCM x blues, jazz and world music: The classy and the different.

Blues and jazz are music styles that CCM has recently explored. In the local music scene, blues and jazz are also niche markets as the mass audience in general is not too familiar with these styles although strictly speaking, many contemporary styles like R&B, hip-hop, rock, and pop actually have their roots and influences from

blues and jazz. Jazz is sometimes considered an inconvenient style to be adopted in CCM because it requires a highly expressive song performance which some consider inappropriate in the CCM context. The expressive voice is thought to suggest self-indulgence and possibly overshadow the Christian cause of the music. A CCM singer I interviewed said,

> In terms of the presentation it might become, more like showing off yourself, so, there'd be listeners who thought, well, are you making a performance or what, and so. After all, as a gospel singer, that line is, I mean hard to draw, like, if you go over it becomes a performance, but, I mean our responsibility does not rest on performance. (Personal interview, September 10, 2009)

Despite the doubt, there appear to be some exploratory moves for CCM to use blues, jazz as well as world music in recent years. Some of the examples include Henry and Roger Chung's "I Have a Dream" (2009, blues), "That Morn Shall Tearless Be" (2009, reggae), Jade Kwan's "Cutie Girl" (2009, flamenco), and Peco Chui's "Generation of Love" (2008, Motown). Two Christian musicians put together an album that features a wide range of music styles and placed it in the jazz section of local record chain stores in 2009. As the first local Christian album marketed as a jazz collection, it was intended to "tell people gospel music can be high-class" (Personal interview, October 6, 2009) and in particular, to target hi-fi lovers who value timbral perfection.

The paralleling musical landscape and ministry.

As shown above, the music styles of CCM today stay close to the styles

generally found in the mainstream, as a musician described his approach to CCM production: "I just work it according to the market" (Personal interview, September 8, 2009). Mirroring the popular musical landscape is safe because the pop landscape already designates what styles general listeners like or dislike and how the market is segmented. CCM thus indirectly deploys the commercial understanding of the market as it references the pop landscape for its own pastiche of styles to maximize its reach. The adoption of popular music styles therefore represents, in one way, the deployment of media-based judgment. Yet it is also motivated by evangelism and the assumption of a need to accommodate, and is a highly faith-informed practice for many Christian musicians, as they typically find justification from the biblical source. This can be seen as an instance where practitioners integrate the media-based frame and the religious frame in the mediation process. For example, one of the musicians explained his incorporation of popular elements and various music styles in CCM:

> Actually it's based on what I understand from the bible, where it says in order to win whatever kind of people, you have to become that kind of people, [...] to a certain extent you need to stay in step with the society, so that others could hear what you're saying. I mean perhaps you're telling people you want to deliver positive messages but when you don't have a common language to communicate, they won't hear you. So in my album actually I'm kind of bold to put in some very pop elements, even some music styles that I haven't tried before, [...] for getting across the message to people out there, [...] to give them a sense that the so-called religious or gospel songs, oh, they can also be so popular, like so modern. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

The scriptural reference this musician made: "I have become all things to all men so

that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9: 19-22) is a religious principle that supports Evangelical Christians' constant explorations of new forms and strategies of evangelism. Popular music styles and pop music elements are some of the many "possible means" of evangelistic outreach. Construed as a "common language" that helps to restore communication between the Christian community and the contemporary generation, popular music styles convey relevance and repudiate the stereotypical perception of Christian music (or message) as old-fashioned.

Another amateur musician who sourced a wide range of music styles in his album said:

> Our mentality was, maybe this album is the only album we would release. Maybe we won't make another one. Well because of that, let's take it farthest musically [...] because, our stance is, I mean Jesus Christ said, you have to go and make disciples of all nations. You have to be in Jerusalem, to the ends of the earth. Speaking of the ends of the earth, which totally inspired us, we felt, hey Jesus told us not to just stay in the church, like we have to step out of the boundary of the church. The more people reached the better, right. (Personal interview, October 6, 2009)

This musician's account again draws on scriptural references. He finds motivation to explore on CCM styles from Jesus' teaching on evangelism and outreach (Matthew 28: 19; Acts 1: 8). The aim of expanding the reach of the gospel justifies musical exploration. These references to biblical scriptures reflect musicians' use of institutional religious resources as they seek their appropriate responses to the musical resources available in everyday media.culture.

CCM can tap the general music pulse not only by referencing the pop landscape but also through musicians who are working in both the mainstream music scene and Christian music. The exposure of these musicians in the popular music industry has strengthened their media-based judgment which they can contribute to CCM in keeping up its quality, so that it can spread the message further. One of these professional musicians said:

> I think the mixture [of mainstream and Christian music involvement] for me has been good because, it keeps me more cutting-edge, coz ah, for the mainstream you have to be modern, you know you have to be up there. And then, because a lot of the Christian stuff, if you didn't have that, you end up staying in a bubble of that style, and not really pushing through and so. And because I've been able to [work in the mainstream music scene], when people ask me to do something, I have more freedom to do it a little more different or, you know not so typical or, or maybe you know, just maybe more commercial, because ultimately you want more people to hear it. That's the bottom line, you know, whatever it takes to help, to have more people hear it, and then, as long as it sounds good, and it says the right thing. (Personal interview, September 24, 2009)

As this professional musician indicated, as they input their media-based resources in the otherwise stagnant CCM scene, it helps to keep CCM in step with the general music trend and give it a better appeal to the general audience. This musician's account is also where the excerpt I quoted in the beginning of the chapter comes from. As much as professional musicians assert CCM can benefit from a more "commercial" sound, they also recognize the importance for CCM to have integrity in its message.

Stylistic experimentation and creativity in CCM.

Given this paralleling musical landscape shaped by musician's active decisions, I would like to pursue its implications for stylistic creativity. Although CCM largely mirrors the trend of the pop music scene, it does not rule out creativity in its music making. Many musicians treat musical adoption as experiences of experimentation where they try out different elements. Take Christian hip-hop as an example. Hip-hop is arguably an area where music appropriation by CCM is most creatively taking place. It is a great form to incorporate elements from very different sources because at the heart of hip-hop music is the "sampling" technique. As described above, Christian hip-hop often skillfully weaves together a local style rap and religious references including biblical scriptures and familiar tunes from traditional church music, to give religious relevance to social critique and social relevance to religious discourse. The creativity of Christian hip-hop thus lies in its ability to mobilize fragments from the different discursive formations in which it is embedded (cf. Pinn, 2003).

We might scrutinize the conditions of musical experimentation from media-related and religious factors. CCM artists' musical experimentation has a professional condition, an economic condition and a religious condition. In terms of the professional condition, the musician role necessitates experimentation for writers to stretch musical boundaries and to break away from their previous works. This

professional condition is also interlaced with an individualist approach to creativity, as CCM musicians generally acknowledge their creative process as characterized by moments of inspiration. Also related to the professional condition of creativity is cross-fertilization of the musicians. As discussed above, professional musicians who are involved in both the mainstream music scene and CCM scene tend to accumulate additional symbolic resources through their mainstream exposure, which allow them to "have more freedom to do it a little more different or...not so typical" when they handle Christian music (as quoted above). This is especially significant as we understand CCM creativity as stemming from the mobilization of symbolic resources from different discursive formations. In terms of operation mode, CCM as independent production affords it certain freedom to be unconventional whereas creativity is usually seen to be stifled by the corporate machine in the mainstream industry. For example, one of the professional musicians I interviewed said, "I mean even some Christian stuff is more, more adventurous than commercial stuff, you know coz they don't need to sell, or get it on the radio or something. Some stuff, you go, wow that's cool, you know." He raised a couple of CCM examples that were able to try on new musical elements and were therefore "different" and "in the secular, you don't hear that kind of stuff very often". (Personal interview, September 24, 2009) In terms of the religious condition, creativity is valued for outreach capacity, like the

aforementioned writer who experimented on the hip-hop style as he considered: "if I had to write a song for non-Christians…One song…One chance only…then let's take it to the far end."

Although creative potentials might be found in some CCM projects, there is also a view that nothing has been musically groundbreaking in CCM in recent years. If the musician's professional role, cross-fertilization, the independent operation mode of CCM production, and outreach capacity could all encourage creativity, why hasn't stylistic creativity been flourishing in the CCM scene as vibrantly as it should? The religious condition of musical experimentation might be the answer. Although the production community recognizes the outreach capacity of creativity, this utilitarian emphasis might exactly confine creativity as well. If the value of creativity is solely tied to its outreach capacity, creativity will always be subjugated to evangelism. Based on ministry needs, creativity is useful but not necessary for CCM. If the bottom line for CCM is to get more people to hear the message, then creativity is great as long as it can attract a wider audience; but there is no further incentive for groundbreaking music experimentation. That being said, I am not offering a pessimistic reading of the potentials of stylistic creativity in CCM. Various popular music scholars have pointed out that musical production is not so much about sudden bursts of innovation but the continual production of familiarity and newness. Creativity occurs in works in "a

recognizably familiar but slightly different way" (Negus, 1998, p. 363) and thus the unit of creativity is always a small one (Tonybee, 2000). On this note, the "slightly different-ness", those small creative achievements in CCM are still crucial, although creativity might always be overshadowed by ministry concern in the mediation process.

Theme Categories and Representations of Christian Messages

Having discussed the shaping of CCM music styles extensively, next I will analyze the theme categories of CCM and their textual patterns to sketch the representations of Christian messages in local CCM. Developed from Howard and Streck's (1999) rationales for CCM, at least six categories emerge as themes for CCM. From perspectives that justify CCM for the purpose of evangelism, worship facilitation and exhortation emerge the theme categories of *gospel*, *praise and worship*, and *devotional*. These three theme categories are in fact also canonical in traditional church music, although the textual arrangements are quite different today. From the view that CCM works as "positive pop", three other theme categories emerge: *inspirational*, *relational*, and *social awareness*, whereas the social awareness infuses the mentality of social critique as well. These theme categories represent Christian messages to the audience in various ways. Nowadays, conventional

religious opinions which consider that the conversion (or salvation) message should be a core message in Christian music are being challenged. For example, in his effort of establishing a model for faith-informed engagement with popular culture, Romanowski (2007) challenged the established view by asking: "Is confessional appearance the only way to characterize 'Christian' pop art?" (p. 35). In the following, I try to address the representations of Christian messages by considering this question and examining both categories where the conversion message is centrally present and where it is absent.

Gospel and devotional: The formulaic representation of the conversion message.

First, I will look at two categories which contain the conversion message – gospel and devotional. From the approach of historical hymnological models, the devotional theme might precede the gospel theme. The devotional theme could be traced to Wattsian hymnody while the gospel theme is associated with the later model of Revivalist hymnody (Viljoen, 2006). Hymns written by one of the greatest hymn writers in history, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), were worship and devotional in nature. They made no appeal to the lost souls as they were informed by the Calvinistic theology which posited predestination and election. Human was seen as powerless to change their predetermined status of salvation, so hymn writers were not at a position

to seek out the lost souls and attempt to convert them. Not until the advent of the Wesleys (John Wesley, 1703-1791 and Charles Wesley, 1707-1788) did a shift in hymnological model take place. The Revivalist hymns focus on evangelistic outreach to win souls through conversion, as Wesleys believed that salvation is available to all and every person has freedom to decide whether or not to be saved. Human is subject to persuasion and hymns could be used as an endeavor to convert, thus developed the gospel theme (Cusic, 1990). Though originated from different hymnological models, gospel songs and devotional songs in CCM today are similar in many ways. The two categories almost converge on a formulaic textual arrangement, and articulate a unified image of the loving God, which will be shown below.

While "gospel" remains as a catch-all term in local CCM today, I define the "gospel" category in an exclusive rather than an inclusive sense, referring to songs that present the Christian faith as the "good news" of life and call for people to accept the Christian faith. These songs make explicit reference to "God", "the Lord" or "Jesus", who is a caring, understanding and patient God. Although usually unspecific, the "you" in gospel songs are addressees to whom the gospel message is preached, therefore likely non-believers. These songs usually start with addressing a condition of alienation, typically expressed in terms of exhaustion, confusion, feelings of loneliness and meaninglessness, and then point to God as the compassionate reliever,

but do not always carry a strong atonement discourse. The thematic marker for gospel songs is the conversion call – the invitation for commitment to the Christian faith.

Devotional songs generally articulate the conviction and struggles in a Christian life, but the texts of these songs are in many ways similar to the gospel songs. The prototypical devotional song expresses an enthusiasm for a purposeful life inspired by the conversion experience or the interference of God in one's struggles. Like the gospel category, devotional songs also set up negativities in life and fulfillment as binary, but with an additional element that mediates the two: a divine encounter. Typical words depicting the negativities in life include "sorrows", "sighs", "despair", "pain", "hurts", "difficulties", "storms", "doubts", and "misery". The divine encounter is articulated as an experience one "see(s)", "hears", "discover(s)", "realize(s)", or one's "eyes (of the heart)" are "opened" to and "stunned" by the act of God. The response is being "grateful", having the dedication to "hold tight to the faith", "offer" oneself to God, "spread God's mercy", "witness for God's power" – all in all a fulfilled and devoted Christian life.

Through the following examples – a gospel song "Home Sweet Home"[45] (Eternity Girls, 2007) and a devotional song "Dedicate My All" (Eternity, 2004) – we can see the similar textual arrangements of the two categories.

[45] "Home Sweet Home". Composer: Li Kin Tak. Lyricists: Li Kin Tak / Cheung Cheung Zi. OP: T2K Asia Music Limited.

Eg 1. Gospel: "Home Sweet Home" (B Major, Tempo: 65)

	Timbre
Instrumental intro (bar 1-8):	
8 bars: Bar 1-4 piano only. Acoustic guitar plucking enters in bar 5.	
Verse 1 (bar 9-16):	Piano only.
Do you find your footsteps weary Reality driving you to feel helpless All about rushing around day and night Hustle and bustle / Seems never-ending	
Verse 2 (1st time) (bar 16-22):	Acoustic guitar plucking enters. Sparse shaker sounds.
Wishing to let you know God is love Been with you every second on the road Would you accept this pure love A life of joy / Full of delight and wonders	
Chorus (1st time) (bar 23-30):	Bass and strings enter. Sparse tambourine sounds (on beat 4 only). Multiple vocal parts on some lines.
Come home / Lay down the hurts Look through the lies in this world In perplexity and darkness / He always thinks of you Come home / Even though it's an ice cold world outside / In this house / There's the love of the Lord / Be no longer afraid	
1st interlude (bar 31-33):	
3 bars: Piano and acoustic guitar first, bass and strings enter in bar 32. Drums enter in beat 4 of bar 33.	
Verse 2 (2nd time) (bar 34-40):	Drums on full pattern. Acoustic guitar and strings increase density. Strong bass line. Increased vocal variety.
Wishing to let you know God is love Been with you every second on the road Would you accept this pure love A life of joy / Full of delight and wonders	
Chorus (2nd time) (bar 41-48):	Increased rhythmic intensity created by drum and bass improvisations.
Come home / Lay down the hurts Look through the lies in this world In perplexity and darkness / He always thinks of you	

Come home / Even though it's an ice cold world outside / In this house / There's the love of the Lord / Be no longer afraid	Increased vocal texture. Multiple vocal parts on almost all lines.

2nd interlude (bar 49-51):

3 bars: Electric guitar solo. All other instruments heighten.

Chorus (3rd time) (bar 52-63):	Drums roll in. All instruments increase density and improvisations.
Come home / Lay down the hurts Look through the lies in this world In perplexity and darkness / He always thinks of you	
Come home / Even though it's an ice cold world outside /	Multiple vocal parts in all lines. Overall richest instrumental and vocal texture.
In this house / There's the love of the Lord / Be no longer afraid In this house / There's the love of the Lord /	All instruments subside except piano.
Don't be afraid	Piano subsides. Vocal only.

Instrumental outro (bar 64):

Piano only.

As seen in this example, the first verse of a gospel song usually addresses and appeals to an almost universal emotional distress – in this case, weariness, helplessness and hustle-bustle of life – using relatively quiet musical accompaniment. The phrase "weary" in the first line is set to a triplet note to highlight the distress. Verse 2 usually introduces God in the scene as the hope of relieving the situation, with enriched musical layers to slightly uplift the mood of the song. In this example, the

introduction of God is emphasized by setting the phrase "God is love" in the first line to a triplet note. Also, while the last line of verse 1 "Seems never-ending" is sung on a set of descending notes (B-A flat-B-A flat-F sharp) to stress burden and despair, for verse 2, the line "Full of delight and wonders" contrasts that despair by using virtually the same phrase structure (B-A flat-(*high*) A flat-(*high*) A flat-(*high*) F sharp) but raising the last three notes to an upper octave to create a hopeful mood and anticipation for the chorus. The chorus then illustrates what God is able to do for the listener and what the listener could do to receive his help. In this song, "Come home" is a gospel invitation. As the song progresses (verse 2 and the chorus are repeated), the timbre is increasingly solid and intense. The final chorus is the most intense section of the whole song and the conversion call is reiterated. Finally, all instruments subside as the song reaches it highest point at "Even though it's an ice cold world outside" to create tension. The last few lines are then sung by a reassuring voice: "In this house / There's the love of the Lord / Be no longer afraid / In this house / There's the love of the Lord / Don't be afraid", first with piano accompaniment and the final line with no accompaniment at all, drawing attention to the soothing final phrase "Don't be afraid". This example has demonstrated the way gospel songs are typically structured to present the duality of the universal emotion of distress and a conversion call.

Eg. 2. Devotional: "Dedicate My All"[46] (F major, Tempo: 69)

	Timbre
Instrumental intro (bar 1-8):	
8-bar intro started with keyboard. Drums roll in at 5th bar, bass and strings enter to build up intensity. Subsides before vocal enters.	
Verse 1 (bar 9-16):	Keyboard and
Looking back at my life /	sparse hi-hat
There were many times I stumbled /	sounds (hits on
Questioning my next steps	backbeats only).
Listen to the Lord's voice / Let go of my thousand thoughts	
I stop doubting / Sorrows all gone / Joy floods in my heart	Acoustic guitar plucking enters.
Verse 2 (1st time) (bar 17-24):	Bass enters. Drums
The mist is gone /	enter on half-time
Looking ahead it's clear, I no longer question my next steps	pattern.
Count on the Lord's grace / Let go of all my thoughts	
I clear all my worries	Strings enter.
With your promises / Rigorously press forward	
Chorus 1 (1st time) (bar 25-36):	Drums roll into full
And I will dedicate my all*	pattern. Strings
Let me hold on to the Lord's will every day	become prominent.
Share Christ's sacrificial love / Never changing in my life	Multiple parts of vocal enter
And I will dedicate my all*	towards the end.
Fearless of trials, walk through the narrow path	
Regardless of gain or loss / Sprint through doubts and stranglers	
Scared not by pain / Forsake my ego / You guide and grasp me	
I will dedicate my all*	
Interlude (bar 37-39):	
3 bars played by keyboard (change of voicing), acoustic guitar, bass, use of ride cymbal and crash cymbals (no snare drum).	

[46] I have based my analysis on the Chinese lyrics of the song. Therefore, I quote the song text with my own translation of the Chinese lyrics even though the song does have an English version.

Verse 2 (2nd time) (bar 40-47):	Drums on half-time pattern. Keyboard and bass maintain. Acoustic guitar plucking more forward and denser. Strings enter.
The mist is gone /	
Looking ahead it's clear, I no longer question my next steps	
Count on the Lord's grace / Let go of all my thoughts	
I clear all my worries	
With your promises / Rigorously press forward	
Chorus 1 (2nd time) (bar 48-59):	Drums roll into full pattern. Strings become prominent. Multiple vocal parts to create rich vocal texture and diversity.
And I will dedicate my all*	
Let me hold on to the Lord's will every day	
Share Christ's sacrificial love / Never changing in my life	
And I will dedicate my all*	
Fearless of trials, walk through the narrow path	
Regardless of gain or loss / Sprint through doubts and stranglers	
Scared not by pain / Forsake my ego / You guide and grasp me	
I will dedicate my all*	
Chorus 2 (bar 60-76):	The whole chorus raised by a semitone. Strings, bass and drums emphasize the first 3 notes. Drums and strings increase intensity. Multiple vocal parts to create rich vocal texture and diversity.
Lord now I dedicate my all*	
Let me hold on to the Lord's will every day	
Share Christ's sacrificial love / Never changing in my life	
And now I dedicate my all*	
Fearless of trials, walk through the narrow path	
Regardless of gain or loss / Sprint through doubts and stranglers	
Scared not by pain / Forsake my ego / You guide and grasp me	
Now I dedicate my all*	
How much more storms / My whole life is for you	Dense bowing of strings, followed by dense bass rhythm. Retard on last 5 notes. Grand ending.
You guide and grasp me	
Now totally forsake my ego / My all* /	
I will give my all*	

* Original English line in the song

The second example, "Dedicate My All", is very demonstrative of a prototypical devotional song. The song opens with a singer's retrospect of one's struggles and failures in the past. As the verse progresses, the song character is enlightened and empowered by "the Lord's voice", his "grace" and his "promises" to let go of doubts and worries. Slightly different in melody from that of verse 1, the last line of verse 2 uses a few higher notes to not only highlight the lines "I clear all my worries / With your promises / Rigorously press forward" but also anticipate an uplifted spirit to lead on to the chorus. The chorus further expresses one's dedication to live a life according to the Christian calling despite all hardships. "I will dedicate my all" is a recurrent phrase set to a melodic hook of the song and at the same time, an English line that highlights itself from the rest of the Chinese text.

Instrumental diversity increases along the progression from verse 1 to chorus 1 (1st time), while vocal texture also increases in the first chorus as "Scared not by pain / Forsake my ego / You guide and grasp me" is backed by multiple vocal parts. This line is also musically emphasized with a series of triplet notes. After a slight retreat in the interlude, vocal and instrumental density keeps building up from verse 2 (2nd time) onward. Both chorus 1 (2nd time) and chorus 2 are characterized by a rich vocal texture. The hook lines "And I will dedicate my all" and "(Lord / And) now I dedicate my all" are all echoed by multi-part back vocals singing "dedicate my all—". The

lines "Share Christ's sacrificial love / Never changing in my life", "Regardless of gain or loss / Sprint through doubts and stranglers" and "Forsake my ego / You guide and grasp me" are all backed by multi-part vocals in both choruses. Furthermore, with the whole chorus raising a semitone, increased timbre density and variety, instrumental emphasis on the first three notes of the leading line "Lor:d now: I: dedicate my all"[47] as well as the melodic retard to emphasize the five notes of the end line "I: will: gi:ve my: all:", chorus 2 is the most powerful part in the whole song, particularly the hook line "Lord now I dedicate my all" and the last lines "How much more storms / My whole life is for you / You guide and grasp me / Now totally forsake my ego / My all / I will give my all".

Similar textual arrangements are used in other prototypical devotional songs while degrees to which they elaborate on the miseries of life as well as the conviction in one's response vary. For example, the degree of conviction ranges from recognition of an unfailing grace in one's life or thankfulness for it to the more mission- and action-driven responses. These songs however converge on an almost formulaic and cliché articulation of the Christian devotion: struggles and miseries → divine interference → purpose and conviction. Most devotional songs make no attempt at subtlety. Most are direct in naming "God", "the Lord" and "Christ" and some further

[47] With reference to Jefferson (2004) for transcript symbols, colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound; while underscoring indicates stress.

use a more theological vocabulary about atonement and salvation such as "savior", "sin", "redemption", "sacrifice on the cross", "repent" and "forgiven" quite often. In terms of subject positions, the "I" in these songs is obviously a believer, given the conversion experience and the Christian devotion described. A number of these songs (for example, "Dedicate My All") are presented by singing groups and most often the verses are sung alternately by a few solo singers and the choruses are in choral. In this case, the "I's" in the same song could be interpreted as multiple individual believers who share the struggles as well as the devotion, thus compounding the affirmative impact of the song. The general textual arrangement of devotional songs is in a sense similar to gospel songs, except that the heightened section of the song articulates devotion instead of the conversion call.

Gospel songs and devotional songs present a unified image of a loving God who is always willing to relieve personal plight and grant people a fulfilled life, running contrary to the unsympathetic and mean God who arbitrarily toys with human fate, as often represented in popular music when religious imageries are invoked. The image of God in the gospel and devotional categories seems to draw more heavily from the Revivalist hymnological model of "intimate love" (God as father; friend; husband; shepherd) than the Wattsian model of the "King" (emphasizing sovereignty) (Vilojen, 2006). Writers generally find little pressure to justify the gospel and devotional

categories because their legitimacy has been passed down from historical hymnological models. In a way it is the legacy of these theme categories that has justified the religious significance of CCM: the form is new, but the message is the same.

However, these theme categories are not free from market pressure to switch to less explicit religious vocabularies. For instance, one composer and lyricist told me an instance in which he was requested to tone down the religiosity in a devotional song. The song was written for a Christian video series upon the request of a local Christian media company and was to be sung by Hins Cheung, a Christian singer who works in the pop music scene. The title of the song was "Encountering God" (2005), as the composer explained, "in fact it's so obvious, the whole concept in the song, everything just goes around this [theme], so I said, well, this song [will be titled] 'Encountering God'." (Personal interview, September 8, 2009) However, the marketing staff of the company was skeptic to the song title, considering it inappropriate to use the explicit naming of God in the title of a song that could be marketed to the mass audience. They suggested re-titling the song with other more ambiguous options such as "Encountering You" or simply "Encounter". The composer was reluctant to accommodate:

> I just said, "well, my principle is, I've given you the song and it's yours. If you want to change it, I won't stop you. But," I said, "I just can't see a better title

than this." I said, "in fact you really shouldn't be so timid. If it's a good song, people would sing it and listen to it. If it's bad, whatever you say, change it all over that it doesn't sound Christian at all, have all the Christian messages hidden, they can still choose not to listen." (Personal interview, September 8, 2009)

In the end, he convinced the marketing staff to keep the original title. This is an instance where market pressure and religious visions come into conflict in the mediation process which requires CCM practitioners to either balance the two or take a side. As will be shown below, religious explicitness is often the center of debates. In this case, the composer considered the religious substance of his work to be best captured with religiously explicit expressions and repudiated the market considerations, thus resulting in a song that makes plain its theme of the divine encounter in the song title.

Inspirational and relational: Negotiating for positive pop.

Compared to gospel and devotional themes which have been established as the staples in Christian music, inspirational and relational themes assume more dubious status in Christian music. The conversion message is generally absent and religious vocabularies are either ambiguous or absent in these two categories. Debates regarding their religious value surround a dichotomy of religious explicitness and implicitness. In the Christian community, listeners tend to look for religious markers such as the naming of God and religious vocabularies to confirm songs as "Christian". This gives them something to identify with as Christians. Being explicit with the

Christian message is taken for granted by the Christian audience and assumed to reflect artists' loyalty to the Christian message. Implicitness and ambiguity is, on the other hand, questioned and assumed to be connected with cowardice. How could these theme categories serve as *faith*-ful if it does not even mention *the* faith? Artists were quick to defend and justify the value of these positive pop as soon as we started talking about their music. Before I discuss the considerations that shape these theme categories, I will first introduce the inspirational and the relational themes.

Inspirational songs encourage and inspire a positive attitude in life in general, without necessarily making any explicit reference to the Christian faith. There are a few sub-themes or different approaches in the inspirational category. The first is to inspire one to reconsider the (in)significance of their daily routines or mundane worldview. For example, the Britpop styled "Eagle and Birdie" by Frances Chiu articulates an alternative life goal through the analogies of an eagle and a little bird, celebrating a simple lifestyle instead of an achievement-oriented path. The second approach encourages one to stay optimistic for life in general, to overcome difficulties, and to pursue one's ideals. Peco Chui's "Never Say Never" (2008), for example, reassures one to look ahead positively despite troubles and failures. Another song "Director of Life" (2009) by Rex Chan, likewise, encourages one to live life to its fullest regardless of its ups and downs. The third approach is to foster a caring culture.

For example, Henry and Roger Chung's "The Chimes" (2009) reminds one to show care and concern to loved ones as well as the society. Most inspirational songs contain no reference to God at all. A few of them have an ambiguous "you"- or "he"-referent which might possibly imply God but there are no explicit theological phrases that firmly point the referent to God, so those songs are still considered inspirational in general. Inspirational songs are also less uniform in music styles and musical arrangements compared to the previous two categories which are predominantly Canto-pop. Many inspirational songs use a more upbeat rhythm and musical arrangements.

Another type of positive pop is the relational songs which address human relationships in general. The relational theme could be further described on two veins. The first covers topics of interpersonal relationships such as romantic love, familial love and friendship. For example, Lambert Chan's "Do You Know"(2006) and New Being Band's "Shade Tree"(n.d.) expresses gratefulness to one's parents, whereas Gary Lau's "Morning Sunbeam" (2006) expresses a romantic commitment. Interpersonal relationships are treated in these songs as what one should cherish and be thankful for, and repairable even if damaged. Another vein of relational song tends to articulate the relationship between the "I"-character and an unspecified "you"-referent, opening the possibility to interpret the expressions in terms of a

God-human relationship or interpersonal relationships. The "I"-character in these songs tend to direct an affection and / or gratefulness for and / or commitment to the "you"-referent. This kind of ambiguity is controversial in Western CCM, sometimes referred to as the "God-is-my-boyfriend" phenomenon that addresses "naïve sweetness" to God (Alfonso, 2002, p. 33). Corinna Chamberlain's "The Greatest Love" (2008) is an example:

Eg. 3. "The Greatest Love" (D Major, Tempo: 67)

	Timbre
Instrumental Intro (bar 1-4):	
Played by keyboard, strings, flute and some percussions.	
Verse 1 (bar 5-12):	Acoustic guitar plucking and bass.
This second / No longer scared of losing /	
Deep down in my heart I vow / This is the proof of love	
In the darkness / You let me find rays of light /	
Ran astray / Your hands still reached out to grasp	
Pre-Chorus 1(bar 13-17):	Strings enter to increase texture. Emphasis on last notes of bar 17 to create expectations for chorus.
You are already here / Loving me unceasingly	
You have given / Even before I knew / You've been by my side	
Chorus (1st time) (bar 18-26):	Bass leads in. Piano enters. Vocal still relaxing.
This is the greatest love* / Inseparable	
Whenever you touch me / The long night is lit up	
This is the greatest love* / Like bliss long endowed to me	
In this world no one else could / Love me so much like you do	
Interlude (bar 27-29):	
3 bars played by piano, strings and bass.	

Verse 2 (bar 30-37):	Drums enter on the rim. Keyboard padding. No strings.
I have found / The warmth that touches my heart /	
Even in freezing winter / Love is preserved for me	
This love / Penetrates into every inch of my heart /	
Finally realize / the meaning of existence	
Pre-Chorus 2 (bar 38-42):	Drums switched to snare but reduced to half-time pattern. Strings enter.
You are already here / This love is flawless	
You have given / Even before I knew / This love has no end	
Chorus (2nd time) (bar 43-54):	Drum roll and bass line lead into chorus. Drums switched to full pattern. Flute enters. Vocal improvisations. All instruments subside after drum roll. Vocal only. Soft outro played by all instruments (no drum rhythm, very light cymbal sounds only). End on vocal singing the last line.
This is the greatest love* / Inseparable	
At the deepest you touch me / The long night is lit up	
This is the greatest love* / Like bliss long endowed to me	
In this world no one else could /	
Love me so much like you do	
This is the greatest love*	

* Original English line in the song

"The Greatest Love" is again a love ballad with a typical Canto-pop arrangement. As seen in this example, the "you" is an ambiguous referent throughout the whole song, which makes it possible to be interpreted as God, a lover, a friend, or a family member. This song was later revised, renamed (as "You Love Me", 2009) and rearranged to be included in Sammi Cheng's album *Faith*. In both versions, the chorus

is the emphasized part of the song, signaled by the rich musical texture (while comparatively, "You Love Me" is a more intense version given its musical arrangement, some rhythmic changes, as well as the vocal treatment), whereas "This is the greatest love", in particular, is the hook line of the song. The unspecified "you"-referent thus leaves room for listeners to ponder upon the source of this "greatest love". The singer of the revised version also acknowledged that this song "addresses no particular unit at all. It doesn't mention God, not Christ, no nothing. It's just saying, I believe there's someone who loves me in my life after all". She said it is up to the listeners to make that connection to a friend, the fiancé, the husband, or whoever they believe it to be if they are not religious, "but if you are religious and you listen to it, you'll firmly believe this is God"[48]. This song thus typifies the religious ambiguity in the relational categories.

The inspirational and the relational categories are somewhat controversial as to its qualification as "Christian". The catch-all usage of the label "gospel songs" to refer to CCM in fact has an immense impact on the expectations of CCM. Because "gospel" has been equated with the salvation message in the Christian community, "gospel songs" are expected to bear a clear mark of the salvation message. To account for positive pop, musicians have to break its way through other Christians'

[48] 881903.com Commercial radio. (2009, December 9) *Ultimate Music: Sammi Cheng's album release* [Archived radio program]. Retrieved from http://881903.com/Page/ZH-TW/index.aspx

expectations of the naming of God or a manifest salvation message in Christian music. It involves the negotiations of what is religiously meaningful and significant, and even what constitutes "gospel". A singer-songwriter who in recent years has released an album with an even mix of devotional and inspirational songs explained:

> I mean the messages in the so-called gospel songs might be usually something biblical, perhaps messages about Jesus'...birth, well, resurrection, or salvation. But apart from that, I think a gospel message should be something positive, not necessarily focusing on just this point of gospel. The gospel songs I used to understand, the so-called gospel songs, the scope is very narrow. That is, they only talk about Jesus' resurrection, or cruxifiction. I mean is gospel just about that scene? To get you believe in Jesus and that is gospel? I mean of course that is gospel, but well, you do live on earth afterwards. Well I think perhaps, some sort of attitude to life, values about life, for a believer, or even for non-believers, these positive messages are also important. So what I understand as Christian music begins to broaden. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

To deal with the expectations typically associated with the label "gospel songs", this musician tried to negotiate the meaning of "gospel". He distinguished a narrow view and a broad view of gospel, and thus of gospel songs. By expanding the connotation of gospel from the salvation discourse to a value transformation informed by the Christian faith, he challenged the conventional definition of and expectations for "the so-called gospel songs" as limited and insufficient. The religious significance of the inspirational theme is negotiated by redefining "gospel".

The inspirational theme involves more than the reconsideration of religious categories; it is also shaped by economic concerns. Although independent labels tend

to be more artistic than profit-oriented (Kruse, 2003), maintaining a financial balance between their day-to-day running costs and revenue gained from the sales of recordings is crucial as they lack extra resources to offset investment in unsuccessful recordings. Likewise, independent Christian labels wish to see financial returns from their albums to at least balance their investment even if they are not seeking profit. As they try to appeal to a general market, they do not want to alienate consumers by being too blatant on the Christian message. This singer-songwriter continued to address the economic considerations behind the production of his album:

> Actually, there're lots of considerations. Economic ones(h)[49], ha, money-wise whether there's any support. Coz the financial resource a production requires of is not small, maybe afterwards even so. Coz I mean, I'm sort of, involved in the popular market, I mean I'm a singer, and I write songs for other singers, so to a certain extent I understand its operation. And I really want to make an album that has a gospel message, but I know the majority in this market might not be very receptive to Christianity. Well, if you go so valiantly to talk about, like, Jesus, like these terms, perhaps people would be resistant. [...] I wanna play a role in talking about some kind of Christian values, rather than, explicitly using terms like Jesus and God. I think actually my faith includes a lot of values, Christian values, and those values actually have an impact in life, well every decision you make, or how you treat people or handle different matters. It influences your whole person, I mean it's not an influence that could come by simply saying these three words "Jesus the Lord". Well, I really wanna penetrate this into, well not necessarily the church circle, I actually wanna outreach more. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

This musician acknowledged the financial pressure in album production and promotion and he did not want to produce an album the audience would foreseeably

[49] With reference to Jefferson (2004) for transcript symbols, parenthesized 'h' indicates plosiveness. This can be associated with laughter, crying, breathlessness, etc.

reject. From his mainstream involvement, he has developed a market assumption about its general resistance to explicit Christian messages. He thus adopted the positive pop approach to overcome that market resistance.

Nevertheless, the musician linked the rationale back to his reflections and negotiations of religious categories, that like he mentioned earlier, the Christian faith transforms values holistically. This argument essentially shifts the explicit/implicit dichotomy from an integrity framework to a profundity framework. In what I call the integrity framework, being explicit with the Christian message is connected to religious integrity while implicitness or ambiguity is criticized as "watered-down" Christianity. Shifted to a profundity framework, explicitness possibly (but not necessarily) suggests superficiality while implicitness might indeed signal profundity ("not an influence that could come by simply saying these three words 'Jesus the Lord'"). From what I call the profundity framework, a song drawn on faith-inspired values qualifies as Christian and represents the Christian faith as a holistic worldview, and inspirational songs are considered an implicit, and possibly profound, outreach tool.

If positive pop is negotiated as a possibly profound outreach tool, it challenges the claim that popular cultural forms fundamentally degrade religion and encourage nothing more than the trivial and shallow (Postman, 1987). Ambiguity in positive pop

is regarded as a catalyst for existential introspection on the part of the listeners, contradicting the view that these pop songs defy religious depth. Ambiguity might be consistent with what Detweiler and Taylor (2003) called the matrix of postmodern theology, which is partly characterized by the willingness to "embrace doubt, leave room for questions, and make space for God" (p. 307). Could it be by replacing the possibly clichéd naming of God with unspecified referents that space is indeed made for God? That question might have to be answered by studying the reception of these songs, but at least lyricists seem to have that vision for religious depth when they plant ambiguity in CCM lyrics. But at the same time, the interpretive space ambiguous lyrics open up for listeners necessarily involves instability. It thus requires lyricists to have a certain level of tolerance for interpretive instability. When I asked this musician how to make sense of the unspecified referents in his songs, he said:

> Well, of course say you're a Christian, when you see [an unspecified referent] you'd be, oh, really sensitive, is this about God? But for the non-believers they would, they would picture certain things, I mean, "well what is he talking about here?" I mean I want them to think over it. I mean if I had wrote it big, like Jesus, or God, they're already, "oh no, not Jesus again". Even if they don't necessarily recognize that as God at that moment, at least after listening they find it a bit, uplifting, or, touching, that I think, is also what I want to achieve in my album. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

This musician assumed ambiguous lyrics work as a stimulus for active introspection in the listeners. At the same time, he also articulated the possibility that the religious connection might not be created and his tolerance for that possibility.

Overall, in this musician's account, positive pop are shaped by both religious and media-based orientations. Economic considerations have to concur with his religious vision for positive pop to be inserted in the spectrum of CCM.

This artist's manager, who had been a senior executive in a large music label for over a decade and now owns the independent label that publishes her artist's album, also explained her vision for the production of CCM album, which again involves both the religious and media-based orientation frames:

> I think, nothing is better than that, at one point, you just [do it] for God, oh, I really stop thinking about the sales and that. I mean the most important is, well, when you do this, is it going to bless people. Right, then we just go ahead. [...] Well and at the same time we're, well, trying to plug it to the mainstream, right. Well we weren't really, like really eager, no. Because after all I think a religious faith [...] is very personal. But, you have to evangelize, and at the same time you can't be pushy. Whenever you are pushy, people would get very resistant. What should you do? (Personal interview, December 8, 2009)

In terms of religious considerations, producing an album is, vertically (between self and God), a service to God; and, horizontally (between self and others), an action of blessing and evangelism. As much as about why doing it, it is also about how to do these things in an appropriate way – carrying out the mission while respecting individuality in contemporary religiosity. In terms of economic factors, market response and sales are also logical points of considerations for album production. How are these dynamics worked out? She continued:

> Well I think our approach is, actually we would want to use some kind of attitudes about life, right. [...] how do we let others get to know our creator,

> actually it may be through different episodes of your daily life, changes in your life, well I think these are what we consider when we make this album. So it's not like totally going for a gospel album, because at some points I want to be softer. Coz otherwise it's...harder, to make to the mainstream. Right, but we just try our best, I mean we tried our best to promote, well, say in the media, we would sell it more softly. Well some of them would buy, "well so inspiring, so positive", well some would feel "oh so churchy". Well that's how it's gonna be, we didn't really think it through clearly beforehand. Coz sometimes, well, you gotta think rational but, besides rational, I just think when we do something for God, we would just go for it boldly. (Personal interview, December 8, 2009)

The themes of the songs or the mix of different themes in an album are decided at a point of compatibility between the religious and the media-based orientation frames. From the religious frame, this artist manager echoed her artist in articulating the value of a holistic Christian worldview as an implicit witness for God without being pushy and invoking too much resistance. From the media-based frame, she also expected the soft approach would make it easier to sell the music to the mainstream market. The compatibility thus yields the optimal mix. However, she also stressed the unpredictability of market response, and appealed the risk-taking decision to the religious cause, overriding financial calculation with the service to God.

Another independent musician whose first Christian album carried apparent Christian messages told me he decided to switch to a more subtle treatment in the next project. Songs in his first album directly addresses the acts and grace of God, including the atonement discourse and some of them contain "God" or "Jesus" in the song title. For the next album, he and his band decided to cut back on the Christian

terms and focus more on inspirational materials. Like the other projects, this decision involves commercial pressure, popular resistance and outreach strategy, only in this case the commercial reality was experienced firsthand rather than anticipated. We discussed this shift towards religious subtlety:

> Interviewer: Was it because for the first album, there were actually people who came to say, oh, it's too direct? Did you hear that?
>
> Respondent: Well, actually there were, some distributors, mainly it was distributors. Right, [the sellers] felt, they labeled us as a gospel band, so they would place fewer orders. None in fact. They didn't place any order, because they thought, this is Jesus-talk, it's not fitting for pop music, it doesn't belong here. So, like they became resistant. And so all of us thought, evangelism is to attract the sheep outside the gates, right. It's not just a game for the believers, so we felt, yeh, I mean Jesus also said, right, like you shouldn't limit yourself, and just stay in your circle. Right, so I think this is a better way, right. When people accept us, gradually in the third or the fourth album we might say more about how it feels or why it's good to believe in Jesus, right.
>
> (Personal interview, February 4, 2010)

In general, the reality of the mainstream market is, the gospel label turns down sales (Sammi Cheng is an exception). In the experience of this musician, the album was virtually blacklisted before it even reached the retail level, because it "doesn't belong". So there was market pressure for his music to go subtle. The other two considerations, popular appeal and outreach strategy, are similar to other practitioners' views discussed above, although this musician maintained a vision for shifting back to more explicit Christian materials once their fan base stabilizes.

All in all, CCM practitioners who write and produce positive pop regard these

theme categories as faithful expressions of Christian messages as they implicitly represent Christianity as the source of a profound, holistic and positive worldview. Practitioners assess the compatibility between economic and religious considerations to arrive at the value of positive pop. Explicit religious expressions are replaced by secular vocabularies and vague referents as the former possibly turns down audience interest and thus sales as well as potential ministry opportunities. These musicians might find Romanowski's (2007) assessment that "[t]he best [Christian] popular artworks communicate not by explicitly stating so much as displaying ideals, beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumption" (p. 161) a very agreeable comment.

Lyrical creativity in CCM.

I have discussed the implications of the music making practices for stylistic creativity in CCM earlier. Let me also consider the potentials of lyrical creativity in CCM before closing this chapter. As much as stylistic creativity is subjugated to ministry concern, lyrical creativity in CCM is also to be understood in relation to the evangelistic goal of the genre. CCM musicians maintain that as CCM is increasingly similar to popular songs musically, ultimately it is the words that tell CCM apart from popular songs. On this note, there might be less flexibility for exploration in CCM lyrics than in music styles. As evangelistic tool, CCM has been assumed to work as "mini-sermons" that convey the Christian message in a clear and unambiguous

manner. Formulaic textual arrangements and stable analogies and metaphors, if any, serve this purpose. Certain metaphors are recurrent in CCM lyrics, for example, the binary opposition of darkness and light; coldness and warmth; stormy and sunny days, representing sin and grace; despair and hope and religious discourses alike; or seed planting and growing as metaphorical of the growth in spiritual life. Many of these metaphors are drawn from biblical resources (e.g. John 1: 4-5; 1 Corinthians 3: 6-7), reflecting a strong religious orientation. Using biblical metaphors is both natural and practical for CCM lyricists, because one cannot go wrong, that is, theologically incorrect, with biblical metaphors while venturing for new metaphors risks theological challenges. However, this preference for the unambiguous might hinder lyrical creativity, which is connected to a certain level of tolerance for interpretive instabilities. Lyrical creativity might be guarded out if it is seen to obstruct CCM from functioning as an effective evangelistic tool. Therefore, like stylistic creativity, lyrical creativity is also overshadowed by ministry concern, perhaps to a greater extent. Nevertheless, as I have shown above, when some CCM practitioners have managed to negotiate the positive pop categories as an evangelistic tool in a holistic sense, not without a greater tolerance for interpretive instabilities, an implication is that negotiating a balance between lyrical creativity and ministry goal is also not impossible.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have shown how the interplay of media-based and religious orientation frames has shaped the song texts of CCM. It has brought about, first, a musical landscape parallel to the local pop musical landscape, and second, varying representations of Christian messages in Christian songs. Throughout the chapter I have stressed that the religious orientation frame is intertwined with, rather than taken over by, the media-based orientation frame, establishing a case towards the mediation of religion.

I have first presented a mirroring of the local popular musical landscape in CCM's adoption of music styles. Alongside the local pop scene in which Canto-pop dominates, R&B and hip-hop are on the rise, rock, jazz, blues and world music serve various niches, CCM has developed a parallel musical landscape by adopting different music styles with varying intensity. In this process, CCM indirectly deploys the commercial understanding of the general market to maximize the reach of its message. At the same time I have shown that the musical decisions of CCM musicians are highly faith-informed as musicians consistently articulate the evangelistic aim of music adoption.

I have then discussed several theme categories in CCM and their textual arrangements to show the different representations of Christian messages. In the

gospel and the devotional categories, the conversion message of Christianity is emphasized and the Christian God is represented as a merciful and patient God that contrasts the unsympathetic and arbitrary God represented in popular music. In the inspirational and relational categories, the Christian message is implicitly represented as the source of a profound, holistic and positive worldview. The desirable level of religious explicitness is negotiated between financial pressure, popular appeal and religious vision.

The text dimension of CCM has not only reflected how practitioners juggle economic and religious considerations in CCM production but also brought out the tension between creativity and the ministry goal of evangelism. By looking at the professional, economic, and religious condition for musical exploration, I have evaluated the potentials of stylistic creativity in CCM and concluded that creative achievements are possible although creativity is always overshadowed by ministry concern. I also discussed the potentials of lyrical creativity in CCM, which I consider slimmer than that of stylistic creativity. I concluded that the balance between lyrical creativity and ministry goal is practitioners' decision to make.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, local CCM production is operating in an independent mode so far. As shown in this chapter, this operation mode has been conducive for practitioners' negotiation. These independent musicians and label

owners are able to negotiate the media-based and religious orientation frames because they themselves are the ones who ultimately bear the risks of these decisions. Even as they have to evaluate market pressure and its consequences, they can consider it from a relatively autonomous perspective and negotiate these concerns with their personal religious vision, without having decisions imposed by a corporate structure. Likewise, they have more discretion in judging and making independent decisions on how much creativity should go into CCM songs.

Chapter 5

Mediating Religion through CCM Performance:

Entertainment and Efficacy

Having discussed how CCM song text is shaped by the intertwined media-based and religious orientation frames of CCM practitioners in Chapter 4, we now turn to another dimension of CCM, performance. Performance in this chapter refers to stage and live performance[50], not singers' vocal performance in their recordings. Performance is a dimension characterized by immediacy and liveness – "the inevitable adjustments of an ever-changing present" (Carlson, 2003, p. ix). It also configures a specific stage-audience relationship in which an audience, big or small, is necessary to sustain the event. But most importantly, CCM performance centrally explicates what Schechner (2006) described as the efficacy-entertainment dyad of performance (pp. 79-80). He suggested that performances exist on a continuum with *efficacy* and *entertainment* on the two poles (see Fig. 1). If a performance aims at effecting change, it resembles a ritual; if a performance mostly aims at providing pleasure, it is an entertainment. Efficacy and entertainment are not opposites, but are "like 'dancing partners', each depending on and in continuous active relationship to

[50] The stress on live performance does not distance this discussion from media studies. At the least, with the increasing use of electric amplification system and multimedia presentations, the live performance itself is, to a greater or lesser extent, a product of media technologies. For further discussion, see Auslander (1999).

the other" (p. 80). CCM performance indeed manifests that dyadic relationship in terms of ministry effectiveness and entertainment, and the elements from the two poles of Schechner's efficacy-entertainment dyad are constantly leaning back and forth with each other in CCM performance.

EFFICACY/RITUAL	ENTERTAINMENT/ PERFORMING ARTS
Results	For Fun
Link to transcendent Other(s)	Focus on the here and now
Timeless time – the eternal present	Historical time and/or now
Performer possessed, in trance	Performer self-aware, in control
Virtuosity downplayed	Virtuosity highly valued
Traditional scripts/behaviors	New and traditional scripts/behaviors
Transformation of self possible	Transformation of self unlikely
Audience participates	Audience observes
Audience believes	Audience appreciates, evaluates
Criticism discouraged	Criticism flourishes
Collective creativity	Individual creativity

Fig. 1. The efficacy/ritual-entertainment/aesthetic performance dyad by Richard Schechner (2006)

This chapter addresses the questions of how CCM practitioners valorize, design and manage live performance based on the media-based and religious orientation frames. First, I will discuss the practitioners' views of the religious and commercial values of live performance. Second, I will discuss the performance design and practices that blur the boundary between pop music and CCM in the performance as

instances of the interplay of the two orientation frames. Third, a range of nonverbal and verbal expressions are identified as elements that might both strengthen and weaken the religious meanings of CCM during performance. Finally, I will use a case study to discuss the opportunities and tensions that arise in the entanglement of the two orientation frames and how they are seized and resolved. The discussion in this chapter will capture the connections and contestations between efficacy and entertainment in CCM performance.

The Religious and Commercial Values of CCM Performance

First, I will discuss how CCM practitioners valorize live performance. Unlike its US counterpart where Christian music festivals have become "the performance staple" (Howard & Streck, 1999, p. 58) of CCM over the years, Hong Kong CCM does not have this tradition of music festivals. CCM live performances in Hong Kong are staged in various settings, from informal music sharing sessions at schools and workplace luncheons, gigs at live music performance venues, small-to-mid-scale gospel events at schools and churches, to full-scale gospel crusades and concert productions.[51] While the Christian music festivals in the US tend to draw mainly Christian audience as their biggest crowd, the various settings of CCM performance

[51] The worship setting is excluded from my discussion because worship is not intended to be spectated as a performance. In fact treating worship as performance would be considered an inappropriate attitude.

in Hong Kong have created a mix of believing and non-believing audiences. Of the various settings, gospel events at schools and churches are the most common CCM performance occasions because CCM is considered an effective tool for evangelism. In general, "frontline" artists who have experience in interacting with students or teenagers feel that students are more receptive to CCM than to traditional sermons. One of the artists I interviewed said:

> Well [the students] are great crowds. I mean what I heard from their teachers was, "wow! You know what, they are not like this usually. Usually they are (h) so quiet, no response whatsoever. But the day you came it was really, uplifting for them." [...] In this year I've been to many schools, and I've heard from many teachers, who said, yeh, perhaps there're really good pastors, who can give really good sermons, but sadly the fact is, the students, well, they might not get it. They fall asleep, or so. Well [the teachers] said, "Through music, or certain figures, like Mr Lui[52], who gives stand-up-comedic talks, it's easier to get across to the students." And they would, well, really pay attention during that period of time. Right, I think that's necessary for the youth. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

CCM at gospel events connects well with the young audience. It is a medium to convey the message of the gospel and the performance itself is more than singing the songs. It is crucial for performers to articulate the religious significance of the songs they sing, and ideally singing and talking about these songs would work to invite the audience to contemplate questions of life and facilitate the audience to make a decision to receive the gospel during the altar call at the gospel event. As performers

[52] One of the Ten Outstanding Young Person Selection 2006 awardees, Matthew Lui is famous for his self-transformation from getting zero mark in HKCEE to earning a First Class Honors degree in university. Also known for his humorous presentation, Lui is now a teacher and frequently gives talks in various Christian and non-Christian settings.

introduce the songs, they might valorize these songs from a cognitive or affective approach. From a cognitive approach, performers would emphasize the way a song bears messages they consider especially relevant for the audience, sensitizing the audience for the "message" of the song which might otherwise be overlooked. From an affective approach, performers would draw audience' attention to the way these songs have brought particular personal impact for them, for example, how the song has moved the performer deeply or inspired and sustained the performer through personal traumas, in hope of transferring that affective potential of CCM to the audience. CCM performers sing to not only present the songs but to make spiritual impact. An effective CCM performance makes the transcendental accessible to the audience, as this artist said:

> For any other singer, whether your inner life is upright, as long as you have a great voice, great techniques, you can do your job. But for us, what I feel is, I mean I personally know that when my inner life is terrible, the song I sing doesn't work. It loses the impact, because when I sing, I am merely singing, I have nothing to offer(h). But when my life is connected to [God], the song I sing is touching, not because of me. It's becoz he comes into the song, his love can be felt through the song. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

Finally, CCM at gospel events is meant to facilitate religious commitment in the audience. Audiences are called to make immediate responses for commitment to the Christian faith through the altar call ritual at gospel events. The ritual varies by church and preacher. Preachers might request people to indicate their commitment to Christ by approaching the stage, standing up in their seats or by raising their hand while

seated. Mazer (2003), in considering a performance-based crusade event, regarded the altar call as "a spectacle of conversion" in which the spectators' own religious commitment becomes the focus of the show. Indeed it is audience response to the altar call, rather than to the song performance itself, that defines the success of CCM performance. A CCM singer said that seeing people come forward at the altar call is the most rewarding experience in the music ministry:

> That joy is beyond description, coz well, I mean for the whole bunch of things you do, practicing singing, working out, and this and that, and you've gotta, keep a nice appearance, I mean all those are just outward stuff, I mean the most important is that they get the message, and then they are really moved and then they would believe. Then, at that moment you would feel, everything is worth it. I mean even, oh how tough it was beforehand, and everything, when you see them, I mean the moment people come forward for conversion, it's really worth everything. (Personal interview, September 10, 2009)

As this artist indicated, although CCM artists make efforts in ensuring presentable appearance and performance, the primary aim of CCM performance is not producing musical pleasure or bodily desire, as in pop performance. The value of CCM performance lies in facilitating cognitive understanding of the Christian message ("they get the message"), affective impact ("they are really moved") and conversion ("they would believe") in the audience.

Nevertheless, these performance occasions are also places to sell CCM records. Of the two views about the relative importance of concerts and records in the business mix of the music industry – either pop concerts exist primarily to promote the sales of

recordings (Auslander, 1999), or the other way round, concert touring is the major income source and records have become merely its publicity tool (Holt, 2010), the business opportunity of CCM performance rests more on the former model. Auslander (1999) argued that the primary economic function of live performance within the "economy of repetition" is to support the circulation of mass-produced cultural objects. Local CCM performance at gospel events typically do not charge for admission and receive no corporate sponsorship either. The economic function of these performance occasions is primarily tied to record selling. CCM practitioners are open to admit the sales opportunities at live performance occasions, as this respondent said:

> I mean actually God is really great, I mean he would provide us perhaps some free promotions, say we have lots of events. For example tonight I have an event for businessmen, and they let us sell our records there. Well, so these are occasions where practically we can sell the records and help people at the same time, so we're actually very blessed already, I think. (Personal interview, December 8, 2009)

This CCM practitioner's view shows that both the media-based and religious orientation frames are at work in the mediation process as she considered the opportunity to sell records at live events as the provision of God for their financial needs and a win-win situation to make both sales and spiritual connection. She told me that selling at the spot is actually quite effective because the audience is often "so moved by the artist's live performance" that they would want to buy an album. Selling

at performance venues also saves the distribution fee and other logistics costs compared with selling through the stores. To make use of the performance occasions, CCM artists might promote their albums on the stage in both subtle and direct ways. Subtle methods include talking about their creative concepts and production process to justify their albums as works of value, while direct methods include autographing on albums purchased at the spot or pitching directly. For example, in a church gospel event, an artist said to the audience, "Do get an album on your way out if you think our music is great. Sounds a bit hard sell, but gotta do this kind of things." Artists are self-conscious that promotion on stage might come out as hard sell but try to naturalize the practice. CCM practitioners have applied both the media-based and religious frames to valorize CCM performance and thus business opportunities might co-exist with evangelism in practitioners' dual valorization of CCM performance. Yet it would be unfair to conclude that business incentives have taken over, since not all artists who perform have albums to sell, and the "transportation allowance" (honorarium) they get for church or school-based performances are not too attractive either.

Furthermore, the ways performers relate to the performance context also support that religious assumptions remain a strong guiding criteria in the mediation process. Focused on the ministry goal, performers are less preoccupied with factors like

technical conditions and audience size of the performance. For example, the lack of professional amplification systems in many church-based or school-based events might undermine the sound quality of CCM performance. This would have been a nuisance for professional musicians if they base their judgment on industrial standard, but when I asked a professional musician whether this is an obstacle in the performance of his CCM band, he said:

> We just have to maintain the mentality that, when you do this for evangelism you can't require everything to be, so perfect, like the sound system or your performance. What matters most is to convey a message that people would feel, there's compassion in your songs, that they could feel it. Say sometimes the places we go, wow the sound was really horrible. Wow. But we would, still perform with great efforts. (Personal interview, February 4, 2010)

This is not to say that CCM performers are casual with performance quality, but as they prioritize evangelism as the primary purpose of performance, other situational factors are put on a lower order. As much as they try to work those problems out during rehearsals, they make the determination not to let technical problems erode their religious fervor in the performance. The ways performers relate to their performance environment thus show a strong religious orientation.

The Blurring of Pop Music and CCM: Song Selection and Song Usage

Having looked at how practitioners valorize CCM performance in general, in the following I will discuss some of the more specific practices in the design and

rendering of these performances. In Chapter 4, I have shown that CCM songs have become less distinguishable from popular music on the dimension of song text. The design and rendering of CCM live performance further blurs the boundary between popular music and CCM in two ways. First, in terms of song selection, practitioners tend to bundle pop songs and CCM in the song set. Second, in terms of song usage, they might appropriate pop songs in live performances with reframing and recoding practices.

Song selection is one of the most important parts in the planning of CCM live performance. In recent years, it has become a more acceptable practice to bundle pop songs and CCM in the song set of gospel events. An artist explained: "well in the beginning I would want to kind of break the ice, like, to sing songs they're familiar with, so that they would be more attentive, to listen to your sharing." (Personal interview, September 10, 2009) Pop songs are used as icebreakers to engage the audience. Usually, pop songs with inspirational messages are the best choices for gospel events because they can be readily merged with the generally positive themes of gospel events while sentimental pop are less often used just as they are. As will be shown in just a while, using sentimental pop songs in gospel events would require some kind of reframing and recoding practices to merge the songs into the context of use. As for CCM selection, the better-known ones might also be preferred in order to

maintain the audience's attention. Bundling in the performance set is important to note because it juxtaposes pop songs and CCM in the same flow and subjects CCM songs to event audiences for direct comparison with pop. At the same time, bundling might increase the penetration of CCM and ultimately of the Christian messages to be communicated, leveraging on the appeal of pop.

For instance, one of the CCM singers talked about her song selection practices for gospel events:

> Usually at gospel events we would pick some well-known songs, well, for example, "Proud of You". [...] Say well, during Mother's Day, I might sing "One and Only", I mean to warm up the scene, I mean to draw their attention, and then when you sing the gospel songs, it's better. And even so, the selection of gospel songs has to be well-crafted. [...] After all we need more interactions, I mean at gospel events, so usually I would choose the more well-known ones, such as "The Unreserved Love", and they would, perhaps sing along, so that it's more interactive, and it would be easier to, like draw them. (Personal interview, December 8, 2009)

The two examples she raised show that pop songs with inspirational messages would be apt choices for gospel events. "Proud of You" (Joey Yung, 2003) is a song to foster self-esteem while "One and Only" (Joey Yung, 2004) celebrates motherly love. Both songs had been great hits in the popular charts. As for CCM selection, the example raised by the singer – "Unreserved Love" (Samantha Lam, 2004) – is the CCM song that has been popularized after Dr Joanna Tse's sacrificial act in the 2003 SARS outbreak and its tunes have been registered, however vaguely, in the memory in the locals. This again demonstrates a preference for the popular. The singer thus

expressed:

> You would be glad to see their response, that they're engaged, or they sing along, and that's great, so actually it's kind of a struggle, I mean sometimes you would feel, oh this song again, that one again, but well, after all, their needs should come first. It's not up to us to choose whatever songs. If I just choose a bunch of different [CCM] songs that they totally have no idea about, coz they don't have access to those songs, well perhaps they just hear it for the first time and it doesn't resonate at all, and they wouldn't hear it again, that would be hard. (Personal interview, December 8, 2009)

The singer pointed out that song selection reflects less of her personal preference than the ministry needs for an engaging performance that might ring spiritual resonance. Although entertainment is not the primary aim of performance, performers are not inert to looking for ways to increase efficacy through entertainment. She added, "after all, what matters is whether you love what we call 'the sheep', the non-believing sheep. I mean if you love them, well, you would try really hard, hoping that they would believe in Jesus, right." (Personal interview, December 8, 2009) This shows that the song selection practice is informed by a religious orientation frame. A compassion for the unsaved is translated into a song selection practice characterized by a preference for the popular and the bundling of pop music and CCM that might increase ministry effectiveness.

In terms of song usage, CCM performers sometimes appropriate pop songs for ministry use with reframing and recoding practices. These practices are most commonly applied to make sentimental pop suitable for ministry use. Performers

might simply reframe the pop songs as analogical of Christian living. For instance, when performing a classic pop love song, "Walking with You" (Lowell Lo, 1986), at a gospel event, the singer said during the interlude, "It feels so great. It's like going on dates with the Lord. Try not to think in terms of worship or a dad, but treat it like dating with him," thus activating a spiritual dimension of the pop song. Moreover, as he sang the final line of the song: "Lifelong with you I walk", he lifted his head to look upward while pointing upward at the same time to identify the "you" in the line to be God, again reframing the song with a religious connotation.

Another way to appropriate pop songs is to recode the song with Christian lyrics. In Christian performances, singers might perform a pop song with part of its lyrics rewritten with religious relevance. They usually start with the original version of the pop song because that is what listeners are familiar with, and spin the final refrain into the religious realm with new Christian lyrics. For instance, an artist performed a song from his pop career, "Stubbornness" (Boyz, 2003), in a gospel event and replaced the last chorus with the lyrics he wrote the night before the performance. The original lyrics of the chorus are:

> Whoever in love is in turmoil
> My stubborn mind I don't wanna change
> Without your love
> There's no way I could live
> The presence of a lover
> Is what I always care about

How could I give in my love

(Boyz, "Stubbornness")

And the artist rewrote it into:

Detesting Jesus brings turmoil
My faith in the Lord I don't wanna change
Without the Lord's love
There's no way I could live
The presence of God
Is what I always care about
Declare the great love of my Lord

By performing the pop song in Christian lyrics, this artist appropriated the pop song for religious use. The rewritten parts are usually only short segments, rewording a few phrases but keeping the major syntactic structure of the original lyrics. In fact, the rewritten parts are usually not very well-crafted compared to the original lyrics written by professional lyricists, but they mark the performers' sincere efforts to sing their devotion with words of their own. These reframing and recoding practices are important because these are practices unique to the performance dimension. Outside those performance contexts, the pop songs still exist as romantic pops; but in certain particular events, a religious spin is offered. Furthermore, the religious spin represents performers' conscious efforts to let the media-based and religious orientation frames interpenetrate by integrating symbolic resources from the popular cultural realm with some of their own religious resources (personal experiences and religious idioms) to articulate their religious commitment. Such practices to reframe, rescript and recode pop songs with denoted or connoted religious meanings in live events are further

blurring the line between pop music and CCM. Overall, song selection and usage in these events connect the media-based and religious orientation frames. More specifically, they connect entertainment and efficacy.

Managing Performative Expressions and Double Enactment

So far I have moved from the more general consideration of the values of CCM performance to some specific practices in song selection and song usage, and now I will offer more specifics by discussing a range of nonverbal and verbal expressions that might suggest extra meanings in the performative moments. The above examples of the reframing and recoding practices have already shown how gestures or verbal illustrations might be used to suggest religious implications for popular songs used in gospel events. In the following I pull the lens back to CCM songs. A range of nonverbal and verbal expressions in the performance will be identified. These expressions have to be well managed in the performance as they could help reinforce ideas and emotions of CCM songs, but at other times they might create tensions for interpretation.

Nonverbal expressions, including gestures and facial expressions, say a lot in CCM performance. Body movement matters in song performance because the body might be understood as an expressive site or medium through which an internal state

or statement is externalized as a movement, which then invites an interpretation by reference to the intention or feeling that produces it (Frith, 1996, p. 218). Thompson, Graham and Russo (2005) asserted that gestures and facial expressions affect music experience on several levels: by encouraging listeners to attend to certain meaning dimensions rather than others; by communicating persona or emotion; and by emphasizing the music performance as reciprocal human interaction, drawing performers and listeners closer together in a shared experience. The facial expressions and bodily gestures used in CCM performance can be interpreted in the categories of *emblems* (body movements with a meaning that is shared by members of a group), *illustrators* (used to clarify or emphasize the content of a message e.g. to identify people or objects by pointing), *regulators* (used to maintain the pace and content of interactions), and *affect displays* (expressions that indicate emotional states), according to Kurosawa and Davidson's study of nonverbal behaviors in popular music performance (as cited in Thompson et al., 2005)[53].

Emblems in CCM performance usually include gestures that find their sources in biblical scriptures. For example, it is common for the performer to lift his/her head upward and look upward when singing the word "God", "the Lord", "Jesus", or the "he/his"- and "you/your"-referent that implies God, corresponding to scriptures such

[53] Thompson et al. (2005) both cited Kurosawa and Davidson's study and used those categories to analyze two performances as case studies. See Clayton (2005) for studies of gestural analysis and contrast his categories of gestural analysis in musical communication with Kurosawa and Davidson's.

as "I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven." (Psalm 123: 1) It is also common for the performer to lift up or spread out one's hand while singing, which correspond to scriptures like "I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands." (Psalm 63: 4) These emblems which carry shared meanings of adoration and devotion to God in contemporary Christian worship are transferred into CCM performance to convey the performer's emotional intensity, so in a way they work as affect displays as well. Looking upward and pointing upward when singing words like "God", "the Lord", "Jesus", or unspecified "he/his"- and "you/your"-referents also work as *illustrators* to stress those words, directing the attention to God and possibly clarifying ambiguity of the unspecified referents. When a singer looks upward while singing, the gaze also serves as *affect display* to convey a dedication to God. Sometimes singers sing with their eyes closed, which also functions as affect display of an introspect demeanor (Thompson et al., 2005), conveying an absorption in, plainly speaking, the song; or more spiritually speaking, the presence of God. These nonverbal expressions in CCM performance thus serve to highlight, interpret and clarify religious meanings of the songs and to convey the emotions of the performer.

Verbal illustrations are also important elements in CCM performance to give meanings to the songs. As CCM performers explicate the religious significance of the

songs (highlighting the message or certain powerful lines of the songs), they suggest certain interpretive perspectives for the audience. For instance, an artist attached the following verbal illustration to the song "Home Sweet Home" at the interlude as he was performing the song at a gospel event:

> I hope you all can try to feel this love. This love is what this song tries to convey, just like this cross (pointing to the cross on the wall behind him): the Lord loves us first (arm moving along the vertical part of the cross), so that we can love people (arm moving along the horizontal part of the cross). This is the Lord's great love. When you learn to love the Lord, you will know how to love people. You will know how to dig out everything from your heart, and you can face the path ahead with ease. I am not scared of what lies ahead, I mean I'm not worried about whether I would get rich, I'm not worried about whether I could stand on this stage again. I'm scared of nothing. The only thing that would scare me is not being able to stay by my Lord's side. I hope you all can feel this love. This is a selfless love. He wouldn't keep it from you. He offers you all at once. (stevencheungfc, 2009, September 21)

This short speech both highlighted and illustrated the lyrical content of the song which introduces a divine love that could take away fear ("In this house / There's the love of the Lord / Be no longer afraid"). It elaborated and echoed two aspects of the lyrical content: the love of God, and fear, with the personal experience of the performer, to show that what is described in the song could be experienced in real life, thus adding a new layer of meaning and realism to the song text. Notably, the artist also made reference to a religious symbol – the cross – which existed in the stage background at the performance venue in his speech and used gestures with reference to the cross to *illustrate* the love he was describing, incorporating material artifacts

and nonverbal expressions to create religious meanings in his presentation.

One particular genre of verbal expression is common in CCM performance – the autobiographical expression. In Christian terms, this is a "testimony" that a believer gives, typically involving a personal narrative of life-changing religious experiences, to testify for the power of God. Hindmarsh (2007) understood Christian conversion narrative as "spiritual autobiography" and I extend that notion to a wider range of testimonial accounts that involve religious transformation. Spiritual autobiographies are "acts of self interpretation" (Hindmarsh, 2007, p. 6) that reflect a high degree of spiritual reflexivity as believers mobilize religious resources to make sense of their personal experiences. When biographical details of the performer are connected to music, they constitute part of the complex interpretative formation of a song (Brackett, 2004). By weaving their testimonies into CCM, or vice versa, performers supply autobiographical details with spiritual relevance which might bring the song text more alive. The self-narrative also registers the performer's voice in the song and establishes a more intimate relationship between the performer and the audience. Since a testimony is structured to show the life-transforming power of God, it requires the believer to expose the dark side of his/her life before the transformation occurs and even the ongoing struggles he/she still faces. For the CCM performers, the autobiographical expression is thus a space of vulnerable self-disclosure, but at the

same time, a sign of sincerity. At a gospel event, a singer who offered her spiritual autobiography while performing a CCM song told me after she got off the stage, that it took great courage for her to reveal herself so deeply to the audience through her testimony. Another artist told his audience in a small-scale gospel event:

> I wasn't used to sharing my feelings with others. In the past when I stood on the stage, I had such a fear about people judging me, and I just wanted to close my talk as soon as I could. But when I have truly received the love from God, I just want to share more. (Participant observation, February 2, 2010)

If embarrassment is a threat to every performer, whose performance involves an expression of self (Frith, 1996), autobiographical expressions in CCM performance further magnify that vulnerability. At the same time, if a performer's voice in a song performance is a measure of his/her truthfulness (Frith, 1996), a performer's autobiographical expression in CCM performance invites even more intense judgment of one's sincerity. The anxiety further increases for performers who find themselves unskilled at public speaking, as this artist expressed:

> It was the first time I shared my testimony, so I was very nervous. I kept practicing at home, what should I say, I wanted to practice. But I was still so worried that I would say something wrong on the day, because I am not very good at speaking, so, and I am not a very smart person, so I was so worried that I would say something wrong, so I was really nervous. And also, worried that they might not understand what I said, or I couldn't get the message across, and I would feel, oh no, would I create something negative, I mean I would be so nervous about these kind of things. (Personal interview, February 10, 2010)

However, inarticulacy is not necessarily a bad thing during CCM performance. Rawness of speech might indeed be interpreted as a sign of sincerity. Being

inarticulate in giving testimonies might also indicate that the performer finds a better way of expression of the self in singing, thus his/her song performance is considered more authentic, just like this artist who said to the audience at a gospel event: "I have been standing up here for five minutes and you've probably noticed I'm not good at speaking. But I really enjoy singing. It's not about all the glamour, having spotlights on you, but that I can express myself through singing." (Participant observation, April 10, 2010) There are thus multiple manifestations of the relation between autobiographical expressions and song performance.

The discussion of these expressive elements in CCM performance leads me to consider what Frith (1996) calls "double enactment", the process in which performers enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality at once while performing a song. To what extent might the performer personality and the song personality be overlapping or competing in CCM performance? For CCM, the song personality is usually consistent with, at least part of, the performer personality. The song character of CCM is usually a Christian reflecting on his/her Christian living (devotional songs) or inviting non-believers to receive the Christian faith (gospel songs), which could be easily merged into the performer's identity. What is sung in the song should be naturally consistent with what the performer would want to communicate to the audience, at least theoretically. On this level, the song personality

is embodied in the performer personality, and vice versa, and we find a range of nonverbal and verbal expressions that are marked with religious significance collaborating in a coherent way. The overlapping personalities enacted by the artist could increase the believability of the CCM song.

The coherence breaks down, however, when the performer says or does things, out of the other traits of his/her personality, which might seem out of context judging from the textual situation of the song he/she is performing. Now what the performer communicates might not be what the song was written to convey. In fact, it is typical for CCM performers to chit chat with the audience during performance in order to engage the audience in a friendly manner, and handling one's expressions to avoid the performance slipping into incoherence is a tricky matter. Performers with a humorous or playful personality seem especially prone to enacting competing personalities. For example, although gestural expressions could illustrate the text of a song as the performer mimic the state described in a song (such as reaching out one's arm at the point when one sings "reach out to receive the love of God"), if a performer excessively dramatizes the gesture or facial expression, the performance would immediately become more comical than touching. For another instance, in the example I cited earlier where an artist was performing the song "Home Sweet Home", he made a comment of his own performance after singing the first two lines: "the

pitch is so low", suddenly diverting the attention of the audience from the song situation to the performance situation. These are usually times when performative expressions escape the religious orientation frame. This is not to say that each and every expression has to bear religious significance in CCM performance. CCM performers certainly also use expressions that are commonly seen in popular music performance, such as illustrators of lyrical content of which spiritual connotations are remote, or regulators to maintain interactions with the audience. Yet once the performative expressions draw so much attention to the performer personality that it competes for attention with the song personality, they might begin to obstruct rather than facilitate the communication of the song message. The efficacy of CCM performance thus requires a delicate management of the performative expressions and the "double enactment".

Case Study: Jade Kwan's "Shining as Star" Concert/Crusade

In the above I have discussed how practitioners' negotiations of the media-based and religious orientation frames shape CCM performance on various levels, from its general valorization, to song selection and song usage practices, to specific performative expressions and their management. In the following I want to discuss the opportunities and tensions that arise in the entanglement of these orientation frames

and how they are seized and resolved through a case study of a live production. In 2009, a local pop artist Jade Kwan staged a concert cum gospel crusade event with the Hong-Kong-based ministry organization Network J International. The event, entitled "Shining as Star", was a concert, a gospel crusade as well as a fund-raiser to support a group of students studying in a local drug rehabilitation school. This production is significant for this study because of its hybridity. The media-based orientation frame makes good sense in this production as it centrally features an artist and repertoire known from the media, but at the same time the leading artist emphasized evangelism as the pure intention for this production, signaling the centrality of the religious orientation. How are a pop artist concert and a gospel crusade molded into the same thing? This hybridization heightens the tensions as well as opportunities in the mediation process in terms of the efficacy-entertainment dyad of CCM performance.

In the following I will discuss this case in a few aspects. First I will look at the conditions of the overall design and the production capacity of the show. Next I will discuss how the show blends popular cultural elements and religious sensibilities by specifically looking at the elements of the dance culture and the bundling of pop music and CCM in the show. Finally, I will discuss the enactment of the leading artist's personality in relation to her performative expressions.

Performance design and production capacity.

"Shining as Star" combined a pop concert, a gospel crusade and a charity event. It was spearheaded by the stand-up comedy gospel crusade pioneer Enoch Lam, who suggested organizing a more music-based gospel crusade as a format alternative to his annual stand-up comedy crusade. Jade Kwan had been a guest performer in Lam's Yeah Show for years, but staging a concert cum crusade held to her name is a more complicated matter. The artist insisted not to have mainstream record labels involved in the concert, because she considered such commercial involvement would introduce "so much calculation and scheming" in the project: "Commercially, recording companies are certainly after profits: Is it profitable? Hey you're doing this show free of charge? No way." said the artist. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010) She thus had to make sure her mainstream recording contract would have expired before the show schedule so that she could work on the concert independently without label affiliation. Next, she explained the considerations in deciding the format of the performance in the early planning stage:

> At first as we considered the format, we thought of having two concerts and two crusade nights, separated. I mean, we're anxious, coz we didn't know how to put the two things together. We're anxious that say the Christians would think wow this is so commercial, or, well like the outsiders would feel wow this is so Christianese. We had lots of struggles, and we kept praying. [...] so later on we, had lots of debates, [...] we didn't want to be so conventional. Coz, to be conventional, you might as well go to a church service, why bother renting a place at the stadium and organizing all this. [...] But we worried if

> we took it over the line, maybe some Christians would, would would have certain voices, so we had to be very careful. So we kept praying. In the end we said, why don't we just do a concert cum gospel crusade, a crossover of the two. [...] Actually we're a bit anxious too. I mean anxious about whether it'd work out or how to do it, and how to plan the rundown. Would it work? Would we lose people's attention? And we just prayed, but I felt at peace, and I felt, we could try, so we decided to do it. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

The choice of performance format involves struggles and negotiations related to religious conventions and popular appeal. In the interview, the artist emphasized over and over that managing the contrasting expectations of believers and non-believers was their major dilemma. Gospel crusades depend on believers to invite and bring non-believers to the scene, so both populations are among the audience. The artist added, "For outsiders, the non-Christians would feel, I come to watch Jade's concert. But for some Christians, I'm here for Jade's gospel crusade. So can you imagine how complicated that is? I mean you have to merge the two sides." (Personal interview, January 30, 2010) In other words, non-believers expect entertainment while believers expect preaching. In terms of music, non-believers might prefer popular songs to CCM while believers might expect the opposite. The challenge was to come up with a format and performance elements that would not disappoint or offend either side. The strategy the artist repeatedly stressed in their deliberation process is prayers – "we kept praying". Although she did not cite any concrete religious principles to abide by, the emphasis of prayers signals an exertion for religious integrity in balancing the contrasting expectations. She also repeatedly emphasized the religious aim behind the

performance design:

> In our hearts we only wanted to evangelize. We wanted to do something new, to attract the non-believers. Coz with my name, Jade Kwan, people would, say they might not want to come hear the gospel, but perhaps they would say I wanna come listen to Jade, and then we can evangelize. That's easier than say, asking the non-believers to come, "oh, crusades, not for me, well, church services, not for me". But if Jade, I am singing, perhaps, it's a little bit more persuasive, "oh alright alright, I'll come" and so. So actually this is the way we're trying to draw the non-believers to come. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

In evaluation of the show, the artist also assessed it in religious terms. Over 400 people responded to the conversion call during the show. The value of the performance was measured against the goal of evangelism:

> Turned out, I was so grateful coz, when I saw so many people come forward to accept the Lord, I felt everything was worth it. Even though, however tough it was or whatever accusations there were, or however difficult, I still felt, wow, so many people were saved, it's <u>really</u> worth it, even for a few more shows. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

To impress regular consumers of secular entertainment, the performance needed not only an attractive format but also a professional quality standard. One of the cast members said:

> Say Jade's concert, for example, it's half concert, half crusade. Well I mean you know Jade is a singer, so perhaps it's necessary to use the more commercial methods, perhaps in order to attract the non-believers. I mean crusades are for non-believers, right, I mean hoping that they would accept God. And what kind of people are they? They live in this world, live in this society, what they receive are popular messages. If you make it like, look really unprofessional, they might, I mean, their focus becomes criticizing this and that, and that way, do they really get the message? So. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

This comment shows that media professionalism is pegged with the ministry goal.

The factor of professionalism might not be as crucial in other ministry settings that are more casual, but since this production was presented in the format of a pop concert, it has to measure up to the benchmark in the eyes of its media-savvy audience. Although a professional production does not ensure ministry effectiveness, it indirectly contributes to the ministry goal by controlling production activities to minimize the errors that could occur to divert the audience's attention from the gospel theme in the show. For a quality performance, "Shining as Star" hired a professional crew and musicians, but they all had to be Christians. The director of the show used to be a director at a local TV station and the cast members tended to acknowledge that the director handled the show with the rigorous quality standard of professional live shows. The cast and the musicians had rehearsed intensively, "until there're no glitches", as another cast member said. This cast member also added the opinion that the professional production was a "testimony" to show that "we Christians are not incapable of doing what non-Christians can do, but we can bring even more joy" (Personal interview, September 25, 2009).

From ecstasy to happiness: Dance as entry point of gospel.

The performance heavily borrowed symbols of popular culture. One of the sources is the disco culture. A disco scenario was set up before the show started. Lights were flashing in the house. A DJ was playing electronic music at his equipment

rack set at the center back of the stage while a group of teenagers was grooving on the stage to resemble a dancing crowd at the disco. The sounds and symbols of the disco culture transformed the performance setting to a space of energy and fun as soon as the audience entered the house. The artist explained this performance design:

> Sometimes you go to a pub, or a disco, I mean, some people would think, wow, discoing is really improper, I mean you would think, yeh, scratching and that kind of things are improper. Well but, hey these things can also go drug free, alcohol free, but can make you feel high. Where does that "high" come from? It's from God. Sometimes as we worship we're also so ecstatic. We reach another state which is different from the ordinary. Actually that kind of "high" is also great. All you want is the happiness, right. Well actually I wanna tell the youth, actually, you don't need to take drugs, you don't need to drink, excessively. In fact when you come into God, you can get that "high". So how to represent that idea? Thus we wanted to create the atmosphere of a disco. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

Aware that the disco culture might be frowned upon by the moralists, the artist challenged certain conventional religious thinking by not alienating that culture but even playing it up in her show. As a charity event for a drug rehabilitation school, the show addressed the dance culture which is allegedly linked to drug abuse, but created a sanitized version of it. The artist associated the symbol of an ecstatic experience at a dance scene with the discourse of happiness, which was a recurrent theme of the show. She asserted that happiness is a universal quest and the transcendent experience of Christian worship could bring people an equivalent, if not superior, satisfaction to the altered state of consciousness sought in the dance culture. By doing so, that artist negotiated a homology between the linkage of dance and ecstasy and the discourse of

gospel and happiness.

The show also used the dance component to further engage the audience. After the opening, there were two pop songs rearranged into a dance beat version during which the artist invited the audience to stand up and dance. "Hello! How's everybody?" She shouted, "Let's stand up and dance together. This is a party. Come on! Wow!" Onto the second song, she motivated them further: "Is everyone alright? Are we all up? Just lay down everything that upset you today, all your stress. This is a party. Come on!" Both times she framed the performance as a party to encourage the audience to let loose. During the dance segment, she and her dancers also kept waving, clapping, and jumping up and down (which functioned as *regulators*) to mobilize the audience to follow suit. She was trying to bond with the audience and to engage them as active agents of the event through their embodied participation in the collective activity of dance. As the dance segment ended, the artist defined the segment as an exuberant experience by saying to the audience, "You're great! Wow! So great! Did you have fun? Wow! So great!" Both verbally and gesturally, she was trying to create an engaging stage-audience relationship and a positive mood in the audience which would constitute a more effective site for evangelism. The artist explained:

> You have to open their hearts first. If they just, ugh, close themselves off, cross their arms whatever you're saying, you simply can't do anything. But if you can get them so relaxed, when they come in, hey you don't have to be that uptight. Hey it's ok to stand up. It's not, just praying all the time. Don't worry,

> it's ok to have fun. [...] Well just to tell them, these sort of things, can be as chic. [...] So that's why we used disco music, and um the lighting. And then in the middle well, have everyone dancing together. I mean sometimes you go to a concert at the Coliseum, to watch the dance singers, you would dance along. Actually these Christian music could be the same, it could be a lot of fun, very cool. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

The dance component was used to relax people's defense mechanism. This is the same rationale that Enoch Lam (2008) argued for the stand-up comedy form crusades. Entertainment is taken to be a facilitator rather than a rival of mission, thus dance now encapsulates both entertainment and efficacy. The dance component was also used to project a fun and cool mood, which would hopefully be transferred into the audience's perception of Christian music.

Bundling pop music and CCM.

Besides borrowing from the disco culture, the program also bundles pop music and CCM. Pop song was the majority in the song set, while the CCM set included one song as the opening, one CCM medley in the middle, and one CCM x pop medley as the finale. As for the pop song selection, more inspirational pop were included than sentimental pop, whereas the sentimental ones were also framed to stimulate more profound contemplations in order to make the heavy dose of popular music "meaningful" in a semi-crusade setting. The love song "Beautiful for Life" (Sammi Cheng, 2001), for example, was sung to remind the audience of the inner beauty of life instead of just the song character's affection for a lover. In the show, the artist told

the audience that her own songs were mostly too sad to be included in the occasion which was meant to send out messages of joy, although her fans would of course expect her to sing her own songs in the concert. Some of her sentimental songs, such as "So Kind of You" (Jade Kwan, 2002) and "Release" (Jade Kwan, 2006), were inserted into her testimony. Strategies to reframe and recode the pop songs with verbal leads and rewritten Christian lyrics could be found in the performance as well.

The selection of Christian songs reflected the diversity of Christian music to the audience of the show. The opening song of the show was "In the Beginning" (Jade Kwan, 2009), an R&B, hip-hop and techno fusion as introduced in Chapter 4, which captivated the young audience with its pounding beats and showed the trendy face of Christian music. The CCM medley in the middle consisted of five great hits in the Christian community – "All Because Of You" (Mimi Tang, 2005), "When You Are Exhausted" (Peco Chui, 2005), "The Surprising Encounter" (2002), "What Sense Does This Make" (Peco Chui, 2008) and "Unreserved Love" (Samantha Lam, 2004). The atonement discourse and the transforming power of the Christian faith are among the themes of these songs. In terms of music styles, the listeners should find little difference between these Christian ballads and the Canto-pop circulated in the mainstream music scene. The artist said to the audience after this medley: "Don't worry that I'm gonna sing hymnal songs only. Actually nowadays many hymnal songs

are really nice, just like the ones we just sang, right?" And she received a big applause from the audience. Through this medley, the artist was trying to present CCM as easy-listening and nice music to the audience:

> Well through our presentation, turned out, some people at the floor, who are non-believers, "wow these songs are pretty nice, never heard of them." "Right, these are gospel songs." I mean so that their perception, coz there're lots of people who might not have come across Christianity, who might have heard of, perhaps the very old-fashioned, in the past, those traditional [hymns], with choirs and so. Well but nowadays it has evolved in a way that, not only those are gospel songs. Gospel songs could be really, really different. Could be like pop songs, but the meaning, what's written in them, is about the gospel. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

The final CCM x pop medley presented another face of Christian music: the energetic and uplifting, and again, as great as pop music. Seventeen pop and CCM songs were arranged into a fast beat (tempo= 90-150) medley; half of them were CCM. This medley finale was performed by a group of Christian artists including Jade after the pastor's (stand-up comedy) sermon, and altar calls were made at the interludes of the medley. In regular gospel events, altar calls with music accompaniment usually use soft music rather than fast songs, let alone pop songs. This finale medley was thus an unconventional arrangement to incorporate popular cultural resources into the altar call ritual, and the boundary between pop and CCM was again muddled. At the rehearsal of the show, the artists were reminded by the show director to be mindful of their demeanor in performing the finale medley:

> To remind you all, although this song is a fast beat, try not to let your emotion

> go over the top. I don't want it to look like you guys are just having fun among yourselves on the stage and have forgotten people at the floor. Don't just sing like you're in a karaoke. Try to spread out a little, to face the audience at every side, coz you're extending the invitation on behalf of the pastor. (Participant observation, September 10, 2009)

It shows that there was still a heavy emphasis on the evangelistic motivation even though a popular format was adopted, and the desired stage-audience relationship was to be engaging and inviting rather than merely entertaining. By mixing pop songs and CCM in the program but using various strategies to reframe, recode and package these songs, the performance took care of the expectations and music tastes of various audience groups.

Moments of sincerity, moments of tears.

Finally, I want to highlight the performative expressions that characterized the enactment of a sincere performer personality in the show because the believability of the leading performer is a key element for this event as a crusade, besides all the fabulous design and popular appeal to make it a great concert. A sincere personality enhances the impact of CCM performance. To justify the religious reality on offer, the audience would want to believe that the musician is being him- or herself, that the performance onstage has some truthful relationship to the world offstage. Jade offered her testimony in the event. As mentioned earlier, this kind of self-narrating practice in CCM performance subjects the performer to the audience's assessment of his/her sincerity. In the show, the way the artist opened her testimony was: "Let's chat a little

bit", while she was seated in a bar stool on the stage, instead of standing to give a speech. This created a relaxed and intimate atmosphere in which the artist was there to "chat" rather than to preach, binding the artist and the audience in a closer interaction. The artist's photos were displayed as visual aids to illustrate episodes of her life and she even included some of her "private collections" (as she told the audience) with images of her as a chubby teenager – not the most attractive image of a performing artist in popular media standard but conveyed the artist's willingness to open an authentic self to the audience. Appeared on the stage in a black leather dress, with her hair pulled back in a simple pony tail with no hair accessories, the artist looked approachable, inviting the audience to understand her as a person. She talked about some dark sides of her life including a suicidal attempt at her teen age and things she was not proud of doing in her career, as well as the strength she has found in the Christian faith. It is not my intention to question the authenticity of the artist's autobiographical account. What I emphasize by attending to these details is, as the audience has the right to choose between believing her spiritual autobiography or not, whatever might affect the artist's perceived truthfulness is to be handled with care in the performance.

The performance of the last song of the artists' solo part (which was followed by the pastor's sermon) might be another moment of sincerity. She first introduced the

song through the following short narrative:

> I remember that ten years ago I was not a singer yet. I had just come back from the Canada after the New Talent [Singing Award]. I bought a ticket, right at that spot. What was it that I came to watch? It was Samuel Tai's music crusade. I just became a Christian back then. As I was watching him sing, I told my heavenly father, I said, father, if I became a singer one day, I really wish to hold a gospel concert here. Today, this comes true. I still remember that Samuel and Huang Guo Lun sang a song that day. This song has moved me deeply, and it's very meaningful. Today I really wish to dedicate this song, a song that was originally written to God, to dedicate it to my God: "I am Willing". (Participant observation, September 10, 2009)

"I am Willing", a pop love song written by Taiwanese musician Huang Guo Lun and recorded by the pop diva Faye Wong (1994), is considered a classic love song. In the Christian community, on the other hand, it is well-known that the song was written by the Christian musician as a prayer to God. This performance occasion was thus an opportunity to re-circulate this song with religious sensibilities among the non-believing audience. In this performance, the artist's verbal lead was almost like an epilogue to her testimony. Her verbal lead put the song in a religious context set up with details from her personal narrative, and since her narrative was a spatial-specific one, it worked with a special relevance in this particular performance occasion in which she was going to sing the very same song at the very same place where she had made her secret prayer. Furthermore, the song was also performed with emotions displayed through facial and gestural expressions. The artist used the emblematic, illustrative, and affect displaying expressions as discussed earlier, like closing her

eyes, lifting her head upward, or gazing upward, to convey her devotion to God.

Moreover, at the reprise of the chorus ("For you I'm willing / For you I'm willing / For you I'm willing to forget my name / Even just for one more second / To dwell in your embrace / I'm willing to do anything / Willing to do anything / For you"), at one point the artist's voice started shaking, then she choked and burst into tears. Tears are the ultimate expression of emotional intensity during CCM performance, to a certain extent because it is harder to fake than other gestural expressions. Even though the artist's weeping kept her from continuing to sing the song, the expression has elevated rather than interrupted the song performance. The audience's approval of the expression was reflected in the huge applause of encouragement from the audience at the point where the artist choked and could not carry on singing. Through her verbal and nonverbal expressions, the artist managed to register her voice in the song and enact a coherent performer personality and song personality. The spiritual discourse of the song was made more believable and more accessible through the performance.

In our interview a few months after the concert, the artist brought up this part of the concert when I asked her to describe some of the most memorable moments in her music ministry:

> Well that day when I was standing on the stage to sing this song, you would, like you couldn't believe it, I mean you would feel, wow [...] and I was telling

> God, in the last ten years, well, I've been through a lot, well, I've been lost, I have left you, well, I've also come back and held on to you. Well, I've succeeded, I've failed [...] Well, so grateful, I mean at that point I wept coz, I really don't know how to say it, I could only keep singing this song which, I really understood where it says "I'm willing, I'm willing to do more for you". Whatever happens, for you I'm willing to forget, or lose everything, I don't care. Then I finally understood that song, its true meaning, was that deep. This is one of the pictures which is deeply memorable for me. [...] Each night [of the show] I told myself, I won't cry when I talk of this again, but (h)each night I just kept crying, I mean I couldn't help it. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

In retrospect, the performance of "I am Willing" still struck the artist because of the religious significance of the song for her personally. She valorized the song performance not in terms of audience acclaim or even ministry goal, but in terms of the way it resonated with her religious experiences and articulated her own religious commitment, indicating a strong religious orientation on the individual level.

Chapter Summary

CCM performance illustrates a dimension that is characterized by liveness, immediacy and the management of stage-audience relations in the mediation process. In this chapter I have shown how CCM practitioners apply and negotiate between the media-based and religious orientation frames as they make various judgments and decisions in the shaping and staging of CCM performance. While record selling is sometimes part of the deal of live events, the primary motivation for live performance is still evangelism. These events aim at effecting spiritual change in the audience, with

their commitment to the Christian faith during the altar call ritual as the ultimate manifestation.

CCM performance centrally elucidates how entertainment and efficacy are both connected and contesting elements in performance as practitioners increasingly recognize the need to maintain their performance as entertaining. In terms of song selection, practitioners tend to bundle pop songs and CCM in performance sets, which reflect a preference for the popular motivated by ministry effectiveness. In terms of song usage, they appropriate pop songs with reframing and recoding strategies for ministry use, showing their conscious efforts in blending popular cultural products with their own religious resources to articulate religious meanings. Performers also have to manage their verbal and nonverbal performative expressions and the double enactment in performance, so that they work to strengthen rather than obstruct the meaning and affective delivery of CCM. Performers are continuously exploring unconventional ways to mix popular cultural resources into evangelistic setting. All of these are practices to reconcile entertainment with efficacy, or more specifically, to achieve *efficacy through entertainment*. If we reference CCM performance to Schechener's efficacy-entertainment dyad once again, CCM performance is at once about the here and now and the transcendental; performers evoke new and traditional scripts, at once in trance and in control of the performance; they entertain but they

also encourage audience to participate. All in all, the entertainment, the pleasure, the fun, ultimately link back to the aim of spiritual change, transformation, and efficacy.

Throughout the chapter, I have shown that CCM performance is shaped by practitioners' decisions and practices through their constant negotiations between the media-based and religious orientation frames. To a large extent, these active negotiations in the mediation process are possible because CCM performance have been able to stay out of the intervention of mainstream recording companies. Many of the events are school-based or church-based. Even for the hybridized production "Shining as Star" as discussed in this chapter, the artist has insisted to separate the production from mainstream label arrangements to avoid commercial control. Certainly, that does not rule out other forms of institutional constraints as CCM practitioners work with schools, churches and ministry organizations, especially as events become more structured and professionalized. Yet in general, CCM practitioners are relatively autonomous in negotiating between the orientation frames and making decisions about the performance because of their independent status.

Chapter 6

Mediating Religion through CCM Stardom:

Commerce, Narcissism and Piety

Ponder not upon whether I would be awarded toady
When I would shine like the bright sun on stage
Only consider my ability to sing today
All depends on the strength you give me

A song must be sung with heart out loud
Standing before the stage to win the praise from the floor
Passing the applause onto God whom I love
My dream, not to be diverged

(Multiple Christian artists,
"To Live is a Sacrifice")

The CCM song "To Live is a Sacrifice" was recorded by 21 local Christian artists as the theme song of a large-scale gospel crusade in 2010. The lyric of the song – articulating the singing career as a dedication to God as opposed to the pursuit of stage glamour or personal recognition – is said to reflect the devotion of Christian artists working in the entertainment circle. The song in fact also reflects some of the contradictions embedded in CCM's engagement with the star culture. Stardom, functioning at the economic heart of culture industry under economic analysis and epitomizing the cultural value of individuality under popular cultural analysis (Marshall, 1997), assumes a paradoxical status and utility when it enters the religious realm. From the Christian perspective, egoistic stardom might run contradictory to

religious piety, thus diluting the essence of the evangelistic mission. Engaging with the star culture presents both opportunities and risks for Christian ministry because the cultural power of stars can amplify the Christian message but scandalous outbursts might backfire and undermine the religious values these stars represent. This chapter thus addresses how these contradictions are problematized and resolved in CCM's affiliation with the star culture.

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 I have discussed how the often contested and/or connected media-based and religious orientation frames constantly interact to shape the two dimensions of CCM – song text and live performance. In this chapter I move onto the third dimension, stardom. Stardom illustrates the mediation of religion in terms of the embodiment of religious values through celebrity figures. I will first identify CCM practitioners' primary points of view about stardom in terms of its power and threats. Then I will examine in details two related projects aimed at utilizing star power while ruling out the related risks – first a star-breeding project through which a Christian singing group formed in the church community was sent to the mainstream scene; and second a star-domesticating project to maintain the ministry readiness of a group of rising mainstream singers. The star-breeding project mainly illustrates the tensions between business factors and religious concerns in CCM stardom while also giving considerations to other media-based factors such as

industrial norms and cultural values. The star-domesticating project addresses the tension between religious piety and the narcissistic disposition inherent to stardom.

The Make-Or-Break Star Power for CCM

As mentioned, there have been two movements of CCM crossover, one in the 1980s and one taking place currently in the 2000s. In both movements, the CCM production community has tried to utilize star power to work CCM into the mainstream music scene. They have both involved mainstream artists who would publicly affirm their Christian identity in CCM projects such as albums and events, and nurtured talents from within the CCM community for mainstream appearances. As a minority sound, CCM relies on stars to gain media value so that it can achieve a greater reach within a shorter time. Stars can both "push" CCM songs to listeners through traditional media such as TV and radio and "pull" listeners to songs in the new media environment where listeners can actively search out and circulate the songs and videos of their favorite stars. This will significantly increase the penetration of CCM if such star power is captured. When I asked a CCM practitioner to evaluate the importance of stars for CCM, he said,

> [Stars are] [v]ery important. I was chatting with [a mainstream recording company executive] a while back, she said we have such great songs, "I have tears when listening to them, I was moved", why aren't people listening to them? Exactly because we didn't get the stars to sing them! [...] Like now

> Sammi Cheng's "Sin and Punish", she said because Sammi was the singer who sings it, many people would listen. It might not go to the charts or get really hit, but because of Sammi, people would go online, look up the song, download it and listen to it. This is the influence she can exert as God gives her this singer position. Well I agree. [...] The crux is, we didn't have stars, to sing these songs, to turn the whole thing into something in the media. Media works fast. You plug a song today, the next moment you can hear it. You can hear it everywhere. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

His comment recognized star power as effective in promoting CCM while at the same time indicating the recent interest of mainstream labels in CCM. In fact, the song this practitioner mentioned, Sammi Cheng's "Sin and Punish" (2009), did receive very favorable airplay in the mainstream radio and climbed to the top of local pop charts.[54] The pop diva Sammi Cheng's gospel album, though its production capacity is quite different compared with a typical CCM project, is recurrently mentioned by different CCM practitioners and artists as a significant move to boost recognition of CCM in the general audience. In the discussion that follows, we will also find Sammi as a recurrent example as various CCM practitioners relate stardom to CCM, or Christianity in general.

However, the desirability of the star culture is a debated one as stardom also poses threats for CCM in at least one of the following two ways.

First, the ideology of stardom and Christianity might be fundamentally contradictory, making Christian stardom an oxymoron. Stardom is essentially the

[54] No.1 on 903's Chart (Nov 7, 2009); No.2 on RTHK's Chart (Oct 31, 2009).

epitome of ego identity and "hyperindividuality" (Marshall, 1997, p. 59) while the Christian faith preaches selflessness and the moderation of egoism for the magnification of God. The narcissism of stardom rivals with the commitment to a humble service to God and people. Stars' inflated self-ego and their obsession with their own career achievement are thus seen as detrimental to ministry. There is a general observation in the CCM production community that success in the pop career tends to dilute Christian singers' interest in ministry goals. One practitioner said:

> Once they reach the position of what we call popular, [their] self-ego gets magnified, which outweighs that, that passion for ministry. I mean [they're] too busy right, you got the opportunity for a blast you would spend all your time to work on those. [...] They wouldn't talk about any charge or anything like that [in the past]. They were more than glad to [be involved in ministry]. But turned out, now it's like, the situation is going off. The whole career-thing makes [them], I mean out of shape in general. Well I think that's a pity. If [they have] a better foundation, it wouldn't be so tough. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

This practitioner's comment reflects the view that the star status might weaken Christian artists' spiritual "shape" for ministry as they replace evangelistic goals with career goals. They might reduce their involvement in CCM as their career prospers.

Second, promoting CCM, and perhaps more importantly the underlying Christian message, with stars means holding them as agents to practice what is preached. Given their publicity, stars are constantly under the gaze of the general audience and their conduct is under heightened scrutiny. CCM's affiliation with the star culture is then risky because any misconduct of the stars might spill over to the music and message,

undermining the assumed moral values they represent. In Stiles' (2005) study of the public relations strategies against scandals in the CCM industry, he pointed out that scandals of the "fallen Christian artist[s]" are potentially fatal blows to the image and even the very foundation of CCM because they expose the inconsistency of the core values of the CCM industry and those who help to uphold it. Some CCM practitioners thus have a mixed feeling about stardom. While recognizing that stardom is effective in promoting CCM, they are also skeptical because of the risks of scandals. One of the CCM practitioners commented:

> Say the album is recorded by a few more singers who are, you know kind of the stars, [the promotional effect] would be better. But I don't quite go with that coz I got scared. You don't know, wow you don't what they're like, right? I mean, I mean their testimony, better (h)be reliable. You know in this era, even pastors got caught [of misconduct]. Well so, so I usually avoid that as much as possible, unless I have some kind of understanding of that person, so. (Personal interview, September 8, 2009)

Under these risks, CCM practitioners venture for new ways to approach the star culture. They still want to promote their music and advance the ministry with stars, but to avoid the problems of stars' dissipated evangelistic passion and misconduct, they try to breed their own stars to crossover to the mainstream as well as to domesticate the rising stars by establishing a peer support community among them.

Eternity Girls: The Home-Breed Stars

In year 2007, a new music group, named Eternity Girls and comprised of four

girls in their twenties – Ady, Judy, Rubbie and Sharon, entered the mainstream music scene with their debut song "Home Sweet Home", as introduced in Chapter 4, in their gospel album *Eternity Girls*. The Christian community had high hope in the group, regarding their act as a significant step in the popularization of CCM. Crossing over from the CCM scene to the mainstream, Eternity Girls has explicitly claimed their Christian identity from the outset. The group was well-received in the teenage community, while parents and educators also tended to appraise the group positively. The song "Home Sweet Home" has received fairly favorable airplay among the four major electronic media channels in Hong Kong. The group received the Metro Radio Award for New Group Singers in 2007, not necessarily the most prestigious recognition in the popular media but at least registered the group's presence in the pop scene.

The four girls have been members of a larger gospel singing group of a local church since the mid-90s when they were still in their teens. After one and a half year of praying about vocational direction, the girls decided to take up "full-time ministry" – evangelism as their full-time vocation – in 2005, and two years later, entering the mainstream music scene as a singing group became part of that ministry. On the one hand, entry to the mainstream music scene is considered part of a religious ministry and this conviction largely guided their practices in the project. On the other

hand, the practical process of the star project involves a great deal of business factors such as financial resources and marketing strategies. Despite the girls' extensive experiences in performing in churches and schools both locally and in overseas mission tours, becoming mainstream performers is a different game.

Stepping in: Religious and commercial perspectives.

For Eternity Girls to set foot in the mainstream music scene, commercial opinions played a decisive role although the project was meant to be a religious ministry. First and foremost, the girl's star potential was evaluated by the commercial eye. The artist manager of Eternity Girls, who has been the music director of a commercial TV channel, admitted that he did not see great star quality out of the four girls instinctively:

> Well actually at the time, my first thought was no way. It'd be so hard. Coz I know this market so well, so well. And I have launched lots of new talents in the past, right. And I think, well, with their qualities, with the kind of financial backup it's impossible, it won't work. (Personal interview, December 7, 2009)

When the group first negotiated an artist contract with a local TV station, they were also regarded as lack of star potential, as their creative director recalled:

> At first we couldn't get the contract. Coz those are actually commercial deeds, you know, I mean why would I sign you as an artist, becoz you would buy our advertising, and attend, or do different things for them. [...] Then they saw the four girls, wow, I mean they said honestly, "they aren't tall, they don't have nice bodies," listened to their tapes, "they don't sing really well either, I don't know why I should sign you." The first time was a bummer, then I thought

about it and it's true, it is. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

Commercial judgment based on looks, skills, and sexuality denies the viability of the girls' pop career. However, the girls seem to possess something else that interested the music business, probably delivered through their live performances: "They might not be dancing great or singing great, but they, you would feel that the whole thing is uplifting," said the creative director (Personal interview, November 17, 2009). To test audience response, the creative director had enrolled the group in various community singing contests in which they performed CCM and energetic dances before they crossed over to the mainstream. Indeed an experienced pop producer in one of the judging panels was impressed by one of these live performances. He then approached Eternity Girls and showed interest in signing them as a group. The testimony of the girls, which was supposed to attract people to the gospel, might be another attraction for the music business. The head of a large local record company approached the group after watching Eternity Girls' testimony video on TV, saying that he was moved by their stories and thought signing them was "a positive thing to do". In the video the girls told stories about their growing up and what made them so devoted in music ministry. Whether the businessman was genuinely moved or he smelt profitability in the girls' stories, the sheer interest, especially from a record company with a track record of producing successful singing groups, was indicative of Eternity Girls' potentials for the mainstream market. Of

course, because of the immense unpredictability of the music market, record companies tend to diversify investment in a large number of new acts and thus these initial commercial interests do not guarantee the group can rise to the top, but at least they indicated the feasibility.

Furthermore, the creative director/mentor of the group connected these business judgments to a religious frame. He said that these professional recognitions are signs of God's approval for the star project:

> I really thanked God, this was a sign. [...] I knew, God was telling me, this is really possible, right? Now even when people from the record company saw them would think they were ok, I mean at least it touched him, well because our songs can really touch people. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

Based on spiritual interpretation, the business opinions supported the group to go ahead, but they declined the offers from these commercial labels. The major rationale is that the financial goal of these secular labels is incompatible with the purpose of ministry and might cause compromises or hindrances to their work. The creative director explained:

> Because these companies certainly do not aim at education, let alone evangelism. It's a commercial concern or a, yeh, that is, money-making thing. Our direction doesn't work that way. By biblical principles it definitely doesn't work that way. Believers shall not be yoked together with unbelievers, on crucial matters, so we knew, if we wanted to do evangelism at full throttle, we could not be strangled by such things. Coz once we're signed [to a commercial label], on a lot of things we would have no say. Say in the past just a bunch of us fools, four girls and a guy, something came up to my mind, we could simply go for it. But with a recording company background we can't. Too many concerns, can't handle that. (Personal interview, November 17,

2009)

He cited the religious principle "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14) to distinguish their ministry intention from commercial deeds. Although secular business validation has served as an impetus for the star project to be taken on, commercial concerns are seen to be a hindering force against evangelism in the long run. To retain the autonomy in working towards their ministry goal, Eternity Girls was not signed to any big labels but worked under a non-profit organization Eternity Music Ministry (EMM) managed by the creative director when they entered the mainstream market.

Professional setbacks and religious resolutions.

Entering the mainstream market under a non-profit Christian label means that Eternity Girls did not have a large record company to back them up financially and strategically. Their artist manager admitted that the lacking in human and financial resources could be frustrating for a manager of a music group:

> [...] From my previous experience at [Channel] "V", a comprehensive promotion plan requires the cooperation of the staff from the promotion, production, advertising, PR and sales departments, in order to launch an album and the singers in the market. To guarantee sales, more money and efforts are to be paid. Thinking of this, I got frustrated at once. [...]
>
> (J. Chan, 2007, February 8)

In the following excerpt from the artist manager's blog entry titled "Silver or gold I do not have", he described the glamour he observed at a live event of another new singing group launched by a large company:

[...] Their press conference was in such a large scale and had such ma nificent setups that I was stunned, and recognized the secular logic that money works everything!

The stage setup was exceptional – TV wall, laser lighting, smoke machine, fireworks, it's just like a concert in the Hong Kong Coliseum! The three girls appeared as if they were super stars, singing their plug song and doing sexy hot dances, while videos of their training in Japan and their MV shot at Japan was being played, boosting the crowd at the scene to such a hyper mood, yelling out those girls' names. At the end they even had media heads toasting at their event and an ice-cream vending van was arranged to hand out free ice-creams for the fans! There were tens of reporters crowding their ways for interviews. It was really outrageous!

Seeing such a big scene, honestly at first I was wishing we'd got all those resources and setups, and was worried the scene of our show tomorrow just won't compare! Because what they have is exactly what we don't - $$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$, everything is stacked up with $$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$, [...]

(J. Chan, 2007, April 4)

Star glamour, and the media attention and fans experience that follow, on which stardom is often built, is stacked up with substantial financial resources. Stardom is an investment, requiring "well-financed institutions and systems of professional practices to produce and circulate images for fans to consume", as Hinerman (2000, p. 205) pointed out. Given their limited budget, the same level of investment would be quite impossible for Eternity Girls. The artist manager referred to this as "the secular logic that money works everything". Nevertheless, he soon shifted to resolve the lack of financial resources with a religious optimism, as suggested by the blog title "Silver or gold I do not have", drawn from Acts 3:6 in the bible. "Silver or gold I do not have,

but what I have I give to you," says the scripture, and the manager quoted from this verse to stress Eternity Girl's message of life despite financial shortage. He also wrote in the same entry that the action of Eternity Girls has the spirit of "five loaves and two fish" (Matthew 14: 13-21), the biblical miracle in which Jesus fed 5000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish, implying a spiritually informed anticipation for magnified blessing in spite of limited resources.

Not signing with major labels also means Eternity Girls had weaker initial access or was put on a lower priority when working with media channels. The artist manager observed a huge gap between the big labels and the small companies at a meeting with the music program producers at a local TV station (J. Chan, 2007, June 22). When visiting radio stations to distribute sample CDs, he also experienced the tough reality of not being affiliated with big labels: "Well for Eternity Girls, our organization is called EMM, Eternity Music Ministry, neither are we EMI, nor EEG, [laugh] who would care? And so, so some DJs were, even harsher to us" (Personal interview, December 7, 2009). Standard practices such as paying visits to radio disc jockeys are much less effective without business support. Similarly, when Eternity Girls released their album and the manager tried to line up the press for coverage, which is a common promotion technique other record companies would use, again he realized that label status differentiates the responses from the press. Without prior

connections and track records, he could only start with cold calls, which of course did not get him very far. A friend working in the music business explained why they were not on priorities, as the artist manager described:

> He just started laughing, and said what I did of course wouldn't work! Just coz we aren't no big companies or super stars. Plus those big companies often take those journalists to great meals and parties and have established pretty good relations, so whatever we do, it's not going to impress those journalists!
>
> (J. Chan, 2007, April 17)

Music program producers at TV stations, disc jockeys at radio and entertainment beat journalists are gatekeepers in the music industry who have control or at least could affect singers' access to popularity. By commercial standard, Eternity Girls was at a disadvantage when competing for selection and promotion by mass media outlets. They also faced different obstacles at different channels. For example, RTHK is more cautious and restrained on religious issues so the group's approach might have been a bit sensitive for her. On the other hand, CR is more relaxed in this regard but is known for a more daring and edgy editorial approach, which the artist manager admitted harder to meet as the appeal of the group is more of congenial than dashy. As for TVB, until recently, singers had typically sought to sign artist contract with her to secure exposure on the most viewed television channel. As mentioned, TVB producers were not interested in signing with Eternity Girls at first. The contract was only possible later through the negotiation by a high-ranked executive in the station who is also a Christian and offered help for the group. In fact many of the institutional

barriers were overcome through these agents, such as Christian DJs (or non-Christian ones who found the group and their music inspiring) to break through the bottlenecks, or other Christian staff in the organizations to smooth things out.

While the group only had limited promotional budget, their promotion plan was again made possible largely by the Christian network. They were granted sizeable outdoor advertising and transit advertising in busy districts such as Causeway Bay and Central for a month by POAD, a leading outdoor advertising company in Hong Kong, through Christian connection. With the appearance of and endorsements from Jade Kwan, a more established singer who is also a Christian, at their album release events, they received media coverage on some newspapers and Cable TV despite unsuccessful cold calls.

Through these relational resources, the independent Christian label managed to offset the limitations posed by inadequate financial resources when launching the group. In the girls' eyes, these extra resources came as part of the plan of God, as one of the members said:

> At the time our promotion was exceedingly plentiful, but we had zero resource. Well why would there be plenty? As we look back we feel, it's God who arranged these people to show up at that time in order to carry out his work. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

The religious interpretation not only allows the group to make sense of the star experience in retrospect, it also provided incentives for the execution of the project.

As the project crew interpreted the material resolution of their difficulties as God's approval and provision for the project, their passion to carry on the project was sustained. The creative director talked of his interpretation in the following:

> You see, God's provision was really great. For advertising it was the best, the most plentiful stuff. [...] I mean people who shouldn't have known would know, well, or people we wouldn't have access to, they would come help us. [...] I mean things like these just happened out of the blue, happened out of the blue. [...] Then you would know, well, God was pleased with that, it's so right, his promise was really real. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

Positioning and persona: Defying sex appeal and commodification and accentuating authenticity.

To bring CCM into the mainstream music scene, Eternity Girls declared their Christian identity from the outset and their artist manager considered the claiming of the Christian identity a positioning strategy. Pop music stars exist in a system of celebrities where each celebrity sign is partially constructed in opposition to, in contradistinction to, or in relation with other popular music celebrities (Marshall, 1997, p. 174). To promote Eternity Girls among the large number of new faces entering the popular music scene, the artist manager recognized that a distinct positioning is important lest the group be submerged in the currents:

> Unless we don't [enter the mainstream], once we do, our Christian character, the positioning has to be very distinct, for radio stations, and for all. Coz I think, if your positioning is wrong, you become vague, coz if you go with a fast beat, and sell sexiness, you definitely won't beat others. Right, but we're the other way round, our major appeal was, our God, our life expressions, our love. [...] Because it's really rare in Hong Kong to have a, actually a Christian

group. (Personal interview, December 7, 2009)

The artist manager considered the positioning decision a core in the star project. The Christian identity of the group filled a niche from the angle of marketing, but at the same time, the group had to negotiate a persona that reflects religious values. A persona that defies sex appeal and commodification and accentuates authenticity was thus developed.

Defying sex appeal.

Sexuality is a crucial component in celebrity construction in general and in female teen idol in particular, but Eternity Girls averted the use of sex appeal in their persona. When explaining the distinct positioning of Eternity Girls, the artist manager dismissed an industrial norm that favors a dance beat debut in female teen idol construction. He cited the debut strategy of an earlier girl group Cookies as an example, and actually this was also the debut strategy of the most popular local girl group Twins, as well as that of HotCha, which entered the pop music scene the same year as Eternity Girls. The dance beat debut is often associated with sexually provocative attire and/or dance movements that draw attention to the female body. The artist manager dismissed the use of sex appeal for the persona of Eternity Girls in both marketing terms and religious terms. From principles of marketing, he assumed sexiness was not the group's competitive edge and selling sexuality would confuse the group's positioning: "if your positioning is wrong, you become vague, coz if you

go with a fast beat, and sell sexiness, you definitely won't beat others" (Personal interview, December 7, 2009) Certainly their resistance to a sexualized persona is also informed by religious principles. Eternity Girls refused to pose themselves as objects of sexual fantasy because such arousal of sexual desire is seen to be a corruption of morality from the Christian perspective. The artist manager mentioned an instance when he rejected an offer for press coverage provided that the girls modeled in bikinis: "We claim ourselves as a Christian group upfront. I don't want to do something to bring shame to our faith or to the name of our God." (Personal interview, December 7, 2009) Based on the above considerations, Eternity Girls abstained from presentations that they consider sexually provocative.

Defying commodification.

Although stardom is a highly commodified phenomenon in the consumer culture, Eternity Girls refused to be identified as a commodity circulated in the flows of capital – as pop celebrities stacked with capital and designed to compel consumption. Rather, they defied extravagance and presented an uncommodified persona. One of the members articulated such dissociation with commodification in her blog:

> Often times,
> people think that to evangelize as a singer, one has to be glamorous,
> to show some class,
> at least comparable to other singers,
> otherwise,
> how are you qualified to compete?

[...]
Eternity Girls never want to be famous,
we are most averse to the loss of freedom, :p
we do not have glamorous promotions of a million-worth budget either,
our only wish is for people to ultimately know our Heavenly Father.....

(R. Leung, 2007, March 17)

As shown earlier, the star project of Eternity Girls was backed by relatively little financial resources. The group thus articulated their persona not in terms of glamour, and even showed certain disdain for extravagance, as their artist manager wrote in his blog: "What we sell is not the citywide golden armor[55], we just want to tell you one thing: 'God loves you!'" (J. Chan, 2007, April 4). The girls tended to dress in simplicity, and their stylist was actually one of the members herself, who explained their styling preference as a choice to reveal their true self: "EG wishes to show people the truest face of ours, so we choose our own clothes in order to show you more precisely what we normally like to wear and what types of things we like" (J. Leung, 2007, May 23). Against the profit-luring culture of the entertainment business, Eternity Girls stressed their intention of evangelism over commercialism. Their artist manager also stressed, "I mean wherever we went we wanted to show, we're not here to make a living, we're not here to grab money, we just want to share with you what we have." (Personal interview, December 7, 2009) By emphasizing "we just want to share with you what we have", Eternity Girls conveyed the community values of

[55] Literal translation of the Chinese title of the movie *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), which signifies scenes of extravagance.

"sharing" and distanced themselves from the greed of commercialism. On their major poster in town, they printed the link to the site where the public could download their debut song "Home Sweet Home" for free, showing that they prioritized getting the song heard over selling albums. The persona of Eternity Girls is characterized by a distance from commodification.

Accentuating authenticity.

Eternity Girls played up a persona of innocence, kind heart and sincerity. Dating back to the time when the popular music star first emerged, the primary personality attribute of pop music star was authenticity or sincerity, upholding a consistency between appearance and reality in human relationship and promising community in a world where it was lost (Buxton, 1990), although star personality soon deteriorated into manufactured and constructed ones. While the authenticity discourse is at the core of popular music, pop music stardom is characterized by a fundamental tension between constructedness and sincerity, artifice and authenticity. Various performers might choose to play out that tension in different ways, some playing up expressions of sincerity while others handle the question through enigma and irony. The persona of Eternity Girls suggests an inclination towards expressions of sincerity, the basic, "previous criterion of the star" (Buxton, 1990, p. 437). The image of innocence is not uncommon in the positioning strategies of teen idols, but Eternity Girls tried to take

sincerity beyond the "image" level:

> We had a slogan, that is, not to be idols; just to be role models, right. Well why say so coz, we, what we promoted was not how great we were. We don't want to be your idols. We just want to share with you our life attitudes and the goodness and beauty we find in our faith, right. (Personal interview, December 7, 2009)

As a "transitional icon" for youth (Marshall, 1997), teen idols tend to project an image that is youthful to the teen audience and non-threatening to the parents. Eternity Girls attempted to deepen their impact for the youth at their transitional phase of life by assuming the role not of "idol" (image) but of "role model" (substance). This claim negates the artificiality typically associated with stardom, making plain their ordinariness (Giles, 2000) but promising a personality that is coherent in public and private. For example, the girls' genuine bonding developed over years was stressed as evidence of their genuineness in treating human relationship, as opposed to the fabricated bonding found in other teen pop idols. The artist manager explained:

> What we emphasized was the love between the four of them, their bonding. Coz you know when recording companies promote a group actually they just pick one [member] from here and one from there, like Cookies, or whatever, so it's common there're disputes, ha! Or this member gets jealous of that one. Well but we, the four of them grew up together. They started singing together since they were in children Sunday school, right, so their bonding is beyond doubt. They can really, really deliver that kind of love, right. (Personal interview, December 7, 2009)

The following excerpt of an interview at a local radio station is another example that captures Eternity Girls' sincere persona:

DJ: You girls are really so cheerful all the time!
Ady: We're so silly!
DJ: I mean in any circumstances! You know what, here in the company the guys were saying that "they're so innocent, so adorable, totally so cheerful all the time" and that. "Just love it!"
Girls: Thank you! (Clapping)
DJ: So how do you keep up to be so cheerful all the time?
Ady: Basically whenever I see them-
Rubbie: We have each other.
[...]
Rubbie: [Because we]
Judy: [Because we] have love in our hearts.
Rubbie: Pray a lot. Because God loves us very much, and you as well! (dramatic gesture pointing to the camera)
Girls: And you! (dramatic gestures pointing to the camera)

(903 MiniTV, 2007, May 8)

The girls expressed their cheerful character and bonding in the video. While the DJ acknowledged the girls as "cheerful all the time" and "so innocent", they also expressed a childlike demeanor through their responses and gestures. They pointed to their bonding ("we have each other") and also tied their persona to the Christian message ("because God loves us very much, and you as well") in their answers. Connecting their persona to the Christian identity, Eternity Girls thus appealed to the idealization of the sincere, filling a niche in a culture in search of authenticity.

Debut song: Home Sweet Home.

The group did not debut with a dance beat, but with "Home Sweet Home" – a pop ballad with explicit Christian lyrics. The artist manager explained that they thought this was the song that could most directly get their message across:

> Well this song, when we were to choose a plug song, which one should be our first plug, we, coz we really had no money, we only had one bullet. If I only had one bullet, should I plug a dance beat just like any other group, certainly it's all dancing and the less you're wearing the better, or should I plug this song "Home Sweet Home", in which the lyrics say, wishing you know God is love. Well but both [the creative director] and I, as we prayed, and discussed, we both felt, we had to plug this song. Coz we had one bullet only, even if this bullet missed, at least we didn't hide the name of God. (Personal interview, December 7, 2009)

He felt the song to be a declaration of religious integrity ("at least we didn't hide the name of God"). In fact, although the debut strategy ran against the industrial norm of female teen group construction, the song would not be a devastating choice in any case. It was a ballad-style Canto-pop, so it was easy-listening enough in terms of popular taste. They also strategized the timing. The song was initially scheduled for release during Chinese New Year but after more experienced media executive advised them that the ballad style of the song did not match with the festive bustles, they pushed it to the post-New-Year period during which not many new songs are released usually. After the song had been on air for a few weeks, they decided to prolong its airplay by releasing three monologue cut versions to the three radio stations, each featuring a DJ of that station to perform the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-31) at the interlude, which reinforces the song message. The group also tended to report how the song has cast positive impacts for listeners in interviews or promotional activities, such as how it inspired listeners to repair broken relationships or had brought a run-away girl home, showing their commitment to offer their music

for the public's well-being and elevating their personality from a non-threatening one to a commendable one.

Planned and spontaneous evangelistic accomplishments.

With evangelism as the major purpose of the crossover act, Eternity Girls seized every media opportunity to profess their faith and each time they managed to do so was considered an accomplishment. Grown up in a church culture, the girls are used to a set of religious language: "thank the Lord in every speech, incapable of any other articulation", feeling "muted" and "deprived of surviving skills"[56] when restricted of religious expressions, as the girls self-reflected. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010) Yet they needed to season their speech to accommodate to the secular settings of media interviews and events so as not to offend the hosts, the press and the secular audience.

At radio or TV interviews, tolerance for religious explicitness depends on the culture of the institution, the nature of the program as well as the inclination of the host. The room for religious expressions is highly controlled by the program hosts who design and monitor the interview flow. The group had to go along with the interview questions while observing for space to penetrate their Christian message without sounding intrusive or too aggressive. Evangelistic acts in these settings have a

[56] Literally, they said "deprived of *mo-gong*", which means the loss of self-protecting and fighting abilities in martial arts terms.

high degree of spontaneity and require shrewdness of response. Apparently, it was easier for the group to profess their faith at programs hosted by fellow Christians. For example, at a radio interview at Metro Radio, hosted by Takchi Tam (a.k.a. Fast Beat), himself a Christian, the girls had the opportunity to talk of their faith elaborately since the host would tailor the questions to allow more religious elements. The artist manager described the interview in his blog:

> [...] Fast Beat wittily guided them to share the faith in a casual way: Rubbie talked about vocation, Sharon talked about lessons from love life, Judy talked about the transformation of self, Ady talked about family relationships. Four girls sharing how they have experienced God in four major areas of life, what a holistic life testimony, it's too touching! In fact I feel so uplifted and moved every time I hear them share the faith in the mass media, because "this is exactly our mission; this is exactly the drive for me to persevere."
>
> (J. Chan, 2007, March 8)

Another example was a short interview they did for a late night music program at TVB, in which religious sharing became uninhibited under a set of faith-related questions a Christian writer of the program tailored for the group.

At interviews prepared and hosted by non-believing hosts, the pressure to minimize religious language is greater. The group was especially cautious as they tried to break into a culture they were not familiar with. For example, to prepare for their first interview at *Ultimate Music*, a program at CR that introduces music from a professional angle, the group had to rehearse for their answers to the professional topics and decided to make religious references only if the host brought up

faith-related topics in the first place. To their surprise, the host did raise these questions that allowed some religious expressions in the interview:

> [...] The host Mini asked right way upon seeing us whether we're Christians or Catholics, I immediately stated the identity for them, and followed on to briefly explain how they gave up their career to step on this path of ministry. Mini looked really curious immediately, so in the interview, apart from music and the plug song, she raised many questions about faith and Christian music. The whole interview turned out to sound like a testimonial program that is pretty relaxing and musical. I believe this to be the most meaningful session in the history of *Ultimate Music*.
>
> (J. Chan, 2007, March 22)

The artist manager said the host of this radio show was impressed by the group's mission and positive message. By the time they attended the second interview at the same show a few weeks later, they had a better grasp of the institutional culture and the dynamics, thus feeling less restricted to make spontaneous religious references in the interview and boldly reciting a biblical passage at this secular music program:

> Thanks to the hosting of DJ Mini, the whole interview was very comprehensive and nice. In addition to talking about the album and the songs, they could talk about faith and the inner source of joy (because the whole crew in the studio felt them to be so carefree and joyous). In the end Mini asked them the meaning of "love". When they were answering, I suddenly had a strong feeling in my heart as if God was telling me to tell them to recite 1 Corinthians 13, that is the famous "passage of love" in the bible, so I instructed them on the paper to recite it. The four of them then recited the whole passage in laughter, just like primary students, eye-opening everyone in the studio. I believe this is the first singer unit that has ever recited biblical scriptures in a CR program in Hong Kong broadcast history, but I felt the whole studio at once became so warm and stunned, and Mini even smiled and said she would remember the verse "love never fails".
>
> (J. Chan, 2007, May 9)

In addition to interviews, Eternity Girls also made use of different publicity events organized by local radio stations to evangelize. At these occasions, their evangelistic acts could be better-crafted as compared to the interview settings. For instance, at a new talents showcase activity organized by a local radio station, where each of the participating new singers/units was required to introduce their favorite idols with a related artifact, Eternity Girls prepared a cross and a speech to identify their faith and their mission, as the artist manager described:

> When I told the show manager what we brought was a cross, it simply shocked her. But I told her we had a reason and we would explain to the journalists and so she let us go ahead. We saw at the venue that all the singers there had really brought the CDs of their idols like Madonna, Yanzi Sun, people throughout the music history of East and West, so Gary and I smiled at each other, we are too different, too brave, and we do need more prayers.
>
> Finally it's time for EG to show up. A few male singers and groups had already introduced the artifacts and CDs of their idols, but EG, fearless and not ashamed of the gospel, said:
>
> Rubbie: I think idol is not only a target of worship but more a role model.
>
> Judy: That's why we picked the cross! Because Jesus Christ is our role model!
>
> Sharon: Right! Jesus came to the world, to bring love and hope for people!
>
> Ady: So Eternity Girls also want to model Jesus Christ "not to be idol, but to be role models", sharing the message of love and hope through our songs!
>
> In the end they also enthusiastically held the cross to take pictures with the whole bunch of singers holding their idols' CDs. Gary and I were so

> moved, as we saw the glory of God occupying a space and shining out in the music scene.
>
> (J. Chan, 2007, July 11)

This is an example of a planned evangelistic act. In these occasions, the group usually stood out by addressing a common topic set by the organizer with a religious sensibility, just like proclaiming Jesus when they were asked to name their idol, or dressing as angels among others' devil-looks at the Halloween activity, sharing their mission when asked of the most memorable experience as new talents.

Commenting on their evangelistic acts, the girls recognized that they had been too inadaptable to the secular culture, but felt their actions might be indirectly conducive to creating a more open environment for religious expressions in the entertainment circle nowadays. One of the members said:

> I realize why I would feel like muted in the past, coz I had too little vocabularies, my experiences were too shallow, that when you stopped using "God", or stopped using bible jargons, you could say nothing. Well actually(h) that makes you an abnormal person right, well but [God] wanted us to grow. [...] and I felt that during this process, God has opened up many ways in the entertainment circle as well. People [in the entertainment circle], nowadays, I mean they could say anything actually. I mean nowadays they could talk about faith issues very explicitly, that's exactly because we were so naïve at the time, we just, spilled it out unintentionally all the time, spilled it out again. And then, more and more people accepted this, I mean as long as that's part of your life it's alright. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

The member identified some of their religious talk not only spontaneous but even unintentional, yet was tolerated on the basis of their personality of sincerity. Nowadays, explicit religious expressions are more acceptable in the mass media, but

the construction of evangelistic acts through the media always involves the balance of religiosity with popular appeal.

Stepping down: Conflicting religious voices.

Eternity Girls' crossover to the mainstream music scene marked the come back of the CCM crossover movement after almost 20 years of inactivity and the Christian community had high hope for the group, but the mainstream career of the group did not last long. The next year after Eternity Girls have entered the mainstream music scene, they transited to another independent music label, Joy Music, a subsidiary of a Christian-owned private business group and became less active in the mainstream market. Counter-intuitively, Eternity Girls has cut back activities in the pop music scene despite plentiful financial backup in the new company. They released a second album without advertising it in the mass media. As of now, the girls work full-time in the business group with workplace evangelism as their major duties. Despite the offer of their boss to support large-scale promotion activities for them, Eternity Girls opted to step down from the show business:

> Like many people said hey you don't show up in the media anymore, is it becoz you're out of money, your boss doesn't support you, we giggled every time, I mean in our hearts, because the reality is not. [...] We do have financial resources and man power, I mean, but in our hearts we're not willing to go, because in our hearts there's a, we all had a feeling that, no, it seemed this was not what God wanted. But if it's just the five of us to decide, without this religious faith, we might have gone ahead, I mean the plan might have just gone ahead. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

The group accounted for the transition in a religious frame. They reached the consensus after seeking for directions in individual and collective prayers, and considered the move a God-led decision. However, stepping down is not the only option available from a religious perspective and their move actually went against some expectations in the Christian community for them to further turn CCM into a mainstream culture:

> Since we released "Home Sweet Home", there was quite a feedback, quite a lot of people liked it, a lot of people knew us. Well, I found it kind of funny, because a lot of people had great expectations on us. Well after doing this, especially people in the church had the expectation, that after doing this you are going to do something greater. Eternity Girls would stand for, like everyone would say Eternity Girls equals to what? The mainstreaming of Christian music, right, now you're out there in the mainstream, we count on you. I mean lots of expectations of this kind. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

Disappointment was felt in the Christian community. Many considered the group's brief mainstream career a pity. The group said they still face a lot of such queries even now. "In every decision, opinions from men were many, and there's no right and wrong," said one of the members, while they based their decisions on their interpretations of "what we should do in the eyes of God" (Personal interview, May 20, 2010). One of the artists in the group said:

> In fact for myself many years ago I already had a vision, a feeling in my heart that, we're not going to become very popular singers for the whole of our lives. I mean God would raise up, but the will God puts among us, I don't have that feeling, strongly not that feeling. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

Another member added:

> What I observed was, what we did was just the first step. Maybe the whole world, I should say many people, would see this and think this is really funny, you girls have no fame, no nothing, just came out and sing a song [...] and then disappeared. Well but I felt, well, at that time my peace was, I felt when we completed this, that mission, was completed. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

"Vision", "feeling" and "peace" – used in Christian terms to articulate ideas or emotive responses individually inspired by God – were the artists' guiding criteria for their decision. Inner peace is again emphasized by the other two members of the group, while they also mentioned scriptural references and trust in fellow members as factors. The decision to step down is informed by a religious orientation frame, and a very individual one. On the other hand, some other crews in the star project had told me (in separate interviews) that they were not so much at peace when the transition took place. One member of the managing team told me he withdrew from any form of ministry engagement for a year of time to settle his disappointment afterwards. The scenario suggests an inherent instability in the religious orientation frame as individual reflexivity gains weight in the interpretations of spiritual experiences.

In the above, I have described and discussed the media-based and religious shaping of the star-breeding project. There were constant negotiations between business factors, cultural values and religious considerations in the mediation process. CCM's engagement with stardom did not come to an end as Eternity Girls stepped

down from their mainstream career but was succeeded by the formation of a Christian fellowship among a group of rising mainstream singers. This group of rising stars has been increasingly active in the work of music evangelism.

Singers of Light: The Domestication of Rising Stars

A singers' fellowship, named "Singers of Light" (SOL), fermented in the year 2008. The singers' fellowship is significant for two reasons. First, it extends CCM's engagement with the star culture in time and exempts the cessation of the second CCM crossover movement since the stepping down of Eternity Girls. Second, it represents CCM's engagement with the star culture on a new frontier with new opportunities and challenges. The group of aspiring artists CCM now affiliates with might have greater cultural power than the home-breed stars, but it is a cultural power that must be more carefully managed. The singers' fellowship thus functions as a star-domesticating project in the mediation of religion.

While the artists and the planner of Eternity Girls might have different opinions on the group's move to step down from the mainstream, they both see continuity from Eternity Girls' crossover act to the establishment of the fellowship. One of the artists of Eternity Girls said:

> When I continued to pray, considering about the transition, I remember at that period of time a group of singers started to come to believe in Jesus, at

> that time a group was raised up. [...] They are all people who are working in this scene, they're already in the scene, and then came to believe in Jesus, even people who came back, who reverted. Well when I got to know them I felt, this is really great, I mean so grateful these things are happening. I felt there're not just us in the entertainment circle, and we're only people who've just stepped in anyways. Well in fact, God might be just starting this act through us, raising up some people, to start evangelizing, or start to want to do something through music. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

She considered their crossover to the mainstream music scene, where they had "just stepped in", only the first step of a God-led mission which is now succeeded by a group of singers "already in the scene" and therefore able to work from within. These mainstream singers are believed to be able to "lift up the name of God more effectively", as another member pointed out (Personal interview, May 20, 2010).

Likewise, in Eternity Girl's former managing team, one of the planners who has shifted to take up a mentoring role in the singer's fellowship, said:

> God is so amazing that, God knew in advance after [Eternity] Girls opened, I mean they used a key to open that door, well lots of people liked to listen [to CCM], people started producing gospel songs for the mainstream, seems like their mission was held up at that point. But, another group of people emerged, that is the singer's fellowship that we're talking about now. [...] In the process we keep doing lots of discipleship training, lots of spiritual training. [...] Well actually we're preparing a group of singers, so that they could stand up on the stage to testify for the Lord. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

Again, SOL is seen as an extension of the mission of music evangelism after Eternity Girl's crossover act has smoothed things out ("used a key to open that door") and the continuity is under complete control of God. The fact that both this core planner and the members of Eternity Girls are now in the singer's fellowship also shows that

continuity of the two projects. Yet the comment of this mentor also indicates that there is certain prerequisite work to be done ("lots of discipleship training, lots of spiritual training") among these new evangelistic agents. At SOL, a group of rising stars are being equipped for music evangelism.

The fellowship has a mix of both mainstream singers and CCM singers and the average attending number is around 20. Most of the mainstream singers there have entered the business during the last five years and are signed with big or small mainstream music labels. One singer told me that various Christian fellowships have been coming into formation in the entertainment circle in recent years. As compared to another artist fellowship in the industry, "Home of Artists", which has been established for over 20 years, SOL has a more homogeneous group in terms of work nature and industry experience. As one singer said:

> The singer's fellowship is a group of us kids, like guys and gals, to talk about the music scene, becoz we all are using, like singing as a means to profess love, profess God. And so, well, the topics would be narrowed down to the singers' context, so there're more shared topics. (Personal interview, February 10, 2010)

The group gathers weekly in worship, bible study, sharing and prayers. "We really pray hysterically, really, " one artist told me. "Every week we pray for the music scene and for certain artists." (Personal interview, September 25, 2009) One of the mentors said the fellowship was meant to be a "support system" for the singers and he quoted a scripture: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward

love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10: 24) to illustrate this purpose of community living. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009) The fellowship as a "support system" is believed to be a previously missing link in the preclusion of the risks associated with stardom: stars' dissipated evangelistic passion and potential scandals. The mentor in the fellowship said, "hopefully now we, give them the vaccine first, so that later on it doesn't get, messed up." (Personal interview, November 17, 2009) In the following, I will discuss in what ways SOL serves to domesticate the rising stars and moderate the two types of risks.

The fame discourse in the rising star community.

Most of the mainstream singers in SOL are in an aspiring stage in their career. Efforts are paid in the fellowship to keep these aspiring singers in perspective before they attain prominence in the music business, as this mentor said:

> Now we're telling them all, whatever goes on in your company, further development or going further, you've got to, understand your ultimate direction, is for evangelism, for the glory of God, but not for, how great I have to become, how much money I've got to earn and so. Now just constantly building this foundation for them. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

To prevent singers from losing their passion for evangelism once they rise to fame, the mentor tries to adjust the singers' career goal from a self-honoring view to a God-honoring view. A specific discourse about fame with a religious orientation is found in the rising star community and will be examined in three layers in the following: fame as God-willed, fame as mission tool, and fame as temptation.

Because the rising stars have to build their career in an intrinsically fame-oriented environment, the fame discourse is significant in regulating the singers' narcissism and reinforcing their religious piety. Each layer reflects the ways fellowship mentors and members connect and contradict the media-based and religious frames as they negotiate a balance between stardom and religious ideals.

Fame as God-willed.

The first layer of the fame discourse posits that fame is willed by God, shifting the attribution of fame from the individual to God. For instance, a mentor in the fellowship, herself an artist manager, said, "Popular or not, that's the will of God. I mean we would leave it for God to arrange." She explained:

> In fact if God, well, places an artist, allows [him/her] to be popular, to evangelize for him, to do something for him, in fact this is what we wish to see most. No matter whether it's [the artist I manage], I think it doesn't matter, of course coz I manage him, so hopefully he gets popular soon, to evangelize for God, well that, okay. [...] I mean, I think it's not necessarily who, whether it's the artist I manage, right, anyway God would raise up a group of artist, to evangelize for him, that is what I really wish to see. (Personal interview, December 8, 2009)

Fame is seen to be imposed by God. It is God who "places an artist" in a certain position, "allows him/her to be popular" and "raises up" an artist. She disowned the obsession as an artist manager to advance the fame of her artist and told me cutthroat competition for job opportunities is against her style of artist management, as it basically contradicts the idea of God-willed fame.

This fame-as-God-willed layer is more specifically articulated in the following account in which an artist talked about the evolution of his perspective for his music career:

> That was a tough period, coz I always struggled with how to walk on my music path, do I merely do things that people like, or, do I have another identity as, perhaps as a Christian, well, I could, like the gospel of God could be spread through this tool, music. [...] Perhaps during the process, what troubled me was, in this industry many things are so realistic, fleeting or, well if you don't fight for it you lose certain things. You need to grab a lot of things for your own. But in my religious philosophy, it's the opposite, it's God who provides for you. The whole thing is the opposite. So there're lots of conflicts inside, right, it's at war inside. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

As this artist mentioned, when he first entered the mainstream music scene, he struggled between making music for public acclaim and making music for evangelism, as well as how aggressive one should be to survive in the entertainment business. Public acclaim is the path to fame, a path the artist struggled to take; and the industrial norm is to compete for fame, a norm that also runs contradictory to his religious understanding of a contented way of life. Over the years, his perspective has evolved:

> I started to find a path that God gives me. Well this path is also telling me, it's a path for you to bless people. Well the purpose of your music-making should be to bless people, not for well, competition of anything, or, to achieve whatever fame or profit. Fame and profit and that sort of things are only outcomes, I mean outcomes God gives you, but not what you pursue. Then your mindset is totally, that focus is totally different. Right. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

His view of fame has evolved from an incomprehensible phenomenon to a fame-as-by-product view. Now setting the direction of music-making on bringing

blessing to people, he understands fame as a by-product of the faith-oriented music-making process rather than what he struggles to pursue. When I followed on to ask whether he wanted his fame to raise, this artist said:

> I do, the reason is I hope the fame could, well help more people. [...] Well, I think fame is also a blessing from God, but I trust God has his own timing. Perhaps when he places you in this position, like it says in the bible, the parable of the rich man, he gives you one thousand, you spend all your heart on that one thousand, he gives you three thousand, it's three thousand. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

Again, fame is treated as God-willed – as a form of blessing, and the timing depends on God. Finally, he cited the parable of the talents from the bible (Matthew 25: 14-30), which defines a faithful attitude of managing the properties entrusted by one's master, to conclude his attitude for fame. Seeing fame as what God (as master) entrusts to his servants to manage and thus beyond the artist's control in terms of level and time, he is now less concerned about whether or when he would become famous, but feels an obligation to always make the best use of his given level of fame to share messages that "bless people". There is coherence in the mentors' and members' accounts, converging to the fame-as-God-willed layer of the fame discourse to regulate artists' quest for fame by telling them fame is beyond human control.

Fame as mission tool.

Fame is not only treated as God-willed; God wills it for a reason as well. The

second layer of the fame discourse treats fame as a mission tool. For example, an artist who is a more experienced singer among the group said she decided to continue her music career only because God instructed her to. Just got married, she said she had considered leaving the entertainment business which she did not feel to have fitted in anyways, but the decision was interfered by God:

> So as I continue to sing now, I said God you make a way. [...] I mean the reason I still work here is to testify for you, otherwise actually I could evangelize at the back as well, I told God actually I could evangelize at the back as well, I could evangelize to the housewives(h), or, you know what I'm saying, I don't have to go that forward. Well but God said no, you've got to go forward, you've got to go. You've got to do it in the front, you've got to do it in the mainstream. [...] I mean God said, you have to continue to increase your fame, because, I used to feel, wow I won't ask for this kind of things, it's wrong to ask for this kind of things, well I should be so humble. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

As this artist indicated, evangelism could take place in both public and private settings, but she felt God has a mission for her in the mainstream. Fame becomes a calling to be fulfilled. She continued to explain the meaning of fame:

> In fact what matters most is your motive. God knows what your motive is. It's not like, I wanna be popular, I wanna be popular, it's for myself, then of course that's not it. But, if I have greater fame, I could be used in more and greater ways by [God], I could have more power to do more things, like God's telling me, oh actually it's ok to pray for that. If I have a good song, I could, well more people would know who I am, or a song that gets heard everywhere, then I could use that fame to do more in evangelism, could do greater things, [be a] greater support. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

Fame has to be sanctioned by the "right motive". While the fame-as-God-willed layer might seem somewhat deterministic, as artists align the motive for fame with

mission, fame becomes something negotiable with God ("it's ok to pray for that"). In this layer, star power is articulated as a tool for more effective evangelism while the self-glorifying aspect of stardom is disapproved. The artist also considered increased fame a source of greater bargaining power with the record company in favor of mission, quoting Sammi Cheng's case as an example:

> I mean just like Sammi, I really appreciate that, she could have such power to ask the company, hey I wanna make a gospel album. But, at my current position, I can't act that way coz, I haven't reached certain position, where my music career is really established. [...] I mean, [my company] wouldn't consider signing me at all, if I said I had to make gospel albums. Coz I don't have that bargaining power, this is real. I mean perhaps when I have established myself further, becoming more recognized musically, then I could really have this say, hey I'm not going to make other albums apart from gospel pop, are you going to release it for me or not. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

Given her firmly held perspective of fame as a mission tool, this artist was commended by a mentor of the singer's fellowship as among the sturdiest in the group, showing coherence in this layer of the fame discourse. The mentor commended the artist:

> She's clear, now she's already refined by God. For her everything only points to a single direction, I sing for the glory of God. Now that she's got married, in fact basically she could quit(h), I mean, not singing is not a problem. But not for her, "why do I have to sing, I am here to, keep my fame, for a greater impact in evangelism, make it easier for people to invite others". I mean she really understands her position. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

Connected to the fame-as-mission-tool layer is the conceptualization of fans. Questions like how audiences conceptualize these Christian stars or what role these

Christian stars play in the lives of audiences have to be studied from the audience approach, but how fans are conceptualized by this group of rising singers is relevant for the fame discourse. First, given that idolatry is basically against Christian doctrines, fans are conceptualized not as idol worshippers. Some of the artists articulated fans as friends, signaling more even reciprocal interactions than the idol-fan hierarchy. For example, an artist commented:

> For me, I don't want to act like, I'm an artist high up there, come worship me, I mean, it's not that kind of thing. Well, I sort of think singer is just another occupation, a job, and [the fans] also have their own jobs. So, perhaps because of this idea, when I see them, I think it's like chatting with my friends, or family, or, right. I think this works to de-idolize their support for me, I mean, de-idolize [myself]. Coz I would just, tell them really casually, like about my life, I'm gonna eat in a while, my daily living and that sort of things, sometimes I would share with them, so they would, that would be closer, right. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

As this artist indicated, friendship is favored over the idol-fan relationship and efforts are made to de-idolize his position. The concept of the pathological fan is also dispelled, as this artist said of his fans: "They are not the(h), really crazy(h), type of [fans], coz I don't like that crazy either." For another example, another artist posted a note in his forum, upon learning that some of his fans skipped job days to attend his functions, to discourage extreme fan behaviors.

Second, the fame-as-mission-tool layer is substantiated by articulating fans as the target of mission. One of the mentors in the fellowship told me the idea about fans he's trying to instill in the artists:

> We always remind each of them, there must be a reason God gives you this position. Your impact or your summoning power is strong. As long as you've got fans, each fan, well, fan club, is a really good harvesting field of gospel. They need to realize that. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

Fan communities are conceptualized as fields of proselytization. Stars are expected to exercise their cultural power of identification, representing a faith-based subject position and explicitly or implicitly inviting their fans to adopt the same. Furthermore, fan clubs function to maintain interactions between stars and fans. The close proximity on regular bases thus facilitates some forms of relational evangelism. Fans are also drawn to attend gospel events that feature their favorite singers. This brings fans under the reach of the gospel message, not in isolated occasions but through possibly repeated attendance of religious events and immersion in religious contexts. When I asked the artist quoted above whether he agreed to this conceptualization of fan communities as fields of proselytization, he kept nodding before I even finished my question, indicating a strong agreement. He explained:

> Coz sometimes the function I attend, like I said, are gospel events, many fans would go to the gospel events, well they, at first, on the funny side, it's like setting them up, hahahahaha [...] I mean in the past they might just listen to my songs, well attend my performances organized by the radio stations, things unrelated to religion. But now when I have more gospel events, they might go to gospel events sometimes. Well I think that's really great coz they could hear the gospel message apart from my singing. Well sometimes when it's over and they wait for me, I'd say hey what did you hear just now, like I would ask them. They would think about things, I know that, like there's cultivation when they hear it often, I mean of this faith. Well, I mean, I would really wish they could, get to know a faith in their heart [...] and I believe God also wants to bless them through these events. (Personal interview, December 17, 2009)

The rising singers are aware of their star appeal to draw fans to gospel events. Brought under the reach of the gospel message, fans are not assumed to be passive receiver of the gospel message, as this artist indicated ("They would think about things, I know that"), though he expects a religious sensibility to be cultivated in his fans through their attendance of gospel events in the long run. The fame-as-mission-tool layer regulates artist's quest of fame by directing it to the cause of evangelism so that it supports rather than dilutes the artists' ministry passion.

Fame as temptation.

While stardom is by nature a celebration of individuality, the fame discourse in the rising star community suppresses the desire for individual recognition. As shown above, the quest for fame is weighed against the motive associated. The third layer of the fame discourse further addresses this and treats fame as temptation when self-seeking motives are involved. Having stepped down from the entertainment business, one of the members of Eternity Girls said:

> I mean many people would feel, why don't you, if I were you I'd rather, to be like Sammi, that'd be great. You understand? Like these are some kinds of temptations. These are what we have to learn to be humble about. (Personal interview, May 20, 2010)

The desire for fame is seen as a trap as it challenges the spiritual virtue of humility. In another case, another artist, who aspires to differentiate herself through a unique music genre, talked of the internal conflicts between pursuing fame for self

and fame for God:

> Well actually this is a pretty big war in my heart, coz, well, the priority between myself and God. [...] Actually I'd really want people to know that I am a girl who sings this type of music, because, I think this would make me feel special. [...] Well I would, really wish people would commend me for that, in fact, this kind of silly thoughts could make me arrogant easily. I think coz nobody is doing this kind of music in Hong Kong, or very few people, so I'd wanna be the first, and I wanna do it great. I really wish, well, for people to, know who I am, right. Well but, I mean very quickly these two voices are like, "I know who you are, and so what". And in the end I'd feel, in fact just say many people knew who I was, but I didn't have God, I would still enjoy it for a while, but, that pleasure doesn't last forever. But when I know I really have the Lord, and I mean people know who I am, and I could do things for him, that kind of joy, I could enjoy for the rest of my life. Right. (Personal interview, September 25, 2009)

She admitted that fame for self is always tempting, but futile, so after an extended account of the struggles in her motive for fame, she finally resolved by identifying fame as a mission tool. The fame-as-temptation layer is thus built upon recognition of the illusions of immortality promised by fame (Giles, 2000), as the artist recognized the pleasure of worldly fame "doesn't last forever", whereas the religious cause is seen as what truly perpetuates the value of fame ("people know who I am, and I could do things for him, that kind of joy, I could enjoy for the rest of my life"). By exposing the delusions of grandeur associated with fame (Giles, 2000), this layer addresses the pitfalls of fame for the artists' alert.

In addition to treating fame as a temptation against the reverence for God, this layer also involves the treatment of fame as the source of other types of temptations.

When I asked Eternity Girls whether they felt they had experienced great conflicts against their faith in the entertainment circle, they said: "usually the greatest conflict comes when you want to be popular, I mean if someone wants to get popular, one would attempt in many ways" and one would pursue it "at all costs" (Personal interview, May 20, 2010), implying that the desire for fame might drive one to fall into all kinds of moral traps. The fame-as-temptation layer functions as a caution for the artists against the obsession of fame.

In the above, I have identified a three-layered fame discourse (fame as God-willed; fame as a mission tool; and fame as temptation) in the rising star community, which addresses the potential problem that singers might lose their evangelistic passion once they attain prominence in their career. By moderating their narcissism and sublimating the purpose of fame from the self to God, the fame discourse developed in the singers fellowship serves to domesticate the rising stars for ministry goals.

Stars' private lives and close encounters.

The second potential problem of stardom for CCM is misconduct. Stars' modes of conduct often become the center of gossip and evaluation among the general audience, because of a need in the general community for an avenue through which to discuss issues of morality that are insufficiently or ineffectively dealt with in the

rational spheres of life (Alberoni, 2007). The private lives of stars are constituted as "a site of knowledge and truth" (De Cordova, 2001, p. 98). Moral evaluation from the public on the one hand provides great opportunities for the church to make a positive impression with the merits of associated stars against the general vulgarity of the show business, but compounds the shame any misconduct of these public figures could bring to the name of the church on the other hand.

The star community certainly recognizes their private lives are often constructed into public knowledge. In a way such interests in their private lives might present opportunities for the stars to draw public attention to the Christian faith. These stars are aware that plain religious talk seldom gets into the media in the end, but given the public's preoccupation with moral evaluation of stars, they might invoke their private lives to claim for a positive Christian testimony. One of the artists explained:

> Say sometimes, [journalists] ask me, about my husband and I, I would share with them, I am a Christian, before marriage, say about sex, we practice abstinence, I would say it. I said yes, we didn't [have pre-marital sex], we didn't, we practiced it for God. I mean these kind of things I am not ashamed. And [the journalist] felt, wow why would you make this open? Well I am not ashamed. And they would write about it, in the end what they wrote was not negative, [...] I mean you get your message across that way, rather than hard sell, just throw out ten bible verses, they simply don't understand what you're saying, [...] so you have to talk with wisdom. (Personal interview, January 30, 2010)

In this example given by the artist, she stressed the difference in moral values between Christianity and the secular culture, making a statement to stand by the

Christian values she represented. In other instances, like when artists are asked to comment on other artists' private lives, she said that she might not make direct value judgment but tended to mention praying for artists who are in trouble, demonstrating the virtue of compassion. Using different tactics, stars might be able to capture the opportunities of the "perpetual gaze of the media" (Giles, 2000, p. 108) to channel religiosity through the articulation of private lives.

In addition to public interest in the stars' private lives, stars' heightened visibility enabled by the media intensifies the need to manage the conduct of Christian stars. "Good testimonies" are made not only useful but necessary in the private lives of the Christian stars. A mentor in the fellowship addressed the need for the stars to maintain proper conduct and consistency in words and deeds especially under intense media scrutiny:

> Coz for artist the situation is, the visibility is high. I mean once the media recognizes you, very often, particularly for more popular ones there comes the paparazzi, you would have lots of things exposed. Well, actually to be exposed, I just thought, actually it's good as well, if you're upright actually you don't need to worry, right? Well of course not necessarily, coz sometimes they write of it badly. Well but I always believe one thing, when you're really upright, you don't need to worry at all, right. Well, in terms of the singers I would say, well, like it says in the bible, like whether what you say matches with your behavior, they should both come from your heart, I mean I think they should be consistent. Right, so you've got to be a good testimony. (Personal interview, December 8, 2009)

Heightened visibility leads to heightened vulnerability. In fact, the mentors of SOL could not tell me any concrete measures they have to tackle the moral threat, but

in general they count on spiritual equipment through a communal approach. This mentor said the primary task of SOL as a community is to provide spiritual equipment and shelter for Christian artists against the vulgarity and brutality of the business:

> Actually I think [for the artists] to get popular is what happens a few steps away. Here what I look for, is the growth in their spiritual life first. Coz I think, actually when they face the society out there, or in this [entertainment] circle actually there're lots of temptations, I mean, many devils, certainly. And it's ephemeral, right. Nothing compares to rooting your spiritual life firmly. [...] Well I think the most important thing to be done here is, well as brothers and sisters, the singers wouldn't get competitive for entering the business, well, coz actually it happens in this business, it does [...] I think, if they can lose the boundary here, everyone just come as a brother or sister in God, as children of God, they grow together here, well I think that comes first, right. [...] If you're firm, when you go out there you won't, not that you won't, but not so easily do you stumble, right. Well if you stumble then come back, I mean sometimes I think you've gotta allow them the space to grow. (Personal interview, December 8, 2009)

I assert to approach their concept of community religiously. Christians are called to live as community, which is said to be experienced as "holy ground" (Gorman, 2002, p. 12). As mentioned by the mentor, the communal values articulated in SOL include collective identity as "brothers and sisters" and "children of God", and togetherness in spiritual growth, which are built up to counter the "temptations", "devils", and the defensive and competitive culture of the star business. SOL is also established as a space of safety where artists might find shelter if need be.

The communal approach is confirmed by the members of the singers' fellowship. Many of the Christian artists I talked to also tend to stress communal support as the

essence of their experience in SOL. For example, an artist explained:

> In the past when I first started in this industry, why would I feel so difficult? Coz I felt so lonely, I mean it's like there're no others, no Christians in the industry. I was struggling all by myself and nobody knew, nobody to share with. But in this group, you can be so honest. We all are facing the same thing actually, but once you talk about it, oh so I am not the only one, they are also facing this. The most precious thing is that we all come to pray about it. Well it's a sincerity I've never felt before. (Personal interview, November 17, 2009)

In his account, the solidarity found in the collective action in the group is juxtaposed with the vulnerability as an individual performer in the show business. The emphasis on this contrast could be felt in the ways he phrased the difference between experiences of solitude ("I"; "lonely"; "no others"; "all by myself"; "nobody knew, nobody to share with") and solidarity ("we all"; "the same"; "not the only one"). Another artist told me she was not worried to walk amiss on the basis of SOL's communal support: "as long as I have a fellowship, that we stay together continuously" (Personal interview, September 25, 2009). A collective spiritual dynamic is built to uphold the artists' modes of conduct and counter the moral threat in stardom.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the working of the media-based and religious orientation frames in the shaping of the third dimension of CCM – stardom. Stars could help promote CCM and endorse Christian values with their immense

pervasiveness in reaching the general audience and their power of identification for fans. However, the hyperindividuality and moral threat associated with stardom could jeopardize the Christian ministry. CCM stardom thus embodies a fundamental tension between narcissism and religious piety, in addition to the contestation between business factors and religious mission. Although it seems that the cases I surveyed in this chapter do not cover any superstars, it in fact reflects the current reality in the CCM production community, in which superstars are beyond their direct reach. Local CCM's affiliation with the star culture is mainly manifested in a stardom of "ordinariness", as practitioners engage in the breeding of their own stars to crossover to the mainstream and the domestication of the rising stars.

The crossover act of Eternity Girls illustrates the ways practitioners negotiate business factors and religious concerns in the mediation process. Through the discussion of the group's entry to and exit from the mainstream music scene, their financial and strategic disadvantage, their positioning and persona, and their planned and spontaneous evangelistic accomplishments, I have shown that business factors and strategies were both opportunities and obstacles in the star project. At the same time, the religious orientation frame functioned centrally in the star project as the group extensively connects the decisions and events throughout the career to religious assumptions, principles and interpretations. I have also addressed how the group

negotiated religious principles with a few other media-based factors such as industrial norms and cultural values. The fact that this star project was directed by an independent Christian label is crucial to the level of autonomy involved, albeit the financial obstacles it presented.

I have also discussed the singers' fellowship as a star-domesticating project, which addresses another set of tension in CCM stardom – between narcissism and piety. I have identified a three-layer fame discourse that is developed to regulate the rising stars' egoistic individuality and channel their quest for fame to the cause of religious mission. Also, the fellowship functions as communal support for the rising artists to reinforce their religious commitment and guard them against the pervertedness of stardom. So far I have stressed the independent operation mode of CCM production as a conducive condition in the mediation process, but unlike independent CCM artists and labels, many of these rising artists do develop their career under contractual obligations with mainstream recording companies. This rising star community is concerned with maintaining the artists' religious commitment over time. I am interested in finding out the effectiveness of this star-domesticating project and how much negotiation freedom these mainstream artists would have when stardom and associated cultural values come into conflict with religious ideals in the long run.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This study has taken place exactly in a period of time which is considered by many CCM practitioners to be an exciting phase for CCM since a lot of actions are underway and a lot is to be unfolded. "2009 is a year in which [Hong Kong] gospel music shines," concluded one of the CCM musicians in our interview. That exciting phase has not ended as of the writing of this dissertation. This study attempted to document as well as to theorize the CCM phenomenon in Hong Kong. I wish to provide a historical perspective for interpreting the trajectory and future of CCM by sketching its past and present shape.

At the same time I have situated the study in a current theoretical discussion about mediation and mediatization in the field of media and religion. Sensing the current of a theoretical shift from the concept of mediation to mediatization to capture the interrelations of media and religion in the field, I attempt to recover "mediation" as a theoretical tool in media and religion studies through the contextualized development of CCM in Hong Kong as an empirical phenomenon. I have considered the ways the CCM production community applies and negotiates between the media-based and religious orientation frames in the production activities as an integral

manifestation of a process of "mass mediation of religion", as these negotiations illustrate how social actors exercise their agency against structural factors. CCM production as part of that mediation process is explained within a theoretical framework that links up two orientation frames – the media-based frame and the religious frame – and three dimensions of CCM – song text, performance, and stardom.

Having set up the background and framework of this study in the first two chapters, I have raised a primary research question as to how the CCM production community negotiates between the media-based orientation frame and religious orientation frame in producing CCM, and specific questions as in the following:

1. In the development of local CCM in the last 30 years, how have interactions between the CCM production community and different church parties illustrated divergent religious assumptions and interpretations? In what ways have the production community interacted with mass media as they attempted to take CCM to the mainstream audience?
2. How are song text, performance, and stardom of CCM shaped by the intertwining religious and media-based orientation frames? What are the opportunities and tensions that arise in the entanglement of these orientation frames and what is the degree of ensuing negotiations for the practitioners?

- On the dimension of CCM song text, how do practitioners organize stylistic and lyrical choices based on the orientation frames?
- On the dimension of CCM performance, how do practitioners valorize, design and manage the performance based on the orientation frames?
- On the dimension of CCM stardom, what is the value of stardom based on these orientation frames? How do practitioners organize activities that construct and manage CCM stardom based on the orientation frames?

In this chapter I will consolidate the answers to these questions as shown throughout the dissertation. Then I will address the issue of business co-optation for local CCM as opened up in Chapter 3. I will close this dissertation by addressing the limitations of this study and pointing to possible areas for future research.

A Historical Understanding of Local CCM

In Chapter 3 I addressed the first set of questions by sketching a brief history of local CCM in Hong Kong from the late 60s to date. Local CCM had been shaped by Western and regional influence which introduced local church youths to gospel folk in the late 60s and 70s and the year 1980 marked the beginning of local gospel folk, as well as local CCM. Although local gospel folk had not been a concern for church leaders when it first evolved, increasing resistance from traditionalists was met as it

circulated more widely among church youths. This indicates a divergence of religious assumptions and interpretations between traditional church leaders and a CCM community that was taking shape. When the newly found CCM community assumed CCM to be an effective evangelism tool, or at least a "pre-evangelism" tool, to reach out to non-believers in a contemporary cultural form, institutional opinions regarded it as a blasphemy and a corrupting force and sought to preserve traditional sacred music from the threat of CCM. In a sense, such discontents in the history of local CCM manifest a struggle between elitist and popular culture that rarely exists in the local cultural makeup and thus rarely represented in cultural studies in Hong Kong (Ma, 2001). While the historical making of culture in the Hong Kong society had not set elitist culture and mass culture into direct competition in general, the trajectory of local CCM did enact a struggle between the elite and the popular, the legacy and the avant-garde, within the church setting. Of course, that struggle has been entwined with the negotiation of what is religiously significant in the case of CCM. A CCM practitioner recalled the following piece of advice he received from a church leader during the early formation of CCM:

> [The church leader said,] "You know what, in Christianity, it is very difficult to reform certain culture. [...] To succeed, you gotta wait for a long time, until those church leaders think your stuff is really effective, that's when they would accept it." (Personal interview, March 9, 2010)

This comment might be quite true in summing up the interaction between CCM

practitioners and church authorities that has evolved to date. The diffusion of CCM in the last twenty some years seem to have made a case for its pragmatic value. In the church community today, CCM basically exists alongside with traditional church music and CCM practitioners generally face much less church resistance as long as they do not directly challenge the traditionalists.

Simultaneously as local CCM negotiated its legitimacy in the church community, it has also sought to make a presence in the mainstream culture. I have recounted the first wave of CCM crossover between 1986 and 1991 through two significant singing groups and bands, Equator and Citybeat. This crossover movement was the initial encounters between CCM and the mainstream media. The differential experience between the two groups reflects that production mode (mainstream/independent) and financial resources were key in crossover acts. Almost 20 years later, a second wave of CCM crossover has been taking place since 2007, marked by the crossover of Eternity Girls. The financial pressure was again practically experienced, and will remain a constraint local CCM must work through as long as it maintains its independent production mode.

CCM Production as Mass Mediation of Religion

Next, to address the second set of questions about the opportunities and tensions

that arise from the intertwining religious and media-based orientation frames and practitioners' negotiations in between, I pursued the answers in three dimensions of CCM throughout Chapter 4 to Chapter 6.

Text, performance, stardom – each of these dimensions captures some common and unique dynamics and tensions in CCM production and illustrates why it is fruitful to approach the relationship between media and religion as mediation. "Mediation" in the field of media and religion addresses the constant construction, negotiation and reconstruction of religious meanings as they are mediated through contemporary media, involving social actors who shape and are shaped by the environment as they negotiate multiple conflicting, integrating and interpenetrating forces. Conversely, mediatization of religion refers to the process that "religion is increasingly being subsumed to the logic of the media, both in terms of institutional regulation, symbolic content and individual practices" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 11).

Throughout this dissertation I maintain that approaching the production of CCM in terms of mediation can recover a lot of dynamic interrelations that might be lost from the lens of mediatization which emphasizes a linear, unidirectional process where media logic takes over the religious realm. This study thus takes into account practitioners' negotiations between the media-based and religious orientation frames on different dimensions to investigate the multiplicity in the mediation process.

Of the three dimensions, recorded songs focuses on the mediation of religion through a relatively permanent form, whereas performance acknowledges the mediation through liveness and the stage-audience connection made in a specific time and space. Stardom, then, focuses on religious mediation through the embodiment of media figures, which requires ongoing management. These three dimensions are themselves not separated but interlinked, and each dimension captures certain major tensions that require practitioners' negotiations.

The text dimension: Negotiating commerce, evangelism and creativity.

As shown in Chapter 4, the text dimension of CCM illustrates the mediation process by focusing on practitioners' negotiations between commercial factors, evangelism and creativity. Recorded songs represent "a form that we can return to repeatedly" (White, 1997, p. 48). This dimension focuses on a relatively permanent form compared to the other two dimensions. The interplay of the media-based and religious orientation frames has shaped a CCM musical landscape parallel to the local pop musical landscape as well as the varying representations of Christian messages in Christian songs.

Mirroring the local pop scene in which Canto-pop dominates, R&B and hip-hop are on the rise, rock, jazz, blues and world music serve various niches, CCM has developed a parallel musical landscape by adopting different music styles with

varying intensity. In this process, CCM indirectly deploys the commercial understanding of the local music market to maximize the reach of its message. However, this should not be considered as an instance where the religious orientation frame is eclipsed by the media-based orientation frame as the evangelistic aim is consistently articulated by CCM musicians as the motivation of their musical decisions. The parallel musical landscape is thus both highly market-oriented and highly faith-informed, and reflects an integration of the two orientation frames in the mediation process.

Various representations of Christian messages in CCM are also the product of negotiation. In particular, religious explicitness is a central decision to make as practitioners negotiate between financial pressure, popular appeal and religious vision. As stable theme categories in CCM, gospel and devotional songs emphasize the conversion message of Christianity and represent the Christian God as a merciful and patient God which contrasts the unsympathetic and arbitrary God represented in popular music. Inspirational and relational themes are negotiated as positive pop categories in CCM. These categories refrain from overt religious vocabularies and implicitly represent Christianity as the source of a profound, holistic and positive worldview.

Moreover, the mediation process involves the connections and tensions between

ministry and creativity. I have evaluated the potential of stylistic creativity in CCM by looking at the professional, economic, and religious condition for musical exploration. I concluded that creativity is always overshadowed by the evangelistic goal, but creative achievements in small units are possible. In terms of lyrical creativity, it is again subjugated to the evangelistic goal. However, exploration in CCM lyrics seems to be less flexible than that in music styles as lyrical creativity destabilizes religious meanings and thus might undermine the evangelistic goal. I concluded that the balance between lyrical creativity and ministry goal is practitioners' decision to make.

The performance dimension: Negotiating entertainment and efficacy.

Compared to the text dimension, performance illustrates the mediation process by focusing on a dimension characterized by liveness and immediacy in a bounded time and space. As shown in Chapter 5, the performance dimension of CCM centrally captures the dyad of entertainment and efficacy. Both the song selection and song usage practices constitute the blurring of popular music and CCM in live performance contexts and reflect the underlying interplay of the media-based and religious orientation frames as practitioners consciously link up the two. Their negotiations between the criterion of audience tastes and religious significance result in the bundling of pop songs and CCM in performance sets and the reframing and recoding strategies during performance, through which they blend existing popular cultural

products with their own religious resources to articulate religious meanings. Performers also have to manage their verbal and nonverbal performative expressions and the double enactment in performance, so that they work to strengthen rather than obstruct the meaning and affective delivery of CCM. The mediation of religion on the performance dimension thus hinges on how practitioners reconcile entertainment with efficacy, resulting in performances that pursue *efficacy through entertainment*.

The star dimension: Negotiating commerce, narcissism and piety.

CCM stardom illustrates the mediation process on a dimension of celebrity embodiment of values. Compared to the other two dimensions, mediating religion through stars requires an *ongoing* construction of traits to embody religious meanings. As shown in Chapter 6, commercial factors again contest with religious assumptions and goals on the star dimension of CCM. At the same time, stardom as the epitome of individuality rivals with piety, constituting another line of tension in CCM stardom. Local CCM's affiliation with the star culture is mainly manifested in a stardom of "ordinariness", as practitioners engage in the breeding of their own stars to crossover to the mainstream and the domestication of the rising stars.

First, the crossover act of Eternity Girls is a star-breeding project in the CCM production community. Business factors and religious considerations interpenetrated and contested with each other throughout the project. Business factors and strategies

were important in both positive and negative ways. Commercial opinions judging the group to be commercially feasible had facilitated the group's decision of entry. However, the industry environment had placed the group at financial and strategic disadvantage, presenting structural constraints that they must work against. In return, the management of Eternity Girls involved the deployment of marketing and positioning strategies to advance the group as well as CCM. Concomitantly, the religious orientation frame functioned centrally throughout this star project. In addition to connecting their entry and exit to religious considerations and continuously seizing media opportunities for evangelism, the group extensively made religious interpretations for various events in their career. Religious assumptions also informed the group to make certain counter-cultural moves, such as defying sex appeal and commodification in developing their star persona. This star-breeding project thus shows the ways practitioners organize and negotiate business factors and religious concerns as they try to mediate religion through stardom.

Second, the singers' fellowship is a star-domesticating project in the CCM production community. This project highlights the tension between narcissism and piety when religion has to be mediated through the embodiment by human beings, more specifically, media figures. The rising stars might be especially prone to egoistic individuality as they are working in an intrinsically fame-oriented environment. A

specific discourse about fame with a religious orientation is thus developed in the singers' fellowship to regulate the singers' quest for fame and reinforce their religious mission. As discussed in Chapter 6, the fame discourse has three layers, each reflecting the ways fellowship mentors and members negotiate a balance between stardom and religious ideals. The first layer – fame as God-willed – regulates artists' quest for fame by emphasizing fame is beyond human control. The second layer – fame as mission tool – channels the quest for fame to the cause of evangelism so that it supports rather than dilutes the artists' ministry passion. The third layer – fame as temptation – serves to caution artists against the obsession of fame. Furthermore, the singers' fellowship aims at establishing communal support for the rising artists, in hope of upholding their religious commitment and countering the moral threats in CCM stardom.

Configurations of mediation: Instrumentalization, legitimation, prioritization and interpretation.

Taken together, practitioners' negotiations on the various dimensions of CCM demonstrate that mediating religion through the mass media has indeed brought up a range of media-based conditions and considerations besides religious concerns. Apparently, economic considerations have entered into the decision-making process of CCM production, as have other media-based factors such as industrial norms,

technological capacities and cultural values propagated in the media environment. However, the crux in understanding CCM production as mediation is to recognize that religious concerns have not been overridden by these media-based factors. The evangelistic goal remains as a backbone of CCM production. Production decisions and practices are also informed by and interpreted with religious principles and moral codes as well as personal religious experiences and visions. To consolidate the discussion throughout this dissertation, I now conclude with a few configurations of the mediation process, namely *instrumentalization*, *legitimation*, *prioritization*, and *interpretation*, as reflected in local CCM production.

Instrumentalization.

The first configuration of mediation I conclude from local CCM production is instrumentalization. In fact, this is the very basic configuration of mediation as well. As discussed throughout the dissertation, evangelism remains the primary goal of CCM production and media-based resources are instrumentalized to achieve that goal. On the text dimension, practitioners reference the market segmentation as indicated by the popular music landscape and Christian musicians who are involved in the mainstream music industry utilize their professional experience to spread CCM and ultimately the Christian message further. On the performance dimension, the pursuit of efficacy through entertainment clearly shows that media-based resources are

deployed to achieve the evangelistic goal. On the star dimension, practitioners also adopt certain business strategies, especially in the star-breeding project of Eternity Girls. However, the ends behind these media-based and commercial means are religious rather than commercial. I thus conclude that, one significant way the two orientation frames interact is that, knowledge and strategies in the media-based frame are instrumentalized in order to serve the goal as defined from the religious frame. Instrumentalization of the media-based frame is thus a central configuration of mediation.

Legitimation.

The second configuration of mediation I conclude from local CCM production is legitimation. When the media-based and religious orientation frames interact in practitioners' negotiation, the religious orientation frame is often a legitimating frame. This is particular apparent on the text dimension. Practitioners tend to feel obliged to legitimate their musical and lyrical decisions based on the religious frame. In terms of music styles, musical exploration or creativity has to be legitimated on the ground of expanding the reach of the gospel. In terms of theme categories, whereas the gospel and devotional categories have inherited their religious legitimacy from historical hymnological models, practitioners must negotiate the legitimacy of the positive pop categories. Even though the media-based and religious orientation frames are both at

work in practitioners' decision-making, the practitioners will not adopt positive pop unless economic considerations concur with their religious vision. Ultimately, practitioners must be able to articulate the legitimacy of positive pop from the religious frame. The religious frame thus works as a legitimating frame in the mediation process.

Prioritization.

The third configuration of mediation I conclude from local CCM production is prioritization. Although the two orientation frames are often interlaced in practitioners' decision-making process, the religious frame is prioritized when trade-offs are to be made. On the text dimension, I have shown practitioners prioritizing the service to God over financial calculation when making possibly risky production decisions. On the performance dimension, I have also shown practitioners prioritizing evangelism as the primary purpose of performance, thus putting other situational factors such as audience size and technical problems on a lower order. Prioritization of the religious frame is thus also a significant configuration of mediation.

Interpretation.

The fourth configuration of mediation I conclude from local CCM production is interpretation. Although the language of "frame" itself does suggest using the

resources within to interpret events, practitioners tend to interpret happenings in the production process with the religious orientation frame, rather than the media-based one. For instance, practitioners interpret their available material resources as the provision from God, or various happenings as signs from God that point to the next step. The fame discourse as discussed in Chapter 6 also illustrates how practitioners interpret fame – a media-based idea – from the religious lens. Interpretation of events with the religious orientation frame thus represents a crucial configuration of mediation as well.

The above concepts sum up the ways the two orientation frames interact and interpenetrate in practitioners' decision-making process, and thus illustrate the specifications of the mediation process.

Independent Music Production of Local CCM

As I discussed the various dimensions of CCM, I have repeatedly stressed that the independent production mode is a crucial condition that has enabled local CCM practitioners the relative autonomy they have in negotiating their production practices. As mentioned, the production of CCM in Hong Kong has not been driven by large music labels but has operated as independent production for a small Christian market. This is quite different from the US scenario in which CCM has evolved into a thriving

business. The independent production mode of CCM is significant for this dissertation for two reasons. First, if practitioners' negotiation is key to understanding the mediation process and the indie mode is the basis for that negotiation *capacity* in CCM production, this operation mode is then the anchoring point for recovering the theoretical lens of mediation. In fact part of the contributions this research is making to the field of media and religion is by studying a case where CCM is still operated in the independent mode, so that dynamic interrelations can be represented in this research, whereas most existing CCM research were done in contexts after the CCM industry has become big business. Second, since this dissertation also aims at providing a historical perspective for interpreting the trajectory of local CCM, this existing operation mode is marked with significance, particularly as the future of local CCM is contingent on the possibility of mainstream co-optation.

Independent record companies generally refer to relatively small-scale operations that usually originate and try to operate outside of the established mainstream organizations that dominate the music industry (Kruse, 2003). Most independent label owners traditionally have not expected to make money from their acts; they have entered the field primarily to make music they would like more widely available to select audience (Kruse, 2003). Like most indies, Hong Kong CCM is not profitable and often walks a financial tightrope. One of my respondents in this study is a former

DJ who used to host a CCM program in a local radio station. She is not a CCM musician herself but has good knowledge of the local CCM scene, and she said, "[US CCM] is already a very mature market. It's about a business. But in Hong Kong that doesn't exist(h). People who make Christian music can't make money." (Personal interview, April 21, 2010) The indie mode thus presents practical obstacles for local CCM practitioners and labels including limited budget, scarce resources for promotion and weak distribution. Independent labels usually suffer when they try to compete with major labels because of their disadvantage operating in "a terrain structured by major labels" (Kruse, 2003, p.2).

Yet at the same time, as Kruse (2003) pointed out, the primary advantage of independent labels is creative freedom. As Laing observed, in general, independent labels are more likely than majors to allow musicians latitude, since they lack the bureaucracy needed for creative micromanagement and the all-encompassing desire to maximize audience and sales (as cited in Kruse, 2003, p. 67). In the case of local CCM, the independent mode affords musicians and practitioners certain freedom and flexibility for negotiations between the media-based and religious orientation frames as discussed in this study. Unbounded by bureaucratic structure and imposed business goals, label owners, managers, musicians, artists, or (small) employee collectives (and of course these roles often overlap) have been able to make relatively autonomous

judgments and decisions on the text, performance and star dimension so far. I assert that this is the condition that merits the case of local CCM to be studied from a mediation approach in which the media-based and religious orientation frames are shown to be interpenetrating and interacting, in order to *complement* the now fashionable mediatization approach.

Mainstream Co-optation for Local CCM

Along the discussion of the independent production mode, I now return to the question of mainstream co-optation for local CCM as promised in Chapter 3. At the beginning of this dissertation I pointed out that this is now a critical moment for local CCM as the genre might or might not be co-opted by mainstream music labels. The success of Sammi Cheng's gospel album *Faith* (2009) has drawn mainstream music labels' attention to the business potential of CCM and they have shown certain interest in this new niche market. This means the independent mode of local CCM might change. Mainstream labels' involvement in the Christian market could play a decisive role in CCM development, as shown in the US experience. It significantly increased the production budgets and quality of US CCM and eventually transformed it into a bankable business. All of the successful independent Christian labels were eventually acquired by mainstream companies in the US. The US gospel industry is

thus considered to have been co-opted by the mainstream recording business (Romanowski, 2005).

In Hong Kong, responses to the possibility of mainstream co-optation seem ambivalent within the CCM production community. There are opinions that welcome mainstream labels' involvement, considering it only a natural development, particularly with reference to the US model or established markets elsewhere. An apparent advantage with major labels is better resources, better promotion and distribution. In a way, Sammi Cheng's *Faith* album might reflect certain truth in the saying that "you need a major label in order to really be heard"[57]. Yet there are also voices of concern. In fact, Cheng's album has created a certain level of skepticism in the CCM community regarding its religious integrity, because the project involved a number of professional but non-Christian composers and lyricists in the core production crew. Some maintain that the bottom line for a song to pass as authentically Christian is that the composer, lyricist and singer have to be Christians so that the song comes out as an authentic expression of Christian experience. In Cheng's case, it was basically the assumption of the artists' tremendous religious commitment plus her high level of autonomy in the project that redeemed the album in the eyes of some CCM practitioners. Yet there are concerns that if mainstream

[57] A British indie musician interviewed by Kruse (2003, p. 65) said so.

record companies increase their involvement in CCM production, inauthentic products are likely to flood the market.

Some CCM musicians also refuse to let certain media-based orientations such as the preoccupation with chart performance to further encroach in the CCM scene. One professional musician said, "Christian songs are not created to be 'plugged' or placed on pop charts…What gospel songs do is to bring you positive messages and peace, to encourage you when you need it. That's enough."[58] Another professional musician advised the local CCM scene against the tendency to be "mediatized": "I don't think Christians necessarily have to re-evaluate their direction in Christian music-making just because of [Sammi's] album, coz God would use different people, [to create] different feelings in different songs." (ahm music station, 2010) It shows that opinions in the production community are mixed as to the future of local CCM.

Yet in fact, a major label has already made its move for CCM recently. It has outsourced a project for an independent Christian label to produce a CCM album for a few of the rising artists in that company. This was initiated by a senior executive, who is a Christian, in the mainstream label. When I asked the producer of the independent label whether he held any cynicism for this project, he said, "Not at all. It's totally [God's] grace. I was more than glad, never could have imagined, that [the major label]

[58] See L. M. Wong (2010).

would want to release a gospel album." (Personal communication, May 2010) During my earlier interview with this practitioner, when I asked of his opinion about business co-optation, he acknowledged that corporate support would increase as well as stabilize resources and thus considered co-optation acceptable as long as the mainstream label guarantees a sufficient level of autonomy for the CCM division, so that they could continue the evangelistic mission uninhibitedly. He cited G-Power, what used to be the CCM subsidiary of Rock Records in Taiwan, as a reference.

Within the local CCM production community, practitioners often make references to the CCM scene in other countries, and in so doing, assert certain practices as common. The local production community generally has a vision for CCM to become a common genre in the mainstream scene – to have shelf space in secular record stores, to have concert productions that would draw a large audience and great expectations, etc. – as it does in more established markets such as US and Australia. Local CCM also resembled certain paths of development with US CCM, such as the attempts to shake off the notoriety of inferior music quality and the crossover acts. Some local practitioners have been trying to launch CCM charts and awards as its US counterparts did, though with little progress so far. When I asked one of the practitioners who has been actively promoting CCM using some of the strategies in the US model whether she considered the US model a desirable direction

for local CCM to take, she said,

> For Hong Kong, is it a desirable direction, well, I can't say it would work in Hong Kong. Well, I would welcome it, if it really works that way(h). But I don't think we could achieve that in Hong Kong, I mean to be that vigorous, I mean after all [in the US] they've been developing it for so many years, but it seems just a start for Hong Kong. (Personal interview, April 21, 2010)

In general, the local CCM production community would wish CCM in Hong Kong could thrive as much as it has in other established markets, although their anticipations for the business co-optation model of US CCM may vary. From my assessment, if a mainstream co-optation indeed takes place, the local CCM scene might change significantly; specifically, practitioners' negotiation autonomy might retract (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 1998) and the CCM scene might become "mediatized". Anyhow, whether mainstream co-optation will happen for CCM in Hong Kong is yet to be seen. While some major labels have been on the move, whether their interest in the CCM market will sustain largely depends on the financial return of these investments.

Limitations of the Study

While this study aims at both documenting and theorizing the CCM phenomenon in Hong Kong, there are some limitations in carrying out those tasks in the current study.

First, I recognize the limitations in my research strategies. For example, given

the lack of published trade statistics in the local CCM scene, I was not able to retrieve industry statistics such as sales figures through archival research but had to rely on the practitioners' reports. As I tried to understand practitioners' decision making criteria and experiences in CCM production mostly through interviews, my subject position would unavoidably confine the data and analysis in one way or the other. Apparently my identity as a Christian believer might activate certain patterns in the interview process because respondents tend to continuously monitor who they are in relation to the interviewer during interviews (Holstein & Gabrium, 2003). While I have tried to maintain a critical distance in analyzing practitioners' accounts, my subject position would implicate on my interpretive practices. For example, I have felt the obligation to honor practitioners' accounts, such as the religious commitment they articulated, as their realities even though I could not verify their "truthfulness" (Rosenblatt, 2003). In terms of participant observation, although I consider my approach generally sufficient for answering my questions, it would have been beneficial if access had been gained to the singers' fellowship so that observations of the rising artists' interactions were possible. In the current study, discussions about the preventive measures to the moral threats in stardom are limited as the mentors of the fellowship were only able to articulate some abstract principles instead of specific experiences.

Another limitation of the study is that it does not address audience and reception

in the mediation process. As it is the aim of this dissertation to address the possibility of agency in the social process of production, I have put my focus on the CCM production community. Yet obviously, agency in the reception process is an important element in the concept of mediation, as it posits that "institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption" (Silverstone, 2005, p. 189). When conducting the current study, I had a general understanding about CCM audiences based on my own experience as an active CCM user as well as some informal interactions with Christian and non-Christian audiences, yet the question of CCM reception could be more systematically addressed. A more comprehensive picture could be represented by matching each of the three dimensions I proposed in this study with questions about audiences and reception: how do audiences receive song text? How do they approach different music styles and overt and implicit religious messages? How does embodied experience in live performance shape consumption of CCM? How do audiences read CCM stars and what are fan practices in relation to CCM stardom? Such inquiries would help to better address the question of CCM reception.

Areas for Future Research

Before closing this dissertation, I will identify a couple of areas that are beyond

the scope of this research but will be significant to engage in for future studies.

This study seeks to engage in a theoretical discussion of mediation and mediatization in the field of media and religion. The current study has shown the usefulness of mediation as a theoretical tool in the field by explicating practitioners' negotiations in CCM production, but this might be a special case, given its production mode, as mentioned. For more established markets of CCM such as US, UK, Australia and Kenya, the scenario might be explained by mediatization satisfactorily. It would then be useful to collect and analyze more cases to assess the applicability of these two concepts and identify the contextual factors. In fact even in the Asian region, CCM has a very vibrant shape in places such as Malaysia and Taiwan. The CCM phenomenon as well as its theoretical implications could thus be further studied on both the global and the regional levels. Besides, there are further research potentials back in the locality of Hong Kong. Given its time frame, the current study has to conclude at a moment when the impact of the second wave of CCM crossover movement and local CCM's prospect which is contingent on mainstream co-optation can not yet be determined. An ongoing monitoring of the genre's development in Hong Kong is worthwhile to determine whether and at what point mediatization with a superseding media logic might actually take place in local CCM.

Another area worth further exploration is the political nature of local CCM.

Previous CCM research from the political approach (in the US context) tends to consider the genre to be rooted in an evangelical ideology and to attribute its growing success in the mainstream music industry to the augmented political power of conservative Evangelicals. Considering the diverse church background in the making of the local CCM production community, I tend not to gloss over local CCM as an Evangelical movement. Practitioners' church backgrounds indeed span in mainline, evangelical, fundamentalist and charismatic churches[59]. It has been observed that the social discourse of evangelical churches in postcolonial Hong Kong tend to concentrate mostly on moral issues and have remained quite silent on socio-political issues, while mainline churches have been more outspoken about socio-political issues and at times criticize government policies (S. Chan, 2007). Given the diversity of practitioners' church affiliation or upbringing, local CCM is likely more than just an Evangelical movement. Questions to be further explored might include: whether connections exist between local CCM and the local political climate; whether and how CCM practitioners relate their political orientations to their music, and how these differences in political orientations are experienced, negotiated or reconciled within the CCM production community.

Through the discussion in this dissertation, I hope I have recovered "mediation"

[59] I adopt S. Chan's (2007) categorization of local Protestant churches here.

as a concept to understand the relationship between media and religion and illustrated certain specific configurations – instrumentalization, legitimation, prioritization, and interpretation – by showing the constant interplay of the media-based and religious orientation frames in CCM production. I also hope my analysis has provided a perspective to understand the trajectory of local CCM and interpret its contingent future. At the time the idea of mediation first gained importance in the field of media and religion, White (1997) pointed out that the study of media and religion as cultural negotiation is "part of the reflexive process of understanding what kind of culture we are creating and whether this is the kind of culture we want" (p. 61). I think this is the best ending note for this dissertation, as I also wish this study will contribute to that reflexive process, so that readers, listeners, and practitioners will be able to keep asking – whether this is the kind of culture we want – as the future of local CCM further unfolds.

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Appendix A
Interview Guide

CCM Involvement in General

1. When was the first time you came across CCM? What was your initial response?
2. How did you become involved in CCM as a _____?
3. Please describe your previous involvement in CCM. What roles have you played? Please describe those experiences.
4. Can you describe your daily work? What do you do as a _____?

Experience and Decision-Making in Production

1. How would you describe your music style and the content of your work? How do you decide on the style and content?
2. How do you find/select projects to be involved?
3. How do you evaluate the result of your work?
4. How often do you perform in live CCM performance? What do you have to consider in these performances?
5. Can you describe the experience of performing CCM live?
6. What are the problems/struggles you face most often in your practice? How do you deal with the problems?
7. What are the greatest motivations/rewards in your CCM practice?
8. What are the most memorable moments in your CCM practice?
9. What are your plans/expectations for your involvement with CCM in the future?

On Specific Project (e.g. Album, Live Performance):

1. How did it get started?
2. What factors did you consider when taking on the project?
3. What did you like about the project?
4. What were the difficulties? How did you handle them?
5. How would you describe the experience of working on the project?
6. How would you evaluate the result?
7. How much was invested in the project? Where did the resource come from? How did the project do financially?
8. What could be done better for the project?

On Stardom

1. Stardom seems to be playing a role in local CCM. What are your views about this

phenomenon?

2. What are the opportunities and problems of working on CCM with/as stars? How can those problems be solved? (How did you handle the problems?)
3. What is your role in the singers' fellowship? Please describe your experience in the singers' fellowship.

Comments on the Local CCM Scene

1. What do you think are the most important qualities for a CCM singer?
2. What makes good CCM? How do you tell good CCM from bad ones?
3. What do you make of the local CCM scene nowadays? What do you appreciate? What needs to be improved?
4. What do you envision for the future of local CCM?

Appendix B

Albums of Citybeat and Equator during the First CCM Crossover Movement

Citybeat (1988) *Citybeat* [Album]. Hong Kong: Phillips.

Citybeat (1989) *Runaway* [Album]. Hong Kong: Phillips.

Citybeat (1990) *The Time is Now* [Album]. Hong Kong: Silver Planet

Citybeat (1991) *Goodbye* [Album]. Hong Kong: Silver Planet

Equator. (1986). *The Compassionate World* [Cassette tape]. Hong Kong: ACM.

Equator. (1987). *Equator* [Cassette tape]. Hong Kong: ACM.

Equator. (1989). *The Hidden Sun* [Cassette tape]. Hong Kong: ACM.

Appendix C
Local CCM Songs Cited in the Dissertation[60]

The Surprising Encounter (2002)
偶然遇上的驚喜
音樂 2000
作曲：盧永亨　　作詞：盧永亨

Dedicate my All (2004) recorded by Eternity
Dedicate my All
主唱：Eternity
作曲：金培達　　作詞：陳志傑　　編曲：金培達

Unreserved Love (2004) recorded by Samantha Lam
愛是不保留
主唱：林志美
作曲：佚名　　作詞：佚名　　編曲：Aubrey Suwito

Encountering God (2005) recorded by Hins Cheung
遇見神
主唱：張敬軒
作曲：西伯　　作詞：西伯　　編曲：金培達

When You Are Exhausted (2005) recorded by Peco Chui
當你走到無力
主唱：徐偉賢
作曲：佚名　　作詞：佚名　　編曲：徐偉賢

All Because of You (2005) recorded by Mimi Tang
全因爲您
主唱：鄧婉玲
作曲：西伯　　作詞：西伯　　編曲：李啓昌

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[60] The list is ordered in: 1. Year of release (in chronological order); 2. Last name of the recording artist (in alphabetical order); 3. First word of the translated song title (in alphabetical order).

Who Can Help Me (2005) recorded by Sonsetfree
誰人可以幫到我
主唱：Sonsetfree
作曲：John Shi　　作詞：John Shi

The Blessings of God (2006) recorded by Angela Au
神所賜的福
主唱：區文詩、小強
作曲：西伯　　作詞：西伯　　編曲：郭家俊

Morning Sunbeam (2006) recorded by Gary Lau
晨曦
主唱：劉港源
作曲：梁冠豪　　作詞：梁冠豪　　編曲：John Laudon

Do You Know (2006) recorded by Lambert Chan
你知道嗎
主唱：陳立業
作曲：凌東成　　作詞：凌東成　　編曲：溫應鴻

Home Sweet Home (2007) recorded by Eternity Girls
回家
主唱：Eternity Girls
作曲：李健達　　作詞：李健達、張祥志　　編曲：Johnny Yim

The Greatest Love (2008) recorded by Corinna Chamberlain
The Greatest Love
主唱：陳明恩
作曲：謝杰　　作詞：徐偉賢、Leo Cheung　　編曲：歐陽業俊

Generation of Love (2008) recorded by Peco Chui
愛．世代
主唱：徐偉賢
作曲：徐偉賢　　作詞：徐偉賢　　編曲：楊毅

His Will (2008) recorded by Peco Chui
旨意
主唱：徐偉賢
作曲：徐偉賢　　作詞：耶穌、何基佑　　編曲：林山川

Never Say Naver (2008) recorded by Peco Chui
Never Say Naver
主唱：徐偉賢
作曲：徐偉賢　　作詞：徐偉賢　　編曲：Johnny Yim

What Sense Does This Make (2009) recorded by Peco Chui
這是什麼道理
主唱：徐偉賢
作曲：盧永亨　　作詞：盧永亨　　編曲：楊毅

The Director of Life (2009) recorded by Rex Chan
人生導演
主唱：陳雋良
作曲：陳雋良　　作詞：Leo Cheung、陳雋良　　編曲：陳雋良

I Have a Dream (2009) recorded by Henry and Roger Chung
夢想．．．有一天
主唱：鍾一諾
作曲：鍾一諾　　作詞：鍾一諾、鍾一匡　　編曲：Edmond Tsang、鍾氏兄弟

That Morn Shall Tearless Be (2009) recorded by Henry and Roger Chung
天明不再有淚
主唱：鍾一諾
作曲：鍾一諾　　作詞：鍾一諾、鍾一匡　　編曲：Bob Mocarsky

The Chimes (2009) recorded by Henry and Roger Chung
鐘聲
主唱：鍾一諾
作曲：鍾一匡　　作詞：鍾一諾　　編曲：Jeff Young

To Do Justly, To Love Mercy (2009) recorded by Henry and Roger Chung (feat. Da Fishermen)
行公義　好憐憫
主唱：鍾一匡、鍾一諾 (feat. 漁夫)
作曲：鍾一匡　　作詞：鍾一匡　　編曲：Billy Chan

Journey (2009) recorded by Good News Messengers
旅行
主唱：佳音使團
作曲：John Laudon　　作詞：朱浩廉　　編曲：John Laudon

Cutie Girl (2009) recorded by Jade Kwan
得意妹
主唱：關心妍
作曲：小福　　作詞：小福　　編曲：Johnny Yim

In the Beginning (2009) recorded by Jade Kwan (feat. MC Jin)
世代之初
主唱：關心妍 (feat. MC Jin)
作曲：關心妍　　作詞：王祖藍　　編曲：John Laudon

Without You (2009) recorded by Jade Kwan
沒有祢　那有我
主唱：關心妍
作曲：吉中鳴　　作詞：張靜珊　　編曲：Jim Ling

Great Power and Love (2009) recorded by Tats Lau @ Love Mission
大能大愛
主唱：鍾凱瑩
作曲：劉以達　　作詞：劉以達　　編曲：劉以達

Walking with the Lord (2009) recorded by Tats Lau @ Love Misssion
與主同行
主唱：劉以達、陳明恩
作曲：劉以達　　作詞：劉以達　　編曲：劉以達

To Live is a Sacrifice (2010) recorded by multiple Christian artists
活著就是祭
主唱：基督徒藝人
作曲：朱榮達　　作詞：朱榮達　　編曲：Johnny Yim

Eagle and Birdie (n.d.) recorded by Frances Chiu
飛鷹與小鳥
主唱：趙芬妮
作曲：John Laudon　　作詞：趙芬妮　　編曲：John Laudon

Shade Tree (n.d.) recorded by New Beings Band
樹蔭
主唱：余[illegible]開（得生樂隊）
作曲：阿生　　作詞：阿生　　編曲：古龍開

Appendix D
Local Pop Songs Cited in the Dissertation[61]

Walking with You (1986) recorded by Lowell Lo
陪著你走
主唱：盧冠廷
作曲：盧冠廷　　作詞：唐書琛　　編曲：鮑比達

I am Willing (1994) recorded by Faye Wong
我願意
主唱：王菲
作曲：黃國倫　　作詞：姚謙

Beautiful for Life (2001) recorded by Sammi Cheng
終身美麗
主唱：鄭秀文
作曲：陳輝陽　　作詞：林夕　　編曲：陳輝陽

So Kind of You (2002) recorded by Jade Kwan
你有心
主唱：關心妍
作曲：陳輝陽　　作詞：林夕　　編曲：陳輝陽

Stubbornnes (2003) recorded by Boyz
死性不改
主唱：Twins & Boyz
作曲：張佳添　　作詞：黃敬佩

Proud of You (2003) recorded by Joey Yung
我的驕傲
主唱：容祖兒
作曲：陳光榮　　作詞：黃偉文　　編曲：陳光榮

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[61] The list is ordered in: 1. Year of release (in chronological order); 2. Last name of the recording artist (in alphabetical order); 3. First word of the translated song title (in alphabetical order).

One and Only (2004) recorded by Joey Yung
世上只有
主唱：容祖兒
作曲：陳光榮　　作詞：黃偉文　　編曲：陳光榮

Release (2006) recorded by Jade Kwan
放生
主唱：關心妍
作曲：李峻一　　作詞：李峻一　　編曲：Billy Chan

Cool Love (2007) recorded by Hins Cheung
酷愛
主唱：張敬軒
作曲：Vincent Chow　作詞：林夕　　編曲：Gary Tong

Love Song (2008) recorded by Khalil Fong
Love Song
主唱：方大同
作曲：方大同　　作詞：方大同　　編曲：方大同

You Love Me (2009) recorded by Sammi Cheng
你愛我
主唱：鄭秀文
作曲：謝杰@ Soulchain　　作詞：徐偉賢　　編曲：Johnny Yim

Sin and Punish (2009) recorded by Sammi Cheng (feat. 24 Herbs)
罪與罰
主唱：鄭秀文 (feat. 廿四味)
作曲：陳奐仁　　作詞：黃偉文　　編曲：陳奐仁