

# Even More Stereotypical? A Qualitative Content Analysis of Gender Representation in Chinese Popular Song Lyrics from 1992 to 2022

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## **Abstract**

This research examines the construction of gender identities in Chinese pop music lyrics from 1992 to 2022 (n=308), using qualitative content analysis. Through Kam Louie's *Wen-Wu* Framework, the study identifies and distinguishes male and female protagonist images as either Chinese Stereotypical or Non-stereotypical, reflecting traditional and modern gender roles. The analysis of Chinese top songs reveals a "V"-shaped trend in stereotypical gender portrayals, with a decline followed by an increase over time. This pattern is attributed to the transition from elites to grassroots due to media development, and government censorship impacting music content. The study provides insights into the interplay of culture, politics, and gender representation in Chinese pop music, contributing to gender studies in the Global South.

**Keywords:** Gender Representation, Chinese Context, Lyrics, Popular Culture, Songs.

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## Introduction

Pop music has always been a crucial site for the issue of gender representation and sexuality (Scott, 2009, p.15), which is overwhelmingly present in people's daily lives (Couto et al., 2022). As a form of media product, pop music encodes gender-related discourses via music and lyrics, which construct gender identities and representations that are further decoded by the audience. Scholars have long focused on interpreting the discourse related to gender identities in a specific genre of pop music and further interrelating socio-cultural transformation (Scott, 2009, p.15; Kreyer, 2015).

Gender representation in pop music has become increasingly diverse with the rise of feminism, LGBT movements, and globalization. For instance, several scholars have identified the changing expression of femininities in English pop music under the influence of post-feminism, where female musicians praise women's independence and self-empowerment in the gender relationship rather than lamenting the fragile romance from the earlier narratives (Liu & Wang, 2022). At the same time, the global rise of K-pop attracts widespread scholarly attention. Instead of singing "*Boy, I love you*" in the past, the core concept of proactive "*Girl's Power*" is praised by female K-pop artists nowadays, which constructs a femininity that emphasizes independence and self-empowerment. Thus, this shift reflects a new gender power relationship in the Asian cultural background. (Kim, Pan & Park, 1998; Li, 2022).

While the global trends highlight a move toward more explicit expressions of female agency, Chinese pop music often follows a distinctly subtle and culturally embedded path, where the gender expression and representation are more euphemistic and ambiguous. The songs contain various imaginaries and discourses based on ancient Chinese tradition, including poetic symbolism, historical allegories, and philosophical concepts. As a result, the audience will need their knowledge of Chinese

culture to interpret the discourses that construct gender representation. Thus, gender representation and identity constructions in Chinese pop music are a more complicated mechanism than in other textual media products (Lu, 2012).

Going into details, the construction of masculinity and femininity in China is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese culture and Confucianism (Lu, 2012). In Confucian ideologies, Men should carry the duties of earning income in a family, while women should follow the rule of “three-fold obedience”, which is subordinated by the father in childhood, the husband in marriage, and the son in old age (Mun, 2015). Such ideologies reflect the gender inequality that women are expected to sacrifice for the family (Patt-Shamir, 2009). The traditional gender identities can be seen in the songs that the Communist Party of China encouraged to write about socialist labor in the 1950s, which marked the existence of Chinese pop music (You, 2012). In the 1990s, when the Chinese pop music market opened to global capital, different types of masculinities and femininities emerged in the music, challenging the normative gender relationships and unequal power dynamics depicted in the song. Such a phenomenon gradually became evident since the development of audio consumption technologies led to easier accessibility of music products for the audience. However, the shift of the gender representation in the song gradually takes place, but it is inevitably subject to supervision and governance from the Chinese government (Li & Hesmondhalgh, 2024). On the one hand, the Communist Party of China allows these changes to occur, but on the other hand, it has strengthened ideological education to consolidate hegemonic masculinity (Song, 2021). With the influence of Chinese traditional culture, globalization, and censorship from the government, gender representation in Chinese pop music was specifically complicated.

However, studies on gender representation in Chinese pop music are still minimal. It is

imperative to explore how Chinese pop music probe gender identities and their interrelations with traditional pasts, global influence, and communist currents. Besides, gender and media studies on music are mainly conducted by the Global North rather than the South. To make up this research gap and contribute to the voice of the Global South in gender and media studies, with a specific historical angle, this thesis will explore how Chinese pop music constructs Chinese masculinity, femininity, and gender relationships, and discuss the shift of these gender representations and power dynamics over time scale afterward.

## **Literature Review**

### **Mediated Gender Representation**

Gender, in the human world, is one of the main structures to discuss and debate. The concept of gender involves social and cultural perceptions (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). How men and women are portrayed, symbolized, and represented across culture and the public sphere can be regarded as gender representations.

Whether the narrative of audio radio and music, or the visual image of advertisements and television, media content is the central agent in maintaining gender ideologies and the key sites of processes through which gender identities are shaped, governed, and negotiated (Gill & Gill, 2007; Turner, 2004; Kanai, 2018). In the mediated society, individuals can also use messages from the media to construct gender identities (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). The shift in how gender is portrayed in media can also challenge the existing stereotypes and expectations related to masculinity, femininity, and gender power dynamics (Edström & Mølster, 2014).

Masculinity was considered a specific configuration in the contemporary metropole apparatus that can be traced, together with its relations with local power (Carrigan et al., 2002; Connell, 2016). Among multiple masculinities, hegemonic masculinity marks a mechanism that ensures the dominant gender identity (Buschmeyer & Lendersdorf, 2016; Connell, 2016). With media products like videos and songs related to the affirmation of hegemonic masculinities coming out, the hierarchical order of masculinities is seriously challenged. A concrete example is the long-discussed “sissophobia” in the Western context in social media focusing on gay men, which occurred to ensure that heteronormative masculinity has been justified and empowered (Eguchi 2011, p.38; Bergling, 2001; Song, 2021). Some marginalized masculinities would automatically consent to legitimize the status of hegemonic masculinity (King et al., 2021). However, the horizontal differentiation of the patterns of masculinity is challenged to lead to a less hierarchical order in the age of social media (Buschmeyer & Lendersdorf, 2016).

Amy Allen (1998) stressed that feminists mainly focused on 1) the passive status of women in society, and 2) the way women achieve self-empowerment. As social media rose, feminists could call for their agencies to make their life decisions and the diversities that carried on the differentiation of repressive femininity. What's more, feminists are now focusing on media engagement and individualism. Young women chose and manipulated profile pictures with their outward appearance of the virtual personality to evolve into critical self-expression and self-empowerment (Chang et al., 2018).

The aforementioned studies identify social media platforms' influence on the internal power structures on masculinities or femininities, which inspired us to explore the shifts of power dynamics within gender representations. However, it is worth arguing that studying identities of one gender is

one-sided. The conceptualization of masculinity and femininity is inherently related, as it is considered a social demarcation and a cultural opposition (Connell, 2005, p. 43). Additionally, when the study focuses on the hierarchical gender order that privileges men over women, the shifting dynamics in gender relations must be taken into account (Connell, 2014; Lendersdorf & Meuser, 2016, p. 29). Thus, the thesis emphasized a concept of “mediated gender representation”, which includes how media presents masculinities, femininities, and gender power dynamics, to better discuss manifestations of gender and its cultural influence in a systematic and holistic perspective.

### **Gender Representation in Pop Music Lyrics**

As one of the media products, pop music is overwhelmingly present in people’s daily lives (Talbot, 2014; Couto et al., 2022). Its availability has increased exponentially since the presence of audio recording technology, the radio, and more crucially, the Internet (Hyatt et al., 2017). With music’s function of communication, pop music can connect people with contemporary conditions and generate meanings, which include the structure of gender (Henry Makura, 2016; Scott, 2009, p.35). musicians employed several strategies, musically or linguistically, to encode the messages and send the gender ideology to the consumers. (Vambe, 2011; Green, 1994).

Pop music lyrics, as the linguistic strategy in pop music, reflect the message with the accompanying melody and rhythm, which are related to relevant culture within time and space (Scott, 2009, p.35; Vambe, 2011). Lyrics are an essential component of constructing gender roles, gender features, and gender power expression (Kreyer, 2015; Gallee, 2016). Besides, the lyrics in pop music can declare underage sexual prowess (Scott, 2009, p.223). Thus, several scholars focused on gender representation in pop music, exploring how masculinity, femininity, and gender power dynamics are

constructed and depicted in the lyrics.

## **Masculinity Construction**

In the previous study, Scott (2009) suggested three approaches to constructing masculinity in pop music lyrics. First, describe the essence of masculinity, putting an internal angle and gaining access to the distinction of masculinity. Second, describe the crisis of masculinity, putting an external angle on masculinity and providing multiple contradictions. The last one describes the illusion of the ideal female, named “masculinity without men”. The three perspectives that Scott (2009) proposed inspired this study to explore the interrelations or differences of gender identities in internal, external, and opposite angles, which provided a crucial theoretical framework in describing a single type of gender identity.

A large body of literature also focused on the gender expressions in different languages of popular music. For instance, Baker-Kimmons and McFarland (2011) conducted a content analysis with popular music lyrics of black male artists from 1990 to 2002 and found that rap music mainly constructed black masculinity by depicting the illusion of an ideal man with humility, honor, and respect for oneself, and demonstrating that they are different than the U.S. normative masculinity which is usually manifested physical strength and virility. Another concrete example is Darling-Wolf's (2004) study on Japanese pop music lyrics, where the masculinity construction mainly stressed that the soft and mild new-generation men were different from the normative old ones. Although the masculinity was gradually shifted, Japanese pop music stubbornly embraces the Confucian gender inequality (Darling-Wolf, 2004). Herein, while some lyrics in pop music affirm the status of hegemonic masculinity, other lyrics that challenge the status quo emerged. The marginalized men use

music to stress the necessity of constructing an “alternative masculinity” to challenge the hegemonic one (Baker-Kimmons & Mcfarland, 2011; Eastman, 2012).

## **Femininity Construction**

There is a large body of literature that focuses on the femininities in different languages of pop music. Cooper (1985) analyzed top song lyrics from 1946 to 1976 for the presence of eleven stereotypes of women. He found that it was dominant for the top songs from 1946 to 1956 to depict femininity as women needed men urgently. As for the top songs from 1966 to 1976, the women were depicted as childlike girls. Dibben (1999) used two approaches from the Frankfurt School to analyze the three popular songs in the 1990s and found that femininity in pop music lyrics was first constructed in the realm of the patriarchal system. The concept of Laura Mulvey’s (2013) “Male Gaze” can be used in the studies of femininity in pop music lyrics because a large amount of Western pop music is written as a fulfillment of male desire (Mulvey, 2013; Dibben, 1999). Femininity in pop music was usually depicted as fragile, weak, innocent, and sexually available girls, stressing the repressive gender identities in the lyrics (Dibben, 1999; Dibben, 2002). This situation seemed different when girl groups like the Spice Girls became popular in the global market. The powerful models and stressed “Girls Power” images gradually emerged in the lyrics. However, they failed to get rid of the Male Gaze and even affirmed the dominance of patriarchal constructions of femininity in the music videos and visual materials (Dibben, 1999; Monnot, 2010). Nowadays, pop music from different regions, such as hip-hop from the black communities and K-pop, is also challenging the patriarchal construction of femininity (Avery et al., 2016; Garza, 2021).

## **Gender Relationships and Power Dynamics**

The abovementioned studies identify the shift in masculinities and femininities within pop music lyrics: In the era of social media, hegemonic masculinity is being challenged, while women are exploring new forms of empowerment through self-expression on digital platforms. However, it is worth arguing that the shift in gender power dynamics should be considered separately. Aligning with Darling-Wolf's (2004) findings, the emerged "alternative masculinity" didn't lead to the shift of gender relationships. Thus, exploring the gender relationships and power dynamics in Chinese pop song lyrics is imperative.

The previous study of gender relationships and power dynamics construction in pop music lyrics mainly focused on two aspects: Dating relationships (Love) and Sexual relationships (Making Love). Smiler, Shewmaker, and Hearon (2017) conducted a content analysis of Western pop music lyrics from 1960 to 2008 to explore the shift of gender stereotypes. They found that female performers are more likely to describe dating relationships, while male performers are more likely to mention sexual behaviors and objectify women. Besides, in the time scale of 5 decades, the description of sexual relationships became more common (Smiler, Shewmaker & Hearon, 2017). Cougar Hall, West, and Hill (2012) also conducted a content analysis of pop music lyrics from 1959 to 2009 to detect the extent to which the lyrics were sexualized. They found that the sexualized lyrics from the male performers were twice that of the female performers. In sexualized lyrics, men objectified women by mentioning violence and degrading terms, while women did self-objectification. (Cougar Hall, West & Hall, 2012; Couto et al., 2022). With aggressive masculinity and repressive femininity remaining the two main gender identities in pop music lyrics, men are over women in gender power dynamics (Avery et al., 2016). However, in the influence of post-feminism, a number of pop song lyrics show

the empowered ideal of gender equality in romantic relationships, but such a depiction is based on the representation of white women (De Laat, 2019).

While existing research has extensively documented the role of popular music lyrics in constructing gender ideologies, significant research gaps remain: Predominantly focused on contexts of the Global North, current knowledge production can't get rid of a lack of studies exploring Chinese pop music. With a distinct socio-cultural landscape, which is shaped by Confucian traditions, socialist gender policies, and rapid commercialization, Chinese pop music lyrics may foster unique patterns of gender representations. Furthermore, previous analyses have not systematically applied a multidimensional analytical framework across masculinity, femininity, and gender relationships. Thus, it is imperative to employ a structured framework with multiple angles to investigate the construction of gender identities and power dynamics within Chinese pop music lyrics.

### **The Ambiguity of Chinese Pop Music Lyrics**

Hall (1976) stressed the concept of “High-Context Culture” in his book *Beyond Culture*. He regarded “High-Context Culture” as a “Culture in which people are deeply involved with each other” and “the information is widely shared through simple messages with deep meanings” (Hall, 1976, p.39; Kim, Pan & Park, 1998). Chinese Culture is a kind of high-context culture, which leads to a hard interpretation of Chinese music lyrics without a strong base of cultural understanding (Zhang, 2018). If it is analyzed separately from the melody, Chinese music lyrics are regarded as a similar text to Chinese poems, stressing the emotion and the purpose with limited Chinese characters (Li & Xue, 2023; Wu, 2009). Apart from the direct narration, Chinese music lyric composers are good at using imagery (called “*Yixiang*” in Chinese) in the narratives, which is attributed to “Chinese styles”

(*Zhongguofeng* in Chinese) (Lu, 2012). Such imageries can be decoded by Chinese audiences with a strong cultural basis, which can also construct Chinese masculinity and femininity implicitly (Yang, 2022).

Lu (2017) conducted a corpus analysis of the top 100 Chinese pop songs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to identify a pattern of how men and women interpret love relationships in the songs. She found that there is a percentage of “trans-songs” in Chinese pop music, which means either male or female singers are appropriate to sing it (Lu, 2017). But she also argues that the gender of singers is important to construct gender roles and identities (Lu, 2012). This suggests that while the content of Chinese pop music songs may sometimes be gender-neutral, their performative enactment by a specific gender actively contributes to the construction of gender representations.

Based on the special attributes of Chinese pop music lyrics, and the research gap of a lack of inductive patterns in Chinese lyrics narratives. The study intends to discuss how Chinese popular song lyrics construct gender identities and relationships. The first research question, with three subordinate research questions, is listed below:

**RQ1:** How do Chinese popular song lyrics construct gender representation?

**RQ1a:** How do Chinese popular song lyrics depict masculinity?

**RQ1b:** How do Chinese popular song lyrics depict femininity?

**RQ1c:** How do Chinese popular song lyrics depict gender relationships?

## **Shifting Gender Representation in Chinese Media Products**

Chinese gender identities and relationships were deeply influenced by Chinese Culture and

Confucianism (Fan, 1996; Shi, 2013). Chinese normative masculinity, defined by Confucianism, strongly emphasizes brotherhood, the core of the family, and solidarity (Louie, 2014). While femininity, under the feudal culture of ancient China, was described as weakness, and was subordinated by the man. For example, the Confucianism Chinese idioms stressed “*Nan Zun Nv Bei*”, meaning women should show high esteem to men (Bu, 2020). Besides, ancient Chinese novels stressed gender inequality and gender relationships in which men dominate over women. For example, *Ximen Qing* in the Pornographic Novel *Jin Ping Mei* is remembered mostly for his big size of sex organ, which celebrates phallic centralism in the novel (Louie, 2014). The ancient context of the historical construction of gender roles informed the masses that women were in the oppression in ancient Chinese society (Fan, 1996).

After the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party tightened its control of the media. During the Mao era, mass media in China were “instruments of class struggle” (Zhao, 2010). Although the media products, like the songs which were composed by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s and 1960s and tabloids, delivered communist messages, including “*Women hold up half of the sky*” and “*Women can do revolutionary work and contribute their share to the strength of the country just as men*”, to depict an image of “*iron women*”, it ended up putting the mask of hegemonic masculinity on women (Croll, 1995, p.71; You, 2012; Shi, 2013).

China’s reform and opening-up policy marked the liberation of the media in the post-Mao era (Zhao, 2010). As for the entertainment, the Chinese government released the singer contract system in 1992, leading to the process that the Chinese music market started to open to foreign capital (Lu, 2018). It also means the increasing visibility of different gender identities, queer and sexual minority groups in both visual and audio media. The emerging different masculinities and femininities

challenged the original form with hegemonic status. However, the Chinese government upholds the authority of controlling the market and cultural trends, trying to regulate gender temperaments via holding censorship on media outcomes (Song, 2021). A concrete example is effeminate male images, called “*Hua Mei Nan*” in Chinese, which frequently showed up in the Chinese entertainment industry through media products like advertisements, TV shows, movies, and songs. However, the phenomenon received heavy criticism in China on social media at a national level, and the government-published policy to resist such an image continues to show up (Song, 2021; Yu & Sui, 2021). At the same time, it’s a trend for female singers and actresses to “speak out for women” directly through their media appearances in China, which is the proliferation of self-empowerment of “Girl’s Power” (Chang, Ren & Yang, 2018).

The aforementioned studies identify the influence of Confucianism, Socialist policies, and global influence, and further probe the interrelation with gender expression in the Chinese entertainment market. However, there is also a lack of exploration of the continuity of how these gender representations shift in the media product. Thus, this study intends to discuss how gender representation in Chinese pop music lyrics shifts under the tension between Chinese socio-cultural transformations and contemporary political censorship. The second research question is listed below:

**RQ2:** From China's first opening of the music market to nowadays, what changes have occurred in the gender representation in Chinese popular song lyrics?

## Methodology

Qualitative content analysis was employed in this study to examine the gender representation in

Chinese pop music lyrics. As Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) discussed, qualitative content analysis involves an inducted design to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation, which is supposed to well support the research purpose of inducting a pattern and coding scheme of gender representation in Chinese pop song lyrics and better cover the research questions.

The lyrics chosen in the study were the top 10 songs in each year from 1992 to 2022 (n=308). The rankings were compiled by BiliBili, one of the most popular media platforms in China for music videos and animations. The top 10 songs every year are suitable databases since they represent the most widely disseminated and consumed mainstream cultural products at the time, which effectively reveals the shifting nature of gender ideology in the Chinese context. A diachronic analysis of these 31 years of data allows us to systematically track how gender representation in pop music lyrics reflects and responds to broader social, political, and economic transformations. Most of the songs are in Mandarin, and several are Cantonese and Fukienese. Information on the selected songs is listed below (See Appendix A “Data of Songs”).

This study employed purposive sampling, the most used sampling method in qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014). The study aimed to induct and summarize the type of expression of Chinese music lyrics' gender representation with rhetorical analysis and code them to recognize the type of masculinity, femininity, and gender power relationship. All the types of gender representation in the database will be numerically tracked.

### **Screening and Coding Procedure**

Wimmer and Dominick (2013) stressed that there are two ways, deductive and inductive approaches,

to establish the coding scheme. The deductive approach is also known as *a priori* coding, namely, scholars can establish a coding scheme based on existing theoretical frameworks and several solid concepts. At the same time, the inductive approach is *emergent coding* (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). Namely, it allows scholars to code the data with an open view and establish multiple methods and concepts to overcome the research question. After multiple screening and testing, scholars can select the most effective coding scheme, and the theme of the research can gradually emerge.

In this research, the context unit of analysis was the lyrics of each song. Thus, the descriptive variables are to be entered for the information of the songs, which are: 1) name, 2) release year, and 3) language. There are 4 categories under language: 1) Mandarin, 2) Cantonese, 3) Fukienese, and 4) other dialects.

As Lu (2012) stresses that the singers, rather than the lyric composers, play the most vital role in constructing gender identities and gender roles. If a male singer sings the lyrics, then the lyrics would be regarded as information related to masculinity. Thus, another aspect of descriptive variables is for singers, which is: 1) name and 2) the gender of singers. The singer's gender can be 1) male, 2) female, or 3) mixed gender group.

To better study how the Chinese lyrics depict masculinities and femininities, the study chose to detect the protagonists who appeared in the lyrics' narratives. Suppose the singer's gender is a mixed-gender group. The study should distinguish the lyrics of men's and women's singing parts to analyze at this level. There are 8 categories for the types of protagonists: 1) "I" as a male protagonist (i.e. the male singer himself), 2) the male protagonist in Men's Eye, 3) the male protagonist in Women's Eye, 4) "I" as a female protagonist (i.e. the female singer herself), 5) female protagonist in women's eye, 6) female protagonist in men's eye, 7) group, 8) none.

As Mosse (1998) argues, people believe that one can decode outward appearance to comprehend its innermost purpose, endowing the body with symbolic meanings. A narration like the lyrics that describe the images of male and female protagonists can disseminate information related to gender identities. Thus, the study regards images of the protagonists as the code at the non-power level. The categories under norms and images are 1) Chinese traditional stereotypical and 2) Chinese traditional non-stereotypical.

Louie (2002) stressed that the word “hegemonic masculinity” couldn’t be appropriately applied in the context of studying Chinese traditional masculinity. Instead, he stressed that *Wen* (文, mental and civil) and *Wu* (武, Physical and martial) should be employed in Chinese traditional masculinity, which is both an ideal pattern and brings sexual priority to women. Thus, two categories under the Chinese traditional stereotypical description: 1) *Wen* men who are full of knowledge and moral cultivation, and 2) *Wu* men who emphasize martial power, strong mentality, and strength.

The study will judge such images based on the literature related to Chinese traditional masculinity and femininity. Each genre of image will be given explanations and examples after screening. (See Appendix B “Operational Definitions”)

As for the power level, when there are only narratives of a single person, it’s necessary to count on the protagonists’ agency: 1) High-level Agency and 2) Low-level Agency. When the object of narratives is about relationships, to study better how Chinese pop song lyrics reflect gender power dynamics, the study chooses “relationship described by the lyrics” as a coding unit. Each kind of relationship includes different actions of male and female protagonists; the active or passive actions in the relationships will be identified and recorded. 4 categories were 1) male over female (men take active actions while women take passive actions), 2) male and female (both protagonists take passive

or active actions), 3) female over male (men take passive actions while women take active actions), and 4) none.

Such agencies in the single narratives and actions in the relationships will be given explanations and examples after screening. (See Appendix B “Operational Definition”).

### **Inter-coder Reliability**

To ensure the reliability of this study, a communication graduate was chosen as the second coder. Wimmer and Dominick (2013) suggested that between 10% and 25% of the content should be used for testing the inter-coder reliability. During the training session, the first author (who was also the first coder) and the second coder coded 63 images in 40 songs that were randomly chosen from the data. Disagreements were analyzed, and some additional explanations were added to the coding scheme. Using Cohen’s kappa, the inter-coder reliability was 0.98 (Type of Protagonists), 0.89 (Content Type of Protagonists), 0.90 (Detail Content of Male Protagonists), 0.90 (Detail Content of Female Protagonists), 0.98 (Subject of description), 0.98 (Type of Agency), 0.98 (Content Type of Agency), 0.93 (Gender Relationships), 0.93 (Action type of men), and 0.88 (Action type of women).

## **Findings and Results**

### **Chinese Traditional Stereotypical Images of Male Protagonists**

According to Kam Louie’s *Wen-Wu* Framework about Chinese masculinity, the study identifies 5 types of Chinese traditional stereotypical images for *Wen* male protagonists and 3 types of those for *Wu* male protagonists. The images are calculated separately in men’s angle and women’s angle. The content types and the frequencies are shown in *Table 2.1* below.

Content-Type	Number in men's angle	Number in women's angle
<i>Wen</i>		
Aa1 Flower Protector	17	2
Aa2 Passionate Chaser	25	1
Aa3 Ruthless Men	5	45
Aa4 Thoughtful Men	7	1
Aa5 Intelligent Gentlemen	5	12
<i>Wu</i>		
Ab1 Chivalrous knight	19	3
Ab2 Physically Strong Men	3	2
Ab3 Men with Strong Mentality	26	0
Total	102	66

Table 2.1 Numbers of Chinese stereotypical images of male protagonists in men's and women's angle

The results show that the most frequent traditional stereotypical image of *Wen* male protagonist in Chinese pop song lyrics is the passionate chaser. Their passionate character and desire to get the targeted women's affirmation and enthusiastic response will be shown in the lyrics. Besides, they try to gain the initiative in the relationship. Such attributes of the images can be seen in Wu Bai & China Blue's '*Norwegian Forest*'<sup>1</sup> (伍佰& China Blue--《挪威的森林》):

让我将你心儿摘下 Let me take your heart out

试着将它慢慢融化 Try to melt it slowly

看我在你心中是否仍完美无瑕 See if I am still perfect in your heart

In this song, the lyrics describe a man trying to pay court to his targeted woman. he makes up his effort to strive for the initiative in the relationship, trying to show his sexual priority to women by asserting his high-level agency of actions.

Another type of traditional stereotypical image of *Wen* male protagonists that is frequently shown in the lyrics is the flower protector. "Flower protector" (护花使者 in Chinese) means the men who

are protecting women. Such a notion regards women as weak objects (flowers, etc.) and emphasizes that men should take responsibility to protect women from harm. The attributes of the images can be seen in Michael Wong's '*Fairy Tales*'<sup>2</sup>(光良--《童话》):

我愿变成童话里，你爱的那个天使，

I would like to become the angel you love in the fairy tale,

张开双手变成翅膀守护你.

and open my hands to become wings to protect you.

In this song, the male protagonist supposes that the targeted woman needs protection. He stresses his will and is eager to be a “flower protector” of the woman. He hopes that women can rely on his protection so that it marks that he successfully exercises his sexual power over women.

As for the *Wu* male protagonists, the image that is shown frequently in Chinese pop song lyrics is a Chivalrous knight with a “Jianghu” spirit. The chivalrous knight (Xia 侠) represents physical power, extraordinary military skill, and leadership, while the “Jianghu” spirit is praised for brotherhood and solidarity (Sullivan & Zhao, 2021). The attributes of the image can be seen in Wakin Chau's “*A Life Of Fighting Is But A Dream*”<sup>3</sup>(周华健--《刀剑如梦》):

我刀，划破长空 My knife cuts through the sky.

是与非，懂也不懂 I am struggling to know whether the thing is right or wrong.

In this song, the male protagonist is emphasized with a good skill of using knives and showing his concern about “Jianghu” when he is a chivalrous knight.

Another type of image of *Wu* male protagonists that is frequently depicted in the lyrics is a man

with strong mental fortitude. To possess a strong character is characterized by self-control and self-discipline (Louie, 2002). They are often required to be strong, brave, and competitive, and not to cry even in the face of setbacks, to ensure the Wu men's priority status in traditional Chinese culture. Such attributes can be seen in Cheng Zhi-Hua's "*The Sailor*"<sup>4</sup> (郑智化--《水手》):

他说风雨中这点痛算什么 He said that the pain in the wind and rain is nothing  
擦干泪不要怕 至少我们还有梦 Wipe your tears and don't be afraid. At least we still have dreams.

In this song, the male protagonist emphasizes the strong mentalities of being brave and progressive, trying to regulate the man so that they shouldn't cry when facing setbacks.

The frequency of the traditional stereotypical image of male protagonists from a woman's angle is different from that from a man's angle. The results show that ruthless men are shown the most frequently in women's angles in Chinese pop song lyrics. Such images of changing partners or breaking up cruelly are another manifestation of Wen men exercising sexual power over girls. This is also a characteristic of sexual violence against girls to maintain their sexual priority. The attributes can be seen in S.H.E.'s '*Don't Want to Grow Up*'<sup>5</sup> (S.H.E--《不想长大》):

我深爱的他, 深爱我的他,  
How could he, whom I love so much, whom loves me so much,  
怎么会爱上别个她  
fall in love with someone else?

The male protagonist in the song changes partners, cheating on the female protagonist. He also leaves her with concerned and heartbroken feelings, maintaining his sexual priority.

### **Non-stereotypical Images of Male Protagonists**

According to Kam Louie's framework, non-stereotypical images give up sexual priority to women in the relationship. The study identifies 3 types of non-stereotypical images of male protagonists in the lyrics. The content types and the frequencies are shown in *Table 2.2* below:

Content-Type	Number in men's angle	Number in women's angle
B1 Coward who shows weakness	36	1
B2 Men who are depressed about an old relationship	37	4
B3 Childish men	3	3
Total	66	7

*Table 2.2 Numbers of Non-stereotypical images of male protagonists in men's and women's angle*

The results show that there are two types of non-stereotypical images of male protagonists that frequently show up in the lyrics: Cowards who show weakness and Men who are depressed about an old relationship.

One of the Chinese non-stereotypical images of male protagonists is a man who gives up sexual power over society by showing their weakness and the dark side of being a coward. Usually, they will drop their tears and admit they are on a relatively weaker and more passive side. Such attributes can be seen in Sam Lee's “*Absolute Crush*”<sup>6</sup> (李圣杰--《痴心绝对》):

你又狠狠逼退我的防备 You forced me back hard again,  
静静关上门来默数我的泪 closed the door quietly and counted my tears silently

The male protagonist admitted his failure in the relationship, letting the tears down and showing his weakness in the lyrics.

This image of a man who is depressed about an old relationship will describe a strong attachment to a past relationship or an inability to let go. They failed to achieve sexual power over women and

can't get rid of being down. Such attributes can be seen in Richie Jen's 'Sad Pacific'<sup>7</sup> (任贤齐--《伤心太平洋》):

我等的船还不来 The boat I'm waiting for hasn't come yet

我等的人还不明白 The person I'm waiting for hasn't understood yet

寂寞默默沉没沉入海 and my loneliness sink silently into the sea

The male protagonist in the song is unable to get rid of an old relationship, he admits that he has no initiative in the narration, giving up his sexual priority to female protagonists.

### **Chinese Traditional Stereotypical Images of Female Protagonists**

As Louie (2002) argues, women in the Chinese traditional society are discussed together with "Xiaoren" (小人), denied by the political and conventional system. The study identifies 7 types of female protagonists' images that accept the passive status in the patriarchy in ancient China. The content types and frequencies are shown in *Table 3.1* below:

<b>Content-Type</b>	<b>Number in women's angle</b>	<b>Number in men's angle</b>
A1 Women who are depressed about an old relationship	43	12
A2 Shy woman with an introverted crush	25	1
A3 Vulnerable women	28	15
A4 Allurer	0	9
A5 Charming Women	4	22
A6 Cute/innocent/childish girls	6	4
A7 Gentlewomen	5	12
Total	96	67

*Table 3.1 Numbers of Chinese stereotypical images of female protagonists in men's and women's angle*

Among the results, Women who are depressed about an old relationship are the most common image in women's angle. They admit the sexual priority of men in the relationship and describe a strong attachment to a past relationship or an inability to let go. They also stressed heartbroken complaints about how ruthless men have dumped her.

Apart from A1, the female protagonists in Women's Angle regard themselves as a vulnerable woman most in the lyrics. This image of female protagonists will admit the sexual priority of men in the relationship. They stress that they are weak and vulnerable in physical or mental aspects in the narratives of lyrics. The attributes of protagonists can be seen in Faye Wong's "*Vulnerable Women*"<sup>8</sup> (王菲--《容易受伤的女人》):

情难自禁, 我却其实属于 I can't help myself, but I belong to  
极度容易受伤的女人 the category of a woman who is extremely easily injured.

The female protagonist in the song stresses her vulnerability in the relationship, accepting her passive status in society.

Compared to the images in women's angle, a particular type of image emerges in men's angle called "Allurer". This image of female protagonists will be described as "Devil" or "Succubus" with sexual tension. Both Wen and Wu men regard this type of woman as a "huge temptation" and the block on their way to achieve success. These women are disdained by the men. In other words, they are forced to accept the sexual priority of men in the relationship. Such attributes can be seen in Phil Chang's '*Moon Trouble*'<sup>9</sup> (张宇-《月亮惹的祸》):

我承认都是月亮惹的祸 I admit that the chaos is all caused by the moon

那样的夜色太美你太温柔 The night like that is too beautiful and you are too gentle.

The female protagonist in Men's angle in this song is regarded as the moon, which is an allurer to the men's self-control and discipline.

Besides, female protagonists are often shown as charming and vulnerable women. From the male protagonists' angle, they can also describe the vulnerability of women. Such images provide male protagonists an excuse to be "Flower Protectors" and exercise their sexual power and priority.

### **Non-stereotypical Image of Female Protagonists**

The study identifies 3 types of images of female protagonists that deny men's sexual priority in society, which are non-stereotypical images to an extent. Such content types and frequencies are shown in *Table 3.2* below:

<b>Content-Type</b>	<b>Number in women's angle</b>	<b>Number in men's angle</b>
B1 The women who came out of the emotional pain	14	10
B2 Girls who take the initiative to pursue love	17	10
B3 Independent, Solid, and Brave women	27	2
Total	58	22

*Table 3.2 Numbers of non-stereotypical images of female protagonists from men's and women's angles*

The results show that Independent, solid, and brave women are shown the most frequently in the lyrics. Such images denied the marginalized status in society, calling for women's agencies and encoding the message that encourages women to be solid and independent. Such attributes can be

seen in Angela Zhang's 'Keep Walking'<sup>10</sup> (张韶涵--《淋雨一直走》):

人都应该有梦 Everyone should have dreams

有梦就别怕痛 If you have a dream, don't be afraid of pain

The female protagonist in the song is described as a solid woman with a strong mentality, showing differences from Chinese traditional stereotypical images of female protagonists.

### **Agency and Action**

The protagonists exercise their power in the narratives of the lyrics. When the object of the lyric's description is about a single object, the study identifies the high-level or low-level agencies in the narratives, while it identifies the active or passive actions in the lyrics' description of relationships.

### **Agency Type of Protagonists**

When it comes to a single object, the narratives as a first-person often emerge in the lyrics, emphasizing the agency of the protagonists or stressing the norms to construct gender identities, the agency types of both male and female protagonists and frequencies are shown below:

Action Type	Number
MH1 Calling for raising to be strong	36
ML1 Helpless about the society	3
FH1 Calling for rights	26
FH2 Calling for self-empowerment and variety	4

*Table 4.1 Numbers of agency types of protagonists in relationships*

The results show that when male protagonists stress their high-level agency, they usually emphasize the norms of being strong both mentally and physically, while they show their negative

attitude towards their ability and the society while associated with low-level agency.

There is no low-level agency identified in the lyrics for female protagonists, when they emphasize their high-level agencies, they are relatively calling for their agencies and their rights to make decisions. Self-empowerment and diversity, which are relatively less mentioned, are also what female protagonists emphasize and pursue.

### **Actions of Male Protagonists**

When it comes to active actions, the action types and frequencies are shown below:

Action Type	Number
MA1 sexually objectified women	47
MA2 regards women as “trouble”	9
MA3 Regard Women as “Subordinate”	22
MA4 Self-Oriented	36
MA5 Being given the initiative by others	54

*Table 5.1 Numbers of active actions of male protagonists in relationships*

The results can be distinguished into 3 aspects and 5 action types. MA1, MA2, and MA3 are actions towards female protagonists. These three actions maintain men's sexual priority by disdaining female protagonists' status or bodies, tacitly or explicitly. MA1 is the most frequently appearing action among the three. Male protagonists are delegating their power and engaging the “male gaze” of female protagonists. The attributes can be seen in Joker Xue's ‘*Gentlemen*’<sup>11</sup> (薛之谦--《绅士》):

我想摸你的头发只是简单的试探啊

I want to touch your hair is just a simple test.

The male protagonist in the lyrics exercises the “male gaze” on female protagonists’ bodies, showing their inner desire to touch their bodies.

MA4 is an action toward the male protagonists themselves. It maintains men’s sexual priority by emphasizing their initiative in the relationship. MA5 is an action effect of action from female protagonists. Female protagonists give up their initiative to the male protagonists in the lyrics so that the male protagonists hold their right to make decisions.

Action Type	Number
MP1 Admits no initiative to change the situation	6
MP2 Can’t get rid of the current relationship	49
MP3 Waiting for others' decision	6

*Table 5.2 Numbers of passive actions of male protagonists in relationships*

Among the three passive actions, MP2 is the most frequent action in Chinese pop song lyrics. This is one of the passive actions of male protagonists. They have given up their initiative and are still very dependent when their partner has left. Such notions can be seen in Steve Chou’s ‘*Lonely alluvion*’<sup>12</sup> (周传雄--《寂寞沙洲冷》):

自你走后心憔悴 My heart has been haggard since you left  
白色油桐风中纷飞 and the white tung trees are flying in the wind

It describes a strong attachment to a past relationship or an inability to let go. They failed to achieve sexual power over women and can’t get rid of being down.

## Actions of Female Protagonists

Action Type	Number
FA1 gets rid of the current relationship	33
FA2 Self-Oriented	36
FA3 sexually objectified man	4

Table 6.1 Numbers of active actions of female protagonists in relationships

The results show that although there are a few female protagonists who exercise their “female gaze” on men, most female protagonists gain their initiative in a relationship by emphasizing their agency. Among them, FA1 takes a large portion of the appearance. In the narratives of Chinese pop songs, they overcome emotional pain and take the initiative to end relationships. The attributes can be seen in Sandy Lam's ‘*For You, I am Blown by the Cold Wind*’<sup>13</sup> (林忆莲--《为你我受冷风吹》).

我会试着放下往事管它过去有多美

I will try to let go of the past, no matter how beautiful it used to be.

The female protagonist in the song tries to forget an old relationship and avoid the disturbance from her ex-boyfriend, showing her initiative to get rid of the situation and deny the male protagonist's decision.

Action Type	Number
FP1 Self-objectification	23
FP2 Being an object of lust	52
FP3 Waiting for others' action	19
FP4 Can't get rid of the current relationship	43

FP5 Has no initiative in the relationship	15
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*Table 6.2 Numbers of passive actions of female protagonists in relationships*

The results also show that there are 5 types of passive actions that female protagonists exercise. The female protagonists that exercise FP1 regard themselves as a sexual object or a “subordination” of male protagonists in the relationship, giving up their initiative when they interact with male protagonists. Such attributes can be seen in Yin Xiangjie & Yu Wenhua’s ‘Tracker’s Love’<sup>14</sup> (尹相杰/于文华--《纤夫的爱》).

只盼日头它落西山沟哇, 让你亲个够

I just hope that the sun will set in the west ravine so that you can kiss me enough,

The female protagonist in the song is a sexual object to fulfill the sexual desire of the male protagonist.

FP2 is a special type of action among them; such an action usually exists in male singers’ songs. When men actively exercise their initiative to chase a love relationship, female protagonists, as targets of chasing, will be objects of lust.

### **Stereotypical Images Percentage**

[Insert Figure 1]

From a macro-observation, the results show that the percentage of Chinese traditional stereotypical images is linked to a “V”-shape trend. Starting at the point of 65.59% in 1992-1997, although the percentage exhibits a slight decrease to 55.95% in 1998-2002, it ended up showing an

increase in the subsequent years and stopping at 75.32% in 2018-2022.

The results also show in a micro-observation that the percentage of Chinese traditional stereotypical images of male protagonists from men's angle follows a similar "V"-shape trend, decreasing from 56.25% to 52.00% in the first 11 years and eventually ended up increasing to 75.00% in 2018-2022. On the other hand, that of male protagonists from women's angle maintains a high percentage in 3 decades, fluctuating from 85.71% to 100%.

As for the percentage of Chinese traditional stereotypical images of female protagonists from both men's and women's angles, the trends in the frontier 26 years are also following a similar "V"-shape, but a decline is observed in the last 5 years. That of female protagonists from women's angle starts at 74.07% and surged down to 41.38% in 1998-2002, then gradually increased to 80.00% in 2013-2017, and ended up decreasing to 67.00% in 2022. That of female protagonists from men's angle starts at 70.59%, reaches the lowest point at 66.67%, increases to a peak of 92.86% in 2013-2017 afterward, and eventually shows a decline to 85.71% in the last 5 years.

## **Relationship Percentage**

[Insert Figure 2]

In Taoism, men, from the *Yang* side in *Yin-Yang* theory, are the dominant than women in sexual behaviors (So & Cheung, 2005). And in ancient Chinese literature, Chinese women are out of the discussion of the *Wen-Wu* framework, being in the same position as "Xiaoren" (Louie, 2002). Due to the fact above, male-over-female relationships were the dominant among the three types of relationships at the starting point of 1992, deeply influenced by Chinese traditional gender values.

The results show that although the percentage of the Male-over-Female relationship exhibits a

decrease from 55.55% to 50.00% within the first 11 years, it gradually increases and ends up at a point of 84.85% in 2018-2022. The percentage of the Female-over-Male relationship is in a decreasing trend from 33.34% to 9.09% within 31 years, even though there is an increase from 15.79% to 28.57% between 2003 and 2012.

## **Discussion**

Previous analysis has analyzed 308 Chinese pop songs released between 1992 and 2022, focusing on the representation of masculinity, femininity, and gender power dynamics in the lyrics. The findings covered both stereotypical and non-stereotypical images of men and women, as well as the dynamics of gendered interaction by coding their actions and agencies. Based on the findings, this session first discusses how Chinese pop lyrics construct gender representations and probe gender relationships, then turns to how such gender-meanings have shifted over time and their interrelations with the socio-political transformation in the Chinese context.

### **Gender Narratives and Representations in Chinese Pop Lyrics**

One striking feature of Chinese pop lyrics is the reliance on the implicit expression of intimacy and sexual desire, which is different from Western pop lyrics, which are tolerant of descriptions of sexual behaviors (Couto et al., 2022). The protagonists' sexual desires are only expressed through descriptions of simple physical contact (such as touching, holding hands, etc.) and praise of non-sensitive body parts (such as face, hands, etc.). At the same time, the most erotic type of interaction between men and women is “kissing” in Chinese pop song lyrics. When it is inevitable to place sexual behavior in the narrative, instead of directly depicting the details, some “imageries” with euphemisms

are used to replace and pass by in one stroke. Taking Jacky Cheung's "*Myths of Wolves*"<sup>15</sup> ("饿狼传说" in Chinese) as an example, the sexual behaviors are described as imagery of "a hungry wolf pounces on his food" ("饿狼扑食" in Chinese), arousing the aesthetic of the narrative and making the expression of sexual behavior implicit.

Such a downgrade compared to Western pop song lyrics is on one hand, linked to the Chinese traditional values and philosophy, which regard "sex" as a taboo in ancient Chinese society (So & Chueng, 2005). To discuss love and sex without being over-explicit, euphemisms were used to deal with sexual matters (Farman, 2012). Besides, in the Chinese philosophy, the characteristic of Chinese etiquette is *Han Xu* (含蓄 in Chinese), meaning a series of reserved, implicit, and indirect communication, and further emphasizes appropriate social interaction in social and relational contexts (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p.26). Such a characteristic foregrounds a lack of expressiveness in daily lives, including sex. On the other hand, songs with direct narratives of sexual behaviors or misogynistic descriptions in the lyrics are identified as "vulgar songs" ("恶俗歌曲" in Chinese) and banned by the Chinese government. A concrete example is the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China banned 120 songs for the reasons of "erotic sexual expression, misogynistic words, and encouraging violence" in 2015. Thus, the implicit sexual implication and relationships are causally associated with Chinese traditional pasts and political currents.

However, while such euphemisms appear to soften gender relations to be *Han Xu*, they in fact reproduce patriarchal structures. the implicit sexual implications mostly appear from the male protagonists' angle, which serves to perpetuate the traditional gender inequality and the gender power dynamics that men have over women (Louie, 2012). Herein, regarded as "the hungry wolves", men's agency is coded through pursuit and metaphorical dominance, while women are positioned as passive

affective recipients like “the food.”

Across the lyrics, Chinese traditional masculinity remains the dominant mode of representation, and male characters are consistently probed as active agents in romantic and emotional interactions. The images align with long-standing cultural ideals of men, which prize intellectual refinement and physical toughness as essential masculine virtues. For instance, lyrics often highlight *Wen* men’s ability to “守护” (protect) and “照顾” (loof after), and *Wu* men’s ability to “忍耐” (tolerate) and “强健” (be strong), which foreground the marker of responsibility and authority. These narratives in the lyrics naturalize the expectations that men should take initiative in relationships and further position strength, persistence, and willingness to sacrifice as elements of masculinity.

Although non-stereotypical male images, such as the vulnerable, emotional men that “get lost”, emerge in the lyrics, these representations rarely challenge traditional masculinity and even to some extent embrace traditional gender inequality. In the narratives, these images “流泪” (cry), “等待” (wait), and “沉溺” (get lost), which depict men as emotionally overwhelmed and unable to act. It seems they are in contrast to the traditional masculinity, but have neither offered an alternative model of masculinity nor negotiated or reoriented their positionality. These images suggest that such men have failed to embody the ideals of initiative and strength, and serve to reaffirmation on the authority of traditional masculinity paradoxically.

Although female protagonists are often constructed as fragile, emotionally dependent, or sometimes even allured, the findings also reveal moments where women emphasize agency and subjectivity. By emphasizing their own desires or refusing unequal relationships, Such non-stereotypical images declare a move beyond the dominant narrative of females’ vulnerability, which

can sometimes be framed as empowered guardians of their own self-worth and the initiators of change. However, these representations remain relatively limited since female agency is often situational when they claim and declare it. Putting female protagonists often in the contexts of breakup and recovery, rather than in equal and mutual romantic pursuit, women's subjectivity in lyrics tends to be acknowledged only within certain patriarchal frames. It ends up leaving the broader asymmetry in gender power dynamics that largely appears.

### **Temporal Shifts in Gender Representation**

The findings indicate a V-shaped trajectory on the percentage of stereotypical images and traditional gender relationships in Chinese pop music lyrics: After a brief period of diversification in the 1990s, the 2000s marked a strong return to conventional gender stereotypes. This session bridges the findings to the background of Chinese socio-political transformation and further underscores the interrelations.

Gender representations in the 1990s displayed relatively greater diversity, which is partly interrelated with the initial global cultural flows and the elite character of music consumption. When the Chinese music market initially opened to foreign capital in 1992, carrying the foreign culture within, the music industry was encouraged by innovation and challenges to previous song themes and expression, which includes gender identities (Lu, 2018). The stereotypical images of male and female protagonists were challenged and started to decrease in number in the 1990s. The introduction of Western gender concepts in this special period also promoted the diversification of gender representations in popular culture.

Another fact is that compact discs (CDs) were the main dissemination medium to the public in the 1990s. On one hand, song publishers needed to bear huge song production costs and music

dissemination costs, so that individuals had limited access to release their demos and songs. On the other hand, consumers needed to purchase expensive CDs. Therefore, the music industry in the 1990s was more like serving the Chinese "upper class" (Zha, 2019). The music culture of the 1990s also seemed like the exploration and self-entertainment of the "elites." Therefore, because of financial barriers, these trendy gender representations and gender identities that are different from Chinese traditional stereotypes are only spread and recognized among these elites but have little connection with the labor class.

The percentage of stereotypical images in Chinese pop song lyrics increased after the 2000s can be linked to the development of music media. With the development of digital media, music could be stored in digital form. Namely, songs could be uploaded and disseminated on the Internet(Li & Hesmondhalgh, 2024). With the rise of streaming music platforms like QQ Music, Kugou Music, and NetEase Music after 2005, grassroots music producers had easier access to releasing music demos, while the public could access songs with a lighter financial burden (Su, 2008). With more open access to the public, the Chinese music industry served not only the "elites" but also the folk (Su, 2008).

It is worth arguing that the content of the songs, including the narrative of the lyrics, is more susceptible to Chinese folk culture afterward, which is highly influenced by Chinese traditional gender values. Taking Wang Lin's "*Can't Afford to be Hurt*"<sup>16</sup> ("伤不起" in Chinese) as an example, the composer and the singer are both from the grassroots, without professional training in songwriting and singing (Jiao, 2012). The song is about a woman who hates his boyfriend because he cheated on her, taking no action but cursing him for not having a good death. This song was highly attached to the passive status of Chinese traditional images of women and presented a male-over-female relationship directly. However, an important attribute of grassroots culture in the Chinese music

industry is vulgar and low art quality (Jiao, 2012). Coarse language and misogynistic words are more likely to show up in the lyrics from grassroots composers (Chen, 2019), and they are therefore the targets that the Chinese Government banned. Moreover, with the emergence of short streaming apps serving the folk in China like Douyin and Kuaishou, selecting the songs that the folk demand (Chen, 2019), can be one of the reasons that support the result that the stereotypical image and male-over-female relationships continue to increase in the subsequent year.

At the same time, the increasing stereotypical images and traditional gender order in Chinese pop song lyrics can also be associated with the media governance by the Chinese government. While the differentiation of gender identities in the media industry, especially LGBTQ identities, is identified by the government as a “Western hostile power” (Ren & Gui, 2024), the related media content is censored to ensure no harm to the morals of the PRC (Yang, 2017). Since the Chinese government supposes that distinctive gender roles are considered crucial in safeguarding national security (Zheng, 2015, p.365), censorships in music exist to prevent Chinese songs' gender ideology from challenging the CPC's conception of masculinity and femininity. Thus, while the banning of so-called “vulgar” songs discourages experimentation with alternative gender identities, the regulatory emphasis and filter on “healthy” or “uplifting” lyrics implicitly reinforces Chinese conventional ideals of masculinity and femininity. A concrete example is the social media account of state-owned institutes using Eason Chan's “*Lonely and Brave Warriors*”<sup>17</sup> (“孤勇者” in Chinese) as background music to make videos. State-run media reported and supported the “positive educational effect” that the song has had on primary school students (Luo, 2023). The song praises the heroes who face difficulties and protect the citizens until the end, which fits well with the “Iron Man with responsibility” image of male protagonists that the CPC advocated.

It is worth noting that the stereotypical image percentage of the female protagonist has decreased since 2018, which can also be attributed to the cultural and ideological frameworks that circumscribe female subjectivity. The Chinese government pursues "educational significance" in media works, intentionally or unintentionally instilling the ideology and nationalism they advocate into the public. As Lu (2018) stressed, "Pop songs in China have a historical mission, taking the responsibility of accumulating Chinese cultural confidence." Especially in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, "positive energy" has been promoted by the government to unite the public and consolidate the power of the CCP (Hou, 2021). In Chinese media industries, including videos and songs, the government will select works with "positive energy" - such as praising anti-epidemic heroes, promoting national unity, emphasizing a strong mentality, etc. - to recommend and spread on social media. Such characteristics they emphasized and advocated were to some extent aligned with the Chinese stereotypical image of male protagonists, which led to an increase in the stereotypical image.

At the same time, with the trend of post-feminism sweeping in China, the feminist movements from the West, like the #MeToo Movement, also affect the Chinese women's traditional ideology, calling for empowerment at both individual and collective levels (Lin & Yang, 2019). To serve the public with changed concepts, some media products, including television dramas and popular songs, that discuss women's self-empowerment in the relationship and the independence of women emerged (Li & Li, 2018).

Instead of being banned by strict censorship, these media products have been noticed by the CCP and given support for dissemination because the concepts of unity of women and self-empowerment expressed by these female characters, in the visual or textual context, have been defined by the government as "Positive energy" (Li & Li, 2018). Taking Miya's "*The Teenager*"<sup>18</sup> ("少年" in

Chinese) as an example, the song is about the singer, as a Chinese teenager, confidently facing the challenges of her life. Same as “*Lonely and Brave Warriors*”, this song was frequently used by state-run media as the background music of the propaganda videos. Thus, images of an independent woman with initiatives, influenced by feminism from the Western world, advocated by the government, which contradict the Chinese traditional stereotypical image of women, were aired frequently in the Chinese domestic media, leading to a decrease in the stereotypical image of female protagonists.

## **Conclusion & Limitation**

The study exploratorily inducted the patterns of complicating Chinese masculinity, femininity, and gender relationships in Chinese pop song lyrics in the *Wen-Wu* framework. It found that *Wen* men in Chinese pop songs predominantly portray themselves as gentle protectors of women, while *Wu* men emphasize their physical and mental strength. Stereotypical men frequently objectify women sexually and view them as subordinates, whereas non-stereotypical men tend not to take the initiative in relationships. Stereotypical women are often depicted as innocent and naive, with attractive physical features, and they typically admit their weakness and cede the initiative to men. In contrast, non-stereotypical women advocate for agency and diversity. Besides, the study attempted to see the trend of being more stereotypical in gender representation in the lyrics in the context of Chinese traditional values, historical background, development of media technology, and political circumstances.

This study shed light on the gender representation in Chinese popular culture. Empirically, it provides a systematic overview of gender identities and gender relationships in Chinese pop lyrics across the recent three decades, revealing both persistent asymmetries and shifting trajectories. This study also underscores the theoretical applicability of Kam Louie’s *Wen-Wu* theory, and further

explores the aesthetics when the lyrics probe gender-meanings. Moreover, the study illustrates the discourse and narratives of longitudinal lyric analysis through qualitative coding, offering a replicable approach for exploring the cultural politics of popular music. It temporarily supports the conclusion that political control and intercultural communication can influence the gender representation of media products.

However, the limitations of this study also encourage further studies to focus on such an area. Methodologically, the study is based on a relatively small database, and qualitative content analysis is inevitably dependent on coders' subjectivities and cultural basis. Further studies can enlarge the database and design more coders of different genders to increase methodological rigor. Moreover, although this study covers three decades, broad periodization cannot fully capture the more nuanced turning points of the trajectories. Further on, to generalize the trend or support the result of the study, further studies may need to cross-check in different forms of media content.

## Notes

1. From the album (爱情的尽头) by Wu Bai (伍佰), Rolling Stone (滚石唱片), 1996.
2. From the album (童话) by Michael Wong (光良), Rolling Stone (滚石唱片), 2005.
3. From the album (风雨无阻) by Wakin Chau(周华健), Rolling Stone (滚石唱片), 1994.
4. From the album (私房歌) by Cheng Zhi-Hua(郑智化), Warner (华纳唱片), 1992.
5. From the album (不想长大) by S.H.E., HIM(华研国际), 2005.
6. From the album (痴心绝对) by Sam Lee (李圣杰), Rolling Stone (滚石唱片), 2002.
7. From the album (爱像太平洋) by Richie Jen (任贤齐), Rolling Stone (滚石唱片), 1998.
8. From the album (Coming Home) by Faye Wong (王菲), Cinepoly, 1992.

9. From the album (月亮 太阳) by Phil Chang (张宇), 金牌大风, 1998.
10. From the album (有形的翅膀) by Angela Zhang (张韶涵), Sony (索尼音乐), 2012.
11. From the album (绅士) by Joker Xue (薛之谦), 潮石音乐, 2015.
12. From the album (星空下的传说) by Steve Chou (周传雄), Sony (索尼音乐), 2005.
13. From the album (Love, Sandy) by Sandy Lam (林忆莲), Rolling Stone, 1995.
14. From the album (我在情中) by Yin Xiangjie & Yu Wenhua (尹相杰/于文华), 龙乐世纪文化, 1995.
15. From the album (饿狼传说) by Jacky Cheung (张学友), Universal (环球唱片), 1994.
16. From the album (咪咕咪咕) by Wang Lin (王麟), 通力唱片, 2012
17. From the album (孤勇者) by Eason Chan (陈奕迅), Universal (环球唱片), 2021.
18. From the album (少年) by Miya (梦然), 声响互动, 2019.

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