

## Ever-Changing and the Daughter of Hong Kong: A Look Back at the Identity of Anita Mui through Cover Album Art

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On December 23, 2023, the exhibition *Timeless Diva: Anita Mui* officially opened in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, commemorating Mui's legacy and contributions to Hong Kong, on the 20th anniversary of her passing in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Anita Mui's legacy is often associated with her avant-garde and diverse visual appearances, as well as her ability to captivate audiences through her dynamic voice, personality and charity works. Throughout her lifetime, Mui has recorded a total of 28 studio albums, many of which incorporated elements ahead of their time.<sup>2</sup> Cover album art often influences one's perception of a singer and was a significant part of 1980s visual culture. In Mui's case, her versatile cover albums proved to develop her identity during the 1980s and 1990s. This paper aims to examine the formation of Mui's persona and identity through her cover album art, with some portraying her as an individual who is masculine, feminine and androgynous at times, but also one who is traditional and equally challenges norms. Mui mesmerizes millions of fans around the globe, with her distinctive ability to oscillate from traditional conforming appearances, to one that deviates from norms and appears rebellious. This paper seeks to answer the following questions by examining the range of album cover art Mui is presented in: how does Mui's cover album art reflect

and embody her personal identity? How does it prolong her legacy in the current age of Cantopop re-emergence? Most importantly, how does Mui's album cover art reflect the identity of Hong Kong?

The 1980s was an era of prosperity and blossoming for Cantopop. Against this backdrop, Mui, after earning wide acclaim and fame with her first album, won the First New Talents Singing Award in 1982 by singing *Season of the Wind*.<sup>3</sup> Soon, Mui's career as a singer began to take off with the release of her second solo album, *Leap the Stage* (飛越舞台) two years later. The cover art for *Leap the Stage* created by designer Alan Chan used airbrush and graphic art designs. The cover illustrates Mui as a diva in outer space (Fig. 1), alongside the use of dynamic and vibrant colors, as seen in the use of pink, white, black, and red. In both the front and back cover, Mui's face takes up most of the pictorial space, dominating viewer's attention to her. In a 1985 radio interview, Mui stated that she herself came up with the name *Leap the Stage*.<sup>4</sup> She suggested that the "theme of the album revolves around events happening on the stage," which explains the artistic decision of having Mui's face relatively large to the pictorial space, as it reiterates her dynamic stage presence.<sup>5</sup> In the same interview, Mui also

1 Fiona Sun, "Exhibition to Mark 20th Anniversary of Hong Kong Cantopop Diva Anita Mui's Death Opens at Heritage Museum," *South China Morning Post*, December 23, 2023,

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3246119/exhibition-mark-20th-anniversary-hong-kong-cantopop-diva-anita-mui-death-opens-heritage-museum>.

2 Sun, "Exhibition to Mark 20th Anniversary of Hong Kong Cantopop Diva Anita Mui's Death Opens at Heritage Museum."

3 The Avenue of Stars, "Statue of Anita Mui," accessed January 5, 2024,

<https://www.avenueofstars.com.hk/en/statues/ms-anita-mui-yim-fong/>.

4 Anita Mui, "1985 電台節目：梅艷芳自傳 (1985 Radio Program: Anita Mui's Autobiography,)" interview by anonymous, 1985, video, 01:06, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Z64y1V7hi/?p=4>.

5 Mui, "Anita Mui's Autobiography," 01:26.



Figure 1

Alan Chan, *Leap the Stage* (飛越舞台), 1984. Album cover, offset lithography, 31.5 x 63.4 x 0.3 cm. M+, Hong Kong. © Capital Artists Ltd.

described how she “desired the album cover to convey a more youthful mood” and “a sense of freshness, showing her awareness to convey herself in a new energetic state of mind.”<sup>6</sup> The use of diverse patterns, geometric shapes and lines further accentuates the dynamic atmosphere of the cover. A lively and captivating presence aligns with the more innovative songs within the album, such as *Leap the Stage* (飛越舞台) and *Generate One Thousand Volt* (發電一千 Volt). *Leap the Stage* vividly showed Mui’s identity to its viewers. The brilliant and flamboyant color used, her imposing face on the album cover with varied shapes and patterns, ultimately portrays Mui as a new superstar who is active, avant-garde and captivating. The cover also shows Mui’s gender-fluid stage persona and identity at the time of her fame.<sup>7</sup> Her androgynous, short haircut in the album contrasts with her first release, *Red Anita Mui* (赤色梅艷芳), where Mui appears in a more feminine and tender image.

However, the emergence of such a ground-breaking album cover in *Leap the Stage* and Mui’s

rise as a superstar must be attributed to the Hong Kong cultural scene in the 1980s, which demonstrates the artistic interaction between Hong Kong, the West and Japan from the East. There was an increased openness and willingness to explore a path different from the past, leading to the rise of artists like Mui who embraced different cultures. Popular culture scholar Li Chin Pang suggests that Mui’s concerts and songs show cultural hybridity.<sup>8</sup> Musical adaptations of existing Japanese, English and Asian songs turned into localized Cantonese music. Mui’s Cantopop songs incorporated influences from China, the West and other Asian countries, which also symbolized the complex local identity formed.<sup>9</sup> Hong Kong as a British colony at the time, was trying to find its own localized status and distinct way of presenting itself. Hence, artists like Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui were able to rise to fame, with their avant-garde styles and attitudes. The diverse range of cover album art embodies the social and cultural atmosphere of society in its time of creation, and *Leap the Stage* in turn reflected the identity of Hong Kong in the 1980s.

6 Mui, “Anita Mui’s Autobiography,” 02:10 to 03:05.

7 “Album Cover, Anita Mui: Leap the Stage,” M+, accessed January 5, 2024, <https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/collection/objects/album-cover-anita-mui-leap-the-stage-2017203/>.

8 Chin-Pang Li, 夢伴此城：梅艷芳與香港流行文化 (*Dream and the City: Anita Mui and Hong Kong Popular Culture*), 1st ed. (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing HK, 2019), 150.

9 Li, 夢伴此城, 151.

In 1985, Mui released another album titled *As Years Go By* (似水流年). The album cover art presents a scene where Mui is at the center of the pictorial space, wearing a light grey suit (Fig. 2). She also wears a pair of sunglasses with her head tipped upwards and staring into the distance. Mui's appearance in this outfit was arranged by designer Eddie Lau and took inspiration from Marlene Dietrich, the first Hollywood female star to dress up in a male fashion in the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> This album cover art develops Mui's persona and identity to a new level. If Mui was energetic and active in *Leap the Stage*, *As Years Go By* provides a different perspective. Here, she became androgynous, possessing both a sense of melancholy and hardness. Mui's outfit here blurs traditional gender stereotypes by fusing masculine and feminine traits in her appearance. This is most evidently seen in how Mui is wearing a suit which strengthens the perception of masculinity, but also has intense makeup on her face that



**Figure 2**

Eddie Lau, *As Years Go By* (似水流年), 1985. Album cover, 31.5 x 63.4 x 0.3 cm. Hong Kong Heritage Museum, Hong Kong. © Eddie Lau.

<sup>10</sup> Li, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Josephine Y.Y. Lai, "Bad Girl, Femme Fatale, and the Androgynous Body: Cantopop Queen Anita Mui's Gender Game," *Visual Anthropology* 34, no. 2 (2021): 167.

<sup>12</sup> Li, 夢伴此城, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Li, 82.

<sup>14</sup> John Witzleben, "Cantopop and Mandapop in Pre-Postcolonial Hong Kong: Identity Negotiation in the Performances of Anita Mui Yim-Fong," *Popular Music* 18, no. 2 (1999): 247.

<sup>15</sup> John Nguyet Erni, "Gender and Everyday Evasions: Moving With Cantopop," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2007): 91.

generates a more feminine impression. By transcending typical gender constructs through her outfit, Mui reiterates her androgynous identity as an independent woman. The designer of Mui's outfit, Eddie Lau, suggested that the outfit is aimed to promote self-empowerment in the absence of love.<sup>11</sup> The outfit is a motif that symbolizes the increased autonomy women had towards their own body, serving as a statement that challenges a conservative society. Mui is a star who is not afraid of breaking norms and actively plays with experimentation. In 1985, she said, "something others haven't thought of trying yet, I will seek to try it first."<sup>12</sup> By presenting herself with an androgynous identity and reinforcing ideals such as self-empowerment, Mui openly challenged the deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions within 1980s Hong Kong.

By 1986, Anita Mui had been established as a household name around Hong Kong, and her new album *Bad Girl* (壞女孩) challenged the established social boundaries of the time. Li Chin Pang suggests that discussion about a woman's sexual needs, sexual pleasures and fantasies were still considered taboo in 1980s mainstream society.<sup>13</sup> Hence, Mui was a changing force in the music industry, and established a new culture by making the lust of women through songs and image visible. Cultural studies scholar J. Lawrence Witzleben suggests that "it was almost unheard of for a young Chinese woman to sing about sexual desire with such frankness," especially in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> Mui's signature song in the album titled *Bad Girl* has lyrics that encourages young girls to challenge patriarchal norms, by openly discussing their bodies, sexuality and desire.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the front cover album art of *Bad Girl* depicts Mui wearing a silk dress, in an elegant pose with her hands holding up her head (Fig. 3). However, the back album cover shows Mui in a denim jacket, with bold makeup on her face as she directly confronts the viewer. The back cover reiterates her androgynous identity, whilst the front



**Figure 3**

Alan Chan, *Bad Girl* (壞女孩), 1985. Album cover, offset lithography, 31.5 x 31.7 x 0.3 cm. M+, Hong Kong. © Alan Chan.

displays a more erotic and teasing Mui. The album cover art and songs within *Bad Girl* challenged what society considered acceptable at the time: many thought Mui was guiding the youth towards the wrong path and providing incorrect ideals for them to follow. But equally, Mui's "Bad Girl" outfit on the album cover attracted many female adolescents to emulate and take influence from her, creating new social progress for women to express themselves freely and discuss forbidden sexual subjects like their own desires. *Bad Girl* as an album sold a total of 720,000 copies at the time.<sup>16</sup> An expert on Hong Kong popular culture, Ng Chun Hong suggests that Mui took influence from Madonna's sexual image, reflecting a shift from past traditional images of women.<sup>17</sup> The album cover of *Bad Girl* reiterated Mui's dynamic and multifaceted identity by showing her previously unrevealed rebellious nature. Li Chin Pang proposes that the 1980s was a special "cultural moment" for Hong Kong and that Mui redefined womanhood.<sup>18</sup> By challenging established patriarchal norms through the controversial lyrics and album cover of *Bad Girl*, Mui shaped herself as an artist with a rebellious and versatile identity. Her unrelenting attempts to push conventions inspired

generations of woman not to be afraid of defying traditions and asserting their individuality.

Mui continued to put out a series of albums in the late 1980s, with the album *Get Drunk Together in Our Dreams* (夢裏共醉) released in 1988. This album surprisingly presented another facet of Mui's identity. The album cover (Fig. 4) shows Mui in the outfit of a classical Hollywood film actress, wearing an eloquent and feminine outfit.<sup>19</sup> Once again, Mui deviates from her past album covers, since she resembles a traditional and glamorous woman like famous Hollywood actress Marlene Dietrich, in *Get Drunk Together in Our Dreams*. Mui's head is tilted slightly, with her eyes gazing to the side and her hands overlapping with one another. Mui is depicted with heavy makeup, as seen in her bright red lipstick and the whiteness of her heavily powdered face. This album cover portrays Mui as a woman who is reminiscent of a past love affair, which is strengthened by the nostalgic atmosphere created. The wide range of Mui's album cover art truly exemplifies the fluidity in Mui's identity: she can be a traditional and elegant woman like *Get Drunk Together in Our Dreams*, a woman challenging the contemporaneous

<sup>16</sup> Li, 夢伴此城, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Li, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Li, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Li, 67.





**Figure 4**  
Eddie Lau, *Get Drunk Together in Our Dreams* (夢裏共醉), 1988. Album cover, 31.5 x 63.4 x 0.3 cm. Hong Kong Heritage Museum, Hong Kong. © Eddie Lau.

gender norms by wearing a suit in *As Years Go By*, or even the rebellious and provocative identity seen in *Bad Girl*.

In conclusion, Mui's album cover art manages to convey her multifaceted and complex identity. As extrapolated based on her album cover images, Mui's identity can be summarized by two words, ever-changing and avant-garde. As stated, Mui's gender identity does not comply with conventional standards established for a woman, as she encompasses both an androgynous and feminine identity. Moreover, Mui's album cover art also epitomizes the identity of Hong Kong in the 1980s, a period characterized by tumultuous changes in social norms and atmosphere. The change in Mui's album cover art, from the avant-garde and active portrayal of Mui in *Leap the Stage* to the sexually charged image in *Bad Girl*, shows the growing acceptance of diverse expressions of identities within Hong Kong's social and cultural landscape. Li Chin Pang echoes this sentiment by suggesting that Mui's contradictory identities show how the facets of a woman's identity are influenced by the rapidly changing society of 1980s Hong Kong.<sup>20</sup>

Mui's identity and status remain unshaken in the present age of Cantopop, despite new groups such as

Mirror and Collar. After twenty years of her passing, Mui is still regarded as the "Ever-Changing Anita Mui" and widely acclaimed for her stage performance, acting, and remarkable songs. Cover album art is part of 1980s visual culture and plays a significant role in sculpting a singer's identity. Two of Mui's album covers, *Leap the Stage* and *Bad Girl*, are both currently on display in the M+ Museum in West Kowloon Cultural District, showing Mui's long-lasting influence even in the present day. Mui's cover art still remains widely celebrated for its innovative and ground-breaking nature, especially in its success in fostering Mui's free-spirited and dynamic identity.

In an age of Cantopop reemergence, Anita Mui is not only revered as the Daughter of Hong Kong, but her legacy is continued through the publication of countless books, movies and exhibitions dedicated to her. Cover album art is only one method of celebrating her legacy and establishing her free-flowing identity. In 2021, there was the release of the biographical drama film *Anita*, which provides a vivid portrayal of Mui's life from a child performer to a shining diva and actress. Not only is Mui's legacy celebrated on the big screen, an ever-growing phenomenon is also emerging in Hong Kong, with new fans being enchanted by Anita Mui, despite being only born after her death in 2003. These fans are dubbed post-Mui fans (後梅迷). The series of commemorative activities and her ever-fresh images on albums prove to sustain her legacy amidst her fans. With Mui's diverse and varied album covers, she will forever be remembered as a legend, an icon and a star who once brightened the Hong Kong Cantopop field through her dynamic identity.

<sup>20</sup> Li, 91.

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