

# Long live the queen

Singer Faye Wong hinted she was going to quit showbiz. An aghast Life! writer pens a letter to her pleading with her to change her mind



Hong Xinyi

**D**EAR Faye, Last week, both your manager Chan Kar Ying and music producer Zhang Yadong hinted that you were thinking about retiring from showbiz.

Don't do it.

I know, I know. It's no fun being the only real diva in the Chinese pop scene. After all, the competition out there is lacklustre. Since the incomparable Anita Mui died of cancer in 2003, no one has quite catapulted successfully into the diva stratosphere.

Singapore's Stefanie Sun shows a lot of promise. With her distinctive voice and an arsenal of catchy songs, she has caught on like wildfire in the region. Just last Saturday, she was named the Best Female Artist at Taiwan's prestigious 16th annual Golden Melody Awards.

But while Sun has commercial clout, she is not yet the stuff of showbiz legends like you are.

Since you wisely abandoned the moniker Shirley

Wong (Wang Jingwen) as well as the career trajectory of a generic popster in 1992, your music and personal style have repeatedly proved that standing out is more fun than fitting in.

You led your life with the same kind of insouciance you brought to your career. In 1997, at the height of your fame, you had a daughter, Jingtong, with rocker Dou Wei, then promptly disappeared from the public eye for almost a year.

Defying all expectations, your star just kept on rising. Years before Demi Moore was flaunting her toy boy Ashton Kutcher, you were leading a blushing Nicholas Tse — who is 11 years your junior — by the hand out of karaoke pubs in 2000.

With unflappable nonchalance, you completely disregarded the Hong Kong paparazzi's obsession with your life, including your divorce from Dou in 1999 and your ever-changing images.

Your fans didn't seem to care much about the gossip either.

Not that the other female pop stars out there don't attract tabloid attention. At the beginning of her career in 1996, Taiwan's A\*mei looked all set for the big time. However, her fate changed in 2000, when she sang Taiwan's anthem at the inauguration of President Chen Shui-bian, prompting China to ban her from performing there. The ensuing bad press, and a string of mediocre albums, has stalled her previously promising career.

And while her powerhouse voice delivers her trademark anguished ballads with aplomb, the same cannot be said for others. Sammi Cheng has a pretty decent flair for fashion, but comparing her vocals to yours is like putting a soggy pandan cake next to a



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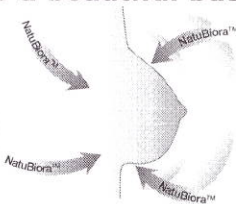
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gossamer-light soufflé.

Your voice and delivery remain unique, despite imitations by singers from Chiang Mei-chi to Grace Chow. They channel your crystalline sweetness without realising your singing can be icicle-cold at the same time. Only chanteuse Sandy Lam's breathy tender purr is on a par with this distinctive style.

Kelly Chen's weedy voice and dead eyes make her unfit for your throne. CoCo Lee is busy trying to repackage herself as a Chinese Beyoncé.

Now, I'm not a big fan of your Cocteau Twins (whom you collaborated with) and Cranberries phase, but while you imitated the styles of these groups, you at least never tried to aggressively court the West.

And let's just give the likes of sweetie-pies Gigi Leung, Jolin Tsai and Miriam Yeung a collective pat on the back for trying. Not even close, honeys.

Karen Mok is certainly cool, has a unique voice and some pretty good songs. But whereas you are both known for not humouring the press, she comes across as haughty when rubbed the wrong way. Your reticence, however, reflects your genuine spaciness.

Not ice maiden but nice maiden

HOW do I know this? Because since becoming a full-time journalist about a year ago, one of the highlights of my short career has been talking to you.

It happened in October last year. You were doing press for Wong Kar Wai's 2046 from a hotel room in Shanghai, and it felt completely surreal when you an-

Continued on facing page

**AND THE BAND PLAYS ON**



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Faye Wong, you will only go on to greater heights, so please don't quit.

## Changing the rules of the fame game

From previous page

swered my long-distance call.

And, to my great relief, you were not the truculent ice-maiden the press has often made you out to be.

Your perplexed pauses as you tried to articulate your rambling thoughts seemed only to show that you were just not cut out for the sort of glib PR spiel that other manufactured popsters spew.

You even revealed a deadpan sense of humour when you talked about one of your 2046 characters, an android. "She has no facial expressions, and doesn't feel emotions. I guess some might feel that was like me," you said, with the barest hint of a chuckle.

It was a memorable experience for someone who has been a fan since the age of 13.

Your first major feature film, 1994's *Chungking Express*, inspired me to get the pixie-cut you sported.

Your music supplied the theme songs for the soundtrack of my life, as your voice changed from the ethereal ballads in 1994's *Mystery (Mi)* to the trance-inflected whispers and operatic soundscapes of 2000's *Fable (Yu Yan)*.

I obsessed over my first crush to *Ambiguous (Ai Mei)*, from 1995's *Di-Dar* and nursed my first heart-break with *Overthrown (Tui Fan)*, from 1999's *Only Loving Strangers*.

Sometimes, you did disappoint. 2001's Faye Wong (the album) and 2003's *To Love (Jiang Ai)* generally left me cold with their impenetrable lyrics and aloof delivery.

But at your best, you showed us that Chinese pop isn't just sappy love songs and cheesy dance tracks.

You sang about becoming a mother in *Tong* (from 1998's *Wanderlust*). You sang about simply being bored (*Men*, from 1997's Faye Wong). You released songs with no words whatsoever, scatting whimsically in 1996's *Restless (Fu Zao)*.

So, please don't retire yet. Get married to China actor Li Yapeng. Take a break. But don't disappear.

Over the course of the past 10 years, you have changed the rules of the Chinese showbiz game. Don't leave us to the mercy of wannabe nymphets and soulless songstresses now.

Sincerely,  
Xinyi

## The regal profession

Foong Woei Wan

IT IS not just divas that are in short supply in Chinese pop. So are Heavenly Kings.

Since the 1990s, few have risen to the same stratosphere as the original Four Heavenly Kings, **Jacky Cheung**, **Aaron Kwok**, **Leon Lai** and **Andy Lau**. Could it be because of the decline of Chinese pop or the rise of musical piracy?

Whatever it may be, Taiwanese teen-pop stars **Aniki Jin**, **Jimmy Lin**, **Tommy Su** and **Nicky Wu** did give Cheung and company a run for their money in Mandarin markets like Singapore in the early 1990s. They were even nicknamed the Four Little Heavenly Kings.

But only Jin (now **Takeshi Kaneshiro**) and Su (now **Alec Su**) have outlasted their 15 minutes.

Kaneshiro made a switch to movies. Su landed a role in the popular period series, *My Fair Princess*, and gained a second wind. Lin and Wu turned to lesser TV careers.

Since the mid-1990s, the Hong Kong press has

anointed just about anyone, from **Nicholas Tse** and **Eason Chan** to **Edison Chen** and **Shawn Yue**, as heir to the Heavenly throne.

Among them, Chan is a truly talented singer, but is hardly a household name outside of Hong Kong.

Tse, son of Patrick Tse and ex-boyfriend of Faye Wong, is more famous — or infamous. Alas, face time in the tabloids doesn't always translate into album sales.

Meanwhile, the Taiwanese have invaded Hong Kong. It has been official since 2002, when wunderkind **Jay Chou** and boyband **F4** played to packed houses at the Hong Kong Coliseum.

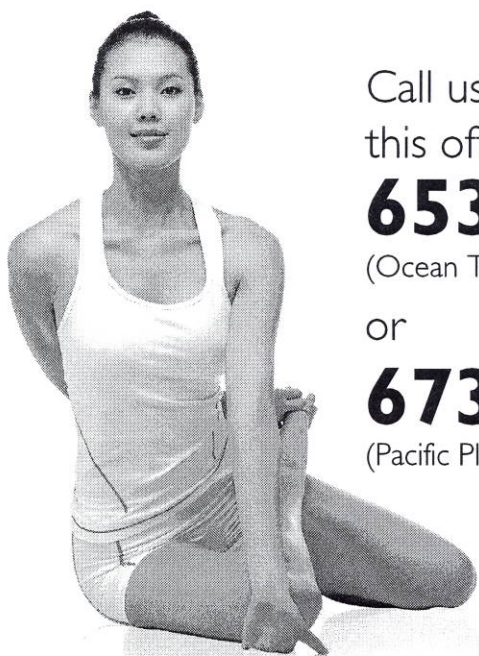
Across Asia, they have fan bases that Hong Kong acts their age can only daydream about.

F4 is out to win over the Japanese next, and Chou is trumpeted as the new hope of the Hong Kong film industry — he is set to star in the much-hyped action movie *Initial D*, which opens next month.

About time, too. The world needs another singing-acting superstar who is not Andy Lau.

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