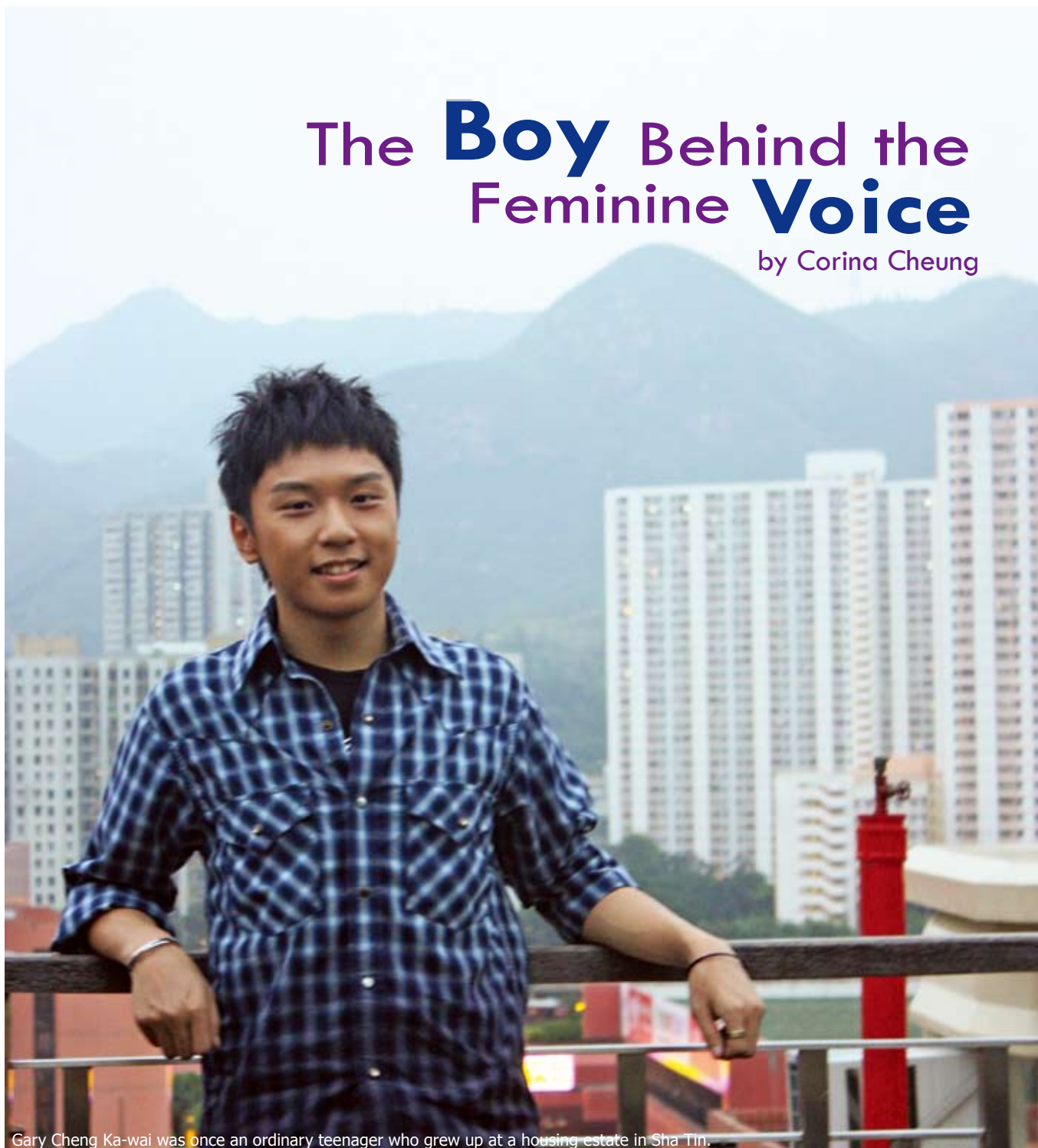


# PEOPLE

## The **Boy** Behind the Feminine **Voice** by Corina Cheung



Gary Cheng Ka-wai was once an ordinary teenager who grew up at a housing estate in Sha Tin.



## PROFILE OF GARY CHENG KA-WAI

**Birthday:** January 5, 1986

**Weight:** 120 lb

**Height:** 172 cm

**Siblings:** Two elder brothers

**Competitions participated:**

2008 Emperor Entertainment Group New Talents Singing Contest

Three years ago, Gary Cheng Ka-wai found his first 15 minutes of fame as a YouTube sensation. A video clip of the teenager singing in the style of Hong Kong pop queen Sammi Cheng Sau-man suddenly became wildly popular on the video-sharing website.

When the clip which featured Cheng performing at a singing contest had been uploaded two years previously, the young singer found himself the centre of attention.

“I have received equal amounts of praise and criticism when my video clips were uploaded onto YouTube,” Cheng said.

Cheng was used to the criticism. Even as a schoolboy he had been mocked for his voice.

“Most classmates who grew up with me witnessed my changes and accepted my voice. But students from lower forms who did not know me as well thought I was weird,” said Cheng. “At times I felt humiliated, especially when they gave me nicknames like ‘Woman.’”

His girlish voice was also an issue when he joined the workforce after

studying at the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education. He remembered his female colleagues despised him for his voice, while male colleagues treated him like a kid due to his “cute” voice.

**“I can sing in a way that touches both genders’ hearts.”**

Frustrating as it was, Cheng’s uniqueness would, every now and then, add some humour to his everyday life. Besides the constant mistake of being addressed as “Miss Cheng” by phone interviewers, even his classmates and friends would sometimes not recognise his voice.

“All of my friends know that I have such a voice. People who called looking for me would often start talking when my mother picked up the phone, assuming that the voice they heard was mine. The opposite happened too,” said Cheng.

Cheng had tried to lower his voice when he spoke, but still wondering why

his voice has not changed as he gets older. His teachers told him that it is normal for some people to retain their high-pitched voice.

It was then that he decided to make full use of his unique voice. But after his first, brief period of fame, Cheng totally isolated himself from singing and did clerical work in an office for four whole years.

“I love to sing, but I never thought that being a singer could be my future job. Therefore, I stopped singing to focus on my work.”

However, a casual conversation with a friend had rekindled his passion for singing, and he decided to join the New Talent Singing Contest. As a result, Cheng won a singer’s contract with music label EEG.

The change of status and role brought about changes in his attitude towards singing.

“I used to be lenient with myself when I was not a singer. I sang because I liked to sing and I sang for my interest. Now, I will do all the preparation I can. I feel obliged to do my best, and strive for perfection since what was once my

dream has now become my occupation,” Cheng said.

The path of a newbie in the Hong Kong music industry is indeed a tough and demanding one, perhaps even more so for a 23-year-old man born with a high-pitched voice. This is something Cheng himself was concerned about.

**“I have received equal amounts of praise and criticism when my video clips were uploaded onto YouTube.”**

“I do not know whether the Hong Kong music industry has the capacity for people like me. In Hong Kong, people may be receptive to a lot of innovative ideas and things other than music. The choice of whether to accept me or not are in the hands of the audience, and I can only do my best to satisfy them with quality music,” Cheng said.

Knowing that his voice falls in a wide range, Cheng cannot decide whether his voice belongs to the male or female category. Besides, he does not think that such “positioning” is necessary.

“I don’t mind comments regarding the resemblance between my voice and Sammi Cheng’s. What I do not wish to see are limitations, whether on my performing style or the genres of the songs I sing, that such resemblance may bring. It may be hard to change people’s impressions at a later stage.”

When Cheng went for recording, the music director told him the range of his voice is slightly lower than females’

and a bit higher than males’. They said it belonged to the “middle range”.

“It is a very subjective issue when it comes to defining which gender my voice belongs to. I may sound female when people listen to my songs casually, yet when they pay attention, they will know that it belongs to a male singer. At the end of the day, I guess what matters the most is they find my voice comfortable and soothing,” said Cheng.

Cheng has confidence in his gift and believes his voice has enabled him to achieve things that are out of reach for other male singers.

By this, he means the expression of sentiments and emotions others might not be able to channel. He explained, “I am a boy myself, so I understand what boys think and how they feel. On the other hand, due to my special voice, I always get to sing female songs so I also understand the underlying emotions of them. Therefore, I can sing in a way that touches both genders’ hearts.”

However, Cheng admits it is possible that audiences might not embrace what he is trying to do in the way he has expected. A boy with a girl’s voice might end up nowhere.

It could appear that neither gender is able to identify his songs because they cannot “situate” where exactly his voice belongs.

Putting aside the pressure of such uncertainty, Cheng believes that being in the public eye has benefited him as knowing that there are people watching him urges him to improve.

“I know very well that everyone is watching. Every mistake, once it has been made, could be repeated and broadcast all over the world via the Internet,” Cheng explained. “This inevitably creates much greater pressure before performances. Yet somehow I’ve become more motivated to prepare ahead of time.”

Now that Cheng is a part of Hong Kong’s music industry, he knows very well where he wants his path to lead. He wants to regard himself simply as a singer, rather than as a celebrity or an artist.

“My only aim now is to improve and to sing well. I have never received proper training before, so I have to work hard on singing techniques at the moment,” Cheng said. “No matter what kind of jobs I manage to get in the future, it is crucial for me, as a singer, to master good singing skills.”



Cheng said he had never thought of becoming a singer before he joined the singing contest.