

Exploring the Impacts of Cantopop on Chinese Pop Music

Jianhong Li

Guangzhou NO.3 High School, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China
jianhongli@ldy.edu.rs

Keywords: Cantopop; pop music; Hong Kong (China); Chinese mainland

Abstract: Hong Kong's (China) economy saw great prosperity in the 1970s. A large number of Cantonese songs, as soundtracks of Hong Kong (China) movies or television (TV) shows, were widely spread. This paper, based on the rapid development of Cantopop, explores its significant influence on Chinese mainland pop songs, provides in-depth insights for the relevant academic community, and confines the findings of related research. The research topic of this paper is to explore the influence of Cantopop on Chinese pop music during the period from the late 1970s to the early 2000s using the research method of literature review. This paper concludes that Cantopop has provided directions for Chinese Mainland pop music in multiple aspects, as well as positive impacts in all aspects. This paper fills the gap regarding the impact of Cantopop on Chinese Mainland pop music within the academic community, revealing the promotion effects and inspirations that Cantonese pop songs have provided for Chinese Mainland music in various dimensions.

1. Introduction

In the 1970s, the middle class in Hong Kong (China) experienced rapid growth, creating demand for local music that could resonate with the public. As Hong Kong's (China) economy prospered, the demand for identity recognition of residents was also increasing. Subsequently, numerous Cantonese soundtrack songs gained popularity as movies and TV shows spread. Many outstanding Hong Kong (China) artists created popularly recognized Cantonese pop music by combining indigenous culture with pop music.

The lyrics of Cantonese songs include both the local culture of Hong Kong (China) and the enduring Chinese culture that prevails in the Chinese mainland. The musical style also integrates the characteristics of both Eastern and Western music, maintaining vibrant vibes while preserving the classic aesthetics of Chinese music. In the late 1970s, the reform and opening-up were implemented in the Chinese mainland. At the forefront of the reform, Guangdong has made Cantopop a highlight in its culture. The trendy musical genre, with rich and diverse styles, soon became popular across the nation, injecting new vitality into the relatively limited pop music market in the Chinese mainland [1]. Meanwhile, the mature music production industry of Hong Kong (China) set an example for the development of the mainland's music industry. Compared to the single-dimensional music environment, Cantonese songs are more diversified, making them more appealing to listeners with different preferences. This promoted more Chinese mainland musicians to study in Hong Kong

(China).

Using the literature review methodology, this study reviews the existing literature regarding the impacts of Cantopop on Chinese pop music in different periods. The scope is limited from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. This study focuses on Hong Kong (China), the birthplace of Cantopop, along with discussions of Chinese mainland and Southeast Asia. Studying the impacts of Cantopop on Chinese pop music can not only contribute to a clearer understanding of the historical development of China's pop music but also enable an effective analysis of the significance of Cantopop within it. Furthermore, this study contributes to the cross-cultural communication of music to a certain degree. Although there have been a large number of studies on Cantopop, systematic studies about its impacts on Chinese pop music are relatively less. Hence, this study fills the gap and provides insights for future studies on music and culture.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, scholars have conducted extensive research on the evolution of singing styles in Chinese pop songs. For example, you analyzed the singing styles of representative singers (such as Li Minghui, Teresa Teng, and Faye Wong) in different periods in the paper *A Study on the Phased Evolution of Singing Style Characteristics in Chinese Pop Songs*, considering the underlying societal and cultural background. The results indicate that pop music in different historical periods is distinctively varied, bearing a clear hallmark of the period. The manifestations include folk-song characteristics of the Shanghai period, the subtle emotional expressions in songs of the Hong Kong (China) and Taiwan (China) China periods, and the diversified fusion singing styles of contemporary songs. However, these studies focus more on style descriptions than systematic cross-cultural comparisons.

In some studies, scholars explored the impacts of Western music and culture on the Chinese music industry. Nevertheless, detailed discussions about how to deeply integrate internationally popular elements with local styles are lacking. Teresa Teng's speaking style of singing is regarded as a significant turning point in Chinese pop music. However, current studies have not fully explored how this style is inherited and innovated in contemporary songs.

In addition, Chinese mainland singers are adopting singing styles similar to Western singing styles in recent years. However, studies of the cultural adaptability behind this transition are scattered. Therefore, this study mainly discusses the innovation and development of contemporary Chinese pop songs from the perspectives of singing techniques and cultural integration, aiming to provide new insights and in-depth analysis for existing research.

3. Emergence and Development of Cantopop

3.1. Origin of Cantopop

In the 1970s, the prosperity of Hong Kong's (China) industrial and business sectors promoted the rapid development of Hong Kong's (China) economy, as well as the revolution of societal structure. A large number of the urban middle class was emerging, thereby creating a demand for a distinctive culture. Soon, as urbanization quickly advanced, the demand for high-quality artworks surged. With the popularization of televisions then, Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) released an abundance of films and TV shows in Cantonese in response to market demand. Their soundtracks attracted a large audience base as these works widely spread, becoming the mainstay of Cantonese songs. Cantonese songs function not only as music but also as a representation of Hong Kong (China) identity [2].

In the late 1970s, PolyGram Records trained and promoted many outstanding Cantonese singers

such as Samuel Hui and Roman Tam, who were beloved by the general public. Samuel Hui, also known as the first-generation “God of Songs”, released his Cantonese album *Games Gamblers Play* in 1974, which was recognized as the pathbreaking album of Cantonese pop songs. Songs by Samuel Hui keep the elements of Western music while integrating the essence of Cantonese culture. They reflected and criticized social realities to a certain extent while providing entertainment, thus gaining the favor of Hong Kong's (China) young generation at that time.

To summarize, the rapid development of Hong Kong (China) in the 1970s creates a nurturing environment for the spread of Cantopop. Rooted in Hong Kong (China), Cantonese songs are far-reaching in the global Chinese community, producing profound impacts on the development of the Chinese-language music industry.

3.2. The Golden Age of Cantopop

From the 1980s to the 1990s, the style of Cantonese songs became more diverse [3]. Many elements of Western music genres were introduced, including hip-hop, rock and roll, and R&B. Singers combined these elements with those of local music genres (such as Chinese opera and folk songs), producing unique musical pieces. This innovation has made Cantonese songs more inclusive and satisfied personal preferences. During this period, the quality of Cantonese songs reached an all-time high, benefiting from the improvement of music production technologies in Hong Kong (China) and advanced equipment. With the strict control of producers over the production process (arrangement, recording, and mixing), songs have achieved perfection regarding both emotional expression and technical skills.

In the golden age, Cantonese songs had enjoyed great prosperity. Major record labels, such as Warner Records and Emperor Entertainment Group were constantly promoting new generations of singers and musical pieces. Jade Solid Gold Awards, Top Ten Chinese Gold Songs Award, and other awards at that time offered platforms for spreading quality songs [4]. During the period from the 1980s to 1990s, Cantopop saw opportunities to spread to the global Chinese community as Hong Kong (China) films and TV shows gained popularity. Subsequently, Cantonese songs generated a significant impact on Chinese communities worldwide, becoming a major part of Chinese-language music. During the same period, Cantopop reached the peak of its influence, making it a hallmark of Hong Kong (China) and even the broader Chinese-language music industry, cementing its important position in the history of Chinese-language music.

4. Impacts of Cantopop on Mainland Pop Music

4.1. Musical Style

Cantonese songs tend to have an expansive melody, allowing a smooth flow while being both graceful and nuanced. *Fen Fen Zhong Xu Yao Ni* by George Lam and *Yue Ban Xiao Ye Qu* by Hacken Lee are representative examples, presenting an objectively melodious tone. This has made the songs more acceptable to listeners, thereby increasing popularity. In contrast, songs in the Chinese mainland were relatively monotonous with most of them adapted from local folk songs. *Persistence* by Tian Zhen and *Young Friends Get Together* by Li Guyi has fewer variations in melodies, similar to simple and popular folk music compared to the complex melodies of Cantonese songs. Furthermore, Cantonese songs heavily borrowed from blues and other Western pop musical styles. Featuring powerful rock vibes, *Ah Lam's Diary* by George Lam is irresistible with an upbeat groove adding up to a distinctive allure.

Compared to Cantopop, music in the mainland mainly only started to draw inspiration from Western music forms since the reform and opening-up due to the impact of the socialist planned

economy. Before that, mainland music was greatly influenced by the music of other socialist countries, resulting in a monotonous style. In the late 1990s, a plethora of songs that utilize elements of Western music forms such as *Hao Han Ge* by Liu Huan emerged. However, they still mainly consisted of elements in folk songs, failing to align with global trends.

The flexibility of Cantopop allows producers to create dynamic pieces by combining rhythms of different styles. For example, *Monica* by Leslie Cheung and *10.12 Inches* by George Lam present pronounced modern vibes and grooves with smooth and varied rhythms, giving listeners different experiences compared to love songs. Although mainland music at the same period had beautiful melodies, they mostly used a four-beat structure. Without any significant innovation, this has led to a relatively tedious listening experience. Meanwhile, Cantopop had been closely aligned with global trends, with dance and rock music genres being introduced at an early stage. *Messy Hair* and *The Legend of Wolf* by Jacky Cheung are two excellent representatives. The rhythmic dance beats promoted their popularity among young listeners, conveying core emotions more effectively. In the relatively conservative mainland then, similar music styles were introduced only until the 1990s by Dao Lang and other singers. Due to information lags, music in the mainland was less innovative compared to Cantopop.

With information advantages, Cantopop was closely connected to Western music, resulting in a gap between it and mainland music, thus leading to the reform of music styles in the Chinese-language music industry [5].

4.2. Lyrical Contents

Cantonese, featuring graceful rhyme and rhythm, has prominent phonological advantages. Compared to Mandarin, it has six tones, enabling a more delicate handling of songs [6]. *Today Next Year* by Eason Chan and *A Life of Numbers* by George Lam have fully leveraged the advantages of Cantonese, enabling better interpretations of the lyrical contents. Utilizing the diverse rhyme endings and flexible syllables in Cantonese, the lyrics of Cantopop obtain a more compelling rhythm and achieve a poetic aura. With only four tones, it is challenging for songs in Mandarin to attain such effects. Originating in Hong Kong (China), Cantopop reflects the unique local cultural and social contexts. A large number of local cultural symbols are incorporated into Cantonese songs. The lyrics of *Diva*, *Ah Hey* by Twins and *Huang Jin Shi Dai* by Eason Chan contain many place names of Hong Kong (China), mirroring the nostalgic memory of to Hong Kong (China) people. In *A Life of Numbers*, by George Lam, the singer chants stock codes to remind people to invest rationally, demonstrating the pragmatism in Hong Kong (China). Whether evident or implicit, these lyrics reflect writers' thoughts and expectations of society, serving as a medium for self-expression. Hong Kong (China) lyricists have been experienced in the application of metaphor. Lyrics of *Fu Shi Shan Xia* written by Albert Leung refer to past love using the metaphor of old clothes, expressing the life philosophy that loss can never be regained.

To improve the simplistic emotional expression in mainland songs, singers, represented by Mao Amin and Na Ying began to learn the emotional expression techniques of Cantopop in the 1980s and 1990s. *Conquered* by Na Ying discusses the association between mental health and love, fully expressing the mixture of love and hate, which creates a sharp contrast with earlier mainland songs. To create the context for emotional expression, Cantonese songs tend to add a narrative section to introduce the background, thereby better engaging listeners with the song. *Barbaric* by Eason Chan starts by introducing the background of obtaining and then losing again after years of pursuit, laying the foundation for the later emotional outburst. This is an area that mainland songs have embraced. *Zou Si Fang* by Han Lei, based on a tone of poignant storytelling and emotion, introduces the background of drifting around. It reflects the characteristics of the times, thus striking a chord with

listeners.

Diverse production techniques and unique phonological advantages have given Cantonese songs inherent qualities that songs in other languages cannot compete with. Despite this, by learning and incorporating elements from Cantonese songs, mainland musicians accomplished improvement and transformation regarding production techniques, developing diverse cultural connotations.

4.3. Singing

Through flexible switch between true and false tones, the richness of Cantonese songs is enhanced. In *Ren Che Zhi* by Eason Chan, the singer employs the technique of switching between true and false tones, expressing the need for personal space of middle-aged groups. This song unleashes the stress of survival, immersing listeners in the same pleasure of relief. Moreover, through the shift between true and false tones, Eason Chan portrays the universal environment of life's uncertainties and varying individual emotions in his song *Homo Sapiens*, expressing the attitude of staying positive attitude even when everything falls apart. Breath control plays a vital role in emotional expression. It is one of the key capabilities of a singer to change the emotional expressions by adjusting the tones of singing. *Fen Fen Zhong Xu Yao Ni* by George Lam tells the unwavering love for the beloved in a melancholic tone, an effect achieved through the breath control of the singer. Similarly, Joey Yung expresses a relentless pursuit of self-enhancement through breath shifts in the song *In Search of Deities*.

Meanwhile, mainland singers primarily employ the shift between true and false tones in love songs. However, it is not strictly confined. Han Hong extensively shifts between true and false tones in the song *Heavenly Road*, thereby creating a dramatic effect and providing the listeners with a spiritual cleansing. The shift between true and false tones can also improve singers' overall vocal skills. Sun Nan conveys intense emotion in the song *Zheng Jiu*, which shifts as he switches between high and low notes, providing listeners with a thrilling experience. Faye Wong precisely controls her vocal tone and breath in the song *Book of Exhilaration*, delivering nuanced emotions. It can be seen clearly that her singing style is deeply influenced by that of Cantonese songs. The individual traits and representative pieces of Cantonese singers have made mainland counterparts realize that songs portraying different emotions require different vocal techniques. Hence, represented by Jane Zhang, mainland singers have started to develop their personal styles. For example, Jane Zhang is renowned as the "Dolphin Princess" for her high-pitched voice.

Mainland singers have developed their styles by learning the vocal techniques from Cantonese singers, including the shift between true and false tones as well as breath control, thereby promoting the diverse development of pop music in the mainland.

5. Cantopop Culture and Its Influence

5.1. Spread of Cantopop Culture and Identity Recognition

From the 1980s to 1990s, a large number of Cantonese films, TV shows, and songs were exported from Hong Kong (China), the then entertainment center of Asia, to communities of overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals. Cantonese songs, as opening theme songs, closing theme songs, or insert songs in films and TV productions, are closely connected with these works. Samuel Hui, Roman Tam, George Lam, Alan Tam, Leslie Cheung, and other representative musicians gained immense popularity both domestically and internationally, achieving significant record sales. During this period, Cantonese songs were widely spread and attracted a large number of domestic and international listeners, promoting cultural connections between overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals with their homeland [7]. Music radio stations featuring Beyond, Jacky Cheung, and other

musicians were particularly popular in Singapore and the United States, becoming one of the symbols of Chinese culture. In addition, world tours of Jacky Cheung, Eason Chan, and other singers contributed to the popularity of Cantopop, further promoting its global spread.

As a regional language used by Hong Kong (China) residents, Cantonese has triggered unique identity recognition. Meanwhile, it embodies the entrepreneurial culture of Hong Kong (China). Against this background, Cantopop became an important bearer of Hong Kong's (China) cultural identity. Among these songs, *Zhong Kou Wei* by Eason Chan is not only an outstanding piece of rock music but also demonstrates the resilience and perseverance of Hong Kong's (China) working class. Besides Hong Kong (China), this cultural philosophy has produced significant impacts on Chinese communities as well, enriching the inner life of people. In Cantonese songs, a large local lifestyle and cultural features of Hong Kong (China) are described explicitly, reflecting the evolution of the times and social progress as epitomes of local culture. *Below the Lion Rock* by Roman Tam is a classic representative song that demonstrates Hong Kong's (China) entrepreneurial culture, encouraging numerous Hong Kong (China) locals to strive forward. It is a must-study classic for Cantopop studies. *Xiao Wang Shu* by Hins Cheung and *Shi Dai Ju Lun* by Eason Chan soothe listeners via discussion about time and destiny, showcasing the humanistic concern and pursuit of self-improvement in Cantonese culture. High-quality Cantopop is a treasured sound of Hong Kong (China) people. Meanwhile, it eases feelings of nostalgia for overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals [8].

Cantopop has played a significant role in spreading Cantonese culture and expanding the influence of Chinese languages. It is regarded as a hallmark of Chinese-language music within Chinese communities and globally, enhancing the international influence and reputation of Cantonese culture.

5.2. Influence of Cantopop on Mainland Music Market

The success of Cantopop is partially attributed to the complete industrial chain. The record label is in charge of the effective operation including production, promotion, and sales. Due to a relatively small music market in the mainland in earlier periods, it was difficult to achieve effective integration of the industrial chain. As the market expands, business entities represented by Huayi Brothers and Taihe Rye Music managed to establish a complete industrial chain with closed-loop operations, aiming to increase the commercial values of music products. Cantopop and Cantonese films and TV productions are mutually dependent on each other and their close connection has created a dual market effect of both music and media. Singers represented by Andy Lau are also involved in films and TV productions, further improving the commercial value of their songs. In recent years, the mainland counterparts have begun to adopt this model, deeply pairing films and TV productions with music. Meanwhile, it launched music variety shows a new platform to promote songs. The global spread of Cantopop has contributed to its great popularity across Southeast Asia and overseas Chinese communities. This has inspired mainland singers. Represented by Jane Zhang, mainland singers began to explore the international market. By releasing albums in other languages, they aim to grow extensive fan bases in Asia and even across the globe.

From the 1980s to 1990s, leveraging the complete industrial chain, Hong Kong's (China) music industry produced works that combined artistic quality with high market demand. As its market expanded, the Hong Kong (China) model soon became the benchmark for mainland record labels. In recent years, many mainland singers have invited top-notch international production teams to participate in music production and highlight the originality and creativity of their albums. Hong Kong (China) record labels highly value the market positioning for their artists and develop the most suitable market strategies for different artists, thereby maximizing their commercial potential [9]. It is also an aspect that mainland record labels have drawn inspiration from. Represented by Cai Xukun and TFBOYS, these idols mainly target a young audience. In contrast, singer-songwriters such as

Mao Buyi primarily appeal to a more mature audience. As digital music advances quickly and the record industry declines, Hong Kong's (China) music industry has gradually transitioned to digital technologies. Presently, Cantonese songs spread worldwide via music streaming platforms such as Apple Music and Spotify. In the Chinese mainland, they are spread through platforms such as NetEase Cloud Music and QQ Music. Digitalization has introduced new business models for the industry such as digital albums. Additionally, it has reduced the distribution costs of music, making music more accessible.

5.3. Long-Term Impact on Chinese Pop Music

Essentially, the pop music model pioneered by Cantopop is the combination of elements from Western pop music and local culture. This has propelled mainland musicians to explore diverse music styles with sustainable development. Leveraging the distinctive advantages of rhymes and rhythm in Cantonese, the lyrics of Cantopop have successfully reflected deep cultural roots. Meanwhile, it has benefited the songwriting of mainland pop music, leading to a greater emphasis on artistry and literary quality in the lyrics. Many vocal techniques pioneered by Cantonese singers have been inherited and further developed by mainland singers, who then developed better vocal effects. This has promoted the diversity of singing styles in the mainland music market. With tailored marketing strategies and the professionalism of Cantopop artists, Hong Kong (China) record labels have successfully nurtured globally renowned singers. This model is adopted by mainland music labels. From perspectives of commercialization and image branding, singers are developed to cater to different audience groups, thereby achieving maximum profits. Cantopop has positively influenced mainland pop music in multiple regards, including music style, songwriting, lyrical content, singing styles, vocal performance, and the industrialization of the music market [10].

6. Conclusions

The success of Cantopop has proved the feasibility of cross-cultural communication of music, inspiring later studies in this regard. While it rapidly declined in the record industry, Cantopop has seized opportunities and continued its prosperity across music streaming platforms, demonstrating the importance of embracing transformation. Its development has offered a reference for updating and developing future music distribution channels.

This paper discusses the development of Cantopop and explores Cantopop's impact on the music style and other aspects of pop music in the mainland, finding that it has promoted the advancement of mainland pop music. This paper fills the gap of Cantopop's impact on pop music in the Chinese mainland across academic communities and reveals the promotion effects and inspirations that Cantopop has provided for mainland music point by point. The unique lyrics of Cantonese songs feature the distinct rhyme and rhythm of the language, which is an area that requires further exploration. Additionally, exploring how to balance artistic and literary quality with effective market operations is also necessary, which will further enhance studies on the development plans of Cantopop in a digital society and feasibility assessment.

References

- [1] Li, A. (2021) *Cultural Paths and Implications of Cantonese Pop Songs*. *Sichuan Drama*, 3, 146-148.
- [2] You, L. (2011) *Phased Evolution of Singing Style Characteristics of Chinese Popular Songs*. *Hunan Normal University*.
- [3] Geng, S. (2017) *Identity in Cantonese Pop Songs: An Analysis of Urban Imagery and Location Placement in Lyrics*. *Comparative Study of Cultural Innovation*, 1(2), 116-117+123.
- [4] Chen, H. (2008) *Development of Chinese Popular Songs from the Rise and Fall of Cantonese Popular Songs*. *Journal of Shaoguan University*, 5, 44-46.

- [5] Wang A. (2024) *Artistic Style and Singing Characteristics of Contemporary Chinese Pop Music*. *Contemporary Music*, (01): 141-143.
- [6] Li, X., and He, J. (2016) *The Beginning and Rise of Cantonese Pop Song Composition*. *Journal of Xinghai Conservatory of Music*, 4, 70-79.
- [7] Qian, T. (2002) *Social Motivation of the Rise of Chinese Mainland Pop Songs in the 1980s*. *The New Voice of Yue-Fu (Journal of the Shenyang Conservatory of Music)*, 4, 45-50.
- [8] Xie, R., and Tu, B. (2014) *Study on the Development and Trend of Cantonese Pop Songs*. *Song of the Yellow River*, 11, 87.
- [9] Guo, J. (2019) *20 Years of Cantonese Pop Songs (1983-2003)*. *China National Exhibition*, 16, 158-159.
- [10] Zhang, Y. (2004) *Research on the Development of Singing Style of Chinese Contemporary Pop Songs and Its Related Problems*. Fujian Normal University.