

# **Riding a Melodic Tide: The Development of Cantopop in Hong Kong**

## **1. Introduction**

Cantopop has confronted many challenges in recent years. With the departure of several singers and music artists, the guiding force behind the Cantopop scene seems to have ebbed away. In his doctoral thesis *The Rise and Decline of Cantopop: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music (1949 - 1997)*, the late James Wong wrote that Cantonese popular music has lost its influence in the mighty torrent of history; slowly but surely its impact is fading from Hong Kong's popular culture. James Wong's conclusion is a sad one. Whether it is correct or not, it raises one question that demands an answer: how does Cantopop relate to us?

Though characterized by commercial productions, Cantopop is also the fruit of the unstinting efforts of countless singers, music artists and producers, whose hard work has generated thousands of pieces of music that combine to build a local popular culture for Hong Kong. We grew up with Cantopop. It is our collective memory.

To trace this precious memory, we interviewed many organizations, record companies, music artists, singers, academics and music critics. The idea was to discover and trace the sequence of Cantopop's development after World War Two from different perspectives. In a progression spearheaded by the music industry and the mass media, Cantopop rode the wave of local culture amid a period of social change to emerge and then exert a significant impact on the Chinese people of Hong Kong, the Mainland and overseas.

The study outlines the development of Hong Kong Cantopop over the decades. It may not strike an immediate high note, but, like the semibreves, minims, crotchets and quavers that make up a song, we hope it will touch your heart and make you reconsider our relationship with Hong Kong's very own popular music.

## **2. Early Hong Kong Cantopop**

Soon after the Second World War, capitalists from Shanghai started emigrating to Hong Kong, bringing their modes of entertainment with them. Mandarin pop songs quickly found favour among upper crust Chinese: casting away sorrow and grief, melodies by singers such as Zhou Xuan, Li Xianglan and Bai Guang were widely played on the radio and in nightclubs. Other Chinese who spoke different dialects also developed their own music, but the Cantonese masses stayed faithful to classic Cantonese opera.

Being a British colony, Hong Kong enjoyed greater political and social stability than its neighbours. Popular cultures from overseas found a stage here and quickly grabbed the spotlight. In the 1960s, influenced by RTHK disc jockey Ray Cordeiro, affectionately known as Uncle Ray, the younger generation developed a passion for Western pop music. The visit by the Beatles in 1964 triggered a craze that swept across Hong Kong, sparking a fad for local youths to form pop bands. To this generation, Western music was definitely mainstream.

Entering the 1970s, Cantopop was still at a nascent stage. While this kind of music did not gain much popularity among the Chinese upper class or the young, it found a following in the Chinese communities of Singapore and Malaysia as well as among Hong Kong's grassroots.

Early Cantopop included cover versions of Cantonese opera pieces, theme songs from movies and radio dramas as well as commercial jingles. Cantonese cover versions were mainly targeted at Chinese miners working in Singapore and Malaysia. Record companies commissioned Cantonese opera composers and lyricists such as Lui Man Sing, Ho Tai So and Chu Ting Hok to transform opera classics into Cantonese pop songs with humorous lyrics. Leading record companies that released this type of Cantopop included Wo Sing Records, Mei Sing Records, Nam Sing Records and Lucky Records. Some copies were exported to Southeast Asia while others that were classified as dance music played in local dance halls.

In the 1950s and 1960s, local Mandarin and Cantonese movies always featured theme songs or tracks sung by the leading actors and actresses. Some of these tunes contributed greatly to the cultured images of film stars and became all-time favourites, and many of the Cantonese theme songs appealed to the masses with their true-to-life colloquial lyrics. Although they were popular, they were seen as a vulgar

and mediocre art form.

Broadcasting for the first time in 1959, Commercial Radio quickly secured itself a reputation as a major channel for early Cantopop. It had special time slots for Cantonese pop music, and the commercial jingles it played were also in Cantonese. Radio plays also featured their own Cantonese theme songs the majority of which were composed by Chow Chung.



Lyrics of Cantonese Songs by Wo Sing Records Company Ltd.  
1952



Lyrics of Dancing Songs by Nam Sing Records Company Ltd.  
1960s



Valve Radio

1960s

2004.9.70

### 3. The golden years of Cantopop

Hong Kong's economy took flight in the 1970s. Stable livelihoods gave rise to greater spending power, which in turn fostered local culture. Against a backdrop of political stability, sustained social development and strong economic growth, the time was ripe for the rise of Cantopop.

By this time, television was fast becoming a household must have. Offering free entertainment to the public, television commanded a great influence. As time went by, all classes of society, in particular the post 1970s generation, grew to accept works of entertainment that were primarily written and performed in Cantonese. It was on this foundation of popular culture that Cantonese classics struck it big. Songs such as *The Fatal Irony* and *Games Gamblers Play* took the local music scene by storm as soon as they were broadcast on the radio and television.

This phenomenon revealed the immense potential of Cantopop to record companies which then began investing in Cantopop records. Meanwhile, many singers who used to sing English and Mandarin pop songs switched to Cantonese. Given great exposure on television and radio, Cantopop rapidly gained prevalence.

The rise of Cantopop coincided with the opening up policy of China. Cantopop songs were introduced into the Mainland by Hong Kong visitors who took electronic music products and cassette tapes to the Mainland, and it soon caught on in China. Around the same time, Hong Kong television programmes started to find new audiences on the Mainland and in Southeast Asia. Since Hong Kong television shows were more entertaining than the local programmes made in neighbouring countries and regions, they were very popular with Chinese living abroad. These exported television productions opened up new markets for Cantonese pop music.

Attracted by the wider market, many local and overseas companies invested more resources in producing records. More and more cover versions were created, while composers were recruited to write new songs. Different types of music were developed, such as love songs, morale-boosting songs, songs about society and making a living, and songs about life and philosophy, while singers became stars with cultured images. These strategies fostered the continuous growth of Cantopop audiences, until Cantopop became the mainstream of Hong Kong music.

The rise of Cantopop would not have been possible without advances in

technology. From vinyl records, cassette tapes to digital CDs, from tape recorders to mini HiFis to walkmans, and from MTVs to karaoke machines, high-tech products and the variety of ways people had of spending their leisure time created a much closer relationship between businesses, music and the audience and thus also furthered the development of pop music.

### *Identification with Hong Kong society*

After the riots in 1967, the government changed its administrative policy. It organized the Hong Kong Festival to “market” Hong Kong to the world and, moving into the 1970s, progressively rolled out public policies such as the Ten Year Housing Plan, the Nine Year Free Education Scheme and the anti-corruption campaign. Society became stable and the local economy prospered. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the new, younger generations no longer saw themselves as temporary visitors or refugees just passing through the colony. Rather, they saw Hong Kong as their home and, with great expectations and visions for the future, felt strongly motivated to build their lives here. Thanks to the political stability and strong economic growth, a common life experience began to be constructed among local people, together with a sensation of Hong Kong and an identification with a Hong Kong society.

This common life experience and identification with Hong Kong society was spread through popular culture. Local television and radio programmes and films broke away from the conventions of the 1950s and 1960s; full of the beat of the city, they were accepted and acclaimed by the public. The media assiduously shied away from Cantonese opera song styles and produced popular music of diverse themes and contents, some of which reflected social issues. This further encouraged people to accept local popular culture and to construct the identity of “Hong Kong People” in a trend that continued well into the 1980s.



Queuing for Water

1960s

1998.16.76

### *Media influence*

From the 1970s to the 1990s, with media such as television, radio and cinema providing strong impetus. Hong Kong's popular cultures boomed. Cantopop thrived.

In 1974, *The Fatal Irony*, the theme song from a television drama series of the same name, was a runaway success. From then on, all local television drama series featured a Cantonese theme song. Later, theme songs and tracks from other highly popular series such as *Hotel*, *The Romantic Swordsman*, *Fatherland* and *Reincarnated* found an enthusiastic reception from audiences, further securing the popular status of theme songs from Cantonese television dramas. As these television productions were sold to the Mainland and other countries, Cantopop reached overseas audiences through drama series. In the 1980s, following the example of Western television channels, local television produced and broadcast music video programmes to offer visual and audio entertainment. The Jade Solid Gold (JSG) show produced by local broadcaster TVB and other music programmes were major media for propagating Cantonese pop music.

Commercial Radio first introduced programmes for Hong Kong's youth in

the late 1960s, with disc jockeys hosting the shows, while RTHK introduced *New Generation* in 1974 to offer pop music and news on the latest trends. The DJs played pop songs and talked about the background to them on air. Programmes like these promoted a better general knowledge of music and they enjoyed very high ratings. With their help, Cantopop became the musical mainstream for local young people.

The Hong Kong film industry also thrived from the 1970s to the early 1990s. Local productions such as *The Private Eyes*, *A Better Tomorrow* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* were box-office blockbusters, and when these films opened overseas the original soundtracks penetrated many markets across the world. Their theme songs became Cantopop classics that everyone knew.

Karaoke, a Japanese concept, was introduced to Hong Kong in the mid-1980s. A new medium for pop music and a new form of entertainment, it was an immediate hit. Karaoke machines could soon be found in homes and entertainment outlets, while karaoke bars sprouted up everywhere, providing another important platform for promoting Cantopop.

### *The music industry*

The production of Cantopop involves a complex distribution of tasks in society. Driven by market demand, record companies approach composers, lyricists and arrangement artists. The songs are performed by pop singers and recorded on discs. The finished works are played on the radio and television for exposure. Next come distribution and retail sales.

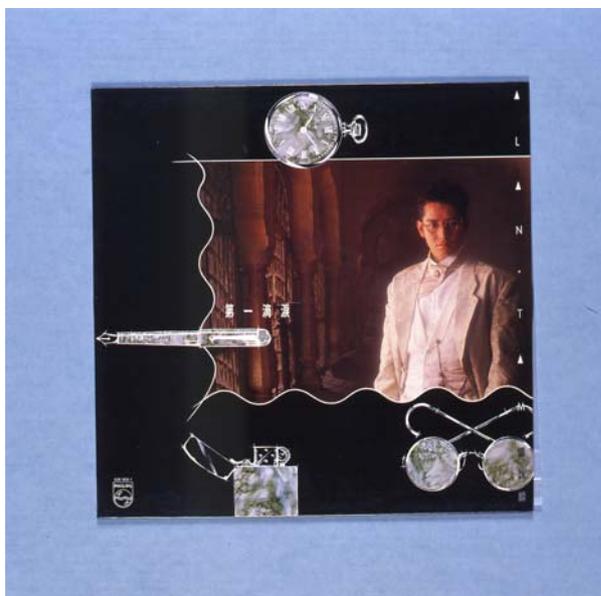
The Hong Kong record industry experienced a boom in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to several local record companies such as Crown, Man Chi, Capital Artists, Wing Hang and Fung Hang, multinationals, including Polygram, EMI, CBS Sony, WEA and BMG, also competed for a share of the Cantopop record market.

In the 1980s, a well developed management system was already in place for local artistes. Managers would select different performing jobs for their artistes to help them gain fame and popularity. Following the example of the Japanese show business industry, record companies commissioned famous designers such as Alan Chan, Eddie Lau and William Chang at high cost to design record covers and fashion

images for singers as a means to market their stars. Other promotion activities were also frequently held, maximizing exposure to arouse the public's interest in the pop singers and their records.

IFPI (Hong Kong Group) was formed back in 1967. An industry association affiliated to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), it is the representative of the Hong Kong record industry and strives to promote the legal interests of the record market and combat piracy. Composers and Authors Society of Hong Kong Limited (CASH) was established in 1977 to protect the legal interests of music composers and authors. Both of these bodies continue to make important contributions to the development of Hong Kong's music industry.

According to information from IFPI (Hong Kong Group), for a record to be awarded a gold disc in 1980 it had to achieve annual sales of 25,000 units; the criterion for a platinum disc was 50,000 units. In 1980, IFPI (Hong Kong Group) awarded 13 gold and 17 platinum discs to local artists. By 1988, the numbers had jumped to 23 gold and 62 platinum discs, figures that demonstrated the great success of the record industry at the time.



Record Album: *First Teardrop*

1986

2004.19.7



Platinum Disc for the album *The Romantic Swordsman*  
1978

#### *Music awards ceremonies*

Many music award shows are staged in Hong Kong every year, and they reflect the thriving development of Cantopop. IFPI (Hong Kong Group) pioneered the first Gold Disc Awards in 1977 to give recognition to records that had achieved outstanding sales. Gold and platinum discs reward the efforts of record companies, singers and music composers and authors and bear witness to the stellar sales performances of hit records.

As Cantopop went from strength to strength, Hong Kong's electronic media rode the wave and produced a wide range of music programmes. In the late 1970s, both RTHK and Commercial Radio introduced Chinese pop charts that rated the current pop songs on how frequently they were played on the radio. In 1979, RTHK hosted the Top Ten Chinese Gold Songs Awards, the first Chinese popular music award show organized by an electronic medium to provide a conclusive report on the popularity of Chinese pop songs during the preceding year. Since most of the winners were Cantonese songs, Cantopop's leadership as the mainstream music genre in Hong Kong was reinforced.

Later, TVB and Commercial Radio introduced the JSG and Ultimate Song

Charts, later hosting the Top Ten JSG Awards and Ultimate Song Chart Awards. Together with Metro Radio's Hit Awards, they have since become annual spectacles that recognize outstanding singers and backstage artists. Enjoying high listener and viewer ratings, these award shows are major success drivers of Cantopop.



The Golden Needle Award of the 14th Top Ten Chinese Gold Songs Award (1991)  
(Awarded to Mr. Roman Tam)

### *Concerts and shows*

In the early 1970s, Samuel Hui gave several concerts at Hong Kong City Hall that drew large crowds. Later, singers such as Michael Kwan and Roman Tam staged solo concerts at the Academic Community Hall, the Lee Theatre or Queen Elizabeth Stadium. All these shows were enthusiastically received by the public.

In 1983, the Hong Kong Stadium in Hung Hom (commonly known as Hung Hom Stadium) opened its doors. With a capacity of 12,000 seats, it quickly became the venue of choice for pop concerts, with shows by local pop stars held in rapid succession, fuelling a craze that has endured to the present day. Having a solo concert became a goal for all pop singers, while going to Hung Hom Stadium to see their idols' concerts was a special occasion for pop fans. Many superstars have performed at Hung Hom Stadium over the years, including Samuel Hui, Paula Tsui, Alan Tam, Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui. The number of nights the stadium would be booked for ranged from several to more than a dozen to record runs of 30 or 40 shows. The great response to local concerts and the frequent tours of the Mainland and other overseas destinations by Hong Kong singers reflected the immense popularity of Cantopop.



Stage Costume of Roman Tam  
1996



The Performance of Joseph Koo and James Wong in the *True Friendship Concert*  
1998

#### **4. Recent development of Cantopop**

The new millennium has brought globalization, technological advances and the rise of the Internet, all factors that have exerted an influence on popular culture. Inevitably, pop music is feeling the impact. Compared to the 1980s, the attraction of Cantopop has declined in recent years.

From the years immediately after the Second World War all the way up to the mid 1990s. Hong Kong Cantopop was borne mainly by records that were played by the mass media such as radio and TV. When karaoke appeared in the mid 1980s, people quickly developed a passion for this new form of entertainment, while record and entertainment companies also used it to promote their current hits. For this reason, karaoke is now one of the key channels for propagating Cantopop

The emergence of new media such as mobile phones and the Internet has brought new functions for popular music. The Internet is now an important part of life. Users can transmit and download movies and songs online, while music websites offer new communication channels for pop music. Against this backdrop, a market has emerged for pop singles. Thanks to the development of new media, record companies can produce or promote single songs without making records that contain many titles. What's more, the public can play current hits on their mobile phones, while Cantopop songs are increasingly downloaded as ringtones. These new media have changed music's functions, forms and communication channels as well as the way people spend their money. However, they have also changed the way people listen to music and given rise to illegal music downloading. These activities inflict great damage on the record market and affect record sales, which dropped from HK\$17 billion in 1997 to HK\$0.56 billion in 2006.

Meanwhile, Cantopop's market positioning has changed. The entertainment industries of neighbouring regions have made great advances since the 1980s, and singers from the Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan are now free to conduct exchanges. A new Chinese market has emerged where Cantopop is only one sector of the greater Chinese music scene. In recent years, Cantopop content has been heavily tilted towards love songs for young people. Unlike in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, it is failing to attract a diverse audience.

Does the problem lie in the fact that Cantopop is now seen only as a niche in Chinese music? Does that explain why the market is shrinking? With reduced record

sales and burgeoning new media, is the market heading towards integration? The melodies and lyrics of the new generation Cantopop are aimed at youngsters; is it true that the music of one generation will never appeal to another? Is this a cyclical phenomenon characteristic of pop culture? Is rampant piracy to blame? Or is Cantopop simply waiting to be borne along on another high tide?