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The Emergence of Cantopop from Hong Kong's Cultural History from the 1930s to the 1980s

Nicholas Chik[1,a,*]

[1]*Department of History, Columbia University, New York, NY, 10027, USA*
a. nc3070@columbia.edu
**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the 1980s and 90s, Hong Kong-born Cantopop music reached a climax of popularity throughout Asia. The genre's development serves as a lyrical mirror reflecting Hong Kong's unique cultural history. First inspired by popular musical forms from the 1920s, its development serves as an artistic resolution to the competition between Asian self-awareness experienced by the British colony's Chinese majority and local pride generated by living in a wealthy Western oasis sheltered from much of the instability that plagued neighboring countries. Cantopop as a distinct cultural product is defined by major historical shifts in Hong Kong's history, from rebellion against British colonial hubris to the aftermath of World War II, international relations during the Korean War, the immigration of musical artists from Mainland China and Taiwan, local reactions to events in China, and Hong Kong's uneven economic advancement as an Asian Tiger. These events would leave a mark on the local Hong Kong identity, expressed musically through Cantopop, as waves of immigration and borrowing from foreign traditions formed a new and distinct political, social and cultural identity. This paper traces and explains this musical development by juxtaposing Hong Kong's history with changing musical trends.

Keywords: Cantopop, Hong Kong history, colonialism, music.

1. Introduction

The music world of Asia long predates the recent decades of global success for Asian popular genres, boasting a rich history of popular music production in major cities such as Shanghai, Tokyo, Taipei, and Hong Kong extending back to the turn of the 20th century. Dominated by a unique blend of Asian, Western, and Indigenous melodies and lyrics, which had been cultivating and developing in Hong Kong from the 1930s until the genre's heyday in the 1980s, Cantopop, as it is called, reflects the coastal port city's cultural history as a colonial economic powerhouse geographically squeezed into a strategically favorable region of Eastern Asia. This paper aims to illuminate the 20th-century cultural development of the Hong Kong-based Cantopop musical style that took Asia by storm in the 1980s.

2. Early Influence of Shidaiqu

Throughout most of Hong Kong's post-Treaty of Nanjing history, the colony's British overlords remained aloof and detached from local Chinese society. Frustration over the colonizer's apparent

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disinterest in the economic, political, and social needs of the colonized people erupted in 1925 in reaction to a May 30 shooting incident between the British-commanded Sikh police and Chinese demonstrators in the Shanghai International Settlement, leaving nine protestors dead [1]. For more than a year, Hong Kong workers and students expressed their bitterness through a general strike to demand basic freedoms, better working conditions, the end of racist policies, and cheaper living conditions, among other changes. The anti-imperialist demonstration was supported by Chinese Communists and the Kuomintang, who hoped to isolate Hong Kong from the international community to help build their respective support bases in connection with the revolutionary uprisings on the mainland. The unpopularity of the British in this period was accompanied by a rising admiration of cultural trends from Shanghai, the "Paris of the East" [2]. Shidaiqu (a fusion of Mandarin Chinese folk music and American jazz that developed in Shanghai in the 1920s) attracted even more interest than traditional Cantonese Opera on the stages of popular Hong Kong venues [3]. When performed in Cantonese, the pentatonic Shidaiqu songs were renamed Jyut Jyu Si Doi Kuk, constituting one of the first phases of the development of Hong Kong popular music that evolved from musical tweaks of borrowed tunes. However, it would take a few more decades before the people living under British rule adopted a local musical identity.

More than 250,000 Chinese citizens left Hong Kong during the 1925-1926 Canton-Hong Kong strike to escape violence and a rumored threat that the British were planning to poison the colony's water supplies [4]. The exodus left Hong Kong a ghost town. The few remaining residents had to contend with soaring food prices and financial crises before the strike was finally put down in 1926. The disorder served as a warning to the British that they needed to pay more attention to local grievances. However, few adjustments were made to the political hierarchy. Chinese residents in Hong Kong still lived separately from the Europeans, who enjoyed special privileges and better conditions. Despite the racial inequity, most locals were grateful to be living in a region that was politically and economically more stable than its tumultuous neighboring countries. In the late 1930s, however, Hong Kong, too, was swept up in chaos when the Japanese ambitiously set out to conquer all of Asia from Manchuria to the Dutch East Indies.

When the Japanese invaded China during the Sino-Japanese War, thousands of Chinese mainlanders sought refuge in Hong Kong. Until the end of 1941, Hong Kong was an important industrial, agricultural, and strategic base and a supply line for foreign aid to help China battle its enemy in World War II. That wouldn't last since the British were too engulfed in their fight against the Nazis in Europe to defend their Asian colonies. By the time the Japanese occupied Hong Kong on Christmas Day 1941, Britain had already evacuated European residents, leaving only 650,000 locals to fend for themselves against twice the number of invaders [5]. After more than three years of occupation, the myth of the invincibility of the British Empire and the superiority of the white race had been shattered [6]. After the war, hundreds of thousands of people returned to Hong Kong, and the British government prepared to resume its imperial role. The Hong Kongese, however, were not eager to return to the status quo antebellum.

As things settled a year after the atomic bombs put an end to Japan's aggression, Hong Kong Chinese adopted a growing sense of national pride. They demanded a new deal that included fairer treatment, an end to corruption, and free education for poor Chinese students. Governor Mark Young responded to this prevailing "1946 outlook" by giving local inhabitants a greater role in managing their affairs and recruiting ethnic Chinese officials into the bureaucracy. His progressive successor, Sir Alexander Grantham (1947-1957), did not build on Young's concession of local autonomy since he concluded that Hong Kong would never become independent but would eternally be under either British or Chinese control. Instead, Grantham focused on keeping the population satisfied by improving opportunities to make money. The new post-war changes attracted hundreds of thousands of ambitious Asian immigrants. Filling a cultural vacuum created by the chaos of war, they helped

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lay the groundwork for a new Hong Kong Chinese identity that blended both Western and Chinese ideals and customs. This shift was, in part, due to the extreme cultural changes taking place in China.

3. 1950s: Music Refugees of the Communist Revolution

After the victory of Mao Zedong's Communist Party in China on October 1, 1949, Hong Kong found itself in a delicate position in the Cold War. Hong Kong maintained a strictly neutral stance in the unfinished civil war between the victorious PRC and the Kuomintang based in Taiwan and traded freely with both. Hong Kong's thriving economy and its liberal policy toward refugees appealed to fleeing entrepreneurs and artists who had been sidelined by the new Chinese government's cultural policies. Hong Kong's population greatly expanded from 600,000 in 1945 to over two million in 1950, just a year after China's Communist Revolution [7]. The influx would play a strong role in developing Hong Kong's music scene.

Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the Chinese Communist Party rigorously controlled the media, news, and entertainment. Music that did not toe the party line was deemed frivolous and degenerate. "Yellow" Shidaiqu (sometimes called Mandopop) music was particularly targeted by the Communist government, driving Shidaiqu musicians to seek creative freedom in other Asian countries. Hong Kong soon became the new center for producing Chinese popular songs. Much as it had in the 1920s, Shidaiqu quickly overshadowed more traditional Cantonese Opera. But this time, it was not just consumed but produced in Hong Kong, as prolific mainland Chinese artists like Zhou Xuan (nicknamed "The Golden Voice" in Shanghai), Yao Li, and her twin brother Yao Min resettled in the comparatively open British colony.

Despite Hong Kong's attempts to stay out of the CCP-ROC rivalry, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 put pressure on the colony's status as a neutral nation. Because of its geographical proximity to China, the British colony was used as a Western base for military operations, support, propaganda, and covert action against the PRC. Hong Kong's short-lived economic boom burst when a trade embargo was put in place by the US and the UN to prevent all trade with Communist China, thus ending Hong Kong's position as China's premier entrepot. The smuggling of pharmaceuticals, dyes, and machinery continued, but Hong Kong's share of trade with the PRC after the Korean War ended declined to 5%. Although Shidaiqu continued to appeal to older generations, the decline in Hong Kong-China trade and the presence of Western military forces resulted in the rising popularity of Western music that aired on British-run Rediffusion Television and Radio Hong Kong (RHK), which had become independent from the government in 1954, and through music companies that focused on distributing British and American music. Locals, including a young Bruce Lee, danced to 1950s rock, and American performers like Elvis Presley became idols [8].

4. 1960s: Beatlemania to Asia Pop

Sam Hui, considered one of the fathers of Cantopop, became enamored with Elvis Presley after his family came to Hong Kong as refugees from Guangzhou in 1950 [9]. As a child, Hui often skipped school to watch Elvis movies and later mimicked the "King of Rock and Roll" by adopting the same hairstyle, clothing, mannerisms, and musical style [10]. His musical ambitions blossomed in the summer of 1964 when the Beatles performed at the Princess Theater in Kowloon, Hong Kong. In the same year that Beatlemania swept across Hong Kong, Hui and his friends formed a band called the Harmonicks. Like other young Hong Kong bands with English-sounding names, including Roman and the Four Steps, Menace, and the Astro-Notes, the Harmonicks played in nightclubs and hotels and performed on the "Music in the Air" program featured on Rediffusion Television. Three years later, in 1967, Hui's new band Lotus was signed by Diamond Records, an independent record label based in Hong Kong. It was founded by Portuguese merchant Ren da Silva in 1960 and sold to

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Polydor in 1970. The center of gravity influencing Hong Kong popular music moved from the pentatonic and minor tones of Shanghai's Shidaiqu to the upbeat melodies of American and British Rock N' Roll. However, for most Hong Kong musicians, band music was considered more of a hobby than a vocation. Most of the young musicians stopped performing when they went to university. The flowering of European influence on Cantopop came to an abrupt end because of the 1967 "Confrontation."

In 1967, Hong Kong was beset by a new wave of anti-government riots organized by China's Cultural Revolution supporters. The disturbances were triggered by labor disputes at two factories owned by Li Kashing in San Po Kong, Kowloon. The labor issue was seized upon by the Hong Kong and Macao Work Committees, a clandestine local branch of the Chinese Communist Party that had been operating under the guise of the Xinhua News Agency [11]. China's Premier Zhou Enlai had assured Britain that the Cultural Revolution, Mao's coordinated attack against "capitalist roaders" in the Communist Party, would not expand into Hong Kong [1]. Still, the local Work Committees feared they would be deemed irrelevant if they didn't play a role in the proletariat movement. The six-month uprising in Hong Kong engaged Hong Kong workers who expressed frustration over wages and working conditions, crowded housing, great gaps in wealth, lack of representation in government, and corruption. The uprising shook the British colonizers, who realized that changes had to be made in the colony to pacify the restive local population. It also shattered many hopes new arrivals from China had for the British administration to live up to its promise of freedom, wealth and liberal government.

By the late 1960s, most local Hong Kong bands had disbanded, leaving a vacuum in the music industry. In light of the 1967 riots, which left 51 people dead, 800 injured, and 5,000 people jailed without trial by Hong Kong's corrupt police, animus towards Western powers increased. Not only was the West responsible for the harsh repression of the protests, but the power of the police was often aimed directly at the very college students who had created Hong Kong Rock N' Roll. As a result, Western music sharply dropped in popularity and Hong Kong's music scene sought yet again for new inspiration. This time, it was found in Taiwan. Since 1949, the Taiwanese had been living under martial law headed by the anti-communist KMT in the name of defense against the PRC. Music and culture were increasingly censored. In 1950, the government even tried to promote a monolingual national language by suppressing minority languages. Radio stations had to register with the government and were monitored for subversion [12]. In 1961, the government banned over 250 songs. It issued a list of prohibitions that could lead to censorship, including songs with sad lyrics and songs that focused on negative aspects of society. These restrictions were expanded in subsequent years, leading well-known Taiwanese artists like Teresa Teng to escape Taiwanese restrictions and perform for more receptive audiences abroad [13].

Despite a history of singing patriotic songs and entertaining Taiwan's armed forces, Teresa Teng's music was less popular in Taiwan than it was in other regions of Asia, partly because of her connection with Japan. Taiwan still harbored memories of fifty years of Japanese colonial rule, and polyglot Teng had mastered the Japanese language and released records on the rival island. Meanwhile, Teng's tremolo guitar techniques added a uniquely Taiwanese twist that excited foreign audiences. In 1976, a year after signing a record deal with Polydor, the "Eternal Queen of Asia Pop" performed in her first Hong Kong concert at Lee Theater with great success [14]. Unlike in Taiwan, Teresa Teng's introduction of Japanese melodies was welcomed in Hong Kong, which had only experienced three years of occupation during World War II and whose British rulers kept friendly relations with Japan [15]. Japanese manga and anime were very popular in Hong Kong in the 1970s, including shows like Maxinger (1972), Doraemon (1973), and Mobile Suit Gundam (1979). Hong Kong TV imported higher-quality Japanese-made TV dramas to replace low-quality local productions. The theme songs from these shows became big hits.

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On a more practical note, royalties from Japanese melodies were much lower than those charged to use Western melodies, encouraging local musicians to incorporate popular Japanese music into their repertoires. For instance, half of the fifty songs in Cantopop singer Paula Tsui Siu-fung's albums between 1978 and 1981 included Japanese hits by famous Japanese singers [16].

5. 1970s: Winners and Losers

The early 1970s brought another great shift in Hong Kong's history and music scene when the global status of the People's Republic of China was transformed from a pariah state to one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. In 1972, US President Nixon visited Mao Zedong. The embargo on trade of non-strategic goods with China was lifted, thus restoring Hong Kong's pre-1950 position as the PRC's main entrepot with the West. China's new elevated international position generated a sense of pride in young Hong Kongese with Chinese heritage, sparking the "Know the Mother Country" movement. This was followed by a successful campaign to recognize Chinese as a second official language in Hong Kong. The nostalgic enthusiasm over China, however, would soon fade when the Gang of Four took control of the PRC after the deaths of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, plunging the Communist country into political chaos. The dimmed view of China was reinforced by the influx of hundreds of thousands of illegal Chinese mainland immigrants who took advantage of Britain's "touch base policy," permitting illegal immigrants to stay in Hong Kong if they successfully reached urban areas and found a home. Most of the refugees had fled from backward rural communes and had been brought up on Maoist ideologies, often facing hostility from the more urbane, Westernized Hong Kong population [17]. The stark cultural differences between the incoming Mainland Chinese and the Chinese people living in Hong Kong were exacerbated by the comparative prosperity of the Asian Tiger British colony. English and Mandarin became the languages of business, while Cantonese remained the language of the working man, marginalized after the failed workers' revolts of the 1960s, and Cantopop "a working-class passtime." While earlier waves of immigration had contributed to the emergence of Cantopop, the class divisions defining immigration in the 1970s exacerbated existing social antagonisms, and Cantopop became the voice of a particular, marginalized population on the rapidly changing island.

According to official narratives, by the mid-1970s, living standards in Hong Kong had greatly improved, partly because the British government had begun devoting more money and effort to increasing social programs and improving living and working conditions to pacify the population after the 1967 uprisings. Per capita income grew five times between 1971 and 1981, creating a new class of self-made Hong Kong billionaires. Under Governor MacLehose, public healthcare and free education greatly improved the quality of life for Hong Kong residents. However, listening to Cantopop music tells a very different story. There were still many problems, including corruption, a lack of water, and harsh working conditions [18]. These shared pains became the subject of local Cantonese pop music, which was beginning to gather momentum. The prosperity of Hong Kong as an "Asian Tiger" was built upon an economic shift away from manufacturing and towards a financialized economy based on banking, trade, and an emerging service sector. While this brought foreign investment and created new high-paying jobs, this was devastating for the working population that relied upon manufacturing jobs. Songs titled "Eiffel Tower above the Clouds" (1974), "Inflation Craze" (1979), or "Water Rationing Song" (1979) expressed the discontent of the working people who were on the losing end of Hong Kong's economic transformation.

6. Conclusion

Like Hong Kong, a home to Asian refugees and Western expats, Cantopop is a composite of foreign influences and indigenous characteristics. Thematically, the song lyrics focus on the concerns of the

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common Hong Kongese and sentimental subjects. It is written in standard modern Chinese but sung in Cantonese, and, at times, the music is accompanied by local instruments. After more than a century of colonization and racial denigration, the racially Chinese citizens were conditioned to see Chinese culture as inferior and British (or Western) culture as superior; however, the creation of Cantonese-language music expressed an opposition to this imposed narrative. Former British Hong Kong came to be defined by its waves of immigrants, particularly those fleeing the chaos caused by the Communist Revolution in both Mainland China and Taiwan, and struggled to form an identity caught between the strong poles of Britain and China but different from either. Nevertheless, Hong Kong artists borrowed freely from Western artists. The British colony was considered a "borrowed place in borrowed time," – especially as discussions progressed on the future of the colony's inevitable return to China [19]. Cantopop emerged as a genre for expression of forms of dissent, first against British rule and later against the narrative of economic progress and success that ignored the suffering of the working class in the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, the people of Hong Kong had fully developed a unique Hong Kongese identity amalgamated from the variety of cultural influences that had impacted the colony since the 1930s. That identity was reflected in original Hong Kong-based Cantopop music.

7. Limitations and Discussions

This paper has demonstrated a correspondence between major popular uprisings and political events, as well as shifts in the major poles of influence on Cantopop. But what are the concrete means by which these political changes have come to take a cultural form? Specifically, how does a mass of students protesting in the streets translate into a change in popular taste from Shanghai Pop to Western Rock to Taiwanese and Japanese pop varieties? This study has linked these political and cultural shifts to the formation of a national identity through both public sentiment and the patterns of (often forced) immigration and emigration. Both the political transformations and the cultural forms of expression are moments in a single process of national identity construction. Yet the question remains: does popular music produced by major artists and record labels adequately represent the broader cultural experience and identity of the masses that consume it?

This research primarily focuses on the transformations in Cantopop and major foreign influences on the creation of the genre through prominent artists and cultural events. It does not look at sources concerned with the everyday practice of music-making by amateurs, and it ignores underground musical trends that did not find a popular audience, as well as the long history of indigenous music before the 20th century. Such difficulties present themselves in any study of the history of popular culture, for the attempt to present a single, coherent narrative of cultural expression always risks ignoring that which does not conform. Nevertheless, this study posits that the transformations of popular culture offer important insight into the creation of a national identity against which even the other must define itself.

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