

Fluid Soundscapes: Media Shifts, Nostalgia, and Identity in Hong Kong Popular Music

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Abstract

This study, from the perspective of fluid soundscapes, explores how media evolution and geopolitical restructuring have reshaped Hong Kong's identity, memory, and sense of spatial belonging. Integrating concepts such as soundscape theory, media materiality, digital value, reflective nostalgia, and musical linking objects, the research examines three stages: the nascent stage of local consciousness and national imagination, the stirrings of cross-regional migration and return, and the algorithmic reconstruction in the digital age. Through analysis of key works, artists, this study reveals how Hong Kong popular music transcends physical and digital forms, local and transnational spaces, and the temporal dimensions of past and present. Hong Kong popular music is a hybrid "transitional zone" within Chinese modernity.

Keywords

Hong Kong popular music, soundscape, nostalgia, cultural identity.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Nostalgia is not simply an individual's attachment to places or times that have been lost. Just as poetry embodies humanity's stimulation, contemplation, sociability, and criticism, popular music expresses the joys and sorrows, as well as drifts and reunions, of modern people. As a mirror image of nostalgia, identity reflects nostalgia while allowing the person standing before the mirror to adjust their self-perception until they reach a state of self-affirmation. Precisely for this reason, when people experience the changing of the times, social upheaval, or personal setbacks, they inevitably engage in self-examination and reflection, and in this way, seek a sense of identity. This study will examine the narratives of nostalgia in Hong Kong popular music to analyze the cultural identity they reflect.

Inheriting the legacy of southbound Shanghai Shidaiqu and blending Western popular trends with local culture, Hong Kong popular music finally formed a distinctive style. From the late twentieth century onward, Hong Kong popular music not only fostered a strong sense of place attachment, for instance, the resilient local ethos of "Under the Lion Rock," but also constructed broader national imaginaries and a Chinese identity through songs such as "My Chinese Heart" and "The Great Wall Will Never Fall." These songs reshaped popular aesthetics in Hong Kong and generated deep and lasting resonance in China's mainland and among Chinese communities worldwide.

Following Hong Kong's return to China, driven by the rise of the mainland economy and the boom in the cultural market, many figures in Hong Kong's entertainment industry moved north. While this is undoubtedly a process of cultural integration, it has also gradually eroded the distinctive characteristics of Hong Kong's popular music. Since the 2010s, digital platforms displaced physical music formats in Hong Kong. This structural shift in music industry remapped the ways listeners connected with music emotionally. Today, what was once Hong

Kong's signature cultural export can resemble "a historical specimen wrapped in nostalgic emotion" (Bai, 2023).

These shifts do not signify the complete end of Hong Kong popular music. Through digital networks and channels for derivative works, Hong Kong popular music has spread widely, imbuing it with a quality of "reflective nostalgia" and allowing it to continue functioning as a fluid soundscape. It still serves as a mediator in matters of identity and provides emotional comfort to Chinese-speaking audiences around the world.

This study tracks how the changing soundscapes of Hong Kong popular music have shaped local identity through successive geopolitical shifts. Crucially, as the physical formats of earlier decades give way to algorithmic streaming, how do these altered materialities reshape the cross-border circulation of Hong Kong popular music? Ultimately, the study explores how dispersed Sinophone listeners draw upon "reflective nostalgia" to negotiate their cultural positioning within alien soundscapes.

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1. Historiography of Hong Kong Popular Music

On the history of Hong Kong popular music, scholars working across different regions and disciplines have produced a substantial body of research. Focusing on Hong Kong Shidaiqu before 1970, Wong (2000) divides its history into three phases: the Heritage Period (1949–1954), the Golden Period (1955–1960), and the Decline of Shidaiqu (1961–1970). Taking a broader view, Wong (2003) organizes Cantonese and Mandarin popular songs into four eras: the "Ye Lai Xiang" Era (1949–1959), the "Bu Liao Qing" and "Green Island Serenade" Era (1960–1973), the "Ngo Hai Ngo" (I Am Who I Am) Era (1974–1983), and the "Waves Washing the Shores" Era (1984–1997). These studies trace the historical trajectory of the development of Hong Kong popular music from 1949 to the milestone of Hong Kong's handover. They also illustrate the intertwining of popular music with the changing times.

Subsequent research focusing on specific periods has further enriched the literature. On the early heritage period, Shen (2018a, 2018b) describes the phase as "Shanghai echoes," showing how post-war Hong Kong musical films carried forward the stylistic traditions of Shanghai Shidaiqu. Xiang (2019) has likewise offered historical musicological analyses of the Mandarin popular songs from this time. When discussing the geopolitical transformation surrounding the handover of sovereignty, Bai (2023) anchors his research in the moment of Hong Kong's return to China in 1997. His research traces the shifting contexts from "Hong Kong narratives" to "Hong Kong style" over the past three decades.

1.2.2. Research on Media Materiality of Popular Music

The production, circulation, and reception of popular music have long been closely tied to changes in media technology. Research on musical materiality has moved from earlier studies of physical formats—broadcasting, vinyl, cinema, cassettes, and CDs—and their tactile and sensory qualities, toward questions of platformization and algorithmic culture in the digital era. Celia Lurie et al. (2024) explored digital valuation and classification algorithms and elucidated how digital platforms endow cultural objects with new meanings and values. This implies that the ways music influences people have undergone a significant change, and music consumption is shifting from active discovery to algorithmic recommendations.

1.2.3. Research on Nostalgia and Identities

Popular music also works as an important soundscape through which geopolitical imaginations and local memories take shape. With regard to the links between Hong Kong popular music and cultural identity, researched have primarily focused on the rise of local consciousness and the formation of "Hong Kong identity" from the 1970s to the 1990s. As to nostalgia in Hong Kong popular music, two ideas prove especially helpful. Svetlana Boym's notion of "reflective

nostalgia" (2001) and Salman Akhtar's concept of the "linking object" (1999) provide us with useful entry points. Together, they help explain how immigrant groups achieve a certain degree of identity reconciliation amid temporal and spatial dislocations. Nostalgia in Hong Kong is generally characterized by a passive longing for a bygone golden age, whereas "reflective nostalgia" demonstrates how nostalgia, as an active emotional practice, helps contemporary diaspora communities to continuously reproduce their identities.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

This study develops a three-part theoretical framework that brings together acoustic space, media technology, and cultural identity. It helps to clarify how Hong Kong popular music shapes identity and remakes itself amid changes in media and geopolitical situations.

First, this study draws on R. Murray Schafer's theory of soundscape (1977). Here, sounds are viewed not merely as physical waves, but as media that shape cultural spaces. As a fluid soundscape, Hong Kong's popular music carries the unique memories of the city's geography, while also helping to reshape listeners' perceptions of Hong Kong as a unique place.

Second, in order to examine shifts in media materiality, the study turns to media theory. The move from physical formats such as broadcasting, vinyl, cinema, and cassettes to digital streaming platforms and recommendation algorithms has changed both the ways auditory culture is experienced and the mechanisms of cultural distribution as well as value creation within transnational circulation.

Third, the analysis brings together Svetlana Boym's theory of nostalgia and Salman Akhtar's (1999) work on diaspora psychology and object relations theory. Under large-scale geopolitical changes and everyday diasporic experience, Hong Kong popular music often serves as a psychological linking object. Through forms of reflective nostalgia, diasporic and cross-border communities do not simply seek to recover some lost origin that can never return. Rather, they reflect critically on history and the present across ruptures in time and space, continually renegotiating their identities.

2. Rise and Foundations (1970s–Early 1980s): The Emergence of Local Consciousness and the Imagination of the "Motherland"

2.1. Grassroots Soundscapes, Urban Everyday, and the Shaping of Local Ethos

Understanding the emergence of local "Hong Konger" subjectivity calls for a longer historical-geographical view. Reflecting on Hong Kong's transformation from a sparsely populated island of a few thousand people in the 1840s into a global metropolis, Chan (2008) notes that pre-colonial Hong Kong was never an uncultivated frontier; rather, it "entered the colonial period bearing Chinese culture" (p. 6). Early indigenous spaces such as Tin Hau temples and traditional schools functioned as the first sites for building social networks and cultural identity. These writings aim to set the record straight regarding Hong Kong and acknowledge its Chinese cultural roots. This cultural foundation provided a crucial sociocultural basis for the rise of Cantopop in the 1970s and the development of a sense of identity as "Hong Kongers."

After becoming a colony, the soil of Chinese culture gave rise to a rich and diverse culture. As Chan (2008) observed, "In addition to traditional Chinese culture (particularly the Cantonese cultural tradition), the main components of Hong Kong culture have gradually come to include Western culture, especially British colonial culture. Of course, cultures from other regions, such as those of Nanyang (Southeast Asia), have also gradually emerged to a lesser extent." (p. 11).

This polyphonic cultural structure can be clearly felt in the 1970s Cantopop. The grassroots soundscapes championed by Sam Hui and the "Koo-Wong tandem" (Joseph Koo and James Wong) combined Cantonese tonal inflections, classical Chinese pentatonic scales, Western pop instrumentation, and even melody borrowed from Nanyang and Japanese popular songs. This

hybrid yet localized music just serves as a reflection of the emotional fluctuations of Hong Kong's citizens amid the city's social transformation. Having embraced and assimilated foreign cultures, Hong Kong has gradually established its own sense of identity. As Chu said, "the localization of Hong Kong popular music—the rise of Cantopop being sung in the mother tongue of most Hong Kong people—can also be seen as a creative hybridization of different music cultures; thus it was a localization with global characteristics" (Chu, 2020, p. 23).

Veteran musicians Jimmy Lo and James Wong have both highly praised Sam Hui's contributions to the history of Hong Kong popular music. Unlike early Cantonese opera performers, Sam Hui—a graduate of the University of Hong Kong—sang songs in Cantonese, which truly helped boost confidence in the Cantonese language. As Chik (2014) contends, Sam Hui's trajectory closely mirrored the shifting "language experiences" of Hong Kong citizens during that era. This shift was less an aesthetic turn than a profound cultural-political practice. By infusing Cantopop with a witty, playful, and street-smart persona, popular music symbolically refined the hybridized language and grassroots survival experiences that had previously drifted outside official dominant discourses. During the 1970s, the success of Cantonese movies like *Games Gamblers Play* (1974) and *The Private Eyes* (1976) helped their theme songs lead a new trend in popular music. Anchored in the voices of ordinary citizens, Cantonpop blurred the boundary between high and popular culture.

2.2. The Aural Construction of the "Imagined China"

2.2.1. Reconstructing National Identity: From Elite Scholars' "Cultural Homeland" to the Mass Circulation of Wuxia Soundscapes

The construction of Hong Kong's local cultural identity has never meant cutting ties with Chinese cultural roots. Instead, it has consistently been accompanied by a strong imagination of a "cultural homeland." In the mid-twentieth century, a number of prominent scholars, among them Ch'ien Mu, Lao Sze-Kwang, Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan, came to Hong Kong and settled in the city for extended periods. As Chan (2008) observed, these intellectuals sought "either to revitalize Sinology or to combine Confucianism with Continental philosophy, imagining that they could turn back the tragic tide" (pp. 16–17). The "cultural loyalist" (*yimin*) mindset and spiritual practices of these elite scholars, who worked to preserve the embers of Chinese culture on the colonial periphery, supplied an important classical foundation for Hong Kong's mass culture.

Hong Kong's popular literature is also striving to shed its status as a "cultural orphan." From 1955 through 1972, for example, Jin Yong created an imaginary world of chivalry through his wuxia novels, a world that, to some extent, bridged the gap between blood ties and social identity. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, an increasing number of wuxia works began to be adapted into television series, and watching these shows became a common pastime for Hong Kong residents in their spare time. The theme songs and insert songs from these wuxia dramas also became widely popular and remain so to this day.

2.2.2. Sounding the Motherland: From Geographical Imagery to Shared Totems across the Diaspora

If the wuxia soundscape offered Hong Kong society a metaphorical "chivalric realm" (*jianghu*) and an imagined "cultural homeland", then the theme song for the TV series, "The Great Wall Will Never Fall", is filled with sincere devotion to the motherland. They channeled ethnic identity into a more embodied historical reflection and a broader nation-state narrative. The early 1980s, when China and the United Kingdom were negotiating the future of Hong Kong, Hong Kong popular music began to frequently draw on symbols rich in imagery from Chinese civilization—such as the Great Wall, the Yellow River, and the Yangtze River.

Written by lyricist Lo Kwok-tsim and composer Lai Siu-tin, “The Great Wall Will Never Fall” is one of the “totemic” works in Hong Kong popular music that helps shape national identity. From an emotional perspective, Lo Kwok-tsim infused the songwriting process with a profound sense of historical pathos. The lyrics’ call to action— “Raise your voices! Shout out loud! Here, every citizen is a soldier!”—carries forward the sense of crisis inherent in “songs of national salvation,” reflecting the spirit of resistance and solidarity among the diaspora.

From the perspective of musical phenomenology, this song’s codes are meticulously constructed. Against a magnificent brass-driven musical backdrop, the lines “The Great Wall will never fall, and the waves of the Yellow River will never cease” poetically present these two Chinese geographical symbols and transform them into a shared “linking object” for the global Chinese community.

3. Golden Age and Shifts (Mid-1980s–1990s): Hybridity, Anxiety and Nostalgic Soundscapes

From the mid-1980s through the 1990s, Hong Kong popular music gradually reached its peak in terms of both commercial strength and artistic influence, and its styles became increasingly diverse. At that time, Hong Kong was at the center of global Chinese-language pop culture, and its music industry functioned much like a “hub.” Its well-developed commercial system drew in talent, capital, and musical creativity from all over the world, and reintroduced them to the global stage in innovative forms.

The term “Hong Konger” is an ever-changing concept that is difficult to define. Hong Kong’s growth has been accompanied by a massive influx of immigrants; many initially viewed Hong Kong merely as a temporary stopover—a “halfway house”—but as the city’s economy took off, this transient mindset gradually gave way to a deep attachment to Hong Kong. Yet, as geopolitical conditions have shifted, some Hong Kongers have set off for distant lands. Thus, a sense of nostalgia has always been present in Hong Kong—both upon arrival and upon departure.

3.1. Cultural Influence and the Global Market

In the realm of popular music, Hong Kong has fully leveraged its developed industry and status as a free port. Talent and technical resources from China’s mainland, Taiwan, and even further afield have been drawn to join its cultural and creative industries. Taiwanese singers Teresa Teng and Dave Wang, as well as mainland singer Faye Wong, have all achieved remarkable success in Hong Kong. Hong Kong record labels would release both Mandarin and Cantonese versions of the same song simultaneously or cover Japanese and Western songs, keeping Hong Kong popular music vibrant and enabling it to spread easily throughout the entire Chinese-speaking world.

This capacity for assimilation and transformation has solidified Hong Kong’s position as a global hub for Mandarin-language popular music. As Chu (2017) notes, “Throughout the 1980s and up until the mid-1990s, Cantopop was the leader in the pan-Chinese popular music industry, having developed into a multibillion-dollar pop industry.” (p. 9). For almost two decades, Hong Kong pop “has significant influence in the region and also a large market in every community overseas.” (Chu, 2017, p. 9).

3.2. Pearl of the Orient: National Identity During the 1997 Handover

If the 1970s classic “Under the Lion Rock” affirmed a sense of local belonging, marked the rise of a sense of identity among the local community and the younger generation, then “Pearl of the Orient,” performed by Lo Ta-yu in the 1990s, signaled that Hong Kong popular music was moving toward a broader and stronger sense of national identity.

Zheng et al. conducted a study on the identity of ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong. The study revealed that attitudes toward the 1997 handover varied significantly by age and educational attainment. Respondents under the age of 30 and those with higher levels of education were more likely to identify as “Hong Kongers.” Among respondents aged 54 and older with lower levels of education, the proportions identifying as “Chinese” and “Hong Kongers” were roughly equal. This phenomenon indicates a fundamental difference in worldview between the immigrant generation and the younger, native-born generation (pp. 71–80).

“Pearl of the Orient” has two versions: one in Mandarin and one in Cantonese. The lyrics for the Cantonese version were written by Cheng Kwok Kong (1986), while those for the Mandarin version were penned by Lo Ta-yu (1991). The Cantonese version highlights Hong Kong’s diligent and resilient urban character, while also conveying a sense of history shaped by trials and tribulations, as well as the pride in having created miracles. The Mandarin version expands this sense of historical vicissitudes to span five thousand years, embedding Hong Kong—the Pearl of the Orient—within the lineage of five thousand years of Chinese civilization. Overall, the Cantonese version offers an internal perspective, while the Mandarin version presents an external one; the former is more realistic, while the latter is more poetic. For example, the term “descendants of the dragon,” which expresses a sense of identity in the Cantonese version, is symbolized as “yellow faces” in the Mandarin version. In the context of Hong Kong’s return to China, this shift reflects a broader sense of identity.

3.3. Hiding in the City: Urban Love Songs, Classical Philosophy, and Lyrical Aesthetics in the Handover Era

From “Under the Lion Rock” to “Pearl of the Orient,” the ever-changing landscape of Hong Kong’s popular music in the late 20th century reflected the grand shifts of history. The public’s expectations, anxieties, or resignation at pivotal moments in history shape the period following those turning points—this is the defining character of a generation. Unlike the high-energy dance-pop style of the early 1990s, after the year 2000, listeners and songwriters became more immersed in nuanced urban emotions and reflections on life.

During the Cantonese opera era, lyricists sought to recreate the love stories of mandarin ducks and butterflies through meticulously crafted and ornate lyrics; with the advent of the Cantonese popular music era, lyricists blended the traditions of classical Chinese literature with the everyday realities of modern urban life, infusing pop culture with a touch of philosophical reflection.

In an interview, Albert Leung elaborated on his creative goals: he wanted “to build popular culture from pop lyrics, while simultaneously reflecting the most classical philosophies” (Leung & Wong 2010, p. 112). For him, lyrics as a literary form crossed the usual boundaries between arts. “Literature knows no boundaries; it encompasses all phenomena. A great painting possesses both artistic realm and literary dimensions... whereas exceptional literature uses words to shape scenery and aesthetic realm (*jing*)” (Leung & Wong, 2010, p. 113).

This way of joining classical thought with popular song was not simply a mass-culture accident. It grew out of the longer effort by Hong Kong’s universities to keep Chinese cultural traditions alive after the mid-twentieth century. New Confucian scholars such as Ch’ien Mu and Tang Junyi had come south and founded New Asia College (later part of the Chinese University of Hong Kong). At the same time the Department of Chinese at the University of Hong Kong continued serious work in classical literature, history and philosophy. Together these institutions maintained a living line of Chinese learning on the colonial edge of the city.

4. Media Transformation and Algorithmic Reconfiguration (2000–Present): From Physical to Digital

4.1. The Deconstruction of the Physical Record Industry and the Retreat of Materiality

In the late twentieth century, the cultural reach and commercial success of Hong Kong popular music. The success rested basically on the old record industry, and cassettes, vinyl and CDs were the media to communicate with audience. Since the start of the twenty-first century, media conditions have changed rapidly and the results have been far-reaching.

With the fading of physical carriers in the music industry, digital technology and the streaming platforms with their algorithmic recommendation systems have changed the routine Cantopop is produced, broadcasted, purchased, heard, and valued. The system controlled by major record companies has become a more scattered field shaped by algorithms and segmented audience groups across different screens. Once music is no longer transmitted in physical forms, platform recommendation systems become the main gatekeepers of what will be seen and heard. Celia Lury and her colleagues (2024) note that these systems work through the shifting classification logic of “People Like You” (PLY) and “Things Like This” (TLT) to deliver personalized suggestions.

4.2. Re-presentation of “Hong Kong Style” under Platformization

Drawing on Chakrabarti’s concept of the “living dead” and Williams’s views on the persistence of rural culture, Natalie (2004) argues that attachment to traditional forms is not merely a form of melancholy. She views this attachment as a form of “infinite resilience”—a way for marginalized groups to preserve their identity in the face of modernization pressures. Although physical media for Cantonese popular music gradually shrank after 2000, many listeners continued to collect vinyl records and cassette tapes. This resilience refuses to be completely swallowed up by algorithmic logic, instead cherishing historical texture and material memory. In the age of digital platforms, when songs no longer require any physical medium, the “Hong Kong style” (*Gangfeng*)—associated with Cantonese popular music of the 1980s and 1990s and its classic visual aesthetic—has not disappeared. On the contrary, in playlists on YouTube and Bilibili, “Hong Kong-style retro” has made a strong comeback among young listeners worldwide. This phenomenon is more than just a simple wave of nostalgia. It reveals that in the digital age, nostalgia is becoming a force that counters algorithmic manipulation.

Hong Kong popular music, which once embodied local social changes and the memories of diaspora communities, has been reduced by algorithms to a set of efficient tags. On Bilibili, it is referred to as “Hong Kong Retro” or “PolyGram Hits”; on YouTube, it might be tagged as “80s Cantonese.” These systems primarily track the immediate feedback these tags receive from young users: click-through rates, user retention time, and the frequency with which songs are remixed or shared. In this way, the platforms strip away much of the original context of the “Hong Kong style.” Complex emotional histories and specific historical trajectories are categorized into standardized templates, transforming into a flexible pop style that allows younger generations to consume and re-create it across national borders.

Recommendation algorithms rearrange listening into what Lury et al. (2024) call a “continuous present” by stacking and adjusting units of time. Under this arrangement, 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong pop is no longer kept at a clear historical distance. It becomes material that can be called up, reshuffled and dropped into the emotional present at any moment (Lury et al., 2024). This way of handling time gives the music a new kind of life. It turns into a neo-nostalgic reference for younger listeners who never lived through Hong Kong’s golden age yet can still form quick sensory links inside the emotional spaces the algorithms create. Because the

experience stays locked in an ever-refreshed present, however, it is hard for listeners to convert that feeling of connection into any lasting historical depth (Lury et al., 2024). For the platforms the same “continuous present,” kept active by the algorithms, turns older catalogues into data assets that can keep generating returns. Cultural memory itself is converted into a digital asset (Lury et al., 2024).

5. Diaspora, Reflective Nostalgia, and Contemporary Identity Negotiation

5.1. The “Auditory Linking Object” in Diasporic Contexts

The disappearance of physical media is not limited to the record industry. Hong Kong Coliseum was once a venue where countless concerts made history; it anchored the public’s emotional attachment to “place” and their sense of Hong Kong identity to a specific location on the city map (Chow & de Kloet, 2010). Today, as large numbers of Hong Kong stars have moved north, Hong Kong Coliseum—as the physical space that witnessed and embodied that era—can no longer recreate the grandeur of those days. The influence of Hong Kong popular music is largely confined to its golden age. As times have changed and people have moved on, the songs that once echoed through those concert venues have become portable “auditory links.” By evoking the auditory memories of those landmark spaces, expatriates engage in a form of reflective nostalgia and rediscover a sense of cultural identity in unfamiliar surroundings.

Van der Hoeven (2018) defines nostalgia for popular music as “a longing for the past that is evoked through popular music’s production and consumption or representations of its history and heritage” (p. 238). He argues that, during times of social upheaval, this sentiment helps people maintain a continuous sense of self and belonging between past and present (p. 239). Drawing on Shiau’s (2009) research on Teresa Teng, he illustrates how old songs serve as “emotional anchors” for overseas Chinese audiences, helping them navigate issues of identity in their lives of displacement and maintain their attachment to their distant homeland.

This kind of sonic expression sits close to what Svetlana Boym (2001) calls “reflective nostalgia.” It does not try to restore an absolute truth—“Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth...”—but “thrives in algia, the longing itself...” (p. xviii). Through a quietly moving auditory narrative the song mediates the pain of displacement. In later years, as Hong Kong popular music travelled across borders, they became more than songs that crossed geographical lines, they turned into an important emotional reference point for Sinophone listeners worldwide as they negotiated questions of cultural identity and shared historical memory.

These movements—from fixed physical containers to portable linking objects, and from social upheaval to the activation of nostalgia—appear clearly in the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra’s concert project *Our Cantopop*. The concerts bring together local audiences and Sinophone listeners from elsewhere inside one shared acoustic space, effectively recreating an “auditory container” in institutional form. The program deliberately links different periods: classic 1970s–1980s songs by Joseph Koo, James Wong and Sam Hui (for example “Love of the Past” and “The Diary in My Heart”) sit beside later urban pieces such as Eric Kwok and Wyman Wong’s “Wedding Invitation Street,” a track closely bound up with Hong Kong’s changing city spaces and local nostalgia, and newer works like Terence Lam’s “A Dance for Tomorrow.” New orchestral arrangements by Ng Cheuk-yin and Alfred Wong take the songs out of their original studio and broadcast settings and place them in live, resonating performance inside a concert hall.

5.2. The Nostalgic Paradox

When examining East Asian popular culture, Cantopop and K-pop should not be viewed as isolated phenomena but rather as interconnected, transnational forces within an increasingly globalized media landscape (Fung & Chik, 2020). However, with the global rise of the “Korean

Wave" (*Hallyu*), the once-dominant position of Hong Kong popular music has undergone a dramatic spatial shift and a somewhat ironic structural reversal. As Fung and Chik (2020) astutely observe, Hong Kong popular culture finds itself in a paradoxical situation where it is reconstructed within contemporary South Korean TV dramas as a nostalgic historical backdrop—forcing Hong Kong audiences to look back at their own cultural “golden age” through the mediated lens of contemporary South Korean media (p. 7).

This reversal of cultural flow is not an isolated phenomenon. The rise and fall of Cantopop are closely linked to Hong Kong’s multiculturalism and “hybridity.” As Chu and Leung note: “As the market has shrunk, Cantopop has lost its sense of diversity as well as its hybridity, which has in turn caused more listeners to turn to other popular genres. In short, the loss of hybridity is the major reason for the decline of the Hong Kong music industry” (p. 76). Theoretically, popular music possesses both “fixity” and “fluidity.” Connell and Gibson (2003) summarized the relationship between these two concepts, which appear to be opposites but are in fact complementary. In terms of fixity, Hong Kong popular music is rooted in Cantonese culture and upholds cultural authenticity, which explains the uniqueness of Cantopop. At the same time, fluidity is reflected in Hong Kong’s acceptance of immigrants and its blending and reinvention of various cultures, which explains why Hong Kong popular music has spread so widely across East and Southeast Asia.

6. Conclusion: Fluid Soundscapes and Unfinished Urban Memories

This study re-examines the dynamic interplay among acoustic space, media technology, and emotional identification throughout the decades-long evolution of Hong Kong popular music. Shifts in media technology have continuously reshaped the auditory landscape of memory surrounding Hong Kong popular music. Yet, listeners are by no means passive recipients. Although platform algorithms fragment historical memory, listeners actively employ “reflective nostalgia” to reconstruct Hong Kong popular music as a fluid auditory linking object—thereby continuously negotiating contemporary cultural identity and a sense of historical belonging amidst unfamiliar soundscapes.

Fundamentally, the enduring vitality of Hong Kong popular music stems from its deep cultural roots. It not only reflects the city’s unique spirit but also shapes a distinct local identity amidst the convergence of diverse cultures. Although Hong Kong popular music no longer holds the commercial dominance it once did, it remains a soundscape that is both locally grounded and fluid; it has not faded from collective memory, and its echoes continue to resonate within Chinese communities across the globe.

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