



An Audience Reception Study on Cantonese Songs in Mainland China

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Abstract. This study examines the reception of Cantonese songs within Mainland China amid the escalating interaction and integration between Hong Kong and the Mainland. Leveraging a methodological framework that synthesizes both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this investigation seeks to elucidate the profile of Cantonese song listeners in Mainland China. The research commences with the postulation of three hypotheses, which are then rigorously tested through a combination of surveys and in-depth interviews. The findings indicate a marked decline in the prevalence and impact of Cantonese songs within Mainland China post-millennium, notably when contrasted with their zenith during the 1980s and 1990s. A discernible wane in their popularity is confirmed through this analysis. In an attempt to elucidate this phenomenon, this paper delineates several contributing factors. These include the intensification of language barriers, the ascendancy of musical productions from Taiwan and Mainland China post-2000, coupled with the waning economic influence and diminishment of the music industry in Hong Kong. Drawing upon these insights, the article concludes with recommendations and projections for the potential trajectories of Cantonese music's development.

Keywords: Cantonese songs; Hong Kong; Mainland China; Popularity; Audience reception.

1 Introduction

In the preceding decades, Cantonese music has emerged as a distinctive cultural manifestation, garnering widespread affection in Hong Kong, occupying a salient position in the Chinese Mainland, and extending its influence across the greater Chinese diaspora (Amar, 2017) [1]. As the predominant musical genre in Hong Kong, it is deeply embedded in the region's sociocultural fabric (Ibid). The intensifying integration between Hong Kong and the Mainland has facilitated Cantonese music's bearing on the cultural trajectory of the Mainland. Characterized by melodious compositions, evocative lyrics, rich emotional resonance, pronounced rhythms, and distinctive vocal techniques, proficient articulation and singing proficiency are requisite for capturing the essence of Cantonese songs (Lau, 2010) [2]. Post-1970s, the flourishing of this genre—marked notably by the contributions of artists such as Samuel Hui—has had a significant impact on the Chinese music landscape (Chik, 2020) [3].

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Nonetheless, this influence has witnessed fluctuation amidst changes in the market environment, cultural preferences, and the globalizing music industry, particularly in the late 1990s. This period saw the waning prominence of the four heavenly kings—Jacky Cheung, Andy Lau, Aaron Kwok, and Leon Lai—the ascendancy of Taiwanese music, and the incursion of foreign musical influences, which collectively contributed to the diminishing impact of Cantonese music in the Mainland (Soh, 2023) [4]. By 2020, a resurgence has been noted, driven by a cadre of talented young musicians from Hong Kong, bringing renewed attention to the resilience and dynamism of this cultural expression (Ibid). The perpetuation of Cantonese songs in Mainland China has become more prominent due to active promotion by Hong Kong superstars through variety shows and concert tours on the Mainland, signaling a renaissance of sorts for the genre (Zhang, 2024) [5].

The aim of this research is to conduct a comprehensive examination of the shifting reception of Cantonese songs in the Chinese Mainland, delineating its historical evolution, current resurgence, and prospective future trajectories. Employing an amalgamation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this investigation will elucidate the adaptive processes and reflective capacities of Cantonese songs in accordance with the extensive societal transformations and cultural shifts among audiences in the Chinese Mainland. This inquiry not only addresses a lacuna in extant research concerning the historical development and current state of Cantonese music in China but also contributes to a broader understanding of cross-cultural communication and regional music identity.

2 Literature Review

In the wake of the Greater Bay Area initiative and the tightening integration between Hong Kong and Mainland China, there has been a notable increment in the dissemination and sway of Cantonese musical compositions within the Mainland (Amar, 2017) [1]. Prime examples of this trend include television music contests such as “*I Am a Singer*”, which have reintroduced Cantonese songs to the limelight. Despite this resurgence, scholarly engagement with Cantonese songs in Mainland China has languished, with only a nascent framework of research currently in place (Man, 2020) [6]. Existing scholarship predominantly concentrates on two trajectories: an examination of the lyrical uniqueness of Cantonese songs as a form of artistic expression, and a broader historical and contemporary analysis of Cantonese music’s development. Yu and Guo (2023) observed a decline in Hong Kong’s music scene since the turn of the century, attributing it to an overemphasis on commercialization [7]. Zhang (2020) dissected the diminishing favor of Cantonese songs, attributing the trend partially to the burgeoning popularity of Taiwanese music and shifts in musical styles [8]. In a related vein, Ou and Xue (2017) investigated the strategic pivots of Hong Kong’s recording industry and their repercussions for Cantonese music [9]. Sun (2018), in a comprehensive assessment, elucidated the impact of both internal and external variables on the trajectory of Cantonese songs, including obstacles within the Hong Kong music industry and the burgeoning economy of the Mainland [10].

While these contributions are informative, they tend to overlook an empirical analysis of Cantonese songs' reception among Mainland audiences. The findings frequently suffer from a lack of empirical validation, and few studies have holistically encompassed the multifaceted factors influencing the Mainland Chinese audience's reception of Cantonese songs. Hence, this paper seeks to solidify the theoretical foundation of this field by examining the reception of Cantonese music among Mainland audiences via an analysis of data collated from 162 valid questionnaire responses.

Audience reception theory furnishes an invaluable lens for decoding the responses of media and performing arts audiences, and thus offers a fresh analytical perspective for the present study. Scholars such as Lundquist (2024) and Arne et al. (2023) have posited that various elements—ranging from cultural background and personal experiences to emotional states—are instrumental in influencing how an audience receives musical works [11-12]. Jono (2022) further underscores the significance of cultural context and individual predilections in the acceptance process [13]. Grounded in these theoretical frameworks, this investigation endeavors to exhaustively chart Mainland audiences' reception attitudes and preferences toward Cantonese songs and to chart the evolving trends of this genre within Mainland China.

3 Research Hypotheses

To investigate the current reception status of Cantonese songs in Mainland China, this paper proposed three key hypotheses.

H1: The popularity of Cantonese songs is dropping, which was higher between 1980 and 2000 compared to the 2000s onwards.

H2: Elder audiences tend to believe that Cantonese songs are being less popular.

H3: The Cantonese songs' being less popular in Mainland China is due to multiple factors.

4 Research Methodologies

For the research methods, this paper employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods simultaneously. In terms of quantitative research, the research designed a survey questionnaire consisting of 9 questions. In terms of qualitative research, the research interviewed two fellow students (Tom Cheung and Jack Chou) from Fudan University on March 26, 2024.

4.1 Sampling Questionnaire Survey

The present study employs a probabilistic sampling technique, wherein a subset of individuals is selected from a larger population to serve as representative samples for the investigation. Given the constraints of resources and time, it is impractical to conduct an exhaustive survey across the entirety of the Chinese populace. Consequently, the sampling approach is utilized as it permits the extrapolation of findings to the general

population. The design and dissemination of the questionnaire were facilitated by the renowned online survey platform “Wenjuanxing” within Mainland China (Kuo, 2018) [14]. The questionnaire is comprised of nine items, commencing with a query regarding respondent age, followed by questions assessing the contemporary prevalence of Cantonese songs and artists in Mainland China, as well as the Mainland Chinese population's attitudes and perceptions towards the decline in popularity of Cantonese music. The final question evaluates the efficacy of different media platforms in promoting Cantonese music. The survey was initiated at 13:00 p.m. on March 18th and concluded at 10:00 a.m. on March 20th, yielding a total of 162 valid responses for data analysis.

4.2 Interview

The interview is an established qualitative research tool that garners in-depth information through direct dialogue with participants. It is particularly efficacious for topics that, despite their significant import, are not extensively covered in public discourse. The method hinges on the researcher's capacity for observation, attentive listening, and reflection to synthesize comprehensive insights. In this study, two students from Fudan University, Tom Cheung and Jack Chou, were interviewed over a two-hour duration. The verbal interactions not only echoed the content from the previously administered survey but also integrated nonverbal cues such as tone, facial expressions, and gestures to more accurately apprehend the perspectives of the interviewees. These individuals elaborated on their beliefs concerning the diminished popularity of Cantonese songs amongst Mainland China's youth. These interpersonal engagements have contributed qualitative depth to the study, addressing limitations inherent in the questionnaire methodology.

5 Research Findings

5.1 Quantitative Analysis

This survey covers most areas in Mainland China. Out of a total of 162 participants, the province of Guangdong represents the highest demographic with 24 individuals. Meanwhile, individuals between the ages of 30 and 40 comprises the largest demographic segment, representing 50% of the total respondent population. This is closely followed by the age cohort of 20 to 30 years, which constitutes 38.89% of the respondents. A smaller percentage of participants falls within the 40 to 50 age range, accounting for 8.64%, while those aged 50 to 60 represents a mere 1.85% of the sample, indicating a relatively minor presence. The following shows the data and analysis of specific questions and answers in terms of Cantonese songs.

According to Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 below, most respondents are interested in and have some understanding of Cantonese songs, so that this study could conclude that the results of this survey are convincing.

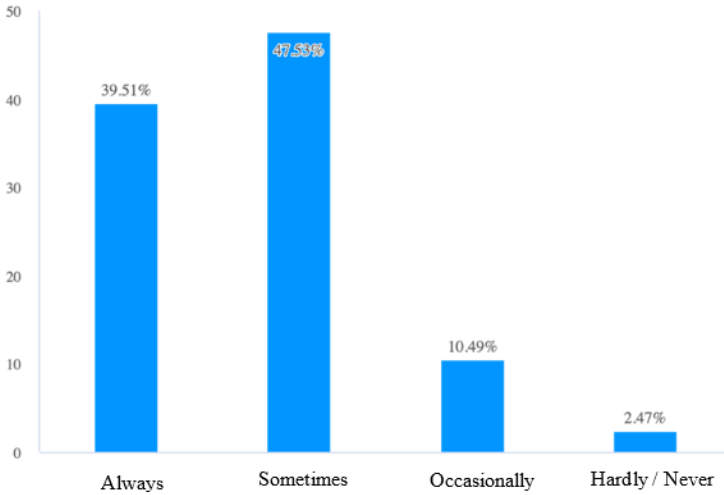


Fig. 1. Frequency of listening to Cantonese songs

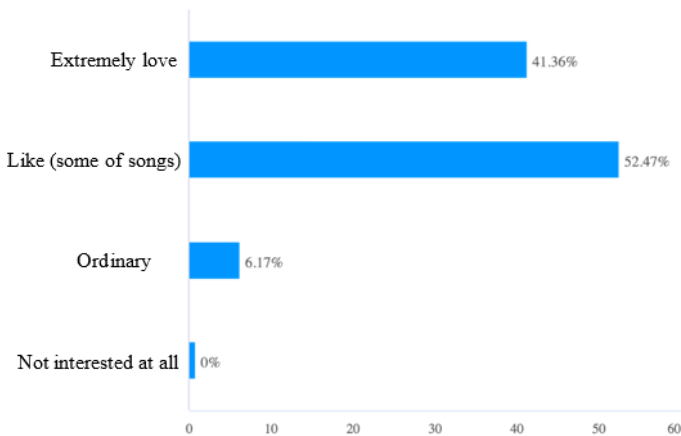


Fig. 2. Opinions on Cantonese songs

Fig. 3 shows that most respondents claimed to be most familiar with Cantonese songs from the 1980s, reaching 38.27%. The group most familiar with Cantonese songs from the 1990s comes second, reaching 35.19%. There are also many people who are most familiar with Cantonese songs from the 2000s, with 19.14%. Those who know Cantonese songs from the 1970s and after 2010 take up a very small proportion and can be almost ignored.

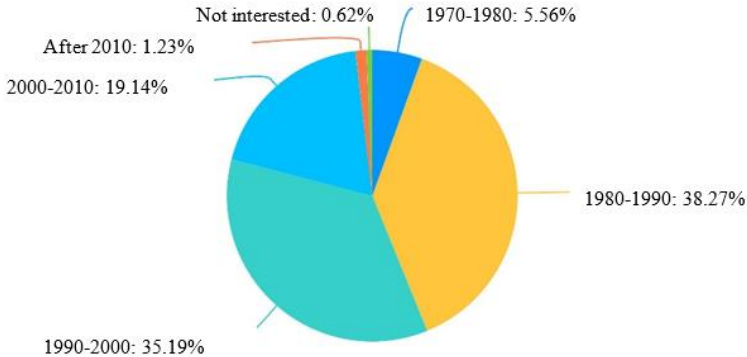


Fig. 3. Familiarity of all respondents with Cantonese songs from different eras

The first hypothesis studies the current reception status of Cantonese songs in different age groups in Mainland China from different eras. According to the data in Table 1, it is found that the surveyed population aged 20 to 40 are most familiar with Cantonese songs both from the 1980s and the 1990s, while the population aged 40 to 50 is most familiar with Cantonese songs from the 1980s only. It is worth pondering that among young people aged 20 to 30, even Cantonese songs from the 1980s have a higher level of acceptance than Cantonese songs from 2000 onwards. This indirectly reflects that the influence of Cantonese songs after 2000 is indeed being less popular, and their influence in Mainland China is not as strong as between 1980 and 2000. Therefore, the first hypothesis is supported.

Table 1. Reception of Cantonese songs among specific age groups

Number / %	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Not Interested	Total
Age 10-20	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (100%)	0 (0.00%)	1
Age 20-30	1 (1.59%)	20 (31.75%)	23 (36.51%)	18 (28.57%)	1 (1.59%)	0 (0.00%)	63
Age 30-40	5 (6.17%)	31 (38.27%)	33 (40.74%)	12 (4.81%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	81
Age 40-50	2 (14.29%)	10 (71.43%)	1 (7.14%)	1 (7.14%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	14
Age 50-60	1 (33.33%)	1 (33.33%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (33.33%)	3

The second hypothesis studies the different opinions of different age groups on whether Cantonese songs have been less popular. The following Table 2 lists the results collected.

Table 2. Views on if the Cantonese songs being less popular by age group

Number/ Percent	Yes (Less popular)	No (Still popular)	Total
Age10-20	0 (0.00%)	1 (100%)	1
Age20-30	35 (55.56%)	28 (44.44%)	63
Age30-40	40 (49.38%)	41 (50.62%)	81
Age40-50	12 (85.71%)	2 (14.29%)	14
Age50-60	1 (33.33%)	2 (66.67%)	3
Others	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0

Due to the small number of people aged 10 to 20 and 50 to 60, this paper focuses on the survey subjects aged 20 to 50. According to the data in Table 2, the study finds that more than half of the respondents aged 20 to 30 and 40 to 50 believed that Cantonese songs were being less popular, while respondents aged 30 to 40 did not show significant bias, and the number of people holding different views was almost equal. Therefore, the viewpoint of whether Cantonese songs have been less popular is not directly related to age groups, but more related to one’s own experience and cognition. Hence, Hypothesis 2 does not hold.

The third hypothesis studies the reasons why the Cantonese songs are getting less popular.

Table 3. The proportion of different reasons why Cantonese Songs are being less popular

Language barrier	Impact of Taiwanese and Mainland music	Impact of foreign music	The decline of Hong Kong’s economy and industry	Decline in Cantonese usage atmosphere
48.86%	51.14%	40.91%	44.32%	31.82%
Declined quality of Cantonese songs	Lack of music talent in Hong Kong	Decline of Hong Kong film and television	he passing of Hong Kong superstars	Others
22.73%	43.18%	44.32%	23.86%	1.14%

Based on the findings presented in Table 3, a majority of the respondents concur that the escalation of music popularity from Taiwan and Mainland China in the 2000s has presented a formidable challenge to the Cantonese song market. The rising preeminence of music industries in these regions, marked by the production of widely acclaimed “Golden” songs, has contributed to the diminution of market share for Cantonese music (Koh, 2022) [15]. The implication here is that Cantonese music is encountering formidable obstacles not only externally but within its own local domain, thereby compounding the challenges it faces in the Mainland market (Ibid).

In addition to the competitive dynamics between Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese music, the incursion of musical influences from Western countries, Japan, and South Korea, the general economic downturn in Hong Kong, the waning dominance of Hong Kong's entertainment industry, and the decline in the reception of Hong Kong's film and television productions in Mainland China have all served as contributing factors (Yu & Guo, 2023) [7]. It merits emphasis, however, that while the Cantonese music market confronts several exogenous challenges, the data does not substantiate the hypothesis that the decline is attributable to internal issues such as monothematic content or inconsistent melodies. The general public's perception that the quality of Cantonese music has not deteriorated significantly is indicative of the genre's persistent intrinsic appeal despite its reduced popularity. Consequently, the hypothesis that extrinsic factors are the decisive force in shaping the reception of Cantonese music in Mainland China, thus corroborating Hypothesis 3 holds.

At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their attitudes towards the future development of Cantonese songs. According to the statistical results in Figure 4, despite facing challenges, the respondents reflect an optimistic outlook regarding the future of Cantonese music, attributing to it an irreplaceable allure drawn from its artistic and emotive qualities, which will perpetually resonate with audiences.

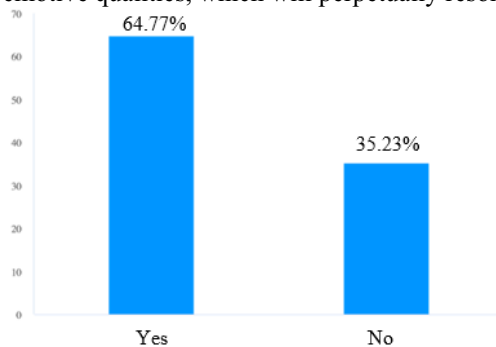


Fig. 4. Respondents' attitudes towards whether Cantonese songs could return to former glory

5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Upon investigating the waning popularity of Cantonese songs in Mainland China, two salient factors have been identified through qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews with two fellow students from distinct cultural backgrounds. The primary factor is the linguistic heterogeneity within regions such as Guangdong Province. The anecdotal evidence presented by Tom Cheung, a native of the Chaoshan area, accentuates the linguistic fragmentation even within a single province: he predominantly utilizes the Chaoshan dialect rather than Cantonese. This microcosm of linguistic diversity exemplifies the dialectical barriers that can impede the penetration of Cantonese music within Guangdong itself. Consequently, the variation of dialects within such provinces must be factored into the analysis of declining Cantonese music popularity in Mainland China.

Furthermore, changes in the channels of cultural output in the past have also played a crucial role. Historically, during the 1980s and 1990s, the cultural industry in Mainland China was nascent, and Hong Kong's burgeoning popular culture served as a conduit for new artistic expression (Chu, 2020) [16]. As the music industry in both Taiwan and Mainland China matured in the 21st century, the relative influence of Hong Kong's cultural exports on the Mainland has diminished (Ibid). This has resulted in a normalization of audiences' preferences towards Mandarin-language productions, thereby posing considerable dissemination challenges for Cantonese musics.

The second finding concerns the shift in the vector of cultural propagation. Jack Chou's narrative reveals a personal transition from familial exposure to Cantonese music during childhood to self-directed discovery and accumulation of such content post-2000. This shift suggests that the passive, naturalized transmission through familial and social milieus has attenuated over time, supplanted by active individualistic pursuit. Concurrently, this indicates a lag in the ubiquity of Cantonese songs in Mainland China post-2000, with a resurgence in recognition of exemplary Cantonese works only observable circa 2010.

6 Conclusion

Through a comprehensive analysis of quantitative and qualitative data derived from questionnaire surveys and interviews, this study offers an incisive exploration of the role of Cantonese songs within the contemporary popular music landscape. The empirical findings of this research suggest that the waning popularity of Cantonese songs over the preceding decades does not show a substantial correlation with the audience's age demographic. The decline in the prevalence of Cantonese music, our analysis reveals, is attributable to a confluence of extrinsic factors. These encompass the emergence of linguistic obstacles, the ascendancy of popular music from Taiwan and Mainland China, and an inadequate discourse surrounding Cantonese musical compositions. From the vantage point of audience reception theory, it is evident that these determinants collectively impinge upon the acceptance and acknowledgment of Cantonese songs among the Mainland populace. Moreover, the investigation delineates that despite potential adversities within the Chinese Mainland context, Cantonese songs persist in exuding an intrinsic cultural allure and a distinctive appeal. Additionally, the Mainland Chinese audience manifests a predominantly optimistic outlook on the future trajectory of Cantonese songs, thereby furnishing a propitious environment for the cultural perpetuation and heritage of this genre.

Consequently, this research posits that a concerted effort to delve into and foster innovation within the realm of Cantonese musical compositions is paramount to align with the evolving market exigencies and aesthetic predilections. The incorporation of an expansive array of thematic elements, musical genres, and advanced production methodologies is imperative for Cantonese songs to preserve their indigenous authenticity while concurrently broadening their appeal to an expansive demographic. Although this inquiry contributes novel perspectives pertaining to the contemporaneous paradigm and prospective trajectories of Cantonese melodic art, it is not without its

encumbrances, notably the constraints inherent in sample selection and analytical viewpoints. It is incumbent upon future scholarship to extend the ambit of empirical data collation and analytical frameworks to yield a holistic appraisal and buttress the enduring advancement of Cantonese musical artistry.

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