Cantopop

From a tune down the street of old Hong Kong, to a voice in Greater China, and eventually to an ‘i-tune’ trapped in the internet

Dr Kai Tai CHAN

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Abstract

‘Cantopop’ was first coined in the 70s of the last century, referring to Hong Kong pop songs sung in Cantonese. Its emergence coincided with the Westernisation, political stabilisation and economic growth of Hong Kong, when Hong Kong people returned to their mother tongue (i.e. the Cantonese dialect) to express themselves in music, instead of Mandarin and English. With the commercial success in the 80s and 90s, Cantopop had even brought the Cantonese dialect and the popular culture of Hong Kong to mainland China, Taiwan and all Chinese people worldwide. In the 1990s, in view of the growth of Cantopop and its reflection of the life and people of Hong Kong, academic research on Cantopop emerged, shedding light on various aspects such as its music and lyrics, its social context and business models. The popularity of Cantopop reached its peak in the 1990s, as reflected in the Hong Kong music industry annual revenue soaring to 1.85 billion HK dollars. However, due to the subsequent rise of Mandopop, the aggravating situation of piracy and illegal downloads and drastic changes in dissemination methods and consumer behaviour, the business’s revenue dropped to 0.7 billion HK dollars in 2005. In this talk, we will look at the vicissitudes of Cantopop and changing Hong Kong society in the past few decades. Through watching music videos of representative Cantopop songs, we will examine its creative aspects, on-going transformations and underlying ideological and identity issues.

Speaker

Dr Kai Tai Chan is a specialist psychiatrist in Hong Kong. After graduating from the CUHK medical school, Dr Chan attained his professional qualifications in psychiatry in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom. In addition to his clinical practice in the public sector in Hong Kong, he has been involved in various kinds of teaching, research and administrative work.

Dr Chan started professional song-writing, firstly as a Cantopop lyricist, back in the early 1990s in his medical-student days, which gave birth to his dual identity in medicine and popular culture. He has been a member of the Composers and Authors Society of Hong Kong since 1990 and has published Cantopop songs of different themes. He has also been involved in different kinds of music and cultural productions, with a special emphasis on Hong Kong society. In recent years, he has also been invited to write Mandopop songs in Greater China, with a focus on the relationship between human beings and the world. In the past decade, with his multi-disciplinary expertise, Dr Chan has been creating and advocating cross-over projects and campaigns between psychiatry, music and culture in community and media in Hong Kong, with a view of promoting public mental health education and improving the well-being of mental health patients. To achieve these goals, apart from having edited a book, he writes articles for the media, and has written and produced various promotion songs and educational videos. He is also the advisor for an innovative community project for the rehabilitation of mental health patients through artistic, green and cultural activities.

In addition to his longstanding medical, cultural and community work, Dr Chan’s recent academic interest is on ‘the human mind and society in the age of digitalisation’, which is a cross-disciplinary study from anthropological and psychiatric perspectives. He is currently an academic visitor in the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Cambridge.