

How Hong Kong Shaped the Rise of Cantonese Popular Culture: A Historical and Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores how Hong Kong has contributed to the rise and global dissemination of Cantonese popular culture, focusing specifically on Cantonese cinema and Cantopop. As a city shaped by both Chinese heritage and British colonial influence, Hong Kong has provided a unique environment where Cantonese culture could flourish. The study first examines the historical and socio-political conditions that allowed Cantonese-language films to emerge and develop in Hong Kong, positioning the city as the cultural hub of Chinese-language cinema during the 20th century. It then discusses the evolution of Cantopop, tracing its growth from a localized musical form to a globally recognized genre. Drawing from both historical examples and scholarly research, the paper argues that Hong Kong played a critical role in institutionalizing, commercializing, and internationalizing Cantonese popular culture. It concludes by emphasizing the continued relevance of Hong Kong in promoting cultural identity through Cantonese language arts and suggests directions for future innovation and preservation.

Keywords

Hong Kong, Cantonese popular culture, Cantonese cinema, Cantopop, cultural identity, globalization.

1. Introduction

Cantonese popular culture is a modern culture with Cantonese as the main language. Cantonese popular culture has many aspects, including Cantonese movies, Cantopop and so on. Cantonese popular culture is loved by the public and has a high evaluation. The rise of Cantonese popular culture is inseparable from Hong Kong. In modern times, with the continuous development of Hong Kong, Cantonese spread in Hong Kong, rose and gradually became the main language of Hong Kong. Nowadays, Cantonese is not only one of the daily languages in Guangdong Province, but also the dominant language in Hong Kong. It is the necessary language for communication and communication in the daily life of the vast majority of Hong Kong people. With the increasing importance of Cantonese in Hong Kong, Cantonese popular culture with Cantonese as the core is also rising in Hong Kong. With the help of Hong Kong, Cantonese popular culture is rising rapidly and spreading rapidly. Nowadays, Cantonese is not only introduced into mainland China and loved by the people but also spread all over the world. Even overseas, Cantonese popular culture has great influence. Hong Kong has made important contributions to the rise of Cantonese popular culture. Therefore, taking Cantonese movies and Cantopop as examples, the essay discusses how Hong Kong contributes to the rise of Cantonese popular culture and makes conclusions and recommendations.

2. How Hong Kong Became a Cantonese Cultural Hub

Hong Kong provides a suitable environment for the development of Cantonese popular culture, especially Cantonese movies. Cantonese movie is a kind of movie with subtitles or language

with Cantonese characteristics. It has been fully developed in Hong Kong in the 20th century. Hong Kong has a superior geographical environment. It is relatively close to Guangdong Province, so it has been influenced by Cantonese and Cantonese culture since ancient times. After 1842, more and more foreign businessmen came to Hong Kong for economic development. At that time, Guangdong Province was already a trade port between China and foreign countries. Therefore, trade and Commerce in Guangdong Province were very developed and there were many local businessmen. After Hong Kong became a trade port with foreign countries, a large number of Guangdong businessmen went to Hong Kong to do business. With these Guangdong businessmen settled in Hong Kong and engaged in business activities, Cantonese has developed rapidly in Hong Kong. It also enabled Cantonese to enter the daily life of Hong Kong people. As Cantonese has laid a good foundation in Hong Kong, Cantonese popular culture, such as Cantonese movies, has also begun to develop. In 1909, Shanghai Asia Film Co., Ltd. made a film called "Stealing A Roast Duck". It is the first Cantonese movie produced by Hong Kong people since Hong Kong became a trading port. "Stealing A Roast Duck" plays a very important role in Cantonese movies in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Film Awards take this film as the origin of Hong Kong films. Although the film was a success, it was not produced by a Hong Kong company. In 1913, Benjamin Brodsky and Lai Man-wai produced a film called "Chuang Tzu Tests His Wife". This film is the first feature film produced in Hong Kong. It means that Cantonese films in Hong Kong have begun to develop. Due to technical reasons and the background of the times, Hong Kong films at that time had no sound, so Hong Kong's Cantonese culture can only be expressed through subtitles. More importantly, in 1933, a film called "The White-golden Dragon" was released. Although it was not produced by a Hong Kong company, it was the first Cantonese audio film. The film soon became popular with the people of Hong Kong at that time. It makes a large number of businessmen, investors and technicians from Shanghai and Southeast Asia feel that Hong Kong people attach importance to Cantonese films. After that, with the outbreak of war in mainland China, the film industry in Shanghai, Guangzhou and other regions suffered a devastating blow. So many filmmakers went south to Hong Kong to make a living. Gold (2009) agreed that most of the leaders of Hong Kong's entertainment industry came from Shanghai and they made Hong Kong the centre of producing Chinese popular culture at that time. Under the joint influence of these factors, Cantonese films in Hong Kong have gradually prospered. After the 1970s, Cantonese became the main language of Hong Kong people, which gradually led to the rise of Cantonese culture in Hong Kong. Therefore, Hong Kong has become the main production area of Cantonese films. According to Chu (2020), in the 1980s and 1990s, Cantonese movies and Cantopop in Hong Kong had a synergistic effect, which made Hong Kong a leader in Chinese popular culture at that time. During this period, many excellent films appeared in Hong Kong, such as "King of Comedy", "Police Story" and so on. The emergence of these Cantonese films has made Cantonese popular culture in Hong Kong more popular. Hong Kong has made outstanding contributions to the development of Cantonese movies. These Cantonese movies integrate the unique artistic style of Hong Kong and depict the folklife of Hong Kong. Hong Kong has not only made Cantonese popular culture popular but also spread it overseas. Some Cantonese movies, such as "Chuang Tzu Tests His Wife" and "Police Story", are shown in some Southeast Asian countries and even the United States. These Cantonese movies not only help spread Cantonese popular culture but also enable more and more people, including foreigners, to better understand and be interested in Hong Kong. Fong (2010) also agreed that Cantonese movies have shaped the identity of Hong Kong people and promoted the formation of Hong Kong's local consciousness and culture. Therefore, Hong Kong's special environment and status play a necessary role in the rise of Cantonese movies and it is of great significance to Hong Kong.

3. The Rise and Popularization of Cantopop

Hong Kong's contribution to the rise of the Cantopop can not be ignored. Cantopop is a modern popular music created in Cantonese, because of its unique art form, it rose in Hong Kong and was loved by the public after the 1980s. McIntyre et al. (2002) considered that Cantopop uses the written form Cantonese, which is more formal than the spoken form Cantonese used in daily life. Cantopop was not the mainstream of Hong Kong music before the 1970s. From the beginning of the 20th century to the 1970s, Hong Kong singers at that time mainly sang Chinese music or English songs, such as the early Wynners. Due to the economy waiting for prosperity, British colonial assimilation and policy and the influence of the Chinese government, at that time, Cantonese music developed slowly. It only appeared in streets and alleys. After 1949, many artists from mainland China went to Hong Kong. Under their influence, Hong Kong's popular culture rose rapidly. In addition, during this period, most of the immigrants who came to Hong Kong were Cantonese or people with Cantonese as their mother tongue. They brought Cantonese and Cantonese culture to Hong Kong. The emergence of this phenomenon has affected these artists and even their next generation. It also led to the emergence of more and more Cantonese speaking Hong Kong artists in the 1970s. For example, early music producers such as Samuel Hui and Roman Tam, many of whose families emigrated from Guangdong to Hong Kong. These artists absorbed Cantonese culture and referred to western popular music at that time to create Cantopop. Besides, Chu and Leung (2013) agreed that the reason for the rise of Cantopop in the 1970s is the huge growth in the number of local audiences in Hong Kong, which makes Cantopop have higher profits and more markets. These reasons made Cantopop in the 1980s and 1990s have great development. According to Stella Sai-Chun Lau (2021), in 1983, 18 concerts were held in the Hong Kong Stadium, but in 1989, the figure increased to 129, which can explain the popularity of Cantopop. After entering the 21st century, a new generation of Hong Kong music producers, such as G.E.M. and Twins innovated Cantopop and made it not only popular with people in mainland China, but also highly praised Cantopop overseas. McIntyre et al. (2002) also agreed that Cantopop can develop successfully without the protection of the government, which shows the strength and vitality of Cantonese culture in Hong Kong. Cantopop is of great significance to Hong Kong. (421 words)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, whether from the perspective of Cantonese movies or Cantopop, Hong Kong has made a special contribution to the rise of Cantonese popular culture. Hong Kong's status and social situation are different. It was influenced by almost 150 years of British colonial culture and the influx of businessmen and refugees from mainland China. It made Hong Kong develop into an advanced city based on Cantonese culture. It is the special environment of Hong Kong that provides opportunities for the development of Cantonese popular culture. Hong Kong has not only made Cantonese movies and Cantopop rise as Cantonese popular culture but also promoted it to the world. Cantonese popular culture also plays a key role in Hong Kong. It shows the unique art and culture of Hong Kong and makes Hong Kong attract more and more attention at home and abroad. In the 21st century, for Hong Kong culture to play its due role, Hong Kong should continue to contribute to Cantonese popular culture and encourage and help it achieve innovative development.

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