

The Cultural Characteristics and Evolution of Chinese Pop Music from the Perspective of Musicology

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Abstract

This article is based on the perspective of musicology research, taking the century-long development of Chinese popular music as the main research thread. Combining the analysis of classic works, authoritative industry data, and cultural context of specific eras, it systematically sorts out the core cultural characteristics and internal evolution laws forged in different historical stages. Research has found that the development of Chinese popular music has always presented three core evolutionary trends: the integration and innovation of traditional music elements and foreign music techniques, the coordinated development of media technology iteration and creative paradigms, and the dynamic balance between commercial value pursuit and artistic expression adherence. Its development process has gone through the exploration of the blending of Chinese and Western elements in early Shanghai era music, the two-way integration and development of popular music from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, and the diverse differentiation and innovation in the digital age. Each iteration and transformation of artistic forms is deeply related to social and cultural changes. This article uses authoritative industry data released by the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association and classic creative cases recognized by academia as empirical support to clarify the interaction mechanism between melody structure, arrangement techniques, singing styles, and external cultural environment at the level of music ontology. The aim is to provide empirical theoretical references for explaining the cultural attributes of Chinese popular music and exploring its high-quality development path.

Keywords

Chinese pop music; Musicological perspective; Cultural characteristics; Media evolution; Localization.

1. Introduction

Chinese popular music originated in Shanghai in the 1920s. As a product of the integration of Chinese and Western cultures, its development has always been deeply embedded in the process of China's social and cultural changes, becoming an important music carrier that reflects the spiritual outlook and aesthetic orientation of different eras [1]. From the perspective of musicology research, the exploration of Chinese popular music is not simply a study of popular culture, but rather a composite cultural form that integrates traditional music genes, Western popular techniques, regional cultural characteristics, and media technology innovation based on the dimensions of melody structure, mode application, and arrangement techniques. Scholar Wang Siqi proposed in "Contemporary Urban Pop Music in China: A Study on the Interaction between Music and Sociocultural Environment" that the development essence of Chinese pop music is a process of collision, integration, and reconstruction of diverse cultural elements. The evolution of its cultural characteristics has always been deeply aligned with the social context and aesthetic needs of specific historical stages. Entering the digital age, emerging media such as short-videos and streaming have broken the traditional creative and

dissemination pattern of the record industry, not only reconstructing the creation, dissemination, and reception ecology of popular music, but also promoting its formation of a new cultural appearance in artistic expression, aesthetic orientation, and other aspects. Based on this, this article takes the development of time as the thread and systematically analyzes the cultural characteristics and evolution trajectory of Chinese popular music from five core dimensions. In the research process, authoritative data from the "2024 China Digital Music Industry Report" of the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association and classic creative cases recognized by academia are used as empirical support, focusing on the inherent interactive relationship between music ontology and cultural phenomena, striving for the authenticity and rigor of research conclusions, and providing solid empirical references for the study of Chinese popular music and academic exploration in related fields from the perspective of musicology.

2. The Inheritance and Reconstruction of Traditional Music Elements

The creative transformation and innovative development of traditional music elements are the core cultural traits that have been passed down through the century-long development of Chinese popular music, and also an important foundation for building its unique national music identity. In the 1930s, Li Jinhui's "Maomao Yu" was the first to explore the integration of Jiangnan folk tunes and Western jazz rhythms, becoming the early beginning of the localization and integration of Chinese popular music. Its melody is based on the traditional pentatonic scale, and Western accompaniment forms such as brass instruments are introduced in the arrangement, breaking the aesthetic barriers between traditional music and Western music at that time. It is a landmark practice of integrating traditional elements into early Chinese popular music. This creative idea continues to develop and innovate in the contemporary era, which has spawned a significant China-Chic music creation boom, and the modern expression of traditional music elements has also become an important direction of industry creation [2]. According to Kuaishou's 2025 Kuaishou Music Ecology Data Report, the platform's self-made adaptation of "Midu Shange" (PHONK) takes the Yunnan classic folk song "Midu Shange" as the melodic base, integrates the electronic music PHONK style bass rhythm, and has been on the platform's music hot list for 123 times, with total in-station exposure exceeding 2 billion times. It has also driven the online secondary dissemination of local folk songs, and successfully achieved the rejuvenation and trend-oriented dissemination of traditional folk songs. From the ontological perspective of musicology, such works are not simply a collage of traditional music materials and modern music techniques. Instead, they use professional techniques such as mode reconstruction, rhythm reshaping, and arrangement optimization to adapt traditional elements to the aesthetic preferences and digital communication scenes of contemporary audiences. They not only retain the unique national music charm of the pentatonic scale, but also fit the auditory characteristics of the digital age, fully demonstrating the contemporary vitality of traditional music genes. This fusion practice is not a one-way superposition of techniques, but a two-way cultural dialogue between tradition and modernity. Traditional music provides a profound cultural core for popular music, while modern popular techniques build an effective carrier for the contemporary dissemination of traditional music. The organic combination of the two promotes the formation of unique artistic features of Chinese popular music that combine national traits and temporal characteristics [3].

3. Media Iteration-Driven Form Innovation

The iterative upgrading of media technology is the core external force driving the continuous evolution of Chinese popular music art forms. Its creative style, dissemination path, and aesthetic presentation form all exhibit distinct media dependence, forming a deep symbiotic

development relationship between the two [4]. In the 1980s, with the gradual opening up of the cultural market after the reform and opening up, cassette media achieved universal popularity with its portable, low-cost, and easy-to-replicate characteristics, providing a key carrier support for the revival of popular music in mainland China. Singer Zhang Qiang's personal cassette sales exceeded 20 million boxes between 1983 and 1988, which was officially included in the "Report on the Development of China's Music Industry". Her straightforward and lively singing style was highly compatible with the dissemination characteristics of cassette tapes, becoming an important cultural symbol for the awakening of popular culture and the release of consumer demand during this period. In the 1990s, CD media and multi-track recording technology emerged simultaneously, and the improvement of track carrying capacity promoted the transformation of popular music arrangement towards refinement and complexity. Luo Dayou's "Zhi Hu Zhe Ye" pioneered the use of multi-track recording technology, integrating the tension of rock instruments with the narrative of folk melodies to construct a richly layered music fabric, becoming a classic example of technology-empowered creation at that time. Entering the digital age, streaming media and short-videos have replaced traditional physical media as the core carriers of popular music dissemination [5]. According to authoritative data released by the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association, the total scale of China's digital music industry reached 102.746 billion yuan in 2024, of which the market size related to music short-videos reached 53.85 billion yuan, accounting for over 50%; According to the data of Kuaishou platform in 2025, the number of short-video releases with background music rose by 18% year-on-year, and the total number of short-videos with BGM produced by creators above 10,000 fans exceeded 4.6 billion. The fragmented dissemination characteristics of short-videos and the personalized recommendation mechanism of streaming media jointly force the creative end to transform towards "short melodies, high memory points, and strong auditory appeal". The melody design is more concise and condensed, and the chorus part pays more attention to auditory impact, forming a completely different creative paradigm from the traditional record era. Media technology not only reconstructs the dissemination ecology of popular music, but also fundamentally reshapes its musical form and creative thinking logic.

4. Diversified Expressions of Regional Cultural Integration

The diversity and differences of regional cultures have created a development pattern of diverse coexistence in Chinese popular music, and its century-long evolution has always shown distinct characteristics of "cultural center migration and two-way integration of regional styles". In the 1950s to 1970s, influenced by changes in the social and cultural environment, the development center of Chinese popular music gradually shifted from Shanghai to Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the two regions forged their own distinctive creative styles based on their own cultural contexts. Hong Kong, with its regional characteristics of blending Chinese and Western cultures, continues the lyrical core of Shanghai era songs and has sparked a trend of adapting "lyrics in Western songs" [6]. Singer Zhang Lu's performance of "Give Me a Kiss" is adapted from the English song "Seven Lonely Days", with lyrics that not only conform to the rhythm of Cantonese language and local aesthetic preferences, but also incorporate Chinese emotional expression, becoming a classic representative work of early popular music in Hong Kong; Taiwan, on the other hand, is deeply influenced by Japanese music creation techniques. Singer Yao Surong's "crying tune" singing technique originated from the traditional Japanese "crying tone" art and was adapted to Chinese lyrical expression after localization, forming a highly recognizable regional singing style that deeply influenced the early development of Taiwanese popular music [7]. After the 1980s, Guangdong became the birthplace of popular music in mainland China, thanks to its geographical advantage of being adjacent to Hong Kong and Macao and its hub attribute of cultural integration. Its development has gone through three

stages: brewing, rising, and transformation and regeneration. Its output works mostly focus on themes of family, nostalgia, and changes in the times, highlighting the open and inclusive characteristics of marine culture. At present, with the development of Internet technology and the popularization of cross-regional communication, the cultural barrier of physical space is gradually broken, and the regional cultural boundary continues to fade. According to the Kuaishou 2025 cultural consumption report, Chongqing, Beijing and Linyi have become the three cities with the highest consumption of music content in China. The northern and southern regional cultures are mutually penetrated, integrated and innovative in communication. Sichuan-Chongqing dialect rap, northern folk song adaptation, Lingnan Cantonese phonology creation and other works continue to become popular, upgrading the cultural characteristics originally belonging to local regions to popular creative materials and cultural expression symbols, further enriching the cultural dimension of Chinese pop music, expanding its artistic expression space and audience aesthetic boundaries.

5. The Dialectics between Business Logic and Artistic Pursuit

The dynamic Dialectics between commercial attributes and artistic pursuits is the core intrinsic driving force for the development of Chinese popular music, which runs through the entire process. The balance between the two directly determines the overall development quality and artistic style of the industry. In the 1990s, popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan flooded the mainland market on a large scale, and Chinese singers represented by the "Four Heavenly Kings" set off a trend. Their works balanced artistic expression and market demand, achieving a win-win situation between artistic quality and commercial value [8]. Liu Dehua's performance of "Wang Qing Shui" is a classic work of Chinese pop music that combines artistic and commercial value, with a soothing and lyrical melody that meets the emotional needs of the public, captures emotional resonance points, and incorporates string accompaniment into the arrangement to enhance the artistic level. According to statistics from China Record Corporation, the physical album sales of this work have exceeded ten million copies. At the beginning of the 21st century, the rampant digital piracy dealt a devastating blow to the physical record industry, causing a cliff-like decline in sales and forcing the industry to accelerate its transformation. In 2015, the country issued the "strictest copyright order" to crack down on piracy, regulate the order of the digital music market, and promote the gradual popularization of paid listening models [9]. According to data from the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association, Tencent Music Entertainment Group's paid user base reached 121 million in 2024, with a payment penetration rate of 20.6%. The industry's copyright order has been standardized, and the profit model has tended to be healthy. However, while the deep involvement of commercial capital has promoted the diversification of creative themes, it has also given rise to the problem of homogenization in the creative industry. According to statistics from third-party music data analysis institutions, nearly 30% of the 570 songs that went viral on short-video platforms in 2024 have high melodic similarity, and some creators neglect original creation in pursuit of fast traffic. At the same time, the group of independent musicians has always adhered to their artistic pursuits, delving deeply into niche creative fields, exploring more expression possibilities through personalized expression and artistic experimentation, filling the aesthetic gap in the mainstream market, and forming a binary pattern of "mainstream commercial music+niche independent music" parallel development. This continuous dialectical relationship allows popular music to meet the entertainment needs of the masses and adapt to market development laws, while always retaining the exploration space for artistic innovation, forming its unique industry cultural ecology.

6. Cultural Identity Construction in the Context of Globalization

With the continuous advancement of globalization, Chinese popular music has undergone decades of exploration and development, completing a phased transformation from "introduction" to "going global". Through the deep interaction and collision between Chinese and Western cultures, it has gradually constructed a unique cultural identity with national characteristics [10]. In the 1980s, Teresa Teng's songs broke through ideological barriers with their gentle and melodious singing style. Her representative work "The Moon Represents My Heart" was translated into multiple languages such as English, Japanese, and Korean, and widely spread in overseas Chinese communities and the global music market. It became a cultural bond that connected the emotions of Chinese people worldwide and a symbolic cultural symbol of Chinese pop music going global. In the late 1990s, musicians such as David Tao and Jay Chou embarked on creative innovation, deeply integrating Western R&B, hip-hop, and other music genres with the Chinese cultural context. Jay Chou's 2001 "Nunchucks" incorporated elements of Chinese martial arts culture in the form of rap, pioneering the creation of Chinese "Chinese style" music and reconstructing the artistic expression system of Chinese pop music, breaking the monopoly of Western pop music in the Chinese music industry. At present, the pace of globalization of Chinese popular music continues to accelerate. In 2025, Tencent Music Chart reached a strategic cooperation with globally renowned music data agency Luminate, officially incorporating Chinese music data into the Billboard global chart statistics system, becoming an important milestone in the internationalization of Chinese music and achieving international recognition and synchronized dissemination of Chinese music data. However, the process of globalization has also brought about the practical challenge of cultural homogenization. The disorderly proliferation of AI cover works such as "AI Stefanie Sun" not only touches on multiple legal issues such as music copyright and portrait rights, but also triggers extensive and deep controversies in the industry regarding copyright protection and the authenticity of music creation culture in the digital age [11]. In this context, localized expression has become the core path to building national cultural identity. Creators have deeply explored and strengthened traditional music elements and regional cultural characteristics, adhered to the roots of national culture in the global pop music trend, and forged a distinctive feature of "global expression carrier and localized cultural core", giving Chinese pop music a unique national identity in global cultural dialogue.

7. Conclusion

From the perspective of musicology, it can be seen that the hundred-year development and evolution history of Chinese popular music is essentially an interactive history of continuous collision, integration, and coexistence between tradition and modernity, local and global, commercial and artistic. The formation and iterative upgrading of its cultural characteristics have always been deeply related to specific historical contexts, media technology innovations, and social and cultural ecology. From the exploration of the blending of Chinese and Western elements in early Shanghai era music to the diverse development of the digital age, Chinese popular music has always adhered to local cultural genes such as pentatonic scales and traditional singing styles, while actively absorbing advanced Western music techniques and modern media dissemination forms, gradually forming a unique cultural character that combines national traits and temporal characteristics. According to authoritative data released by the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association, the number of online music users in China reached 729 million in 2024, with a total digital music repertoire of over 263 million songs. The huge market size and user base provide solid market support for industry creation and innovation. However, at the same time, the industry is also facing practical problems such as insufficient originality, serious homogenization of some works, and blurred boundaries of

digital copyright, which seriously restrict the high-quality and sustainable development of the industry. In the future, Chinese popular music needs to balance commercial value and artistic pursuit accurately on the basis of adhering to the core of localized culture, and rely on media technology innovation to achieve improved quality, efficiency, and diversified dissemination of cultural output. From the perspective of musicology research, only by continuously cultivating the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional music elements, strengthening the artistic expression and original exploration of music itself, and abandoning the impetuous commercial speculation mentality, can we construct a unique Chinese pop music cultural identity in the global cultural landscape, achieve a leap from "temporary popularity" to "classic inheritance", and truly become an important music carrier to demonstrate China's cultural soft power.

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