

Cantonese Pop Music

When Wong Jum-sum grew up, Cantonese pop music was just one among many of the sounds heard on radio. This came as a surprise, given that close to 80% of Hong Kong's population primarily spoke Cantonese at that time.

Cantonese pop had a deep root in traditional Cantonese music. That root cut both ways. On the plus side, the latter gave the former a vast reservoir of conventions and techniques to build on. On the minus side, the old form of art had difficulties catching up with the tone and tempo of the modern era.

Many felt there was a need to modernize traditional Cantonese music. The work started in the 1920s. Western instrumentation and arrangement slowly seeped into the genre. The popularity of dance halls in the 1940s gave impetus to new forms of Cantonese music, variously called 'light music' or 'spirit music', which stressed the dance beat and relied on the drums for lead.

The burgeoning radio and record industry in the 1950s gave such trend a further push. Special programs were created on radio, partly in reaction to demands from Southeast Asian markets, to spread the new kind of music. Gradually the music acquired a new identity. The record industry began to use the title 'Cantonese popular music' for some of their new productions. Creators and performers like Chow Chung and Lui Hung were key figures in this. The growth of the local youth population added their weight for a new brand of local music. Wong Jum-sum witnessed such a shift at close quarters, when he played music by the side of rising film star Patricia Lam Fung in 1959.

Despite all this, Cantonese pop music did not get off the ground in a dramatic way until much later in Hong Kong's development. The Cantonese pop music industry in the 1950s was at an embryonic stage, with a number of small-scaled companies pioneering the act. Mandarin pop, with superior stars and production, dominated the airwaves and the records market. Very soon, Western pop became irresistible.

In 1960, Wong participated in the first Sing Tao Amateur Singing Contest. There was no provision for entries in Cantonese singing. That same year, when he came to write his first group of lyrics in his life, Wong actually wrote in Mandarin, not Cantonese. This tortuous history of language and pop music cries out for careful re-examination.