

Revival on the Other Side of the Country: Cantopop in Mainland China

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Abstract: *Cantopop, Hong Kong pop music in Cantonese, has impacted Mainland China since its gradual introduction, both legally and illegally, after China's "Reform and Opening-Up" in 1978. It provided Mainland Chinese with fashionable music, lifestyle ideas, and a way of understanding Hongkongers, the people on the "other side" of the Shenzhen river boundary. In the late 1990s, Cantopop's popularity declined in Hong Kong, while it survived on the Mainland in various bootleg forms sold by street vendors and witnessed a recent revival on Chinese TV and the Internet. This paper reviews how Cantopop traversed language and culture barriers to reach Mainland China and considers its future.*

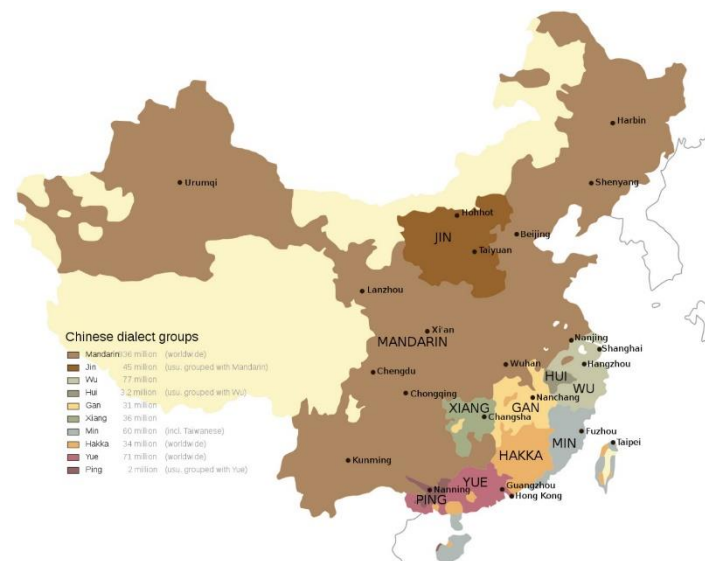
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1. Introduction

Hong Kong popular music, or Cantopop, began in Hong Kong in the 1970s. It is sung in Cantonese, a language mainly spoken in parts of southeastern China—including Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, Hong Kong, and Macau—alongside Mandarin, the national language of the country (see Figure 1). Cantopop music vividly reflects people's daily lives of different times, and as a significant musical and cultural phenomenon in Hong Kong, it has had a significant societal impact ^[1]. Mainland China's cultural gates were opened with the "Reform and Opening-Up" policy of 1978. Cantopop entered China through tapes and posters and gradually gained tremendous popularity there, especially among young people, bringing them a taste of modern musical life and global pop culture. Though tapes and CDs with legal copyrights came at a high cost, it was not challenging to find illegally reproduced Cantopop tapes and CDs, and photographs and posters of the singers at street vendors' stalls in many parts of Mainland China (Figure 2). Audiences enjoyed the high-quality music and were excited to learn about the singers, their songs, and their lives, and it became fashionable among Mainlanders not only to listen to Cantopop and collect Cantopop albums. Few cared about the ownership rights of the music producers, big Hong Kong record companies such as Rock Records & Tapes, Warner Music Hong Kong, and Electric and Musical Industries (EMI). The negligence of copyright led to the low cost of Cantopop recordings, which partially explains Cantopop's rapid spread into many corners of the country in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the mid-1990s, due to Hong Kong's economic downturn and the localisation campaign's failure to create a new space in which Cantopop could increase its diversity, Cantopop suffered from a significant decline in Hong Kong, and Mandarin popular songs, or Mandopop, were predicted to take the lead in the new millennium in Hong Kong ^[2]. Norris points out that music stands in the broader context of worldly, cultural, and socio-political concerns, reflecting these political, cultural, and social contexts ^[3]. As Cantonese is the official language in Hong Kong and Macau but not in Mainland China, and Cantonese has six tones, two more than Mandarin's four, it is not easy for many native Mandarin speakers to overcome the language barrier. It is reasonable to wonder whether Cantopop in Mainland China would follow the same trend as in its birthplace. However, this doubt can be reconciled by observing the increasing nationwide popularity of Cantopop songs in recent years. For example, Cantopop has been frequently featured in many prominent professional singing Mainland Chinese TV shows in China, such as *I Am a Singer* and *Singing with Legends*. Moreover, a higher frequency of Cantopop performances is also found on various TV shows on China Central Television and local satellite TV channels of different areas, including Guangdong, Guangxi, Beijing, Shanghai, Hunan, Sichuan, and Liaoning. This

phenomenon can be indicative as it seems to contradict China's lasting dedication to the popularization of Putonghua (Mandarin) in the country^[4], which promotes TV shows and programs in the country to be mainly in Mandarin. In other words, the more frequent Cantopop performances not only show local audiences' preference for Cantopop but also hint at the central government's mandate to allow Cantopop to be broadcasted, which is particularly important in China. Different from popular American TV competitions, such as *The Voice* and *American's Got Talent* which attracted a variety of participants from different parts of the country or the world, *I Am a Singer* has been open merely to well-known professional singers worldwide. Participants have included many reputed Chinese singers as well as famous foreign singers, such as Jessie J from the United Kingdom ([Link](#)), Dimash Kudaibergen from Kazakhstan ([Link](#)), Akon from the United States ([Link](#)), Hayley Westenra from New Zealand ([Link](#)), Shila Amzah from Malaysia ([Link](#)), KZ Tandingan from the Philippines ([Link](#)), The One from Korea ([Link](#)), and Gary Chow ([Link](#)). The professional singers perform their representative songs live in front of 500 audiences during the fierce competition. Their choices of Cantopop reveal Cantopop's popularity and competitiveness among various music genres. Similar to *I Am a Singer*, *Singing with Legends* has invited professional singers to perform.



The Cantonese-speaking region corresponds with the Yue dialect, identified in the southeastern area of the country.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_Atlas_of_China#/media/File:Map_of_sinitic_languages_full-en.svg

Figure 1: Language map of China.

It is not surprising that large and cosmopolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai accept Cantopop^[5]. Nevertheless, one may be surprised by Cantopop's enduringly strong popularity because, first, Cantopop has received wide acceptance throughout China (e.g., in the Cantonese-speaking regions and the large number of non-Cantonese-speaking provinces mentioned above) and, second, the trend is contrary to that in Hong Kong. This study examines how Cantopop's current influence in Mainland China has emerged and pays attention to the representative songs and singers and the underlying reasons behind this trend.

2. Cantopop Songs Provide Hope

Popular music is a field where various social forces are active in the production of cultural goods^[6]. From the social perspective, on the one hand, Cantopop is a contemporary manifestation of the enduring Chinese urban folk song tradition^[7], effortlessly resonating with Mainland Chinese audiences, who share the same Chinese culture and have very similar mentalities. On the other hand, having originated from Hong Kong and its capitalist market economy, Cantopop can stimulate the development of popular songs in the socialist market economy environment of Mainland China^[7]. For instance, Cantopop was well-advertised by the recording companies and conveyed messages that were easy for audiences to digest. Specifically, the idols pictured on the cassette tape covers presented in Figure 2 (a) appear fresh and attractive to Chinese Mainlanders, and Alan Tam's pose on the CD in Figure 2 (b) hints that he is running toward an audience for a Hug, the name of this album. Cantopop's characteristics endeared it to many Mainland listeners and offset the language barriers.



Figure 2: (a) Cantopop music cassette tapes easily found in different cities in Mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s; (b) Alan Tam's album Hug, released in 1988-

From the socioeconomic perspective, Hong Kong's economy has greatly benefited from an increase in manufacturing jobs since the 1960s, which arose from the deindustrialization trends of advanced western economies such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Mainland China experienced the same trend much later than Hong Kong. In 1990, Hong Kong had a gross domestic product of US \$77 billion, about one-fifth of Mainland China's US \$361 billion; Hong Kong's GDP per capita was US \$13,486, about 42 times that of China, as shown in Figure 3. Additionally, Mainland China's population was about 1.18 billion, more than 200 times Hong Kong's 5.6 million. The sizeable economic disparity between Mainland China and Hong Kong, manifested by the differences in GDP per capita, could easily have led young Mainlanders to consider products from Hong Kong as "better," including its cultural products such as Cantopop and educational opportunities [8].

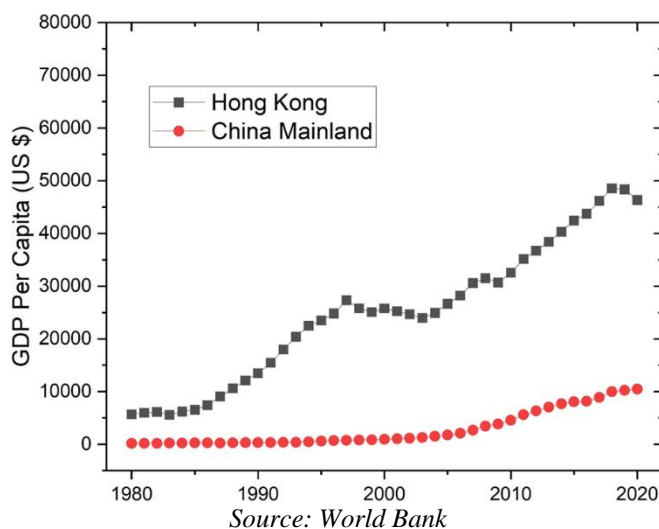


Figure 3: Gross Domestic Production (GDP) per capita of Hong Kong and Mainland China between 1980 and 2020.

Cantopop's rise in the 1970s resulted in part from its hybridity, an important aspect that was influenced by using cover versions that changed its soundscape; however, in the mid-1990s, its market in Hong Kong began to shrink significantly [2]. Many songs created in the early period, the 1980s and 1990s, have continued to be performed widely in recent years. Singers in their 20s and 30s then have continued to perform, and audiences of the same age or slightly younger who began listening to their music initially have continued to do so. Many obtained their first impressions of Hong Kong and the outside world by listening to Cantopop in their youth. When China's society was experiencing the rapid transformation of opening up to the world, Cantopop was one of the first traditions to fill the void of popular culture. Consequently, some Cantopop singers became famous in Mainland China before they had performed there, including Alan Tam Wing Lun, George Lam Tsz Cheung, Sally Yeh, Leslie Cheung, Teresa Carpio, and the band Beyond. Wide acceptance of their songs in the 1980s and 1990s foreshadowed their continued popularity in recent years.

3. Retelling Good Memories of the Past in the New Era

As Mainland China's economy has burgeoned since the 1980s, Mainlanders have gradually acquainted themselves with cultures from the outside world, while Mandopop has steadily caught up with Cantopop in Mainland China. Though Cantopop has been very frequently sung in karaoke, it has not been widely selected for performances on television managed by government officials in the first decade of the millennium. However, in recent years, performance opportunities have become increasingly available on professional televised singing shows (e.g., *I Am a Singer* and *Singing with Legends*), where reputed veteran singers are the main performers. Cantopop remains a sentimental favorite and a strong competitor among different styles of music due to its wide acceptance and shared memories. Besides, as the government's attitude becomes more open to various popular music cultures, including English pop, K-pop, and Cantopop, television has expressed a greater willingness to invite professional singers from the outside world, thus facilitating Cantopop's high popularity on various TV veteran singing shows. Alan Tam Wing Lun, the Cantopop singer, born in 1950, who is famous for singing romantic ballads with modern arrangements, has many great hits and is one of the most frequently invited Cantopop singers in Mainland China in recent years. "Can't Say Goodbye" a song released by Tam in 1994 in Hong Kong ([Link](#)), became one of his greatest hits. The song expresses that people should remember the beauty of relationships (e.g., love or friendship), regardless of how difficult a situation is, or who is right or wrong. Tam sang this song more than two decades later, on *I Am a Singer* ([Link](#)) and *Time Concert* ([Link](#)), on Hunan TV. This song's lyrics demonstrate Cantonese characteristics, using words like "say" and "much nostalgia", which are used in Cantonese but are much less frequently adopted in today's Mandarin. Thus, both native Cantonese and Mandarin speakers recognize the song as Cantonese. Interestingly, Sun Nan, the famous Mainland pop singer from Jilin province, who is not a native Cantonese speaker, covered this song on *I Am a Singer* ([Link](#)), paying tribute to Tam. Rocky Chan, a pop singer from Hong Kong, also covered this song on the Music Program on China's most-watched network, China Central Television (CCTV) ([Link](#)). Tam has performed many other Cantonese songs in Mainland China; he performed old songs with The Wynners, a Hong Kong band established in the late 1970s, at the CCTV 2022 Spring Festival Gala ([Link](#)). In addition, he covered "What Do You Want in Life", a classic Cantopop tune released in 1989 by Danny Chan, the first real pop idol in Hong Kong, on *Singing With Legends* ([Link](#)), with Li Jian, a pop singer from Heilongjiang province, who is again not a native Cantonese speaker. Singing classic Cantopop gives these non-native Cantonese-speaking singers from Mainland China more opportunities.

George Lam Tsz Cheung, the veteran Cantopop singer, born in 1947, is famous for his wide tenor range, between G2 and F5. His career spanned more than four decades and stood as another excellent example of the high popularity of Cantopop in Mainland China, manifested by his multiple performances and being considered a "legend" on *Singing With Legends* on Shanghai TV, with songs such as "Life of Numbers" ([Link](#)), "Dare to Love" ([Link](#)), and "With Love" ([Link](#)). Lam sang these songs with young Mainland singers such as Hu Xia from Guangxi province, Joker Xue from Shanghai, Ji Jiahe from Jiangsu province, and Sunnee, who is Chinese Thai. Except for Hu Xia, who is from the Cantonese-speaking province of Guangxi, these singers were again non-native-Cantonese but made an effort to cross the language barrier to sing with Lam and pay tribute to this Cantopop legend. Released in 1986, the song "Life Of Numbers" has unusual, difficult-to-follow lyrics that include strings of numbers, reflecting the fast-paced changes in the Hong Kong stock market. It was a symbol of Hong Kong society's changes in the 1970s and 1980s, when manufacturing jobs started to move to the mainland for cheaper production costs, and Hong Kong's economy came to depend more on real estate, finance, banking, and the stock market. Thus, written in the Cantonese language but with the unique inclusion of strings of numbers in its lyrics, the song also conveys Hong Kong's sociological and economic background, pushing singers to fully understand the true meaning of the song and to sing it effectively.

Cantopop is also core to Hong Kong's identity, as it carries the social and cultural values created and upheld by the Hong Kong people at different times^[1]. "Dare To Love", typical of Lam's style and sung in high pitch with full voice and volume, urged people to pursue the ones they love bravely in 1980s Hong Kong society, where sharp economic fluctuations made people feel less sure about the future, making long-term goals more challenging to achieve for most people. These songs reflected people's psychology in a rapidly changing Hong Kong society where the economy was on an uptrend, the finance industry was growing rapidly, and people enjoyed an abundance of emergent business and career opportunities. Benefiting from the high fertility rate of over 5.5 in the 1960s, as shown in Figure 4, Mainland Chinese society experienced a fast growth of the young labour force after its opening-up in 1978. This laid the foundation for an ongoing economic uprising that has afforded people plentiful

chances in areas such as production, sales, research, development, and innovation. The songs mentioned above also fit the scenario in Mainland Chinese society.

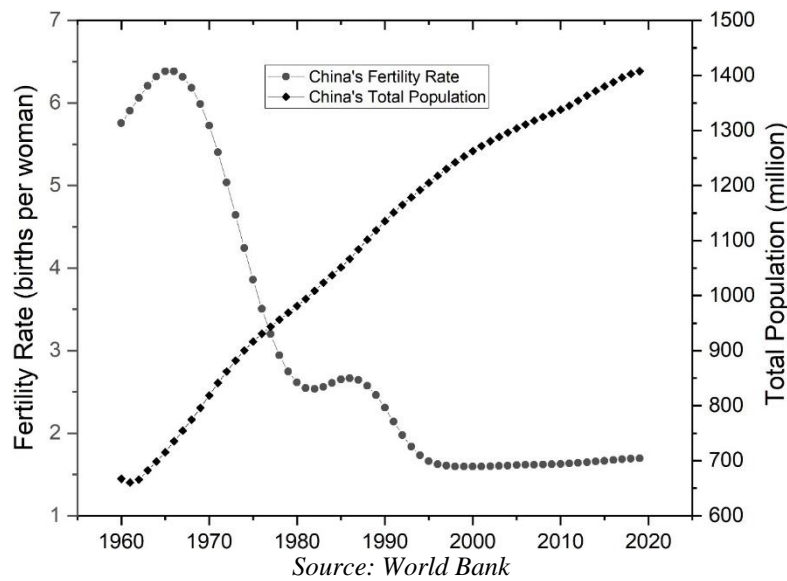


Figure 4: China's Fertility Rate and Total Population between 1960 and 2020.

Sally Yeh, Lam's wife and a famous Cantopop and Mandopop singer, was invited to sing various songs on Shanghai TV, Baidu TV, and TikTok, including "Bless" ([Link](#)) and "The Choice" ([Link](#)). "Bless" is not a religious song; it praises friendship and love in a traditional Chinese context. Lyrics like "Wandering in the jungle facing the rain / The long flowing spring turns with the road / Occasionally turn around the mountain" adopt standard methods in Chinese literature which describe the beautiful natural environment in detail for complementing the singer's good mood, a gentle way of emphasizing the "blessings" in the chorus. This is consistent with the Chinese urban folk song tradition ^[7], where descriptions of scenarios or landscapes are an implicit way of expressing people's mood. "The Choice" is Lam and Yeh's classic Mandopop love song; its message is that the singers (playing two lovers) are making the right choice in choosing each other. This song is viral in Mainland China. Lam and Yeh's multiple provincial-level televised performances of it demonstrate the popularity of Cantopop, Mainlanders' high respect for Cantopop singers, and the mandate and approval of the government.

4. The Enduring Popularity of the Songs of Beyond

Cantopop displays a fascinating contrast between its musical conservatism and linguistic, ethnic, and sexual messages [9]. Cantopop is musically conservative in that it adheres to the traditional characteristics of Chinese music; however, the messages conveyed by the lyrics are different. The richness of these messages facilitates the success of many Cantopop songs popular on the Mainland. An example is the high popularity of the song "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies", performed by Beyond, a famous Hong Kong rock band ([Link](#)).



Figure 5: (a) Beyond's four members (from left to right), Paul Wong, Wong Ka Keung, Yip Sai Win, and Wong Ka Ku, in the 1980s; (b) Beyond's trip to Tanzania in the late 1980s

As presented in Figure 5, Beyond's members include lead vocalist Wong Ka Kui, bassist Wong Ka Keung, drummer Yip Sai Wing, and guitarist Paul Wong. Chow describes what the highly populated and crowded city of Hong Kong looked like when Beyond's band members were in their 20s and 30s ^[10]:

Who are the oppressed of this place? There are many. They are faceless, voiceless, living in refugee camps, housing estates, rented rooms, rented beds, and other unknown corners of the overcrowded colony. Inside the packed spaces of the working city, the oppressed one most commonly encounters are the keepers of ubiquitous department stores and supermarkets.

As the voice of Hong Kong, Cantopop has given generations of people born in the city a sense of belonging [11]. Beyond's early songs were concerned mainly with the typical mentality of the city's busy, long-hour-working people, as shown by the following lyrical excerpts of two early songs, "Forever Waiting" (Link) and "Say Goodbye Ideals" (Link).

Song: "Forever Waiting"

Composer: Wong Ka Kui

Lyrics: Paul Wong

Lyrics excerpt:

In the heat of the night, I put on a black jacket
Can't resist now, the fire in my heart
A huge voice penetrated my heart
The phantom flashes speed up my breath
It's about to explode now
Try to throw away the fake masks at this moment

...

Hope to get everything in singing
But in reality, how to get everything
Forever waiting forever waiting

Song: "Goodbye Ideals"

Composer: Wong Ka Kui

Lyrics: Beyond

Lyrics excerpt:

Sitting alone on the street corner, the cold wind blows
Silently accompany my lonely shadow
I just want to hug the guitar tightly and tell the bitterness
Just remember the past at this moment
A passion in the heart
Put aside that reality without worries
It's like you have everything around you
Seems to be separated from others

...

Sing Rock' n' Roll together...

Sing Rock' n' Roll together...

Sing Rock' n' Roll together...

...

Beyond's early songs originated from their own working class background and resonated with others in the city who shared the same experience. "Forever Waiting" describes the contrast between the solid inner desire to pursue dreams in the real world and the cruel fact that not much can necessarily be achieved; one is "forever waiting." The "fake masks" can be understood as representing the wide range of norms people need to follow in society, which serves as a foil for the strong desire to achieve dreams. "Goodbye Ideals" tells of the struggles wrought upon a young pop singer. The contrast between the feelings of isolation, loneliness, and worry and living in a highly populated, crowded city conveys what music means for the young artist. He still considers music a safe harbor despite the separation from others, as manifested by the refrain "Sing rock 'n' roll together." Beyond's early songs depict the difficulties in the lives of working people, who needed to consistently adapt to the fast-changing environment and rapidly growing capitalist economy of Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s, at the expense of their personal wishes. It might not have been easy for Mainlanders to feel the same way at the time, as they had not yet experienced capitalist society for as long as Hong Kong. Moreover, the language barrier and ethnicity rendered them less likely to become famous for some time in Mainland China.

Interestingly, Beyond's songs "I Really Love You", "The Grand Earth", and "The Great Wall" pay tribute to Chinese culture by praising mothers, the land, and the Great Wall, the same symbols often acclaimed in Chinese traditional values. The urban folk song tradition of these songs^[7], where depictions of the motherland or symbols such as the Great Wall convey people's deep love for the country, is easy for Mainlanders to comprehend; this explains why they are popular today in Mainland China despite language barriers. For instance, Teresa Carpio sang "I Really Love You" in *The Singer* 2017, an episode of *I Am a Singer*, on Hunan Mango TV and received warm applause ([Link](#)). Paul Wong and Yip Sai Wing were invited to sing "The Grand Earth" on Sichuan TV four years ago ([Link](#)). Another widely popular song is "Liking You", a love song telling of a man's memory of his past love ([Link](#)). The beginning of this song describes the "sad" environment of "drenched streets" with "lonely night light" in the drizzling dawn, implying that the singer has sad memories of love. The lyrics describe gorgeous eyes, charming laughter, and a lovely face that convey how much he loved the one he previously liked. These lyrics are plain to understand and can resonate with many audiences, leading this song to stand the test of time. Gloria Tang, also known as G.E.M, a famous singer-songwriter from Hong Kong born in 1991, covered this song on China Central Television ([Link](#)), SMG Shanghai TV ([Link](#)), and Hunan Mango TV ([Link](#)). Interestingly, this song also has a Tibetan version, performed by two Tibetan singers, Dan Bhawan and Ben Ba Deji, on China Central Television ([Link](#)) and China Sichuan TV ([Link](#)), which are essential in China with the central and provincial governments' mandates. In addition, a multilinguistic version was performed on Hunan Mango TV ([Link](#)), encompassing verses in Mongolian, Uyghur, Korean, Ukrainian, Tibetan, and Kazakh. The love theme of this song furthers its wide popularity.

Song: "Liking You"

Composer: Beyond

Lyrics: Wong Ka Kui

Lyrics excerpt

Drizzle with wind drenched streets at dusk

Wiping away the rain, eyes looking up for no reason

Looking at the lonely night light

It's the sad memory

...

I like you

The eyes are attractive, and the laughter is more charming

I wish I could caress your lovely face again

Hold hands and talk in my sleep

Like yesterday you were with me

Beyond's songs in the late 1980s and the early 1990s were quite different from their early ones. A trip to Kenya in 1991 considerably widened their horizons: They saw the reality of people's lives there and realized how the overall living standards in Kenya were significantly lower than in Hong Kong. After observing this "bigger world," they found that their previous feelings about the world—which were

merely generated from their life experiences in Hong Kong and neglected lives in other parts of the world—were somehow "parochial." They decided to write songs differently. "Amani," meaning "peace" in Swahili, is a representative song of this period that aimed to raise funds to support the lives and schooling of Kenyan children on a Hong Kong TV show ([Link](#)). Transcending personal struggles in the crowded city of Hong Kong, this song emphasizes the longing of many African people for peace and how parts of Africa have been affected by continuous conflict, as manifested by its lyrics with the repeated theme "Amani, nakupenda wewe, tunataka wewe." These Swahili words translate as "I call out to the world: Peace, I love you, I love you, we want you." "Amani" conveys a feeling of deep love, calling for peace from a pure, unconditionally accepting heart. Another representative song in this period is "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies" ([Link](#)), with a central theme of the pursuit of personal freedom and dreams regardless of endless difficulties, as manifested in lyrics such as "How many times having faced icy stares and ridicules", "Yet never have abandoned my heart's true ideals" and "Forgive me for life's unruly indulgences and love of freedom". This song entered China when the country was experiencing a significant and rapid socioeconomic transformation after the Reform and Opening, where Mainlanders were adapting to the new socialist market economy. Praise for the pursuit of a dream and fighting to make it come true amid social change, and people's longing to find their place, reflect the new features of the economy, which gave much more freedom to private companies than before. It is no wonder that the popularity of "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies" has not waned because the same social conditions still apply and it has overcome language barriers, becoming one of the most popular Beyond songs on the Mainland. Multiple cover versions have been sung by many native and non-native Cantonese singers on various Chinese television channels, such as Gary Chaw on Hunan Mango TV ([Link](#)) and Liaoning TV ([Link](#)); Tracy Wang on Guangxi TV ([Link](#)); Hua Chenyu on Hunan Mango TV ([Link](#)) and Liaoning TV ([Link](#)); Dan Quadi on Sichuan TV ([Link](#)); and Paul Wong and Yip Sai Wing (two Beyond members) on Sichuan TV ([Link](#)). Dan Quadi's version is in Tibetan, while Hua Chenyu's version on Liaoning TV was accompanied by Lang Lang, the famous Chinese pianist who has performed with leading orchestras in China, North America, Europe, and elsewhere. Jack Ma, the Chinese business magnate, investor, and philanthropist, also performed a version of the song at a small concert ([Link](#)). Beyond had not performed on the Mainland before Wong Ka Kui's death in 1993 during the band's visit to Japan, which brought a significant change and instability to the band as he was its soul. However, the band's songs fit well with the mentality of mainland society amid rapid socioeconomic change over the last three decades. Mainlanders tend to describe this period of rapid economic growth and significant social transformation as the days of embracing boundless oceans and vast skies or the age of infinite possibilities. Besides "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies", perhaps Beyond's most famous song among Mainlanders is "Glorious Days" ([Link](#)), a song written as homage to Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa, who fought apartheid and was imprisoned when the song was released. Both songs conveyed the persistent and audacious pursuit of dreams, partly explaining why the band became famous even without its physical presence. Beyond disbanded in 2005; however, over the recent decade, former members were frequently invited to different provinces in China to perform their music, reflecting the longevity of the charm of their songs for Mainlanders. For example, Yip Sai Wing and Paul Wong gave a joint performance on Zhengjiang TV ([Link](#)) and sang in a one-hour concert together on Sichuan TV ([Link](#)). Wong was also invited to do an individual performance on TV singing shows such as *I am A Singer* ([Link](#)) and *Call Me By Fire* ([Link](#)), indicating their continued popularity.

Song: "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies"

Composer: Wong Ka Kui

Lyrics: Wong Ka Kui

Full lyrics:

Today, I saw the snow drifting in the cold night

With a cooled heart I also drift away to a distant place

Through the wind and rain I chase

In the mist the shadows are vaporous

Vast skies and boundless oceans between you and me

Who will change? (Who doesn't change?)

How many times having faced icy stares and ridicules

Yet never have abandoned my heart's true ideals

A trance-like moment
I feel as if I have lost something
Unconsciously, something has faded
It's the love in my heart (Who understands me?)
Forgive me for the life's unruly indulgences and love of freedom
Though I'm also afraid that one day I might take a tumble
To desert one's ideals, anyone can do that
But I'm not afraid even if one day there are only you and me
...
Still free, that I am
Forever singing aloud my song
Traveling everywhere, unmeasurable distances

5. Other Cantopop Singers and Developments in Recent Years

Many other famous Cantopop singers from Hong Kong exist who are younger than Alan Tam and George Lam's generation, such as Eason Chan and Miriam Yeung, who were born in the 1970s; both have performed at multiple concerts on the Mainland. For instance, Eason Chan brought his Duo tour to 26 mainland cities in 2011 and 2013 and his Eason's Life tour to more than 30 mainland cities in 2013 and 2014; he performed long shows, with more than 30 songs on his set list, and received a positive response. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the rise of Mandopop since the 1980s has satisfied Mainlanders' need for popular music in their mother tongue. It was different from the 1960s and 1970s when the Mainland and Hong Kong had few cultural connections before the opening-up. Meanwhile, songs, singers, groups, and bands from Western countries (e.g., "I Will Always Love You" by Whitney Houston, "My Heart Will Go On" by Celine Dion, Jessie J., Adele, Taylor Swift, Avril Lavigne, Backstreet Boys, and West Life) are also becoming more and more common and arising as competition for Cantopop audiences' affections. Moreover, the prosperity of the Mainland's economy narrowed the economic gap with Hong Kong and other developed economies, leading people to no longer view Cantopop and Western pop music styles as "advanced." More capable Mainland musicians, who write their songs themselves, have emerged. It is fair to say that many Cantopop singers retain a sizable group of Mainland fans, but it is difficult for their songs to be as popular as one of the very first Cantopop songs on the Mainland, "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies". Interestingly, G.E.M. had two Mandopop songs out of five on G.E.M., her first solo EP, released in 2008, and seven Mandopop songs out of ten on MySecret, her third album, released in 2010, indicating her willingness to target the Mainland Chinese market. Her first performance on the Mainland took place in 2014 on *I Am a Singer*, where she impressed audiences with the power of her voice, reflecting her emotional rage and disappointment in a relationship described in "Bubble", one of her Mandopop love songs ([Link](#)). Mainland audiences were struck once again by her Mandopop cover of Mainland rock singer Wang Feng's "Exist", a song describing the refusal to be mediocre ([Link](#)), as depicted in the lyrics: "How many people are walking but still stuck in the start? How many people are living but look like they are dying?". G.E.M. performed many Cantonese songs in Mainland China, such as her cover of Beyond's "Liking You" ([Link](#)); in addition, she performed cover versions of English pop songs, including Beyoncé's "If I Were A Boy" ([Link](#)) and Alicia Keys' "Falling" ([Link](#)). Unlike her Cantopop seniors, she includes Cantopop as merely a choice on her menu. In general, new Cantopop songs are preferred less than before on the Mainland; Ho's recent study indicates that secondary students on the Mainland now prefer a wide range of styles, the preference rankings of which are Chinese folk songs, traditional Chinese orchestra music, traditional Western orchestra music, popular songs from Mainland China, traditional Western Opera, Western musicals, other world music, Chinese children's songs, popular songs from the UK and US, Beijing opera, Shanghai folk songs, Western rock music, Western blues and jazz, popular songs from Taiwan, Western rap and hip hop songs, popular songs from Hong Kong, Kun opera, Shanghai opera, Western punk, popular songs from Japan, Cantonese opera, and popular songs from South Korea ^[5]. Namely, popular songs from Hong Kong (mainly Cantopop) are sixteenth on the list.

The Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area is an ambitious plan, proposed in 2017, that aims at building a highly competitive and integrated metropolitan economic area by 2035, consisting of nine cities in Guangdong province as well as two special administrative regions, Hong Kong and Macau. Political, economic, and cultural ties are expected to be strengthened within the area. Cantonese is widely spoken in this Bay Area and Hong Kong pop culture has deeply influenced the people for decades via various forms of Cantopop, TVB dramas (i.e., dramas produced by Television Broadcasts Limited, one of the most influential TV channels in Hong Kong) and Hong Kong movies. In other words, audiences know many Hong Kong singers and actors quite well. Cantopop can play a vital role in the economic and cultural developments in this new period, giving more performers from Hong Kong opportunities such as TV shows, concerts, and commercial shows. These performances lead to tightened economic and cultural ties. For example, Jordan Chan, Julian Cheung, Michael Tse, Edmond Leung, and Jerry Lam were invited to sing George Lam's "The Real Man" at the 2021 Greater Bay Area Mid-Autumn Festival Film and Music Gala, aired on CCTV ([Link](#)), while Bobby Au-Yeung Chun Wah was invited to perform the classic Cantopop song "Shanghai Beach" originally by Frances Yip at the Guangdong 2021 Spring Festival Gala ([Link](#)), the show celebrating the Chinese lunar new year, one of the most important festivals or even the most important festival in China. Acting is most of these singers' main job, and Bobby Au-Yeung Chun Wah in particular is considered a famous TVB actor in Hong Kong rather than a singer. It can be expected, due to factors such as closer ties and shorter geographical distances within cities in the Bay Area and the deep influence by Hong Kong pop culture, that opportunities in the Bay Area will increase for many Hong Kong artists to perform Cantopop and other types of music in the future. Many opportunities will remain in other places in China, but they may be mainly for performers who are more famous or considered "legends." Consequently, similar to the popularity of Irish music in North America ^[12], Cantopop survives and flourishes across the Shenzhen river on the other side of the country, despite its decline in its birthplace.

6. Conclusion

We investigated Cantopop's advent and subsequent success in Mainland China from a socioeconomic perspective, mentioning many representative songs and singers. Arising in Hong Kong in the 1970s, Cantopop has flourished on the Mainland since the 1980s, and was made more attractive by Hong Kong's economic success, despite Cantopop's decline in popularity in Hong Kong. It filled a market void and helped Mainlanders understand the outside world. The first wave of Cantopop in the 1980s and 1990s was a huge success and artists like Alan Tam Wing Lun, George Lam Tsz Cheung, Sally Yeh, Teresa Carpio, and Beyond have been brought back on various Mainland TV shows in recent years; mainlanders treat them as legends and pay them tribute. The allure of their songs outweighs the language and culture barriers. Beyond's "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies" and "Glorious Days" may be the most popular among these songs due to the special meaning of always pursuing dreams that they carry, which resonates with Mainland China's social development. As the Mainland's economy has maintained its rapid growth momentum, Cantopop has witnessed the emergence of rivals—Mandopop and English pop songs—signalling that its popularity may have waned. Nevertheless, Cantopop is expected to maintain its charm in many parts of China, especially in Cantonese-speaking Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, because of the shared language and the anticipated enhancement of economic and cultural ties in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area in the future.

Disclosure Statement

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