

A Study on the Development of R&B Localization in China

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Abstract: *Rhythm & Blues, or R&B, was created in the United States during the 1940s and has captured the interest of music enthusiasts ever since because of its distinct melodic and rhythmic qualities. This kind of music has gradually made its way to China due to the world's diverse development, which in some ways influences the emergence and evolution of Chinese pop music and gives it a new lease on life. Chinese musicians fuse R&B with traditional Chinese culture to produce R&B that is uniquely Chinese, all the while increasing public awareness and understanding of this genre. This essay primarily examines the impact of R&B on Chinese pop music, as well as the localization and development process within China. This study explores the distinctiveness of China's R&B music style by analyzing the works of David Tao and Khalil Fong as illustrative examples. Ultimately, it reflects on the contemporary state of music advancement. This study anticipates the forthcoming trajectory of R&B music in China, intending to furnish scholarly resources for the investigation and implementation of R&B music within the country.*

Keywords: *R&B music; popular music; music style; Chinese localized music*

1. Introduction

1.1 The goal and significance of the study

R&B music originated in the United States in the 1940s. It is a kind of music created and developed by American blacks based on blues, jazz, and other music. Its dynamic rhythm and catchy melody made it famous rapidly^[3]. Subsequently, introducing R&B music to China led to its emulation by Chinese musicians, resulting in the creation of localized Chinese R&B compositions. R&B music is characterized by its openness and inclusiveness, and to sustain its robust vitality and enduring appeal, it necessitates a continuous enrichment to align with contemporary trends. R&B signifies not only a musical genre but also the cultural milieu of a particular era and the intrinsic spiritual essence of spontaneity. Numerous new forces, exemplified by Jay Chou, David Tao, and Khalil Fong, have emerged in China's pop music landscape as a result of the continuous development of R&B. These artists have adopted various forms to integrate R&B with Chinese music forms, thereby advancing the development of R&B in China. Many audiences have come to appreciate and identify with R&B music. R&B, however, has only been around for a few decades in China, so it cannot be referred to as mainstream music here. Additionally, R&B musicians are extremely rare in the market for music, and the development process has many shortcomings. Chinese music continues to face multiple challenges in this context, while there are quite a few classic compositions that possess genuine substance.

Based on the above, this paper reviews R&B-related literature and music materials, summarizes some of the most meaningful R&B musicians and representative works, aims to provide some reference value for the creation and development of China's R&B, and analyzes where to go and how to maintain their characteristics for forward development.

1.2 Research Methods

1.2.1 Literature Analysis Method

The literature analysis method is a strict and comprehensive approach to investigating the issues, phenomena, and laws addressed in the literature through in-depth research and systematic analysis. The research process consists of gathering, categorizing, evaluating, organizing, and summarizing the relevant literature materials. Then analyze and interpret the chosen literature to gather the relevant information.

This article uses literature analysis to summarize the history and characteristics of R&B music in China and establish a theoretical foundation for future research.

1.2.2 Case Study Method

The case study method is a scientific analysis method that carefully studies representative individuals, groups, or organizations to obtain a general comprehension.

This paper adopts the case study method to analyze the creation and development of Chinese R&B music by taking the representative figures of Chinese R&B music and their works as the research cases. It summarizes the current situation and characteristics of the development of Chinese R&B music.

2. The Localization Process of R&B in China

2.1 Origin of R&B

In the 1940s, Rhythm & Blues (R&B), among other musical genres, rose to prominence in the United States. The name R&B has a long history, and it appeared as early as the 1920s in the U.S. when the record industry was emerging^[1]. However, within the societal context of pervasive racial prejudice in that era, the categorization of this specific kind of music inside the record business was similarly classified based on racial lines. The term "Race Record" refers to musical compositions created by African-American vocalists within a recording studio setting^[4]. This category encompasses a range of widely appreciated black music genres, including jazz and blues. During that period, the administration of record businesses was mainly made up of individuals from the white demographic, resulting in evident prejudice against music produced by black artists. Nevertheless, due to the unique rhythmic attributes and melodious qualities inherent in black music, it garnered significant admiration from several listeners. Profit-driven promotion of "Race Record" by the white owners contributed to the rapid growth and expansion of black music. With the rise of the white progressive class and the resistance of the black upper class to the discriminatory term "race," the term "Race Record" is no longer acceptable to the public. The term "Rhythm & Blues" or "R&B" became the preferred classification for this genre. It originally replaced "Race Records" as a record classification^[5]. With the continuous development of the record industry, record classification was gradually refined, and the record classification terminology and music styles were slowly integrated. "R&B" became a synonym for specific music styles^[6].

2.2 Localization Process

With the diversification of the world, western pop music elements entered the Chinese music scene, which was not well accepted by the public at the beginning. However, when an increasing number of musicians began integrating Chinese elements into various music forms, it earned a growing appreciation from the general public and gained widespread popularity.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the singer Sandy Lam started a musical exploration of R&B, evident in her trilogy of albums titled *Gray*, *Wildflowers*, and *Urban Touch*. Similarly, in 1991, Dewey To ventured into the field of R&B-inspired compositions, shown by his "song *Love of a Lifetime*". This album took the genre to a whole new level. These developments appear to signify the emergence of the R&B era in the Chinese music industry. During the period characterized by a perceived lack of depth in the R&B genre, David Tao introduced his eponymous album "*David Tao*" which skillfully incorporated elements of the local culture, presenting this musical style to the listener in its original flavor. The progression of time led to the emergence of an R&B renaissance in the Chinese music scene during the twenty-first century. A series of excellent compositions created by millennial R&B vocalists seemed to announce to the audience that after ten years of rooting, R&B was about to become indelibly ingrained in the musical DNA of China.

Chinese R&B music developed its unique sound by incorporating the melodic and rhythmic qualities of Western R&B music. Chinese music composers have integrated ethnicized musical forms and structures into the genre of R&B music. In the album "*The Sun and Moon in My Heart*" by Wang Leehom, a variety of ethnic instruments are employed to complement the lively pace of R&B, so offering the audience a unique auditory encounter. In his seminal piece "*A Mistake Made In A Flowery Field*," the composer combined the vocal techniques of transcription and legato singing from the opera genre, resulting in a remarkable fusion that imbued the music with exceptional worth and attractiveness. Jay Chou is also a great promoter of the localization of R&B in China. The public initially did not accept and recognize his music due to its ambiguous spoken language and avant-garde creative style. However, as

time proceeded and the general public's appreciation for artistic expression grew, his musical compositions garnered increasing recognition and exerted a considerable influence on the evolution of Chinese music. In the composition titled "East Wind Break," he skillfully integrates traditional Chinese lyrics with elements of R&B music, resulting in a fascinating and harmonious auditory encounter for the audience. This not only expands the reach of contemporary Western popular music but also, to some extent, revitalizes traditional Chinese culture with fresh energy. Most of the lyrics in Chinese R&B music are straightforward. For instance, "That girl, who has long hair and is dressed in a white shirt, prefers to listen to me quietly", Naturally and directly describes the impression of the girl he likes. The direct manifestation of emotional content inside a song contributes to the enhanced satisfaction of the listener's psychological requirements, hence propelling the progression of R&B music.

Chinese R&B music has incorporated distinct elements of Chinese culture, including traditional instruments like guzheng, erhu, and bamboo flute, This integration of diverse musical instruments has contributed to the stylistic diversity of Chinese R&B, connecting with the aesthetic preferences of Chinese listeners and enhancing the music's reception^[6]. Furthermore, the inclusion of unique lyrics and songwriting in Chinese R&B serves as a means to effectively convey the essence of Chinese culture. In the composition "Blue and White Porcelain" by Jay Chou, the intro features the Chinese guzheng and bamboo flute, evoking a vivid portrayal of antiquity. Subsequently, the addition of drums and electric guitars introduces a Western ambiance to the Chinese melodic framework. This combination enables people to appreciate the attraction of traditional Chinese mystery while simultaneously embracing diverse musical styles. Despite the notable distinctions between traditional Chinese music and current Western music, Chinese musicians have adeptly combined the two genres to cultivate the distinctive musical attributes of Chinese localized R&B. This fusion has played a pivotal role in fostering the internalization and advancement of R&B in China.

3. Contemporary Chinese Localized R&B Representatives and Their Musical Characteristics

After an extensive period of evolution, R&B music has moved past its initial association as a genre exclusively enjoyed by the black community and has progressively gained traction across the Chinese music scene. The localization process in China has given rise to a multitude of music composers who possess distinct and innovative creative styles. In this chapter, the author will utilize David Tao and Khalil Fong as case studies to provide an overview of the innovative categories and notable works of prominent R&B artists in the Chinese music industry.

3.1 David Tao

Numerous admirers consider David Tao to be the "Godfather of Chinese R&B" and the preeminent figure in Chinese R&B. David Tao is an exceptionally gifted musician. Before 1997, the year he released his first album "David Tao" as a vocalist, he was primarily involved in music production work behind the scenes and served as the album producer for several well-known artists. He is regarded as the progenitor of R&B in China because this album earned many awards, including the Best New Artist Award, the Best Producer Award, and the Best Composer Award, all of which he received shortly after its release, making the album the purest R&B album in the Chinese music industry at the time. As the person responsible for composing, arranging, performing, harmonizing, and producing his debut album, he skillfully combined R&B with native Taiwanese songs and meticulously arranged the tracks. The song "10:30 at the Airport" begins with the sound of an airplane taking off, which fits the title of the song perfectly, followed by a finger-snapping rhythm accompanied by Tao's humming. When first hearing the song, listeners can sense the singer's inner hesitation and regret at failing to love while awaiting the girl he likes. "Love is Simple", "Quicksand", "Beach" and "Seventeen Years Old" are all masterpieces of this album, classics of Tao's lyrical R&B. Each track featured on this album has been widely regarded as a classic by fans, which brought him significant prestige and caused a great sensation in the Chinese music industry.

However, this sudden fame brought him a lot of psychological distress, leading to a period of emotional decline. To get rid of the media-imposed label of "Taiwan's Babyface", he tried to adjust his state and devote himself to creation. After a continuous dialog with himself, he released his second album, "I'm OK," in 1999, using a hymn like "Doxology" as the beginning, which was Tao's hope that God could guide him and lead him to find himself. The song "Find Yourself" uses natural sound effects, like wind, thunder, and rain, throughout its intro to set an emotional tone. These natural elements align with David Tao's preference for including such elements inside his musical arrangements. The song titled "Find

Yourself" consists of a simplistic harmonic structure, mostly using two chords— G# and C#add9, and he uses simple chords and straightforward lyrics to make people feel relaxed and happy on a summer's day. In order to give the song a sense of power, he purposefully uses tones with a ripping sound for the shout before the final chorus repetition. Country Rock serves as the album's introduction and is a cathartic discharge of his long-repressed emotions. The second song, "Small Town Girl," with a more retro arrangement, is introduced by a train whistle. Firstly, a diverse range of instruments, including organs and wind instruments, are prominently used in the songs. Secondly, the vocals, guitars, and percussion exhibit a distinct Soul style reminiscent of the 1980s. The song is ostensibly a love story, but it's really about his transition from a "small-town girl" to a "big-city manager," —from being a behind-the-scenes producer in the past to a singer in the present. It is also about discovering who he is, a dialogue with himself. It is precisely because of this loss and struggles that the closing line "Maybe you'll miss it someday, but I'm not here anymore" is repeated repeatedly. The eponymous track of the album, "I'm OK," begins with a brief period of Chinese instruments for 10 seconds, followed by heavily distorted guitars and Tao's strange screams. Then there's the barely audible title track, where he injects a lot of "technical intent" into the song, and the contrasts precisely reflect Tao's inner anxieties and entanglements. The bridge goes from whispering to making an unpleasant sound, expressing discontentment, and conveying a desire to escape from the current situation. The three songs presented above serve as a comprehensive representation of the central theme of the album, which revolves around the concept of "get lost and find yourself". Despite encountering various challenges, experiencing anxiety, and feeling confused, he remains resolute in his pursuit of personal growth and self-realization. "Ordinary Friends" is one of the first half of the album and one of Tao's classic R&B masterpieces. "Ordinary Friends" is a song in the first part of the album, showing Tao's exceptional talent in the realm of vintage R&B music. The composition, including two acoustic guitars and several modulations, effectively expresses his nuanced emotions and exceptional aptitude for songcraft.

Undoubtedly, he created a great deal of representative works in a wide range of styles, Several instances of these include "Peaceful World," which skillfully combines elements of traditional Chinese culture; "Susan Said," a song that draws inspiration from the Peking Opera "Su San Qi Xie"; and "The Art of War," which is named after the ancient books "Dream of the Red Mansion" and "The Art of War". Despite having a very varied style, he always aims to communicate the deeper significance of musical concepts in his works. The process of music creation entails the expression of himself.

3.2 Khalil Fong

Khalil Fong was born in Hawaii, USA, and moved back to Guangdong, China at the age of twelve. He has been involved in music since he was a child, specializing in piano and guitar, and is experienced in stage performance^[9]. He once claimed that when he listens to music, he is accustomed to isolating every instrument and occasionally plays the songs repeatedly to focus on a particular instrument. He also enjoys listening to the styles and techniques of various musicians. He released his first solo album, "Soulboy," in 2005, although his songs were not well-known in the Chinese music industry. It is possible to say that "Nan Yin," one of the songs, captures the spirit of all Khalil Fong intended to say with this record. The song tells the life of Ah Bing, a blind Chinese artist who, despite being a gifted child, ended up making a living by selling his artwork on the streets until he died, at the time his art became widely known. Therefore, Khalil Fong used chords like the diminished seventh to emphasize the gloomy mood in the song's core section. However, in the chorus, he uses a succession of chord changes to brighten the song, expressing his faith and hope for the future. It then returns to a minor key to express the frustration and attitude of continuing to pursue his dream despite the lack of appreciation. The song is a tribute to his idol Stevie Wonder as well as a dialogue with himself.

The public began to anticipate more straightforward love songs from Khalil Fong after "Love Love Love" became a hit from his third studio album "Future" in 2007. In response to this demand, he created the "not too complicated, not too difficult to sing" Love Song, which is like a meticulously crafted dish, refreshing people's taste experience and bringing freshness to the public. The Intro section opens with strings, followed by a simple piano and drum set. The progression and transition of the chorus are more apparent in this simple arrangement, and the song gains an element of dissonance through the transition from C major to E-flat major, and eventually back to C major. The "love song" is finished with warm strings.

In 2008, he released an album titled "Orange Moon," which refers to a warm golden sunset. The general aesthetic of the album is relatively free; it can represent the first love for levity and restlessness, the dissolution of heartache, or even an imaginative romantic affection; the transformation of the song style is quite smooth. The poetic lyrics "I'll always be looking for that orange moonlight to light up the

ocean of our love" add a different atmosphere to the album. "Singalongsong" from the album is a very clean English lyrical song with a skillfully crafted surprise in the bridge section. "Little Bugs" has simple lyrics that perfectly capture the essence of youth and first love. The light guitar and keyboards are complemented by the hidden bass, which is gentle and soothing, bringing the listener's emotions into the song. The 2011 album "15" represents an evolution for him, as he goes through the hardships and pains of growing up and rediscovers his original creative heart. "No matter when it's over, it's always the same again," he said. It's nice and warm all over again when it's over." This album reflects his inner confusion, but it has become one of his classics as a result.

Khalil Fong's music has always been dedicated and pure; "he doesn't care if he's popular or not," and he has maximized the light of life in his music.

4. The Development Trend and Significance of Localization of R&B Music in Contemporary China

4.1 Development trend of localization of R&B music in China

A song is the sound of its time. On the one hand, the generation of R&B compositions comes from the creative ideas of popular music producers. On the other hand, it comes from the improved aesthetics of the listener, which promotes the development of musical works^[6]. Pop music can be popular because it must be in line with the background of the times and the public's aesthetic demand so that it can develop and spread. The combination of R&B and traditional Chinese culture is the premise that it can be prevalent in China. The diversified result of pop music's nationalization is unavoidable as time goes by. The appearance of Chinese classical imagery in well-known works in recent years reflects the Chinese people's sense of national identity toward Chinese culture as well as their cultural self-confidence. Although the development of R&B in China is still in its infancy, with a small number of mature singers and works, more and more people are beginning to like and pay attention to this type of music, and colleges and universities are beginning to set up systematic courses in teaching so that in the future, more and more musicians will take part in the study and creation of R&B music^[7]. R&B in China will continue to grow in prosperity. In addition to showing the distinctive appeal of Chinese music on an international stage, Chinese popular music must continue to innovate and grow, promote the nationalization concept in its creation, and preserve the national culture.

4.2 Development significance of localization of R&B music in China

Many expressions of Chinese pop music have been included in the localization of R&B in China. Chinese R&B music is expressed better when composers employ special Chinese instruments and combine Western elements in their compositions. In the song "Song of Departure," the band incorporates the erhu into the arrangement, which, when combined with the rock-style vocals and orchestration, makes the entire song express melancholy in the cathartic struggle. The combination of R&B and Chinese culture serves to enrich the type of Chinese pop music while also increasing public awareness regarding traditional Chinese musical instruments and culture. Furthermore, this fusion enables R&B to cater to the preferences of an increasing number of foreign listeners and connect with the foreign music market's target audience. The localization of R&B has facilitated the exportation of Chinese traditional elements, contributed significantly to the advancement and promotion of Chinese popular music, and publicized and promoted Chinese traditional culture^[7]. The creation and development of music are not a closed door, but there should be more exchanges with the world. What is considered national is universal^[8]. Music transcends national boundaries; it serves as a platform for expressing emotions and a demonstration of culture in the spirit of integration. The songs' creators incorporated elements of their ethnic group, thereby facilitating not only the dissemination of exotic flavors and ancient cultures but also injection of new blood into the music market to foster cultural exchanges and music among nations.

5. Conclusion

R&B refers to a series of black pop music genres produced in the 1940s, which became popular in China at the end of the twentieth century. Chinese musicians have created many great musical works by fusing R&B with traditional Chinese characteristics. This has given traditional Chinese music a new voice, energized the music industry, and elevated the promotion of Chinese music and culture. Many music enthusiasts have taken notice of this creative way of production, and an increasing number of people are trying to contribute to the development of R&B. It not only maintains a dynamic style but also

evolves continuously in response to the progress of society, thereby reflecting the style's fluidity throughout its evolution. The world music system is characterized by the constant fusion and exchange of materials from other ethnicities and cultures. This fusion and fission give rise to new types of music that cater to the diverse listening preferences of various audiences. Music is an essential part of social development because it is a reflection of the times, a shining star in the vast ocean of history, and a symbol of the past that will live on in people's hearts forever. It also honors and celebrates the spiritual realm of the modern society.

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