

A Cross-cultural Study of Preferences for Popular Music Among Hong Kong and Thailand Youths

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to explore popular music preferences among young people in Hong Kong and Thailand. The survey was conducted between June and November 2003. It includes a short questionnaire concerning participants' musical habits, a listening test comprising fifteen excerpts from popular songs in Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Spanish, and English and interview questions about musical preferences and influences. The correlation between the language of songs and the subjects' native language was significant, although Korean songs were rated highest and Mandarin lowest in the listening test. Most respondents admitted that they had pop idols and that they preferred mainly local singers. Whilst most respondents believed that a good singing voice was the most important consideration, some said that good looks, good dancing, unique character, and a good image were also important. Subjects engaged in higher education in both places had a greater preference for classical and Western music generally. The results of this study indicate that generalizations about musical preferences must take into account the specific cultural and educational background of the subjects concerned.

Key words: Hong Kong; Bangkok; popular music; consumer behaviour; social and cultural influences.

Introduction

This article compares the cultural and social conditions in which popular music emerged in Hong Kong (HK) and Thailand, and in which it has been nurtured by young people. MTV, which was spawned in the USA, is acknowledged by many as the leading medium of global

youth culture. Regional channels, like MTV Asia and Channel V, adapt Western pop culture to Asian tastes, in a process of assimilation that has been accelerated by the rise of English as a second language among HK and Thai young people. Meanwhile, MTV has probably done more to encourage local youth icons to engage with their local music business. Star TV's Channel V is an inescapable music video programming presence in both HK and Thailand. This study of young peoples' musical preferences and social perceptions in HK and Thailand ignores the many internal differences within popular music. It first examines the rise of Western popular music in the diverse socio-political climates of HK and Thailand, and then presents the findings of a listening test and interviews with young people.

The ethno-political situation in HK

HK is situated off the Kwangtung Province of south-east China. After the first Opium War, China ceded HK to the United Kingdom (UK) under the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. On Christmas Day, 1941, the British army surrendered HK to Japan, but reclaimed it four years later on 14th August 1945. As a result of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, the UK promised to restore HK to China on 1st July 1997 as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) with a high degree of autonomy in all matters except foreign and defense affairs for the following 50 years. Almost 95 per cent of the 7.4 million populations are ethnic, Cantonese-speaking Chinese, approximately 90 per cent of which are an eclectic mixture of local religions, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, whilst the remainders are divided almost equally between Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian sects. Chinese and English are the two official languages, the latter being more commonly used for business and the former being the most widely spoken dialect. Besides the international schools and those Chinese schools using English as their teaching instruction, Cantonese (one of the major dialects of the Chinese language and mainly spoken in the south-eastern part of mainland China, HK,

Macau) is the medium of instruction in school, though, since 1997 many schools switched to using Mandarin.

An overview of popular music in HK

Popular music is the single most influential factor for many young people in Hong Kong (see Ho 2002, 2003; So 2002). HK popular music had been dominated by English and Taiwanese popular songs since before the 1980s. During the 1960s and 1970s Western popular songs by the Carpenters, the Bee Gees, the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Olivia Newton John, and the Rolling Stones dominated the music market in HK; and Taiwanese singers such as Yao Su-rong, Qing Shan, You Ya, Tang Yan, Zhang Pi and Geng Li-jun (otherwise known as Teresa Tang) rose to fame in the late 1960s and 1970s. Then Cantonese songs took over the market in the 1980s and 1990s. Several big record labels such as Sony, EMI, Polydor, and Philips run the businesses in HK, targeting Cantonese audiences, often reissuing British, US-American and Japanese originals. Since the early 1990s HK popular artists have been producing both Canto-pop, and Mandarin songs, or Mando-pop, to reach a wider music market in the greater Chinese communities. The most significant success stories to date were those of Warner Music's Sandy Lam and Polygram's Grasshopper. For instance, Polygram, employing similar marketing and recording techniques as Warner Music for their Mandarin projects, sold over 450,000 copies of Sandy Lam's first Mando-pop release "Loving for the Wanderer" (Ebert 1992: 41-2). More and more artists have recorded in Mandarin after the return of HK's sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China (see Ho 2000; McIntyre *et al* 2002).

The ethno-political situation in Thailand

In 1939 Siam changed its name to Thailand, but it was then changed back to Siam between 1945 and 1949. Thailand occupies a central position on the Southeast Asian peninsula, bordered by Myanmar in the west and north, Laos in the northeast, Cambodia in the east and Malaysia in the south. The population of 63.1 million is divided between central Thai including Bangkok (BBK) (33.7%), northeastern Thai (34.2%), northern Thai (18.8%), and southern Thai (13.3%). It is relatively homogeneous with 75 % Thai, 14% Chinese, and 11% of the Malay, Khmer, the Mon, and the Vietnamese. More than 85% speak a dialect of Thai and share a common culture. BBK, which is the capital and largest city of Thailand, was founded in 1782 by King Rama I, and is the political, economic and cultural centre with a population of 6 million. Between the nineteenth century and the Second World War (1939-1945), thousands of Chinese immigrants came to BBK to seek for job opportunities. Theravada Buddhism, which embraces 95 per cent of the population, is the official religion of Thailand. Along with the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand was occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War. After the defeat of Japan in 1945, Thailand has had very close relations with the United States and was a major abettor to the Americans during the Vietnam War. Whilst the official language is Thai, Chinese and Malay are also commonly spoken among ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, many Chinese in Thailand use the Thai language, adopt Thai values, attend Thai schools, and honour Thai religious festivals (for details, see Chan and Tong 1993; Skinner 1957). The Chinese language, however, has been re-introduced into Thailand's schools and universities after a long period of official obstruction. Since the mid 1990s Chinese popular culture in Thailand has been celebrated, and imported Chinese TV shows have been highly popular (Jory 2000: 19-20).

An overview of popular music in Thailand

Though Thailand was never colonized by Western powers, popular music and other forms of European and American music have become extremely influential. By the 1930s Western classical music, jazz and tango were popular in Thailand and jazz dominated popular music. By the 1960s Western rock was popular and Thai popular artists imitated bands like Cliff Richard and the Shadows. Because television and radio stations did not reach the rest of the country before the 1950s, the development of Thai popular music before then was restricted to BBK. In the 1970s Rewat Buddhinan, a famous Thai musician, composer and chairman of the Grammy Music Company, produced Thai language rock music (Clewley 2000), and when cassette tapes reached Thailand in 1977 it marked a new era for the popular music business, particularly in BBK (Maryprasith 1999). In the early 1980s, Thai popular music was reformed by Grammy's unique fusion of local lyrics and Western pop rhythms in order to compete in the global market (Crispin 2001: 46). With the financial crisis of 1997-8, the Government encouraged its people to "buy Thai", and fans responded by turning to Thai country music (Clewley 1998: 47). Channel V, an international operation, was launched in Thailand as a joint venture with Broadcasting Network Thailand in an attempt "to be very localized by talking directly to youth and by holding local promotions" (Clewley 1999: CV8). Campbell (1994) maintains that Thai people spend their time and money on various types of popular music, but that young people in central towns, such as BBK, listen mainly to US-American-derived rock. Chris Emerson's song "All Because of You" was selected as a featured track on Thai Airlines' AC/pop in-flight channel (Taylor 2002: 20). According to Maryprasith (1999), Western popular music is preferred by BBK students, followed by Thai popular music (*phleng Thai-sakon*), then Western classical, Thai country (*Phleng Luk-thung*) and Thai classical music. Nonetheless, English is not widely spoken in Thailand, and some students listen to Western popular music as a way of practicing the language, which is a core subject in school education (ibid). Though there are many more people of Chinese origin in

BBK, there is no Chinese music station (ibid), but people listen to Chinese, Japanese and even Korean popular music in films and television serials. Audiences in Thailand have also begun to show an inclination towards Japanese pop. Bakery Music, the largest Thailand independent label, recently launched a label, Dojo (Japanese for a martial-arts practice hall), and a preteen/teen magazine, Katch, which is the biggest-selling teen magazine (McClure 2000: 49).

During these few years, the “Korean Wave” has been sweeping through HK and Thailand and South Korean music, fashion and style has overtaken Japanese pop. Korean entertainment companies are more than willing to tailor their offerings to overseas markets. For example, Korean boy or girl bands include at least one English-speaking member and others who speak Japanese or Mandarin. Their names are memorable English acronyms such as HOT, NRG and their songs' refrains are in very simple English (“I am your girl”, “I will be back”) (for details about the Korean Wave, see Yoon 2001: 94).

The study: Socio-cultural and linguistic factors determining pop music consumer behaviour

The relations between the mass media, society, and popular music have been a major subject of inquiry within sociology, communication and cultural studies. Though music research and intercultural studies are inextricably bound together (see Baes 2001; Neuenfeldt 2001a; Neuenfeldt 2001b; Moyle 2001), there is little systematic comparative research of Asian audiences, and there are none on Asian adolescents' preferences for the various languages involved in popular music. The diverse cultural, economic, and political profiles of HK and Thailand provide fertile ground for the comparison of young people' popular musical experiences and preferences. This paper hypothesizes that young people in both places have

explored Western, Japanese and other Asian popular music, whilst at the same time showing preferences for their local popular songs.

Even though musical preference has been one of the most frequently studied topics of musical behavior for decades (e.g. Burge *et al* 2002; Fetto 2002/2003; Finnas 1987; Gregory 1994; LeBlanc *et al* 1988; LeBlanc *et al* 1996; Madsen *et al* 1986; North *et al* 2000; Schmidt and Zdzinski 1993; North and Hargreaves 2000; Sims 1987; Tarrant *et al* 2001; Wapnick 1976, 1980), most of these studies concern only North American and European youth. Most of the literature concerning music and language use is focused on linguistic development and the relationship between musical and linguistic structures (Feld and Fox 1994: 26). This study deals with individual differences (age and gender); social and cultural influences (language, musical tastes and society); and pop music consumer behaviour. Educational and family issues as they relate to ethnicity, age, and other cultural contexts will also be examined. The ethnographic interviews provide a means of understanding popular musical preferences across the diverse adolescent cultures of HK and Thailand, and their various determinants. They use the following three main questions:

- (1) To what extent does the language of popular songs influence listeners' musical preferences?
- (2) What are the most attractive popular musical and non-musical elements?
- (3) Are there any similarities and differences among the respondents' popular musical preferences around such variables as age, gender, education, peer group and family background?

Procedures and methods in the collection of the data

The study was conducted between June and November 2003. It consists of three parts: (1) personal data including gender, age, educational level, popular music buying habits (CDs, VCDs, or DVDs and concert attendance), and preferences for classical or pop music; (2) a paper-and-pencil listening test involving fifteen pop songs; and (3) an interview concerning opinions about pop music, pop idols and the influence of peers, siblings and parents.

The listening test compared HK and BBK young people's preferences for fifteen excerpts from popular songs in Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Spanish, and English. Respondents were found in public places such as parks, beaches, schools, a university campus, a quiet food court and shopping malls. Each HK participant was rewarded with a bookshop or fast-food voucher, whilst each one in BBK was given a plastic carrier bag. Both contemporary and older popular songs were selected from HK, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Thailand, England and the United States. The selection was intended to reveal participants' familiarity with the music and language of the songs, and to identify the subjects' preferences. In HK an MD player with headphones was used, whilst in BBK a CD player was played through its loudspeakers, because, as suggested by the translator, most respondents there might not have any experience with MD players. The listening test lasted about 23 minutes.

The listening test was conducted on both an individual and group basis by the use of the random sampling of "a person on the street". It incorporated both fast and slow vocal excerpts (see Table 1 for information about the songs).

Table 1: Excerpts from Songs for the Listening Tests

Sequence	Song title	Singer	Gender	Language	Tempi Metronome/software*	Duration
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1	Jaleo	Ricky Martin	Male	Spanish	96	1:20
2	Sad Tears	Fin K. L.	Female	Korean	105	1:09
3	You Love Me	Wu Bai	Male	Mandarin	70	1:19
4	American Life	Madonna	Female	English	101	1:36
5	Variety	Joey Boy	Male	Thai	101	1:13
6	Blessing	Kelly Chan	Famale	Cantonese	95	1:09
7	Innocence	Smag	Male	Japanese	60	1:17
8	Not Gonna Get Us	t.A.T.u.	Female	English	64	1:20
9	I Believe	Sam Lee	Male	Korean	65	1:17
10	Pain of Women	Anita Mui & Andy Hui	Female & Male	Cantonese	78	1:05
11	All In Love Is Fair	Stevie Wonder	Male	English	67	1:20
12	No, no!	Nicole	Famale	Thai	71	1:10
13	I Finally Lose You	Zhao Chuan	Male	Mandarin	65	1:22
14	Automatic	Hikaru Utada	Female	Japanese	95	1:09
15	The Way I Am	Eminem	Male	English	87	1:30

* Two ways to deduce tempi:

- 1) Listening to music and checking the tempi with a digital metronome;
- 2) Listening to music and tapping on the spacebar of a computer keyboard, tempi being estimated with a software entitled “AnalogX Tap Tempo”.

The excerpts were ordered systematically with respect to tempo, gender and country of origin. Subjects were asked whether they had listened to each excerpt and to what extent they liked it. Variation in musical preferences was estimated by requesting participants to choose from five statements the one that best described their reaction to the music. The five statements were presented in the following order:

1. strongly dislike
2. dislike
3. undecided
4. like

5. like very much

“Post Hoc test”, “t-test” and “association” were adopted for the analysis. The GLM (General Linear Model) procedure provided regression analysis and analysis of variance for multiple dependent variables by one or more independent variables. Using the GLM procedure, the null hypothesis about the effects of the independent variables by means of various groupings of a joint distribution of dependent variables could be tested. “Post hoc test” was also used to evaluate differences between specific means.

After the listening test, they also answered descriptive questions in face-to-face interviews, during which notes were taken. Another twenty minutes were allocated for each interview.

Interview questions for the semi-structured interviews were as follows:

Section A

1. What do you feel about the 15 pop songs that you listened to earlier?
2. What are the musical and non-musical elements that attract you to popular music?
3. Do you think the language of popular song lyrics affects your preferences? To what extent?
4. Do you prefer songs sung in your mother tongue, and why?
5. When you listen to a new popular song, what factors are the most influential on your tastes?
6. Do you listen to some particular pop songs repeatedly, and why?
7. Do you have any popular idols? Please name a few including local and international artists.
8. To what extent do your listening preferences relate to your popular idols?
9. Do the presentational styles of your preferred popular singers influence your choice?

Section B

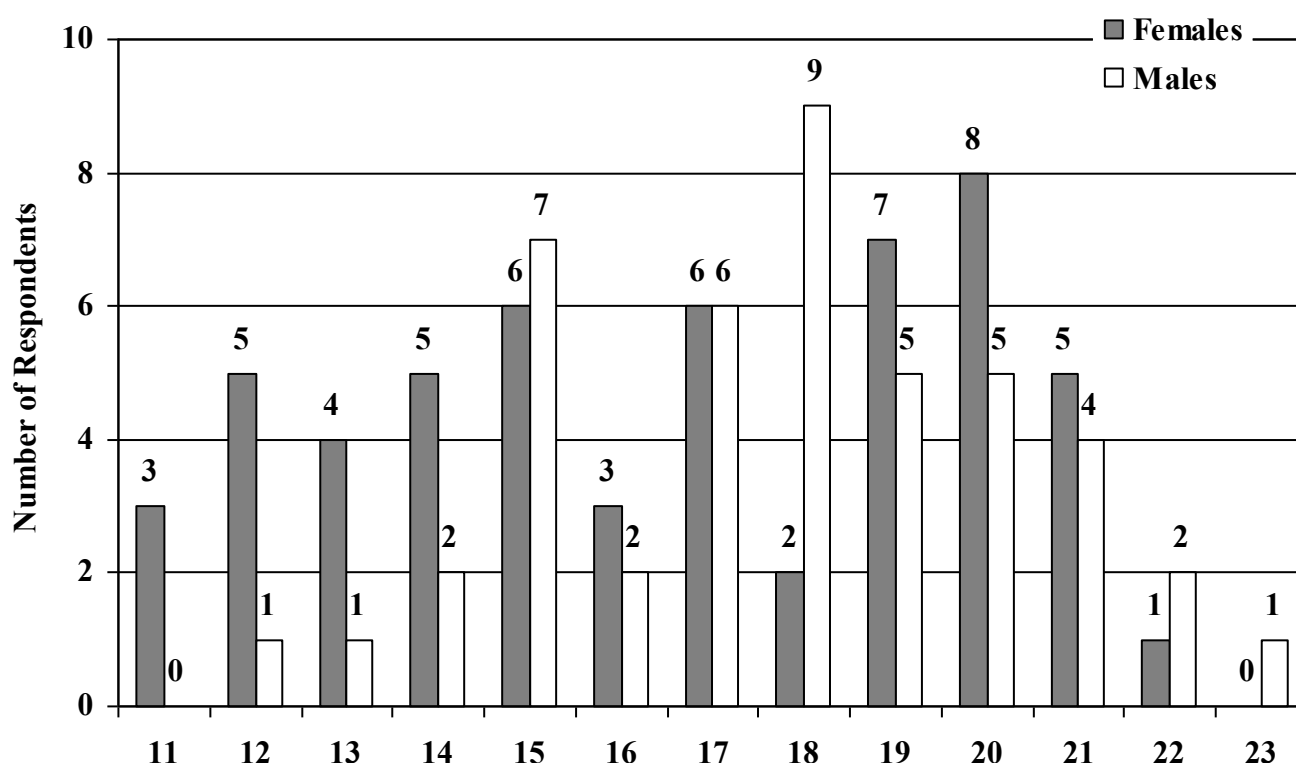
1. What type of music do your parents prefer?
2. What type of music do your siblings prefer?
3. What type of music do your good friends prefer?
4. Who has exerted the most influence on your musical preferences? Do you listen together with them?

Key findings of the research

Respondents

Fifty BBK and fifty HK adolescents were selected to participate in the study, each divided into three levels of education: primary, secondary and higher. The 100 participants included 55 females and 45 males aged between 11 and 23 (for the distribution of the age among females and males, see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Age distribution among Hong Kong's and Thai's females and males



Five respondents were attending primary education, 20 junior secondary education, 38 senior secondary education, 1 institute of vocation education, 6 polytechnic education and 30 university education. Among HK respondents, only 6 females and 4 males were Christians, 4 females and 2 males were Catholics and the rest had no religious beliefs; whilst all Thai respondents were Buddhists. Among the 50 HK respondents, only one stated that his first language was Mandarin and the rest were Cantonese; five said that their second language was Mandarin, two had no opinion on their second language and the 43 remaining cited English. All 50 Thai subjects claimed that their first language was Thai. 31 said that they had no second language, whilst the other 18 and one said that English and Chinese were their second languages respectively.

Musical behaviour toward popular music

To some extent young people's preference for popular music is determined by their mother tongue. Subjects were asked to select their most preferred musical style from the following

list of twelve: Western folk music; Western classical music; Western pop; Chinese classical music; Chinese folk music; Thai classical music; Thai country pop music (*Phleng Luk-thung*); Thai capital pop music (*Phleng Thai-sakon*); Korean pop; Japanese pop; Mandarin pop; Cantonese pop. 32 of the HK youths chose an example of Cantonese pop as their favourite, 5 chose Western pop, 5 Japanese pop, 4 Mandarin pop, 2 Western classical music, 1 Korean pop, and 1 Western folk music. 27 Thai youths preferred an example of Thai capital popular music, 10 Western pop, 4 western classical, 3 for both Thai and Western pop, 1 Thai, Japanese pop and Western classical, 1 for four kinds of Thai, Korean, Japanese and Cantonese pop, 1 Western metal, 1 Western and Chinese folk, 1 Thai country pop, and 1 for Thai classical music.

Though most subjects of both places preferred popular music, most did not spend their spare time listening to recorded music, attending pop concerts, or buying pop music CDs, MDs, VCDs and DVDs. When asked about their habits of buying popular music MDs, CDs, VCDs and DVDs, 14 in HK answered “Yes, often”; 15 “Sometimes”, 19 “Seldom” and 2 “Never”; whilst 10 BBK subjects said “No”, 1 “No comment”, 21 “Seldom”, 16 “Sometimes” and 2 “Very often”. Whilst these latter 2 Thai respondents who said that they “Very often” bought audio and visual pop music products, one never went to pop concerts and another went “Sometimes”. Even though 15 HK respondents said that they liked popular music very much, only one often went to pop concerts whilst 10 said that they did “sometimes”.

Preferred popular songs in music listening

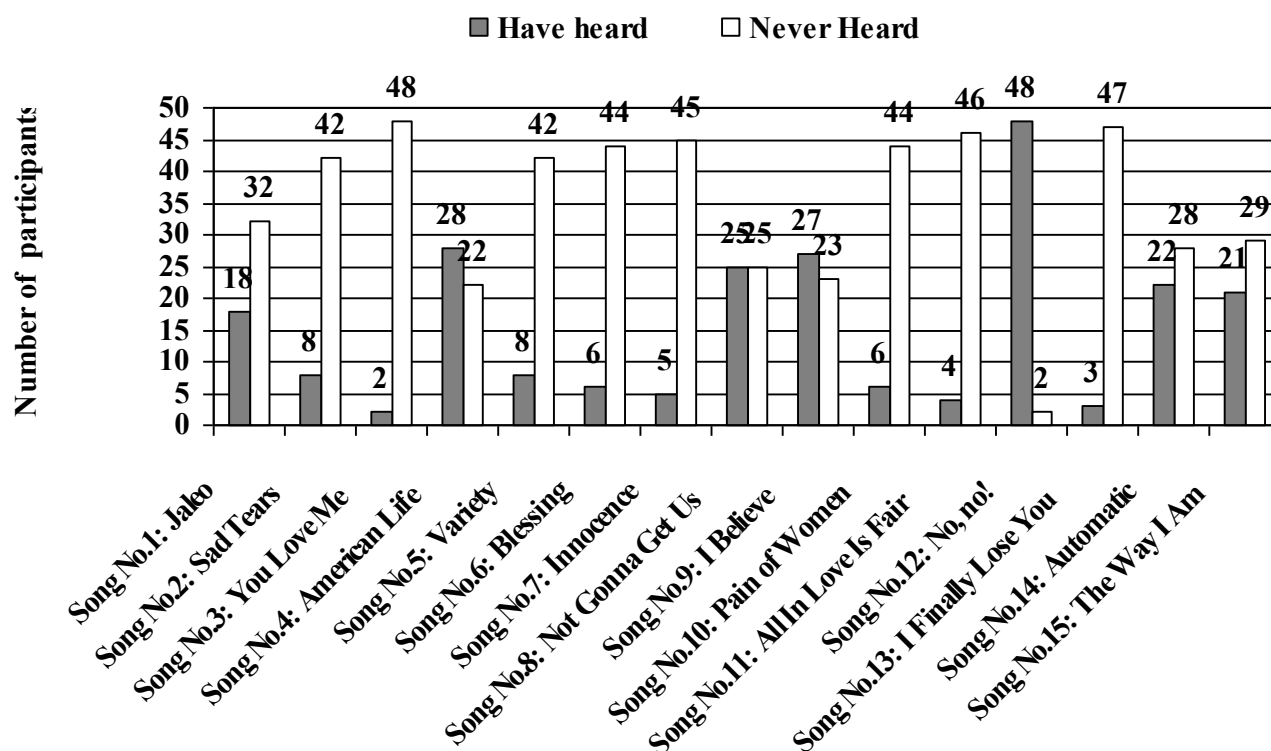
Most participants were very patient about listening to the songs. Most in HK seemed comparatively shy, and did not show much reaction, sitting still and looking at the questionnaire paper whilst rating their answers. However, in both HK and BBK, when the youths enjoyed the songs, they always tapped their feet and sang along. The Thai youths

seemed more willing to express their feelings when they listened, and when they recognized the tune of songs nos. 4 and 12 (see Table 1), they sang along. Most Thai subjects, when they listened to the instrumental introduction of the Mandarin song no.13, had no special facial expressions, but when the voice entered they laughed at the singing style and seemed disappointed. When respondents heard unfamiliar songs they did not like, they would make strange facial expressions or laugh.

As the group sizes were unequal in the sample, the harmonic mean of the group sizes was used. The “Independent-Samples T Test” procedure compared means for the two groups of cases. On the whole HK subjects maintained a higher responding rate for the 15 songs. The data showed that their religions and their ratings were independent at the 0.112 level (2-tailed). Gender and ratings for pop songs were also found to be insignificant. However, the data showed that the correlation of the song languages and the subjects’ first language were significant, but Korean songs were rated higher and Mandarin occupied the lowest rating. The tempi of the songs were found not to be co-related to the ratings. Ages and preferences for various categories of musical styles such as Cantonese pop, Chinese classical music, Japanese pop, Korean pop, Mandarin pop, Thai country pop, Western pop, Western folk, Western classical music, Thai classical and Thai capital pop were dependent. The older subjects preferred classical music and Western styles including Western folk, Western pop and Western classics. The data also showed that subjects attending a higher level of education had a higher rating over their preferences.

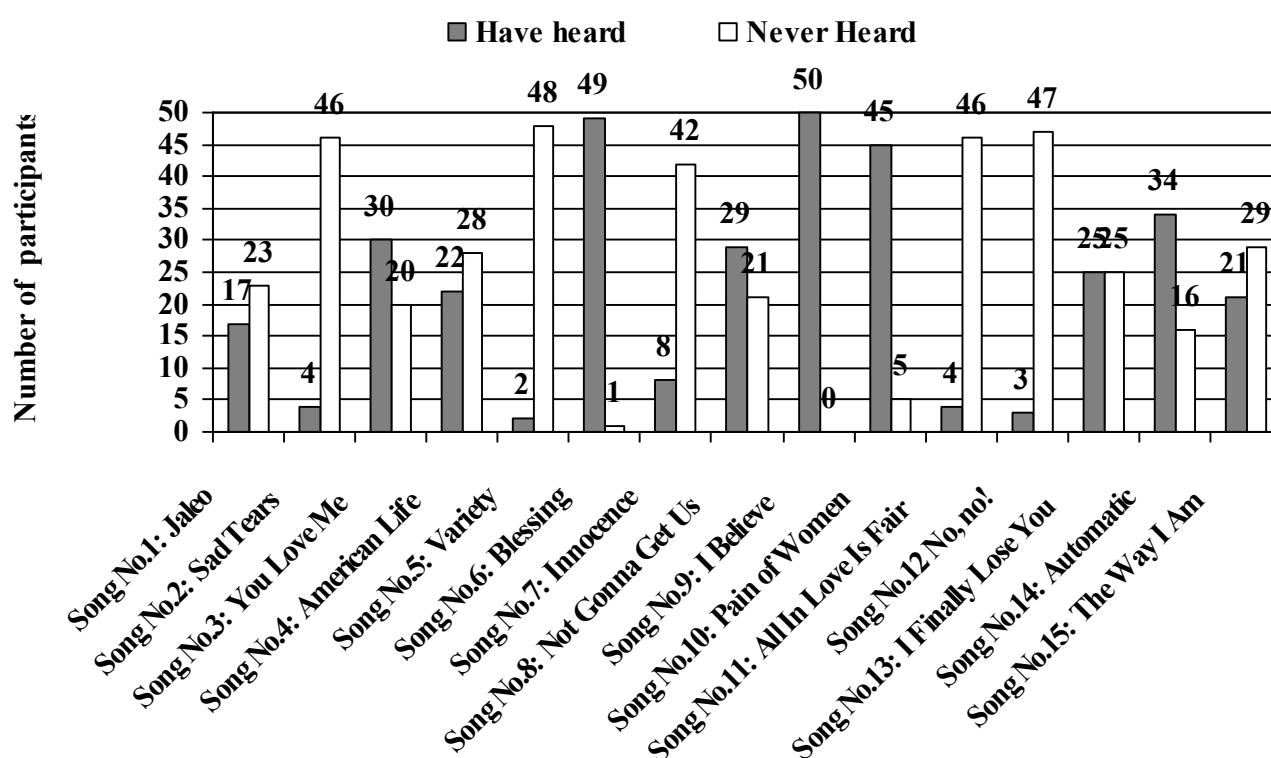
27 Thai and 50 HK respondents had heard the Korean song “I Believe” (no.9) (see Figures 2 and 3). Over half of the BBK respondents had heard song nos.4, 9 and 12 before; whilst song nos.3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, and 13 had been heard least before (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Songs heard and never heard before among the Thai participants



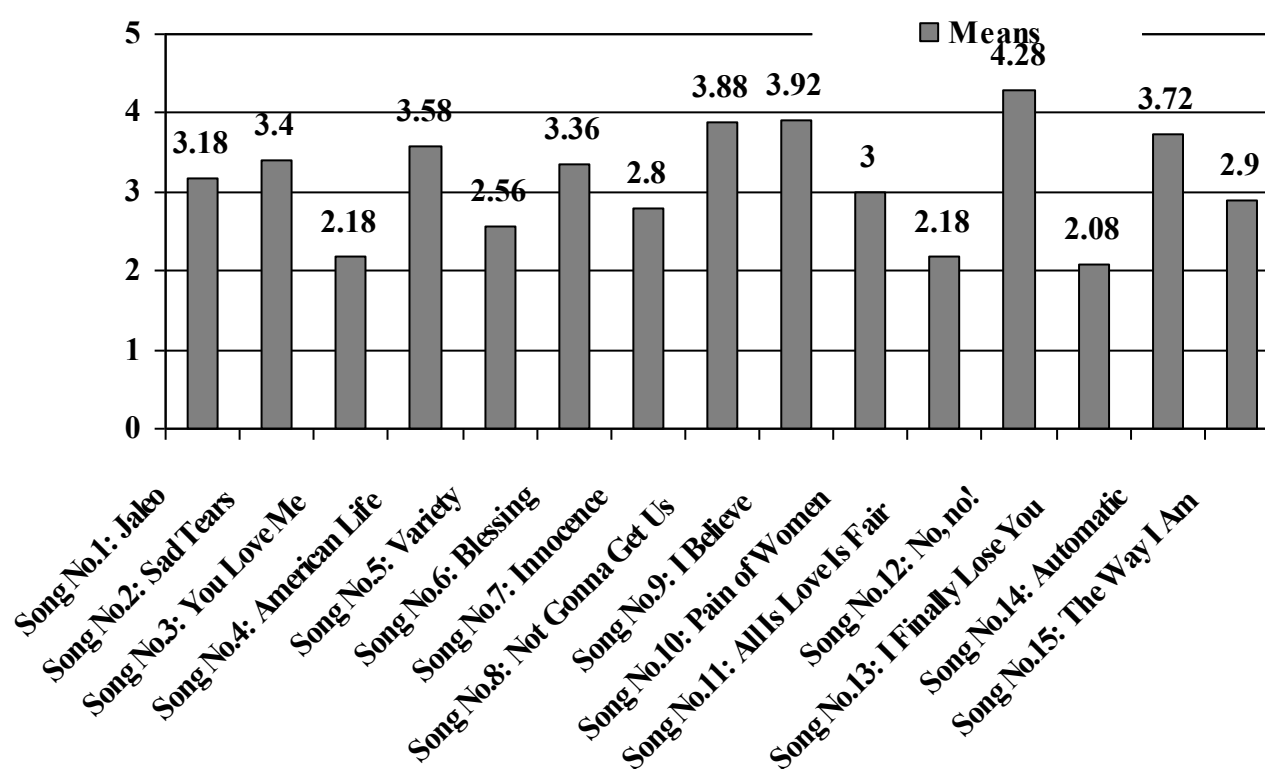
Outside the Cantonese songs (i.e. nos. 6, 10), over half of the HK subjects had heard songs the Mandarin song of no. 3 and the English song of no. 8. (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Songs heard and never heard before among the Hong Kong's participants



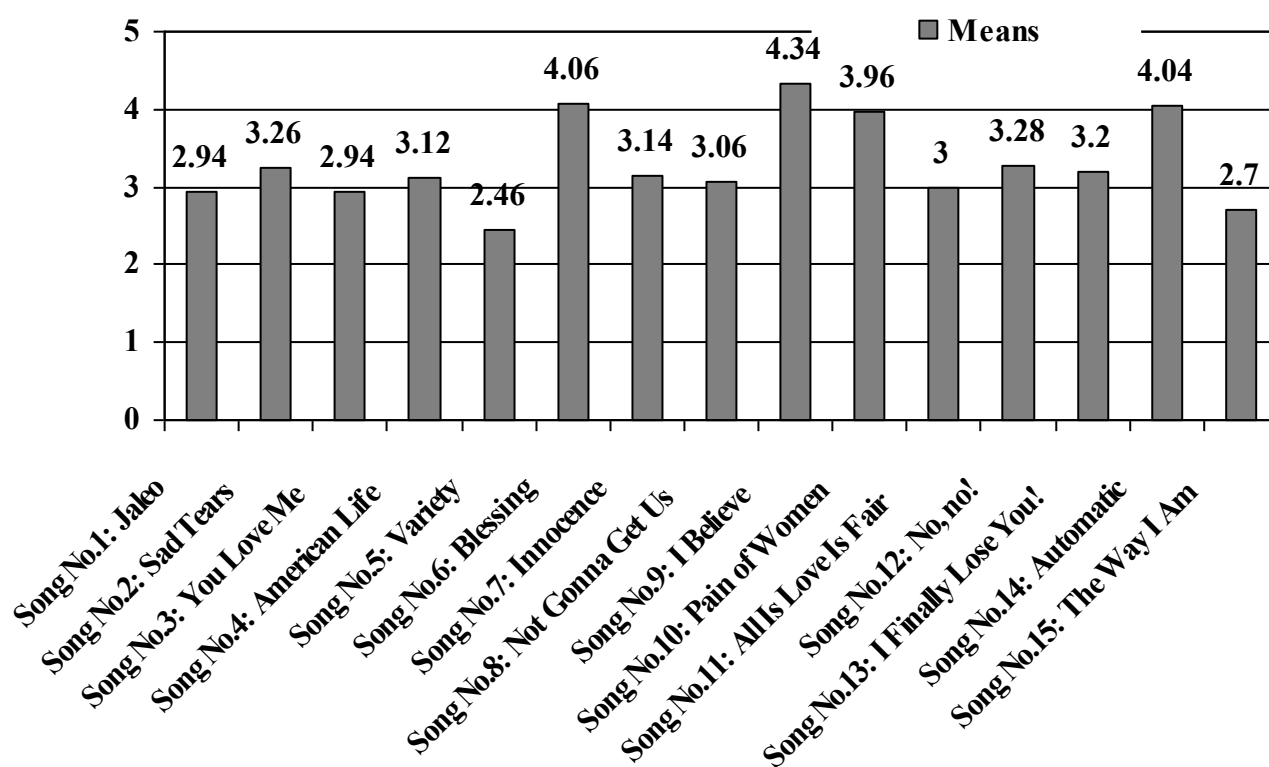
Though no.5 “Variety” was sung in Thai, only eight BBK subjects had heard it before. The responding means for the first five preferred songs among BBK subjects were 4.28 ($SD=0.671277$) for song no.12, 3.92 ($SD=1.046666$) for no.9, 3.88 ($SD=0.982292$) for no.8, 3.72 ($SD=0.858095$) for no.14, and 3.58 ($SD=0.970798$) for no.4 (1= “Strongly dislike”, 2 = “dislike”, 3 = “Undecided”, 4 = “Like”, and 5 = “Like very much”) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Means of preferences scores for the 15 popular songs among the Thai participants



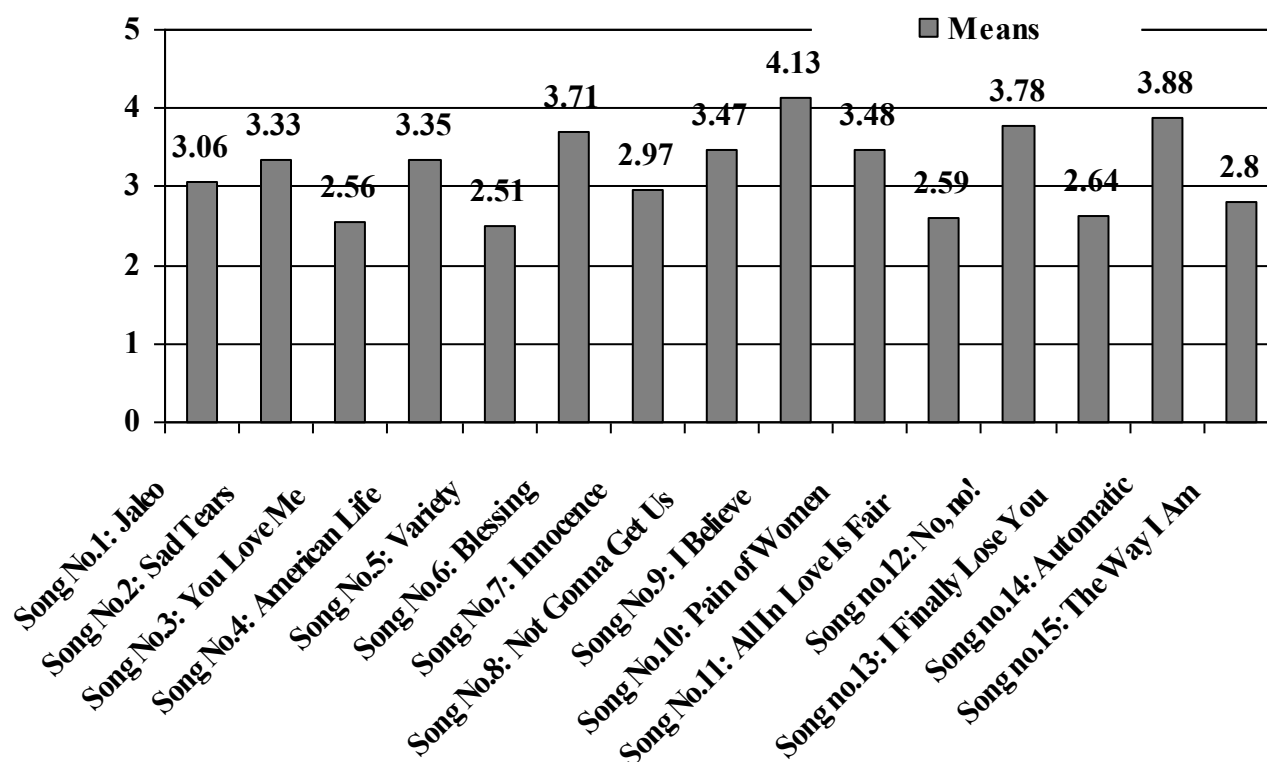
All 50 HK respondents had heard the Korean song “I Believe”, 49 had heard the Cantonese song “Blessing”, and 45 had heard the Cantonese song “Pain of Women” (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Means of preferences scores for the 15 popular songs among the Hong Kong participants



The HK subjects ranked the Korean song “I Believe” as their most preferred and the responding means of the first five songs were in the order of 4.34 ($SD = 0.745326$) for no.9, 4.06 ($SD = 0.71171$) for no.6, 4.04 ($SD = 0.781417$) for no.14, 3.96 ($SD = 0.637598$) for no.10, and 3.28 ($SD = 0.7295512$) for no. 12 (see Figure 5). On average, the Korean song “I Believe” (no.9) ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.928287$) was the most preferred amongst all the subjects (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Means of preference scores among both Hong Kong and Thai participants



The Japanese song no. 14 “Automatic” ($M= 3.88$, $SD= 0.832181$) came second, the Thai song no.12 “No, no” ($M=3.78$, $SD= 0.859645$) came third, the Cantonese song no.6 “Blessing” the fourth ($M=3.71$; $SD= 1.027845$), and the Cantonese song no.10 “Pain of Women” ($M= 3.48$, $SD= 0.937221$) the fifth (see Figure 6). Correlations between songs heard and not heard before were significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Feelings about the 15 songs in the listening test

After the listening test participants were asked to express what they felt about all 15 songs. Most Thai subjects indicated that some songs were nice and a few said that they did not like them because of their “unfamiliarity, “song languages”, “singing voice”, and “strange musical style of the singing part not matching the instrumental arrangement”. HK subjects

shared similar attitudes, some saying that they preferred “lively music”, “not noisy”, “slower tempi”, “soft and beautiful melody”, and “familiarity”. Many admitted that they generally preferred Cantonese-pop because it was easier to understand. One HK boy claimed that he did not like unhealthy and meaningless lyrics. Two HK girls expressed their appreciation for the rap song no.15, and one boy and one girl thought it too noisy.

When asked about the musical elements that attracted the participants to popular music, 17 Thai subjects selected melody as the priority, insofar as it must be “easy listening”, “lively music”, and “relaxing”. 7 Thai subjects enjoyed songs with well-defined rhythm patterns. 25 HK subjects liked those with a “beautiful melody”, “memorable melody”, and “romantic melody”, whilst others thought the singing techniques of the singers, rhythm, good arrangement of music, accompaniment, and tempi to be most significant. When invited to express their views on the non-musical elements, many Thai youths highlighted good looks and dressing style. Only two Thais thought that meaningful lyrics were significant. 31 HK subjects agreed that lyrics were most important in the sense that they must be understood, encouraging and meaningful. Thus they preferred Cantonese pop. 18 HK youths liked songs by their favourite pop singers, and said that their pop idols must have a healthy public image. Two HK youths thought the attitude of the singers significant.

Language and popular songs

The interviewees in both places largely agreed that the language of popular song lyrics effected their preferences, in that they felt more comfortable if they knew the meanings of songs. 34 Thai and 35 HK respondents preferred to listen to songs in their mother language. Most preferred songs in their mother tongue, and only those others in their second language if they were understandable:

Thai respondent 6: "I can immediately understand the lyrics. For foreign songs, I have to listen to it many times to get the meaning."

Thai respondent 5: "I like Thai songs because I understand the song lyrics. For foreign songs, I only listen to the music and rhythm."

Thai respondent 9: "Depends on the words. I prefer Thai songs because I understand the lyrics. For the English songs, if I understand the lyrics, I also like them."

Thai respondent 26: "It is our language. I am patriotic."

Thai respondent 43: "The language is important as I understand what the song-writer wants to convey as the message in the song."

Some HK interviewees expressed a similar attitude, most preferring Canto-pop, English pop, and Mandarin pop as they could understand the lyrics.

HK respondent 4: "I would feel more familiar with the songs that are sung in my mother tongue."

HK respondent 7: "I only listen to Canto-pop. I don't listen to songs if I cannot understand the lyrics."

HK respondent 34: "I like Canto-pop very much. I don't like the songs that I am not familiar with in the Korean and Thai languages."

HK respondent 41: "I prefer to listen to songs in my mother tongue. I feel that songs are meaningless when I can't understand them."

HK respondent 44: "I like Canto-pop more. I accept Mandarin, Western and Japanese pop songs. But I don't like music sung in other languages such as Thai."

HK respondent 46: "I feel better if I can understand the lyrics of songs."

HK respondent 50: "I feel good if I can sing the songs and understand the lyrical meaning."

Six HK respondents admitted that their preference for Canto-pop was mostly influenced by the HK mass media. In spite of the language problem, one HK boy said that even though he did not like songs in the languages he could not understand, he nonetheless liked Korean songs. Though many agreed that the language of pop songs lyrics effected their preference, 10 and 11 HK and BBK interviewees still maintained that melody and rhythm were more important respectively. These subjects would accept other languages as long as the music was good. For example:

Thai respondent 11: "My preference does not rely on the languages of songs. If the melody and rhythm are nice, I'll still listen to the songs."

Thai respondent 20: "I like the rhythmic part and the overall composition."

Thai respondent 35: "I mainly listen to the melody and rhythm."

Thai respondent 38: "I mainly listen to the melody."

HK respondent 13: "I only care about the style of music."

HK respondent 26: "I like good songs written in any languages."

HK respondent 28: "Languages do not affect my song preference at all."

HK respondent 40: "I only focus on the music."

Listening to new songs and repeated listening

Most interviewees in both communities said that "good and beautiful melodies", a "good singing voice", and "good lyrics" attracted them to new popular songs. A few would always be interested in new songs by their pop idols. 23 HK subjects first heard new pop songs on the basis of recommendations from the mass media such as television, radio, the internet, friends, classmates, and sisters. A few gleaned first hand information from the web. One HK girl said she would download the new songs of her favorite singers as MP3 files, and buy the CDs if she liked them. One HK boy said that he first heard new pop songs as MP3 files sent to him by friends through the internet. Only 7 Thai subjects were recommended new songs by radio and television, whilst most agreed that they would find out their favorite songs by themselves. One Thai subject visited a music shop, chose some recordings to listen to, and on that basis decided which to buy.

When asked about their habits of listening again to particular songs, 49 said that repeated listening would depend on the extent to which they liked the songs and found their lyrics meaningful. One Thai girl said that it depended on whether she wanted to study the lyrics more closely. One Thai boy said that he listened again to songs on the internet. Among the HK respondents, 43 were in the habit of listening again to particular songs, whilst 3 said "No" and the other 3 "Depends". Four of them had a song list in their MP3 player, including newly released songs, which they listened to repeatedly. Amongst those that said "No", two boys only listened again to classical music, whilst one only listened repeatedly to J. S. Bach's music. The other one said "No" because she thought it boring to listen the same song repeatedly.

Pop idols and popular songs

49 Thai and 43 HK respondents admitted having pop idols and most preferred local singers. 35 and 30 HK and Thai respondents respectively believed that good presentational skills, including dancing technique, fashionable clothes, singing technique, and image were all significant. Among the most popular Thai singers, D2B were named thrice, Bird Thongchai and Dome Pakorn twice. Among the most popular idols among HK subjects, female singers such as Joey Yung were named eight times, Miriam Yeung six times, Kelly Chan and Twins five times. For male singers Eason Chan was named eight times, Jacky Cheung six times, Andy Law four times, Haken Lee and Beyond twice. Most of the 49 Thais stated that they preferred artists with good voices; whilst a few noted that good looks, good dancing, unique character, and good images were also attractive. When asked about their favorite international singers, nice songs and a powerful voice were the main consideration. For example:

- Thai respondent 4: "David Clawford, Sarah Brightman and Celine Dion have powerful voices."
- Thai respondent 7: "Though I don't understand what Kinki Kid (a famous Japanese pop band) sing, all of their songs are nice."
- Thai respondent 8: "I like Ricky Martin. He is good looking. I also like the Latin drum rhythms of his songs."
- Thai respondent 16: "I like Blue Wave because their music has a good match with the rhythms and lyrics."
- Thai respondent 29: "I like t.A.T.u because they have good voice and are good looking."
- Thai respondent 41: "I like Britney Spears and Sonia. Britney is cute and good at dancing. Her concert performance was very attractive..."
- HK respondent 2: "I like Jay Chou, David Tao, and Jeff Chang (all of them are Taiwanese pop singers) because their voices are good."
- HK respondent 3: "I like Park Jiyeon (a Korean singer) because her dancing technique and songs were good."
- HK respondent 49: "I like Westlife because of their soft music, Celine Dion for her good voice and beautiful melodies of her songs. I also like t.A.T.U. because I like their rock music very much."

Even though many Hong Kong and Thai subjects had their popular idols, their listening preference for pop music greatly depended on the attraction of each individual song style. Some Thais alleged that if they liked singers they would always buy their new albums. Hong

Kong subjects paid more attention to their idols' new releases but still accepted any good songs by other artists.

Influence of parents, siblings and friends on music listening

When asked about the preferred music styles of their parents, siblings and good friends, most subjects in HK and Thailand said that their siblings and peers shared their same preference for Canto-pop and Thai pop respectively. A few HK and Thai subjects noted that their siblings and good friends loved Western pop. However, none of subjects from the two places said that their siblings and good friends were fond of classical music, and that their parents preferred oldies or Thai country pop. Most HK subjects maintained that their parents preferred 1970s and 1980s Canto-pop, whilst a few said that they preferred 1970s and 1980s Western and Mandarin pop. Western classical music, Christian hymns and Chinese opera were each preferred by just one HK subject's father. 17 Thai parents were thought to prefer Thai country pop, 11 Thai pop oldies from the 1960s, 8 Thai pop, 2 Thai songs for life, 2 Western pop, 4 Western oldies like the Bee Gees, and 2 Thai classical music. When asked about the most influential person on their musical preferences, most respondents in both places said that they were not influenced by their parents, friends and siblings. However, their parents shared their Western pop and oldies at home; whilst some respondents recommended good songs to one another by exchanging MP3s, at a Karaoke Box and at pop music concerts. Respondents in both places agreed that they shared their musical tastes with good friends.

Summary and discussion

The contemporary predominance of Cantopop and Thai pop were clearly registered by the respective HK and Thai subjects' preferences. As mentioned earlier 32 of HK youths rated Cantonese pop for their first preference and 28 Thai youths rated Thai capital popular music. Despite most subjects' preference for their local pop, the Korean song "I Believe" scored

highly in the listening test. The distinctive popular musical tastes of the young people sampled were sufficiently shared in opposition to the classical musical tastes of their music teachers and schools, to suggest an alternative student musical culture amongst friends and classmates. Be it nationwide, regional or city-by-city, music marketing is an economic approach to establish long-term customer relationships. The adoration of local popular singers has become a part of youth culture in HK and Thailand. Based on the collective data, this study can be summarized in terms of apparent challenges to our three fundamental heuristic categories:

1. The understanding of song lyrics among young people does not significantly effect their popular music preferences.
2. The globalization of the music market does not necessarily lead to culturally heterogeneous processes.
3. The higher education level of young people would maintain a higher rate of all musical styles as well as a higher respondent rating for Western classics, English folk and pop.

Though most of the respondents in both places agreed that the language of popular songs effected their preference and understanding, the Korean song “I Believe” scored the highest in the listening test with an average mean of 4.13 (from 5 = “Strongly like” to 1 = “Strongly dislike”), which in part possibly results from its easily remembered title. HK subjects rated this song at a mean of 4.34 and Thai ones at 3.96 (just after the highest mean of the Thai song “No, No” at 4.28). Since the end of the Second World War, English has had more impact than French, German, Japanese, Korean or any other language in Asian countries. It is common practice for both HK and Thai youths to learn English as their second language, which might partly explain why many of the subjects said that Western pop was their second preference. American pop songs are so enthusiastically accepted by Asian young people.

Since the late 1990s, South Korea's film industry business has undergone a remarkable transformation in the hands of a new generation of Korean film makers. During the summer of 2001, South Korean film goers went crazy for the romantic comedy *My Sassy Girl* (*Yeopgijeogin geunye*), which earned a place in the record books as the highest grossing Korean comedy history in South Korea, as well as in other Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Thailand. *My Sassy Girl* is a light-hearted comedy with a good blend of teen humour, good theme music, and traditional melodramatic romance. With the captivating ballad "I Believe" sung by Sam Lee, the film swept across Asia from 2001 to 2002. "I Believe" has also been one of the most popular ringtones for download, and Hong Kong and Thai popular singers sang it in their local languages. So there could well be a mixture of factors involved in its preference in the listening test.

Young people's daily exposure to the various modes of mass media such as radio, television (including Channel V), and more recently, the internet, has grown in both width and depth, and has an enormous influence on their musical behavior. However, the globalization of the music market does not necessarily lead to the creation of culturally heterogeneous processes. The music industry promotes local popular singers by dramatizing the relations between fans and artists through the reproduction of idols' images as posters and badges. So it is no surprise that the young people who were interviewed in both places said that their popular idols were mainly their local pop stars (see Ho 2002; So 2002; Marysraith 1999). The contents of the lyrics will affect people's musical preferences. As highlighted by HK and BBK participants, songs sung in their native language are more easily understood and some stated their preference for encouraging, meaningful, and healthy lyrics. To some extent the worship of local pop idols depends on a clear understanding of their lyrics. Global pop does not therefore transcend performers' and audiences' languages and dialects. Popular music must always

have rhythmic, melodic, and timbral properties, and for those adolescents who are preeminently interested in music alone, linguistic differences are never prohibitive.

Ages and preferences for various categories of musical styles are related. The older subjects and those in higher education showed a greater preference for classical and Western styles including folk, pop and classics, whilst the informal musical experience of the younger participants in this study seemed to be more affected by their peer group. They generally preferred local rather than foreign pop and were less interested in other styles. Further research into the relations between peer cultures, educational attainment and the construction of personal musical tastes is required.

To a considerable extent, the perspectives of contemporary HK Chinese and Thai youths are a product of the surge in both communities towards a market economy, and the simultaneous exposure to diverse foreign music, and other consumer products. The mass media, defined in the conventional sense as the electronic forms of radio, television, film and recorded music, and the print forms of newspapers and magazines, are the artifacts, experiences and practices of popular music for contemporary youth. The findings on popular music preferences are consistent with the sociological generalization that young people tend to be ethnocentric about the familiar stimuli of native languages. This study may provide methodological and substantive rationales for expanding inquiry into the cross-cultural correlates of popular musical preferences for students of sociology, media and communication studies, and intercultural studies.

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