

CHARTING THE COURSE: TAIWANESE POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES IN RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

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Introduction

The field of Taiwanese popular music studies has garnered increasing scholarly interest in recent years. Taiwan's vibrant music scene, with its roots in Hokkien songs from the Japanese colonial era and its evolution into the diverse soundscape of today, offers a rich tapestry for academic exploration.¹ Researchers have delved into the historical development, socio-political dimensions, and cultural impact of Taiwanese popular music, contributing to a growing body of knowledge.

Despite these significant contributions, Taiwanese popular music studies face challenges in gaining wider international recognition. The predominance of Chinese-language scholarship presents a linguistic barrier, limiting accessibility for non-Chinese-speaking audiences. Although English-language research is gradually increasing, notably with the publication of two edited volumes (Guy, 2022; Tsai, Ho & Jian, 2019), it remains relatively limited within the field. Furthermore, Taiwanese studies as a whole often struggles to establish itself within predominantly English-language global disciplines such as Asian studies, ethnomusicology, popular music studies, and cultural studies, which further hampers the dissemination and recognition of Taiwanese popular music research.

This article seeks to mitigate the impact of these challenges by providing an overview of the existing literature on Taiwanese popular music. It traces representative studies, identifies key themes and findings, and explores potential future directions in the field. By making these insights more accessible to international scholars and enthusiasts, this article aims to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the vibrant and multifaceted nature of Taiwanese popular music.

Studies on Popular Music in Colonial Taiwan

Taiwanese popular music, originating from commercially produced Hokkien pop songs, thrived in the 1930s during the Japanese colonial era. These songs were born from a unique cultural fusion, blending Taiwanese folk music with influences from Japanese, Shanghai, and Western popular music. The recording industry's growth, fueled by technological advancements in gramophones, radio, and film, played a pivotal role in expanding the reach and popularity of these new musical expressions. Classics such as "*Wang chunfeng*" (Longing for the Spring Breeze) and "*Yuye hua*" (The Torment of a Flower), born during this period, continue to resonate with audiences today.²

Over the past decade, scholarship on Hokkien pop songs from the colonial era has flourished, fueled by advancements in international recorded music studies and renewed access to related 78-rpm phonograph records (e.g., Hung, 2021; L.-C. Lin, 2015; Liu, 2013; T.-W. Lin, 2015; Y.-F. Wang, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2022; Y.-W. Wang, 2013; Y.-Y. Huang, 2014). Among these works, Huang Yu-Yuan's (2014) monograph stands out as an earlier, dedicated study of Taiwanese popular music during the Japanese colonial period. Based on historical archives, it examines the recording industry's history, analyzes song lyrics, and explores their cultural meanings.

Wang Ying-Fen has also made significant contributions to the study of colonial Taiwan's phonograph records and popular music. Wang investigates early popular song composers like Zhang Fu-Xing and Pan Rong-Zhi, who blended Western influences with local traditions (Y.-F. Wang, 2012a, 2012b). Moreover, Wang (2013) employed newly discovered archives from the Nippon Phonograph Company to reconstruct its production strategies, providing crucial insights into the historical development of the recording industry in Taiwan under Japanese rule. Wang's recent publication (2022) offers a synthesis of her prior research endeavors and provides valuable methodological guidance for future investigations into recorded music from the colonial period in Taiwan.

Furthermore, Hung Fang-Yi's (2020) monograph offers a comprehensive overview of Taiwanese popular music during the Japanese colonial period, exploring the multifaceted roles of listeners, performers, creators, and industry. By analyzing numerous historical documents and phonograph records, Hung reconstructs this musical history and examines the socio-cultural implications of the songs, focusing on themes such as gender and romance.

Studies on Postwar Taiwanese Popular Music

After World War II, with the arrival of the Kuomintang government from mainland China, Mandarin was mandated as the "national language" in Taiwan. This led to the rise of Mandopop (Mandarin popular songs) on the island,³ often infused with nationalistic sentiments. Conversely, Hokkien songs faced suppression due to the Kuomintang's language policies, hindering their growth and popularity. Despite this suppression, Hokkien pop continued to evolve, reflecting the experiences and aspirations of the Taiwanese people.

Numerous scholars have explored the significant role of postwar Hokkien pop in Taiwan's postwar era (e.g., Jones, 2020; P.-F. Chen, 2020; Shih, 2014, 2019; Taylor, 2004; Y.-Y. Huang, 2019). These studies frequently emphasize how this musical genre served as a crucial vehicle for expressing local sentiments and resisting the Kuomintang's language policies. For example, C.S. Stone Shih's (2014) monography examines the interconnected network of musicians, producers, distributors, and media outlets involved in Hokkien pop music. By utilizing theoretical concepts like "rhizome," "lines of flight," "hidden knowledge," and "quasi-globalization," Shih illuminates how Hokkien pop navigated censorship and marginalization to forge a distinct cultural identity. Similarly, Chen Pei-Feng's (2020) monography shows how the frequent use of Japanese *enka* covers with their distinctive vibrato style reflected collective trauma and a desire for self-redemption among marginalized *bensheng ren* under the Kuomintang regime.⁴ Andrew Jones (2020) also explores this theme in his analysis of the 1969 Taiwanese musical film "Goodbye, Taipei," featuring Hokkien pop artist Wen Shia. Jones argues that Wen Shia strategically used cover songs, borrowing melodies from Western and Japanese pop hits, to resist cultural assimilation and express local sentiments.

While Hokkien pop has received considerable scholarly attention, Mandopop—despite being the mainstream popular music in postwar Taiwan—remains relatively understudied. Early research predominantly focused on campus songs from the 1970s onwards, exemplified by Chang Chao-Wei's (2003) monograph, which examined their role in the context of rising local consciousness and the development of Mandopop itself. Regarding Mandopop in the 1950s and 1960s, Shen Tung's research has yielded groundbreaking results. Shen's studies (2012, 2013, 2014, 2016a) on Taiwanese composer Chou Lan-Ping's compositions, particularly the LP recordings produced by Four Seas Record, demonstrate that Mandopop served as a medium through which Chou navigated the complexities of mainland nostalgia and Taiwanese imagination. Furthermore, Shen (2016b, 2020) has conducted in-depth analyses of the 1960s Taiwanese television music program "*Qunxing hui*" (Stars Gathering) and the soundtracks featured in films by Taiwanese director Lee Hsing, who was active from the 1950s to the 1980s. The interaction between Mandopop and Taiwanese films has also been previously addressed by Emilie Yeh (2000), whose monograph covers examples from both 1970s Taiwanese films and later works from the 1990s. Additionally, Meredith Schweig's (2022) book chapter makes an equally significant contribution to postwar Mandopop studies. Through musicological analysis and the concept of "multivocality," Schweig highlights the complexity and agency in Teresa Teng's musical performances.

Alongside Mandopop and Hokkien pop, a unique genre known as "mountain songs" emerged in Taiwan from the 1960s onward. These songs, often featuring Taiwanese Indigenous artists, drew inspiration from Indigenous melodies and themes. Early recordings captured the raw authenticity of Indigenous communities, preserving their unique sounds and languages. As the genre gained popularity, later productions incorporated more elements of commercial pop music, balancing this with a continued connection to Indigenous traditions. This evolution also led to the creation of multilingual "mountain songs" performed in Indigenous languages, Mandarin, Hokkien, and even Japanese, broadening their reach and cultural impact. "Mountain songs" have also attracted increasing scholarly interest. Chen Chun-Bin's (2019) textual analysis observes a shift from vocables to lexical lyrics in commercialized Amis (one of Taiwanese Indigenous groups) songs. Additionally, Huang Kuo-Chao (2012, 2019) explores the commercial side of Indigenous "mountain songs" by examining the production and marketing strategies of major record companies. Furthermore, Sun Chun-Yen's (2013) case study of the song "The Maiden of Malan" provides insight into the collaborative process behind transforming Indigenous traditional tunes into popular songs, showcasing the interplay between Indigenous and Han artists and industry practitioners.

Studies on Contemporary Taiwanese Popular Music

In addition to the historical research mentioned above, which primarily focuses on the earlier periods of Taiwanese popular music, a growing body of scholarship has emerged that examines the more contemporary landscape of Taiwanese popular music, particularly in the post-martial law era (post-1987). These studies frequently employ ethnographic methods and engage more deeply with critical theories, exploring the multifaceted ways in which popular music intersects with various socio-cultural and political dynamics.

A central theme in these studies is the role of music in shaping and expressing identity. For instance, Schweig's (2022) monograph explores how rap music in post-martial-law Taiwan serves as a potent medium for self-expression and identity formation. Notably, Schweig dedicates a chapter to examining gender dynamics, illustrating how male rappers reinterpret traditional Confucian gender norms to construct alternative models of masculinity, camaraderie, and

selfhood. Building upon Schweig's earlier work, Lin Hao-Li (2019) argues that Taiwanese braggadocio rap, while influenced by American hip-hop, presents a distinct form of "alternative masculinity." This alternative masculinity employs innovative wordplay to challenge prevailing conceptions of black masculinity within the global hip-hop scene, showcasing a uniquely Taiwanese perspective.

Similarly, Marc L. Moskowitz (2010) and Yun Emily Wang (2018) also examine the relationship between gender and Taiwanese popular music, though from different perspectives. Moskowitz (2010) counters Western critiques of contemporary Taiwanese Mandopop, demonstrating through textual analysis, interviews, and examination of socio-cultural context that Mandopop actively challenges traditional gender roles and provides vital emotional outlets for its audience. Wang (2018) focuses on how diasporic Taiwanese queers in Toronto utilize puns in popular song and speech to forge a sense of community and belonging, highlighting the complex interplay of gender, language, and ethnicity within this particular context.

Beyond gender, studies on contemporary Taiwanese popular music also delve into the evolving concept of "Chineseness," which is intricately linked to both ethnicity and national identity. For instance, Lin Chen-Yu (2020) examines how market forces, media censorship, and artistic expression influence the portrayal of "Chineseness" in the music of prominent Taiwanese artists such as Jay Chou and Wang Leehom. Furthermore, D.J. Hatfield (2022) explores how the recent expansion of Taiwanese Indigenous popular music into the global market influences Indigenous ethnic identity. Hatfield emphasizes how this growth has developed a dual voice: on one hand, it is entangled with official multiculturalism in Taiwan, while on the other hand, it serves as a means of resistance to fixed ethnic identities.

Other research on contemporary Taiwanese popular music spans a broad range of topics, including its relationship to ecological concerns, cross-regional circulation and influence, and the role of social networks in shaping music production and consumption. Nancy Guy (2009), for example, provides an ecocritical analysis of Taiwanese "Tamsui songs," showing how these popular songs reflect changing environmental perceptions and document the evolving relationship between Taiwanese people and their natural surroundings. Huang Chun-Ming (2021) explores the reception of Taiwanese popular music in mainland China amid political tensions, using a "relational" perspective to highlight how mainland Chinese audiences simultaneously idealize and resist Taiwanese pop. Several studies also employ sociological theories to analyze the Taiwanese rock music scene of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly focusing on the role of social networks in shaping the scene's development (e.g., C.-C. Wang, 2022; Chu, 2017). Collectively, these scholarly works highlight the multifaceted nature of contemporary Taiwanese popular music and its role in reflecting and shaping various aspects of Taiwanese society in the post-martial law era.

Concluding Remarks and Future Directions

This article provides an overview of Taiwanese popular music studies, emphasizing the breadth and depth of existing scholarship. Researchers have carefully documented the historical development of Taiwanese popular music, examining its diverse genres, socio-political contexts, and cultural influences from the colonial period to the present. By reviewing the existing body of work, this article seeks to deepen international scholars' understanding of the nuances and complexities within the field. It also aims to serve as a valuable resource for those interested in exploring this dynamic and multifaceted area of study further.

While existing scholarship provides a solid foundation, there are several promising directions for future research in Taiwanese popular music. One such area is Hakka popular music, which emerged after the 1970s and holds a significant place in both the historical and contemporary Taiwanese music landscape. Despite its importance, Hakka popular music currently lacks representative scholarly research and deserves further attention. Another underexplored area is the diverse styles of indie music, which play a key role in the contemporary Taiwanese music scene yet remain relatively understudied. Additionally, cross-regional influences on Taiwanese music offer fertile ground for further research. For instance, the popularity of Taiwanese Mandopop artists like Teresa Teng in Southeast Asia and Japan, as well as the influence of Shanghai *shidaiqu* and American rock music on postwar Taiwanese popular music, are rich areas for exploration. Such inquiries could also engage with the theoretical framework of “global music history” (Strohm, 2018), which has become increasingly prominent in contemporary music scholarship. Furthermore, historical research on Taiwanese popular music has often prioritized empirical data collection and reconstruction, with limited engagement in critical theories and emerging methodologies in historical studies. While this empirical foundation is valuable, future studies could benefit from integrating more interpretive, theory-driven approaches. By addressing these gaps and expanding the scope of inquiry, scholars can offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Taiwanese popular music and its role within the global cultural landscape.

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¹ Hokkien, often referred to as “*Taiyu*” (literally, “Taiwanese language”), is the native language of the majority of Taiwanese residents. While most Taiwanese residents are Han Chinese, and Hokkien is the most widely spoken language among them, Taiwan’s linguistic landscape is far more complex. The island is also home to a significant Indigenous population comprising 16 officially recognized tribes, each with its own distinct language. Furthermore, Mandarin Chinese, established as the official language during the Kuomintang era, has remained widely used in government, education, and media since then.

² I primarily utilize the Hanyu Pinyin system for romanizing Chinese terms and expressions in this article, with some exceptions, such as personal names.

³ In this article, I use the term “Mandopop” to refer to Mandarin-language popular music. Although some in Taiwan might not traditionally categorize the post-1970s genre of campus songs as Mandopop, I have included them in this discussion. This is because campus songs share the same commercial production methods, distribution channels (like records and radio), and widespread popularity as other recognized forms of Mandopop.

⁴ The Han Chinese population in Taiwan is divided into *waisheng ren* (mainland Chinese immigrants after 1945) and *bensheng ren* (earlier Han Chinese settlers, including Hokkien and Hakka).

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