

A Cultural Study of Diversity of Pop Music Appreciation—A Case Study of Youth Audiences Since the New Era*

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From the perspective of cultural studies, there are mainly three ways in China to enjoy popular music since the New Era. The “random listening” brings pleasure by providing access to specific psychological compensation thus strengthening the tenacity in the modern order. The “shock” experience breaks the control of power order and makes the appreciation a more interactive process. “Fans” demonstrate their keen and comprehensive participation and assembly-styled creativity and productivity, while they may as well bear an ill name for problematic over-interpretation, in counter of which we advocate a soulmate style appreciation that lays emphasis on companionship. Such a cultural analysis of the diversity of popular music appreciation can help better understand the construction of self-identity of adolescents who are the majority of pop music market.

Keywords: ways of appreciation, random listening, shock, fans

Introduction

Currently in China, the most important music type is pop music, which is unexceptionally targeted at young people, a universal phenomenon across the globe. In regard of this fact, such a reality in China should not be overlooked that these listeners may not have much so-called musical accomplishments. Most cannot sing from the numbered musical notation, not to mention abilities of musical analysis and melodic interpretation. Through participatory observation and investigation, we find that although in most cases, though a “casual” collective, once pop music listener shave a “shocking” experience, some will be thrown into such indulgence that they are upgraded to “fans”. This process involves a variety of ways of emotional enjoyment and enrichment. In view of this, we intend to explore their main ways of appreciation, with a purpose of a more comprehensive understanding of the pop songs audience.

Random Listening for the Majority

As we all know, classic art appreciation, free from the bounds of the practical needs and the utilitarian demands, concentrates on the aesthetic object to one’s eyes or ears while the aesthetic subject must rely on his or her aesthetic judgment to comprehend, so much so that the artistic value of the object is realized to some extent. Considering the fact that the vast majority of teens do not have the musical accomplishments needed for classic music, we cannot deny that they seem to be gifted for a natural “learning” of popular music. The

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account for such an easy pick-up lies in that, in addition to the educational function of the mass media, popular music lowers its threshold and requires much less systematic or professional training. That is to say, its popularity results from the accessibility and availability of the content, the material, and the techniques, which endears it to the heart of the public, especially the young. As the most accessible among all the music resources, pop music has seen its ways of appreciation spontaneously formed in the listening process and naturally distinguished from those of classic music.

Our investigation reveals that most teenagers are doing “random listening” to popular songs with “being unfocused” as its prominent manifestation. The virtue of “disinterestedness” alone does not identify them as a “distracted” group, otherwise such an understanding would equal to ignorance of the implicit constructiveness of being mindless. In “random listening”, the relationship between the listener and the song is pendulous, which marks him as the “flaneur” (or the wanderer) in Benjamin’s words when he commented the flaneur’s treatment of his leisure as a spokesperson of his own personality, a protest to division of labor that turned a human into a one-sided mechanic (Benjamin, 2006). Thus, in Benjamin’s definition, the “flaneur” has the compound temperament of a scumbag, an artist, and a detective who lives apart from the order of production as a spectator and a discoverer of modern life’s interests with vague resistance. His image is well mirrored in the earliest pop music listeners in mainland China. LI Wan, a scholar of pop music, described them as follows:

Young urbanites wire taped Taiwanese songs in their dorms, wore bell-bottoms and sunglasses with its trademark label unremoved. They wandered about, carrying the most stylish tape recorders, riding their bikes in flocks, roaring along the streets the songs of Teresa Teng and Chang Di all the way. “Young ass, all A Feis”, the old generation would frown at their back, murmuring. (LI, 2002, p. 68)

“A Fei” is a local name for a rascal, synonymous to “flaneur” who is disturbed by the status quo and has no clear goal. However, he has foreseen the upcoming cultural storm before contemporary urbanization in China begins. Constructing himself as someone deviant from the mainstream, he bears a spiritual resemblance of Benjamin’s “flaneur”. Undoubtedly, A Fei of those years also needed to take up some courage to listen to popular songs while the “random listening” type in the new century is more featured by their relaxedness and calmness.

In fact, “random listening” and “flaneuring listening” are similar in spirit but with a meticulous distinction. The notable difference, foremost, lies in quantity. In any sense, the flaneur is an alternative and a distinctive individual to the urban population. However, random listeners are the opposite; they are a collection of strangers, who, as described by Simmel, have or will be integrated into modern production order. In this view, the two seem to have no intersection. But one important question is why these people come together in the city in the first place? In addition to the possibility of earning living necessities, there seems to be some attractiveness of urban living that makes cities such a dreamland that they leave behind the country life. Therefore, although they are growing away from the Bohemian bloodline inherited by all the flaneurs and they are shaking off the temperament as is shown by a coy or an artist, they do not give up the fun of acting like detectives, which lays the psychological horizon for the two types to meet.

Another important difference between a random listener and a flaneur is that the latter is mostly idle and purposeless, while the former is often entangled in everyday matters. In this sense, their bodies are both inlaid in the modern order of production and hard to break free. But listening to songs, even if it is done randomly, will keep one’s mind in a wandering state. Such is the way that they engage themselves with the song in the

same manner that a flaneur flirts with the city. Random listeners are keeping an on-and-off relationship with the thing they are dealing, from which they derive some extra pleasure. Flaneurs are idling away their time since they are not in any form occupied. It is in this regard that the aloofness means differently to the two types of people. If it is safe to say that the latter, by maintaining a flexible distance between himself and the city, is implementing his strategy of survival as an ambiguous resistance to modernity order, then it is evident to see the former generates extra pleasure from the on-and-off relationship from which he finds compensation for what he feels dull and boring and tenacity which is required for any modernity production order.

Shock as a Focused Experience

“Random listening” contains an attitude of being picky and a readiness to get serious in listening at the point when they are so impressed that they will switch to focus and appreciate. This transformation is the “shocking” experience emphasized by Benjamin who defined “shock” into two senses:

First, the external burst, a powerful energy to stimulate the soul and the protection of the protective layer of the mechanism of inhibition of this stimulus, buffer access to instant experience; second, people cannot experience the past adaptation and assimilation of vast amounts of materials to the external world, both of which lead to the psychological experience of fracture. (ZHU, 1997, p. 151)

It can be seen that “shock” always contains more or less the sense of danger and anxiety brought about by modern life. The process of turning this sense of danger and anxiety into something to be appreciated is also a process of adapting to “shock”. Therefore, Benjamin believed that the appropriate attitude to modern art is taking it as but a pastime.

Shock comes from the miraculous and momentary fusion of intellectual discovery and perceptual experience. Isolated from loitering, shock is an instant obsession with something in an environment. “Random listening”, though a loitering gesture, also implies the obsession of pop songs unwilling to admit, and, of course, some hint of danger and anxiety as he feels reluctant to lose himself to the songs. However, once a certain song forms an external stimulus that exceeds the strength of the self-protection mechanism and evokes in the listener involuntary admiration and appreciation, the wandering mind instantly enters a station and the random listening becomes purposeful—this is the moment when the “shock” effect is created and secured. Moreover, as Benjamin pointed out, the shock comes from the absence of modern life experience. However, appreciation of popular songs does not depend on such experience; as long as the subject has an experience of fundamental things and daily emotions, he is capable of making alternative to and compensation for what is inadequate of his experience, which explains the fact that even underage and inexperienced people are capable of appreciating the pop songs.

“Shock” becoming explicit, the attitude of the pop song appreciators then fundamentally changes when they are devoted and focused, always expressing directly their feelings of the work by taking actions, such as waving glowsticks, screaming, and echoing the singing. With such an intensity, the process of appreciating a song resumes its primordial nature as a process of incident. When appreciating classical music, listeners retain their respect for the text and also maintain the distance between the text and themselves, and even there is a factor of power order manipulation. As a result, classical music appreciators generally maintain an image of being rational, calm, and decent. However, “shock” shatters the distance between the listener and the text, and also breaks the control of the power order. The audience no longer seems to be away from things; instead, they could express in an almost “uncontrolled” way what they feel and understand, which gives rise to a

process-based interaction. On this interactivity is built the eventuality of pop song appreciation, indicating the sense of immediacy, vivacity, and carnival, and sometimes of noises and chaos all mixed up, all of which classical music does not possess. The successful performance of popular singers is based on this eventuality when they invite this kind of interactivity to fuel the entire show into a two-way performance.

Closely related to the expression of action is the presentation of body and pleasure by the pop song admirers. Pleasure gained from the appreciation is to stimulate the excitement of physical activity and enthusiasm and to accommodate a variety of tangled feelings and emotions. In this respect, Fisk said:

Many popular pleasures, especially those of young people, who may be the most motivated to evade social discipline, are transformed into ones with excessive physical awareness in order to produce this ecstatic escape. Rock music is played deafeningly so much that it can only be felt by the body but not by the ears; some forms of dance, such as head banging, flashing lights at discos, use of drugs (legal or illegal)—all of this can be used to provide materialistic and sensual pleasure, and escapist, and offensive pleasure. (Fiske, 2001, p. 53)

This is the most representative way of enjoying popular songs. Fisk quoted Bart's discourse as "reading with the body", in which the "body" (i.e., the material constitution of the text) is reflected by the flesh-and-blood of the admirer. We can confirm, from a purely aesthetic point of view, the significance of this pleasure—the body when relaxed and fully stretched is in itself a piece of beauty. Situated in a repressive culture, it has the resistance or subversive power; when freed, it has an aesthetic value worthy of display.

Fans to be Upgraded

In appreciation of popular songs, shock may be no longer momentary; it becomes long-lasting once the state of wandering is secured, solidified, and intoxicating. In extreme cases, such listeners upgrade to what we call the "fans".

Chinese version of "fans" as "Fensi" is a spontaneous and mimetic transliteration, with its strictest sense applied. Due to social stereotypes and media guidance, "fans" were once labeled as fanatic, irrational, and morbid, whether domestically or abroad; they were critically treated as consumers who were unidentified and lacking in resistance to certain popular cultural products. In wake of this old time impression, in the current Chinese context, "fans", no longer referring to ordinary viewers, are viewed as more or less addictive. Nevertheless, we do not classify them as a different group, as Fisk said, whose difference from the average pop music listeners is but slight, not broad enough to be equivalent to what Fisk named as "excessive reader". (Fiske, 2009, p. 17) When we look beyond the social prejudices and at the fans and their cultural practice unbiasedly, a problem arises—how does the fan's appreciation differ from the average pop music lover?

First, fans show more sensitivity to specific musical texts. Pop music fans are always in favor of specific music types or musicians. Andrea (2009), a fan culture researcher, thought fans are "more focused on a text than any other type of audience". (McDonald, 2009, p. 411) The textual traits that they love are the so-called fandom in fan culture studies. Fiske said:

Fandom is a common feature of popular culture in industrialized society. It singles out performers, narratives, or genres from a quantity-based repertoire and incorporates them into a culture of selected performers, narratives, or genres, thus forming a popular culture to delight and to signify. A popular culture like this is similar to and at the same time significantly different from the cultures intended for the more "normal" mass audiences." (Fiske, 2009, p. 4)

Fandom nurtures the pop music fans in that they come into the possession of sensitivity to specific types of music texts. The same song, if performed by a different singer, would not fail to be recognized by any keen

ear. But the fascinating thing about this recognition is that they would be at the same time selective, ignoring other details as scrutinizing some. Such practice of “focusing on one point while ignoring all the others” gives rise to “brainless fans” as well as “sabotage fans”. The subjective and arbitrary nature of such a textual discernment is self-evident and falls far short of the rational and objective purport of high art criticism.

Second, for fans, appreciation requires a higher degree of participation. Needless to say, pop music fans are the kind of people who are crazy about songs; their involvement is certainly manifested in pitched screaming and touching tears and they will not be content with the appreciation of the text itself. Furtherance may include consumption of derivative products, such as T-shirts, dolls, and posters with celebrity avatars and events like cos-play shows. In Fisk’s words, they are moving from “original text” to “secondary text”. This is a demonstration of greater prominence of fan participation, through which, fans are graded as “ideal consumers” in the cultural industry. However, this point of view is ignored. It is through routinizing the resources provided by the cultural industry into daily practice that the fans have completed the mission of reassembly. That is to say, the significance of popular culture is not determined by cultural industrial producers, but rather by the general public’s interpretations, which are bound to vary from person to person.

The last thing in emphasis is the creativity and productivity generated by fans in their appreciation. With the active participation, the productivity of the fans has also been released: Spending on the texts is not the end, instead they will rely on cultural industrial products as resources to create a large number of new and varied texts, such as online fan fictions, imitation shows, re-recording, re-singing and MTV remake, and so on. Fisk argued that the obsessive behavior of popular culture fans motivates the creation of their own texts:

... In this way... it is reinterpreted, re-manifested, and recreated, for the original text is a cultural resource from which innumerable texts are generated. The structure of the original text may limit or determine the scope of the newborns but it will never set limits to its “fanatic” identity as creators and producers. (Fiske, 2001, p. 155)

Moreover, the production by the general public, especially the fans, is mainly done through an “assembling” approach: “A modest but still productive example of ‘assembling’ is the practice of pop music fans. The materials in the album are chosen to make up his own ‘record’. This practice, though not ideologically and economically resistant, is productive, pleasing, and resistant in the sense that it serves as an escape from institutions”. (Fiske, 2001, p. 158) Due to the creativity and productivity, fans have become a dazzling existence of popular culture.

Although we have uncovered many of the wonders of popular music fans, we do not mean there is no problem with them. Like it or not, as the classic music may make some of us drowsy, or, worse than that, pretentious, there are also flaws with the widespread random listening and fans’ over-reading and over-interpretation of pop music texts. There is no denying that some of the pop music audiences “blindly follow the trend” to such an extent that some, by depriving themselves of the music texts, are transforming into a consumer of the musicians’ images, let alone some special cases under extreme conditions. In view of this, we advocate a kind of “soulmate” style in popular song appreciation.

There is a significant difference of appreciation style between a fan and a soulmate. In general, “a soulmate” is a metaphor speaking of an ideal version of classical music appreciation. Like the well-known Chinese story of musicians Yu Bo-ya and Zhong Zi-qi, who were seeking for a “Zhiyin” or a soulmate (which literally means “know the tone”), a soulmate style appreciation needs proficiency of the creative work not only in terms of textual forms but more importantly of the intention or the theme, through which the recipient and

the creator meet at a deeper spiritual level.

Classic art and pop music often give people an illusion that they are on opposite tracks. However, the reality is that the exchanges between the two have never ceased. This means that popular music not only offers much to learn for the classical art, but also produces such cross-border singers as Sarah Brightman (classical music/pop music). Such people are by no means rare as turn eager ears to both classical music and popular songs. Despite of the different approaches to these two types, two-way infiltration and influence are also unmistakably identified, which provides a realistic basis for their fusion. More importantly, discrepancies of interests and ways as there are, they share one thing at the basic level, which is consistency. Both “a soulmate” and “a fan” must construct their identity on keen textual discernment and loyalty to their text-based judgment. Therefore, “a soulmate style listener” is more than only a theoretical possibility; it is reality.

In a nutshell, a “soulmate” listener should regard their beloved pop music works as a return to the music itself and complete the architect of fandom, confirmed by aesthetics of pop music, which results from their scrutiny of the music texts. The illumination and “appropriation” must be text-based so as to be open and welcoming to musicians or ways of appreciation of other categories and works. Soulmate-style listeners may idolize but they only allow themselves to “run away” in the process of text appreciation. When it comes to social interaction, they are self-contained and respectful for others’ rights and interests. We believe the advocacy of “soulmate-style listeners” will improve popular music appreciation, thus overcoming shortcomings and inadequacy and boosting the creation and production of popular music.

Conclusion: Understanding the Adolescent Majority in the Audience

Understanding the diversity of ways in enjoying popular music is to enable us to better understand the audiences, especially the adolescent majority.

Western cultural researchers tend to emphasize the aspects of resistance and rebellion of popular music, which are not rarely found in China’s pop music admirers who are courageous to resist, rebel, and speak out their opinions. However, more often, Chinese adolescents are more willing to seek mainstream acceptance of culture. In a special issue in 2002, China Youth Research magazine conducted an interview on “Pop Music (Songs) and Adolescent Growth”. Many of the interviewed adolescents emphasized, consciously or unconsciously, the positive functions of pop music, among others, as an emotional regulator. Two things are particularly noteworthy: For one thing, a majority of interviewees expressed their love for lyrical pop songs, but they felt rock music “annoying” and “noisy”; for the other, most of them were empathetic and obedient to their parents’ opinions (YANG, 2003, p. 4). As can be seen from the interviews, adolescents are seeking legitimacy to pop music, but this legitimacy is not a showcase of resistance or rebellion to the suppressing mainstream culture and elitism, as demonstrated by Western culture studies, but an embodiment with the values recognized by mainstream culture.

It is not surprising that such an attitude should be incorporated into the history of structural changes in contemporary Chinese culture. At the beginning of the modern history of China, culture and knowledge is only in the hands of the few. The part of Chinese high-end traditional culture and some of the newly introduced Western learning constituted the elite culture in China. However, this elite culture was criticized and cleaned shortly after the founding of People’s Republic of China with the emerging mainstream culture centered on “revolutionary” and “people’s” values. Therefore, the so-called elite culture is not in a hegemony position of cultural structure in contemporary China. After the self-adjustment in the 1980s, mainstream culture not only

enabled elite culture to be reconstructed, but also provided necessary opportunities for the recovery of popular culture. Although no alliance is found between elite culture and popular culture, it is obvious that the two cannot form a “repression/resistance” model similar to that in Western cultural studies. At the same time, “to serve the people”, as the fundamental purpose of mainstream culture, is not always opposed to what is practiced spontaneously by popular culture. Instead, there are many possibilities for communication and transformation. Therefore, as a natural result of the structural adjustment of contemporary Chinese culture, adolescents prefer lyric-style pop songs and seek the recognition and acceptance of mainstream culture.

In recent years, Western “post-subculture” studies have come to the conclusion that young people’s love of popular culture, such as pop music, is not so much a battle for political power as a direction leading to the formation and construction of their identities in everyday life. It is safe to say that China’s pop music is undergoing a function conversion in which accepting the orientation of mainstream culture does not annihilate the enthusiasm and initiative demonstrated by adolescent listeners, who, being socially and historically conditioned, practiced their music appreciation accordingly and became marked with the stamps of the times.

After the adjustment of beliefs and values in the 1980s, the liberated mind of the youth was exposed both to joy and loss, embracing secularism and criticism. Their taste in hybrid is moderated between what is refined and what is popular, ranging from symphony and chamber music, overseas movie music, pop songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan, to Cui Jian, the Chinese mainland rock star. Correspondingly, pop music from the Chinese mainland in the 1980s had a signature of humanitarianism when rock music, together with other types of pop music, showed their ambition of social care. In spite of the restrictions imposed on production and dissemination of pop music in the 1980s, musicians (Teresa Teng, Ming-Min Zhang, Qi Qin, Liu Huan, etc.) and their works were loved universally (in this case, by almost all pop song listeners).

With the decline of “Northwest Wind” songs, the grandness and loftiness in aesthetic pursuit in the 1980s has finally dissipated. In its replacement is a more targeted style with more delicacy in melody. Confronted with the statement from a few that the 1980s, when pop music was of higher quality and gave way to the corrupted 1990s, an objective observer would say that pop songs of the 1980s were to some extent “overloaded” with values and judgments. It is true that humanistic care should be conveyed and lofty aesthetic qualities should be pursued by pop musicians, but they should not be taken as a requirement for all. Therefore, the change of musical quality in the 1990s certainly implies a strong vicinity to the transformation of deeper social structure and it cannot be denied that there is a role played by the rhythmic development of pop music itself.

Consistently, the shift in taste and appreciation since the 21st century continues to serve as evidence. Chinese teenagers have shown intense interest in popular music from Europe, the United States, Japan, and South Korea as a result of influential Western cultural hegemony and shaking-you-all-over dynamics in music. Since the start of the new century, popular songs have entered the “no record” era in which songs are not released in the form of an album or a tape, but in the digital form stored in the media. “No record”, as an option of appreciation, not only makes distribution easier but also enhances the autonomy of the listeners. This kind of independence and selectivity highlights the subtle differences and changes in tastes of pop music on the one hand, and further aggravates the differentiation of pop songs audiences on the other hand. It can be said that the audience of pop songs in the name of being “popularized” is actually a gathering of countless “minorities”.

In general terms, we can sum up that the pop songs after the 1990s and their young listeners are both aiming at a higher degree of self-expression. As a result, we also find that young people that comprise the targeted majority of pop music market are making constant efforts to set the cultural trend and keep up with the

changing cultural symptoms. The way the culture as a fashion keeps renewing itself, though relevant to political influence, is more directly and closely linked with the identity consciousness and self-shaping of young people across different times.

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