

A study of Chen Xiaoqi's music creation: a literature-based review of its developmental trajectory and characteristics

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Abstract. Chen Xiaoqi is a representative and influential songwriter in the development of contemporary Chinese popular music. His creative career has spanned the various historical stages since the launch of China's reform and opening-up, yet systematic academic research on his work remains relatively underdeveloped. Chen Xiaoqi holds a pioneering position in the creation of Chinese-style popular songs, and his "Southern School" artistic style has exerted a profound influence on popular music in mainland China. Through a systematic review of existing literature and historical materials, this study aims to clarify the trajectory of Chen Xiaoqi's creative development, the artistic characteristics of different stages of his career, and the reasons underlying his success. Adopting the literature research method, the study classifies and analyzes existing academic papers, in-depth interviews, music reviews, personal accounts, and other relevant materials, and conducts a systematic synthesis from multiple dimensions, including his creative career, lyrical language, artistic style, and contributions to the music industry. The findings indicate that Chen Xiaoqi's creative career can be divided into three stages: an exploratory period, a peak period, and a period of consolidation. His artistic style can be characterized as representative of the Lingnan School of Chinese-style popular music in mainland China. His success derives from his profound cultural foundation, his keen insight into the emotions of the times, and his strong contribution to the industrialization of popular music.

Keywords: Chen Xiaoqi, popular music, Chinese style, music creation research

1. Introduction

Chen Xiaoqi is one of the most influential lyricists and composers in the history of contemporary Chinese popular music. Since beginning his creative career in 1983, he has written more than 2,000 songs and has received major awards, including the China Golden Bell Award for Music and China's Top Ten Golden Songs. The trajectory of his professional career closely coincides with the development of popular music in mainland China following the launch of reform and opening-up, giving his work considerable historical significance. His works are renowned for their profound cultural grounding and the elegant and restrained artistic style of the "Southern School", and he occupies a pioneering position in the development of Chinese-style popular songs in mainland China.

However, compared with Chen Xiaoqi's remarkable achievements in popular music practice, systematic academic research on his work remains relatively underdeveloped. Existing studies consist primarily of media

interviews and informal essays, while academic papers are relatively scarce. Moreover, research perspectives have tended to focus on cultural interpretations of his lyrical texts, with insufficient attention paid to his melodic language, harmony and musical form, as well as his later cross-disciplinary practices, such as large-scale stage works including *Hakka Imagery*. Against this background, this study systematically reviews the existing literature in an effort to clarify the trajectory of Chen Xiaoqi's creative development, the artistic characteristics of different stages of his career, and the deeper mechanisms underlying his success. It is expected to provide a useful reference for research on popular music in Guangdong and contemporary Chinese popular music more broadly.

2. Literature review

Academic interest in Chen Xiaoqi and his music creation began in the 1990s, and research output increased gradually after the beginning of the 21st century. Overall, however, existing research remains fragmented. Based on research topics, the existing literature can be broadly categorized into the following four dimensions.

First, studies of his life and the periodization of his creative career. In *Chen Xiaoqi: Giving Life to Songs and Soul to Lyrics*, Song Hanyu divided Chen Xiaoqi's creative career into three stages through in-depth interviews [1]. Chen Xiaoqi himself elaborated on his aesthetic philosophy of "creating for the sake of classics" in *How Can Popular Music Keep Up with the Rhythm of the Times?* [2]. Works such as Wu Fusheng's *A History of Popular Music in Guangdong* and Jin Zhaojun's *Popular Music in Broad Daylight: Experiencing Chinese Popular Music Firsthand* also provide accounts of his creative career [3, 4].

Second, studies of lyrical language and textual characteristics. Li Wei and Shi Peixuan, in *Norms and Innovations in Chen Xiaoqi's Lyric Works*, analyzed the rhetorical features of his lyrics from a linguistic perspective [5]. Wen Fang, in *The Inheritance of Classical Chinese Poetry in Contemporary Popular Lyrics*, regarded Chen Xiaoqi's works as successful examples of the creative adaptation of classical Chinese poetry [6]. Li Mei, in *An Exploration of the Artistic Characteristics of Chinese-Style Popular Music*, identified him as a "leading figure of the Lingnan School" in the development of Chinese-style music [7].

Third, studies of artistic style and aesthetic value. He Ping and Pan Yi, in *The Practice of Symphonic Composition in the Popular Music of Guangdong Composers*, conducted a technical analysis of the symphonic adaptations of his works [8]. Lei Xiang, in *The Development and Cultural Characteristics of Popular Music in Guangdong*, discussed Chen Xiaoqi's music within the broader cultural context of popular music in Guangdong [9]. Lin Lijing, in **A Study of the Artistic Characteristics of Chen Xiaoqi's Album Yi Yun*, employed aesthetic concepts such as "artistic conception" and "resonance" to conduct a specialized analysis of his later works [10].

Fourth, studies of his contributions to the music industry. Wang Siqu's *The Development and Cultural Studies of Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* documents historical facts such as Chen Xiaoqi's involvement in planning Yang Yuying's "sweet songs" repertoire and his efforts to establish the first planning department in China's popular music industry. These accounts reveal his role as an industry promoter in addition to his identity as a songwriter and composer [11].

In summary, existing studies provide an important foundation for the present research. Nevertheless, they are subject to several limitations, including a concentration on a small number of representative works, insufficient analysis of melodic techniques, and inadequate attention to Chen Xiaoqi's cross-disciplinary creative practices after 2000. These limitations also provide scope for further research in the present study.

3. A multidimensional examination of Chen Xiaoqi's music creation

This study focuses on three core questions concerning Chen Xiaoqi's music creation: the trajectory of his creative development, the characteristics of his artistic style, and the mechanisms underlying his success. Through a systematic review and synthesis of the existing literature, the study arrives at the following findings.

3.1. A three-stage division of his creative career

Based on existing research, Chen Xiaoqi's creative career can be divided into three historical stages with distinct characteristics.

3.1.1. *Exploratory period (1983–1989): cultural root-seeking and the emergence of "Chinese style"*

This period is represented by works such as *Dunhuang Dream*, *Dreams of Jiangnan*, and *Willows at Bàqiao*. Influenced by the cultural root-seeking movement of the mid-1980s, Chen Xiaoqi began incorporating modern poetic techniques and the artistic conception of classical Chinese poetry into popular song creation, pioneering the development of Chinese-style popular songs in mainland China. Taking *Dunhuang Dream* as an example, the work draws extensively on classic imagery associated with the Silk Road: "the moon from the Qin era, the passes from the Han era, the sound of camel bells awakening ancient Dunhuang" and "the snow of Qilian, the frost of Yumen, where are the flying apsaras in my dreams?" [12]. While looking back on an ancient civilization, the song also conveys a strong sense of humanistic concern. As Li Guangping pointed out, the work is "both an aesthetic contemplation and a humanistic concern", marking the starting point of Chen Xiaoqi's Chinese-style creative practice [13].

3.1.2. *Peak period (1990–2000): the maturation of the Southern School style and resonance with the times*

This period produced enduring classics such as *The Sound of the Waves Remains the Same*, *How Are You, Big Brother*, *Ninety-Nine Daughter's Red*, and *Red of the Plateau*. During this period, Chen Xiaoqi's "Southern School" artistic style, characterized by elegance, subtlety, and profound cultural grounding, gradually matured. His works responded precisely to the collective psychology of Chinese society during the social transformation of the 1990s. The heightened emotions of the 1980s gradually subsided, and society entered a period of "nostalgia". Meanwhile, as a frontier of reform and opening-up, Guangdong attracted large numbers of migrant workers, giving rise to a distinctive culture of people who had left their hometowns to seek opportunities elsewhere. *The Sound of the Waves Remains the Same*, for example, creatively adapts the poetic imagery of Zhang Ji's Tang-dynasty poem *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* and incorporates the Chinese pentatonic mode centered on zhi into its melody, achieving an organic integration of classical aesthetics and modern emotions. *How Are You, Big Brother*, by contrast, takes "big brother"—a form of address with an innate sense of intimacy and a distinctly popular character—as its point of entry. Through the repeated reinforcement of the chorus melody, the song precisely captures the homesickness experienced by migrant workers. In an interview, Chen Xiaoqi noted that the song was created by taking the culture of people who had left their hometowns as its point of departure, so that "when it was sung, it could resonate with everyone" [1].

3.1.3. *Period of consolidation (2000–present): artistic reflection and cross-disciplinary integration*

This period is marked by the publication of the album *Yi-Yun* and the creation of the large-scale Hakka song-and-dance production *Hakka Imagery*, reflecting a systematic summation of Chen Xiaoqi's artistic career and his engagement in cross-disciplinary artistic practice. In *A Study of the Artistic Characteristics of Chen Xiaoqi's Album Yi-Yun*, Lin Lijing classified the works in the album into three categories according to their cultural contexts. Works from 1984 to 1989 reflect the "confusion and bewilderment" of a period of social

transformation; works from 1990 to 1995 respond to the prevailing trends of "nostalgia" and "homesickness"; and works from 1997 to 2007 embody an "awakening of self-awareness", focusing on the value of individual life and the pursuit of a spiritual home [10]. Notably, *Hakka Imagery* marks the extension of Chen Xiaoqi's approach of integrating popular music with traditional culture from song creation to large-scale stage productions. However, specialized academic research on such stage works remains relatively insufficient.

3.2. The cultural positioning of his artistic style

When Chen Xiaoqi's creative work is examined within the broader cultural context of popular music in Guangdong, it becomes evident that his works embody a strong sense of popular consciousness and serve as a reflection of the social psychology associated with Guangdong's distinctive culture of people who leave their hometowns to seek opportunities elsewhere. Lei Xiang's research indicates that Chen Xiaoqi's creative work can be understood within the framework of the core characteristics of Guangdong popular music, including the "open and inclusive spirit of maritime culture" and the "popular cultural orientation toward ordinary people and entertainment" [9]. Within the developmental lineage of Chinese-style popular music, Chen Xiaoqi is a leading figure of the Lingnan School who rose to prominence by building on the tradition of popular songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan. *Dunhuang Dream*, released in 1984, takes the Silk Road as its subject matter and looks back on ancient civilization from a modern perspective, pioneering the creation of Chinese-style popular songs in mainland China. His subsequent works, including *The Sound of the Waves Remains the Same*, *March in Yangzhou*, and *Night Rain in Bashan*, combine the artistic conception of classical Chinese poetry with modern humanistic consciousness, giving rise to a "Southern School" style characterized by profound cultural grounding. At the 2018 Academic Symposium on Chen Xiaoqi's Lyrics and Compositions, scholars and industry professionals unanimously recognized that he had "pioneered the creation of Chinese-style popular songs in mainland China" and praised his works for combining "the artistic conception of Tang poetry and Song ci with modern humanistic consciousness".

3.3. A three-dimensional analysis of the mechanisms underlying his success

A synthesis of the analyses presented in the existing literature suggests that the success of Chen Xiaoqi's creative work can be understood at three levels.

Cultural foundation: Chen Xiaoqi graduated from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Sun Yat-sen University. His profound literary training provided a solid foundation in classical poetics for his lyric writing. At the same time, his early study of traditional Chinese instruments such as the *erhu*, *sanxian*, *yangqin*, and *xiao*, together with his extensive study of folk musical traditions such as Han opera, Chaozhou opera, and Hakka mountain songs, gave his melodic compositions an inherent pentatonic character. This dual accumulation of "poetry" and "music" constituted the foundation of his artistic style.

Insight into the times: Chen Xiaoqi's creative work has accurately captured the social and psychological needs of particular historical periods. From reflections on ancient civilizations amid the cultural root-seeking movement of the 1980s, to the homesickness experienced by people who had left their hometowns in the 1990s, and later to the pursuit of an individual spiritual home, his works have consistently remained in tune with the emotional currents of their times. As he himself observed, the popularity of nostalgic songs in the 1990s was "closely related to the psychological shift taking place throughout society" [1].

Contribution to the development of the music industry: Chen Xiaoqi was not only a creator but also an important promoter of the industrialization of popular music in mainland China. His involvement in planning Yang Yuying's "sweet songs" repertoire, his efforts to establish the first planning department in China's popular

music industry, and his promotion of a "contract-based" system profoundly influenced the production mechanisms and modes of dissemination of popular music in mainland China [11].

4. Implications of Chen Xiaoqi's creative experience for contemporary popular music

Popular music needs to accurately capture the social emotions of different eras while also looking toward the future. However, when popular music becomes overly focused on chasing trends, it can easily fall into the trap of stylistic homogeneity and superficial content [6]. By contrast, works that transcend their particular time and possess a deeper spiritual core are more likely to become enduring classics. Contemporary popular music is produced on a massive scale, but its quality varies considerably. Against this backdrop, it is of considerable practical significance to trace the development of popular music in Guangdong and examine the creative experience of Chen Xiaoqi, one of its leading figures at the time. This section discusses the implications of Chen Xiaoqi's creative practices for contemporary popular music creation.

4.1. Popular music is essentially a response to the emotions of the general public

In an interview, Chen Xiaoqi explicitly explained his creative approach: "Why did *The Sound of the Waves Remains the Same* and that group of nostalgic songs suddenly become popular in the 1990s? It actually had a lot to do with the society at that time. The entire 1980s was a particularly exuberant era, so songs with a strong northwestern style were popular. By 1990, people had begun to calm down and started to feel nostalgic" [1]. This statement indicates that the popularity of music depends not only on the technical quality of a work, but also on whether it reflects the collective psychology of the public during a particular historical period. The implication for contemporary creators is that, rather than blindly pursuing a popular musical style or form, they should first consider what people of their time truly need emotionally. Contemporary Chinese society is experiencing a period in which rapid development coexists with considerable psychological anxiety. What kind of music does the public need today? Is it simply entertainment and diversion, or should music also provide a sense of emotional resonance and solace? These questions deserve serious consideration by music creators.

4.2. Becoming a classic requires the test of time

Chen Xiaoqi proposed that a classic should meet three conditions: it should represent the highest artistic standards of its era, be widely accepted by the public, and stand the test of at least ten years [2]. His work *The Sound of the Waves Remains the Same* did not become popular until several years after it was written, and the process also required a certain degree of opportunity and luck. In the author's view, this offers an important lesson for contemporary creators: every work has its own period of maturation, and its value should not be judged by its immediate popularity. Truly outstanding works require time to mature, while creators should cultivate an awareness of "creating for the sake of classics".

5. Conclusion

Chen Xiaoqi is a representative figure in contemporary Chinese popular music whose creative work has been closely connected with the times. However, existing research lacks systematicity and a perspective grounded in the musical work itself. Through a review of the literature, this study seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of the overall characteristics of his creative work. It summarizes the trajectory of his creative

development, his artistic style, and the underlying logic of his success, thereby providing a valuable case study for understanding the industrialization and artistic development of Chinese popular music.

As a synthesis-based study grounded in existing literature, this paper identifies several gaps in current academic research on Chen Xiaoqi. First, the research content is relatively narrow, focusing mainly on a small number of representative works such as *The Sound of the Waves Remains the Same* and *Red of the Plateau*, while lacking a systematic classification and comprehensive examination of his more than 2,000 works. Second, existing research places greater emphasis on cultural interpretations of his lyrical texts, while technical analyses of his melodic composition, harmony, musical form, and other aspects of the musical work itself remain relatively limited. Third, research has focused primarily on the period from the 1980s to the 2000s, with insufficient attention to his post-2000 cross-disciplinary and integrative works, including the album *Yi-Yun* and *Hakka Imagery*. These limitations suggest several directions for future research. First, researchers could investigate the musical substance of his works by conducting technical analyses of the melodies, harmonies, and musical forms of his representative compositions from a musicological perspective. Second, specialized fieldwork and textual analysis could be conducted on his later cross-disciplinary and integrative artistic practices. Third, Chen Xiaoqi could be examined within the broader process of the industrialization of Chinese popular music, with particular attention to his historical contributions as a promoter of the music industry.

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