

Chapter Two: Popular Culture

2.1 Introduction

Let's begin the analysis on Hong Kong with an assessment of her achievements in art. Hong Kong is probably best known for her economic success. When it comes to art, however, few people will associate the name of this harbour city with titles like the City of Art or City of Culture. There are certainly some truths in statements of this kind. Hong Kong has never been an artistic centre like Paris or Vienna, and she is unlikely to become one in the foreseeable future. She lacks the cultural heritage that many European cities inherit from their ancestors.

Nonetheless, the saying that Hong Kong is a desert of culture is also partly incorrect. What most people have in mind when they comment on the cultural side of Hong Kong are fine artists who produce paintings to be shown in museum, teams of orchestra performing every night, or groups of professional actors who play Shakespeare on a regular basis. In this sense, Hong Kong has of course nothing to compete with the European cities. However, classical arts like those mentioned above are far from being the only type of art prevailing in the contemporary world. Especially in these days, popular arts, like popular music, comic, movies, cloth fashion and others, have gained such a strong foothold everywhere in the world that these so-called "degraded" or "low-class" arts loom to have taken over the mainstream position once enjoyed by classical culture.

This is where Hong Kong comes into play. Ever since the 1960s, popular culture has been developing in a rapid pace in the city. Gradually, classical music ceded to be the mainstream music, yielding its place to the "low-class" popular music. Likewise, classical dramas in theatre have been phased out by popular movies in the cinema, while classic novels from Renaissance writers were

replaced by comics and popular fictions. In fact, similar phenomena can be observed in other places in the world, as popular culture is gradually taking over the classical European culture. This is no doubt one of the most cultural important events in the twentieth century, and it definitely deserves a closer investigation. This is the theme of the current chapter.

2.2 Twins and Popular Music

Whenever I have to discuss a complex issue such as the one we have at hand, I often hesitate to use the traditional textbook method, namely to throw in a full list of names, places, dates, important events, and a bunch of technical terms. Such systematic method will only generate unnecessary hardship and boredom, and may even turn potential readers away. Instead, the method that I usually employ is to begin the discussion by relating a trivial event that takes part of the larger phenomenon under scope. During the course of describing this trivial incident, one will inevitably draw many links with the larger issue, thereby allowing readers to absorb the material in a less rigid manner. Such method may appear rather disorderly and unsystematic, but what is gained is that the material will become much more digestible.

2.2.1 December 1st 2001 — A Day of Insignificance

The trivial event that will be used to introduce the current analysis on popular culture happened in year 2001. On December 1st of that year, a Saturday, something non-trivial happened in a busy district in Hong Kong. That day, three thousand people, almost exclusively teenagers, gathered outside a sport-specialty store in Mongkok¹, definitely one of the busiest districts in Hong Kong and perhaps even in the whole world. What were these teenagers doing

¹ 旺角

there? They were waiting for two young girls called Charlene Choi² (b. 1982) and Gillian Chung³ (b. 1981). They are the two members of a new popular music band in Hong Kong called Twins.

On that day, the Twins has been arranged to show up in that store and hold a function in which they would autograph on a certain limited-edition T-shirt sold by that sport-specialty store. Because the quantity of that limited-edition T-shirt only numbered at a thousand, a few young people began to queue up in front of the store at as early as nine o'clock of the previous night⁴ so as to ensure that they would get the autograph of their idols on the T-shirt.

On the day of the event, a few hours before the beginning of the function, around three thousand people⁵ gathered outside the store, many of them just came to see their idols. They quickly filled up the entire street where the store located, including the car-way. Moreover, the crowd has blocked the entrance of around twenty other stores on that same street and thus seriously affected their revenue on that day.⁶ Due to the potential danger that this huge crowd may cause, around a hundred police officers have been called in to maintain the order. That portion of the street was also immediately delimited as pedestrian zone.

At around 3:10 pm, the Twins finally arrived. Their fans instantly went crazy and began to scream the name of their idols. Charlene and Gillian, once arrived, without delay entered the store, and autographed the T-shirt of the store owner. In the meantime, however, the mood of the fans who were still waiting outside went

² 蔡卓妍

³ 鍾欣桐

⁴ Lin Cho-Kit, "Turmoil due to Twins," in *Mingpao* (Hong Kong, December 12th 2001). All quotations from Chinese newspaper including this one are translated by the author of this book.

⁵ Wong Ah-Si, "Twins' Autograph Function Cancelled by Police," in *The Sun News* (Hong Kong, December 12th 2001).

⁶ Lin Cho-Kit, "Turmoil due to Twins," in *Mingpao*.

higher and higher, and some of them even began to push each other, albeit the warning of the police. Although the function was supposed to begin at three o'clock, the organizer of the event decided not to immediately begin the function for obvious security reason because the crowd was far too large and too excited. Ten minutes later, the manager of Twins was invited by the head of the police officers to discuss the situation outside the store. After a short conversation, the person in-charge of the store announced with an amplifier that "We hope that all of you can maintain in peace; otherwise we may be forced to cancel the function."⁷ However, the crowd was so noisy that that person had to borrow the amplifier of the police to repeat the same message. This advice evidently did not work as expected because the fans, once heard the announcement, began to hiss, and the crowd got further disorderly. At last, the police ordered the function to be cancelled. (See figure 2.1)

Later, when asked if they were scared in that afternoon, the Twins responded: "No, we were not scared at all. Our company has arranged everything for us. However we feel that it is quite a pity that the function has to be cancelled, but after all public security is more important."⁸ And their manager, when asked about details of her conversation with the police officer, said: "I immediately apologized to him, but to my surprise he asked me if the songs of Twins are really that great. I then told him to go home and ask his daughter. Then he advised me not to hold any more function in Mongkok."⁹ Such was the ending of this trivial event.

This is of course not the only occasion where the Twins has attracted such a large crowd and caused a chaos. Figure 2.2 contains a list of some of their functions that had attracted a similar size of crowd.

⁷ Wong Ah-Si, "Twins' Autograph Function Cancelled by Police," in *The Sun News*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Figure 2.1: Pictures of the Twins taken from the autograph function on December 1st 2001 in Mongkok¹⁰



Top: Gillian (left) and Charlene (right) waiting for the function to begin

Bottom Left: The crowd had filled up the entire street

Bottom Right: The person in-charge of the store appealed with an amplifier to the three thousand fans outside the store to stay calm.

¹⁰ Pictures taken by unknown photographers and published in Wong Ah-Si, “Twins’ Autograph Function Cancelled by Police,” in *The Sun News*, (Hong Kong, December 12th 2001).

Figure 2.2: A list of functions with participation of Twins

Date	Event
2001-09-02	An autograph function with over a thousands fans in a shopping centre. Some of them are reported to begin queuing up as early as four o’clock in that morning.
2001-09-17	A function to celebrate the sale of their album that just reached one platinum level, with over a thousand fans attended.
2001-10-28	Another autograph function with two hundred fans that included many children.
2001-11-11	A function to celebrate the grand-opening of a store, with more than seven hundred fans.
2001-11-29	A function to celebrate the grand-opening of a cosmetic store in Mongkok. Around three hundred fans attended, with some twenty police in place to maintain the order.
2001-12-01	Another autograph function for a sport-specialty store with over three thousand fans, as described above.
2001-12-15	A function to fingerprint their new photo-album, with around two thousand fans. Some of them had waited for about twenty hours to obtain the fingerprint of their idols.
2001-12-31	The Twins has been denied by the police to participate in the New Year’s Eve countdown show due to the chaos that they created in Mongkok a month ago.
2002-02-11	A function of a charitable auction in a shopping centre with more than two thousand fans. Jewellery stores nearby immediately shut their door to avoid the crowd.
2002-02-25	A function to celebrate the grand opening of a sushi restaurant with several hundred fans, including

some five to six year old kids.

2002-11-03 A function in Canton to stamp their latest photo album, with over three thousand fans.

This is of course only a portion of the full list, since in 2002 they held a wide variety of function on almost a weekly basis. Anyhow, this list is enough to conclude that whenever the Twins attend any kind of function, at least several hundred, if not several thousand, fans will attend to meet their idols.

Figure 2.3: The crowd waiting for Twins on December 10th 2001¹¹



¹¹ Picture taken by Foo Jun-Wai, published in *Next Magazine* (Hong Kong, December 12th 2001), pp. 96-7.

Even the police officer could not resist the charm of Twins. Pay attention to the age of these fans.

What is equally impressive is the amount of time they took to become the most popular artists in Hong Kong. The band was officially created on May 18th 2001, even though by then Charlene and Gillian have already received intensive training for over a year. On June 14th of the same year, their company publicly announced that they will spend tens of million of dollars to promote them. From then on, the Twins quickly became the hottest group in town. All kinds of promotions, products and commercials that are associated with the word Twins kept flooding the market. When reading the newspaper, listening to radio, walking into a music store, or watching the television, there is no way to avoid the programs or advertisements related to these two girls. It is no exaggeration that even people who never listen to Hong Kong popular music would know who the Twins are.

Their popularity is best reflected in the sales of their music albums. Since their debut till July 2003, they have released seven music albums. The sale of their first music album “Twins EP”, released on August 15th 2001, quickly reached one platinum level (50,000 copies sold) within a month.¹² In the midst of the economic recession and the rampant violation of copyrights, such result is indeed spectacular, especially for a new musical group. Their third music album, released on January 29th 2002, also reached one platinum level within two weeks.¹³ Their sixth album “Happy Together”, released on November 28th 2002, which contains twenty-four songs, some of which are their most popular songs in their previous albums, even reached double platinum level on the day of release, pressing their company to release two other editions shortly

¹² Yau, Ai-Wai, “Get Popular in Six Months,” in *Singtao Daily* (Hong Kong, September 17th 2001).

¹³ Wong Jing-Man and Lok Wah-Ling, “A Dangerous Auction,” in *Appledaily* (Hong Kong, February 11th 2002).

afterwards.¹⁴ Certainly, these numbers that only number in tens of thousand are obsolete when compared with the sale of music album in United States, England and Japan that often reach million or even tens of million count. Yet, one must not forget that the size of the Hong Kong market is minuscule comparing with the United States and Japan, making a sale of one platinum to be rare enough. Multiply the sale number above by a factor of twenty (for Japan) or forty (for United States), and one would get an idea how popular they are compared with singers in Japan and United States.

Music album is certainly not the only kind of product that Twins has released so far. They have also issued a couple of photo albums, where one of them has reached a sale of more than sixty thousand.¹⁵ This is quite a wonder, given their obvious lack of statural beauty. In addition, from September 13th 2002 to September 15th 2002, they have held three concerts in a row with around forty thousand audiences in total. Popularity will certainly bring in a lot of advertisements. In 2002 alone, they have filmed fifteen TV commercials,¹⁶ plus numerous non-TV one. In addition, they have also filmed a couple of movies and TV series, and numerous MTVs.

The end result of all these efforts is money and prize. It has been estimated that the Twins have earned at least thirty million Hong Kong dollars together in 2002 alone. Even after their manager's commission, each of them still pocketed around nine million dollars.¹⁷ This is already numerous times higher than the income of many CEO in town. And remember, they are only two young girls who just turned twenties. Similarly, their popularity has brought them thirty-four prizes of various kinds since their debut till

¹⁴ Tong Ka-Hei, "Double Platinum for Twins' Latest Album," in *Mingpao* (Hong Kong, November 28th 2002).

¹⁵ Chu Ji-Ying, "Four Thousand Copies Sold for Twins' Photo Album," in *Appledaily* (Hong Kong, August 8th 2002).

¹⁶ "A Gutsy Move of TVB," in *Appledaily* (Hong Kong, January 4th 2003).

¹⁷ Kwok Hin-Jing, "Income for Super Stars," in *Mingpao* (Hong Kong, December 11th 2002).

July 2003.¹⁸ No doubt they were the most popular artists in Hong Kong in 2001 and 2002.

2.2.2 A Closer Look at Twins and Their Production

After reading all the above description on their immense success and popularity, one may be interested to take a closer look at them as well as their music albums in order to understand their secrets to their enormous success. Since they were first trained as singers, let's begin by looking at one of their music albums: their third album called "Twins" (officially written in simplified Chinese).

The very first thing that may shock anyone who sees this album for the first time is its shape. If my memory serves me well, nobody in Hong Kong has ever used a non-rectangular jewel box for a music album. Yet the paper-made box that contains this third music album from Twins takes shape of a hexagonal prism that is almost one and a half inch high. Hardly anyone would not be caught in surprise by such unconventional shape, thereby generating a curiosity to open it. (See figure 2.4)

Take a quick glance on the cover of the package, and the face of these two young girls will draw our full attention right away. No wonder may one agree with the general public that indeed Charlene and Gillian look immensely cute, young and perhaps beautiful, yet apparently lacking any sense of femininity found on some of the more mature female singers. After all, their typical baby-face is the key to success of many superstars in the world these days. An important impression that their baby-face may generate is that they look very simple, so simple that they look rather like a pair of children whom one does not feel any complexity and pressure with their presence. Another impression associated with such appearance is, needless to say, that they are eye-candies for our eyes. In Hong

¹⁸ Please refer to the official website of Twins for a complete list of prizes they have won thus far. <http://www.eegmusic.com/artists/eeg/eeg06.php>.

Kong, as in many other places in the world, if an artist does not have a pleasing appearance these days, chances for him or her to get popular will not be much higher than nil. As a famous lyrics writer in Hong Kong once said: “the singing skill of an artist can be so-so, but his or her appearance must be attractive.”¹⁹ Few people would disagree that appearance takes a heavier and heavier weight in the popular music industry these days.

Figure 2.4: The cover of two of their albums



Left: The cover of their first album “Twins EP”. Charlene is on left and Gillian on right.

Right: The cover of their third album “Twins”. Gillian is on left and Charlene on right

Their style also attracts our attention. Judging from their hairstyle, their costume, and the background picture, they appear to be imitating the traditional Japanese style, thus creating a sense of exoticism and golden-oldies, accompanied by a sense of ridicule. On the other hand, on the cover of their first album called “Twins EP”, the sleeveless garment, the fresh hairstyle, as well as the background of a white beach and a blue sky, together summon an energetic atmosphere that is anxiety-free. If we yet take a look at their fifth album entitled “Amazing Album” (See figure 2.5), their circus-like costume along with the black and white background that apparently belong to the 1960s together bring in again a sense of freshness and ridicule. Such incessant shift in style, unfortunately, fails to translate into any depth. As clearly illustrated from their pictures where no two of them ever give the impression of being similar to each other, their different styles look rather like something that can be effortlessly taken on and off. Each of their above mentioned styles that have been in fact carefully designed is indeed an eye-candy, but there is nothing much underneath such external beauty. It is as if those styles only aim to visually produce a pure aesthetic experience and have no intention to convey any meaningful message.

Nonetheless, it is probably the content inside this hexagonal package that may surprise us the most. What’s inside this hexagonal box is a pair of Chinese New Year banners, some so-called Lover Cards, some cash vouchers, and a VCD with some MTV and a short drama, all closely associated with Twins. These “bonuses” make the music CD that is found underneath all these gadgets to assume only secondary importance. This album is of course not the only one that comes with all these unusual gifts. In their first album, for instance, there are some samples of shampoo, a string for mobile phone, and many other vouchers. Their second album includes a key-holder, a wrist-pad, a small pack of snacks, and many other vouchers. In their fourth album, it includes a small plastic dolls, a little towel, a string for mobile phone, samples of skin care products, and some vouchers. In their fifth album called “Amazing Album”, other than the music CD and a VCD, it has a voucher for a mobile phone service called

¹⁹ Wu Hing-Wing, “Under the Lion Rock,” in *Mingpao China* (Hong Kong, April 15th 2002), pp. 5.

Twins Mobile, a fan, some paper stands, and many other vouchers. (See figure 2.5) All these “extras” are of course tightly associated with Twins, and make the music album look more like an Easter Egg or a gift box. Their albums seem to offer a lot more than purely the joy of music.

Figure 2.5: Inside their fifth album “Amazing Album”



From upper-left, clockwise: the box of the album, four paper-stands, a collection of lyrics, and a fan. The vouchers are not shown here.

Deep under all these extras may one find the actual music compact disc. Play it in a CD player to understand the type of music that currently prevails in Hong Kong. The first song of this album however may catch everyone in surprise. The first few seconds of

this song called “Sleeping in Pyjamas”²⁰ is enough for one to conclude that the melody of the song is much too unsophisticated compared to, let’s say, classical music. In fact, the more one hears this song, the more one will be mistaken that this is a song written for six year old kids. Another important feature of their songs that should become evident after the first few seconds of the music is that it has a strong beat. An easy way to determine whether a song has a strong beat or not is to see if it feels right to follow the beat by tapping the beat on the floor with one’s foot or even by shaking one’s head. (Simply imagine someone listening to Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata with his head shaking and with one of his feet tapping the floor.) The same is true for the other four songs on the album, and in fact for all of their songs released so far.

Here, it is interesting to briefly compare Twins’ simple and childish songs with classical music. People who have grown up with classical music will certainly agree that the works of Beethoven and Mozart focuses more on producing elegant melodies that are imbued with comprehensive delineation of certain complex human emotions. Twins’ music, however, seems to be more interested in producing melodies in simple harmonies that are less sophisticated both in terms of the complexity of the melodies themselves and also the underlying message of the music, as their songs are hardly portraying any sophisticated human passion. In this sense, the melodies and their style somehow converge to one point, namely to create a sensual pleasure and nothing much beyond that. And yet, their fans appear not to be overly concerned on this issue, given the wide success of their albums.

The surprise certainly does not end here. Once we get to hear their singing skill after the introduction of the song, the first impression must be that their singing skill is only barely acceptable. Once again, it is perhaps adequate to say that, judging by their fragile voice and their barely satisfactory singing skill, they should perhaps

²⁰ 著睡衣睡覺

belong to the category of children songs. After all, their songs were produced in such a manner that it does not take a lot of skill to sing them well. Also, their popularity clearly indicates that singing skill is not the decisive factor for a contemporary popular singer. The same holds true for every single song of them.

The lyric of this song is equally revealing. Let's take a look at the first few lines of its lyrics:

It is very noisy, nobody can hear any appeal.
The person in pyjamas, quickly wake up and dance.
O~~~~LA LA LA LA LA LA LA
O~~~~LA LA LA LA LA

You have panda-like baggy eyes, if you think that midnight is still too early for you, then quickly raise your hand.
Dear sleepy panda baby, if you live happily, then insufficient sleep does not matter. Let's Go!
The sheet is not good; anyone in pyjamas can dance happily.
Why accuse someone for that? You are so noisy that nothing can be heard.

It is very noisy, nobody can hear any appeal.
The person in pyjamas, quickly wake up and dance.
It is very noisy, come on let's be at the mercy of the music.
We will for sure wait for you, we just have enough people for the ball.
O~~~~LA LA LA LA LA LA LA
O~~~~LA LA LA LA LA

If you do not have a dating tomorrow morning, then find a good friend to evade your bad luck.
Dear sleepy panda baby, why do you fight with a lion in your dream? Let's go!
The furs are not good, take on the pyjamas and dance as if in a fashion show.

The moment is late, the whole universe is waiting for you to begin the show.²¹

Humorous readers may want to compare this lyric with classical poems, and see how nowadays poetry looks like. Anyone familiar with classical culture would agree that every word in classical poems has been so carefully thought out that the spirit of the poem summons an indescribable beauty and wholeness. The lyric of Twins' song quoted above, however, appears to be hopelessly jumbled together, as every pair of adjacent lines shows very little coherence. For instance, while the first line of the lyric talks about a

²¹ The lyrics of "Sleeping in Pyjamas" included in the third album "Twins". In the Chinese version of the lyrics, all these eight lines perfectly rhyme.

十分嘈 誰亦聽不到申訴
睡衣人快起身跳舞
O~~~~LA LA LA LA LA LA LA
O~~~~LA LA LA LA LA

你熊貓眼肚 嫌午夜尚早快些舉起手報到
熊貓寶寶 能快樂睡不夠都不必補 Let's Go
床單不好 誰著住睡衣也可開開心跳舞
何必控訴 嘈到像甚麼也都聽不到

十分嘈 誰亦聽不到申訴
睡衣人快起身跳舞
十分嘈 來吧聽音響擺佈
定等你 舞會剛夠數
O~~~~LA LA LA LA LA LA LA
O~~~~LA LA LA LA LA

你明天一早 無約會便找友好躲一躲 劫數
熊貓寶寶 何以在夢中與獅子比武 Let's Go
皮草不好 來著住睡衣當花生騷起個舞
時光不早 全宇宙就等你一位開騷

noisy scene where someone is making a complaint, the second line, out of nowhere, suddenly jumps to urge people to wake up and dance. In fact, the link between the lines is so thin that any line in the poem can be taken out without seriously affecting the main theme of the lyric, if it has any.

The lack of coherence of this lyric is indeed disturbing for anyone who tries to seriously digest it word by word and line by line. As my own experience with this lyric tells me, reading this lyric with the method that one normally uses for classical poems will make one's mind like the metallic ball in pinball arcade, where one's head will keep hopelessly bouncing from corner to corner, until the music finally ends. One can imagine how dizzy one may feel afterwards. Language, when used brilliantly, may produce flavours of flowers. But when it is poorly used, it can smell like garbage.

The incongruousness of the lyric is also partly due to the complete absence of rhetoric. Rhetoric, the ancient art of using language to effectively communicate with others, demands not only a text to be free of grammatical errors, but it must also include a carefully selected vocabulary as well as some advanced analogies or metaphors, plus numerous other writings techniques. The author of this lyric, however, apparently could not even make his lyric coherent, let alone rendering it rhetorical. For instance, the vocabulary of any lyric or poem should be cautiously chosen lest the atmosphere get destroyed by unbecoming words. Accordingly, given the childish theme of the song, delightful and juvenile words should be exclusively used. This has been partially achieved by using expressions like "panda-like baggy eyes" and "happily dance". Yet, the lyric includes weighty and humorless words like "appeal" and "accuse" that seriously disarrange the childish atmosphere of the song.

Even more disturbing is how he violates all kinds of basic grammatical rules. For instance, a portion of many compound words,

as in the case of the word "happily", has been cut off.²² Some words have been purposely substituted by another word with similar meaning, like "time" is replaced by "moment".²³ Worst of all, lyric should be written in formal language, yet colloquial words and expression are mixed with formal words throughout the lyric. All these little mistakes here and there have of course not been committed accidentally. Instead, they were carried out so as to conserve the meter and the rhyme. Unfortunately, by violating all these basic rules, even though it perfectly preserves the meter and the rhyme, it at the same time washes away all poetic elements from the lyric.

The consequence of all these violations of grammar is that the whole lyric is stripped of all concrete meaning, let alone poetic value. Supposedly, this lyric is a little fantasy of a child who refuses to sleep at midnight. Such childish theme is not where the problem lies. After all, if the lines have been more coherent, if all the basic grammar rules have been respected, and if there has been certain level of rhetoric, then the lyric may still sketch a joyful scene of a naughty child in vivid details. Yet, as a result of all those unacceptable violations, some more serious than others, the lyric fails to even describe the scenario in concrete details, let alone delineating the particular emotion of that little kid in any depth. What is left in lyric is merely a scattered image with hardly any descriptive power, if not a complete ruin. And yet, many Twins' fans show no concern about the literary beauty of the songs and memorize many of their idols' broken lyrics by heart.

All the above descriptions about how childish and unsophisticated the music of Twins is may give rise to an impression that their target audiences are largely kids under twelve year old. Indeed, many of them are only primary school kids, and some of

²² In Chinese, happily should be written as "Hoi Hoi Sum Sum". Yet in the lyric it is written as "Hoi Hoi Sum".

²³ Where "Si Gan"(time) should have been used, "Si Gwong" (moment) is used.

them are even only five or six year old. However, a sizeable part of their fans are high school and even University students. For instance, many of my friends in the early twenties of age all bought most of Twins' CDs and listen to them like other popular music. A mature female singer in Hong Kong once publicly said that she has a male friend in the mid twenties who is also a fan of Twins and who begged her to get an autographed picture of Twins for him.²⁴

This is indeed an interesting phenomenon that deserves closer investigation. A popular singer band, whose packaging, melody, lyrics and singing skill all indicate that they should belong to the category of nursery rhyme, has gained immense popularity among people of all age. From the eyes of these fans, there is nothing wrong in falling in love with Twins. After all, they think that that is where the latest fashion lies and there is nothing to worry. From the viewpoint of the parents of these teenagers, however, the enormous success of Twins is lamentable, as they understood it as decadence of music and corruption of their children's taste. This is because many of the parents, especially those who were grown up with classical music, feel that the music of Twins is garbage and their style as a whole is childish. In fact, even the Twins once admitted in a public occasion that they felt really bad when people said they act like idiots.²⁵ An elderly singer also once openly said that for her the Twins looks like a pair of kindergarten girls.²⁶

To sum up, for many people, the popularity of Twins represents a radical shift in the style of music, if not a decadence. The important question to ask is: what does this decadence or radical shift in music tell us about the nature of the contemporary society? And, more important, what has caused this decadence? Before

²⁴ Chan Mui-Heung, "Yip: Twins as Kindergarteners," in *Appledaily* (Hong Kong, September 7th 2002).

²⁵ Kwok Hing-Jing, "The Simplicity and Cuteness of Twins," in *Mingpao* (Hong Kong, May 4th 2002).

²⁶ "Yip: Twins is More Popular than Tung," in *Singtao Daily* (Hong Kong, September 7th 2002).

answering this question, let's expand our horizon and inspect music from other popular singers.

2.2.3 The Superstars Phenomenon

Of course, this apparent decadence in music was not initiated by the Twins. The truth is that starting from the nineties of the twentieth-century, there sprang in Hong Kong a new generation of popular singers who were never above twenty-five years of age, and who have gone through a comparable life cycle of Twins. With only a few exceptions, all of these singers look very stylish, handsome, or youthful; their style shifts as quickly as the traffic light; the rhythm of their songs loses the emotional intensity; their voice and singing skill appear fragile and amateurish; the lyric of their songs lacks the rhetoric and poetic beauty; and their fans appear to be exclusively teenagers or young adults. What distinguishes the Twins from these new generation superstars is that Twins is a tad more extreme in everything: they look even younger; their style changes more frequently; the packaging of their products is more colourful and youthful, if not childish; the melody of their songs is even less emotionally intensive; their singing skill is even more amateurish; the lyric of their songs is even less poetic; and their fans are even younger. In short, Twins has merely continued the prevailing trend in Hong Kong music industry.

In fact, there exists one additional feature that all the new generation singers share and that is not yet apparent on the Twins. That is the brief length of their career life, since it appears that they are unable to maintain their popularity for very long. Every few months, a new star will suddenly pop out from nowhere and gradually take over the leading position of another star. And a few months later, the same thing will happen to this new star, and on and on. Thus, it should not surprise anyone if the Twins quickly fades out from the market in the coming year, yielding their position to another

unheard-of singer who is probably even younger and whose songs are even more childish than Twins.

This so-called “superstar phenomenon” is certainly not unique to Hong Kong, which has in fact adopted the idea of modern popular music from the West. As a matter of fact, in the last few years, no matter in United States, in England, in Japan, and in many other advanced countries, one superstar after another emerged in the market. For instance, in England, we have the Spice Girls and Britney Spears; in United States, we have the Back Street Boys; in Japan we have Amuro Namie²⁷ and Hamasaki Ayumi²⁸, to name just a few. Almost all of them share certain similarities with Twins, which require no repetition. It is no exaggeration to say that this superstar phenomenon is a global trend.

To be precise, this phenomenon is not a product of the 1990s. It is perhaps difficult to assign a year of birth to it, but few people will disagree that by the 1960s, superstars have attracted a lot of attention from the public. Among these early superstars were the Beatles and Elvis Presley. It is hard to imagine how many youngsters’ soul has this first generation of popular singers attracted. How nowadays parents who have grown up with the Beatles and Elvis sneer on Twins is the same as how their parents who have grown up with classical music sneered on the Beatles and Elvis. Twins and other nowadays superstars are simply a continuity of the popular culture initiated by Elvis and Beatles, even though fans of Elvis and Beatles will for sure argue that their idols sing better, that their songs are more emotional, and that their lyrics are more poetic and meaningful. This movement of superstars and popular culture witnessed almost five decades of growth and gained more and more acceptance throughout the world.

As a digression, this phenomenon interestingly is not limited to the music industry alone. In the movie industry and the sport industry, one can equally notice the presence of superstars who get astronomically paid every year. This is especially striking when compared with the fact that top twenty highest paid American executives earned only an average of US\$36.56 million in 2002²⁹, while the same average is US\$188.99 million for the twenty highest paid celebrities.³⁰ (See figure 2.6) Many of these movie stars and sport stars are so famous that it costs million of dollars to invite them to film a commercial that only lasts a few seconds.

Figure 2.6: Some of the highest paid celebrities in USA in 2002³¹

Name	Occupation	Total Pay (in US\$)	Pay Rank
Steven Spielberg	Movie Director	\$200 million	1
Tiger Woods	Golf Player	\$78 million	5
Jim Carrey	Comedian	\$40 million	15
Michael Jordan	Basketball Player	\$35 million	23
Jennifer Lopez	Actress, Singer	\$29 million	44

To be sure, Twins’ type of popular music is not the only type of music that has been invented in the last hundred years. To name just a few, there are also Blues, Electronic, Funk, Hip-hop, Jazz, Metal, New Age, Punk, R&B, Rap, Rocks, Techno, plus many others. Each of them widely differs from each other. For instance, while Jazz and Blues are about expression of personal feelings, Rap, Electronic and Techno apparently give the impression that they are merely producing noise. The wide differences amongst them,

²⁷ 安室奈美惠

²⁸ 濱崎步

²⁹ Calculated from Forbes.com, *What the Boss Makes*, available from <http://www.forbes.com/2003/04/23/ceoland.html>.

³⁰ Calculated from Forbes.com, *The Celebrity 100*, available from http://www.forbes.com/static_html/celebs/2003/index.shtml.

³¹ Ibid.

however, become comprehensible once we include classical music in the analysis. In a sense, all these myriad variations of twentieth-century music are signs of decadence. Especially in the eyes of classical music admirers, those noisy beats and blatant expressions of feelings are unmistakably inferior to the elegance of classical music. It appears that the transition from classical culture into popular culture that has already taken place in the last century will turn out to be something the world must regret in the future.

At first glance, it may appear inadequate to compare classical culture with nowadays popular culture. After all, each of them symbolizes two distinctly different epochs. However, it is exactly for this last reason that such an absurd comparison becomes meaningful. Can this “regretful” transition from the classical culture to popular culture be adequately and convincingly explained? Hardly anyone will argue that it is impossible nowadays to produce another Beethoven or Mozart. Why is it the case?

These interesting and critical issues, regrettably, have received comparatively little attention from the world. Comments and even theories abound, but none of them is convincing. Here are the most popular ones: it is because composers of popular music are less competent than classical composers; it is because popular singers nowadays are unskilled; it is because the target audience of popular music is the young generation; it is because popular culture is commercialist; it is because nowadays people are materialistic; it is because classical culture is too boring; it is because popular culture receives more marketing.

All of these “explanations” that we hear or read everyday from newspapers, from magazines, from television, from books, from magazines, or even from our parents are unfortunately only half way to the truth. Nowadays composers may indeed be unable to match classical composers, but why can’t they? Today’s popular singers’ singing skill may be inferior to classical singers in a drama, but why does it no longer matter? The audience of popular music

may be exclusively young people, but why is popular culture always associated with young people? Popular music may be commercialist, but how in details does that translate into the current decadence of music? People nowadays may be very materialistic, but why can’t they enjoy classical music? Classical music may sound boring for many people, but why do they find it boring? Popular music may receive more marketing, but does that tell us anything about the transition? In short, these explanations seem to merely bring in more questions than answering it.

It appears, then, that there currently exists no plausible theories to explain the decline of classical music, the rise of popular culture, and, most important, the origin of the various features associated with popular music. In order to thoroughly answer these questions, one certainly has to carefully analyze the historical background of both European classical culture and popular culture. But before doing so, let’s remember that popular culture includes not only popular music but many other things like comic, movie, fashion, plus many others. Therefore, in hope of drawing a comprehensive and conclusive theory concerning the transition from classical culture to popular culture, one should look further than popular music and include the foresaid variations in the analysis. This will no doubt produce a fuller and broader understanding on the popular culture. Such is the task of the rest of this chapter.

2.3 Comic and Movie

There are three main forms of art, namely music, painting, and literature. Music has already been briefly discussed in the previous section. This section shall focus on painting, or visual art. Similar to the fate of classical music, these days in Hong Kong, production of fine art have been pushed to the margin. Rarely does anyone in nowadays Hong Kong pay much attention to exhibition of fine art paintings. That certainly does not mean that visual art has

altogether disappeared. Instead, it has survived in comic, designer furniture, interior design, plus many other.

2.3.1 Comics and Contemporary Visual Arts

Let's begin with comic. Comic is more than about visual art, as it is in fact a story recounted with graphics. Hence it has both literary and visual elements. The visual element shall first be covered in this section, followed by its literary characteristics in the coming section.

To give readers an idea how well-liked comic is among Hong Kong youngsters, allow me to relate a personal incident. It came about in the summer of year 2000 when I happened to have a temporary job in the annual book fair in Hong Kong. Early in the morning of the first day of the fair, I arrived at the entrance of the luxurious Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (See figure 1.2) where the book fair took place. There, I was shocked when I saw a thick and long queue of people outside the main entrance, all waiting to get in the centre. I was especially surprised to notice that the first few dozens people of the queue were all teenagers. Immediately, I questioned myself: "When did Hong Kong teenagers develop such frenzy in reading?" Because I was an employee, I could therefore enter the building with my employee pass and did not have to line up with the mass outside.

The incident happened when I was waiting for the lift that located not far from the main entrance. While waiting, I suddenly heard some heavy noises beside me. I turned to the source of that noise and noticed that a couple of concierges have just opened the main entrance, and around a dozen of teenagers who have lined up in the front of the queue were all running at full speed towards one section of the book fair. My first impression was: "This cannot be true. Hong Kong teenagers cannot be so enthusiastic about reading." Then I got in the lift and began to forget that scene.

That night, after almost nine hours of busy work, I took the subway to go home. In the carriage of the subway, I saw the second episode of this incident. I saw a teenager, probably around eighteen years of age, and he was vertically holding a six-foot tall plastic scythe. I was shocked and almost burst out laughing. At that time, however, I did not expect that that scythe would have anything to do with the Book Fair.

Once I got home and watched the news, I finally understood what had happened that day. It is all about comic. The truth was that a section of the fair has been reserved for comic booths, and some of them decided to sell some limited-edition weapons in plastic used by the characters in their comic. Those plastic weapons were certainly not cheap. I remembered that in the news, a teenager said he had spent an equivalent of around five hundred US dollars to buy several pieces of plastic weapons found in one of his favourite comic series. That explained everything I saw on that day. Those few dozens of teenagers who rushed into the centre were in fact running to those comic booths to buy their most wanted weapons. My first impression in that morning was correct: Hong Kong teenagers could not be so enthusiastic about reading anything but comics.

This personal anecdote did not exaggerate how popular comic is among today's teenagers. As a Hong Kong youngster myself, I can assert that comic is definitely one of the most widely read types of writing, together with fashion and electronic games magazines. Such immense popularity certainly deserves our closer attention.

Let's take a look at the following strip from one of the more successful Japanese comic strips in the last few years – the immensely popular Crayon Shin Chan³². (See figure 2.6) The techniques that its author used to draw the strips are full of

³² 蠟筆小新

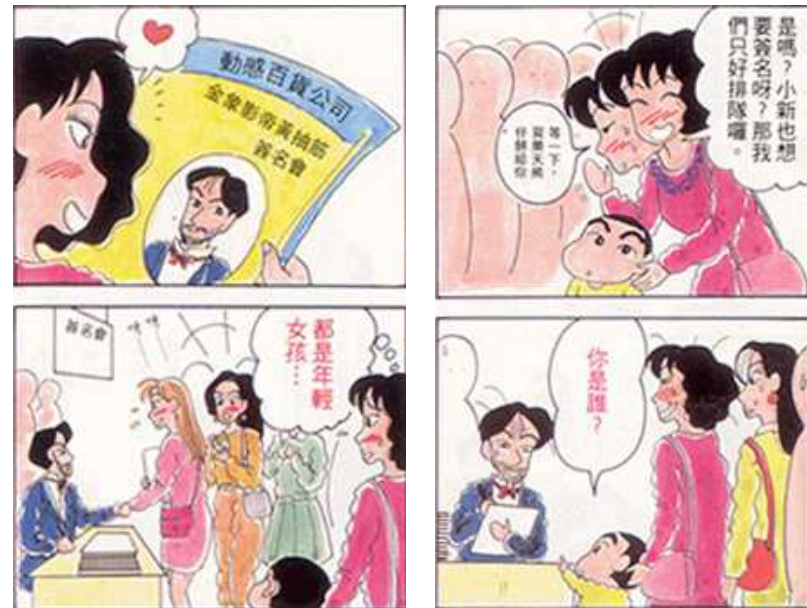
revelations. To begin with, the size of each narrative box is neither too big to be incomprehensible in a single glance, nor too small to escape our attention. All the narrative boxes are rectangle. Their background is never too dark since darker images tend to be more difficult to recover from memory, thus more difficult to comprehend. For most of the time, the backgrounds are not crowded places such as on a busy street or in a packed supermarket. This is because the images of the things crowding such places, which would occur in a crowd in our memory, may block other images of things that the author intends to place there. At times when a crowded background cannot be avoided, as in the case of the strip shown here, the author cunningly draws the crowd as line-men that all look identical. The details of these background figures is reduced and simplified to such a level that they lose all physical traits, and this helps to minimize disturbance caused by their presence. In terms of the order of narrative boxes, they usually have a continuous and straight-forward order, so that our memory may find with dispatch all the inscribed images in places where we expect them to be located.

The drawing of the important characters, meanwhile, tells a more complicated story. The size of the main images, usually a human, is generally moderate in that it takes very little effort to comprehend the whole image. The nature of the images, however, is usually wondrous and intense because such things are impressed in memory more profoundly. It is for this reason that the eyes of most comic characters often occupy almost one tenth, if not more, of the face, and that their head is usually oversized. After all, our eyes and our head are what other people pay the most attention at when they look at other people. Thus, by enlarging them, readers will more easily focus on these characters whose body ratio has been distorted.

The same is true for the colouring of the image. The colouring of cartoon almost never gets close to what they really are in the real world. They are for most of the time very brilliant and intensive, such as fiery red, plain blue, bright yellow, etc. As such, the image will strongly stand out from the plain background and

impress more deeply in our memory than if their real colours were used.

Figure 2.6: A Strip from Crayon Shin Chan at actual size³³



- 1) Top Left. Written on the newspaper: “Lively Department Store: Autograph function of the Best Actor of the year.”
- 2) Bottom Left. Thinking of the mother: “All young girls...”
- 3) Top Right. Words of the mother: “Oh really? Shin Chan also want his autograph? Then we have to line up. (Whispering) I will get you some snacks afterwards.”
- 4) Top Bottom. Words of Shin Chan: “Who are you?”

³³ A strip from Yoshito Usui, *Crayon Shin Chan*, trans. Chin Ah-Tung, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Hong Kong: Tong Li Publishing, 1994), pp. 10.

As for the actual drawing of the image, the author is no doubt trying to simplify the image as much as possible. All the shadows, details, tones of colours and other little visual details are all swept out from the strip. What remain are only the essentials of the character. After all, the author never intends to perfectly portray the reality. Likewise, the reader's attention will not be bogged down to some fine details of the drawing.

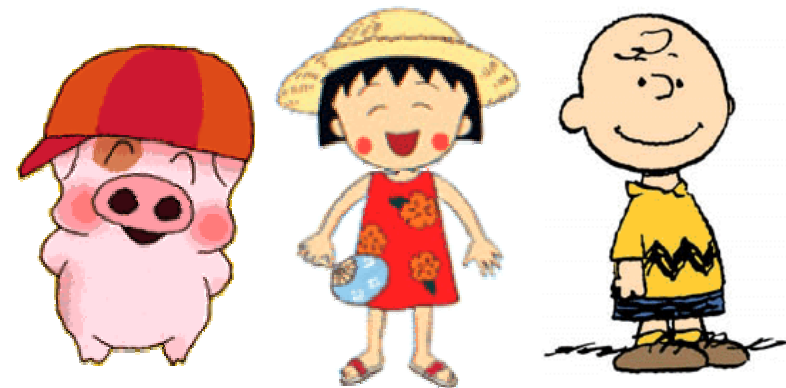
The images also rarely remain tranquil. Every character that the author wants the readers to pay attention has some apparent qualities such as movement, gazing, emotion, or actions. These active images may be commended to memory more effectively than tranquillity or repose.

Concerning the emotion of the subjects, they similarly follow the foresaid basic principles. If a character is supposed to be happy, then the mouth of the character will take the shape of a big melon with no teeth inside and will occupy almost twenty percent of the face of the character, while the eyes will take form of a line. If a character is angry, then the facial expression will again be exaggerated by showing surfaced veins on the forehead, the oversized teeth will grind, the eyes become a dot, and the eyebrows become two slashes pointing to the centre.

Facial expression is of course not the only way to depict a character's emotion. As shown from the strip from Crayon Shin Chan, the mother's idolatry on the superstar shown in the newspaper is represented by a little red heart; her embarrassment is shown by some red zigzags on her cheeks; her combined feeling of being made fun of and being shocked is shown by some exaggerated drops of sweat and two or three uncombed strings of hair — no doubt these are very simple and direct method to graphically represent some instantaneous feelings. Same thing happens to other emotions like satisfaction, sorrow, pain and others. As such, the feeling of the character would be transferred to the readers in the barest, reduced, direct, and yet the most exaggerated fashion.

These methods of drawing figures are certainly not the creation of Crayon Shin Chan's author. As a matter of fact, most comics nowadays employ these long-established techniques, although they may be less extreme than in the case of Crayon Shin Chan mentioned above. For instance, characters in Sailormoon³⁴ and Chibi Maruko³⁵ and Dragon Ball³⁶ from Japan, Snoopy and Superman from USA, and even the McDull³⁷ from Hong Kong all share certain characteristics with the Crayon Shin Chan depicted above. (See figure 2.7) And yet, despite these untraditional drawing techniques that drastically differ from the conventional styles, they have all gained enormous popularity, especially among the younger generation.

Figure 2.7: Examples of Comic Characters



From left to right: McDull (Hong Kong), Chibi Maruko (Japan), and Charlie Brown (United States).

³⁴ 美少女戰士

³⁵ 櫻桃小丸子

³⁶ 龍珠

³⁷ 麥兜

The above quick survey on the drawing of comic may appear original, as rarely has anybody studied the drawing style of comic from such angle. However, in reality, the methodology of the analysis above is mostly copied from a short treatise entitled *De memoria artificiali acquirenda* or *On Acquiring a Trained Memory*³⁸ written by Thomas Bradwardine (1300?-1349) more than six hundred years ago. In that short yet brilliant treatise, he had proposed several techniques for fixing and recalling specific material through the use of graphically detailed, brilliantly coloured, and vigorously animated mental images as well as other techniques mentioned above in the analysis of comic.

Readers must be surprised at the striking similarities between the techniques proposed in Bradwardine's text written some six hundred years ago and those used by nowadays authors of comic. The fact that Bradwardine's techniques, originally invented to make a text easier to remember by adding graphics, were apparently adopted either consciously or unconsciously by nowadays artists might reveal some unknown hidden features of comic. But before getting in depth on this topic, let's take a brief look at other kinds of visual arts in the present world that share similar features with comic.

Another type of mainstream visual art in these days is interior design. Here again one may identify the core features found in comic, namely the reductionist method. Beginning from around 1960s, there emerged in the West a new style in interior design that emphasized on extreme simplification, usually known as Minimalism.³⁹ This new fashion rejected the delicacy of traditional

³⁸ For an English copy of the treatise, see Thomas Bradwardine, "On Acquiring a Trained Memory," trans. Mary Carruthers, in *The Medieval Craft of Memory*, ed. Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 205-214.

³⁹ Much more on Minimalism will be covered in chapter five.

decoration that emphasizes on royalty and fine details (similar to the classical music), but instead adopted the comic-type of reductionism. It suffices to take a look at the advertisements in some European magazines on interior design to learn more on this latest fashion. Generally speaking, the engineers of those Minimalist furniture and interior designs avoided all the fine details like patterns, prints, carvings, as well as complex variation of colours. Accordingly, everything is simple in design and monotonous in colour. A table is simply a mono-colour table, with no fine carving or complicate mixture of colours. A bed is simply a bed, with no skirts or prints on the legs. And yet a "simple" designer furniture that has been reduced to its bare essentials can often cost ten times more than a similar piece of furniture with actually more colours and prints. Once again, this shows that the classical style is no longer the mainstream, where its position has now been taken over by the reductionist style.

Certainly, paintings for art sake have not yet been completely wiped out by popular culture. There are still many earnest artists around the world who produce paintings that are to be shown in museum. Interestingly enough, these paintings have equally lost all the fine details found in classical arts and have been reduced to such a level that actually makes them highly abstract, if not incomprehensible.⁴⁰ The briefest glance on these contemporary paintings is enough to invoke the following impression: what is the painter drawing? Indeed, almost all the modern paintings and sculptures are composed with mono-colour geometrical figures or at times even with industrial products like tubes and lamps. They hardly appear to be paintings in the traditional sense.

This brings us back to the comparison between comics and classical paintings. Comic, designer furniture, interior design, and even genuine paintings unmistakably exhibit the same reductionist style. They have abandoned all classical elements, and many people understood this transition as another regrettable decadence. The

⁴⁰ See for example figure 5.8 for a Minimalist painting.

problem at hand is then: what is the implication of this radical shift in style in visual art in the last hundred years? Furthermore, does such decadence in visual art have anything to do with the decadence in music? Once again, before answering these two questions, let's take a look at a third type of art — literature.

2.3.2 Movies and Modern Literature

Nowadays in the opening of the twenty-first century, few people would disagree that human life has never been so comfortable. Indeed, with the coming of the age of machinery and then the age of computers, the days when human have to struggle with the nature seems a distant myth. Paradoxically, this apparent new height in human civilization is accompanied by a rapid decadence in arts. As shown so far in this chapter, the various types of music and visual arts produced in the recent past have abandoned the tradition descended from nineteenth-century Europe, changing the course of development of art forever. This shift in direction that has been often understood as decadence indeed deserves a closer inspection. Music and visual art are of course not the only two categories of arts. Another important one is literature, or the art of letters.

Everywhere in the society can one find the presence of literature. For instance, it is present in the lyrics of popular music. As discussed in a previous section, these supposedly modern poems are full of grammar mistakes and colloquial terms, get increasingly stereotyped, infantile, emotionless, and often predictable, and they are stripped of all rhetorical values. What is left is merely a text that perfectly rhymes and respects the meter. Artistic values seem to be vanishing from the lyrics.

Comic also possesses literary elements, as it is a story recounted by correlating picture and text. Yet, comic does not exempt from the current of artistic decadence in the twentieth

century. In my experience, authors of comic usually limit themselves to non-controversial yet attractive themes like violence, sexuality, humour, sport, and fantastic adventure. These themes are often combined and then packaged into a straightforward storyline in which one or a few heroic figures would solve all the encountered obstacles with all kinds of exciting or intelligent methods. Yet, other than the sensual excitement and the temporary escape from the world, there is nothing much beyond these simple and often repetitive plots. After all, comic cannot be compared to classical plays that discuss human nature or to religious stories that aim to convert people. It is the general consensus that the whole purpose of comics is merely to provide some instantaneous entertainments, instead of discussing philosophical issues. For instance, Charles Schulz (1922-2000), the author of *Peanuts*, when asked if he used the cartoons to get a message across, said: “Yes, but that is secondary... the main thing I try to do in the strip is to amuse people.”⁴¹ Indeed, especially for young students, after hours of study, comics provide an instant escape into a fantasy world. They are less tiring on the eyes than a novel, and it is easier to read a comic for ten minutes than it is to watch ten minutes of a one-hour drama on television. In short, comic is meant to be an entertainment and thus decidedly differs from the more serious classical writings.

If one thinks that popular music and comic are reserved for youngsters and that the above comments on nowadays literature should not be generalized to other variations of literature for adults, then perhaps it will be worth the effort to take a look at movies that are mostly produced for the adult world. A brief look at the top ten all time box office in Hong Kong is a good way to begin the analysis.

Figure 2.8: Top Ten All Time Box Offices in Hong Kong⁴²

⁴¹ Arthur A. Berger, “Peanuts: An American Pastoral,” in *Journal of Popular Culture* 3 (Summer 1969): pp.4.

⁴² Unverified data from http://home.kimo.com.tw/austinmoviezone/gross_3.htm.

Rank	Year	Name	Main Actor	Box Office (SHK)
1	2001	Shaolin Soccer	Stephen Chow	60 million
2	1996	Police Story IV: First Strike	Jackie Chan	57 million
3	1995	Rumble in the Bronx	Jackie Chan	56 million
4	2002	Infernal Affairs	Andy Lau	55 million
5	1994	God of Gamblers 2	Yun Fat Chow	52 million
6	1992	Aka Justice	Stephen Chow	49 million
7	1992	All's well end's well	Stephen Chow	48 million
8	1995	Thunderbolt	Jackie Chan	45 million
9	1997	Mr. Nice Guy	Jackie Chan	45 million
10	1991	Fight Back to School	Stephen Chow	43 million

To be verified with http://www.filmacademy.com.hk/HKFA_Ch.htm.

Rank	Year	Name	Main Actor	Box Office (SHK)
1	2001	少林足球	周星馳	60 million
2	1996	警察故事四之簡單任務	成龍	57 million
3	1995	紅番區	成龍	56 million
4	2002	無間道	劉德華	55 million
5	1994	賭神 2	周潤發	52 million
6	1992	審死官	周星馳	49 million
7	1992	家有囍事	周星馳	48 million
8	1995	霹靂火	成龍	45 million
9	1997	一個好人	成龍	45 million
10	1991	逃學威龍	周星馳	43 million

Two names keep recurring in the list. They are Jackie Chan (b.1954), known for his kung-fu movies, and Stephen Chow (b.1962), known for his comedies. Let's begin with Stephen Chow. Interestingly enough, opinions on his movies do not widely vary since different classes of people all agree that his movies are low comedies and are not worth a look. Yet albeit these severe criticisms, Stephen Chow has four movies listed in the ranking above.

Let's take a look at one of his movie called *From Beijing with Love* produced in 1994. This movie is in fact a parody of one of the greatest icons of western cinema – James Bond. In the story, Chow was a humble butcher but he was in reality a secret agent of Mainland China. One day, he was sent on a deadly mission in Hong Kong after having been forgotten by his own employer for years. Once arrived, he teamed-up with a beautiful secret agent who in fact secretly worked for the enemy. Later, it turned out that his enemy was actually his employer, but Chow discovered this conspiracy of his superior and killed him at last.

The plot, to be fair, is not the main factor that determines the literary value of a work, whether it be a movie, a poem, or a drama. What counts is the way the story is actually written. If Shakespeare was to write another play in old English based on this plot, he would most likely put a lot of emphasis on the psychology of every character through skilful rhetoric so that when we read it, we more than see it, we feel it too – not to mention the fact that the whole play would be full of wisdom and rich description on various sides of human nature. If a contemporary American director was to direct a movie based this plot, probably a large portion of the budget would be invested in special effects like explosion scenes and fire exchanges – all accompanied by superb background music and cunning editing. If Jackie Chan was to act in this movie, then the movie will be full of kung-fu fighting scenes. But if Stephen Chow was to act then the movie would become a comedy full of comical scene. Below are some examples of the humorous moments in that movie:

Chow was called up by his superior who has long forgotten him. When they met, Chow told his master with sentiment: "I thought the state has already forgotten me." The commander immediately answered: "That is not true. Even a roll of toilet paper or an underwear has its value." Then Stephen Chow replied: "Commander, your comparison is excellent."⁴³

The partner of Chow has accidentally shot her own shoulder. Chow immediately went to his suitcase to find something to help her. However, he returned to his partner and said: "I have nothing but this band-aid. Apply it to stop the bleeding first."⁴⁴

These are only two instants where one will probably burst out laughing while watching this movie, or at least they are where Chow expects his audience to laugh. His other movies contain hilarious scenes similar to those two above. For instance, in "Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella", there is a scene where Chow had to open a gigantic spelled door made of stone:

Stephen Chow stands right in front of the door, and cried the spell "Open Sesame". The door did open, but it fell directly on him. A few second later, the door closed up automatically. The slightly injured Stephen Chow quickly got back up and began to mumble in front of the door: "What the heck, I am sure that the spell is Open Sesame...." And the door fell on him once again.⁴⁵

As a dedicated fan of Stephen Chow myself who have seen all of his movies, I am probably qualified to comment that the selling point of his movies is the myriad hilarious scenes that stuff his productions. This does not mean that there is no message underneath his works. In fact, Chow often claims that there are always positive

meanings hidden in his films, but again that is secondary. People see his movies because they are funny.

Needless to say, similar to the case of popular music and comic, Stephen Chow's movies also fundamentally differ from classical works. Indeed, in the eyes of many traditional people, they regard Chow's movies – and in fact all contemporary movies – as utterly worthless. As mentioned for numerous times above, the classical artists who evidently belonged to a totally different epoch were more interested to address issues related to human nature through brilliant use of rhetoric. Stephen Chow's movies, however, apparently lacks these classical elements. This is because his works are usually some highly exaggerated fantasies or adventures stuffed with humorous scenes, and avoid altogether any inner and spiritual discussion on the issues of human nature. Moreover, the language used in the movie is straightforward and often bawdy, and the ancient art of rhetoric seems largely absent in his dialogs. This makes his movies almost effortless to enjoy because there is no need to cogitate upon the connotation of the poetically written lines, or to ponder the author's understanding of human nature as reflected in the reaction and decision of a character who encounters a certain dilemma. All the complicacies in humanity and in the real world are reduced to its bare essentials, while all kinds of fantasies and comical moments are included to produce a purely entertaining movie, similar to the case of popular music and comic. This is the main reason why traditional people denounce popular culture, and entitle the recent transition from classical culture into popular culture as decadence.

Adding hilarious scenes is certainly not the only method to make a movie successful these days. Another common way that used to be popular in Hong Kong is to fill the movies with kung-fu fighting scenes. This can be shown from the fact that four out of the ten best hits in Hong Kong are from Jackie Chan. As in the case with Stephen Chow, most of Jackie Chan's movies have a simple plot, usually about how a few heroic figures uproot an entire evil gang.

⁴³ *From Beijing with Love*, dir. Lee Lik-Chi and Stephen Chow, perf. Stephen Chow (Hong Kong: Win's Movie Production, 1994).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella*, dir. Jeffrey Lau, perf. Stephen Chow (Hong Kong: Win's Movie Production, 1995).

Such repetitious storylines are hardly attractive by themselves and are certainly not the selling point. Yet with the help of kung-fu fighting scenes, the plain story that looks like a monotonous lawn suddenly saw a blossoming of flowers of all kinds. In a sense, the violence and the corresponding sensual excitement create a fantasy for contemporary people who live in the relatively peaceful modern mega-cities and who rarely encountered those bloody scenes in real life. And, naturally, the simple storyline lacks any discussion on human nature and rhetoric, which makes these kung-fu movies effortless to understand.

A third way to package a movie is by adding in a lot of special effects and latest scientific themes. This is where American movies really shine, thanks to their gigantic market which allows a larger production budget. Examples of this type of movies are ubiquitous. Take a look at the top ten all time box offices in America. (See figure 2.9) With a few exceptions, these best-sellers are largely decorated with the all kinds of marvellous special effects generated by computers and explosive. This is especially true for the Star Wars series, the E.T. series and the Jurassic Park series, where the spaceships, aliens and dinosaurs that are generated with the help of computers are almost the exclusive selling points of these movies. The fact that each of these series has at least two sequels already tells how popular they are. Unfortunately, similar to the Stephen Chow's and Jackie Chan's movies in Hong Kong, the storyline of these American movies is again no Shakespeare. Most of these movies are merely science fiction with the focus on the power of future technology or some fantasies with dinosaurs, with aliens or in an idealized medieval world imbued with magic. It may be boring to see a hundred movies on this kind, but it is indeed entertaining to watch them for the first few times. Especially for the younger generation, watching these effortless movies is indeed more interesting than watching a three hours Shakespeare's play that has no special effects, no kung-fu fighting or hilarious scenes, but only philosophical discussion on human nature.

Figure 2.9: Top Ten All Time Box Offices in United States⁴⁶

Rank	Year	Name	Box Office (\$US)
1	1997	Titanic	600 million
2	1977	Star Wars	460 million
3	1982	E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial	434 million
4	1999	Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace	431 million
5	2004	Shrek 2	425 million
6	2002	Spider-Man	403 million
7	2003	The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	376 million
8	2004	The Passion of Christ	370 million
9	1993	Jurassic Park	357 million
10	2002	The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	341 million

The following analogy serves as a good summary for the above survey on contemporary movies. Classical works like those from Shakespeare are like a lengthy solid friendship built upon many unforgettable incidents. Every time we recollect this friendship, flow after flow of recalls would emerge in our mind, and we will then re-taste every part of it bit by bit. It is all about memory. Most of nowadays movies, meanwhile, are comparable to a dinner in one of those themed restaurants. Surely enough, the decoration we see, the music we hear, the menu we use, and the food we eat may appear similar to what we think it is supposed to be in the particular foreign country used as the theme, and we may generate the impression that we are really in that distant territory. However, once we step out of the restaurant, all the music, food, people and decoration instantly

⁴⁶ Yahoo.com, *Yahoo! Movies – Box Office and Buzz*. Available from <http://movies.yahoo.com/boxoffice-alltime/rank.html>. Accessed December 16th 2003.

disappeared. We are back to the real world, with skin deep memory on the themed restaurant that we just have dinner in. Such transience is the essence of popular culture.

To sum up, similar to the fate of music and visual art, the art of letters similarly suffers a setback from the peak of classical culture a few hundred years ago. This can be illustrated from the storylines of movies that are decorated with comic, violence, fantasy and special effects, and that are stripped of rhetoric and interest in human nature; from the straightforward plot of comics; and from the plain lyrics, which is supposedly the only remaining type of poem in the contemporary world. Yet, nowadays people, despite being aware of their poor artistic value, still rushed to spend their money on comic, on popular music CD from superstars, and on the latest movies, instead of spending it on classical art. It is as if literary value no longer counts in literary products.

2.3.3 General Comments on Popular Culture

Such is the brief survey on the sort of art that currently prevails in contemporary world. No matter in the domain of music, visual art, or literature, it is clear that nowadays artists have left the classical world behind them, and instead embark on a journey to explore various artistic expressions that are brand-new to the world. It is probably unfair to assert that this radical shift in style represents a decadence in art, yet undeniable is the fact that popular culture, after several decades of incessant development, have little in resemblance with the once appreciated classical culture. To illustrate this point, it suffices to compare popular music with classical music, comic with classical paintings, and movies with classical literature. Generally speaking, classical works put a lot of emphasis on rhetoric and human nature, while modern culture largely abandoned these elements and only aim to excite or impress our mind in order to produce temporary entertainment. These are of course not all the

differences between the classical and popular culture,⁴⁷ but they are sufficient for the present purpose.

After having analyzed the basics of the prevailing culture in the contemporary society, the next important task is to determine what to do with these observations. As mentioned in chapter one, society is more than about technology and economics. Similarly, it is also more than about arts and culture, although the premise of this book is that art is the clearest pointer of human history. To recall, human society is like a giant spider web, meaning that each of its component is so connected to each other that sectional analyses will necessary forgo the intricate interaction among them.

Moreover, not only is it necessary to expand the horizon to art and culture instead of limiting oneself to economic and technology, equally imperative is to study our past in depth so as to understand the origin of everything we see in the present world. To put it differently, in order to understand contemporary Hong Kong through popular culture, one has to put the above survey in a macro context so that not only the interaction among the various components in the present world, but also the interaction among the various components in different periods of history shall be unveiled. This seemingly abstract and complex task is the goal of the remaining of this book.

⁴⁷ The rest of this will slowly bring up the most important difference between these two cultures.