The Development of Chinese Pop Music Based on Stylistic Trends and Audience Preferences among the Thai People*

[1]Fan Yahui, Tepika Rodsakan and Pongsapich Kaewkulthorn
Faculty of Fine Arts, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand.
[1]Corresponding Author's Email: 452682816@qq.com

Abstract

The objectives of this research are 1) to outline dominant musical characteristics associated with widely consumed Thai pop songs in the digital streaming era; 2) to examine how stylistic elements have evolved across different time periods; and 3) to interpret the relationship between musical style and audience listening behavior within platform-based environments. This research was a qualitative descriptive research design supported by quantitative indicators. The research population comprises Thai popular songs that achieved sustained popularity between 2016 and 2025. Data were collected from five major music platforms–YouTube Thailand, Joox, Spotify, Apple Music, and Popnable. Thirty representative Thai-language pop songs were selected through a three-stage sampling process based on chart recurrence, streaming volume, chart longevity, and cross-platform visibility. Data analysis integrates qualitative listening analysis with descriptive platform indicators. Musical components–including melody, rhythm, tempo, instrumentation, production texture, and lyrical expression–were systematically examined, while chart duration and replay tendencies were used to support interpretations of audience preference. The songs were further categorized into two periods (2016–2020 and 2021–2025) to facilitate temporal comparison of stylistic tendencies.

The research result was found that 1) Thai popular music from 2016–2020 was largely dominated by pop ballads and soft rock styles, marked by melodic clarity, warm acoustic timbres, and emotionally direct lyrical expression, reflecting audience preference for familiarity and emotional accessibility. 2) Between 2021 and 2025, stylistic expansion became evident through the increased integration of R&B, rap, and electronic elements; however, these features primarily enriched existing emotional and melodic structures rather than replacing them. 3) Across the decade, audience preference was closely aligned with digital platform listening patterns, favoring mid-tempo songs with introspective moods, clear melodic profiles, and high replay suitability.

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The conclusion of this research is that Thai popular music has developed through aesthetic continuity combined with selective stylistic expansion, with audience preference shaped more by emotional resonance and listening comfort than by genre novelty.

Keywords: Thai Popular Music; Audience Preference; Musical Style; Digital Platforms

Introduction

Over the past decade, Thailand's popular music landscape has been increasingly shaped by the expansion of digital streaming platforms. The parts of services, such as YouTube Thailand, Joox, Spotify, Apple Music, and Popnable, have become central channels for music discovery and everyday listening, fundamentally altering how audiences access, evaluate, and repeatedly consume popular music. Platform-based listening environments, supported by algorithmic recommendation systems and chart-based visibility, have accelerated the circulation of musical styles and reinforced patterns of audience preference. Previous research indicates that digital platforms play a decisive role in shaping musical exposure and emotional engagement, particularly by privileging music that is emotionally resonant and suitable for repeated listening (GWI, 2021; Peechapat and Puttanapong, 2024).

Within this platform-driven environment, Thai popular music has exhibited both stylistic continuity and gradual diversification. While pop ballads and emotionally expressive melodic forms continue to occupy a central position in mainstream listening, recent years have seen increasing integration of R&B, rap, and electronic elements. These stylistic developments reflect broader changes in listening habits, especially among younger audiences, who increasingly engage with music through personalized, mood-oriented, and headphone-based listening practices. Rather than replacing established musical conventions, newer stylistic elements tend to coexist with and subtly enrich familiar melodic and emotional frameworks in Thai popular music.

Understanding how musical style and audience preference interact in this evolving digital context is essential for interpreting contemporary Thai popular music development. By systematically examining representative Thai pop songs released between 2016 and 2025, this study provides empirical insight into how stylistic features correspond with platform-based listening behavior. The findings contribute to popular music studies by highlighting audience-centered mechanisms of stylistic change and by offering a structured analytical framework that may inform future comparative research on popular music trends in Southeast Asia and other digitally mediated music markets.

Objectives of the Research

1. To identify the dominant musical characteristics of widely consumed Thai popular songs in digital platform environments between 2016 and 2025, with emphasis on melody, rhythm, instrumentation, production texture, and lyrical expression.

2. To examine the stylistic development of Thai popular music across two periods (2016–2020 and 2021–2025), focusing on both continuity and selective expansion in musical style.

3. To interpret the relationship between musical style and audience preference by analyzing how platform-based listening patterns, chart longevity, and replay suitability reflect audience behavior.

Research Methodology

The 1st Step: Documentary Study

The first stage of the research consists of a documentary study that establishes the conceptual and analytical foundation for the investigation. Existing literature on popular music, cultural industries, and audience preference was reviewed to contextualize stylistic change within broader musical, cultural, and technological frameworks.

Previous studies on Chinese popular music (C-pop) trace its historical development from early twentieth-century Shanghai to contemporary hybridized forms, emphasizing the interaction between traditional musical elements and global popular music influences (Qiao & Thoard, 2022; Bi & Prathumchan, 2023). Research has highlighted stylistic hybridization, genre fusion, and the role of cultural identity in shaping musical production and reception, particularly within East Asian pop music ecosystems (Meng, 2024).

Scholars have also examined popular music from sociological and cultural perspectives, viewing music as a medium through which collective values, identity negotiation, and globalization processes are expressed (Qiao & Thoard, 2022; Bi & Prathumchan, 2023). Comparative studies further indicate that regional pop industries in East and Southeast Asia are interconnected through shared production models, stylistic circulation, and audience-oriented market strategies.

In relation to audience behavior, prior research demonstrates that musical preference is influenced by demographic factors, cultural background, and listening environments (Han et al., 2022). In the digital era, streaming platforms play a critical role in shaping musical visibility, reinforcing stylistic familiarity, and promoting emotionally resonant content through algorithmic recommendation systems (GWI, 2021; Peechapat & Puttanapong, 2024). Studies on Thai popular music specifically emphasize melodic clarity, emotional expressiveness, and stylistic hybridity as enduring factors in audience engagement (Eamsa-Ard, 2006; Sawangchot, 2015).

Together, this body of literature provides a theoretical reference for interpreting stylistic characteristics, audience preference, and platform-based listening behavior, and informs the analytical framework adopted in the present study.

The 2nd Step: Sample Selection and Data Sources

The second stage involved the selection of representative music samples. Annual chart data from 2016 to 2025 were collected from five major music platforms: YouTube Thailand, Joox, Spotify, Apple Music, and Popnable. Songs were selected according to the following criteria: (1) appearance within the Top 20 rankings on at least three platforms; (2) YouTube Thailand view counts exceeding 100 million; (3) sustained chart presence over multiple consecutive weeks; and (4) notable public recognition or cultural impact.

Based on these criteria, thirty Thai-language pop songs—three from each year—were selected as the analytical corpus, ensuring both popularity and representativeness across different audience groups.

The 3rd Step: Stylistic Listening Analysis

The third stage consisted of qualitative listening analysis. Each selected song was examined in terms of genre orientation, tempo, rhythmic structure, melodic contour, instrumentation, production texture, and lyrical expression. This analysis aimed to identify dominant stylistic features, patterns of emotional expression, and the emergence of hybrid forms combining acoustic and digital elements, melodic hooks and rap phrasing, as well as atmospheric sound design.

The 4th Step: Interpretation of Audience Preference and Trends

In the final stage, qualitative stylistic findings were interpreted in relation to descriptive platform indicators, including chart longevity, replay tendencies, and cross-platform visibility. This comparative interpretation enabled the study to assess how musical style corresponds with observable audience listening behavior in digital environments. By triangulating listening analysis with platform performance data, the research enhances the reliability of its conclusions regarding stylistic trends and audience preferences in contemporary Thai popular music.

Research Results

The 1st objective is to investigate the dominant musical style characteristics of Thai popular music between 2016 and 2025 within digital platform environments. From the research result, it was found that:

The analysis reveals that Thai popular music across the decade demonstrates strong stylistic continuity rooted in melodic clarity, emotional accessibility, and moderate tempo structures. Between 2016 and 2020, Thai pop was predominantly shaped by pop ballads and soft rock influences, characterized by warm acoustic timbres, diatonic harmonic progressions, and emotionally candid lyrical narratives. Representative songs such as *“Cinderella”* by Tattoo

Colour, *"Pen Thuk Yang"* by Room39, and *"Sorn Klin"* by Palmy exemplify this stylistic orientation through language-driven melodic contours, restrained arrangements, and storytelling that foregrounds emotional sincerity.

Instrumentation during this period relied primarily on acoustic guitar, piano, and string sections, while electronic processing was applied subtly to enhance rather than dominate the soundscape. These stylistic choices reflect long-standing Thai listening traditions that prioritize emotional expressiveness and narrative intimacy. The sustained chart success of these works indicates that audiences were drawn to familiarity, emotional transparency, and musical comfort rather than experimentation.

From 2021 onward, Thai popular music exhibited visible stylistic expansion while retaining its foundational characteristics. Although R&B, electronic textures, and rap-influenced phrasing became increasingly common, they did not replace melody-centered composition. Instead, they were selectively integrated to enrich emotional depth and atmospheric nuance. Songs such as *"Fade"* by Jeff Satur, *"Day One"* by Pun, and *"Yours Ever"* by COCKTAIL and Q Flure demonstrate this development through layered production, ambient pads, and spatial effects that deepen emotional engagement.

Overall, the research confirms that Thai popular music is defined not by abrupt stylistic shifts but by gradual enrichment of an established emotional and melodic framework. Table 1 summarizes the dominant stylistic characteristics observed across the two time periods.

Table 1: Dominant Stylistic Characteristics of Thai Popular Music (2016–2025)

Period	Dominant Styles	Key Musical Features	Emotional Orientation
2016–2020	Pop ballad, Soft rock	Acoustic instrumentation, diatonic harmony, clear melody	Emotional openness, familiarity
2021–2025	Pop with R&B, Rap, Electronic elements	Layered textures, ambient effects, rhythmic diversity	Introspective, mood-oriented

The 2nd objective is to examine stylistic changes and continuities across two periods (2016–2020 and 2021–2025). From the research results, it was found that:

The comparison between the two periods highlights a pattern of stylistic continuity accompanied by selective transformation. While the earlier period emphasized direct emotional narration through melody and lyrics, the later period introduced new expressive dimensions through timbre, spatial design, and rhythmic layering. Importantly, these changes did not disrupt established listening expectations but expanded the expressive range of Thai pop music.

A notable development during the later period is the rise of rap–pop hybridization. Artists such as Youngohm, F.Hero, and Saran incorporated hip-hop aesthetics into Thai popular

music while maintaining linguistic rhythm, regional storytelling, and culturally recognizable sound elements. Songs like *"Tararat"* and *"Kularb"* blend contemporary rap delivery with Thai vernacular language and, in some cases, traditional instrumental timbres such as the *Pin* or *Khlui*. This demonstrates that innovation in Thai pop music often operates through cultural layering rather than stylistic replacement.

Rather than signaling a departure from Thai musical identity, these hybrid forms reinforce it by embedding new stylistic elements within familiar emotional and cultural frameworks. Audience acceptance of rap–pop hybrids suggests that stylistic change is most effective when new elements are introduced in a manner that preserves emotional continuity and cultural locality.

In addition, the increasing use of ambient textures and digital production techniques reflects broader shifts in listening contexts. Headphone-based and personalized listening environments encourage greater attention to atmosphere, space, and mood. Consequently, emotional expression in Thai pop music after 2021 is conveyed not only through melody but also through sonic texture and dynamic subtlety.

Taken together, the findings indicate that stylistic transformation in Thai popular music is evolutionary rather than disruptive. Continuity remains the organizing principle, while transformation occurs through gradual expansion of expressive tools.

The 3rd objective is to explore the relationship between musical style and audience preference by relating stylistic features to platform-based listening performance. From the research results, it was found that:

The analysis demonstrates a strong alignment between musical style and audience preference within digital platform environments. Streaming data indicate that songs featuring mid-tempo rhythms (approximately 90–110 BPM), clear melodic structures, and emotionally introspective themes consistently achieve longer chart duration and higher replay rates across platforms.

These listening patterns suggest that Thai audiences prioritize emotional resonance and listening comfort over genre novelty. Music that balances rhythmic subtlety with accessible emotional expression is particularly suited to digital contexts, where songs are often consumed repeatedly during solitary or routine activities. The preference for replay-friendly music reinforces stylistic continuity, as artists are incentivized to maintain melodic clarity and emotional intimacy even while experimenting with new textures.

Language also plays a critical role in shaping audience connection. The use of conversational phrasing, colloquial vocabulary, and youth slang enhances emotional proximity between performers and listeners. Songs such as *"Toh Rim (Melt)"* exemplify how linguistic naturalness strengthens audience identification by mirroring everyday speech and personal experience. This reinforces the perception of authenticity, which has become a key criterion for audience evaluation in digital music cultures.

Platform-based listening environments further amplify these preferences through algorithmic recommendation systems and chart visibility. Songs that perform well initially are more likely to be repeatedly recommended, reinforcing existing stylistic tendencies rather than encouraging radical experimentation. Table 2 summarizes the key stylistic features associated with strong platform performance.

Table 2: Musical Features Associated with Strong Platform-Based Listening Performance

Musical Feature	Listener Response	Platform Outcome
Mid-tempo rhythm	Listening comfort	High replay rate
Clear melody	Emotional accessibility	Chart longevity
Introspective mood	Personal engagement	Algorithmic recommendation
Conversational lyrics	Perceived authenticity	Sustained popularity

Overall, the findings indicate that Thai popular music between 2016 and 2025 has expanded stylistically while maintaining a stable emotional and cultural core. Audience preference is shaped less by innovation for its own sake than by how effectively music supports emotional engagement, personal reflection, and repeated listening within digital environments.

The New Body of Knowledge

The new body of knowledge derived from this study is synthesized as a concise conceptual model illustrating the relationship between musical style, audience preference, and digital platform dynamics in Thai popular music. The model highlights that stylistic development is driven by aesthetic continuity combined with selective stylistic expansion. Core elements such as melodic clarity, emotional accessibility, and moderate tempo remain stable, while new stylistic components are integrated in ways that enhance emotional resonance. Audience preference and platform mechanisms jointly reinforce these patterns, guiding sustainable music production and consumption in contemporary digital environments.

Table 3: Conceptual Model of the New Body of Knowledge

Component	Key Focus	Outcome
Musical Style	Melody, rhythm, timbre	Emotional continuity
Stylistic Expansion	R&B, rap, electronic elements	Enriched expression
Audience Preference	Comfort, intimacy	Listener engagement
Platform Dynamics	Replay, chart longevity	Sustained popularity

Discussion of Research Results

From the research result of the 1st objective, it was found that Thai popular music between 2016 and 2025 demonstrates strong stylistic continuity, particularly in terms of melodic clarity, emotional accessibility, and moderate tempo structures. This is because Thai audiences have long valued music as a medium for emotional expression and narrative communication rather than stylistic experimentation. The sustained popularity of pop ballads and soft rock reflects a culturally embedded listening preference in which familiarity and emotional sincerity are perceived as positive aesthetic qualities. This finding is consistent with the research work of Eamsa-Ard (2006), who emphasized that emotional expressiveness and melodic intelligibility are central to Thai popular music culture and audience reception.

From the research result of the 2nd objective, it was found that stylistic change in Thai popular music occurs through gradual expansion rather than replacement, especially after 2021. While elements such as R&B, electronic textures, and rap-influenced phrasing became more visible, they were incorporated without displacing established melodic and emotional frameworks. This is because Thai popular music tends to absorb global influences through localized adaptation, allowing innovation to coexist with cultural familiarity. This pattern is consistent with the concept and research work of Bi and Prathumchan (2023), who argued that contemporary popular music development often relies on stylistic hybridization that preserves core cultural and emotional structures while introducing new expressive layers.

From the research result of the 3rd objective, it was found that audience preference is closely aligned with platform-based listening environments, favoring music that supports repeated and emotionally comfortable listening. Songs with mid-tempo rhythms, clear melodic profiles, and introspective moods consistently achieved stronger replay performance and longer chart presence. This is because digital streaming platforms reinforce listening habits that prioritize emotional stability and replay suitability through algorithmic recommendation and usage patterns. This finding is consistent with the research work of Peechapat and Puttanapong (2024), who demonstrated that platform mechanisms play a significant role in shaping music visibility and stabilizing audience preferences in Thailand’s contemporary music industry.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the development of Thai popular music between 2016 and 2025 was characterized by evolution rather than disruption. The findings show that melody-centered songwriting, emotional accessibility, and replay-friendly structures remained the core features of mainstream Thai popular music across both periods. At the same time, the later phase (2021–2025) demonstrated a pattern of selective expansion, in which producers incorporated ambient textures, spatial depth, softer timbral layering, and mood-oriented production while preserving familiar melodic and lyrical appeal. This indicates that Thai

popular music has not undergone a radical stylistic break, but has instead adapted gradually to the logic of digital listening environments.

The study also finds that audience preference in the platform era is shaped not only by musical content itself, but also by how songs function within algorithmic systems of recommendation, replay, playlist circulation, and short-form exposure. Songs that support introspective listening, emotional immediacy, and repeat consumption appear to align more effectively with streaming-platform behavior. Therefore, the contemporary success of Thai popular music lies in its ability to balance stylistic familiarity with subtle sonic innovation, making songs both culturally recognizable and digitally compatible.

Suggestions

1. The suggestions from the research

From the research result of the 1st objective, it was found that Thai popular music is characterized by strong stylistic continuity, particularly in terms of melodic clarity and emotional accessibility. Therefore, music producers, composers, and record companies should prioritize melody-centered composition and emotionally sincere lyrical expression when developing new works. Cultural and creative institutes, such as music academies and arts faculties, may apply this finding by emphasizing emotional storytelling and melodic structure in music education and songwriting training, rather than focusing primarily on technical experimentation.

From the research result of the 2nd objective, it was found that stylistic development in Thai popular music occurs through selective expansion rather than stylistic replacement. Therefore, artists and production teams should apply new stylistic elements—such as R&B, rap, or electronic textures—in ways that enhance rather than disrupt established emotional frameworks. Music industry organizations and cultural agencies can apply this finding by encouraging culturally localized hybridization strategies that balance innovation with audience familiarity, especially in youth-oriented music production.

From the research result of the 3rd objective, it was found that audience preference is closely linked to platform-based listening environments, favoring music with high replay suitability and emotional comfort. Therefore, digital music platforms, marketing teams, and independent artists should design release strategies that consider listening context, such as mid-tempo pacing, introspective mood, and conversational lyrical style. Related institutes, including music promotion agencies and digital media units, may apply this finding by aligning promotional planning with platform algorithms and replay-oriented audience behavior.

2. The suggestions for future research

2.1 An in-depth study of how platform algorithms shape the circulation of specific musical features, especially spatial sound design, ambient texture, and emotionally introspective production styles that appear to support replay-oriented listening behavior.

2.2 A focused investigation into the influence of AI-driven composition and AI-assisted music production on stylistic expansion in Thai popular music, particularly in relation to melody preservation, emotional authenticity, and digital market adaptation.

2.3 A study of User-Generated Content (UGC) platforms such as TikTok to examine how short-form participatory media may accelerate selective stylistic expansion, affect song structure, and reshape audience preference in contemporary Thai popular music consumption.

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