

Hong Kong Christian Songwriters' Dilemma: Juggling Sacred Music, Tonal Language, and Christian Faith

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INTRODUCTION

The Cantonese adjective *ngamjam* literally translates to “tone-matching,” “pitch-fitting,” or “correct sound.” It describes words spoken, or in this context, sung, without tonemic distortions. The older generation of Hong Kong Christian songwriters who had contributed to the surge of *ngamjam* songs in the 1990s now finds it more and more challenging to write new ones for the congregation. They found their progress impeded by the lack of vocabulary, and, in their efforts to present the tonal nature of Cantonese properly, they found themselves out of ideas for song melodies as well. In my interview with him, Calvin Chan 西伯, a famous local songwriter, exclaimed:

The entire vocabulary for Cantonese worship songs includes only about two hundred words. Back and forth you'll encounter the same clichés: 'ging3 baai3 (worship),' 'zaan3 mei5 (praise),' 'gam2 jan1 (give thanks),' 'zaam6 lap6 (stand),' 'jung2 pou5 (embrace),' 'yee? 'Jau5 paan3 mong6 (having hope),' 'sap6 zi6 gaa3 (the cross),' and others like those, right? They are like collective memories. If you don't believe me, go analyze any recently written song texts, and you'll find those two hundred words. Want to write your own? Pick from these two hundred words... Once you have written enough songs with these two hundred or so words, you can hardly come up with any new ideas. (Chan 2021).

[2] Another songwriter Corbet Ma 馬啟邦, said the following in a similar interview:

God's precious blood... love and protects me... Lord.... oh, I love you most, because you love me most... I wish to embrace you every day to be with you—overused, cliché, vain, vapid, inappropriate, ineffective words! Unfortunately, you can find songs infested with those adjectives and phrases everywhere.” (Ma 2021).

[3] As this study will show, many other Hong Kong Christian composers face the same dilemma and share the same sentiment as well. While some bewail the grim future of Cantonese Christian worship music, others test new methods and approaches to solve the problem. Ultimately, one must look into the Cantonese language as well as the age-old dichotomy of composing songs text-first or tune-first in order to comprehend how juggling between musical aesthetics, Christian theology, and Cantonese literature brought songwriter's composing careers to a standstill.

METHODOLOGY

[4] This study examines and compares two *ngaamjam* songs . Both released in the 2010s, these two songs represent the tune-first and the text-first repertoires respectively. Investigations on the musical, literary, spiritual, and theological influences that shaped the songs reveal the creative processes of their composers: Calvin Chan and Corbet Ma, both prolific Christian songwriters in Hong Kong. Such a project required a multifaceted set of methodologies: historical, ethnographic, and analytical. I grew up attending a church belonging to the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination in Hong Kong since 1999. Over the past two decades, I have learned and performed an increasing number of *ngaamjam* songs, eventually writing one of my own in 2019. This research draws from that personal experience, as well as the experience of local songwriters, music producers, sound engineers, and music performers like church ministers and accompanists from different denominations whom I interviewed. I conducted all of my ethnographic interviews in Cantonese, the regional language spoken in Hong Kong, then translated them into English. To help non-speakers understand the rhyme scheme and tonality of the Cantonese language, all musical analysis uses *Jyutping* (粵拼), a romanization system for Cantonese.

CANTONESE AND THE CONCEPT OF NGAAMJAM

[5] When comparing songs in different tone languages, Linguist Murray Schellenberg evaluates them according to a continuum of varying “speech melody and sung melody correspondence (Schellenberg 2012a, 269).” Cantonese popular songs feature exceptionally high correspondences, averaging 92% (ibid., 271; Wong and Diehl 2002, 205). However, Cantonese songs of other genres like translated nursery rhymes and traditional Christian

hymns often present much lower correspondences, leading to all of my interviewees' categorization of local music either as *ngaamjam* or *ng ngaamjam* (non-tone-matching). Musicologist Lily Chen-Hafteck confirms this dichotomous classification, writing that “the pitch movement of [Cantonese songs'] linguistic tones and melodic contours were either matched or mismatched (Chen-Hafteck 1999, 66).”

[6] The concept of *ngaamjam* did not emerge until the 1970s when Cantopop music grew popular and overtook the local music scene in Hong Kong. Before the rise of Cantopop, Mainland Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and American folk, pop, rock, classical, and jazz music comprised the local media soundscape, along with Cantonese opera (Ferguson 2002, 307; Liu 2013, 16–26; 75; Wong 2003, 45–57; 79–81; 105–08). Meanwhile, locals regularly listened to and performed another style of music in Protestant churches and Christian-founded schools—*cyuntungsingsi* (傳統聖詩), “traditional hymns (Kan 2019, 4).”

[7] Local songwriters like Ben Ng 吳秉堅, Calvin Chan, Corbet Ma, Irene Ku 古丹青, Joseph Chi 吉中鳴, and Yvette Lau 劉凝慧 all reported growing up singing “traditional hymns” in churches. Most of these hymns circulated among local Christians through three hymnals: *Hymns of Universal Praise*, a Chinese ecumenical hymnal published by a committee led by Chinese Christians like Timothy Lew in 1936, and *Youth Hymns of the Christian & Missionary Alliance* denomination, compiled by the Rev. William C. Newbern in 1951, which was later succeeded by Richard Ho's *Hymns of Life* in 1986 (Leung 2007, 85–104; Tseng 2015). Hymnologist Fang-Lan Hsieh shows in her study that the late-twentieth-century Chinese hymnody mostly comprises Chinese texts set into tunes primarily imported from the Euro-American hymnody (Hsieh 2009, 143–78). My previous research further examines these Chinese texts, identifying in them strict ancient Chinese poetic configurations and literary devices even though they were mostly translated from Western texts (Kan 2020, 11–16). Chinese Christians' extensive efforts in translating Western texts into Chinese poetry granted Chinese hymns an indigenous character despite their Western tonality. However, many of these literary devices, like rhymes and “word tone” patterns, only apply when read in Mandarin Chinese, the official language of Mainland China.

Hong Kong Christians and Concept of *Ngaamjam*

[8] When Hong Kong Christians sing hymns in *Hymns of Universal Praise*, *Youth Hymns*, or

Hymns of Life, they sing them in their regional language, Cantonese. Though sharing the same written script, Cantonese pronunciations of words often differ greatly from their Mandarin counterparts (Kan 2019, 31). Singing “traditional hymns” in Cantonese, therefore, not only nullifies certain literary elements but also severely distorts most of the words phonemically, rendering them *ng ngaamjam* (tone-mismatching). Nevertheless, Hong Kong Christians continued this practice for three reasons. First, they endorse the “global character” of these “tradition hymns,” which combine tunes sourced from sacred music written in other parts of the world with Chinese poetry, thus embodying the “transnational Christian” identity (Leung 2007, 102–03; Kan 2020, 9). Second, they believe that singing texts meticulously translated from those penned by “saints of the past” allows today’s worshipers to partake in “communion” with them, which elevates the worshipers’ worldviews “to that of Christ (Law 1978, 41).” Third, influential local Christian musicians and theologians like Daniel Law 羅炳良 advocated for sacrificing the quality of *ngaamjam* in order to preserve the transnational and transgenerational Christian identities represented by “traditional hymns.” Hymn translators found that painstakingly selecting words with tones that match the melody contour of the hymn tunes severely limits available word choices, causing translations to lose either their accuracy or their literary beauty (Fok 2018). Law further reasoned that many Christian terms and phrases, like “Messiah” (彌賽亞) and “Lord have mercy” (主憐憫我), come with inherent “word tone” contours that do not easily fit in every line of a tune. He explains in his article:

If a single note is assigned to each word, and this ‘note’ must be of a set pitch, [I] fear that each text can only be fitted to a single tune. In the past millennium, the Western churches sang thousands of [different] “*Kyrie Eleison*” pieces, now the Cantonese speaker may only have a few to switch between (Law 1995, 160).

[9] Expanding on the example raised by Law can establish a framework facilitating later dissections of the two *ngaamjam* songs in this study.

[10] Cantonese features nine “word tones”—pitch inflections (pitch height, shape, and length) directing the pronunciation of each syllable (Pian 1993, 202). The chart below approximates the relative pitch of these “word tones” in staff notation (See Figure 1 below).

Cantonese Tone:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Chinese Character:	分	粉	糞	墳	奮	份	忽	發	佛
Approximated Pitch in staff notation:									
Jyutping System:	fan1	fan2	fan3	fan4	fan5	fan6	fat7	faat8	fat9
Meaning (in English):	score	powder	dung	grave	exert	share	sudden	burst	Buddha

Figure 1. The Syllable “Fan” and "Fat" Pronounced Under the Nine Cantonese Tones.

[11] Unlike Mandarin, the first, third, and sixth tones of Cantonese are “flat tones” (平聲)—syllabic notes without pitch inflections. Cantonese speakers listen for the intervals between two monosyllabic words to distinguish between, for example, “sharing dung” and “sharing powder.” These intervals, along with in-syllable pitch changes in the second, fourth, and fifth tones, generate melodic contours, which can be plotted on a graph using d4 as the median pitch (see Figure 2 below).

[12] Following the Cantonese tone contours charted by linguists like Peggy Mok and Wong, Figure 2 portrays the “rising/falling tones” as curves instead of linear slopes (Francis et al 2008; Mok and Wong 2010, 1). Figure 2 depicts the short length of the seventh, eighth, and ninth “short tones” when pronounced. However, since scholars identified little differences between them and the “flat tones” when sung except for instances where composers

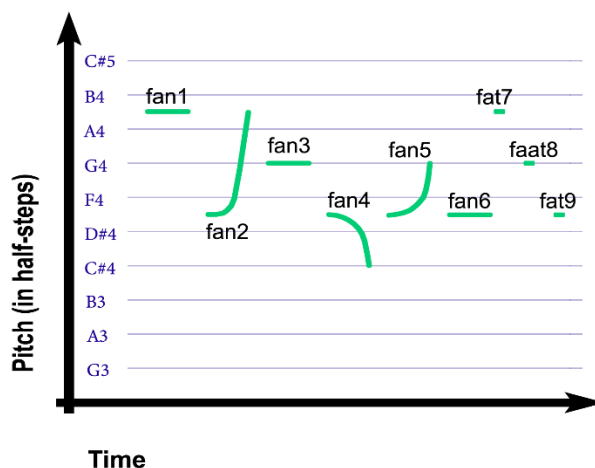


Figure 2: Pitch Contours of the Nine Cantonese Tones.

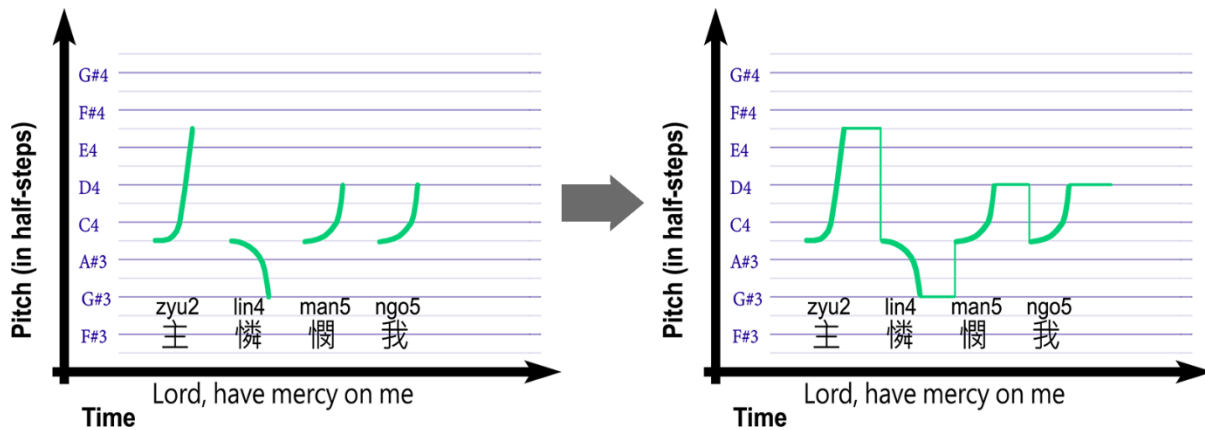


Figure 3a. Linking the Individual “Word Tone” Contours of “Zyu2 lin4 man5 ngo5”.

deliberately accentuate them for effect, the “short tones” will be depicted as “flat tones” in subsequent graphs (Chan and Chey 2013, 104; Schellenberg 2012b, 1).

[13] The liturgical phrase “*Kyrie eléison*” translates to “zyu2 lin4 man5 ngo5” (主憐憫我), with the numbers indicating each syllable’s “word tone.” Using the same graph, Figure 3a traces a “word tone” contour from individual words of the “*Kyrie eléison*” phrase.

[14] In Figure 3a, every “coda” (尾韻)—a syllable's ending pitch—is maintained once reached and extended until the next syllable to produce a continuous contour for the entire phrase (Wong 2003, 71). Figure 3b below places this contour on the notes of an A minor scale:

[15] Figure 3c below demonstrates two melodic phrases in A minor that accurately render the “word tones” of “zyu2 lin4 man5 ngo5” when sung. In both the E-A-C-C and F-A-D-D

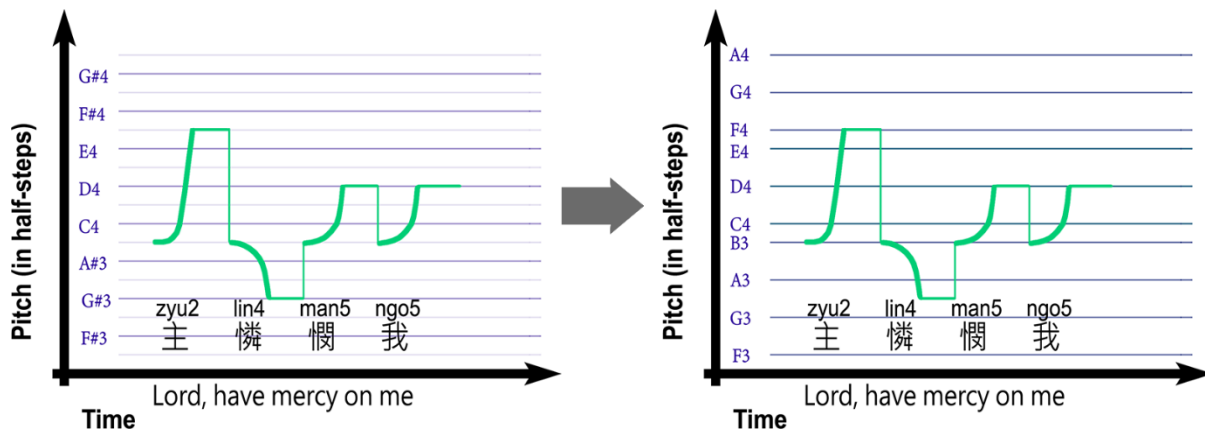


Figure 3b. Fitting the “Word Tone” Contour of “Zyu2 lin4 man5 ngo5” to the A minor Scale.

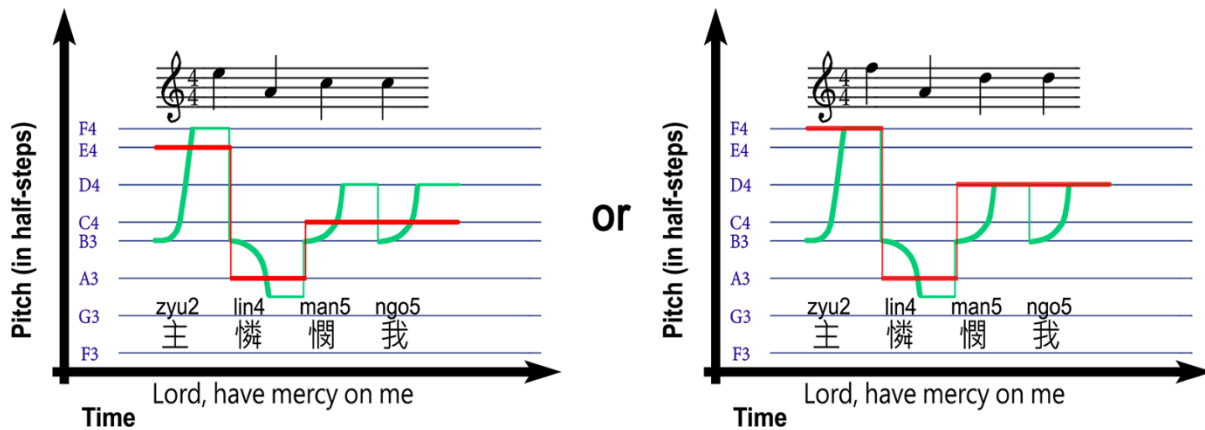


Figure 3c. Setting the “Word Tone” Contour to Two Different Melodic Lines.

melodies, the tune contours (in orange) parallel the “word tone” contours (in green). In practice, the singer may add a grace note before the syllable “zyu2” or sing with a “scoping technique” to stress the rising curve so as to avoid mistakenly presenting it as “zyu1,” which stands for “pig” (Law 1995, 160; Wong 2018).

[16] Evidently, the number of melodies available to Hong Kong singers insisting on minimal “word tone” distortions does pale in comparison to the “thousands of *Kyrie eléison* pieces” sung in the West. Before the 1980s, Hong Kong church musicians deemed both fitting an undistorted text to a tune and vice versa impossible. Instead, they ignored the “word tone” distortions and focused instead on producing rhetorically rich hymn texts modeled on ancient Chinese poetry (Kan 2020, 16). Translators lavishly adorned texts with literary devices like parallelism, idioms, and rhymes, writing in a refined fusion of ancient Classical Chinese style and modern “plain language” styles (Charter and DeBernardi 1998, 90).

Cantopop’s Influences

[17] In the 1970s, the emergence and popularity of a new syncretic *ngaamjam* music genre overturned the above premise for many church musicians. Cantopop combines Western pop band sounds with traditional Chinese instruments and *ngaamjam* Cantonese lyrics (Lee and Witzleben, 354). The adoption of Cantonese lyrics with undistorted “word tones,” instead of English or Mandarin, attested to the language’s elevating status in the city beginning from the 1970s (Chan and Chey. 2013, 106; Wong 2018, 70). In turn, the prominence of the Cantonese language indicated the growing prestige of the local population’s collective identity as *Heonggongjan* (香港人), translated as “Hong Kong people,” “Hong Kongese,” or

more recently, “Hong Konger” (Liu 2013, 24; Mathews 1997, 11). Sociologist Chun-hung Ng 吳俊雄 believes that a “native consciousness” arose from the widening social-political differences with Communist China as well as the growing solidarity among working-class immigrants and locals (Ng and Cheung 2002, 86–90). In 1974, when a local musician’s bold attempt to fit Cantonese lyrics to his theme song for a television series met instant success and citywide recognition, Cantopop was born (Liu 2013, 33; Wong 2018, 95).

[18] Cantopop artists excel in fitting intoned Cantonese words into melodies while maintaining perfect “word tone” and melodic contours correspondence. They do so by sourcing musical and literary vocabularies from a much wider range of styles than previous local genres (Tsui 2018, 1–10). Lyricists write in both ancient Classical Chinese and trendy colloquial Cantonese; Writers tell stories varying from witty social commentaries to heroic epics; Composers create tunes based on both Chinese and Western music theories; Arrangers adopt diverse instrumentations from choirs and orchestras to rock bands and saxophones (Kan 2019, 56–57). The expanded variety enables Cantopop artists to craft tunes and texts with great flexibility, allowing them to keep songs *ngaamjam*.

[19] As a whole, Cantopop songs enriched the city’s soundscape with a vibrant array of musical and literary styles, all promoting Cantonese as their cultural centerpiece (Bruche-Schulz 1997, 296). Local Christians, used to singing “traditional hymns,” found themselves surrounded by *ngaamjam* Cantonese songs by the late 1970s. Some church musicians detested this new form of “transient, coarse music” of the secular culture (Kan 2019, 55). Others regarded it as the model for future Cantonese Christian music. Songwriter Ben Ng and his partners quickly began composing their own Christian Cantopop music in 1978, publishing in their third album the following reflection:

All this time we have never possessed a published song collection that belongs to – composed by, suits the need of, and resonates with – Hong Kong people. In this past decade or two, we only concerned ourselves with translating... translating, but we forgot about the responsibility to create! (H. K. Association of Christian Musicians, 1983)

[20] Calvin Chan was amazed by the works of the Cantopop singer-songwriter Sam Hui 許冠傑. Hui’s songs narrate humorous everyday stories in witty, funny Cantonese rhymes set in

tunes he borrowed from Elvis Presley. “How did Sam come up with that?” Chan (2021) recalled thinking to himself, “[h]ow do these short, simple songs carry such immense expressive power?” Meanwhile, Corbet Ma recalled first hearing a “truly local sound” in Hui’s slow-paced romantic ballads in minor keys, where he set *wenli* poems to music. Ma (2021) attributed this “sound” to the “unique effect of coming up with tunes according to Cantonese sentences... [since] the jumps and drops in our linguistic [word tones] give a special character to our local melodies when they are set to tunes that match the words.”

CALVIN CHAN, THE TUNE-FIRST SONGWRITER

[21] Trained as a computer programmer, Calvin Chan decided to start writing Christian Cantopop after witnessing the power of Sam Hui’s music and meeting Ben Ng, who pioneered the movement to write *ngaamjam* Christian music. Chan believes he is particularly apt at stringing intoned words together to make good melodies, as well as finding the right words to fit whatever melodies he comes up with. “It is like programming,” Chan (2021) explained, “[I] am an analytical person. I can easily solve problems concerning sound by moving words around.”

[22] Chan began his career in songwriting by imitating what Sam Hui did—fitting witty sentences in colloquial Cantonese into existing tunes. Later, he took a few guitar lessons and decided to start composing his own tunes as well. Since the early 1990s, Chan (2021) has published “hundreds of pieces of Christian Cantopop music.” However, he only intended about a dozen of them for Christian congregational worship. Others were meant for performances by professionals or listening to in private. When asked why he composed so few pieces for worship, he explained that he found his creativity constrained by the lack of Christian worship vocabulary, especially since he refuses to repeat clichés in his text. He also held his creative process to the rule of “*bat ji jaam zau ci*” (不以音就詞), meaning “never to compromise the music for the text.” He interprets this rule, which he learnt from Cantopop artists, as never to change the chords or notes of the melody he has conceived in order to accommodate a word that he intends to write. In other words, Chan prioritizes the music contour and harmony over the text of his songs. His methods result in simple songs with relatively predictable melodic motions, which “can be picked up by the congregation easily (Chan 2021).”

[23] The following diagram shows the “word tone” and melody contour of Chan’s worship song *Hoengjing* (響應). In the graph, the red line traces the pitch contour of Chan’s melody and the green line shows the “word tone” contour of his text. The vertical lines mark individual beats. Every fourth beat is marked with a darker line to indicate the beginning of a new measure, as Chan wrote the song in 4/4 time (see Figure 4).

[24] The graph below divides Chan’s song into four lines to better present the structure of *Hoengjing*. Chan believed that worship songs must be kept “repetitive and simple” in order to “help the congregation learn the song and get into the music (Chan 2021).” The melody

《響應》“hoeng2 jing3 (Resound)”

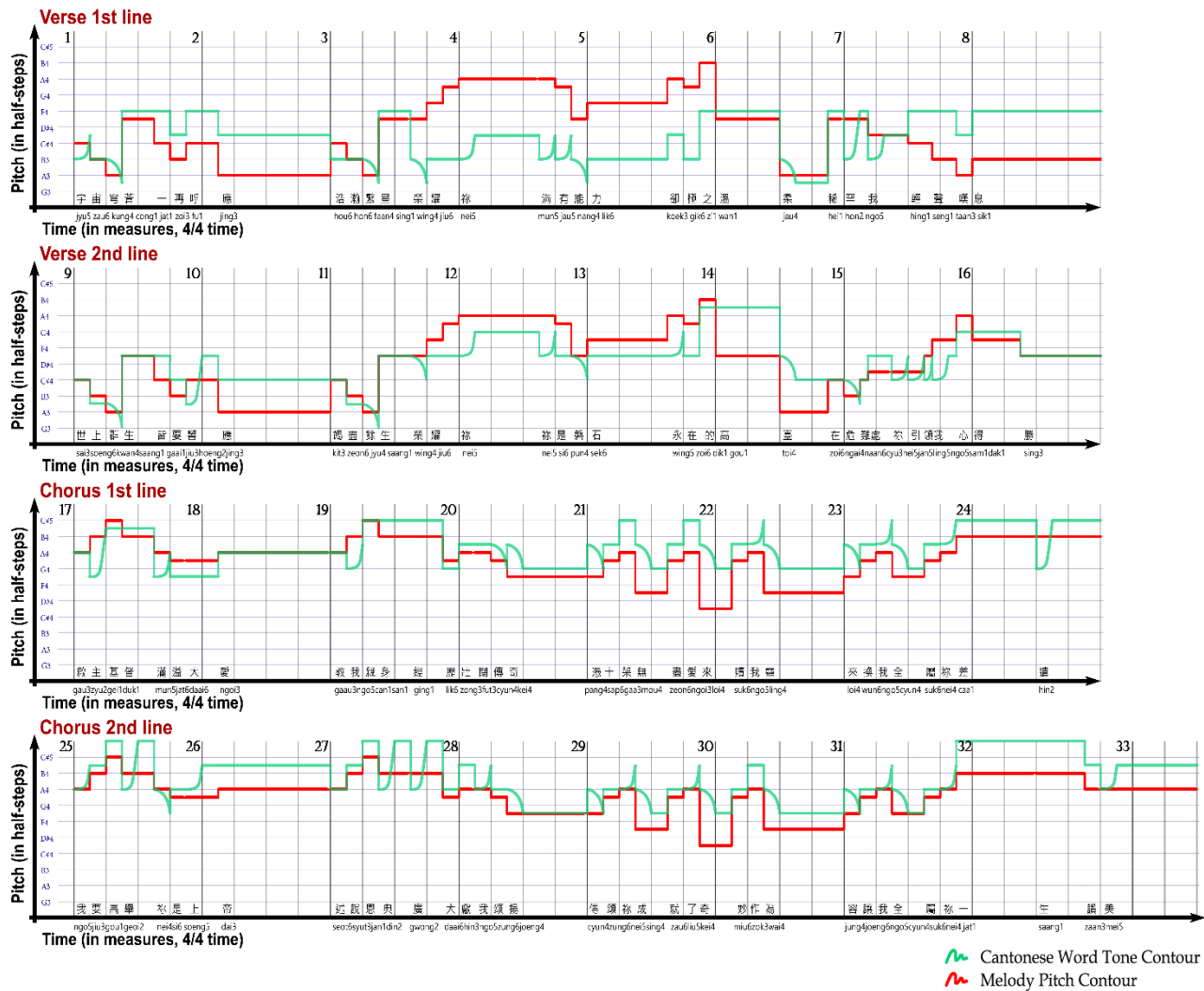


Figure 4. Melody and “Word Tone” Contour of *Hoengjing* (響應).

contour above indeed exhibits repetitiveness and simplicity. The second and fourth lines echo the first and third lines of the song respectively, granting the piece an A-A'-B-B' form. In the verse, measures 1, 3, 9, and 11 all open with the same C#-B-A-E phrase. In the chorus, measures 17, 19, 25, and 26 share the same contour. Furthermore, measure 21 to 23 see the G#-A motif repeated five times with widening jumps between them—a set found also from measure 29 to 31.

Calvin Chan's Creative Process

[25] Similar to the Cantopop artists who inspired him, Chan writes songs in a variety of styles. However, without formal musical training, he has had to rely on his analytical talent to teach himself. He describes his method as follows in our interview:

I would search online to play radio mixes [of whatever I want to learn] for several weeks at work until I learn their contents—distinctive vibes, grooves, syncopations... [I would] analyze the singers' accents, phrasings... the chord progressions, musical forms—until I have them all figured out (Chan 2021).

[26] When writing *Hoengjing*, Chan intended to produce a Western “praise and worship music” sound, specifically in the style of “Hillsong,” an Australian megachurch band (Chan 2021; Cusic 2010, 347). In fact, Chan's song shares many similarities with Hillsong's 1994 popular hit *Shout To The Lord* written by Darlene Zschech. First, the same A-A'-B-B' structure characterizes both songs. Second, *Hoengjing* presents the same number of measures in each section as *Shout To The Lord*. Third, with the exception of section A', the starting and ending notes of every section are identical in both songs: Section A begins with the median and ends with the supertonic; section B starts with the tonic and ends with the supertonic; section B' begins and concludes with the tonic (see Figure 4 above). Finally, both songs feature an uplifting chorus where the music rises both in volume and in register.

[27] Chan deliberately modeled his piece after Zschech's in order to reproduce the “stirring and powerful” moments that he felt when first listening to Hillsong's worship music (Chan 2021). He attributes the power of Charismatic churches' worship songs to their simplicity and repetition. On the other hand, he considers the elegant and theologically sound lyrics to be the strength of traditional Evangelical churches' hymns. He aims to combine both in his own compositions. The table below presents the Chinese text of *Hoengjing* and the author's

literal translation of it (See Table 1 below).

<i>Hoengjing</i> 響應 (Resound)		
Verse		
1	宇宙穹蒼一再呼應	The universe and heavens (the firmament) repeatedly call and echo.
2	浩瀚繁星榮耀祢	Vast [number of] stars glorify You -
3	滿有能力卻極之溫柔	Full of power yet extremely gentle,
4	稀罕我輕聲嘆息	[who] treasures my* soft sighs
5	世上群生皆要響應	The earth's creatures must all respond,
6	竭盡餘生榮耀祢	spending their entire lives glorifying You.
7	祢是磐石 永在的高臺	You are the Rock, the everlasting high tower.
8	在危難處祢引領我心得勝	In [my] distress, you lead my heart to victory.
Chorus		
9	救主基督滿溢大愛	Savior Christ's overflowing [and] immense love
10	教我親身經歷壯闊傳奇	teaches me [to] personally experience [His] " spectacular legend "
11	憑十架無盡愛來贖我靈	—
12	來換我全屬祢差遣	Through the cross [and Your] endless love, [You] redeem my soul; To ransom me [so that I can be] fully Yours to send out!
13	我要高舉祢是上帝	I must exalt [You], You are the Lord!
14	述說恩典廣大獻我頌揚	Declaring [Your] grace's breadth [and] offering my praise.
15	傳頌祢成就了奇妙作為	Proclaiming you've achieved [a] marvelous deed,
16	容讓我全屬祢 一生讚美	Allow me [to be] fully Yours, and praise You all my life.

Table 1. Chinese Text and English Translation of *Hoengjing* (響應).

[28] Chan often integrates scriptures into his worship songs without quoting them from the Chinese bible verbatim. He deems it impossible to write good melodies based on the irregular strings of “word tones” in unaltered sentences of scripture texts. He also finds the practice of quoting scriptures word for word unnecessary. He explains it by using the existence of different Bible translations as an example:

[When writing a song], can you quote scriptures from the Chinese New Version (新譯本), published in 1992 as well as the Chinese Union Version (和合本), published in 1919? If yes, then why can't you use your own words? You want the “original text?” The Chinese Union Version is the Bible. The Chinese New Version is also the Bible. [If I] describe the scriptures in my own words, can God still do His work through them? Absolutely!

[29] Instead, Chan teaches his songwriting class students to first comprehend and interpret a Bible passage before writing them into songs in their own words:

If I write my lyrics skillfully and craft them well, I can infuse them with scriptures in such a way that, even if you cannot see them, you can experience them. The text may be my words... my vocabulary, my expressions, but they are Biblical in nature.

[30] This concept is demonstrated in the first two lines of *Hoengjing*. Chan's use of the *wenli* word “heavens/firmament” (穹蒼), together with his personification and vocalization of “the universe” and “stars,” references Psalm 19 (Ps. 19:1–2 [NRSV]). Similarly, in lines 7 and 8, he paraphrases Psalm 18's metaphors of God being “my rock... my high tower—my stronghold,” by whom the singers can be “saved from [their] enemies (Ps. 18:2–3 [ESV]).”

[31] Striving to adhere to the rule of “never compromise the music for the text” (不以音就詞) on one hand while keeping his lyrics infused with holy scriptures on the other, Chan devised an “alternating method” for crafting his worship songs. He begins by coming up with a key phrase for his song and approximating the “word tones” that come with the words into notes on a scale in his mind, using a process visualized earlier in Figure 3c. After that, he tries to extend that segment either by generating the next part of the tune and fitting words into it, or by formulating another string of words that can yield a tune contour compatible with it. Chan usually composes with one method until he reaches an impasse, then he tries to proceed with the other method. He calls it “the alternating approach (輪流方

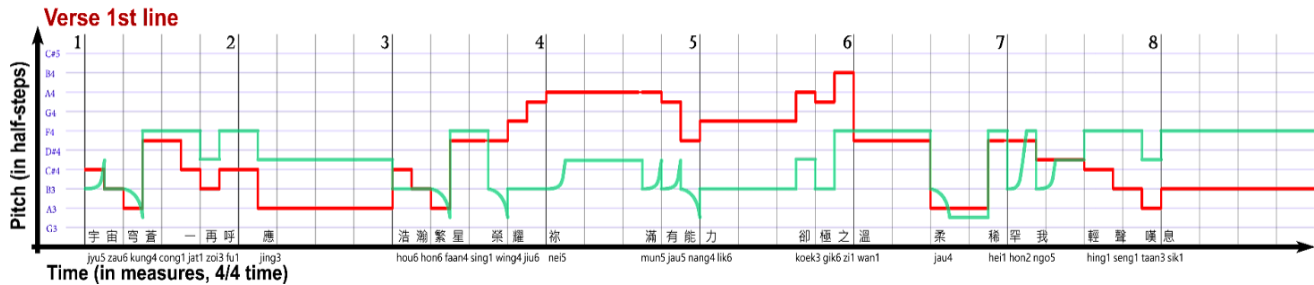


Figure 5. The Two Contours of Measure 1 to 8 of *Hoengjing* (響應).

法) (Chan 2021).” Working so closely with both the tune and text of his compositions has led Chan to maximize the expressiveness of his storytelling. Measure 3 to 8 of *Hoengjing* exemplifies this technique (See Figure 5).

[32] Beginning from the last beat of measure 3, the melody line (red) stays about seven half-steps above the “word tone” line (green) until measure 6, where it drops lower than the melody. In spoken Cantonese, uttering sentences in a relatively higher register indicates the speaker’s “heightened mood,” and renders the utterances “proclamations” (Fox et al. 2008, 335). In *Hoengjing*’s first line, Chan composed the tune with this in mind. To sing the melody, the singer must proclaim the words “Full of power, yet extremely...,” then switch to a lower register to tenderly finish the last word of the sentence “... gentle.” This contrast echoes word painting techniques in music written in non-tonal languages.

Limitations of Chan’s Tune-first Approach

[33] In *Hoengjing*, Chan successfully kept his text and tune *ngaamjam*, reproduced the Hillsong sound he sought after, and presented holy scripture in his own words, all the while never having altered a single chord for his text. However, he achieved these at severe cost to his music productivity—a dozen songs over 30 years. Furthermore, his carefully crafted text still contains some grammatical inaccuracies. In line 2, Chan matched the adjective “vast” with the noun “stars,” while he actually meant to say “vast number of stars.” In line 4, Chan sacrificed an important noun modifier, which left the sentence open to interpretation either as “treasuring me, [God] softly sighs” or “[God] treasures my soft sighs.” In line 10, Chan resorted to describing the love of Christ as a “spectacular legend,” which lies out of context in the original Chinese. Chan ended his commentary on his own song with the remark “I

don't find this text particularly outstanding, but I am quite satisfied with the song 'format (*English*)'(Chan 2021)."

[34] In the 2000s, worship songs written by Calvin Chan and other composers using the same approach dominated the Cantonese Christian Worship song market. However, the same challenges that plagued Chan also affected others. Irene Ku, another prolific songwriter whom I interviewed, reported writing songs for children more often now, since they are "shorter and simpler (Ku 2021)." Meanwhile, Ben Ng has ceased composing altogether (Ng 2021).

CORBET MA, THE TEXT-FIRST SONGWRITER

[35] Corbet Ma, a singer-songwriter radio host particularly popular among Hong Kong's Christian young adults in the past decade, uses a different method for writing worship music. With only a few years of violin lessons and choir experience under his belt, Ma does not consider himself trained in music. However, in my interview with him, he revealed that he has been submitting "twenty to thirty new worship songs" to his production team every year (Ma 2021).

[36] Ma writes his songs text-first, sourcing his lyrics directly from the Bible—a method developed from his own spiritual experience. Raised in a Christian household, Ma nonetheless found the Bible dull, and had stopped participating in all faith-related activities by the time he entered college for his master's degree in Boston. He "chanced upon a Chinese Bible" there, and as he flipped it open and randomly read a verse, he found himself "hearing a song in [his] head from reading the words... from Romans 12:1–2 (Ma 2021)." Moreover, thanks to the song then stuck in his head, he had the two verses memorized. Amused, he kept reading the Bible in the days that followed just to "hear the new song of the day (Ma 2021)." He even prayed to God that, "if [he] receives twenty more songs from reading the Bible like that, [he] would take God seriously (Ma 2021)." Ma reported having received over a hundred songs by the time he graduated—all taken verbatim from the scriptural texts, all memorized, none transcribed. He showed me his notes on his notepad. They all consisted only of a few paragraphs of Chinese characters and some vertical lines—the scripture text and some bar lines marking where the singer is to take a breath. His notes sometimes also include YouTube links to Pop songs whose musical arrangements he intends

his team of musicians to reference.

[37] As scriptures transformed into songs in Ma's mind, he began to "notice the biblical authors' feelings and emotions behind the verses, and ultimately, the love of God, which [he] never felt when attending churches (Ma 2021)." The realization eventually led him to commit to Christ. It also motivated him to record and publish these songs that he has been hearing in his head. Although fellow songwriters like Calvin Chan disfavor presenting the scriptures verbatim, Ma believed that "the scriptures can stand for themselves... and adding a melody to them grants room in the listener's soul to experience the word [of God], and that experience is worship (Ma 2021)." For proof, he offered his own conversion story.

[38] Furthermore, he noticed that his scripture songs resonate exceptionally well with the grassroots audience he targets. He reasoned,

"You don't preach to the 'grassroots' about, say, the theology of hope, and expect to influence their lives. They work three jobs a day, their kids are always crying, their husbands have left them for good... they don't have time for theological discussions. We do community service regularly, and what we witnessed is that our scriptural songs speak to these people and stay in their minds all day. So let the scripture stand for itself. Let the scripture speak to them (Ma 2021)."

Ma's Text-first Composition

[39] Corbet Ma considers *ZoiNeiMinCinMungJyutNaap* (在祢面前蒙悅納), translated as "Be Acceptable In Your Sight," his most successful scriptural song. Written while taking shelter from a snowstorm in Boston in 2014, *ZoiNeiMinCinMungJyutNaap* quotes Psalm 19:12–14 in praying to God for protection against sinning. Ma began his creative process by first picturing the entire Psalm as a "musical drama, noting who the characters are, who is speaking with what tones, and at whom the characters are staring (Ma, 2021)" Finding the passage too long, he isolated verse 12–14 for his piece. Then he analyzed the three verses to extract "responsive phrases," which he pieced together to construct the chorus. The following table lays out each line of the song's Chinese text and their corresponding verses in Psalm 19, English Standard Version (see Table 2).

Verse		Ps 19:
1	願我口中的說話 心中的意念 在祢面前蒙悅納 Let the words [utterances] of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, 願我口中的說話 心中的意念 在祢面前蒙悅納	14a
2	Let the words [utterances] of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,	14a
Chorus I		
3	誰人能知道自己的錯失 願祢赦免我隱而未見的過錯 Who [which person] can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.	12
4	求祢攔阻祢僕人 不犯任意妄為的罪 Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;	13a
5	不容這罪轄制我 我便完全免犯大罪 let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.	13b
Chorus II		
6	耶和華 只有祢作我的磐石 耶和華 只有祢作我的救贖 O Lord, [only You are] my rock and... [O Lord, only You are] my redeemer.	14b
7	求祢攔阻祢僕人 不犯任意妄為的罪 Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;	13a
8	不容這罪轄制我 我便完全免犯大罪 let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.	13b

Table 2. Chinese Text and English Translation of *ZoiNeiMinCinMungJyutNaa*.

[40] In the table above, extra words that Ma added to the text are marked in bold letters. While Ma believes that the scriptures should be quoted verbatim, he still accepts using repetitions to craft a better poetic structure (line 6). He even paraphrased two words of the

Psalm in lines 1, 2, and 3 in order to produce a better melodic contour.

[41] After laying out the body of the text, Ma searched for “hook lines” in the melodic fragments that he could approximate from the word tones sequences present in the text of 82 Chinese characters. The diagram below shows the melody of *ZoiNeiMinCinMungJyutNaap*'s verse (see Figure 6 below).

[42] As seen in the diagram, two almost identical phrases made up the verse. Ma believes that “a good melody is one that has ‘symmetry,’ one whose ‘motifs’ can be easily identified (Ma 2021).” Since Ma always sings this song’s verse four times in live performances, the congregation hears the same phrase eight times, and can memorize it more easily. The two choruses proved more challenging. Ma kept the ending of the two choruses identical (measure 15–18 and 25–28). Measures 9, 13, 19, 21, and 23 all present the same A3-A4-G4 phrase, maintaining a repeating motif. In spite of this, the notes in-between (measure 10, 11, 12, 14, 20, 22, 24) remain difficult to follow. Moreover, the contours of the first halves of the choruses differ greatly, rendering them confusing to a congregation singing along for the first time.

[43] Ma sets the chorus in a higher register to emulate a passionate response, similar to the technique Calvin Chan demonstrated in *Heongjing*. The music pitch and word tone contours of Ma’s song are traced in the diagram below (See Figure 7).

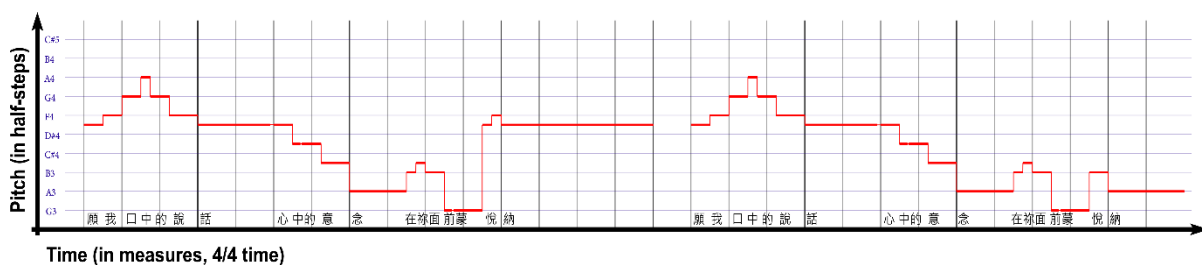
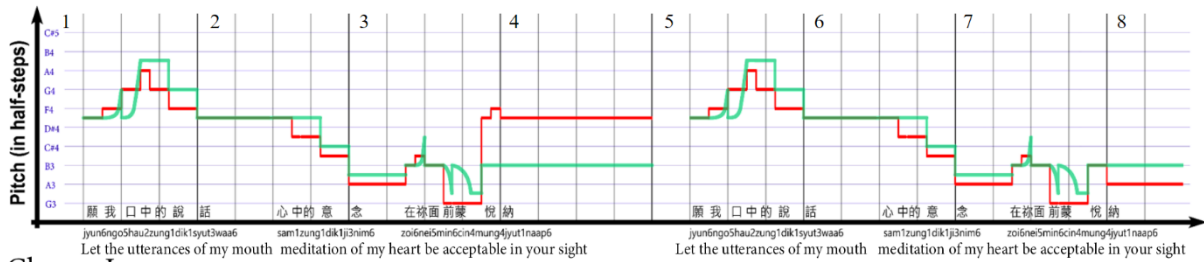
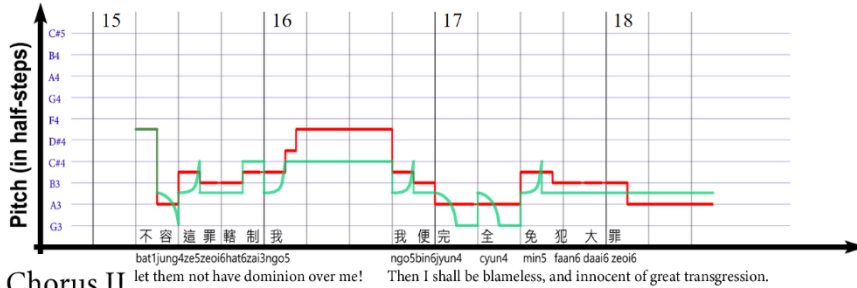
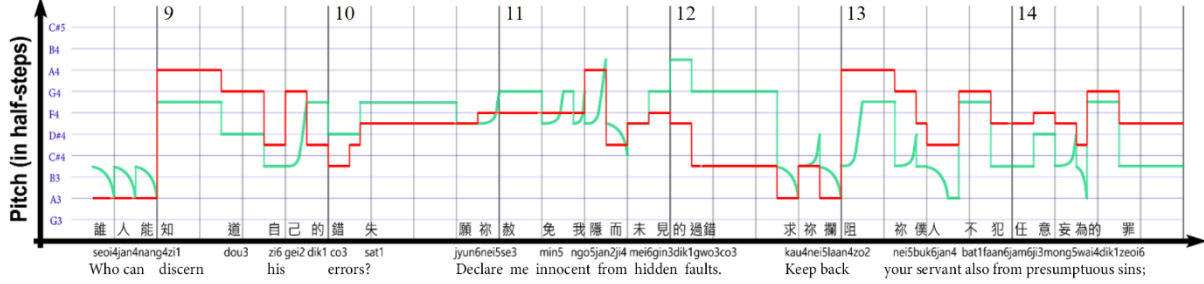


Figure 6. The Verse’s Melody Pitch Contours of *ZoiNeiMinCinMungJyutNaap* (在祢面前蒙悅納).

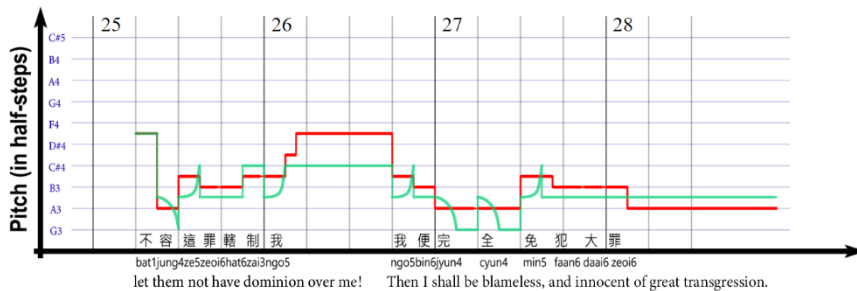
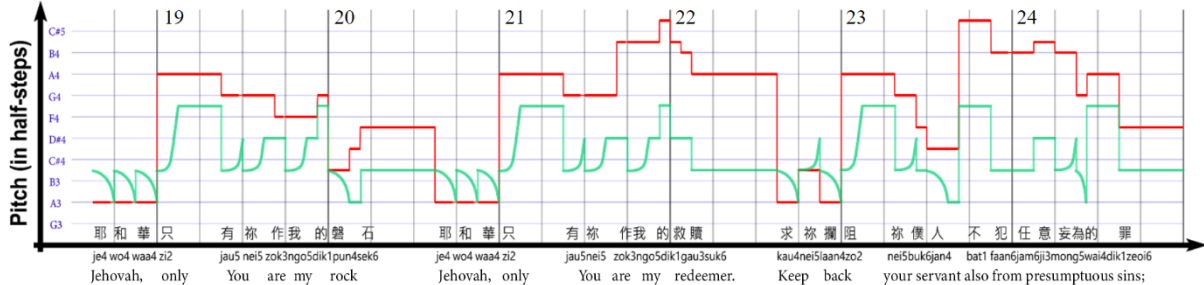
Verse



Chorus I



Chorus II



Cantonese Word Tone Contour
 Melody Pitch Contour

Time (in measures, 4/4 time)

Figure 7. Melody Pitch and Word Tone Contours of *ZoiNeiMinCinMungJyutNaap* (在祢面前蒙悅納).

[44] After cutting and pasting the verses to create a song's text, which determines the melodic contour, Ma would give his finishing touches to his piece. This included the key, the arrangement, and whether the song would be in major or minor. In this case, Ma picked a vibe similar to "the music from Studio Ghibli," a Japanese animation film studio. He has found their music "very spiritual, and they give off an unusual kind of pleasantness that reminds [one] of fairytales and child-like innocence (Ma 2021)." Ma found this to represent the sincere prayer of Psalm 19 perfectly.

Reception and Future Developments

[45] On YouTube, 在祢面前蒙悅納 grew more popular than Calvin Chan's *Heongjing*, with over 628,000 views, compared to *Heongjing*'s 45,800 (Hong Kong Association of Christian Musicians 2016; One Circle 2015). Not every one of Ma's songs received the same warm welcome. In the interview, Ma admitted that sometimes his unique method of composing yields songs that leave the "audience hanging their jaws open (Ma 2021)." "That is when you know that your songs aren't working," he said with a laugh. However, Ma still believes that writing melodies that prioritize preserving natural sentence structures and word tones offer the right path to creating good Cantonese Christian worship music. He concluded by saying:

I think... when judging how good a melody is, if you forcefully impose western melody aesthetics in critiquing HK's local song melodies...it doesn't make sense. It even takes away the local language's peculiarity. We have cultural differences from the west, we cannot just mimic them and expect to succeed... Westerners would not understand why your melodies leap up and down, back and forth...they would call it "unstylish," but only in...[shaping a melody according to the text's] "word-tones" can one endow it with a sense of warm familiarity to a Cantonese-speaker's ears. (Ma 2021)

[46] At the time of the interview, Ma just finished studying theology for seven years at a local seminary. His training in hermeneutics boosted his confidence in accurately presenting scriptures, even without quoting passages verbatim. He began combining different scriptural passages in each song, even adding some sentences of his own to put the verses into context. This grants him access to numerous texts materials without the problem of "repeating the same 200 words," as reported by Chan (Ma 2021; Chan 2021).

[47] Writing melodies according to the word-tone contours of certain Biblical phrases

generates some recognizable melodic fragments. In the Psalms, the phrases “*je4 wo4 waa4 cing2* (Jehovah please),” “*je4 wo4 waa4 zi2* (Jehovah only),” and “*je4 wo4 waa4 jan1* (Jehovah because)” all call for a series of three notes of the same pitch followed by a jump of nine half-steps. This melodic fragment appeared twice from measure 18 to 21 of Ma’s adaptation of Psalm 19 (See Figure 7). The same fragment can be found in other Psalm-based songs by Ma and other text-first songwriters like Yvette Lau as well (Ma 2021; Lau 2018).

[48] To sing text-first worship songs means dealing with more unexpected leaps and dips in the melody. Desmond Ngai, the sound engineer of Ma’s production team, noted that he often need to pay extra attention when tuning the vocalists’ recorded tracks. “Every sung Cantonese syllable can be divided into three parts... [When working with Ma’s] songs, I often need to adjust the ‘onset (*Eng*)’ of a syllable ever so slightly in order to correct the vocalists’ articulation.” Ngai reported (Ngai 2021). He believes that singing text-first Cantonese songs demand greater efforts and skills on the singers, because any slight distortions of the syllable can “sound off to a listener’s ear,” yet the rugged contours make singing more difficult (Ngai 2021).

Maintaining A “Transnational Christian Identity”

[49] Both Chan and Ma eagerly showed me a few other worship music pieces that they have composed in vastly different genres. Chan, for example, showed me a musical that celebrates Jesus’ second coming with a full orchestra and a choir of 200, as well as a K-pop-style rap song that reinterprets traditional Chinese New Year blessings and that incorporates Beethoven’s “An Die Freude” chorus as its bridge. Ma, on the other hand, played me a setting of Psalm 19 with an arrangement modeled after Hans Zimmer’s pieces in the animated musical drama film “The Prince of Egypt,” as well as another one of Psalm 121 with ‘Rock and roll style’ instrumentation (Ma, 2021). This expansive adoption of different genres to present Biblical texts echoes the practice of earlier Chinese Christian songwriters, who deliberately included hymn tunes from different regions of the world to represent the “transnational Christian” identity of their church.

CONCLUSION

[50] Linguistic and musical analysis in this study illustrates that Schellenberg’s “speech

melody and music contour correspondence” quality, known in Cantonese as “*ngaamjam*,” is indeed central to musical discussion among Hong Kong’s church musicians serving the younger generation who grew up after the rise of Cantopop. Songwriters have embarked on this quest since the 1970s when the new musical genre made *ngamjam* songs commonplace in Hong Kong’s secular music scene. They phased out the translated western hymns that offer low level of word tone and melody pitch contour compatibility. By today, songwriters and audiences alike have grown tired of the usual two hundred vocabularies for worship songs, with common phrases that come with melodies dictated by their word tones. However, the pool can hardly be expanded because of the limited amount of words and phrases considered appropriate for congregational worship.

[51] While songwriters like Calvin Chan and Irene Ku seek to keep the music scene fresh by introducing music of various different styles and producing fewer songs of higher quality, songwriters like Corbet Ma and Yvette Lau have tapped into the abundant source of Biblical text by quoting scriptures almost verbatim. The former camp represents a new group of tune-first composers who agree never to “compromise music for the text.” The latter group discovers and embraces a unique local flavor that naturally appears from following the text’s string of word tone contours.

[52] Visualizing word tone contours and melody pitch contours contrasts different musical aesthetics. The need to quote passages of the book of Psalms verbatim popularized the rhythmic pattern of a low triplet followed by a high long note, one of the few effective methods to fit in the phrase “Jehovah, only,” or “Jehovah, please.”

[53] Direct comparisons between the word tone contours and melody pitch contours reveal various techniques employed by local songwriters to express emotions. To emphasize certain sentences, both Ma and Chan came up with melody pitch contours that stays at least a fifth interval higher than their corresponding word tone contours to create the effect of speaking in a higher register, and therefore a sense of fervency or proclamation. In line with the Western examples that Chan learns from, he matched higher melody pitches with words of lower word tones and vice versa, creating a contrast that resembles word painting.

[54] While in most songs by composers who prioritize the tune, singers can easily enunciate words without distortion; it is not the case in songs where the text is prioritized.

Unpredictable jumps and unexpected intervals demand better vocal techniques from the singers, who may otherwise risk distorting the melodies.

[55] Composers who write songs text-first easily supply the market with new compositions every month, so their worship songs make up an ever-increasing percentage of the worship song repertoire in Hong Kong's churches. Can songwriters who prioritize tunes turn the table with new creative approaches? Much rests on the young generation of Hong Kong Christians. As the Hong Konger identity shifts and Cantonese's status as the city's language changes, the pursuit of *ngaamjam* songs may not even continue. The transformation of Hong Kong's worship music scene will yet be revealed.

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