# The Resurgence of City Pop and The Nostalgia Cycle: Impacts on The Music Industry and Modern Culture

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**Abstract.** This study examines the phenomenon of the "nostalgia cycle", which is gaining attention globally and is rapidly gaining ground in China, particularly through the influence of social media platforms. This study find that music and fashion trends from the past are once again in the spotlight, especially some once-popular clothing and styles. This resurgence of retro trends is closely linked to the rise of social media platforms, which have become an important tool for sharing photos, music, movies and fashion from the past. More than just a cultural phenomenon, the nostalgia cycle has had a profound impact on the contemporary economy and the development of the Internet, contributing to the rise of the second-hand market, creating business opportunities for many small businesses and entrepreneurs, and contributing to the diversification of the economy. This study has chosen "city pop" music as a case study to examine its relationship with the nostalgia cycle and its impact on the Japanese economy and music industry. In addition, this study explores the actual impact of the nostalgia cycle on the contemporary economy. Despite the limited data availability, it attempts to present this phenomenon's effects through texts and historical records. The nostalgia cycle is not just a cultural trend but also an economic phenomenon with far-reaching impacts on several fields.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia Cycle; City Pop Music; Retro Trend; Economic Impact.

## 1. Introduction

Many individuals may not be acquainted with the term "Nostalgia Cycle" or may have yet to encounter it. Still, this phenomenon is currently highly noticeable globally, including in China. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in past music and fashion trends, with a revived fascination for clothing and styles that were once in vogue. The resurgence of this retro trend can be largely attributed to the emergence and popularity of social media platforms. These platforms share photos, music, movies, and fashion from bygone eras [1-3]. Similarly, the Nostalgia Cycle is believed to have contributed to contemporary economics and the development of the internet.

The Nostalgia Cycle is not just a cultural phenomenon but has profound effects on contemporary economics and internet development. Social media platforms have become essential tools for people to share and rediscover the past, driving the development of the second-hand market, including vintage music records, vintage clothing, and retro items. This has created business opportunities for many small enterprises and individual entrepreneurs, promoting economic diversification [4, 5].

The recent retro trend can largely be attributed to the development of social media platforms. Similarly, the Nostalgia Cycle may have contributed to contemporary economics and internet development. While there are discussions about such phenomena on the internet, there needs to be more research that combines it with economic and business aspects. This research has chosen the music genre "city pop", popular in Japan in the last century. The birth and existence of city pop are inseparable from the economic conditions in Japan at the time. This study will also explore the impact of city pop on the Japanese music industry and people's lives during that period. Providing a historical overview of city pop allows for examining its relationship with the Nostalgia Cycle.

Furthermore, this study will explore the actual impact of the Nostalgia Cycle on contemporary economics. Although data from the 1990s is limited, this study will present this phenomenon's effects through text and historical records. The Nostalgia Cycle is a cultural trend and an economic phenomenon with far-reaching impacts for many fields. Delving into research and discussions about the Nostalgia Cycle offers a better understanding of culture and trends.

## 2. The Sonic Reflection of Economic Prosperity and Decline in Japan

The concept of the Nostalgia Cycle does not have a precise definition in the field of music, and it can be understood as people's nostalgia for past musical types or some particular songs [6, 7]. In music, people often experience different musical styles and tracks from various periods, which can evoke feelings of nostalgia and bring back memories of the past. For this reason, the nostalgia cycle makes people feel warmth, tenderness, joy, loss, and regret more intensely. Also, another reason that happens when a person is unhappy with the present. He might pine to live in a time or society earlier than their existence. This cycle may shift between different music eras and styles, but the feeling of nostalgia itself still exists.

City pop holds a significant place in the realm of nostalgic music. It is a genre of popular music that originated in Japan and was most popular during the 1970s and 1980s. It was influenced by various music styles, including American and Western pop music, funk, soul, and jazz. Artists and producers in Japan were inspired by these genres and blended them into a unique sound that became city pop. In those types of music, jazz and funk music affected city pop most. It often incorporates jazz and funk elements, including groovy basslines and jazzy chord progressions. Also, producers often incorporate funk rhythms into the accompaniment. Funk's repetitive drum patterns and rhythms add a sense of dynamism to the music. Just as guitars and bass are commonly featured in Funk, city pop also borrows this characteristic, enriching its sound. This fusion allows city pop to encompass the features of Funk while giving it a distinctive richness and appeal.

For a genre of culture to become mainstream, aside from commercial viability, it is crucial to resonate with the era's spirit and fulfill the masses' needs during that time. The term "City Pop" comes from the genre's focus on city life and urban experiences. In the 1970s, Japan entered a period of economic prosperity, with an increasing standard of living and a corresponding need for culture. City pop, in its essence and texture, catered to the aspirations of some urban listeners, particularly those with relatively high living standards. As Japan experienced rapid urbanization and economic growth, the music reflected the optimism and affluence of the time. City pop represents Japan's "Bubble Era", a period of economic prosperity and cultural change. It reflects the extravagance and excesses of the time, with lyrics often celebrating materialism, fashion, and pursuing a glamorous urban lifestyle. It's also characterized by a sense of escapism, providing a soundtrack for people looking to escape the pressures of daily life. Upon observation of the records from the City Pop era, even starting with the most prominent album covers, the design elements often featured urban scenes, beaches, oceans, and swimming pools. From this, it can also see the desires of urban dwellers of that era.

Regarding representative figures of city pop, this study will mention Tatsuro Yamashita. In May 1980, Yamashita's song 'Ride on Time' was released and promoted by a cassette tape commercial. It soared to the third position on the Japanese Oricon singles chart, selling 417,000 copies, marking it as Yamashita's first chart-topping hit. The same year, his eponymous album was released, claiming the top spot on the Oricon album chart. 'Ride On Time' is widely regarded as the starting point of the "City Pop" era. It's safe to say that Tatsuro Yamashita is rightfully dubbed as the "Godfather of City Pop". In the 1980s, he and his wife, Mariya Takeuchi, were unquestionably the stars of the Japanese pop music scene, achieving impressive album sales. What is also significant is that Yamashita's songs exuded strong funk and disco rhythms, which essentially laid the foundation for the subsequent perception of the essential elements of city pop.

In some city pop-related materials, this study learned that city pop is often associated with the wide use of car stereos and is considered a music genre well-suited for driving. It offers a comfortable and relaxed listening experience for urban drivers. 1980s, Japan's automotive industry peaked, and car stereo systems became popular. This perfectly provided city pop music with a prominent platform. With its emphasis on vitality and strong rhythms, city pop became the perfect driving companion. This explains why the combination of cassette tape advertisements and Ride On Time had such a huge success. Cassette tapes were the emerging medium used in car stereos at that time, representing a new and free lifestyle.

Behind the city pop trend, the influence of record companies, particularly those with international backgrounds, cannot be understated. In the late 1970s, Sony began venturing into the music market, forging collaborations with American record company CBS. Sony's entry was pivotal in propelling the Japanese domestic music scene forward. It facilitated the fusion of American and Japanese music, which benefited city pop. The record labels' enthusiasm for promoting city pop was closely tied to the economic landscape of the time. The rapid economic growth spurred consumer aspirations for elevated experiences. This translated into city pop's popularity in the music market, with artists like Tatsuro Yamashita becoming beloved by urban consumers seeking sophistication and enjoyment.

By the 1990s, as the bubble economy burst, people no longer had the leisure to travel and enjoy life through car journeys. Simultaneously, new technologies such as CDs and streaming emerged, gradually causing city pop, which relied on traditional media, to lose popularity.

## 3. Digital Renaissance

Nevertheless, as time passes, City Pop, once overshadowed by technological changes, has recently made a comeback thanks to a new technological revolution.

Since the 2000s, the internet has gradually entered lives, and social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and others have emerged, becoming essential for daily life. People can explore anything they are interested in on these platforms, with big data analysis automatically delivering content. This has created conditions for the resurgence of music genres like city pop from past decades [8, 9]. Additionally, the widespread use of electronic devices, from computers and smartphones to even music apps on smartwatches, has liberated music from the confines of tapes or records, making it much more convenient for people to enjoy music.

Since the 2000s, the internet gradually entered the field of vision, and social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and others emerged, becoming essential daily apps. People can explore anything they are interested in on these platforms, with big data algorithms automatically delivering content to them [10]. This laid the groundwork for the resurgence of music genres like City Pop from previous decades. Additionally, the proliferation of electronic devices, from computers and smartphones to even music apps on smartwatches, has liberated music from the confines of tapes or records, making it much more convenient for people to enjoy music.

Before the resurgence of the retro trend, there was a music genre called Vaporwave that had already appeared on the internet. This genre, which began about five years before city pop regained popularity, can be described as a reinterpretation of old songs. Artists would create a "dreamy" atmosphere by remixing the rhythms and sounds of classic tracks, and many of the sources for Vaporwave came from City Pop.

In 2017, a song called "Plastic Love" by Mariya Takeuchi played a pivotal role in the revival of City Pop. Its viral popularity on YouTube led to global users receiving it in their recommendation feeds. Curiosity led many people to click and be captivated by this song. In this way, "Plastic Love" and city pop, represented by it, gained more and more attention. Platforms like Spotify and Apple Music made it accessible to people from all over the world. New technology injected new life into City Pop.

That's why this study believes there is a Nostalgia Cycle. In recent years, a trend in youth culture has been retro. Observing youth culture since the 21st century, various past-century pop styles like disco revival, post-punk revival, synth-pop revival, 808 revivals, and funk revival have emerged one after another.

The impact of the Nostalgia Cycle has been significant, creating new opportunities for the modern music industry.

Recently, there's a very popular app in China: Xiaohongshu (also known as Little Red Book). People use it to share their favorite music, recommend restaurants, and suggest books and movies; its impact on young people's lives has been enormous. Over the past two years, people's lifestyles have

changed significantly, and it has become a routine for many to check Xiaohongshu before going out with friends to look up reviews of the places they plan to visit.

The retro trend undoubtedly benefits from platforms like Xiaohongshu. The fashion industry followed suit as music genres with a vintage feel became popular. This led to the rise of a clothing style known as 'Vintage', which can include both second-hand items and vintage clothing from past eras. It's very popular in China, with an increasing number of vintage clothing stores on the streets. Xiaohongshu hosts more and more bloggers who visit these vintage clothing stores, compare prices, and evaluate clothing quality, further spreading awareness of this fashion category. Based on my research into the traffic on Xiaohongshu regarding posts about retro music and vintage clothing, even just some city pop music recommendations can receive tens of thousands of views and likes. Not to mention the posts by bloggers reviewing vintage stores, some of which even have tens of thousands of likes. This indicates that the retro trend is no longer a very niche phenomenon. It's gradually gaining a foothold in the market.

Xiaohongshu's presence has also increased the recognition of city pop and other retro music genres. Not only is city pop used as BGM in some online short videos, but it's also chosen as background music in public places like cafes.

The resurgence of retro music genres like city pop has led to a turnaround in the physical record market. In the first half of 2021, the physical record sales revenue of the three major music groups—Universal, Sony, and Warner—showed varying growth. Sony Music's physical record sales revenue for the first quarter of this year increased by 89.7% compared to the previous year. Universal Music grew 72.6% in physical record sales revenue in the second quarter, and Warner Music experienced a 154.9% growth in physical record sales revenue for the first three quarters of the 2021 fiscal year.

Of course, it's important to note that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020 on the record market cannot be ignored. Due to prolonged staying at home, people had more time to listen to music. Additionally, the social platform played a role, making more people willing to spend money on vinyl records, turning vinyl into a symbol of taste and ceremony. It became a trend on platforms like Xiaohongshu, and data from the record collection platform Discogs showed increased activity in the physical record market. In 2020, the platform sold significantly more vinyl records, CDs, and tapes compared to 2019.

## 4. Trends in Modern Music Retail

With the improvement of the physical economy, the development of physical record stores has also been evident. Taking Guangzhou as an example, there have been more and more physical record stores in the past two years. The types of records they sell have also become various, including music records from the past and albums from contemporary artists. Vinyl records are gradually becoming more merchandise, and many artists release vinyl versions of their albums, consumed by fan communities. This further reflects the impact of the retro trend on the modern music industry.

In 2020, global vinyl record sales revenue reached $889 million, accounting for 21.1% of physical record sales revenue, increasing by 23.5% compared to 2019. Looking at the revenue data for the first half of this year, the growth of global vinyl records in 2021 is expected to surpass the previous year. According to Mixmag's report, vinyl record sales in the United States increased by 108% year-on-year in the first half of 2021. In China, where the vinyl consumption market is relatively underdeveloped, there has also been a rapid growth in vinyl sales. According to IFPI, in 2020, mainland China's vinyl sales revenue increased by 359.3% compared to the previous year. That's a huge increase.

Surveys conducted by market research agencies in countries like the UK indicate that "vinyl" is highly popular among Generation Z (people born from the mid-1990s to early 2000s). For many young people, vinyl is even more familiar than CDs, which helps sustain the growth of the vinyl market. Furthermore, vinyl records are priced more than CDs, allowing record companies or record stores to generate higher profits, which is why the vinyl market is expanding. And vinyl records are

targeted toward consumers with some economic capacity and consider collecting vinyl records as a hobby. They will likely make multiple purchases of vinyl records, not just for novelty.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, an investigation into the growth of record sales and the increasing traffic on platforms like Xiaohongshu provides evidence that the influence of the Nostalgia Cycle is substantial. Furthermore, by examining the significant impact of cassette tapes and iconic city pop songs, it can conclude that city pop profoundly impacted Japan's economy at that time.

This study also conducted an in-depth analysis of the history of city pop, leading to a better understanding of Japan's economic and societal characteristics in the late 20th century. Through this research, it can see that today's retro trend has both backward and forward directions. For instance, city pop is seen as awakening people outside Japan to the golden memories of the 1980s, even if they didn't experience that era. In this sense, this nostalgia is "backward-looking". However, a closer look at their posts reveals that listeners perceive the 1980s in Japan as a beautiful time because people back then still had hope for the "future", which drives their longing for the future. Thus, their "nostalgia" is also "forward-looking". This helps us realize that the retro trend isn't a random occurrence but has a traceable origin.

While this research may lack extensive data, it organized the Nostalgia Cycle and city pop's history chronologically, making it more integrated and saving the need to search for information everywhere. Additionally, the integration of business aspects into the research is something many other studies lack. However, one shortcoming of this research is that the limited data available couldn't show the broader fields influenced by this trend.

This study hopes that the Nostalgia Cycle can attract more people interested in these past cultures through social media. This study aims to keep these cultures alive and in the public eye, preventing them from fading into history. Over a year ago, this study heard a song from the city pop genre on a social platform, and it was precisely "Ride on Time". The charm of city pop immediately captivated the researcher, prompting them to learn to play the guitar to gain a deeper understanding of city pop and its connections with funk and jazz. This study aims to encourage a broader audience to take a deeper interest in these non-mainstream genres and to preserve them.

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