juniper and pine

Appreciating, Playing, and Writing Chinese Pop Music

workshop handout · further reading

一 Harmony 2.0

Here are a few more fundamental harmonic ideas.

Extended chords: 7ths, 9ths, 11ths, 13ths

Stack one more third on top of any triad and you get a *7th chord* — four notes instead of three. In C Major, for example: **Cmaj7** (C E G B), **Dm7** (D F A C), **G7** (G B D F). Like thirds, some 7ths are major, some are minor, and some are dominant — it depends on how far the 7th sits above the root. Cmaj7 uses a major 7th (a half-step below the octave); Dm7 uses a minor 7th (a whole step below). G7 pairs a major third with a minor 7th — that combination is what makes a chord "dominant," and it's why V7 pulls so hard toward I. Keep stacking thirds past the 7th and you get 9ths, 11ths, and 13ths: jazzier, richer versions of the same triads, common in R&B-leaning CPOP ballads (David Tao, Khalil Fong, Eason Chan).

Cmaj7 C · E · G · B | *Dm7* D · F · A · C | *G7* G · B · D · F

Borrowed chords

Not every chord in a song has to come from the "home" major scale. Three of the most common colors, borrowed from the parallel minor key (the minor key built on the same root note — for C major, that's C minor, not C major's relative minor, A minor):

- **iv** (minor four) — F minor in the key of C. A darker cousin of IV, often used right before returning home to I.
- **♭III** (major three) — E♭ major in the key of C. An unexpected lift, common in key changes and dramatic choruses.
- **♭VII** — B♭ major in the key of C. A rock/pop favorite (we used this one in 森林's chorus earlier today).

Stepwise chord movement

Sometimes a song will walk up or down the chord scale (e.g., ii – iii – IV – V), especially within a chorus or bridge. This is a classic way to build cheap momentum and energy before resolving in the next section.

ii | *iii* | *IV* | *V*

> Note how 愛你 does this at the end of every chorus.

二 Rhythm 101

Most pop songs live in one of two time signatures — count along with anything you know and one of these will click:

4/4 — common time
Four beats per measure: ONE-two-three-four. The default feel for almost all CPOP.

3/4 — waltz time
Three beats per measure: ONE-two-three. A swaying, ballad-like feel.

三 Lyrics & Melody

Tone and melody in Cantonese and Mandarin

Both languages are tonal — the same syllable means different things depending on its pitch contour. A melody has to at least loosely follow those contours, or a lyric can end up sounding like an entirely different word (or just "off"). Fitting the words' natural speech-tones and the melody together — without either one fighting the other — is one of the biggest challenges of writing in Chinese.

Pentatonic melodies

Beyond tone-matching, a lot of CPOP melody writing leans on the *pentatonic scale* — the same five-note, no-half-steps scale from earlier today — specifically because it's an easy way to evoke a more traditionally "Chinese" sound, especially in songs that reach for a folk or classical feeling.

四 From chord progressions to full song forms

A song isn't one progression on a loop — it's a handful of sections, each doing a different job:

- **Verse** — tells the story and preps your ear for the chorus. Usually the same progression repeated a few times; the melody changes with the lyrics, the harmony doesn't.
- **Chorus** — the emotional peak. Catchiest, loudest, highest-energy section — often exactly the four-chord song idea from today.
- **Bridge** — a contrasting section, often appearing only once, that sets up a different chord color or key before the final chorus.

A common shape to try mapping onto songs you already know:

Intro (optional) → Verse → Chorus → Verse → Chorus → Bridge → Chorus

> Most songs from today's collage fit this shape almost exactly — try mapping one out for yourself.

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Got questions? Reach out any time — about today's workshop, or about songwriting and music theory in general.

P.S. Are you interested in learning Cantonese? We teach it! In fact, we're developing a **free** Cantonese learning app that's about to go into beta. Follow us for more information, and shoot us a message if you'd be interested in beta testing!