

Protest music becomes the popular rhythm of a nation

Yenni Kwok in Hong Kong



Protesters dance to a dangdut tune in Jakarta.

Strolling through Hong Kong's Victoria Park on a Sunday among the throng of Indonesian domestic workers, one is likely to hear music with a strong rhythmic drumbeat. It may sound like Indian music, but it is not. It is dangdut, the most popular indigenous music of Indonesia.

Some people believe dangdut is the closest thing Indonesia has produced to salsa. It is a hybrid of Indian, Arab and Malay folk music. Its name comes from the music's incessant drumbeat – dang-dut-dang-dut.

Emerging in the 1970s, dangdut was initially popular among the Muslim youths, especially those of the lower and lower-middle class. Dangdut gave these people a voice to express their resentment against the inequalities of life.

Today, it is so popular that it is enjoyed by government officials, ministers and the upper class.

Dangdut is usually played live to accompany a free-style dance called joget. Bands are often invited to entertain at private, corporate and military functions.

In Hong Kong, the music is always present at demonstrations by Indonesian domestic workers or simply when they are enjoying a day out. “It is a good way to lift our spirits,” said Tarini Sorrita, who recently won a dangdut contest in Hong Kong.

Since the 1990s, new sub-genres of dangdut have emerged, combining it with the sounds of Latin, house, R&B and even hip hop. One of the biggest hits in 1990 was *Kopi Dangdut*, a dangdut version of the Latin American folk song, *Coffee Rhumba*.

Indonesia has a long tradition of embracing and adopting foreign cultures. The mellow keroncong music, popular from the 1900s to 1940s, is said to have evolved from the music brought by Portuguese traders and freed slaves 400 years ago and was later mixed with Javanese elements.

There is also gambang kromong, a blend of Chinese and gamelan music, and gambus, the localised version of Arabic music.

Although western pop has become a dominant force in Indonesia, marginalising much of the indigenous music, dangdut stands out. MTV Asia broadcasts its own dangdut programme, MTV Salam Dangdut, which literally means “dangdut greetings”.

The biggest dangdut star today is Inul Daratista, a rural Javanese girl, whose erotic, hip-yrating dance movements have invited a strong following – as well as irked conservative Muslim leaders.

It can be seen as a struggle between the moderate and the conservative brand of Islam. It also reflects the legacy of dangdut music as an expression of the underdog against the establishemnt.

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