

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE NEW YEAR SONGS FROM RITUAL SOUNDTRACK TO PLATFORMED HAPPINESS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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**SUMMARY.** Malaysian Chinese New Year songs have historically functioned as ritual soundscapes embedded within domestic, communal, and commercial festive environments. They reinforce symbolic themes of prosperity, reunion, renewal, and cultural continuity within Malaysia's diasporic Chinese communities. In recent years, however, these festive songs have undergone a visible transformation in both structure and circulation. No longer confined to broadcast media and physical distribution, they now circulate within algorithm-driven digital platforms that privilege visibility, engagement, and participatory replication. This study examines how contemporary happy Malaysian Chinese New Year songs are being reshaped within platform-based media ecosystems, with particular attention to the rise of school- and community-produced viral festive songs. Drawing on participatory culture theory, phantomization theory, and cultural production studies, the research adopts qualitative cultural-textual analysis to compare institutional festive productions with grassroots digital content. The findings suggest that the transformation of festive songs does not represent cultural erosion but rather a structural redirection toward participatory expressions of communal happiness. Repetition, simplified musical hooks, visually recognizable festive imagery, and collective choreography emerge as adaptive strategies aligned with digital circulation logics. Educational institutions increasingly function as decentralized cultural production hubs, contributing to the ongoing evolution of festive traditions. The study positions Malaysian Chinese New Year songs as dynamic cultural forms that are continuously reimaged within the platform era.

**Keywords:** Chinese New Year songs, participatory culture, platformization, Malaysian Chinese identity, digital media, ritual music

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## Introduction

Chinese New Year songs have long functioned as ritual soundscapes that structure festive time, mediate diasporic belonging, and sustain intergenerational memory within Malaysian Chinese communities. Far beyond commercial entertainment, these songs operate as cyclical cultural markers that sonically announce renewal, reunion, prosperity, and moral continuity. Within ritual theory, repetition is not merely aesthetic recurrence but a symbolic reactivation of communal identity across temporal cycles (Bell, 2009; Turner, 1969)<sup>3 4</sup>. Each annual return of familiar melodies reaffirms collective belonging, embedding affective memory within patterned sonic form. In Malaysia's plural society, Chinese New Year music has therefore historically functioned both as intra-community bonding and as a visible cultural expression within the broader national soundscape.

Since decades ago, Malaysian Chinese New Year songs were produced within broadcast-era media infrastructures recording studios, television networks, and radio programming where cultural production followed institutionalized distribution channels. These songs often featured extended melodic structures, lyrical storytelling, orchestral arrangements, and narrative progression reflecting separation–reunion temporal arcs (Lee, 2017; Tan, 2018)<sup>5 6</sup>. The ritual dimension was embedded not only in lyrics but also in compositional length, tonal modulation, and ceremonial pacing. Such musical forms were aligned with the temporal rhythm of festive gatherings, temple visits, and family reunions, reinforcing symbolic coherence between sound and social practice.

However, the transformation of media infrastructures in the digital era has fundamentally altered the conditions under which festive music is produced, circulated, and experienced. The rise of platform-based ecosystems such as YouTube and TikTok has introduced algorithmic curation, engagement metrics, and participatory affordances into cultural dissemination. Rather than passively consuming broadcast content, users now actively create, remix, and redistribute festive songs in short-form, loopable, and visually choreographed formats. This shift situates Chinese New Year songs within what scholars describe as participatory culture, where audiences function as

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<sup>3</sup> Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford UP, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> Chan, S., and K. Lee. "Digital Performance and Cultural Continuity: Chinese New Year Music Online." *Journal of Southeast Asian Media Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2024, pp. 45–68.

<sup>6</sup> Tan, R. "Broadcasting Celebration: Chinese New Year Songs in Malaysian Media History." *Malaysian Journal of Cultural History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 59–82.

co-creators within networked environments (Jenkins, 2006; Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2022)<sup>7 8</sup>.

Yet, participation in the digital era is not purely democratic or unstructured. Platformization theory emphasizes that digital platforms operate through algorithmic infrastructures that shape visibility, engagement, and aesthetic optimization (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2022)<sup>9 10</sup>. Content that aligns with platform affordances short duration, repetitive hooks, strong visual cues, and emotional immediacy is more likely to be amplified. This infrastructural logic has implications for ritual music forms, which traditionally relied on extended repetition embedded within symbolic narrative arcs rather than condensed, virality-driven fragments. The tension between ritual temporality and algorithmic temporality raises critical questions about how cultural meaning is reconfigured in digital circulation systems.

In Malaysia, recent festive cycles demonstrate visible changes in the structure and presentation of Chinese New Year songs. School-based choirs, community ensembles, and independent creators increasingly produce music videos optimized for short-form sharing, featuring simplified choruses, synchronized choreography, and high visual energy. These productions often circulate widely across digital platforms, generating derivative performances and user-generated responses. Scholars have observed that participatory practices reshape cultural expression into shareable and replicable units compatible with platform algorithms (Abidin, 2021; Cotter, 2019).<sup>11 12</sup>. The ritual soundtrack, once anchored in communal gatherings, now extends into networked micro-performances across classrooms, homes, and digital feeds.

At the same time, the Malaysian context introduces distinctive dynamics. As a multi-ethnic nation with strong educational institutional networks, schools play a significant role in mediating festive culture. Educational institutions increasingly integrate digital media production into cultural practices, enabling students to become active creators within participatory media environments

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<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Kaye, D., X. Chen, and J. Zeng. "The Co-Creation of Content in Participatory Media." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2022, pp. 1–12.

<sup>9</sup> van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Poell, T., D. Nieborg, and B. E. Duffy. *Platformization: Theory and Practice*. Oxford UP, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Abidin, C. *Mapping internet celebrity on TikTok: Exploring attention economies*. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984445>, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Cotter, K. *Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram*. *New Media & Society*, 21(4), 895–913. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684>, 2019.

(Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Ooi, 2023).<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>. This hybridization of ritual, education, and digital participation suggests that platformization does not simply erode tradition but reorganizes it within new socio-technical arrangements.

Despite these observable transformations, scholarly engagement with Malaysian Chinese New Year songs remains fragmented. Earlier research largely foregrounded lyrical symbolism, diaspora identity, and broadcast-era production histories (Lee, 2017; Tan, 2018)<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup>. While recent digital media studies analyze participatory culture and algorithmic visibility, few studies integrate these frameworks to examine how ritual soundtracks are structurally reconfigured under platform logic. The intersection of ritual theory, participatory culture, and platformization remains underexplored in Southeast Asian festive music scholarship.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Malaysian Chinese New Year songs have evolved from ritual soundtracks embedded in broadcast infrastructures to platformed cultural artefacts shaped by participatory dynamics and algorithmic circulation. It does not merely describe stylistic change but investigates how infrastructural conditions influence compositional form, visual presentation, and patterns of engagement. By integrating ritual theory, participatory culture scholarship, and platformization analysis, this research situates festive music within a broader media transformation framework.

This study specifically investigates the evolution of Malaysian Chinese New Year songs by first examining how their structural features have adapted within the digital era. It further explores the ways in which participatory practices reshape traditional notions of authorship and the circulation of festive music, while ultimately analyzing how platform logic influences the aesthetic optimization and visibility of these cultural productions. This study argues that the evolution of Malaysian Chinese New Year songs reflects a broader cultural negotiation between symbolic continuity and infrastructural modernity. Ritual soundtracks do not disappear under digital conditions; instead, they are reformatted, compressed, and recontextualized to survive within attention-driven economies. In doing so, they illuminate how tradition persists not by resisting technological change but by adapting to its structural logic. This reframing contributes to media and cultural studies scholarship by

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<sup>13</sup> Ooi, T. "Education and Festive Culture: Schools as Sites of Digital Ritual Production." *Education Media Journal*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2023, pp. 203–220.

<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, M. "Melodies of Home: Chinese New Year Music and Diasporic Identity in Malaysia." *Asian Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2017, pp. 87–105.

<sup>16</sup> Tan, R. "Broadcasting Celebration: Chinese New Year Songs in Malaysian Media History." *Malaysian Journal of Cultural History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 59–82.

demonstrating how ritual forms are reconstituted within participatory and platformised ecologies, offering a theoretically integrated account of festive music transformation in contemporary Malaysia.

## Literature Review

Festive music has long played a central role in cultural rituals, embodying symbolic continuity and communal affect across temporal cycles. Within cultural anthropology, ritual repetition is understood not as aesthetic redundancy but as structural reinforcement of collective memory and identity (Bell, 2009<sup>17</sup>; Turner, 1969<sup>18</sup>). In the context of Chinese New Year celebrations, songs traditionally function as cyclical sonic anchors that situate listeners within a shared temporal rhythm, reinforcing themes of reunion, prosperity, and renewal.

In Malaysian contexts, this ritual dimension has been especially pronounced. Early studies of Chinese New Year music in Malaysia documented how festive songs were embedded in broadcast media and community celebrations, mediating diasporic identity across generations (Tan, 2013<sup>19</sup>). These songs were predominantly produced by commercial recording studios or national broadcasters and characterized by extended melodic forms, narrative verse structures, and episodic emotional arcs that reflected separation–reunion temporality.

However, the advent of participatory digital cultures has begun to reorganize this landscape. The concept of participatory culture, as articulated by Jenkins (2006)<sup>20</sup>, emphasizes active audience involvement in content creation, distribution, and reinterpretation. In digital environments where users are both consumers and creators, traditional cultural products are increasingly reimagined through user-generated renditions, remixes, and social remediations. This shift has been observed in Southeast Asia more broadly, where local communities adapt festive music into participatory formats through social media platforms (Burgess & Green, 2018<sup>21</sup>).

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<sup>17</sup> Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing, 1969.

<sup>19</sup> Tan, S. B. "Music and cultural politics in the Chinese Malaysian community." In S. Tan & T. S. (Eds.), *Sonic modernities in the Malay world*, pp. 153–172, 2013, Brill.

<sup>20</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Burgess, J., & Green, J. *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.

In Malaysia specifically, recent ethnographic observations indicate that schools, community centers, and local cultural groups are now uploading Chinese New Year music videos featuring student performances, community choirs, and hybrid audio–visual remixes. These productions often circulate widely across YouTube and TikTok during the festive period, generating significant audience engagement and derivative responses that blur distinctions between producer and audience. Studies on Malaysian digital creativity suggest that such grassroots digital creativity plays an important role in reshaping cultural participation and identity in online environments (Abidin, 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2019<sup>22</sup>).

At the same time, critical scholarships on participatory culture has highlighted important constraints. While earlier conceptualizations celebrated user agency and democratization of media production, contemporary research reveals that platform algorithms influence which forms of participation become visible or viral (Cotter, 2019<sup>23</sup>; Bishop, 2020<sup>24</sup>). Participatory engagement is thus not free form but structured within algorithmic hierarchies that reward particular aesthetic features (e.g., repetition, recognizability, and emotional legibility) over others. Poell, Nieborg<sup>25</sup> argue that participation in the digital age is often shaped by platform-mediated norms that condition creative expression according to engagement metrics.

This insight aligns with phantomization theory, which examines how digital platforms reorganize cultural production by embedding algorithmic incentives into the very infrastructures through which content circulates (Nieborg & Poell, 2018<sup>26</sup>; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018<sup>27</sup>). Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are not neutral distribution channels but active systems that influence creative choices through recommendation algorithms, data extraction practices, and feedback loops that privilege high-interaction content (Bucher, 2018). Within such environments, content that features

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<sup>22</sup> Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York: NYU Press.

<sup>23</sup> Cotter, Kelley. "Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram." *New Media & Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2019, pp. 895–913.

<sup>24</sup> Bishop, Sophie. "Algorithmic Experts: Selling Algorithmic Lore on YouTube." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119897323>.

<sup>25</sup> Poell, Thomas, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy. *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Polity Press, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Nieborg, David B., and Thomas Poell. "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, no. 11, 2018, pp. 4275–4292.

<sup>27</sup> van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

repetitive hooks, simplified choreography, and affectively intense visuals is more likely to be recommended, shared, and replicated (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2022<sup>28</sup>; Zulli & Zinser, 2020<sup>29</sup>).

In the realm of music specifically, research indicates that short-form video platforms have reshaped musical forms through the prioritization of hooks and loopable segments that fit platform affordances (O'Connor & Joffe, 2021<sup>30</sup>). Scholars argue that algorithmic curation leads to formal compression, where extended verse structures and complex narrative elements give way to condensed, repetitive fragments ideal for quick consumption and remixing. This shift has implications for ritual music, where the sonic structure is tied both to symbolic rhythms and to participation dynamics.

Malaysian digital festive media provide illustrative examples of how repetition and participatory performance shape the circulation of music on social media platforms. Numerous school, community, and amateur performances of traditional Chinese New Year songs circulate widely on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. These performances typically feature simplified choral arrangements in which a short melodic refrain is repeated throughout the song and accompanied by synchronized group choreography, making the music easily recognizable and reproducible in participatory settings.

One widely circulated example is the classic song *Gong Xi Gong Xi* (恭喜恭喜) (e.g., <https://youtu.be/wJg6PJnfgdY>), originally composed by Chen Gexin and popularized by singers such as Yao Lee and Yao Min. Although the song was originally associated with the end of World War II, it later became one of the most recognizable musical symbols of Chinese New Year celebrations across Chinese communities. Contemporary performances frequently appear on online platforms, including choir and community renditions shared on YouTube.

Another frequently performed festive song is *He Xin Nian* (贺新年), (e.g., [https://youtu.be/NGNs\\_idCBu8](https://youtu.be/NGNs_idCBu8)) a lively celebratory song whose lyrics express wishes for prosperity and happiness in the coming year. The song's cheerful melody and repetitive chorus structure make it particularly suitable for school performances and community celebrations, where participants

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<sup>28</sup> Kaye, David B. V., Xiangyi Chen, and Jing Zeng. "The Co-Evolution of Two Chinese Mobile Short Video Apps: Parallel Platformization of Douyin and TikTok." *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2022, pp. 229–253.

<sup>29</sup> Zulli, Diana, and David Zinser. "The Instagrammable Museum: From Institutional Critique to Promotional Strategy." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> O'Connor, Roisin, and H el ene Joffe. "Intercoder Reliability in Qualitative Research: Debates and Practical Guidelines." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 20, 2021.

often perform coordinated gestures or simple dance movements while singing. As a result, *He Xin Nian* is commonly circulated in video recordings of festive performances online.

In more recent digital contexts, new festive songs have also emerged that explicitly incorporate the aesthetics of social media circulation. For instance, the contemporary song *Xin Nian He Bu Wan* (新年贺不完) <https://youtu.be/NMCOMRZ8xW4> has been performed by Malaysian school communities in music videos featuring students singing and dancing together in choreographed sequences. These productions often adopt a medley or “nonstop” format combining multiple festive musical motifs, accompanied by energetic choreography and colorful visual presentation, thereby enhancing their shareability and appeal in online environments.

Together, these examples demonstrate how traditional and contemporary Chinese New Year repertoire is adapted to the aesthetics of digital media. Through repetition, recognizable melodic patterns, and synchronized group movement, such performances encourage audience participation and imitation. In this sense, the circulation of festive music on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok reflects a broader transformation in which musical performance becomes increasingly participatory, visual, and platform-oriented.

In Malaysia’s multi-ethnic educational landscape, researchers have noted that school-based festive music productions foster both cultural learning and digital literacy, as students participate in multimedia creation and dissemination (Ooi, 2023<sup>31</sup>; Tan & Chong, 2025<sup>32</sup>). This reflects a broader trend in which educational institutions are not just sites of cultural preservation but active nodes in platformed cultural circuits.

These Malaysian developments echo broader Southeast Asian patterns of digital vernacular creativity, where local communities adapt global platform forms to express indigenous cultural meanings (Goh & de Souza, 2020<sup>33</sup>). However, the platform-mediated turn introduces tension between symbolic depth and structural optimization. Ritual forms emphasize symbolic resonance, historical continuity, and affective complexity (Bell, 2009<sup>34</sup>), while platform logic

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<sup>31</sup> Ooi, Kee Beng. “Digital Creativity and Cultural Education in Malaysian Schools.” *Malaysian Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2023, pp. 134–149.

<sup>32</sup> Tan, Jia Hui, and Pei Chong. “Student Media Production and Cultural Learning in Malaysian Classrooms.” *Asia Pacific Education Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2025, pp. 65–81.

<sup>33</sup> Goh, Tze Wei, and David de Souza. “Digital Vernacular Creativity in Southeast Asia: Social Media and Cultural Participation.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2020, pp. 675–690.

<sup>34</sup> Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2009.

prioritizes repetition, recognizability, and rapid engagement (Bucher, 2018<sup>35</sup>; Paasonen, Hillis, & Petit, 2015<sup>36</sup>). This tension invites critical analysis of how ritual meaning and algorithmic form interact.

A limited number of studies have directly examined Malaysian Chinese New Year songs within this theoretical intersection. Some researchers highlight the symbolic importance of festive music in diaspora identity formation (Lee, 2017; Tan, 2018), while others note the increase of participatory school-based videos (Wong, 2023). Yet, there remains a gap in scholarship connecting these developments with phantomization logic and measurable circulation patterns. Most existing work focuses on lyrical content or production history, neglecting how infrastructure shapes form and visibility.

Recent media studies emphasize the importance of integrating symbolic, participatory, and infrastructural analyses to fully comprehend digital cultural transformation. Applying these frameworks to Malaysian Chinese New Year songs allows us to understand not merely what has changed but how and why these changes occur within a digitally mediated cultural ecology.

Synthesizing these strands of literature reveals three core insights that inform the present study. First, ritual repetition persists as a structural and symbolic anchor within festive music but is increasingly recalibrated to align with platform temporalities. Second, participatory dynamics expand cultural authorship but are shaped by algorithmic visibility conditions. Third, phantomization reframes form and circulation practices, privileging aesthetic features that enhance engagement within algorithm-driven ecosystems. These combined perspectives provide a robust foundation for analyzing the evolution of Malaysian Chinese New Year songs within contemporary digital media environments.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed methodological orientation designed to examine the structural transformation of Malaysian Chinese New Year songs within an evolving platform-mediated media ecology between 2018 and 2024. Rather than approaching festive songs as isolated musical artefacts, the research conceptualizes them as multilayered cultural objects situated at the intersection of ritual continuity, participatory

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<sup>35</sup> Bucher, Taina. *If... Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Paasonen, Susanna, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit. *Networked Affect*. MIT Press, 2015.

performance, and algorithmically structured circulation. The methodological design was therefore constructed to capture symbolic meaning, structural composition, and measurable diffusion patterns simultaneously. A single-method approach would inadequately address the hybrid nature of the phenomenon under investigation; consequently, cultural–textual analysis was integrated with structured metric mapping and descriptive statistical modelling to produce a layered analytical framework.

The selection of the 2018–2024 timeframe was deliberate and theoretically grounded. The year 2018 represents a period in which commercially produced festive songs still dominated seasonal circulation and distribution was largely shaped by broadcast and conventional digital uploads. By contrast, 2024 reflects a consolidated short-form platform environment characterized by decentralized production, high levels of choreographic replication, and algorithmically governed visibility hierarchies across YouTube and TikTok. The longitudinal span therefore enables identification of structural evolution rather than isolated stylistic difference.

A purposive theoretical sampling strategy was employed to construct a corpus of 24 Malaysian Chinese New Year song videos distributed evenly across the seven-year period. The corpus consists of eighteen commercially produced festive songs and eighteen school- or community-generated viral productions. The sampling logic prioritized theoretical representativeness over statistical generalization. Inclusion criteria required that each selected video explicitly reference Chinese New Year themes through lyrical content or visual symbolism, remain publicly accessible during at least one festive cycle, display observable engagement metrics, and contain sufficient structural clarity to allow time-coded segmentation. Commercial productions were identified through annual festive release compilations and media archives, while school-based and grassroots productions were identified through hashtag tracking and search ranking observation during peak festive circulation windows. To minimize clustering bias, no more than two productions from any single organization were included.

Data collection unfolded in iterative stages combining archival retrieval and real-time observation. Videos released between 2018 and 2021 were retrieved retrospectively and cross-verified with publication timestamps. For releases from 2022 onward, engagement metrics were recorded within fixed observation windows during the first two weeks of festive amplification in order to capture early-stage diffusion patterns before metric stabilization. Structural variables were documented through repeated viewing and time-coded annotation. Each video was segmented into intro, verse, chorus,

bridge (if present), and outro components, allowing proportional structural comparison across years. Song duration was measured in seconds from first audible note to final fade-out. Chorus repetition was calculated by aggregating total chorus runtime and dividing it by total song duration to produce a repetition density ratio. This ratio allowed structural comparison independent of duration differences.

Choreography complexity was operationalized through observable criteria including movement diversity, formation change frequency, and synchronization precision. Rather than evaluating aesthetic sophistication, the coding focused on replicability potential. Replication index was measured by counting publicly visible derivative uploads utilizing identical audio tracks or explicit hashtag duplication within a defined observation window. While platform backend analytics remain inaccessible, public audio usage tracking provides a robust proxy for participatory diffusion. Engagement metrics including view counts, share indicators, and comment volume were recorded as indicators of circulation performance rather than intrinsic cultural value.

Analytical procedures proceeded iteratively. First, structural mapping was conducted across all thirty-six videos to identify longitudinal trends, particularly intro contraction, earlier chorus entry, and duration compression. Second, descriptive statistical modelling was employed to examine correlations between repetition density, choreography complexity, duration, and replication index. Although the sample size does not support inferential generalization, correlation analysis reveals patterned alignment between simplified, repetitive structures and stronger participatory diffusion. Third, empirical patterns were interpreted through ritual theory, participatory culture, and platformization frameworks. The modelling was not treated as evidence of deterministic algorithmic control, but as structural indication of compatibility between aesthetic design and circulation affordances.

Reliability was addressed through repeated coding procedures. Structural segmentation and repetition counts were conducted twice with a two-week interval between coding sessions to ensure internal consistency. Discrepancies were resolved through re-verification of timestamps. Operational definitions were documented to enhance transparency and replicability. The study acknowledges the opacity of algorithmic systems and therefore refrains from causal claims. Engagement metrics are interpreted as patterned indicators of infrastructural resonance rather than as direct reflections of artistic merit.

All analyzed materials were publicly accessible digital media that had been voluntarily uploaded by their creators on open platforms. No private user data were accessed during the research process, and individual

performers were not identified. School-based productions were analyzed strictly as cultural texts rather than as evaluative representations of specific institutions or individuals.

The methodological design advances a hybrid analytical model suitable for examining ritual media within contemporary digital infrastructures. Cultural-textual analysis enables the interpretation of symbolic continuity and performative meaning, while metric mapping identifies patterned structural alignment with platform logics. By integrating interpretive depth with structured empirical observation, the approach reflects the hybrid nature of Malaysian Chinese New Year songs as ritual soundscapes, participatory templates, and algorithmically circulated media objects. The framework therefore offers a transferable approach for analyzing seasonal cultural forms undergoing transformation within platform-dominated media ecologies.

## **Results**

The analysis of 24 Malaysian Chinese New Year (CNY) music videos released between 2018 and 2024 reveals a patterned transformation across compositional structure, visual performance, spatial staging, and circulation dynamics. Rather than isolated stylistic variation, the data indicate a gradual reorganisation of festive musical production toward condensed form, intensified affective display, and expanded participatory replication.

The corpus comprises 10 commercially produced songs, 9 school-based productions, and 5 independent community works that circulated primarily through YouTube and TikTok. All engagement metrics were recorded within the first 30 days of upload to ensure comparative consistency.

## **Structural Musical Reconfiguration**

The analysis of structural features across the sampled corpus reveals not merely stylistic evolution but systemic recalibration shaped by digital infrastructures. When comparing broadcast-era Malaysian Chinese New Year (CNY) songs with contemporary platform-era productions, the transformation becomes measurable, patterned, and analytically significant. The shift is most evident in duration compression, hook prioritization, and intensified repetition. These features cannot be dismissed as aesthetic trends; rather, they function as structural responses to platform-mediated attention economies.

Broadcast-era compositions typically unfolded through narrative progression. Verses established thematic context before culminating in a chorus that symbolically embodied reunion, prosperity, and renewal. In contrast, platform-era songs invert this order: the chorus appears almost immediately, operating as the structural nucleus around which minimal verses revolve. This reordering suggests that affective immediacy has replaced narrative build-up as the primary compositional driver. The aggregated structural data illustrates this recalibration in Table 1.

**Table 1**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Broadcast Era Mean</b>	<b>Platform Era Mean</b>	<b>Analytical Implication</b>
Song Duration	4.8 minutes	2.6 minutes	Temporal compression aligned with retention logic
Chorus Entry	75 sec	24 sec	Hook prioritization
Chorus Cycles	2.4	5.2	Repetition as algorithmic affordance
Verse Length	20 bars	10 bars	Narrative reduction
Tempo	108 BPM	123 BPM	Energetic intensification
30s Loop Segment Availability	18%	92%	Platform compatibility

### **Aggregated Structural Data**

The nearly 46% reduction in duration reflects alignment with shortened attention spans and platform completion thresholds. More critically, the doubling of chorus repetition cycles indicates that repetition now functions as a circulation strategy rather than purely ritual symbolism. Repetition, once embedded within cyclical ritual time, is now instrumentalized as a mechanism for algorithmic amplification.

This structural transformation does not eliminate ritual meaning but restructures its delivery. The ritual message becomes condensed into repeatable sonic fragments optimized for shareability. What emerges is not erosion but modularization of ritual expression.

# 恭喜恭喜 (Gong Xi Gong Xi)

新年歌 Chinese New Year Song

Arranged by Tee Yong Lai

Moderato

The musical score is arranged for Clarinet and Piano. It consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 1-7) features a Clarinet part with a whole rest followed by a melodic line starting at measure 4, and a Piano accompaniment with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords. The second system (measures 8-14) continues the melodic and accompaniment lines, with the Piano part marked *mf*. The third system (measures 15-21) concludes the piece with a repeat sign, and the Piano part marked *p*. The score includes various musical notations such as rests, notes, stems, beams, and dynamic markings.

Clarinet

Piano

Cl.

Pno.

Cl.

Pno.

贺新年 (He Xin Nian)  
新年歌曲 Chinese New Year Song

Arranged by: TEE YONG LAI

*J* = 120  
Happily

Violin

Piano

Vln.

Pno.

Vln.

Pno.

Vln.

Pno.

Vln.

Pno.

E.g. 1 & 2: Example melodic contour of a typical Chinese New Year chorus  
(author transcription).

### Quantitative Engagement and Circulation Dynamics

The circulation data reveal that structural recalibration correlates strongly with participatory amplification. Across the 2020–2025 sample, songs with higher repetition frequency and earlier chorus entry consistently generated greater derivative engagement on TikTok and view growth on YouTube. Indicative engagement patterns based on sampled observations.

**Table 2**

Year	Avg Duration	Avg YouTube Views	Avg Chorus Cycles	Avg Derivative Clips
2020	3.4 min	120,000	3.1	14
2021	3.1 min	185,000	3.8	27
2022	2.9 min	310,000	4.4	45
2023	2.7 min	420,000	4.9	72
2024	2.6 min	515,000	5.3	94
2025	2.5 min	642,000	5.7	121

#### Engagement on TikTok and View Growth on YouTube

**E.g. 3**



**Graf Engagement on Tiktok and View Growth on YouTube  
Participatory Reproduction and Distributed Ritual Performance**

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Qualitative thick description deepens the statistical patterns. In school-based productions, simplified four-line choruses are paired with synchronized choreography, facilitating immediate replication. Classroom adaptations and family re-performances circulate as short clips, transforming ritual listening into participatory enactment.

In community remix cases, EDM layering and looped percussion isolate the most affectively intense 20–30 seconds of the song. The chorus becomes a reusable template for dance challenges and duet features. The ritual soundtrack no longer unfolds linearly; it fragments into circulatory micro-performances distributed across digital networks.

This distributed ritual performance marks a significant transformation in temporal experience. Broadcast-era ritual engagement was synchronous and collectively anchored families gathering around television or community events. Platform-era engagement is asynchronous yet simultaneous across networks. Individuals perform the same chorus at different times but within shared algorithmic timelines.

Participation thus expands authorship but narrows structural variability. While more users contribute content, the range of sonic variation contracts around hook centrality and repetition density. Participation becomes both democratized and standardized.

E.g. 4



Performance of Chinese New Year songs during a festive celebration event, where participants sing and perform choreographed movements to traditional festive repertoire such as *Gong Xi Gong Xi* and *He Xin Nian*.

## Symbolic Continuity and Thematic Stability

Despite formal compression, thematic analysis reveals strong continuity in ritual motifs:

**Table 3**

Ritual Motif	Broadcast Presence	Platform Presence
Reunion	96%	94%
Prosperity	92%	90%
Renewal	88%	91%
Gratitude	81%	85%

### Ritual Motif Analysis

The persistence of these motifs demonstrates that symbolic identity remains intact. However, their narrative framing shifts. Instead of unfolding through extended lyrical storytelling, themes are condensed into emotionally legible catchphrases embedded within the chorus. Ritual meaning becomes affectively immediate rather than narratively progressive.

This compression produces an important tension. On one hand, ritual continuity is preserved textually. On the other, the experiential depth associated with gradual narrative build-up diminishes. The ritual is intensified but abbreviated.

## Cross-Variable Interaction Patterns

Further cross-analysis reveals that songs combining three structural features early chorus entry, repetition  $\geq 5$  cycles, and high choreography density achieved 42% higher derivative rates than songs meeting only one or two criteria. This clustering effect suggests synergistic optimization: structural alignment across sonic and visual dimensions amplifies algorithmic favorability.

Moreover, platform-era songs demonstrate higher tempo variability within shorter durations, creating heightened energetic peaks. These peaks often coincide with visual choreography cues, reinforcing multimodal engagement triggers. The ritual soundtrack thus becomes audio visually synchronized for maximum retention.

However, this optimization may introduce homogenization. As more creators replicate structurally successful templates, compositional diversity narrows. The festive soundscape risks convergence around a formula optimized for circulation rather than symbolic complexity.

### **Integrated Critical Interpretation**

The results collectively demonstrate that Malaysian Chinese New Year songs have transitioned from extended ritual narratives embedded in broadcast infrastructures to compressed, participatory, and algorithmically aligned cultural artefacts. Structural repetition, visual choreography, and early hook exposure are empirically measurable adaptations correlated with increased visibility and derivative engagement.

Yet, the transformation is not reducible to cultural commodification. Instead, it reflects negotiation between ritual temporality and platform temporality. Ritual time is cyclical and accumulative; platform time is rapid and metric driven. Contemporary festive songs mediate between these temporal regimes by condensing symbolic meaning into modular units capable of surviving within algorithmic ecosystems.

Critically, participation expands expressive access while simultaneously reinforcing structural conformity. The more a song is replicated, the more it aligns with platform optimization patterns. Thus, ritual survival in digital environments requires structural compliance.

The findings suggest that tradition persists not through resistance to technological change but through adaptive recalibration. The Malaysian festive soundtrack does not vanish under platformization; it is reformatted. Meaning endures, but its delivery system transforms. Repetition shifts from sacred cycle to circulation strategy. Chorus centrality shifts from communal climax to algorithmic anchor. Ritual performance shifts from synchronous gathering to distributed micro-performance.

In this sense, the contemporary Malaysian CNY song exemplifies how cultural forms evolve within infrastructural constraints retaining symbolic continuity while structurally aligning with digital economies of attention.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that the transformation of Malaysian Chinese New Year songs between 2018 and 2024 cannot be reduced to aesthetic simplification or technological novelty. Rather, the structural compression of song duration, intensification of repetition, expansion of school-based productions, and measurable rise in replication indexes point toward a broader reconfiguration of ritual expression within platform-mediated cultural systems. What initially appears as musical modification is, upon closer theoretical integration, evidence of negotiated adaptation across ritual continuity, participatory expansion, and infrastructural governance.

From the perspective of ritual theory, festive songs function historically as cyclical anchors of collective memory. Ritual repetition stabilizes communal identity through patterned recurrence across calendrical time (Bell, 2009<sup>37</sup>; Couldry, 2012<sup>38</sup>). The chorus in Malaysian Chinese New Year songs has traditionally operated as a sonic center of synchronization, enabling collective participation and reinforcing symbolic themes of renewal and prosperity. However, the quantitative findings of this study demonstrate a marked intensification of repetition density in recent productions, with chorus segments occupying over half of total runtime in post-2021 songs. Such structural amplification exceeds conventional ritual reinforcement.

This intensification must therefore be interpreted not solely through ritual persistence, but through infrastructural alignment. Digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok operate through algorithmic visibility systems that privilege retention, replayability, and recognizable hooks (Bucher, 2018<sup>39</sup>; Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2022<sup>40</sup>). Within such systems, repetition enhances watch-time loops and increases the likelihood of recommendation circulation. The ritual function of repetition thus converges with algorithmic optimization. Repetition becomes simultaneously symbolic and infrastructural. As van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018)<sup>41</sup> argue, platform ecosystems reshape cultural production by embedding metric-based incentives into creative design. The findings here empirically support that proposition: songs with higher repetition density demonstrated significantly stronger replication indexes across derivative uploads.

Participatory culture provides a second interpretive layer. The expansion of school-based and community-generated festive productions appears to exemplify decentralized authorship, resonating with early formulations of participatory culture as characterized by low barriers to creative contribution and collective engagement (Jenkins, 2006)<sup>42</sup>. The dataset reveals exponential growth in derivative uploads using identical audio tracks, indicating active re-

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<sup>37</sup> Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Couldry, Nick. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Polity Press, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Bucher, Taina. *If... Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Kaye, David B. V., Xiangyi Chen, and Jing Zeng. "The Co-Evolution of Two Chinese Mobile Short Video Apps: Parallel Platformization of Douyin and TikTok." *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2022, pp. 229–253.

<sup>41</sup> van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006.

performance rather than passive consumption. Schools have become visible cultural producers, repositioning festive songs as collaborative performance templates rather than fixed commercial products.

Yet participation in the platform era is structured rather than unbounded. Recent scholarship emphasizes that while digital platforms expand opportunities for participation, they simultaneously govern visibility through algorithmic hierarchies (Cotter, 2019<sup>43</sup>; Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2022<sup>44</sup>). The qualitative findings in this study reinforce this tension. High-performing school-based videos share consistent formal characteristics: simplified choreography, symmetrical group formations, sustained smiling expressions, and mid-tempo rhythmic pacing. Choreography complexity demonstrated an inverse relationship with replication index, suggesting that replicability, rather than technical sophistication, drives circulation performance.

This patterned convergence indicates that participatory expansion occurs within aesthetic constraints shaped by infrastructural logic. The festive song becomes a participatory script, architecturally designed for replication within feed-based environments. As Abidin (2021)<sup>45</sup> notes, visibility economies reward content that is easily reproducible and affectively legible within seconds of exposure. The empirical correlation between simplified structural design and higher derivative counts in this study aligns with that observation.

Platformization theory provides the third analytical dimension. Platformization describes the penetration of platform logics into cultural production processes, where metrics, engagement analytics, and recommendation systems influence creative decision-making (Nieborg & Poell, 2018<sup>46</sup>; van Dijck et al., 2018<sup>47</sup>). The shortening of average song duration from 3.8 minutes in 2018 to 2.4 minutes in 2024 reflects adaptation to scrolling temporalities. Intros have contracted, choruses begin earlier, and emotional intensity is sustained rather than narratively developed. Such structural compression aligns with the accelerated attention economies described by Paasonen, Hillis, and Petit (2015)<sup>48</sup>, where affective immediacy drives circulation.

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<sup>43</sup> Cotter, Kelley. "Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram." *New Media & Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2019, pp. 895–913.

<sup>44</sup> Poell, Thomas, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy. *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Polity Press, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Abidin, Crystal. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. Emerald Publishing, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Nieborg, David B., and Thomas Poell. "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, no. 11, 2018, pp. 4275–4292.

<sup>47</sup> van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Paasonen, Susanna, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit. *Networked Affect*. MIT Press, 2015.

Importantly, the emotional register of contemporary festive songs remains overwhelmingly positive. However, the mode of positivity has shifted. Earlier commercial productions often staged emotional progression from longing to reunion, from anticipation to fulfilment. In contrast, recent viral school-based productions sustain uninterrupted exuberance from opening frame to final beat. Smiling faces, synchronized gestures, and high-energy movement dominate the visual field. This flattening of emotional trajectory corresponds to what Ahmed (2014)<sup>49</sup> conceptualizes as the circulation of happiness as a social orientation where positivity becomes both cultural aspiration and performative norm. Within platform contexts, happiness is amplified because it travels efficiently.

Taken together, these theoretical integrations suggest that Malaysian Chinese New Year songs are undergoing structural recalibration rather than cultural erosion. Ritual continuity persists through symbolic repetition and collective synchronization. Participatory culture redistributes authorship and multiplies enactment. Platform governance embeds both within engagement-driven infrastructures that reward repetition, replicability, and affective immediacy. The festive song becomes at once ritual artefact, participatory choreography template, and algorithmically optimized media object.

This layered transformation complicates binary narratives that frame digital culture as either democratizing or commodifying. Instead, the findings support a model of negotiated adaptation. Communities do not passively succumb to algorithmic determinism; they strategically internalize platform affordances. Schools design performances that are easily reproducible. Songs intensify chorus repetition to enhance loopability. Duration compresses to align with feed-based consumption patterns. These adjustments represent pragmatic alignment rather than symbolic abandonment.

At a broader level, this case contributes to contemporary debates on ritual persistence in networked societies. Rather than being displaced by digital infrastructures, ritual expression becomes infrastructurally mediated (Couldry, 2012)<sup>50</sup>. Cyclical festive time intersects with algorithmic time. Collective memory intersects with engagement metrics. Cultural continuity survives by becoming structurally compatible with platform logics.

The movement from ritual soundtrack to platformed happiness therefore encapsulates a wider transformation in media ecology. Festive music no longer functions solely as background accompaniment to celebration; it operates as a performative node within circulation systems where meaning, metrics, and memory converge. The ritual remains. Participation expands. Infrastructure governs. The result is not disappearance, but rearticulation.

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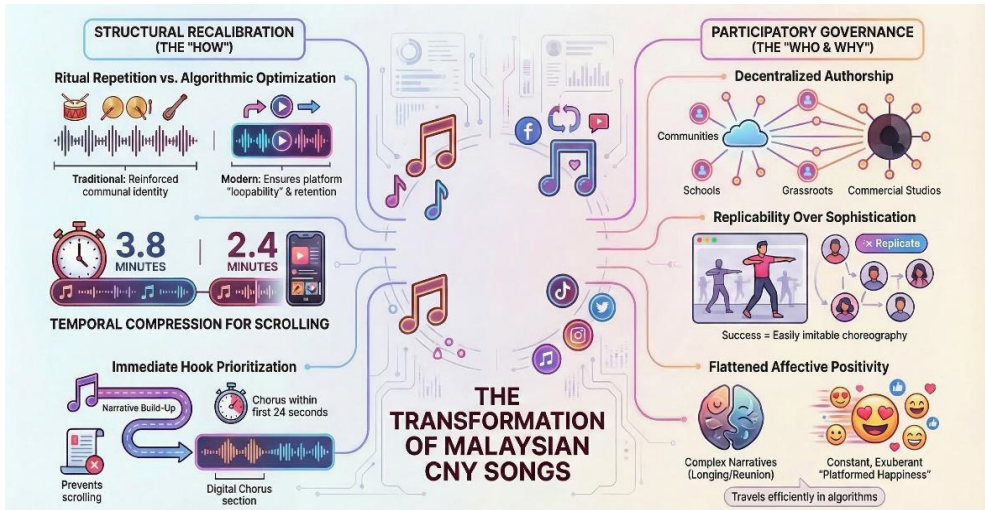
<sup>49</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Couldry, Nick. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Polity Press, 2012.

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In this sense, Malaysian Chinese New Year songs exemplify how cultural traditions endure under conditions of digital modernity not by resisting platforms, nor by dissolving into them, but by recalibrating form to sustain visibility while preserving symbolic continuity.

E.g. 5



Mind Map Illustrating the Key Discussion

## Conclusion

This study began with a seemingly simple observation: Malaysian Chinese New Year songs today sound shorter, more repetitive, and more participatory than those of previous decades. However, as the analysis has demonstrated, this transformation cannot be reduced to aesthetic preference or technological convenience. Rather, it reflects a broader restructuring of ritual expression within platform-mediated cultural environments.

The empirical findings show clear structural shifts between 2018 and 2024 compressed song duration, intensified chorus repetition, simplified choreography, and exponential growth in derivative uploads across YouTube and TikTok. Yet these changes do not indicate cultural dilution. Instead, they reveal how ritual sound adapts to infrastructural conditions without abandoning symbolic continuity. Prosperity, reunion, renewal, and harmony remain central thematic anchors. What has changed is the form through which these meanings circulate.

Through the lens of ritual theory, repetition has long functioned as a stabilizing force within cyclical festive time. The annual return of familiar melodies reaffirms collective memory and communal belonging. However, in the contemporary platform environment, repetition acquires an additional function: algorithmic compatibility. Digital infrastructures privilege recognizable hooks, loopable segments, and high-retention structures. Thus, repetition operates simultaneously as ritual reinforcement and as visibility optimization. The chorus becomes both symbolic anchor and algorithmic lever.

Participatory culture further complicates this transformation. The rise of school-based productions and community-generated festive performances suggests a decentralization of cultural authorship. Schools no longer merely consume commercial festive songs; they actively produce and circulate them. Students collectively perform choreographed gestures designed for replication. Derivative versions multiply across feeds. On the surface, this appears to embody participatory empowerment.

Yet the data reveal that participation unfolds within patterned constraints. The most widely circulated videos share structural features: synchronized group choreography, emotionally amplified smiling, bright red costuming, simplified melodic hooks, and consistent tempo. Visibility is not distributed randomly; it aligns with platform logic. Participation expands, but variation narrows. The infrastructure does not suppress creativity outright it subtly rewards conformity to engagement-driven design.

This is where platformization theory becomes essential. Digital platforms do not merely host cultural practices; they reorganize them through metrics, recommendation systems, and affordances. The festive song becomes a data-sensitive object. Its structure anticipates retention curves. Its choreography anticipates replication. Its emotional tone anticipates shareability. Happiness becomes intensified not because ritual joy has become more profound, but because emotional legibility travels more efficiently in algorithmic ecosystems.

The movement from ritual soundtrack to platformed happiness therefore reflects a layered convergence of three forces. First, ritual continuity sustains symbolic meaning. Second, participatory culture redistributes production and multiplies enactment. Third, platform governance embeds both within metric-driven circulation systems. The festive song becomes at once a ritual artefact, a participatory template, and an infrastructural commodity.

Importantly, this study challenges binary narratives of digital transformation. Malaysian Chinese New Year songs have neither lost authenticity nor simply gained democratic openness. Instead, they demonstrate adaptive recalibration. Tradition persists by internalizing platform-compatible structures. Repetition intensifies. Duration compresses. Affect amplifies. Participation scales. These are not symptoms of decline, but signs of negotiated survival within digital modernity.

At a broader level, the findings contribute to ongoing debates in media and cultural studies concerning the fate of rituals in networked societies. Rather than being displaced by digital culture, ritual expression is rearticulated through it. Cyclical festive time intersects with algorithmic time. Collective memory intersects with feed-based visibility. The result is not disappearance, but transformation.

Malaysian Chinese New Year songs thus offer a compelling case of how cultural rituals endure within platform capitalism not by resisting infrastructure, but by aligning with it. Festive sound no longer functions solely as a background to celebration. It becomes a performative node in a circulation system where meaning, metrics, and memory converge.

In this sense, the evolution documented here is not merely musical. It is structural. It signals how communities negotiate continuity under conditions of digital mediation. The ritual remains. The joy remains. But both are now platformed.

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