Mandopop Under Siege: Culturally Bound Criticisms of Taiwan's Pop Music

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Abstract

This article examines the cultural biases embedded in critiques of Mandopop (Mandarin Chinese pop music). Contemporary commercialised Mandopop is generally recognised as beginning around 1980, drawing on musical traditions from the early twentieth century. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Taiwan’s popular music swept across China and many in the PRC government reacted to the values embedded in Taiwan’s lyrics with mistrust and disdain, expressing a fear that Taiwan and Hong Kong’s cultural incursion would result in the PRC’s loss of national identity. On the other side of the strait, people in Taiwan complained of Mandopop’s fast pace and changing nature and linked this to similar trends in Taiwan’s society. More recently, several of Taiwan’s scholars have critiqued Mandopop for promoting patriarchal gender roles, and English language publications complain of a lack of individualism in that songs are produced in teams of composers, lyricists and performers. I examine the cultural contexts of these critiques in order to come to a better understanding of the most popular Chinese language music in the world.

Jay Chou (Zhou Jielun) saw them come and go, pretty boys who could barely carry a tune, divas who had the attitude but not the talent, boy bands whose members were chosen for their dance steps instead of their voice chops. (Drake 2003, p. 76)

These highly commoditized performers are young, good-looking, stylish, and usually possess little or no talent at all. (Ching 1995, p. 271)

But pop is not only a dream machine: perhaps, like witchcraft in another age, it is the unofficial chronicle of its times, a history of desires existing in the margins of official history, which, except at rare moments of rupture, do not speak but act. In setting out a history of today, popular culture etches the contours of a history of tomorrow in that it ‘feels’ a social atmosphere in its earliest, unformulated stages [. . .]. (Hennion 1983, p. 205)

In 1980, contemporary Mandopop (Mandarin Chinese language pop music) evolved out of Taiwan’s 1970s Campus Songs Folk movement, drawing on several previous or coexisting musical traditions in East Asia, including Shanghai’s 1930’s jazz era, Japanese enka, Taiwan’s Taiyupop (Minnan dialect pop music: Taiyu gequ), and Hong Kong’s Cantopop (Cantonese pop music). In spite of its wild popularity, Taiwan’s musical production has virtually been ignored in English language scholarship. Taiwan’s music sales are the third largest in Asia – behind Japan and South Korea but ahead of much bigger countries such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and India (Wells 1997, p. 206). In the 1980s and early 1990s, Taiwan shared its musical
fame with Hong Kong. After Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997, however, Hong Kong lost much of its glamour in the PRC’s imaginary and Taiwan took an even more central role – by 2002 Taiwan's Mandopop accounted for an estimated eighty to ninety per cent of Chinese language music sales in the PRC (Xu 2002, p. 323; Wong 2003, p. 153).  

When Taiwan’s pop is mentioned it is often in explicitly negative terms. This is not to imply that all work on Mandopop has been condemnatory, but rather to explore the issue of the ways in which such critiques are culturally bound. This article will explore the cultural biases of such critiques (including comments made in the PRC, Taiwan, and in English language publications) in the hopes of coming to a better understanding of why the largest population in the world’s favourite music is so readily dismissed.

Critiques from the PRC, Taiwan, and in English-language publications

The 1980s were a time of intense liberalisation in the PRC, resulting in an opening to mass-mediated culture from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Taiwan’s Mandopop was at the forefront of the PRC’s introduction to the outside world. However, this caused a backlash among many in the PRC government. Several Western scholars have documented the PRC government’s extremely hostile reaction to Mandopop produced in Taiwan and Hong Kong, saying that it is ‘too loud and too vulgar’ (Brace 1991, p. 59), ‘morally decadent and aesthetically empty’ (Brace 1991, p. 43), and going so far as to label the music as pornography (Honig and Hershatter 1988, pp. 59–60, 70; Leng 1991, p. 30; Witzleben 1999, p. 247; Jones 2001; Baranovitch 2003, p. 15). As an extension of this, the PRC government called for the nation to fight against Taiwan and Hong Kong-produced Mandopop’s ‘evil influences’ (Leng 1991, p. 30), represented it as an emasculated ‘illness that was inherited from the 1930s’ (Baranovitch 2003, p. 135), and labelled it as ‘spiritual pollution’ (Witzleben 1999, p. 247; Fung and Curtin 2002, p. 265), and ‘the sounds of a subjugated nation’ (Baranovitch 2003, p. 16). In the 1980s, people in the PRC could be arrested simply for listening to Mandopop from Taiwan which had not been authorised by the State (Honig and Hershatter 1988, p. 61).

An examination of PRC musicologist Leng Sui-jin’s writing provides us with a representative sample of the PRC rhetoric on Mandopop from that era. Although on the whole fairly positive about the value of Mandopop from Taiwan and Hong Kong, Leng warns of a dangerous subset of this genre, labelled as ‘obscene and pornographic songs’:

The lyrics are full of sexual incitements and dissolute and licentious interests [. . .] The use of strong rhythms and ‘slippery’ sounds enforces the effects of frivolity and sexual arousal [sic]. Moral decline, a life sunk in drunkenness and dreams, and hysterical behavior are all shown through the use of great wave-like trills of reeds and throaty musings of saxophones. (Leng 1991, p. 25)

The PRC critiques I have outlined above are strikingly culturally bound. Their condemnation of pop as pornography, for example, arose in an authoritarian state that, as Kay Ann Johnson (1983) and Judith Stacey (1983) have pointed out, had long acted as patriarch to its subjects. Thus, the concern lies not with the quality of the music per se as with a perceived danger of disrupting a communist utopian ideal.
Beijing rock musicians share the PRC government’s anxiety that Taiwan’s Mandopop will usher in commercialised values and an ensuing loss of national identity; disparaging Taiwan- and Hong Kong-style Mandopop as inauthentically ‘Chinese’. Similarly, a blog written by a PRC music critic goes as far as to compare Taiwanese musicians with prostitutes, stating that they only go to China to make a quick buck, concluding with the question, ‘but when they leave with their money, what is left for us’ (ESWN 2006)? The critic asserts that China’s music industry has unquestioningly followed Taiwan’s musical trends resulting in losing its own sense of identity, and likens Taiwan’s musical influence on China as an act that ‘counter-invades the mainland’ (ESWN 2006). Thus, the Chinese elite’s dismissal of Mandopop is part of a larger resentment towards popular culture from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the US for ushering in crass commercialism and Western decadence (Yang 1997, p. 310).

Taiwan’s scholarship shares this last set of concerns. Liang Hongbin, for example, uses Mandopop as an emblem to express a fear that Taiwan is losing its cultural identity because it has absorbed so many influences from countries such as Japan, Korea and the US (See Liang 2001, p. 179).

Another common complaint is linked to the temporal nature of popular music. Taiwan’s musicologist Liu Xing, for example, in comparing Japanese-era Chinese language popular songs to Mandopop in the 1980s, laments, ‘Why are yesterday’s popular songs so much better than today’s?’ (Liu 1984, p. 172). He asserts that earlier genres had a charming simplicity in contrast to modern Taiwan Mandopop in which ‘the tempos are very fast, they are performed fast, they are sung fast, and they are quickly forgotten’ (Liu 1984, p. 170). Liu links the speed of the music with the pace of society and at times compares the growing complexity of society with his own development, complaining that his growing sophistication as a musicologist has ruined his appreciation for song (Liu 1984, p. 170). Somewhat predictably, Liu links the pace of change in both music and society with ‘foreign influences’ (Liu 1984, p. 170).

Although Taiwan’s elderly are more likely to make such statements, I have spoken with several younger people who shared these views. Xiangyu, a twenty-six year old graduate student in Taiwan, points out that such nostalgia is connected with Taiwan’s tremendously rapid economic development and urbanisation.

People listen to songs from a period to remember that time. Some people always think of the future, many prefer to think back to the past. Taiwan is very small but it is very complicated so we like to listen to music from a simpler time. (Xiangyu, 20 November 2003, Taipei)

These statements are fairly representative of a common ethos of nostalgia among many in Taiwan. For the Taiwanese, nostalgia, an already problematic concept, is even more of a quandary, for in romanticising their past they idealise a time when Taiwan was a colony of Japan, or later, for all intents and purposes, of the Kuomintang of China (KMT). This interpretive retelling of history is therefore yet another example of an invention of tradition, or a nostalgia for a past that never existed (Appadurai 1996, p. 77; Iwabuchi 2002, p. 174).

Taiwan’s more recent scholarship has also featured several critiques about the effect that Mandopop’s conservative gender roles and patriarchal themes have on youth. If this analysis seems more familiar to a Western reader than the PRC rhetoric outlined above, it is because of the dramatic influence that Western political and academic developments have had on Taiwan’s growing feminist movement. This
scholarship also reflects many Western academics’ assumptions that good music should be ideological, even revolutionary in nature (see Hebdige 1987, 1991, for example), and in this sense begins to sound like the PRC’s disdain for the incorrect political messages of such songs.

Contemporary English language publications describing Mandopop are also extremely culturally bound. Although they do not express concern with the pernicious degenerate effects of pop, they quickly dismiss it with the implicit critique that it does not live up to the authors’ Western expectations of what the music should be. Surprisingly, this is often voiced in popular press that is ostensibly promoting the industry. An English language Taiwanese newspaper article states the following:

[T-Ho Brothers’ (Tiehu Xiongdi)] sound is the first of its kind to be born in Taiwan, where pop music is largely a pantheon of pretty faces. (Momphard 2003, p. 16)

Similarly, a *Times Asia* article covering Jay Chou, the undisputed king of Mandopop from 2002 to 2007, spends most of the article with the somewhat unexpected sales angle that he is unattractive, which, the article implies, adds to his legitimacy as an artist. The article also notes that, unlike other pop stars, Jay began his career writing music for others and therefore possesses talent, rather than the external packaging, that it asserts is the norm for Mandopop:

Male Canto-and Mando-pop stars are supposed to be born with connections, grow up with money and emerge in adolescence lithe, androgynous pinups, prefabricated and machine-tooled for one-hit wonderdom and, if they’re lucky, lucrative B-movie careers and shampoo commercials. How did a kid with an overbite, aquiline nose and receding chin displace the Nicholases and Andys and Jackys to become Asia’s hottest pop star? The explanations starts somewhere back in that stuffy studio, with the discipline and the songs and the revolutionary idea that the music actually mattered. (Drake 2003, p. 77)

To the degree that Taiwan pop is addressed at all in Western scholarship, it is often also quickly dismissed.

These young ‘idols’ [. . .] are usually given a particular character trait – cute, naïve, rebellious, or animated – most of which are completely different from their personalities. These performers almost never make or play their own music; their songs are written and produced by professional songwriter. (Ching 1995, p. 272)

Even when Western scholars do not dismiss Taiwan’s pop quite so readily, their analysis has its own set of cultural biases. The book *Music at the Margins: Popular Music and Global Cultural Diversity* (Robinson et al. 1991), for example, while not overtly hostile to Taiwan’s music, also reveals an underlying ethnocentrism. Robinson et al. correctly attempt to problematise the idea of Western cultural domination as a one-way flow ‘From the West to the Rest’ (*ibid.*, p. 3). Yet if their stated goal is to undermine concepts of Western hegemony, the underlying logic is that the worth of music lies in the degree to which it enters the Western market.

Second, they assume that what Taiwan has to offer is an integration of traditional Chinese sounds and instrumentation, thereby attempting to force Taiwan into the position of representing a Chinese minority through their association with traditional ‘ethnic’ music. The result is a study replete with statements that support Western hegemony and ignore Taiwan’s accomplishments:

Canada, the Netherlands, and Taiwan do not have strong contemporary popular music forms of their own in comparison with India, Jamaica, and Nigeria, although Taiwan’s Chinese musical tradition offers the possibility of adding highly innovative traditional elements to the world’s popular music pool. (*ibid.*, p. 140)
As Allen Chun and Ned Rossiter have emphasised, the conception of ‘world music’ is in fact a European and American reinforcement of perceived transnational hierarchies (Chun and Rossiter 2004, p. 13). Leaving aside the fact that Taiwan is combined with such disparate nations in this blanket statement, the authors fail to ask the Taiwanese what they think about their own music. Thus, Robinson and her co-authors unquestioningly judge Taiwan’s music according to their own standards of what qualifies as excellence and what does not.

Robinson and her co-writers go on to state:

Taiwan, as a former colony of Japan and a long-time enemy of mainland China, has been more concerned about cultural encroachment than cultural encouragement. (Robinson et al. 1991, pp. 140–1).

As I noted above, music produced in Taiwan is exceptionally popular in Hong Kong, the PRC, and any region with a sizeable Chinese speaking population (Malaysia, Singapore, and Los Angeles come readily to mind). The fact that Taiwan is one of the centres of music for one of the largest populations of the world is ignored here and the West exalted by setting it as the standard for musical success.

In the above examples, Westerners tend to sum up Asian pop music as a mirror of Western identities, with the West at top of the transnational hierarchy (Thompson 2002, p. 59). Eric Thompson asks the important question for Malaysian pop music, however – if it is merely imitation of the Western form, why would anyone listen to the local versions? In other words, if this is the case, ‘Why does the ‘copy’ appeal more to Malay youth than ‘the real thing’?’ (Thompson 2002, pp. 59–60). Culture flows in all directions so that the image of Westernisation as an omnipotent hegemony might have more to do with a somewhat self-aggrandising fantasy of the West than a tangible unilateral force (Taussig 1993; Bhabha 1994; Adrian 2003, pp. 13–14).

These English-language critiques of Mandopop are ultimately based on a perceived failure to live up to Western standards for the genre. I have spoken with many Westerners in Taiwan who point to the fact that performers do not usually write their own songs – demonstrating a rather unquestioning belief in the superiority of individualism. Several scholars have warned that one should be wary of teleological views of Western modernity and emphasise that other countries have other modernities. Mandopop, as an enduring if always shifting marker of modernity, should also be given its own space as an alternate cultural/musical form.

It is true that in the case of Mandopop singer’s styles overtly rely on what Irene Yang has called a ‘singer-composer relationship’ (Yang 1992, p. 59) rather than the image of an individual creator/performer such as those found in some US musical styles. Yet Taiwan’s method of musical production is not necessarily a worse system than in the West. It may also point to a greater rationality that prioritises the end product more than binding the music to individual stars’ identities. In theory, if one could take the very best songwriter and team him or her up with the best singer and composer, one would get a better result. In other words, why not co-produce songs if one can combine the best of each person’s skills? Mandopop’s acceptance of co-produced songs may also point to a greater focus on teamwork rather than the obsession with individual performance. This, in turn, reflects on larger cultural conceptions concerning the superiority of group effort over individualism.

Indeed, unlike the US, for example, lyricists and composers also become famous in Taiwan. Xiangyu, who I quoted above, said the following:
Chen Xiaojuan wrote the song for Karen Mok’s [Mou Wenwei] CD [i] which won so many awards. Chen Xiaojuan’s boyfriend is a famous producer. Another producer stole her boyfriend’s heart so she wrote this song ‘Love’ (Ai). There was a lot of public outcry about her winning because Karen Mok can’t sing well but the songs are so good she won the Golden Melody award for best singer. In the news and web pages there was lots of really heated discussion about this. People, even if they can’t sing well, get the ‘best singer’ award. Shouldn’t it mean she is the best singer? (Xiangyu, 20 November 2003)

Such remarks highlight the public personas of songwriters in Taiwan. In a sense, Xiangyu’s statements support the critiques that performers are empty shells. Yet on another level it also points to the public’s high expectations for every member of the song’s creation and performance team.

Lyricists write songs with certain singers in mind and sell their songs to the performer whose public persona best fits the mood of what they have written. The following account is from an interview with Michelle, a twenty-four year old lyricist from Taipei.

I’ve been working for this company for about a year now. I had been writing songs for myself – whether or not I’m going to be the one performing them. But my boss told me I have to start writing songs for others – professional songwriters have to write songs for others, after all.

I have to know the performer’s personality, what fits best for her. I listen to their songs for inspiration as to their personality and I will meet them for coffee to talk with them to get to know them, and I explore what they have done already and then I write songs for them. But it’s not like I just want to do what they’ve done before. I put new energy into the songs so it is a blend of their and my styles really. (Michelle, 28 October 2003, Taipei)

So yes, these songs are constructed, but perhaps less arbitrarily and more creatively than it might at first seem. Note Michelle’s statement at the end of the above quote, for example, in which she stresses that she wants to leave her own mark on the music she composes rather than just doing what the artist has done before. Because songwriters and performers are mixed and matched, Mandopop performers can explore a wide range of identities which adds to the complexity of the music.

The Western critique of the fact that many Mandopop stars do not write their own songs uncritically accepts conceptions of Western Enlightenment individualism as the only virtuous path. It has been argued that in Japan that, for many, individualism has more to do with being fashionable or sophisticated than being independent thinkers (Tanaka 1998, p. 121). I would suggest that this statement is true in Taiwan as well, and in the West for that matter. Thus, such attitudes unreflexively accept the team-produced images of Western pop as individualistic while condemning what is arguably a more honest approach of co-production in Taiwan in which successful songwriters gain fame in their own right. To critique Mandopop with the implication that Western pop is somehow different in these regards ignores all of the people who are part of the production marketing team for pop music in Western music industries.

Indeed, Westerners tend to lose sight of the somewhat arbitrary nature of what we think of as ‘natural’ guidelines for musical creativity. As Howard Becker points out, there is a cultural consensus in the West that rock and roll should be written by the performer whereas composers of classical music may also perform, but it is not expected that they do so (Becker 2001, p. 68). Similarly, Edward Kealy’s examination of the importance of people who do song mixing for the finished product leaves little doubt as to the innately collaborative nature of music production in the West (Kealy 1979).

The above-mentioned English-language comments on Mandopop embrace the individualistic imagery of Western musical production while losing sight of the
constructed nature of such imagery. In doing so, they forget that their cultural standards for creative production draw arbitrary lines that become naturalised over time. Why, for example, do they insist that the songs be written by the performer though they do not care if the music videos are produced by others? Backup bands define a large part of the sound of any given song, even with hits that are ‘written’ by performers, as do the sound mixers. In the 1950s it was understood that performers ranging from Patsy Cline to Aretha Franklin to Frank Sinatra had others write songs for them. In the 1960s, performers such as the Grateful Dead and Jimi Hendrix produced covers of Bob Dylan songs which became some of their most famous hits. In recent years, the US, especially, has been moving towards remakes (both movies and songs) of earlier works. The alternative band, Counting Crows’ 2003 wildly successful release of Joni Mitchell’s song ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ (1970), or country/western singer Johnny Cash’s 2003 cover of alternative band Nine Inch Nails’ 1994 song ‘Hurt’ readily come to mind. Trent Reznor, of Nine Inch Nails, in an interview about Johnny Cash’s extremely popular version of Reznor’s song ‘Hurt’, said:

I think exposure to this video or any of Johnny’s music today may help some people realise the possibility of music and remind you that it doesn’t have to all be what it has turned into for the most part. (MTV.com, 2005)

The truth is that all genre’s of today’s music, ranging from rock and roll to punk to pop to country/western, take songs from other genres and ‘localise’ them to expose their own audience to new forms of song, and also to demonstrate what their musical genre can do with other musical forms. This can be seen as an homage to the original song makers as well as an important form of creative expression. As Reznor points out in the above quote, it also forces the listener to reconceptualise too rigidly defined views of musical genres.

The power of European and American music is in their blending of a richly diverse set of musical traditions from Africa, Europe, and South America, among others. In much the same way, Taiwan’s adoption and adaptation of other countries’ music should be seen as a vibrant adoption and adaptation of many different musical traditions from traditional Chinese music and religious performances as well as American, European, Japanese, Korean, Latin American, Taiwanese aboriginal, and other musical influences.

Another failure of English language condemnation of Mandopop is that it implicitly refers to ‘boy-toy bands’ and ignores the majority of individual performers, some of whom are quite talented. If we were to do the same for Western popular music, would we really be conveying a sense of the genre as a whole? There is incredible diversity among Taiwan’s performers, ranging from Qi Yu’s astounding vocal range to Bobby Chen’s somewhat atonal but beautifully poetic songs, to Wu Bai’s soft metal grit, to Jay Chou’s sophisticated jazz-influenced R&B. By lumping all Mandopop in one category, English language critiques reify the image of the Asian other as nameless faceless clones that are all alike.

Mass production, standardisation, and lyrical poetry

The condemnation of Mandopop draws on a history of academic dismissal of pop music in the West, including the works of Theodor Adorno (1941), Walter Benjamin (1955) and Jürgen Habermas (1989) who seemed to find mass production and, indeed, popular culture as a whole, so distasteful that it takes on a vaguely immoral
nuance in their theoretical frameworks. Though such ideas are dismissed by most today, the basic assumption that music of resistance is ‘good’ and that standardised music is ‘bad’ can also be seen in later works, such as Dick Hebdige’s remorse over the standardisation of once alternative musical forms in England as becoming ‘frozen’ over time (Hebdige 1979, p. 96).

Here too, it would seem, statements on the quality of music are often less about the music itself than introducing the biases of those who have the authority to assess its value (Frith 1996, p. 9). Part of academia’s hostility to disco, for example, is in its unabashedly capitalistic image tied in with extravagant expenditures on performances and musical production (Dyer 1979, pp. 411, 417–18). Yet rock is also intensely professionalised despite the image it must maintain to retain legitimacy (Dyer 1979, pp. 411–12; de Kloet 2003, p. 25) – as opposed to pop, in which, in the words of Jeroen de Kloet, ‘authenticity is just another style’ (de Kloet 2003, p. 25). Dyer also stresses that assumptions concerning disco’s innate hegemonic values are problematic in that capitalism’s main goal is profit and as such the music industry quite willingly presents social critique as long as it sells. He thus takes to task the notion that music produced within capitalism innately supports the hegemony of its controllers (Dyer 1979, p. 412). Citing gay cultural uses of disco as an example, Dyer also highlights the often contradictory messages in the music and the multiple ways in which it can be appropriated (Dyer 1979, p. 413).

In examining critiques of pop music in the West we see insightful analysis of the commoditisation of musical genres, ranging from punk (Hebdige 1979) to rock and roll (Frith 1988). Much of this academic discourse shares the assumption that music’s value is in its anti-hegemonic struggle against society. As Richard Dyer also points out, one should be wary of taking political themes as the only value of pop music (Dyer 1979; Stokes 2004, p. 32).

Mandopop does have several standardised guidelines. Most songs are about heartbreak. Many of the popular singers are what might be defined in the West as androgynous men, or women who, though more sexualised in the last few years, present relatively sexually restrained images in comparison with their hyper-sexualised US counterparts. Many of these songs include the occasional English word or phrase and are heavily influenced by US melodic styles. Most have simple melodies that avoid syncopation or too wide a vocal range – making it easier for the songs to be sung in karaoke.

Mandopop is hardly alone in having thematic and tonal boundaries, however. Any genre (blues, classical, and pop) has a melodic structure and lyrical themes – that is what makes it a genre, after all. It is important to remember that there is tremendous variation and innovation within mass-marketed frameworks. As Simon Frith points out, even standardisation is a conceptual category that shifts according to who is judging the music:

More generally, we could say that such ‘formula criticism’ tends to be genre-centric: minor variations in teeny-bop music (the fact that the stars have different vocal registers, say) are taken to be quite insignificant; minor variations in rural blues guitar phrasings are taken to be of great aesthetic importance. (Frith 1996, p. 69)

To the degree that Mandopop does have certain recurring themes, one should also note that from the perspective of the lyricist, here lies the challenge. Not unlike traditional Chinese or English poetry in which one should follow a limited set of rhyming patterns, the Taiwanese lyricist must take set themes, and to some degree a
fixed vocabulary, and make them fresh, new and moving. The result can be the tedium one experiences when one examines many Western pop lyrics, but when Taiwan pop gets it right, the results are nothing less than fantastic.

In looking at Western popular literature, John Cawelti argues that all stories are a mix of convention, in which one knows what to expect, and innovation, which makes the story new and interesting – a tradition dating back to Homer and Shakespeare (Cawelti 2001, p. 205). John Fiske makes an equally important point that Madonna’s music and videos are interesting precisely because they draw on previous images (Fiske 2001). As an example he cites the music video Material Girl as a playful reference to Marylyn Monroe in the movie Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, which in turn draws on cultural images of blondes in general (Fiske 2001, p. 218). Thus, as Andrew Goodwin points out, ‘pop has plundered its archives with truly postmodern relish, in an orgy of pastiche’ (Goodwin 1988, p. 260).

Since I began working on this project, the response of most Westerners I have spoken with in Taiwan, ranging from professors to businessmen, language teachers, and students, could be summed up with a statement that was something to the effect of ‘That’s a great project, but you have to admit, the music sucks’. For the most part, such comments come from Westerners who do not speak Chinese and/or have not paid attention to the lyrics which, most fans agree, is the strength of Mandopop songs (for more on Chinese fans’ preference for lyrics over melodies, see Ceng 1999, p. 7).

In Taiwan there is a split in which most Taiwanese people prefer to listen to Western pop when clubbing because of the lively melodies. When at home or in karaoke, however, there is a clear preference for Mandopop. A large contributing factor to this split is because modern Mandopop inherits a tradition, dating back at least to the 1930s birth of Chinese language pop music, of adopting poetry as lyrics for its songs. An equally important factor that shifts the focus to the lyrics is karaoke, which has changed the criteria of many listeners from whether or not one enjoys listening to the music to whether or not it is easy to sing. As a result, with a few exceptions, Mandopop melodies are often relatively simple, avoiding syncopation or erratic stress on particular words. To make a rough comparison with music familiar to the Western reader, the songs of Ray Charles, Bob Dylan, Elton John, and Willie Nelson have fairly simple melodies and the charm of their music is often in the lyrics. As with Mandopop, this is not to say that their melodies are not appealing but that in ignoring the lyrics one misses the best part of these songs.

Part of Western perceptions that Mandopop all sounds the same is because the foreign audience is confronted with it as outsiders. To the uninitiated, country/western, pop, rock or classical music might seem equally standardised though fans of each genre would no doubt take offense at this statement. Studies of Western pop culture have pointed out that negative assessments of various forms of pop culture ranging from heavy metal (Weinstein 1991, p. 273) to soap operas (Allen 2001, p. 239) are often based on the views of incompetent readers who lack sufficient knowledge to make the genre meaningful. In other words, uninitiated audiences lack the necessary background to appreciate, or indeed comprehend, the nuances of the story being unfolded before them (Allen 2001, p. 239). Western condemnation of Mandopop is at least in part the result of Western listeners’ lack of linguistic or cultural expertise to appreciate the genre – or, in the case of the Taiwanese critic cited above, a generational resistance to change.

Leo Ching points out that scholarship on Japan’s cultural influence on Taiwan has both ignored the voices of Taiwanese consumers and wrongly considered them to
be passive receptacles to popular culture (Ching 1995, p. 280). In talking with people in Shanghai and Taipei, it becomes clear that there is more to the music than meets the ear. Miss Cai, a twenty-four year old college student, told me the following:

[Mandopop is] more subtle [than songs in the US . . .] Taiwan songs have more imagination. They aren’t like US songs which are so direct – U.S. songs have no subtlety. (Miss Cai, 1 November 2003, Taipei)

Miss Luo, a twenty-four year old interior designer in Taipei, said the following:

I listen to Taiwan pop but I don’t really like U.S. pop – it’s not that I hate it or anything, I just don’t end up buying it. Foreign music is better for clubs. But if I go to karaoke I always listen to Taiwan’s pop because it is easier to sing in Chinese. (Miss Luo, 12 July 2004, Taipei)

Miss Li, a twenty-eight year old nurse in Shanghai said:

Americans always hate our music but I think they just don’t understand it, you know? It’s like poetry, you can’t just glance at it and get it, you really have to savor it for a while to really feel what the song is about. (Miss Li, 9 July 2006, Shanghai)

George Trivino is a Taiwanese man who spent several years in the US. He worked for Rock Records for three years and now heads his own music label with artists such as A-yue (Zhang Zhengyue) and MC Hotdog. When I asked him what he saw to be a difference between Taiwanese music and American music, he replied:

[Trivino] I think the most basic difference is Taiwan’s music draws on a lot of different sounds. For example, if you ask about A-yue’s CD and what kind of musician he does it is difficult to say because it is not just one genre. He has some songs that sound like hip hop and some like rock, and some that take elements from both in the same song. But in the US if someone is a rock star he just plays rock, if he is a hip-hop artist he just plays hip-hop. A-yue’s albums are a great example of this. Even in one song there are elements from many different kinds of music. The genre is not as important in Taiwan the music is very hybrid (hen baorong).

[Moskowitz] Why is that?

[Trivino] Because Taiwan’s culture is also very hybrid (hen baorong). It includes Japanese influences, Western influences, and native Taiwanese (bentu) influences. You know, Taiwan has around twenty-three million people, many of whom are from very different backgrounds and very different places [from the various regions in China]. This is a very unique place. I think that except for the US Taiwan is one of the most hybrid places in the world. (George Trivino, 9 March 2006, Taipei)

Miss Cai emphasised that Mandopop was a more ‘subtle’ and more imaginative force than Western pop. Miss Luo appreciated Mandopop for more practical reasons – citing the fact that it was easier for her to sing than Western music. George Trivino pointed out that Mandopop is less rigid in its musical categorisation which leads to a wider range of musical expression which in turn draws on Taiwan’s extremely diverse foreign and local influences. These are just a few examples of statements by many of the people I interviewed who felt that Mandopop was superior to US pop in a variety of ways. Keeping in mind that most of the people I interviewed were familiar with musical genres in China, Taiwan and the West, one might suggest that it is we, not they, who ‘don’t get it’.

Conclusion – Mandopop as resistance?

On the surface, Mandopop can hardly be seen to be a form of protest – its very name ‘Mandarin Chinese popular music’ emphasises the fact that it embodies mainstream,
rather than alternative, ideals after all. Yet, as outlined above, there is something about
the genre that seems to offend just about everybody. The incredible range of these
critiques, and the culturally bound nature of the protests, suggest that there is
something to be teased out here.

As is the case with other forms of transnational pop, there is always the question
of whether we are witness to cultural imperialism or, as more recent studies have
shown, an active appropriation and transformation of Western influences. A model
of the cultural appropriation and assimilation of foreign symbols is intrinsically more
interesting – and more accurate – than a mythically totalising force from the West. Yet
I also want to avoid the idea that if it is one (cultural appropriation) it cannot be the
other (cultural imperialism). As Clifford Geertz has suggested, in making one’s
theories too neat, one loses sight of the complexities of real life (Geertz 1973, p. 18).

Mandopop’s complexity has been overlooked by lay people and scholars alike.
Scholars and the popular press in the PRC, Taiwan, and the West critique Mandopop
for not living up to their standards of what they think the music should be. Although
I have defended Mandopop on its own terms, in a sense whether the music is ‘good’
or not is irrelevant. The most important question here, and one that is far too
infrequently asked, is what the largest population in the world, sees or, rather, hears
in the music. The question is not, therefore, ‘why are they getting it wrong’ but,
instead, what are we missing here?

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Endnotes

1. In addition to the review of written materials on
Mandopop that I will provide here, this article is
based on eighteen interviews in Shanghai and
fifty-eight interviews in Taipei. The primary
research period was from July 2005 to July 2007
but I also draw on interviews I have conducted
since 1999 on this topic.

In keeping with grounded theory, in both the
Taipei and Shanghai fieldwork I continued to
conduct interviews until I reached saturation. In
other words, I stopped taking fieldnotes when
there was no significantly new information or
insights forthcoming in the interviews. In truth,
I have spoken with at least five times this
number of people on this topic – most of the
people I spoke with were in Taiwan.

Those interviewed included laypeople and
men and women working in Taiwan’s music
industry such as lyricists, performers (who
sometimes write their own lyrics), and people
working in music companies. Those interview-
eds were overwhelmingly college-educated
urbanites in their twenties and early thirties.
This ranged from men and women I had met for
the first time at tea houses or coffee shops to
friends that I have known for several years. It
should be noted that both field sites were large
urban centres that are cultural production
centres. In the PRC sample I did not have access
to members of the lower class or rural villagers,
so my findings should be taken to reflect
middle-class to elite urbanites rather than all of
China. Taiwan is so much smaller, and the flow
between urban and rural communities so con-
tinuous, that I can say with a good deal of cer-
tainty that the analysis here reflects youth from
all segments of Taiwanese society youth.

2. Taiwan’s Mandopop industry also dominates
its domestic market, with an estimated sixty-
five per cent of music purchased in Taiwan
being Taiwan-produced Mandopop, in contrast
with Western pop and classical music which
accounts for twenty-five per cent of Taiwan’s
music market (Wells 1997, p. 208). Another
study of over one thousand teenagers through-
out Taiwan found that 66.3% preferred
Mandopop songs, 7.7% preferred Taiyupop,
and 15.6% preferred English language songs.
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