

Decoding Mandopop Culture: Exploring Cultural Identity and Music Perception of China's Millennials

LI Fan¹, SONG Liuyan^{2*} & ZHAI Linghan³

1.College of Teacher Education, Taishan University, Shandong, China.
2.Department of Music, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia.
3.School of Music, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA.
*Corresponding Author Email: 859005840@qq.com

Abstract

This paper explores how China's millennials decode the musical and cultural meanings of Mandopop through long-term listening and lived experiences. Based on semi-structured interviews and a phenomenological observation, this study examines how audiences interpret Mandopop songs. The findings reveal three aspects: (1) Cultural transmission—audiences gain deeper awareness of Chinese traditional culture through *zhongguofeng* music. (2) Style and commercialization—while early Mandopop featured diverse innovations, recent trends show formulaic production driven by market demands. (3) Decoding and empathy—audiences' interpretations reflect personal backgrounds, with music serving as a medium for identity and emotional connection. Digital platforms further reshape consumption, prioritizing fragmented, high-engagement experiences over traditional album listening. Mandopop is not merely a product of cultural industry, but rather a dynamic process of meaning negotiation between creators and audiences. Its cultural value depends not only on creative intentions, but more crucially on audiences' active decoding and reinterpretation in their daily life.

Keywords: *Mandopop, Culture, China's Millennials, Identity, Perception.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the influence of various external environments and social factors such as fast-food culture and consumerism, seemingly the cultural connotation and ideology of Mandopop has aroused grave concern in Mainland China. The new generation of singers began to turn their attention to diverse musical styles, and R&B, rap music gradually becomes widely popular (Chen, 2012). Unlike the individualistic style reflected in Western popular music works, Mandopop songs always embody a teamwork so that it is produced by a team of composers, songwriters and performers (Chen, 2023). Moskowitz (2009) emphasized that contemporary commercial Mandopop is widely believed to have begun around 1980s, drawing on the musical traditions of the early 20th century. In the early 1990s, when Taiwanese popular music swept across China, many public officials in the government were distrustful and dismissive of the values embedded in Taiwanese lyrics, fearing that the cultural invasion of Taiwan and Hong Kong would lead to a loss of Chinese national identity. After 2000, the Chinese government was actively involved in the development of Mandopop, granting market access to singers who never acted against the interests of the country, and sometimes actively providing what the country needed (Groenewegen, 2011).

In the process of listening to or experiencing contemporary Mandopop songs, people do not understand all the content in the same way as the songwriters do. In relation to features of songs, some audience have their attention captured by the lyrics, and some are influenced by the music; in either case, there is some content that they miss. In fact, the audience may decode

or understand the same song in different ways. Decoding refers to a cognitive process of reading or interpreting what is described in the musical text and context of a song. This paper addresses how the respondents decoded the musical text and context of contemporary Mandopop over two decades of listening and experiencing. It does not focus on the content of their decoding for a particular musical work. Instead, it attempts to exemplify the common cognition in their decoding of Mandopop songs. Therefore, the authors recruited respondents who belongs to China's millennials to conduct semi-structured interview based on a phenomenological perspective.

2. CHINA'S MILLENNIALS AND MANDOPOP

The growth of millennials is basically synchronized with the development of Internet technology in China. Digital media has an impact on the consumption behavior of millennials. The millennial generation is mostly only children because of the influence of the Mainland China's family planning policy, so they are more individualized and more concerned about their own development (Moore, 2005; Xu, Xia, 2014). Some studies have found that the group consumption characteristics of the millennials are blind consumption, high consumption, the pursuit of differentiation and pursuit of uniqueness, which is consistent with the personality characteristics of the millennials (Moore and Carpenter, 2008; Luttrell, McGrath, 2016). They are impacted by the new consumption concept; hence the consumption growth rate is fast. In addition, China's millennials, influenced by Western culture, more agree with the concept of 'cool', value difference and pursue uniqueness (Yun et al., 2012). They are the most powerful leading force and influential consumer groups in China's consumer market, and their consumer behavior has formed a new phenomenon. The millennials are no longer limited to the requirements for product quality. They value the sense of experience and participation, and are more inclined to convey their preferences to the brand. They can skillfully use social media to exchange product information and share comments with other people (Kijek et al., 2009). It reveals that millennials are more willing to pay for the added value of some services; influenced by the Internet, the consumption behavior of the millennials mainly depends on the convenience of the digital technology of the Internet, which makes the consumption process easier and simpler.

The consumption tendency of millennials tends to products that can bring a higher sense of experience. The convenient and efficient Internet environment, relatively rich economic conditions and the pursuit of a simple and convenient personality make millennials more inclined to products that can be easily obtained. Sweeney (2006) pointed that millennials are free to consume and their demand for goods is not affordable, but personalized. They are easier to accept new trends. Whether it is the purchase of clothing, food, housing and transportation or cultural goods, personalization and a high sense of experience are their first choice. Millennials' pursuit of personalization is also reflected in that they do not want to buy the same goods as other consumers. Ryalls (2016) emphasized that among millennial consumers, young girls are the absolute dominant force and they are the main force paying for cultural goods. They use social platforms more widely and want to talk with brands and express their needs. When millennials buy goods, the opinions of family and friends will not affect them, but the comments on social networking sites will. They value the uniqueness of products, and fresh, creative and interesting goods are their preferred consumption and experience objects. In the process of creating goods, brands and businesses also focus on the sense of experience and persuasion of goods (Qader, Omar, 2013). Millennials have enhanced their sense of self-initiative in the realization of consumer behavior. They pursue fresh consumption, excellent

behavior experience, novel brand and avant-garde fashion concept. Meanwhile, they are more willing to participate in the design process of products and services. Millennials also pursue personalization in their consumption and experience of music goods. With the development of 'knowledge payment' and copyright awareness in recent years, millennials are more likely to accept the behavior of consuming digital music, and they focus more on their sense of experience. Millennials tend to pay more for music and pursue personalization. Influenced by Western culture, contemporary Mandopop is trendier and fresher, therefore it is loved by the millennials.

Moreover, factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and geography create varied experiences and perspectives for millennials that the broad label fails to capture. The media often amplifies narratives around millennials that emphasize entitlement or a lack of commitment, yet these portrayals often miss the context of societal changes (McDermont, Jacob, 2023). Additionally, the desire for personalization and authenticity in consumption can be viewed as both a response to the oversaturation of media and a reflection of deeper existential concerns in a rapidly changing world. A critical discourse on Millennials must challenge reductive stereotypes and consider the broader socio-economic and cultural factors at play. By doing so, it is nuanced understanding of their complexities and contributions, acknowledging that this generation is not merely defined by its differences from previous ones but is also shaped by the unique challenges and opportunities of its time. The audience of contemporary Mandopop singers is mostly the millennial generation. They were born at the end of the 20th century, and Chinese popular music exerted a great impact on Chinese millennials at the beginning of the 21st century. As the first group to receive emerging technologies, they have also become the main users of today's advanced media. In 2021, millennials have grown into people aged 25-40, and their behavior has become a crucial force affecting the whole society. Therefore, their consumption behavior of popular music and lived experience have gradually become the power to dominate the direction of contemporary Mandopop in China. Additionally, the millennials' consumption and lived experience of contemporary Mandopop in the new media era has become a phenomenon worthy of study. The respondents mentioned in this study are given aliases with their permission.

IPA [Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis] is adopted as the research method in this study which emphasizes the individual's understanding of the meaning of a phenomenon in the social context. The researcher is an instrument, because he is engaged in each stage of data collection and analysis from the beginning to the end. Morse (2006) explains that the researcher can build data from the surrounding environment and events related to the phenomenon based on the problem statement and the research question. This requires the researcher to establish a sense of pre-understanding of the phenomenon, which happens to be a key point of the IPA method. Throughout this study, the researcher participates in the process of reflection and interpretation. Drawing on the informants' existing previous experiences and pre-understandings, he adjusts his perception and understanding in time and remains open to all narratives put forward by the informants. To this end, the researcher summarizes the lived experience of China's millennial audience in relation to listening to and consuming Mandopop songs.

The researcher, who was born and grew up in Mainland China, is a member of the millennial generation who is keen on experiencing and listening to contemporary Mandopop and has listened to relatively little other popular music from around the world. However, many kinds of popular music exist in his daily life in China. The main media of popular music are

radio, cassette tapes, CDs, MP3 files, digital files, and media platforms; different works are in different languages. The researcher has consumed and experienced Mandopop from Mainland China, Taiwan, and the Southeast region since adolescence. During his teenage years, influential Mandopop artists such as Jay Chou, JJ Lin, David Tao, and Leehom Wang produced a mass of musical works. He started by purchasing tapes and CDs of these Mandopop artists and experiencing their world tour concerts. Although he studied bel canto in college, he maintained a close interest in contemporary Mandopop. At this stage, he was interested in the diverse stylistic elements of contemporary Mandopop and continued to listen to popular songs in those styles and genres. Particularly, he continued to listen to Mandopop songs from the period 2000-2010, while he followed the development and changes in contemporary Mandopop. The audience range of contemporary Mandopop is extremely pervasive in China. In order to better understand the lived experience of these Mandopop songs, the researcher integrated his own knowledge into Internet platforms to learn about how different the audience understood the audiovisual works of contemporary Mandopop.

The researcher witnessed and experienced Mandopop in the way of live streaming concerts during the period of COVID-19 in China. The experience of interacting with an audience that is keen to consume and listen to contemporary Mandopop has led the researcher to think about the impact of short video platforms on how the audiovisual works of contemporary Mandopop are interpreted from the individual's perspective. Many of the users who post videos analyzing and commenting on contemporary Mandopop have substantial experience of listening to and consuming Mandopop works. There seems to be near-unanimous agreement among them that for China's millennial generation, the audiovisual works consumed and experienced during their teenage years constitute the peak of the contemporary Mandopop industry. In addition to the personal lived experience of the researcher mentioned above, some other experiences under the context of Chinese society are also important. After Chinese reform and opening-up, the government, led by Jiang Zemin to Xi Jinping, has strengthened the soft power of the country in the political aspect; in the economic aspect, international events such as the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the World Expo in 2010 have made China rise rapidly in the world; and technological innovations have also brought different experiences to the people. Factors such as these are witnessed by the researcher. These experiences allow the researcher to more fully understand and appreciate the lived experience of informants and even the millennial generation, to form a consensus, and to objectively analyze their narratives.

In China today, several digital music applications supply their audience with a range of popular songs. Contemporary Mandopop is still universally popular in China, and it has a large audience in other Chinese-speaking communities. Popular songs on music platforms and music reality shows on TV in China are the entertainment products that the researcher has always chosen, because he finds it harder to understand songs in other languages, such as Cantopop, Hokkien pop, and songs from other countries. However, he also listens to and consumes foreign popular music, including British and American pop songs, K-pop, Cantopop songs, and foreign songs covered by Chinese singers but with Chinese lyrics. His acceptance and experience of this kind of non-Mandopop genre depends on the songs having a unique style of composition or an attractive rhythm and melody.

Research participants are selected for their specific perspective on the phenomenon being studied, making it easier for people to access the more essential content. Therefore, the first informant accepted the interview task through purposive sampling and the first in-depth interview was conducted on August 19, 2022. Totally 10 participants were recruited for the

interview. The practicality of sampling should also be taken into account. This requires the researcher to construct a well-designed study and consider carefully the homogeneity of his desired sample. Being realistic is a very important criterion, especially when reviewing ongoing recruitment efforts. Sometimes it is extremely difficult to recruit informants from a special group, and a change of thinking or selection criteria may be required. Based on the considerations about sample size, the IPA researcher selects informants according to the likelihood of obtaining essential content that will help gain a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study. In drawing up the selection criteria, the researcher should form a basic judgment in relation to potential informants and select those who can provide an informative story (Moser & Korstjens, 2018, p. 10).

3. DECODING CONTEMPORARY MANDOPOP

3.1 Obtaining Cultural Information

Many people do not have the same ability for writing lyrics or composing music that songwriters do, even though popular music is considered as a commodity that can be consumed, unlike classical music or folk music. The main audience group for Mandopop songs is people living in Chinese-speaking regions, and among the respondents in this study there are different voices for this kind of music. Some claimed that the more they listened to Mandopop songs, the more they learned in depth about aspects of their culture that had been unknown to them. Others reported that they were able to understand more about Chinese culture through some Mandopop songs. This suggested that they compared and filtered the songs they wanted to listen to carefully. The inherent nature of Mandopop songs made it possible for the respondents to access information that appealed to them in the process of decoding. Therefore, it was important for them not only to listen to and experience Mandopop songs superficially, but also to gain more interesting cultural information.

The content that contemporary Mandopop songs can present is rich and varied. Some songs convey meaning in the narrative of the lyrics, some showcase the diversity of musical styles, some convey elements of the Western world, while others express aspects of Chinese culture. No matter what information the songwriter wishes to convey through the song, the content reflects the cultural dimensions of the songwriter, such as literature, music and art. Da Sheng explained that he felt a sense of cultural confidence and cultural return from *zhongguofeng*-style songs in recent decades. Hukan pointed out that “Mandopop is a form of recreation for the public, except for conveying the emotion, if it brings you some cultural references, you will feel excited, and people will find it more valuable.” Some respondents stated that “When you listen to enough Mandopop songs, and over a long period of time, you can differentiate between the songs that are good or ordinary, fascinating or boring.” However, no one indicated that they would make such a distinction among Mandopop songs, just that they had own preferences for and understandings of the songs they listened to, based on their own demands. Da Sheng noted that some Mandopop songs depict ‘Chinese culture’ and that he “gives [a] special attention to them.” He believes that this category of songs is unique in the Mandopop scene, distinguishing it from the popular music of other countries. After he gave some examples of his favorite *zhongguofeng*-style songs, the researcher asked him if they had any special significance for him. He said:

[Popular] music is arguably one of the most valued cultural output channels for each country in the 21st century, as it can influence young people ... I like Chinese literature and history, but obviously I used to get it from books ... and *zhongguofeng* [pop music]

allows me to enjoy the process of cultural influences in my life more than going to the movies or playing football, which is a cultural giving in any time and place.

The *zhongguofeng*-style music had not received much attention in the past, but it was the type of Mandopop that Da Sheng had always focused on. In the interview, he talked about the views of some of his friends:

I remember, a friend told me that he learned about The Classic of Tea [茶经] [the book that] was written by Lu Yu [陆羽] after listening to the song The Tea Grandpa Makes [by Chou], ... and also [I] was talk[ing] to friends about *zhongguofeng* lyrics, like Vincent Fang, he didn't simply pile up the words, but used "refining" the [Chinese] character after passing a cultural understanding ... Those who like it naturally feel they can gain a lot of cultural knowledge, but for some of the so-called *zhongguofeng*-style songs nowadays, [my] friends would criticize them as just superficial imitations, I guess.

犹记得那年	Still remember that year
在一个雨天	On a rainy day
那七岁的我躲在屋檐	That seven year old me hid in the eaves
却一直想去荡秋千	Yet I constantly wanted to swing
爷爷抽着烟	Grandpa was smoking
说唐朝陆羽写茶经三卷	Said in Tang Dynasty, Lu Yu wrote three Scrolls Tea Classic
流传了千年	It has been passed on for a thousand years

**Figure 1: An excerpt of lyrics from the song "The Tea Grandpa Makes"
(English translation by the author)**

On how the *zhongguofeng*-style songs have evolved in recent years, he said, "In my opinion, many songs now carry the characteristics of *zhongguofeng* elements, or call them *gufeng* 古风 or *minzufeng* 民族风." In fact, both words are different from the meaning of *zhongguofeng*. The music style of the former is more based on legends and stories about China, and its songs are mainly derived from online animation or games and TV series. The latter usually means that the song has strong ethnic minorities music characteristics. However, he insisted that it is the combination of Jay Chou 周杰伦 and Vincent Fang 方文山 that gives him his own *zhongguofeng* image. During the second interview, he mentioned Chou's latest *zhongguofeng*-style song, Cold Hearted 红颜如霜. He stressed that "As all fans expect, the song should present *zhongguofeng* from lyrics, music to MV like the songs Dong-Feng-Po 东风破 and Hair Like Snow 发如雪, despite the fact that the MV has no pavilions, terraces, and the elements of traditional opera, which is not what the audience expects" (personal communication, February 20, 2023). For decoding this phenomenon, Da Sheng's own point was that "Jay Chou has always tried to make *zhongguofeng* trek to the world." The motivation for this combination of 'Chinese' and 'Western,' which he called the 'new *zhongguofeng*,' can be traced back more than 10 years. There is no specific genre definition which genre it belongs to for this style of songwriting. However, Da Sheng believed that understanding *zhongguofeng* involved not only acceptance by the Chinese people themselves, but also enabling foreigners around the world to know *zhongguofeng*.

Table 1: Music analysis result of *zhongguofeng* songs mentioned by Da Sheng, the respondent

Song Title	Key	Style	Scales Mode	Instruments (Acoustic/ Synthetic)	Remarks
Dong-Feng-Po	G–Ab major	Ballad [<i>zhongguofeng</i>]	Chinese heptatonic scale (<i>qingyue</i>)	Guitar, Drum kit, Bass, Piano, Chinese instruments [<i>Guzheng</i> , <i>Pipa</i> , <i>Erhu</i> , <i>Konghou</i>]	Lyrics come from <i>Song ci</i> 宋词 and using Chinese rhetoric.
Hair Like Snow	B major	Ballad [<i>zhongguofeng</i>]	Chinese pentatonic scale	Drum kit, Bass, Strings, Piano, Chinese instruments [<i>Guzheng</i> , <i>Yangqin</i> , <i>Pipa</i> , Temple block]	Lyrics come from <i>Tang poems</i> 唐诗 and using Chinese rhetoric.
Cold Hearted	G major	Ballad [<i>zhongguofeng</i>]	Chinese pentatonic scale	Guitar, Drum kit, Bass, Vibra Harp, Chinese instruments [<i>Guzheng</i> , <i>Yangqin</i>]	Lyrics come from <i>Yuefu</i> 乐府, <i>Fu</i> 赋 and using Chinese rhetoric.

On the same night Chou released the song Cold Hearted, Da Sheng appreciated it with fans in a Douyin live stream. He then uploaded a short video he produced himself about decoding this work, stating that it was “different from the past” *zhongguofeng*-style songs and describing his understanding as follows:

For me, it is the best work that Chou and Fang created in recent years ... It tells a sad story in the form of a letter about a man and a woman who miss each other as living apart from one another ... [The lyrics] seem to condense the memories with face [of the woman] at the moment in the autumn and winter, not letting it disappear in the cold winter, ... and the music[al] style is different from the past, the melody is brisk, [with the lyrics] which give a person [a listening experience] of mournful but not distressing, ... although there is no high note, but accompanied by the opera tune is more like telling a story.

This song conforms to Da Sheng’s lived experience of Chinese history and culture in his daily life. The *zhongguofeng* elements in Mandopop songs encompass aspects of Chinese history, culture, literature and national identity. As the researcher mentioned, “Mandopop has always had an axis of *zhongguofeng*-style trajectory in its development, offering the audience a special meaning outside Western popular music, especially for the China’s millennials.” As Da Sheng said in his first interview, *zhongguofeng*-style music gave him a lot of cultural knowledge and greater expectations for Mandopop exports from China. This has led him to engage more with short video platforms, through analyzing, producing, uploading and spreading the cultural insights he has gained, rather than just listening to the songs.

All the respondents expressed the idea that they had been influenced by *zhongguofeng* style music to some degree, even if some of them were not loyal fans of this type of music. It can be observed that although Mandopop covers a range of different stylistic content, *zhongguofeng*-style music still plays an important role in the aspect of cultural transmission. Popular music can be a form of entertainment for mass consumption, as it encompasses different types of musical and cultural content. Contemporary Mandopop is no exception, and the audience can choose the works that they benefit from. Xiang Xi chose his major at university because of a song: “It was because the lyrics of Love Before BC 爱在西元前 referred to the Code of Hammurabi that I decided to study law.” Mumu also defined the process

of her listening to Mandopop as a way to “gain some unknown knowledge,” especially in the musical and cultural fields: “Now I’m willing to learn about hip-hop culture, but [before] I really didn’t get it, and [had] no interest, even didn’t know the concepts ... because you know it’s a foreign [genre] of popular music, and a lot of terms musically are completely foreign when you were watching the TV show *The Rap of China*.”



Figure 2: Poster of auditioning for The Rap of China in Los Angeles (IMDb, 2019)

When the researcher asked Mumu how she had started to access the hip-hop music she liked, she answered that she “thought it was cool at the time ... Rappers dressed very fashionably, with all sorts of very strange gestures and rapped very rhythmic words, which I can’t find in my life.” The researcher then raised the question of hip-hop musical culture, especially regarding the show *The Rap of China* 中国新说唱 (Figure 2), which has been a huge success in Mainland China. Mumu explained: “I feel like almost my friends around me do follow it, but for different purposes, some people really like [hip-hop], some have that desire to know [about it], but most watch it as an entertainment variety show, I guess.” Da Sheng and Xiang Xi also mentioned that although some vulgar culture is present in Mandopop songs and is spread among users through the current media platforms, they still stand by their stance of filtering out the boring songs and keeping the songs that are true and meaningful to them. Zibo explained the meaning and value that can be gained from listening to Mandopop songs as follows:

What I listened to [the songs] when I was a student, it didn’t seem to be clearly understood at the time, ... it was a teenager’s level of awareness ... But I look back on that period, it was really wonderful, ... [I] actually [think] that music brings me more than just happiness, for example, the simplest thing is that [when I was] tired of doing homework, I would listen to Mandopop and get something out of it ... But I’m not sure if teenagers today would feel that way, because they have more options.

In fact, Zibo’s job, which is closely related to popular music, allows him to constantly gain knowledge in the field of Mandopop. He decodes works by different artists, makes videos and uploads them to the Internet and participates in music TV programs to learn from professional producers about the latest ideas and trends on the Mandopop scene. He also noted that “It depends on the level of awareness of the audience. You can choose to accept it or not, but you can definitely get something out of it.” In the context of globalization, the ways in which cultural integration takes place have become more and more sophisticated. Yet, from

another perspective, each country has tried to consolidate and enhance its local cultures. Zibo (personal communication, July 3, 2023) explained:

[Mandopop] indeed blended a lot of [foreign] pop genres, and subtly catered to the audience's tastes ... metal and jazz, two genres that I think are very lacking [in Mandopop market], but very important, ... especially in terms of increasing the diversity of the music and the audience's ability to accept it with more breadth and depth, and hopefully they make up for their own unknown in the area of [popular] music, which is something I personally expect ... we can actually localize it, like other genres, right?.

No matter what the audience hears in the Mandopop song, they have their own way of understanding it. The music itself is the medium of negotiation between the audience and the creator. Nevertheless, the creation of Mandopop is closely linked to the everyday life of the general public.

The creator transmits the work to the audience, who in turn can gain different aspects of cultural cognition and even their own understanding of the songs. Indeed, each song is also a cultural product constructed by songwriters from different cultural backgrounds, which can reach a wider group of people. As a result, the millennial audience now have the ability to interpret the songs that contain different cultures. As discussed in the previous section, all the respondents have their favorite singers and songs, and they declared their reasons for this, but it could not be proved that they made the initial and active choice.

In other words, there was a cycle in which the songs attracted them, following which they obtained knowledge of the songs and came to appreciate or admire the singers. Alternatively, perhaps they were able to seek a resonance with the songs or singers in contemporary Mandopop.

3.2 Formulaic Expression and Hybrid Thinking

The respondents have been experiencing and listening to contemporary Mandopop songs over a period of more than 20 years. When they first accessed the songs as adolescents, they did not have the awareness or ability to understand them. However, as they grew older, they became mature in their perception of contemporary Mandopop. Some of them distinguish songs simply as fast songs or slow songs. Some of them have no knowledge of the genres and styles contained in popular music in the past. For the general audience, it is difficult to notice a clear division of songs into genres in the contemporary Mandopop scene.

The respondents have obtained information from the Internet and the media to help them decode the stylistic characteristics of the songs they listen to in their daily lives. As a result, they are able to give their own perceptions about style changes in contemporary Mandopop from the past to the present. Mumu (personal communication, July 12, 2023) described the musical style in her memory and gave a personal explanation of the contemporary Mandopop style she still listens to:

When I was a kid, I was basically listening to children's songs, [which were] upbeat and childish, ... until one day I was influenced by my older cousin sister and listened to the song Tornado [龙卷风], and the style was so different [for me] ... The songs that I used to listen to were so diverse and rich in style and content ... Although slow songs still dominate, you can hear different stylistic songs, like e-dance, rock and folk ... I also feel that [the Mainland China]'s pop is not quite the same as the style of gangtai pop ... but now it seems almost similar.

When the respondents first accessed contemporary Mandopop songs, they all had a moment when they felt amazing. Da Sheng, Xiang Xi and Ajun referred to Jay Chou's musical works, which may have guided them to really get to know popular music after their childhood. Fung (2009) explored the interaction between Chinese fans and their idol Jay Chou, pointing out that Chou expressed a sense of directivity including notions such as 'love,' 'dream' and 'cool,' and that the self-expression of these emotions or aspirations was reflected back to the fans. Western popular music presented its audience with jazz, rock and hip-hop, while Mandopop exposed fans to diversified musical styles by means of the charm of their idols. However, the contemporary Mandopop market seems to use the fusion of genres as one way of attracting the public, as the respondents of the study were able to go from being unconscious of genre to being swayed by the genre of popular music as they reached adulthood. A small number of respondents mentioned a specific genre of popular music that they personally liked because it provided more distinctive and individual musical characteristics. The development and formation of Mandopop differed from that of Western popular music. Even though they continue to listen to Mandopop songs today, they have noticed a change in style. In particular, they have identified stylistic differences between the current songs and those they used to listen to. Ajun, who has been fascinated with experiencing Jay Chou's music for many years, stated:

I admit that [the] Mandopop [market] is booming right now, whether you're a professional or grassroots [artist], you have the opportunity to show your creations, but I'm really not interested [in that] ... I don't want to comment on [whether] the current [Mandopop] songs are not as good as before, after all we're preconceived, but I really feel the songs which [we] listened to in the past are very special, and the songwriters had much "blue-sky thinking" [reflected in the works] ... But when you listen to the songs now, it's just like [they're] mass produced.

Ajun (personal communication, June 28, 2023) talked about one of her favorite songs by Chou. She explained that she had "never heard such a song before" and did not even dare to imagine that "there was a song like this." From then on, she had no intense interest in any songs by other singers. She liked hip-pop style songs, and she fantasized that one day that she could be a 'cool' girl by rapping just like Jay Chou, which made her feel marvelous:

I really love the [song] Chapter Seven [夜的第七章] so much, its [creative] inspiration was from the story of Sherlock Holmes ... It's difficult to imagine a song like this in the Mandopop scene ... The lyrics of this song contain a lot of plots about the detective. It's not like the Mandopop song lyrics in a traditional sense, but written in a diary way, ... [musically] with rapping as the main style, the chorus [part] presents the [theme melody] sung with female vocal[s], the melody in the intro straightforward creates a mystery, and the music video is shot like a movie ... Such a song contains so many elements, it's not easy to find a similar one nowadays, I guess.

Some respondents mentioned a few singers in the Mandopop field, such as Jay Chou, Leehom Wang 王力宏, JJ Lin 林俊杰 and David Tao 陶喆, who in their own right typified a combination of songwriting, producing and singing. Therefore, as Da Sheng described, they are "constantly exploring their own creative possibilities," and although they have their own outstanding stylistic features, their diverse creative thinking is "the benchmark of the Mandopop industry at that time." Some of the respondents were interested in digging into the components of a song in their own way and exploring each element that appealed to them. Zibo said: "I like the music with rich contents, where you can hear the elaborate design and arrangement except for what we often call creative inspiration,... but when you look at the

song creations nowadays, most of them on the market look like they've been seemly assembled in a pre-set mold." He mentioned that recently people like to discuss either social media stars or online celebrity singers:

I think, actually [Mandopop] style is forced to change a bit, especially with [the] pushing of the economy, [popular] music starts to appear [with] the audience-segmentation ... Each singer almost only does one style of music and then go[es] to catch that part of the group who likes this style ... So I think the change is not in the music itself, but in the market, the environment, and the way of entertainment.

Most of the respondents mentioned the word 'album' in the course of their accounts, which was an expectation in the process of experiencing Mandopop in the past, because most artists regularly released an album per year. Usually, the songs on an album were selected to create a variety in terms of style or theme. Zibo's narratives suggested that the trend in musical styles is actually an embodiment of a change in creative methods and public tastes:

I find that I don't pay much attention to new songs, why? ... Listening to songs was a single form of entertainment in the past, you would focus on one singer, his works, you could single cycle or even [follow] with the singer to learn to sing ... you would hope the creators could surprise you through his works ... Whereas now, the public seems to focus on the 15 to 20 seconds of music on Douyin platform, and the creators might be wishing to make themselves known outside of [a] fixed circle ...

Zibo would not have been able to clearly identify current stylistic trends in Mandopop if he did not have a deep memory of past songs, or if he did not have the experience of listening to Mandopop for a long time and working in a related field. The researcher himself would not have gained an understanding of the connections between creators, musical styles and the general public if he could not rely on his judgment within the industry. The transition in style could be a shift in the relationship between people and things; in other words, people's needs were different than before. Obviously, the best outcome is to reach a common tacit understanding between the creator and the audience that the creator's work appeals to the public's taste; meanwhile, the public worships the creator, and the music is the medium. However, as the culture and aesthetics of the audience gradually improves, their demands on the work become higher. The screening mechanism of the market does not consider only the aesthetics of the audience. The real purpose is the profit motive, with a view to reducing costs. The stylistic change in Mandopop cannot simply be depicted as being for the better or for the worse. Zibo described the current situation in the Mandopop scene as having an "atmosphere sense not [as] good as before, between the music and fame, [with] most people choosing the latter." In the main, however, the respondents pointed out that the changing trends of Mandopop over the past 20 years were acceptable to them.

Some respondents showed a common logic in describing the stylistic changes in Mandopop based on their own positions. For example, when they heard some old songs or covers on platforms that happened to be in their own song list and compared them to the prevailing music, they felt that Mandopop had regressed. This view has led to a lot of discussion. Popular music is still an aural art, and the musical aspect is the most important in terms of whether a pop song can touch the audience. Contemporary Mandopop moved from the ballad songs that were the mainstream to a scape where musical styles were diverse, at a time when each independent genre was gradually taking its own shape in the Mandopop industry. The standardized pattern of creation and production was perhaps the target set by this

market. Since her student days, Grace has accessed Mandopop songs written by songwriters from Singapore and Malaysia, such as Tanya Chua 蔡健雅 and Tan Kheng Seong 陈庆祥. She gave her views on the musical style embodied in their works:

For some singers in the Mandopop industry who are from Singapore and Malaysia, since most of them belong to the immigrants from the southern part of [Mainland China], and simultaneously are influenced by Western popular music culture, they form a very special cultural attribute ... For example, they sing Mandarin songs and also sing their own dialect songs, even sing English songs as well ... So, their works and themselves show a kind of fusion.

However, in recent years, the Mandopop market has gradually taken on a new dimension with original musicians and indie musicians as the subject. The term 'original' here refers to singers who combine songwriting, arranging and production. The current market includes a wide range of music from pop, rap and jazz to electronic music. It could be observed that some musicians are also incorporating different stylistic elements into their works, which seems to signal that they have still not found their own stylistic characteristics. Each respondent has their own preferences in relation to the style of Mandopop songs, what genres they listen to as the grown-up millennial generation, and what new outlook the Mandopop scene can give them. In their interpretations of their favorite Mandopop songs, the respondents inevitably venerated older songs and disdained recent songs. It is worth noting that the style of Mandopop might be moving forward in line with the shape of global popular music. The mature millennial audience was bound to be pitted against the Generation Z audience. What the respondents showed through their conversations with the researcher was their aesthetic level and cognitive ability, although all the dialogues were specific to the experience of contemporary Mandopop.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the decoding of Mandopop over the past two decades, especially of songs with specific content, is formed by the individual's listening and experiencing in everyday life. The rejection or expectation of recent content can lead to different results in the decoding of the musical text and context of a song. Another factor to consider is that the different experience and consumption situations of the respondents brings out different results. An example is the obsession with lots of Mandopop artists and how to distinguish between liking the music because of the singer and vice versa. This situation was more pronounced for females, and was even criticized by some male respondents. However, one of the female respondents associated with this description had an 'obsession' that led her to follow her idol's musical works on an ongoing basis. She interpreted the information from the songs that resonated with her, and thus the music and the icon brought her strength and influence. Similarly, if the audience has a strong interest in contemporary Mandopop, they want to acquire the content that goes beyond the song itself or the information delivered by the songwriter.

This study found that for millennials who are keen to listen to or consume Mandopop, the songs they acquired are different from the music that they are taught or learn from textbooks, and from the mainland context they live in, which is decoded as stylistic hybridity. When a Mandopop song is described as stylistically hybrid, it means that the audience is drawn in by the 'idea' of the creator, intentionally or not. This hybridity in songwriting style was not widely accepted in the Mandopop scene at the time, but appeals to the China's millennial audience. They try to give their own interpretations as to why the 2000s was a boom period for

contemporary Mandopop. This decoding of the stylistic hybridity of pop songs suggests that the vast majority of the China's millennial audience who are obsessed with contemporary Mandopop do not actually have a clear perception of the popular music genre.

Decoding Mandopop's stylistic hybridity can also be regarded as a way of interpreting musical texts from the audience's personal perspective. The Mandopop's audience is able to detect the 'surprise' of a song's stylistic features while searching for songs that fit their musical tastes and aesthetics in a context where they have no musical knowledge. This is in line with what some studies have suggested is the fusion of contemporary Mandopop (Lu, 2011; Li, 2022), either through the musical talent of the creators or through commercial strategies (Lin, 2009). As this hybrid style of Mandopop songs gradually came to be accepted by the public, the commercialized operation led to the creation of similar works, becoming formulaic expression. The process of their textual perception and decoding of Mandopop culture is related to their own experience in daily life in the past. Figure 3 summarizes the findings in relation to decoding musical texts and contexts in the audience's individual lived experience in contemporary Mandopop.

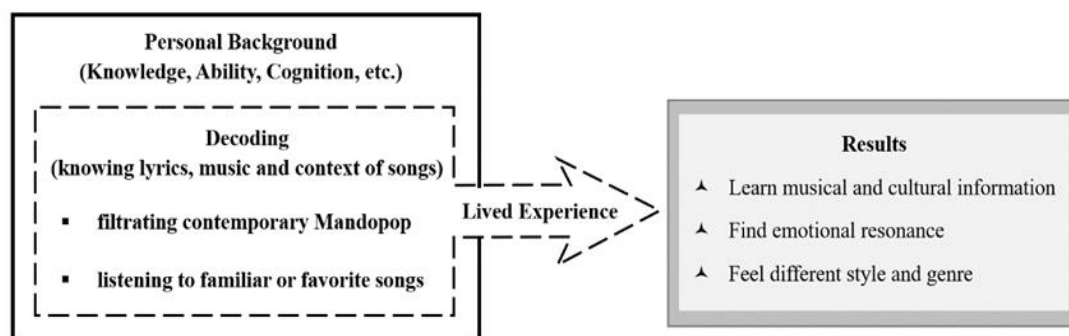


Figure 3: The process of decoding Mandopop songs

The audience of Mandopop may become obsessed with or repelled by a particular style or genre of popular music after decoding the stylistic hybridity of the musical works. Interpreting the content of song texts, therefore, requires people to have some musical knowledge so that they can analyze and explore. Perceived hybridity highlights a characteristic of cultures in the context of globalization, which means that in each culture there are traces of other cultures. Weiss (2014) mentioned that hybridity establishes a positive exchange, creating an emotional connection between popular music and the audience and leading to a mutual transformation of both. As Kraidy (2006, p. 151) pointed out, "If hybridity can bring about cultural meaning and behavior, then attention should be paid to whether hybridity can give mass groups influence over the course of their lives."

Some of the respondents depicted their empathy with the songs they had listened to in the past, particularly the Chinese culture embodied in the *zhongguofeng*-style songs they mentioned; however, they were not aware of the reasons for this kind of creation in terms of hegemonic versions of Chineseness (Chow, De Kloet, 2011). The emotion and content embodied in the song texts are a negotiation of lived experience between the creator and the audience. The production team needs to interact with the audience in order to drive and realize the meaning. The respondents found empathy in contemporary Mandopop cultural texts, which was the key to maintaining a connection with each other. This is because empathy is a process by which individuals understand and infer the emotions of others and generate similar emotional responses themselves (Preston, De Waal, 2002).

Another finding from the respondents in relation to decoding is reflected in formulaic stylistic expression. In decoding the texts of contemporary Mandopop songs, the audience recognizes the stylistic shifts and trends in Mandopop over the past 20 years. Prolonged listening may lead to a relatively deep perception. Even if the audience does not possess specialist musical knowledge and skills, they can detect or feel the stylistic progression of a song over a long period of listening. Astor and Negus (2016) mentioned that formulaic expressions can obscure or stifle the true meaning that the lyrics and melody of popular songs are trying to convey. However, the contemporary Mandopop industry has moved into a seemingly highly formulaic system of popular music hitmaking. Today's creators and production teams are expected to gain audience numbers on their platform in a rapid manner.

5. CONCLUSION

In line with Stuart Hall's (1980) account of the encoding/decoding model, a complex relationship is established with the producer as the encoder and the receiver as the decoder. In this study, various contents encoded in contemporary Mandopop songs helped the respondents to establish the ways in which they appreciated and accepted the perceptions of popular music culture in order to develop an empathic communication in the real world. From the respondents' adolescence onward, they gained some knowledge and learned about cultures in the contemporary Mandopop texts they were exposed to and which had previously been unknown to them. Later, when they were adults, they discovered that the songs resonated with them. In other words, the decoding process can allow the audience to empathize with the song. However, empathy is different for different audience, because everyone has their own life experiences and musical preferences. The outcome of decoding a song text is also related to the life experiences and background of its audience. A song may provide a person with knowledge, information and even a cultural perspective, but different people have different interpretations. Brackett (2023) mentioned that the way in which a work is decoded may change our perception of that work and deepen our understanding of it. In popular music audience studies, even though the music is classified as popular and mass, and although the social context of the audience has been emphasized, the accumulation of listening and experiential aspects in everyday life is often overlooked.

Coleman (2008) highlighted that in order to present unknown songs to large audience, all previous experiences must be erased, which results in songwriting that is "formulaic rather than creative" (p. 132). Stone (2016) emphasized the prevalence of formulaic popular music, which is produced to appeal to the so-called lowest common denominator. However, there are still works that can be distinguished from the popular music that is considered formulaic and unimaginative. It is clear from this argument that the value of popular music is rarely dismissed outright these days, and thus it is more meaningful through the decoding of song texts. Furthermore, without further exploration of the decoding of popular music texts in other countries, it cannot be determined whether the style trend toward formulaic expression occurs only in contemporary Mandopop song texts or is only partly derived from the results of the audience's decoding.

The interpretation of texts of popular works from the audience has always been an academic focus in the field of popular music studies. Interpretations of the meaning of the lyrical and musical texts of songs are determined according to one's knowledge base, level of perception and cultural position. A person's educational background and long-term listening behavior also have a profound impact on their text decoding. Popular music is a genuinely mass

industry with relatively few limitations compared to other entertainment industries (Robinson, 1986). It is also one of the culture industries that embodies powerful articulation on a global scale (Cammers, 1982, p. 19). The interaction between youth and popular music is important in determining any cultural results of the global spread of popular culture products.

Ethics Declarations

The ethics committee for research involving Human Subjects of Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) has studied the content for the above project and found that there were no objectionable ethical issues involved in the proposed study.

This paper is written based on the PhD thesis entitled ‘Individual Lived Experience among China’s Millennials in Contemporary Mandopop since 2000’ by Li Fan, the author. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendices

Basic information and biography of main informants

Alias	Gender	Year of Birth	Location	Occupation	Brief Description	Interview Date
Da Sheng	Male	1988	Beijing	Executive	Self-made and uploaded a series of short video about Mandopop to Douyin	1: 19/08/2022 2: 20/02/2023
Xiang Xi	Male	1987	Wuxi	Lawyer	Write textual contents about experiencing Jay Chou's music works	1: 09/09/2022 2: 22/06/2023
Zibo	Male	1989	Shanghai	Indie Musician	Commentor of music reality show	1: 19/09/2022 2: 03/07/2023
Mumu	Female	1995	Ningbo	PhD Student	Listening to Mandopop songs 15 years and a member in Jay Chou's fans club	1: 17/09/2022 2: 12/07/2023
Grace	Female	1981	Beijing	CEO	20 years of experience in Mandopop record industry	1: 21/08/2022 2: 21/02/2023
Ajun	Female	1993	Nanjing	Piano Teacher	Covering Jay Chou's songs on Douyin	1: 16/10/2022 2: 28/06/2023

Pei	Female	1995	Baoding	Singer	Covering Mandopop songs on WeSing	1: 16/01/2023 2: 09/03/2023
Cai	Male	1991	Beijing	WeMedia Influencer	Self-made video about Jolin Tsai's songs on Douyin	1: 23/08/2022 2: 23/02/2023
Hukan	Male	1985	Shijiazhuang	WeMedia Influencer	Self-made and uploaded a series of short video about Mandopop to Douyin	1: 17/12/2022 2: 20/07/2023
Shuai	Female	1988	Baoding	Teacher	Music education and listening to Mayday's songs 20 years	1: 20/12/2022 2: 11/03/2023

Data Sample

Narratives of Informants	Codes	Theme
Da Sheng: ... <u>bring back</u> the songs that may have faded away <u>in the memory</u> ... (p. 3).		
Da Sheng: I also like Mayday's songs, give me a <u>kind of youth</u> rock feeling... (p. 3)		
Da Sheng: ... <u>reliving</u> the most moving melodies of my <u>student days</u> once again, ... but also <u>reminds</u> me of my <u>childhood memories</u> and brings us all together to <u>recapture the youth</u> ... (p. 5)	bring back memory youth	
Xiang Xi: ... It can be said that Mandopop should be a <u>memory</u> unique to our generation as it <u>grew up</u> with us, especially those days <u>on campus</u> (p. 8).	reliving student days	
Xiang Xi: ... we can <u>recall</u> those scenes ... It should be a very special but unforgettable <u>memory</u> ... (p. 10)	remind	It is a memory of youth.
Zibo: I am keen on commenting and sharing some previous works to take the audience down <u>memory</u> lane (p. 15).	childhood grew up on campus	
Grace: ... Mandopop has been with me since I was <u>growing up</u> , it is <u>my youth</u> (p. 21).	remembrance	
Ajun: ... I think I just commented on the feeling of said <u>youth</u> , on this simple word... (p. 29)		
Hukan: ... an expression of self-emotions and <u>memories</u> , ... which is also a kind of <u>reminiscence of the past</u> , my <u>youth</u> (p. 40).		

Interview Guide

Introduction

- Could you please introduce yourself and tell me briefly about your story with Mandopop?

Part One

- Could you tell me when you started to listen to Mandopop?
 - What artists or songs do you like in previous listening experiences?
 - What do these artists or songs mean to you?
- Could you describe any particularly memorable or meaningful events in your life related to your experiences about Mandopop?
 - Have you ever bought an album at a video store? When?
- In what ways you experience or consume Mandopop?
 - Any changes? Make better or worse?

Part Two

- To what extent do you consider yourself experience in both contemporary Mandopop and other popular music?
- Could you describe how you feel about Mandopop at that time?
 - Are there any specific artists or songs that have inspired you?
 - Who/ what are your favorite artistes/ songs/ genres? Why?

Part Three

- Could you tell me what place Mandopop has in your life at the moment?
- Do you think Mandopop has changed over time?
 - If yes, how do you feel about these changes? If no, please tell me your views.

Part Four

- Do you still experience or consume contemporary Mandopop now?
 - In what way?
 - Any special experience or story?
- Could you tell me how you started to combine your lived experience into Mandopop?