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Mandopop's English Enigma: Language Choices, Identity Politics, and Global Forces

Keywords: English mixing, cultural hybridity, glocalization, globalization, popular culture, identity construction, nativization, code-ambiguation, transnational pop aesthetics

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LEXIE LIU



SH: How did you decide when to express yourself in a specific language?
LL: Usually, the melodies come first. Sometimes I find words or vowels that were subconsciously chosen in the melody-writing takes. So, I go with my subconscious choice of language when something really makes sense or fits the melodic context. Other than that, it probably depends on the language based on the message and theme of the lyrics, too.

McElroy, D. (2023, February 21). Lexie Liu talks The Happy Star, the magic of tarot and Mandopop. Sweety High. Image courtesy of Jeremy Z Qin.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

- Due to the globalization of popular music, English has become a widely circulating symbolic and stylistic resource in music industries around the world.
- In East Asian popular music, English mixing has been especially visible in genres such as J-pop and K-pop, where it has been associated with cosmopolitanism, affect, rhythm, and global marketability.
- Compared with these industries, Mandopop appears to incorporate English more selectively, raising questions about how artists and lyricists negotiate global influence within Mandarin-dominant popular culture.
- As a Pacific and Asian Studies project, this study approaches language choice in pop music not only as a linguistic pattern, but also as a reflection of broader cultural values, media industries, and identity-making practices.

1.2 Filling the Research Gap

- Previous studies of English mixing in East Asian pop music have often focused on Japanese, Korean, or Taiwanese corpora rather than contemporary Mandopop chart music across the 2020s. These studies also had relatively small, now outdated corpora or centered primarily on linguistic form and function.
- Less attention has been given to what English use in Mandopop may reveal about cultural positioning, commercial priorities, and the relationship between local identity and global pop aesthetics.

1.3 Theoretical Orientations

- Popular culture scholarship emphasizes that global cultural forms are not simply copied locally, but adapted and reinterpreted in local contexts (Storey, 2003; Lee & Moody, 2012).
- This study draws especially on cultural hybridity theory, which understands global and local cultural forces as negotiated together through adaptation, reinterpretation, and in-between forms (Hall, 1991; Jin & Ryo, 2014).
- It also engages ideas of glocalization, where local identity and global circulation coexist rather than cancel each other out (Roudometof, 2016; Storey, 2003; Lee & Moody, 2012).

Note: Mandopop refers to Mandarin-language Chinese popular music, while C-pop is the broader umbrella term for Chinese popular music more generally, including subgenres such as Mandopop and Cantopop. In this study, I use Mandopop to refer specifically to the Mandarin-dominant chart music in my corpus.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 DATA COLLECTION

- **Corpus:** songs from the **TME UNI** and **TME Wave** Official Annual Rankings
 - **TME UNI:** a platform-activity / streaming-based chart generated from user data across Tencent Music's *QQ Music*, *Kugou Music*, *Kuwo Music*, and *WeSing* platforms.
 - **TME Wave:** a professionally judged chart, based on monthly evaluation by Chinese music industry professionals rather than only platform consumption data.
- **Lyric collection:** lyrics gathered and cross-referenced from trusted online lyric sources (*Genius*, *KKBOX*, *Musixmatch*, *Baidu Baika*) and entered into a spreadsheet
- **Unit of analysis:** each song analyzed line by line
- **Metadata:** chart source, artist, title, release year, primary and featured artist origin, language composition (song level)
- **Exclusion criteria:** All-Cantonese, all-Mandarin, and all-English songs were retained for corpus-level language distribution but excluded from line-level linguistic analysis. Only one song (all-Mandarin) appeared in both chart rankings.
- **Analytic subset:** Form and function analysis was limited to songs containing English segments, yielding 21 songs and 84 unique English-containing lines. When non-lexical vocalizations (e.g., ooh-ooh, shalala) were excluded, the final total was 80 lines.
- **Segment:** a coded English unit within a line (single word, phrase, clause, or musical filler). One line may have multiple segments.
- **Token:** the individual English word(s) in that segment collected for frequency count

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

Coding Scheme (adapted from Wang, 2013)

- Step 1:** code each line for English presence
- Step 2:** code English-containing lines for form (single word, phrase, clause, musical filler) and sub-form (single word: function/content word class, phrase: NP/VP/AdjP/PP, clause: complete/incomplete + declarative/imperative/interrogative)
- Step 3:** code English-containing lines for function (expressive, phatic, directive, referential, poetic, metalinguistic)

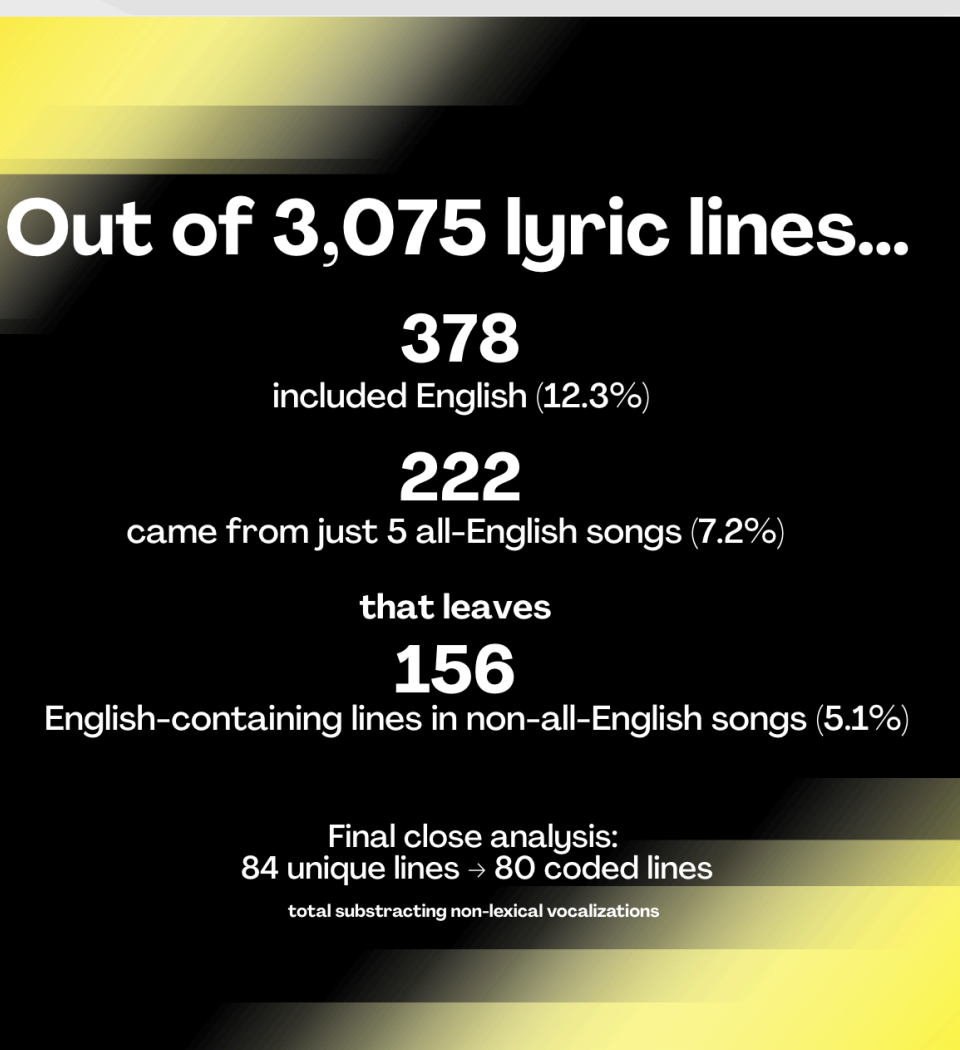
Line-Level Examples

- 听着 mp3 / tīng zhe mp3 – “Listening to an mp3 player” → single word / noun / referential
- 試著看开 learn to live again / shìzhé kànkāi, learn to live again – “Try to let go; learn to live again” → clause / expressive *nativized
- 别拖 let's go / bié tuō, let's go – “Don't hesitate – let's go” → clause / directive
- This is your show (这是你的舞台) – “This is your show (this is your stage)” → clause / metalinguistic
- 这场 show-ow 美不胜收 / zhè chǎng show-ow měi bù shèng shōu – “This show is dazzling / breathtaking” → single word / poetic *nativized

Code ambiguation is when one sound string can be heard across two languages at once (Moody & Matsumoto, 2003). In 《来啊》 by Zhou Shen, the title 来啊 (lái a) when spoken can sound close to English “liar,” while the repeated English hook “Don't tell me lie, lie” strengthens that bilingual echo.

3. KEY FINDINGS

- 48 all-Mandarin songs (60.8%), 4 all-Cantonese (5.1%), 5 all-English (6.3%), 21 Chinese-English mixed (26.6%), and 1 Mandarin/Cantonese mixed song without English (1.3%).
- 26 of 79 songs (32.9%) contain English, but English appears in only 13.5% of all lyric lines (419/3,111).
- English mixing is unevenly distributed: it appears more often in TME UNI (38.0%) than TME WAVE (26.7%), and line-level English use is especially dense in 2025 (29.8%).
- English is usually brief and salient: the most common forms are single words (41.4%) and clauses (39.3%).
- English is used mainly for expressive (41.8%), phatic (23.1%), and directive (18.7%) functions.
- Single-word insertions are slightly more often function words (52.6%) than content words (47.4%).
- Within single words, nouns (96.3%) dominate content words and interjections (89.7%) dominate function words.
- Among phrases, noun phrases (60.0%) are most common.
- Among clauses, complete clauses (75.0%) and declaratives (58.3%) predominate.
- Artist origin may also shape patterns: Mainland China artists account for most English-mixing songs in raw numbers, while Hong Kong artists appear relatively English-forward proportionally, though this should be interpreted cautiously due to smaller sample size.



4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Language Choices

4.1.1 Genre Matters: Pop Lyrics Are Written for Oral Performance

- The English that appears in this corpus is most commonly short, repeatable, and performance-friendly: single words, short phrases, and simple clauses. This pattern suggests that English in Mandopop functions less as dense semantic content and more as a resource for hook construction, rhythm, affect, and memorability. Its punchiness may also make songs easier to circulate through short-form and social media platforms.

4.1.2 The Relative Scarcity of English

- The relative scarcity of English suggests that Mandopop may not be under the same pressure to maximize English for international legibility as K-pop has often been argued to be. A large Mandarin-speaking market may reduce the commercial need for overt linguistic accommodation, allowing English to remain supplementary rather than central.

4.2 Identity Politics

4.2.1 Resource for Identity Construction.

- This tension between domestic acceptability and global aspiration is visible in artists such as Lexie Liu, whose broader persona is linked to international circulation, yet whose corpus song remains strongly Mandarin-centered and culturally marked through Zhongguofeng (中国风) rather than overtly English-driven like the majority of her contemporary music catalogue.

4.2.2 Constructing Consumable Cultural Authenticity

- Comparison of this data with cases such as SKAI ISYOURGOD further suggests that Chinese pop music may also travel internationally through Mandarin-centered distinctiveness rather than English accessibility. This contrast, I hypothesize, demonstrates an ongoing orientalist consumption trend of linguistic difference.

4.3 Global Forces

4.3.1 English as Selective Globalization

- Suggests that Mandopop does not simply follow the more English-saturated trajectories often associated with J-pop or K-pop. Instead, English appears as a selective symbolic resource rather than a default language of pop production seeking global success.

4.3.2 Shift of Questioning Framework

- “Is Mandopop becoming Westernized through English incorporation?” → “How is Mandopop negotiating itself as a genre amid global influence?”
- Rather than abandoning local linguistic identity in favour of English dominant songs with native forms occurring occasionally as is the ever growing number of cases in other Asian music scenes, Mandopop appears to incorporate English in ways that preserve Mandarin as the central linguistic frame.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

These findings suggest that Mandopop participates in global pop culture without fully reproducing the linguistic patterns often associated with more globally export-driven East Asian music industries. In this sense, *Mandopop's “English enigma”* is not simply about how much English appears, but about what its careful selectivity reveals about language, identity, and cultural positioning in Chinese popular music.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE:

- **Audience reception:** How do listeners interpret English in Mandopop? Does it index coolness, cosmopolitanism, emotional intimacy, or commercial calculation? Furthermore, how does fandom initiatives surrounding artist releases come in play?
- **Artist branding:** Do artists with more international or cross-regional personas (such as former K-pop idols) use English differently from artists marketed primarily toward domestic audiences? How may the “Global Englishes” concept be adapted here? (Pennycook, 2007)
- **Promotional discourse:** Does English appear more heavily in social media, music videos, interviews, or branding than in the lyrics themselves?
- **Diachronic change:** Is the sharp increase visible in 2025 an anomaly or the beginning of a larger trend?
- **Comparative East Asian study:** How does Mandopop's selective English use compare with similarly ranked charting K-pop songs in Korea or J-pop songs in Japan?
- **Orientalist / authenticity hypothesis:** Future work could also test whether non-English or minimally English Chinese pop may circulate internationally through ideas of “authenticity” that are shaped by orientalist listening expectations rather than by linguistic accessibility alone.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How often does English appear in contemporary Mandopop chart music?
- What linguistic forms does English mixing take?
- What social and pragmatic functions does English serve in these lyrics?

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