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GEC1001/GEH1006

CHINESE MUSIC, LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (IN ENGLISH)

AY2022/2023 Semester 2

Individual Essay

The significance of Jay Chou in Chinese Popular Music Scene



Figure 1: Photograph of Jay Chou (source: JVR Music International Ltd)

A brief biography of Jay Chou

Jay Chou (周杰伦) is unambiguously one of the most accomplished singers in the Chinese popular music scene today, with over 30 million records sales (Sixthtone, 2019) to date. Born in 1979 in Taiwan, Jay Chou has shown an affinity with music from a young age, starting his

musical venture when he first played the piano at the age of four, before specialising in western classical music in high school (Lin, 2017).

Jay Chou began writing songs and released his debut album, *Jay*, in 2000, which was met with immediate phenomenal success, winning the Golden Melody Award for Album of the Year in 2001, one of the most influential music awards in the Chinese music scene, and propelling him to instant stardom. However, this increase in prominence marks just the beginning of Jay Chou's musical ascendancy, as he proceeded to win countless musical awards and gained endorsement deals from conglomerates throughout his career (see appendix), evidencing his immense popularity in the mandarin-speaking community. His nickname, "King of Mandopop" (South China Morning Post, 2020), further acts as a testament to his clear dominance over the landscape of Chinese Popular music (Lin, 2013).

Beyond Jay Chou's musical hegemony, he has also ventured into acting and directing (see appendix). Beginning his screen career in 2005, Jay Chou made his Hollywood debut in 2011 (Asia Society, 2010), and his directorial debut in 2007 (The Hollywood Reporter, 2007). Indeed, one can opine that Jay Chou has achieved a **well-rounded** success in the Chinese entertainment industry.

Outside of music, Jay Chou aims to present a positive image to the public (Taipei Times, 2010), and promote traditional Chinese values (The China Project, 2020). Unequivocally, his influence in the mandarin-speaking community extends far beyond his musical significance in the Chinese Popular music sphere, as his star identity is a confluence of images projected by his music, films and public persona. (Ng, 2011)

Chinese elements in Jay Chou's music

Jay Chou's music comprises various music genres, with the most prominent ones being pop, R&B, rap, and classical music (Fung, 2008). His admiration for Chinese culture is also apparent in his musical works, as he often incorporates traditional Chinese elements into his music, utilising Chinese instruments such as Pipa, Guzheng, Erhu and Dizi (Lin, 2020). Jay Chou's musical style includes the integration of both Chinese melody and poetic lyrics with western music style arrangements (Fung, 2007), giving a nostalgic aura of Chinese antiquity in his music. In fact, a focal point of his musical works is his Chinese style songs (中国风).

Chinese Style Songs

Chinese style songs refers to a musical style in Chinese popular music characterised by the fusion of classical Chinese instrumentation with western pop styles, and vivid lyrical references to Chinese cultural elements and poetry (Chow & de Kloet, 2011, p.60).

Many lyrics of Jay Chou's Chinese style songs are written by Fang Wenshan (方文山), one of the most accomplished lyricist in Chinese Popular Music, who is known for his **emotionally** rich and unconventional imagery in his poetic lyrics (Yao, 2019), with frequent references to Chinese history. The song *Blue and White Porcelain* (青花瓷) is one such collaboration between the two talented singer and lyricist.

Blue and White Porcelain



Figure 2: The beginning of the Music Video, featuring the female lead playing the Gu Zheng
(Source: Screenshot of *Blue and White Porcelain*'s Music Video)

A brief synopsis and key message of ‘*Blue and White Porcelain*’

Regardless of its music, lyrical expression, style, or instrumentation, *Blue and White Porcelain* is undoubtedly one of Jay Chou's best Chinese style songs. Winning the “Song of the Year” at the Golden Melody Awards in 2008, this song is certainly a representative work of the Chinese style songs in Chinese popular music in recent years.

The lyrics narrates from the viewpoint of a swordsman missing his lover, and using the drawings on the blue and white porcelain as a metaphor to articulate his admiration of her beauty and his longing for her. The music video also aptly uses archaic settings and costumes of a Chinese Imperial Dynasty to accompany the song, composing a sad love story of reincarnation and emotional entanglement with one's past and present life.

The music video begins by recounting how the swordsman's lover was kidnapped in their past life, and him surrendering a rare porcelain as a ransom for his lover, only for her to be killed and

die in his arms. The video then cuts into a scene of an auction in the modern era, where the porcelain appears again as an antique to be auctioned, and their love rekindled by their chance encounter in this life. However, their tragic ending also repeated itself, only this time with the swordsman dying in the arms of his lover instead.

The ubiquity of Chinese elements in *Blue and White Porcelain*

From its cadence, artistic conception, sophisticated imagery, to its compelling style, an oriental grace permeates through the entirety of the song. The melody displays a Chinese attribute, blending R&B with traditional Chinese instruments such as Guzheng and Dizi (Lin, 2018), while its name and lyrics make references to Chinese porcelain from the Tang Dynasty.

The lyrics adapts the heritage of classical Chinese literature by offering frequent allusions to Chinese poetry that were used to allegorise the mesmerising beauty of the swordsman's lover. The gentle brush strokes, the peony on the porcelain, and the chinese painting, all equate her beauty to art. The whiffs of incense smoke and the budding flower illustrate her charming beauty and how it captures his attention, and the kiln and the embroidery needles show her unfathomable yet delicate elegance. This relates contemporary Chinese listeners' to their culture, which, as Lin aptly puts it, “demonstrates how Chinese tradition can be rejuvenated through its application to popular music.”(Lin, 2013).

In the second verse, “*But your beauty dissipates like smoke to a place I can never reach*”, he compares the dissipation of smoke to the fading of his lover's beauty when she dies, to a place that he can never reach because her death now acts as a separation **between** them.

In the chorus, “*The azure colour is waiting for the misty rain, like how I am waiting for you*”, he uses the sky to symbolise how he has been waiting for her for an entire reincarnation for them to

meet again. “*From a river thousands of miles away, I gaze at the curling chimney smoke*” just like how smoke catches one’s attention from afar and permeates everywhere, yet intangible to one’s touch, she is constantly on his mind, yet they can never be together. “*The moonlight smudged away the remnants of our ending*” The moonlight being smudged away also aligns to the tragic ending of one of them dying.



Figure 3 and 4: The appearance of the Blue and White Porcelain in their past and present lives
(Source: Screenshot from *Blue and White Porcelain's* Music Video)

The porcelain in the video symbolises their fate, acting as a ransom for the woman in the past, and as an antique to be auctioned, which led to their encounter in their reincarnated lives. Similar to how the porcelain stayed the same after centuries, their love and tragic fate also repeated itself.

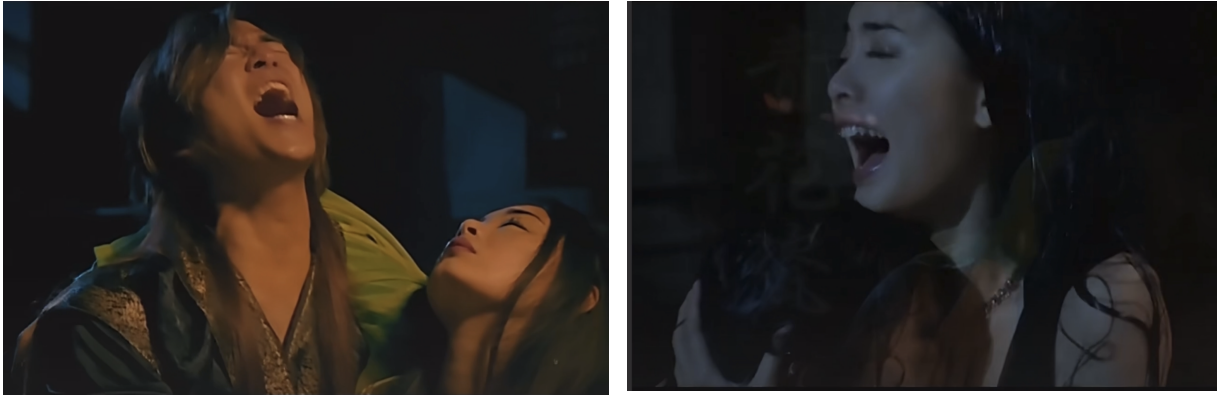


Figure 5 and 6: The swordsman's lover and him dying in each other's arms respectively
(Source: Screenshots of *Blue and White Porcelain's* Music Video)

The flashbacks on their past lives show the repetition of their love and eventual fate of one of them dying. At the end of the video, the woman's agonising screams were muted and overlapped with the sound of Guzheng, which slowly faded away as the story ended. The disconnect between what the audience sees and hears further highlights how their struggles to change their fate ends up in vain, further intensifying the misfortune of this tragic love story.

From an artistic standpoint, the song uniquely presents itself like a painting before us. The playing of the prelude is akin to the opening of a painting scroll, with the brush outlining a beautiful pattern as the song begins to tell a story. Towards the end of the song, the painting scroll is then seemingly being put away as the music fades, leaving endless possible interpretations behind this musical piece.

Conclusion

Jay Chou's utilisation of Chinese elements and his blending of oriental and occidental cultures in his songs (Lin, 2013) not only caters his music to audiences of different age demographics, but also developed a hybrid cultural form of music that is unique to Chinese popular music. Such style, as noted by Anderson, "is more akin to a nostalgic recollection of the history of China and

the sense of taking pride in one's own heritage.” (Anderson. 1983) and especially relates the young to modern music trends, whilst strengthening their embracement of Chinese culture (Qiao, 2022, Zhang, 2013). *Blue and White Porcelain* in particular, has enabled Jay Chou to push Chinese style songs to new heights, reaching its pinnacle in Chinese popular music.

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Appendix

Hanyu pinyin and English translation of *Blue and White Porcelain's* lyrics:

Verse 1

sù pēi gōu lè chū qīng huā bǐ fēng nóng zhuǎn dàn

素胚勾勒出青花笔锋浓转淡

The brush outlines a beautiful pattern, brush strokes becoming lighter

píng shēn miáo huì de mǔ dān yì rú nǐ chū zhuāng

瓶身描绘的牡丹一如你初妆

The peony on the porcelain, simplest beauty, just like you

rǎn rǎn tán xiāng tòu guò chuāng xīn shì wǒ liǎo rán

冉冉檀香透过窗心事我了然

Whiffs of incense smoke bring your troubles to my heart

xuān zhǐ shàng zǒu bǐ zhì cǐ gē yí bàn

宣纸上走笔至此搁一半

I pause halfway while painting

Verse 2

yòu sè xuàn rǎn shì nǚ tú yùn wèi bèi sī cáng

釉色渲染仕女图韵味被私藏

The glazing of the lady's portrait hides her charm

ér nǐ yān rán de yí xiào rú hán bāo dài fàng

而你嫣然的一笑如含苞待放

Your smile, to me, like a budding flower

nǐ de měi yì lǚ piāo sàn

你的美一缕飘散

But your beauty dissipates like smoke

qù dào wǒ qù bù liǎo de dì fāng

去到我去不了的地方

To a place I can never reach

Chorus 1

tiān qīng sè děng yān yǔ ér wǒ zài děng nǐ

天青色等烟雨而我在等你

The azure colour is waiting for the misty rain, like how I am waiting for you

chuī yān niǎo niǎo shēng qǐ gé jiāng qiān wàn lǐ

炊烟袅袅升起隔江千万里

From a river thousands of miles away, I gaze at the curling chimney smoke

zài píng dǐ shū hàn lì fǎng qián cháo de piāo yì

在瓶底书汉隶仿前朝的飘逸

The base of the vase is inscribed with calligraphy, imitating the graceful old dynasty

jiù dāng wǒ wéi yù jiàn nǐ fú bǐ

就当我为遇见你伏笔

Just pretend that it's a foreshadow for our meeting

Chorus 2

tiān qīng sè děng yān yǔ ér wǒ zài děng nǐ
天 青 色 等 烟 雨 而 我 在 等 你

The azure colour is waiting for the misty rain, like how I am waiting for you

yuè sè bèi dǎ lāo qǐ yūn kāi liǎo jié jú
月 色 被 打 捞 起 晕 开 了 结 局

The moonlight smudged away the remnants of our ending

rú chuán shì de qīng huā cí zì gù zì měi lì
如 传 世 的 青 花 瓷 自 顾 自 美 丽

Like legendary porcelain caring only about its own beauty

nǐ yǎn dài xiào yì
你 眼 带 笑 意

Your eyes carry a smile

Verse 3

sè bái huā qīng de jīn lǐ yuè rán yú wǎn dǐ
色 白 花 青 的 锦 鲤 跃 然 于 碗 底

Those blue carp seem to come alive on the white bowl

lín mó sòng tǐ luò kuǎn shí què diàn jì zhe nǐ
临 摹 宋 体 落 款 时 却 惦 记 着 你

While I am imitating the Song inscription I'm thinking of you

nǐ yǐn cáng zài yáo shāo lǐ qiān nián de mì mì
你 隐 藏 在 窑 烧 里 千 年 的 秘 密

The eon of secrets you buried in the kiln

jí xì nì yóu rú xiù huā zhēn luò dì
极 细 腻 犹 如 绣 花 针 落 地

It's exquisiteness like an embroidery needle

Verse 4

lián wài bā jiāo rě zhòu yǔ mén huán rě tóng lǜ
帘 外 芭 蕉 惹 骤 雨 门 环 惹 铜 绿

The banana tree outside brought the sudden downpour

ér wǒ lù guò nà jiāng nán xiǎo zhèn rě le nǐ
而 我 路 过 那 江 南 小 镇 惹 了 你

zài pō mò shān shuǐ huà lǐ
在 泼 墨 山 水 画 里

And in turn the copper rust on the door handle

My passing by Jiangnan brings me to you

nǐ cóng mò sè shēn chù bèi yǐn qù
你 从 墨 色 深 处 被 隐 去

Yet you fade away into the deep abyss of the Chinese painting

Repeats【*Chorus 1 and Chorus 2*】x2

(Hanyu Pinyin:

Translation adapted from <https://youtu.be/TrUy1rcQ5iA> and Lin, 2017, 2018)

Music Awards won by Jay Chou at the Golden Melody Awards:

- Best Mandarin Album 2001, 2002, 2004, 2011
- Best Composer 2002, 2008
- Best Album Producer 2002
- Best Single Producer 2007
- Song of the Year (*Blue and White Porcelain*) 2008, (*Rice Field*) 2009
- Best Instrumental Composer 2008
- Best Instrumental Album Producer 2008
- Best Music Video 2009
- Best Mandarin Male Singer 2010, 2011

Movies that Jay Chou has starred in:

- Initial D (头文字D), 2005
- Curse of the Golden Flower (满城尽带黄金甲), 2006
- Secret (不能说的秘密), 2007
- Kung Fu Dunk (功夫灌篮), 2008
- The Treasure Hunter (刺陵), 2009
- True Legend (苏乞儿), 2010
- The Green Hornet, 2011
- The Viral Factor (逆战), 2012
- Abba (阿爸), 2012
- Kung Fu Panda 3, 2016
- Now you see me 2, 2016
- 10,000 Miles (一万公里的约定), 2016

Television Shows that Jay Chou has appeared in:

- Mr.J Channel (MR.J頻道), 2010
- The Voice of China 4 (中国好声音4), 2015
- Sing! China (中国新歌声1), 2016
- Sing! China 2 (中国新歌声2), 2017
- Sing! China 3 (中国好声音), 2018
- This is Dunk (这！就是灌篮), 2018
- J-Style Trip (周遊記), 2020

Some of Jay Chou's Endorsement deals with conglomerates:

- Pepsi (2002–2007)
- Panasonic (2001–2005)
- Motorola (since 2006)
- Levi's (2004–2005)