# Message in a Bottle: Lyrical Laments and Emotional Expression in Mandopop*

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ABSTRACT This article explores the ubiquitous themes of loneliness, isolation and anomie in Mandopop (Mandarin Chinese language pop music). This is not to imply that people in the PRC and Taiwan are lonelier than people from other countries but, rather, that being human they experience these emotions. What is distinctive here is that Mandopop becomes a primary conduit to express feelings that are sanctioned in daily speech. The article addresses these concerns and uses in-depth interviews in Shanghai and Taipei to find out why Mandopop's themes of loneliness and isolation are so resonant to its fans.

*I drew away from the window, and sat down in my one chair by the bedside, feeling it very sorrowful and strange that this first night of my bright fortunes should be the loneliest I had ever known*. (Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*)[1]

*"You want to tell me about it?" she asked him.*
*"I don't know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul."* (Toni Morrison, *Beloved*)[2]

This article examines some of the factors leading to loneliness, anomie and alienation in Taiwan and the PRC. It explores these themes in conjunction with performers' and lay people's views of Mandopop. Because Mandopop is generally recognized as a "feminine" musical genre,[3] I give particular attention

* I am grateful to the Fulbright Foundation for providing research funds for two consecutive grants to work on this project from July 2005 to May 2007. I would also like to thank David K. Jordan, Terry Kleinman, Andrew D. Morris and David Schak for their comments on earlier drafts. This article is based on 18 interviews in Shanghai and 57 interviews in Taipei. This includes laypeople and people from Taiwan's music industry such as lyricists, performers (who sometimes write their own lyrics) and people working in music companies. Because I was primarily interested in the presentation of, and reflection on, women's experiences in these songs, the majority of the interviewees were women. They were overwhelmingly college-educated urbanites in their 20s and early 30s. They ranged from men and women I met for the first time in tea houses or coffee shops to friends that I have known for several years. With the exception of public figures (such as the pop stars) I have given them all pseudonyms to protect their identities.

1 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (New York: Penguin Books, [1861] 1994), p. 136.

2 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Press, [1987] 1997), p. 71.

3 For more on the contrast between Rock's masculinist imagery and Mandopop's feminine orientation, see Nimrod Baranovitch, *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978–1997* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 20–22, 130–31, Timothy Brace, "Popular music in contemporary Beijing: modernism and cultural identity," *Asian Music*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1991), p. 49, Jeroen de Kloet, "Authenticating geographies and temporalities: representations of Chinese rock in China," *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 18 (2005), pp. 230–33, 236, Jeroen de Kloet, "Popular music and youth in urban China – the *dakou* generation," *The China Quarterly*, No. 183 (2005), p. 611, Jeroen de Kloet, "Sonic sturdiness: the globalization of 'Chinese' rock and pop," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2005), pp. 322–23, Hao Huang, "Voices from Chinese rock, past and

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to women's perceptions of these songs in relation to their own lives. As a final set of inquiries, I examine the ways in which the music is used, ranging from the catharsis of listening to songs of sorrow to using the songs to bring up issues that are taboo in daily speech.

In spite of the dramatic political liberalization of the PRC and Taiwan, their economic growth and the unprecedented freedom that youth enjoy, there seems to be a increasing sense of loneliness and anomie in contemporary China and Taiwan. Yet, emotions such as loneliness, sorrow and heartbreak are difficult to express in Chinese and Taiwan's cultures which idealize stoic endurance and emphasize indirectness as a means of maintaining social harmony. Below, I present interviews that demonstrate the ways in which songs become a conduit through which people in China and Taiwan can come to an understanding of, and a means of expression for, their own experiences. Songs of sorrow serve an array of social functions. One can share a song with a friend to show understanding and sympathy, one can listen to gain comfort from the thought of others sharing one's experiences, and one can go to KTV (Taiwan-style karaoke)[4] to sing what cannot be said. Mandopop's seeming superficiality thereby reveals itself to be a surprisingly sophisticated poetic expression that reminds the listener of his or her humanity and assists in overcoming the social and personal challenges of expressing emotions that, after all, make us human.

## Isolation and Loneliness in Taiwan

Durkheim's analysis of anomie as arising from an excess of opportunity which leads to a loss of moral authority fits the case of Taiwan well. Urbanization and the breakdown of community as well as familial and religious authority, combined with a growing capitalist infrastructure, have in some sense been liberating but have also left many feeling isolated, lonely and unsatisfied. In one study, for example, an average of 12.3 per cent of people living in the cities of Kaohsiung, Taipei and Taichung reported that they felt a sense of loneliness or "emptiness," accounting for an estimated 1.07 million people across Taiwan.[5]

Because of traditional views of gender relations many women lose contact with their friends when they get married and they are lonely as a result.[6] Indeed, Taiwanese women's views of marriage are at an all-time low in that it is commonly thought that women get stuck in the home with their children while

*footnote continued*

present tense: social commentary and construction of identity in *yaogun yinyue*, from Tiananmen to the present," *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2003), pp. 186, 195.

4 KTV is distinctive from karaoke in the West in that one rents a room with a group of friends rather than performing in a public space among singers.

5 Y. Jiang, "Taiwan san da bu hui chu – 107 wan jimouxin dangdai xinfu" ("In Taiwan's three largest urban districts there are 1.7 million lonely hearts waiting for happiness"), *Yuanjian zazhi* (*Yuanjian Magazine*), 10 April 2006. The same study found that people between the ages of 20 and 24, or above 70, were the most lonely.

6 J. Wu, *Haixiu, jimo, ai* (*Shyness, Loneliness and Love*) (Taipei: Yuanliu Publishing House, [1985] 2001), p. 136.

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men are out gallivanting with other women.[7] As a result, many Taiwanese women are choosing divorce or not to marry at all. In 2001, for example, 20 per cent of women between the ages of 30 and 34 were unmarried,[8] a statistic that would have been unthinkable even a decade earlier. Taiwan also has the highest divorce rate in East Asia[9]: in 2002, for example, there was one new divorce in Taiwan for every 2.53 new marriages.[10]

Women's views of their natal ties are often equally bleak. Anru Lee's study of working-class women in Taiwan demonstrates that although Confucian thought portrays individual subjugation to the needs of the group as part of a desirable order of the cosmos, daughters often resent the sacrifices they make for natal families that consider them to be part of their husbands' families and will later give all inheritance to their sons.[11] Thus, for many women, filial piety is seen as an irresistible force to be fulfilled rather than to be enthusiastically embraced.[12]

Scott Simon's study of female entrepreneurs highlights more hopeful transitions for women with greater economic viability in Taiwan,[13] but many of the women he interviewed also demonstrated a marked cynicism towards community, familial relations and friendship. In several of his accounts, women related that they had to rely on themselves with statements such as "neither friends nor enemies are eternal"[14] and "but in the end, every individual is alone […] human life is by nature solitary,"[15] opinions that are echoed in Chinese language scholarship.[16]

Mandopop's concern with loneliness and isolation in many ways reflects the speed with which Taiwan has transformed from a rural agrarian society to an urban industrial environment. In 1949 slightly less than 25 per cent of Taiwan's population lived in cities with a population of 50,000 or more[17]; by 1988 this had risen to approximately 70 per cent.[18] Unlike people from the United States,[19] for

7 Bonnie Adrian, *Framing the Bride: Globalizing Beauty and Romance in Taiwan's Bridal Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press., 2003), p. 93.
8 *Ibid*. pp. 93–98.
9 *Ibid*. p. 94. This reflects on general dissatisfaction with marriage but also to the fact that women now have greater economic independence so that fewer women are bound to unhappy marriages simply because of economic considerations.
10 *Ibid*. p. 94.
11 Anru Lee, *In the Name of Harmony and Prosperity: Labor and Gender Politics in Taiwan's Economic Restructuring* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 125–29.
12 *Ibid*. pp. 112–17.
13 Scott Simon, *Sweet and Sour: Life Worlds of Taipei Women Entrepreneurs* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
14 *Ibid*. p. 109.
15 *Ibid*. p. 113.
16 For example, see K. Liu and J. Liang, *Hongchen suiyue – San Mao de shengming liange* (*The Mortal Days – San Mao's Love Songs of Life*) (Taipei: Metropolitan Culture Enterprise Co., 2003), pp. 5–6; Wu, *Shyness, Loneliness, and Love*, p. 122.
17 Albert Hermalin, P. K. C. Liu and D. S. Freeman, "The social and economic transformation of Taiwan," in Arland Thornton and Hui-Sheng Lin (eds.), *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 56.
18 *Ibid*. p. 56; Adrian, *Framing the Bride*, p. 33.
19 I use the US in contrast with China and Taiwan because those I interviewed often specifically referred to the US as a comparison. It should be noted that they often used "US" to mean "the West" in general. I am uncomfortable with using the term "Western" when using specific examples, however, because of the tremendous range of music and cultures in Western nations and because the

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example, where several generations have dealt with urban capitalism and the strain on familial and community relations that ensued, Taiwanese people in their 20s and 30s were raised on their parents' and grandparents' stories of rural childhoods that were fully immersed in the social ties of small-town alliances. These rural lives had their own problems – greater pressure to conform, more vulnerability to gossip and peer pressure, and to some extent a more limited range of life choices. With the exception of newly married brides who changed their natal communities and support networks to that of their husbands,[20] however, the fantasy of escaping the pressures of one's social network was no doubt a far larger concern for most than feelings of loneliness.

In the last decade there has also been a growing sense of economic uncertainty in Taiwan, accompanied by an increasing class division[21] with an estimated average of 70,000 people a year entering into the category of poverty stricken.[22] Many feel a greater sense of uncertainty about their economic future than they have in decades[23] and suicide rates have skyrocketed in the last few years: there were 16,779 suicides in Taiwan from 2001 to 2005, with 4,282 of them in 2005 alone.[24]

Another factor leading to loneliness and isolation in Taiwan is a fear of losing face. Some 50 to 53 per cent of people in Taiwan report that they are shy, which places them between American (at 42 per cent) and Japanese (at 60 per cent) respondents.[25] People I interviewed in both Taiwan and the PRC listed loneliness as a major social problem and revealed an extremely prevalent belief that people in Taiwan and China are more shy than people in the West. Linked to this is a growing cultural ethos of individualism in Taiwan which has resulted in a greater need to rely on oneself, leading in turn to many individuals questioning their self worth.[26]

## Alienation, Anomie and Loneliness in the PRC

The PRC shares many of the concerns outlined above for Taiwan. Its unique governmental structure and the remarkable speed of cultural transition in the last few decades have added several distinctive aspects to this picture which I will briefly outline here.

If the early communist era wiped out religious belief for many, the Cultural Revolution eliminated any faith in the government for most. Beginning in 1978,

*footnote continued*

juxtaposition of "the West" with "the East" is too problematic on a number of ethical and intellectual levels. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin. 1978).

20 Margery Wolf, *The House of Lim: A Study of a Chinese Farm Family* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).

21 V. Lee, "Hard times hit the middle class – a new lesson in capitalism for Taiwan?" *Taiwan Panorama*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1997), p. 84.

22 *Ibid.* p. 89.

23 *Ibid.*; V. Lee, "What help for the new poor?" *Taiwan Panorama*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1997), pp. 86–90.

24 Lee, "What help for the new poor?"

25 Wu, *Shyness, Loneliness, and Love*, p. 31.

26 *Ibid.* p. 146.

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Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms towards capitalism brought a level of prosperity to China that had arguably never been seen before, but many were left behind in the transition. The PRC was thrust into a market economy seemingly overnight and people were confronted with the need to transform their identities because of the larger labour market.[27] This ushered in an era that many saw as having all the same problems but "missing [a] socialist conscience."[28] Such a "loss of the humanist spirit"[29] left what some Chinese have referred to as a "moral vacuum." Lack of job security and low pay, combined with the difficulty of finding work after decades of guaranteed employment, created a general feeling that the 1990s were a harsher world than the 1980s,[30] combined with widespread resentment about corruption.[31] Tabloids, for example, evince a growing mistrust of the rich as emblematic of a new corrupt culture where many are being left behind.[32] In such accounts, the poor came to represent the dangers of a new society in which state protection and the iron rice bowl had been melted down for the new currency.[33]

The raw size of the population, combined with a dramatic restructuring of the economy, resulted in a general ethos of survival at any costs – hardly an environment for feeling part of something larger than oneself. The gulf between the rich and the poor is a visual presence in urban centres where one can see people sleeping on the street, begging and the sort of general poverty, as described by Gregory Lee, "the likes of which I had only previously seen in films made by communist producers to expose the social evils of old China."[34] In turn, the dreams leading up to the Tiananmen demonstrations for democracy in 1989 have been replaced by a pervasive cynicism. As Hao Huang notes for today's 20-somethings: "The official public amnesia surrounding the Tiananmen massacre has engendered a nihilistic public anomie. Activist students and intellectuals are currently regarded as having brought victimization upon themselves through egotism, elitism, and gross miscalculation of the possible outcomes."[35] Similarly, Nimrod Baranovitch suggests that part of Beijing Rock's declining popularity in the PRC was a post Tiananmen cynicism about one's ability to change anything.[36] This new ethos, often embedded in

27 Amy Hanser, "The Chinese enterprising self: young, educated urbanites and the search for work," in Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen and Paul G. Pickowicz (eds.), *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 190–93.
28 Huang, "Voices from Chinese rock," p. 185.
29 *Ibid*. p. 185. Huang is quoting Chinese academics here.
30 Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, pp. 49–50. Hanser, "The Chinese enterprising self," pp. 195–201.
31 Richard Levy, "Corruption in popular culture," in Link, Madsen and Pickowicz, *Popular China*, pp. 39–56.
32 Yuezhi Zhao, "The rich, the laid-off, and the criminal in tabloid tales: read all about it," in Link, Madsen and Pickowicz, *Popular China*, pp. 111–36.
33 *Ibid*.
34 Gregory B. Lee, "The 'East is Red' goes pop: commodification, hybridity and nationalism in Chinese popular song in its televisual performance," *Popular Music*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1995), p. 96.
35 Hao Huang, "*Yaogun yinyue*: Rethinking mainland Chinese rock'n'roll," *Popular Music*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2001), pp. 1–11.
36 Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, pp. 43–44.

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Darwinian rhetoric, is a large factor in making Mandopop's themes of loneliness and alienation so relevant to many in the PRC.

## Differing Rhetorics and Disappointed Realities

The prevalence of the themes of loneliness and isolation in the PRC and Taiwan is in some sense surprising, yet the range of social pressures reviewed above does seem to suggest that many are indeed isolated. An essential factor here is that growing individualism has provided many people with ammunition to protest against the greater abuses of traditional familial obligation. While this freedom to rebel is in many ways a good thing, it has created a vacuum that family ties, for better or worse, had once filled.

The growing expression of loneliness and isolation can also be explained, at least in part, by the ideological structures of traditional Chinese and Taiwanese cultures. In the United States, for example, individualist rhetoric is such that a fundamental part of being American is believing oneself to be an individual. In this ideological framework, separation from family or friends in the interest of career is seen as a natural event.[37] To the extent that this leads to ideological conflict, the problem lies in the attempt to explain one's feelings of loneliness when one is doing the "natural" thing, such as moving to a new city for a promotion and thereby leaving one's family and community behind.[38]

In China and Taiwan, however, Confucian and other indigenous ideological views portray a world in which one's social ties not only define one's identity but are the basis of the social world. Many people in Taiwan, for example, feel that being alone is unnatural and that they should not feel lonely.[39] I suggest, therefore, that a significant factor affecting the trauma of being alone in China and Taiwan is based on the greater expectation that one should be part of a group.

Mr Tao, a 42-year-old independently wealthy male, demonstrates this point:

> All people have lonely periods in their lives. In Taiwan people like to get together, it isn't like the US where people like to go home alone. Taiwanese people like to have lots of people around, and they are never alone. It's sort of like when you start drinking and you feel good and you hit a high point and then you get too drunk and you feel really bad. It is the same thing, when you go out with your friends you are really happy but afterwards when you go home you feel even more lonely because of the contrast – after people have left then you are all alone – then what do you get? Sorrow.
>
> Or say someone is driving his car alone. Maybe he has sex or goes out with someone, and then says goodbye and goes home. On the drive back you might enjoy that last moment when you are thinking about it but then you feel more and more by yourself. That's lonely. You want to keep that good feeling – you want it to last longer. (Mr Tao, July 2002, Taipei)

Paradoxically, then, part of the loneliness that people in China and Taiwan feel arises from their greater group orientation. In other words, whereas many in

37 Robert N. Bella, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1985] 1996).

38 *Ibid.*

39 Wu, *Shyness, Loneliness, and Love*, p. 130.

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the West might look at their separation from friends and family as an unfortunate but inevitable event, in modern China and Taiwan individualism has been ushered in by the modern capitalist infrastructure at such a rapid pace that it has not yet been naturalized. Part of the problem, then, is for an individual to explain why relationships are not enough, or why they are unfulfilling, when so much of their culture tells them that they are part of a greater whole.

## Mandopop as Modern Laments

Given the pressures of the traditional family system, modernization might seem like a liberating force to many. Certainly, the contemporary social trend that empowers the individual at the expense of the group is marketed as an appealing choice by youth-oriented film and music industries. Yet in the midst of the personal liberation that modernity promised is a sense of anomie and alienation that accompanies it. As I outlined above, tragedies of the traditional world are thereby replaced by the Weberian iron cage of the modern one, a fact that is made no easier to bear because people chose this path themselves.

I want to emphasize that my goal here has not been to suggest that people in the PRC or Taiwan are more or less lonely than in other countries but, rather, to demonstrate that there are factors in these societies that cause loneliness, isolation and anomie to be resonant themes for many. The sorrow expressed in Mandopop can be seen as an eloquent expression of the grief of the age, and in looking at scholarship on other areas of Asia one gains a sense that the PRC and Taiwan are not alone.

The melancholy nature of Mandopop is in part a result of influences by Japanese *enka* and Taiyupop (*Taiyu gequ* 台語歌曲, Taiwanese language songs), which are notoriously maudlin, and in part because people in both the PRC and Taiwan are suckers for a tragic ending. This is an extension of similar themes in East Asian film industries, traditional and contemporary literature, and the wildly popular soap operas produced in Japan, Korea and Taiwan. This sadness colours Japanese music ranging from jazz to *enka* to *gunka* war songs.[40] Similarly, it has been suggested that the sorrowful (*beiqing* 悲情) tone of much of Japanese literature has had a profound effect on Taiwan's literature[41] which in turn affects Taiwan's film and music industries. Chinese television drama focusing on "youthful despair and social ennui" is another example of prevalent

40 E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 40. Junko Oba, "To fight the losing war, to remember the lost war: the changing role of *gunka*, Japanese war songs," in Tim J. Craig and Richard King (eds.), *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia* (Vancouver: USB Press, 2002), p. 240.

41 W. Chen, "Lun Taiwan wenxue de 'beiqing'" ("A discussion of the 'sorrowful' [ethos] of Taiwan's literature"), in Zhang Yanxian (ed.), *Taiwan jin bai nian shi lunwen ji* (*A Collection of Taiwan's Theses in the Last 100 Years*) (Taipei: Wuzhi Books Co., 1996), pp. 95–103.

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passion for melancholy.[42] In fact, as Wu Jing-jyi has pointed out, loneliness is a prominent theme in all forms of Taiwan's mass media, ranging from literature to soap operas to cinema to popular music.[43]

Miss Yan, a 23-year-old college graduate looking for work in Shanghai, suggests that Mandopop is an eloquent expression of these social tensions:

> [In addition to Mandopop from Taiwan and Hong Kong] lyrics in music produced in China also revolve around loneliness (*jimo* 寂寞) and isolation (*gudu* 孤獨). Especially in Shanghai, people's lives are very individualistic. You go to work and you have to depend on yourself so you can feel very lonely. I just graduated from university and now all my friends are moving back to their home cities because they couldn't find work in Shanghai. So my whole social network disappeared overnight – that is of course a lonely feeling. So the songs capture this – people's sense that they are losing friends who have to focus on their careers to survive. I think Taiwan's songs, especially, capture this feeling very poetically. I think people in Shanghai can really identify with the lyrics of Taiwan songs. (Miss Yan, 23 June 2006, Shanghai)

Miss Dai, a 22-year-old college graduate with a degree in economics, emphasizes this point for Taiwan as well:

> Many people are lonely in Taipei. Every day they go to work and their faces carry smiles but they are not truly happy. If you have a problem you can't talk about it. … For example, before I found work I felt lonely but I couldn't talk to anyone about it. I still had to smile when I saw people even though I was very lonely. People can't talk to others about their unhappiness so they listen to songs that make them cry. When I listen to this kind of song I feel like someone understands me and after crying I feel a little bit better. (Miss Dai, 3 August 1999, Taipei)

As Miss Dai points out, the sad nature of Mandopop provides social solidarity that comforts through shared pain. This common ethos is clearly as responsible for the transnational character of Mandopop as the linguistic commonality that more overtly links urban centres such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Taipei.

Loneliness and isolation are not new themes in Taiwanese or Chinese culture, but who expresses them, and when they do so, differs. Traditional Chinese poetry was a conduit to express loneliness and isolation but, unlike Mandopop, was primarily the domain of the educated elite. Traditional poetry often revolved around the burden of the poet's responsibilities in the political sphere and the isolation that came with their posts, or with expulsion from their positions. In contrast, Mandopop centres on themes of romance and heartbreak and reaches youth in every sector of society.

Mandopop's melancholy is shared with other Asian musical genres such as Japanese *enka* or Taiyupop. Yet it is distinct from them because they focus on nostalgia, and because Mandopop has an overtly present-oriented time frame. Though occasionally lamenting the loss of past loves or fears of a lonely future, the emphasis of Mandopop lyrics is almost inevitably the pain, or joy, of the

42 Michael Keane, "Television drama in China: engineering souls for the market," in Craig and King, *Global Goes Local*, p. 129.
43 Wu, *Shyness, Loneliness, and Love*, p. 119.

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moment. As Jeroen de Kloet points out, Mandopop's seeming superficiality is a commitment to the moment, in that the speed with which pop trends come and go reflects the frenetic pace of urban centres such as Hong Kong,[44] Shanghai or Taiwan. This fragmented present orientation also accentuates the sense of anomie and alienation in these songs because they highlight fractured realities rather than expressing a belonging to communities with long-term social and emotional ties.

In addition, Mandopop tells anyone's (and everyone's) story; it is immediately convertible to any urban landscape in Taiwan, the PRC or beyond. It thus comforts because it suggests that others share these experiences, even if one does not know them. A Mandopop song is therefore akin to a message in a bottle that is sent with an almost desperate hope that it will drift to an unknown destination to send rescue.

## Lyrical Laments

As should be evident from the above discussion, loneliness and isolation are far more central concerns in the PRC and Taiwan than one might expect. This is forcefully evinced when examining the prevalence of words for loneliness and isolation in Mandopop lyrics. In examining a list of 20 top-selling CDs in Taiwan, for example,[45] I catalogued the frequency of key words concerning loneliness and/or isolation, as shown in Table 1.

In total, key words for loneliness and/or isolation appeared 80 times in 227 songs. As a point of contrast, a similar compilation for the top 20 in a US billboard chart for best sales[46] included only 17 words for loneliness or isolation in 306 songs. Also, in all the American songs, the key words "lonely" and "alone" came up as passing references whereas they were usually thematically central to the Mandopop songs.

Of course the actual percentage of lonely lyrics varies from week to week, and is somewhat different according to who is providing the data, but these themes

**Table 1: Frequency of Words in the Lyrics of Top-selling CDs in Taiwan**

| Word | Meaning | Occurrence |
|---|---|---|
| *jimo* (寂寞) | lonely, lonesome | 36 times |
| *gudan* (孤單) | alone, lonely, friendless, isolated, solitary | 26 times |
| *gudu* (孤獨) | lonely, isolated, solitary, alone | 13 times |
| *guji* (孤寂) | lonely, isolated, desolate | 5 times |

44 Jeroen de Kloet, *Red Sonic Trajectories: Popular Music and Youth in Urban China* (Amsterdam: Academisch Proefschrift, 2001), p. 121.

45 This accounts for a two-week period in February 2006. "G-music billboard chart based on sales from 2/3/06–2/9/06: a combination of Rose Records (Meigui changpian), Dazhong Records (dazhong changpian), and G-music," www.g-music.com.tw/GMusicBillboard1.aspx (accessed 11 February 2006).

46 As with the Mandopop charts, this accounted for the most popular songs, regardless of musical genre. "US pop charts," www.billboard.biz/bb/biz/yarendcharts/2005/tlptitl.jsp (accessed 26 November 2005).

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are consistently prevalent from year to year. Also, because it is common to use almost an entire song's lyrics as the chorus – repeating the lyrics several more times – a listener is often confronted with these key words far more than is suggested by these numbers. Furthermore, in examining Mandopop lyrics it soon became clear that the majority of the songs express loneliness even if they do not use the specific vocabulary.

Singaporean performer Stefanie Sun (Sun Yanzi 孫燕姿) has the following to say about why loneliness is such a pervasive theme in Mandopop:

> Loneliness is not really one theme. There are many kinds of loneliness. There is loneliness in a crowd, loneliness when you are alone, loneliness when you are with friends, or with family. There is also loneliness when you have just ended a relationship and loneliness while you are still in a relationship. So one reason this is such an important theme in Mandopop is that it covers such a wide range of emotions and experiences. There is a lot of material there if you want to explore human emotions which a good song should do. Mandopop songs are very sensitive to this range of experiences and because everyone has gone through these experiences a lot of people can relate to the songs. (Stefanie Sun, 23 October 2005, Taipei)

Stefanie Sun emphasizes the range of emotions and experiences conveyed with this seemingly narrow theme. She highlights the fact that one need not be alone to feel lonely, a point that several of the other people I interviewed brought up.

Miss Su, a 28-year-old Malaysian of Chinese descent, is a television host in Malaysia and bears a remarkable physical resemblance to Mandopop star Stefanie Sun. Miss Su was educated in Chinese schools in Malaysia and feels a certain kinship with Taiwan but also perceives it from an outsider's perspective.

> I think we are all a little unhappy because we have too many choices. So we don't know what we want and that makes people feel unhappy. Taiwanese people are very nice but I think they always want a little bit more. If you tell someone in Malaysia "you can have ten" then they are happy with ten. If you tell someone in Taiwan "you can have ten" they will say "why can't I have fifteen?" This creates a mindset where one is always wanting more, always a little dissatisfied with what one has. (Miss Su, 9 January 2006, Taipei)

With characteristic humour, Taiwan's performer A-yue Chang (Zhang Zhenyue 張震嶽) also feels that melancholy is part of Taiwanese culture:

> Taiwanese people are extreme (*jiduan* 極端) [they have bigger emotional highs and lows] they are more sensitive (*mingan* 敏感). They might say "Oh, I'm so sad" and then a minute later they will say "Oh, I'm so depressed! (*beishang* 悲傷) [so the sadness quickly escalates]." (A-yue Chang, 9 March 2006, Taipei)

Physical environment may also play a role here. To Miss Su, cited above, Taiwan's dense population, bleak concrete buildings and relative lack of public space all create an environment of sadness and isolation. George Travino, who runs his own record label in Taipei, links the maudlin melodies of Mandopop with larger geopolitical themes, referring to Taiwan's weakness both in its colonial history under Dutch and Japanese rule and after the KMT's arrival.[47]

47 George Trivino, 9 March 2006, Taipei.

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In many ways Mandopop successfully captures a melancholy side of PRC and Taiwan culture, yet in allowing the expression of taboo topics the music offers a psychological catharsis. PRC scholar Huang Shusen, who also links loneliness to a physical culture, elaborates on this point:

> We live in overcrowded cities with fierce competition. We feel lost and lonely (*jimo*) and look for ways to rid ourselves of the unbearable sadness, loneliness and helplessness. [Mandopop love] songs are good medicine [for these ills].[48]

Miss Guo, a 25-year-old marketing executive in Taipei, also suggests a positive twist to this seemingly pessimistic environment:

> I've never cried at KTV but sometimes at home I'll cry when listening to a song. Many songs are really beautifully written. … Taiwan's pop songs are sad because we all like to feel this way. A lot of times we are so busy at work we become obsessed with day-to-day tasks. Pop songs and films remind us to feel. They remind us of what is important, like love and caring – these feelings – that is what matters but we often forget because we're so busy.
>
> As to why the songs are so sad, we live in a very complex world. The world changes so fast and you have to be able to adapt. This is not a caring world but one of survival – life in a big city. So we listen to these songs and it is a release. That's why I like sad songs sometimes. I feel better after this kind of release. (Miss Guo, 12 October 2003, Taipei)

Huang Shusen and Miss Guo reframe Mandopop's lonely ethos in a positive light. This view, echoed by many others I have spoken to, emphasizes that the poetic expression of despair reminds one of one's humanity in the mist of an urban capitalist environment that transforms people into commodities. Thus, as Christine Yano suggests for the Japanese music genre *enka*, in a strange sense this expression of sorrow is comforting in that it "holds up to public view a communally broken heart."[49]

Maria is a 33-year-old secretary from Tainan who asked that I use her English name. One easily forgets her age because of her active enthusiasm for all manner of things and a rather endearing inability to navigate the streets of her home town of Tainan without getting lost. The following is what she had to say about one song in relation to her own life:

> I really like the song "I'm not sad" by Stefanie Sun.[50] A friend gave me this song because my situation was the same as the one in the song. So she copied the song to give to me. It really is like my story. … The girl who gave me the song is a good friend and knows my relationship with a certain guy. I've known this guy a really long time and we were really good friends and always spent a lot of time together talking and such. I told him I liked him and he said he had a girlfriend. Afterwards it was hard to talk to him. He told me how tender (*wenrou* 溫柔) she was so our relationship could not be. … The first time I sang the song at KTV I cried. Then I felt better because I knew other people also went

48 S. Huang, "Liuxing jiehuo" ("Popular meetings"), in Y. Chen (ed.), *Ai ru qingge: liuxinggechu de aiqing gonglue* (*Love is Like a Love Song: Love Strategies in Popular Music*) (Guangzhou: 2000), p. 6.

49 Christine Yano, *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

50 Stefanie Sun, "Wo bu nanguo" ("I'm not sad"), lyricist Yang Mingxue, composer Li Sisong. In *Wei wancheng* (*To Be Continued*) (Warner Music Taiwan, 2003).

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through this so I felt better – not so pitiful. I went to KTV to sing this song and it felt like my song, not Stefanie Sun's song. (Maria, 23 August 2003, Taipei)

Maria's statement, "I went to KTV to sing this song and it felt like my song, not Stefanie Sun's song" suggests that people internalize Mandopop lyrics to reflect their own experiences. Two days earlier, when I casually spoke to Maria about the same song (without pen and paper unfortunately), she told me that it was about a boyfriend who abruptly let go of the singer's hand when he saw his other girlfriend. She revised this account two days later (in the above interview), after she was able to look at the lyrics more carefully – in fact, she downloaded the lyrics from the internet and brought them to our meeting. Neither version of the song was an exact match for Maria's experiences, however, in that Maria was never romantically involved with her love interest whereas the song describes a couple that had once mutually been in love.

As David Henderson points out, the success of both poets and musicians can be attributed to their ability to create works that are vague enough that the audience can project their own experiences on to the art.[51] Maria's conversion of the song's meaning points to the flexibility of the music and the creative appropriation of the listeners. The audience's interpretation of Mandopop can therefore be seen as a constantly changing act of translation. This communication is in many ways more effective than a spoken interaction in that the listener can more closely identify with the experience. In allowing listeners to project their own experiences on to the lyrics, the lyricist allows for the necessity of translation between conflicting experiences. It should be noted, however, that the songs are also limited by that very fact. In other words, the more listeners project on to the statement, the more they distort it. The songs therefore become continually shifting dialogues between the writer and the listeners.

In our interview, Maria also noted the Buddhist emphasis on mercy and letting things go in the songs.[52] Mrs Chen, a 46-year-old Chinese language teacher, also raised this point:

Song companies know what sells. They don't like songs about resisting fate because people can relate better to putting up with mistreatment. … Maybe you have an argument with your husband and listen to a song and feel better and forgive him. The other kinds of songs are angry so when you listen to them the problem becomes even worse. So these songs comfort people. (Mrs Chen, 24 October 2003, Taipei)

In the above quotation, Mrs Chen sees Mandopop as a means of regaining emotional balance. She uses the music to gain solace so as to avoid

51 D. Henderson, "Emotion and devotion, lingering and longing in some Nepali songs," *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1996), pp. 440–68.

52 For more on Mandopop's Buddhist emphasis on accepting fate see Y. Ke and J. Zhang, *Meiti de nüren, nüren de meiti – shang* (*Mass Media's Women, Women's Mass Media – Part One*) (Taipei: Shuoren Publishing House, 1995), p. 117; Z. Su, "Taiwan liuxing yinyue zhong de aiqing jiazhiguan: 1989–1998" ("Conceptions of the value of love in Taiwan's pop music: 1989–1998"), MA thesis, Department of Communications, Kaohsiung: Zhong Shan University, 1999, p. 80; and Fang-Chih Yang, "Working class girls and popular music in Taiwan," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, Vol. 40 (1996), p. 9.

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confrontation and, in listening to songs of forgiveness, she recognizes that her problems are not unique which helps her to smooth over her marital difficulties.

Maria cited prevalent cultural shyness and lack of time as reasons why people feel more isolated in contemporary Taiwan. Mandopop songs echo this concern, for the theme of loneliness frequently links to a story of loving someone secretly but not being able to tell him – usually because he is in another relationship.[53] Slow simple melodies accentuate feeling of loneliness (*jimo*) and isolation (*gudan* 孤單) in the songs.[54] Mr Chen, a 30-year-old male who works for a cellular phone company in Shanghai, elaborated on these concerns:

> Mandopop songs revolve about being lonely more because Chinese suppress their feelings more. In Europe people are really open about what they are thinking and feeling but we tend to cover things up more. That's why we like these songs, because they talk about emotions that everyone has but that we have a hard time expressing. (Mr Chen, 1 July 2006, Shanghai)

This point arose in several other interviews as well. Xiangyu, a 26-year-old graduate student in Taipei, said the following:

> [The emphasis on Buddhist forgiveness] is a racial (*minzu* 民族) characteristic. Taiwanese people believe that you should endure (*rennai* 忍耐) but never say anything so we listen to songs and cry. Americans express their feelings more easily. If you are lonely or sad in Taiwan you can't talk about it so you listen to songs that express this feeling. Taiwanese people think a long time before doing things. (Xiangyu, 20 November 2003, Taipei)

These statements point to the prevalence of shyness and introspection in daily life as causing a social isolation that results in loneliness. The difficulty of speaking directly, a modern extension of traditional Chinese etiquette, is also a recurring theme in their explanations of why loneliness is so common in songs and people's lives.

If shyness is commonly thought to cause loneliness that is expressed in song, Mandopop can also be used as a means of expressing oneself more directly, which provides a safety buffer should one's confession be met with rejection or awkwardness. Maria notes that friends who feel uncomfortable discussing intimate matters can express understanding and sympathy by exchanging popular songs. Similarly, Miss Fu, a 25-year-old elementary school teacher who moved to Shanghai to be with her fiancé, said the following:

> It can be very lonely in Shanghai …. We Chinese like sad stories in general – they are more moving. That is true if you look at movies or television dramas or music. But also I think that songs with lonely lyrics fill a place in our lives because we can't really talk about that with people. So we can go to KTV with a group of friends and select a song that talks about it – maybe being lonely, maybe having someone break your heart – it is a way of letting people know you have had these kinds of experiences without everyone becoming uncomfortable. (Miss Fu, 7 July 2006, Shanghai)

53 Ke and Zhang, *Mass Media's Women*, pp. 131–32.
54 *Ibid.* p. 138.

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Another example of this sentiment can be seen when Miss Zhou, a 25-year-old Taiwanese woman who was pursuing a degree in fashion design in England, said the following:

> Sometimes I'm really sad in England. I remember a song and think "that's exactly like me right now." Also, with songs I can share my feelings with my friends. I can share them with my boyfriend and he will know I really feel sad. It is hard to talk about being sad – your friends or boyfriend will feel uncomfortable because it is too serious a topic. But if you sing it, it doesn't threaten anyone – because otherwise sometimes people don't want to listen. They get scared if you say serious things, so you sing. (Miss Zhou, 5 July 2002, Taipei)

These are just a few of the many statements in my interviews that point out that Mandopop songs are a conduit to express emotions that are difficult to broach in daily conversation. In Maria's case, a song is exchanged to signify her friend's sympathy and understanding. For Miss Zhou, singing songs of loneliness becomes part of a repertoire to communicate with her boyfriend – and because this is such a common technique, there is little doubt that the boyfriend understood. Miss Fu links the sentiments in Maria and Miss Zhou's accounts by suggesting an interrelatedness of exchanging songs and performing them as a means of emotional communication.

## Conclusion

Mandopop songs help people feel that they are not alone – that the lyricists, performers and other audience members share their pain. Mandopop's audience members use the poetic verse of such songs to gain solace, to come to a better understanding of their experiences, and to communicate emotions that are normally sanctioned in daily conversation. These themes of loneliness and isolation are hammered in by the lyrics and by the pictures that accompany CDs, KTV, MTV, live performances and magazine coverage.

Most of the people I have spoken to in Shanghai and Taipei said they felt that their societies are experiencing a breakdown of traditional moral and religious values, which is causing a moral vacuum. As David Buxton has suggested for the West,[55] consumerism is largely filling this kind of void. Mandopop reaches everyone's lives through consumption in the form of KTV, club culture, consumer goods such as CDs and name-brand clothing, or simply by watching television. Mandopop reflects the consumerist embrace of modernity while simultaneously insisting that we remind ourselves of our own humanity through singing these songs of sorrow.

The songs express despair but they inevitably do so in terms of an absent lover or the performer's own experiences: economics, politics or other social forces are usually self-censored as part of a marketing strategy. This is in part because

55 David Buxton, "Rock music, the star system, and the rise of consumerism," in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (eds.), *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (New York: Routledge, [1983] 2000), p. 431.

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Taiwan and Hong Kong's music industries do not want to risk losing China's huge market but, more importantly, Mandopop fans on both sides of the Taiwan Strait prefer not to think about such matters and tend not to listen to (or buy) politically oriented music.

Mandopop's melancholy can also be seen as an attempt to deal with more serious issues than Western pop. It provides a means of communicating more honestly than everyday speech and culture allows. The songs allow people in Taiwan to express loneliness, isolation and anomie. As the old adage goes, "laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone"; perhaps Mandopop is an innovative solution to transcend this barrier.

The people I interviewed in Shanghai and Taipei believed that Mandopop's lonely lyrics point to a greater poetic sense and search for meaning than pop in the United States. Thus, rather than viewing the melancholy of Mandopop as revealing a negative aspect of Chinese or Taiwanese cultures, it may be more accurate to stress that its lyrics are evidence of poetic creativity, careful introspection, emotional expression denied in everyday conversations, and reasserting humanity into a seemingly uncaring world.

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