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REASONING WITH C-POP: IDEALS, IDOLS, IDEAS, IMAGERIES

Abstract: Chinese popular music (C-pop) has experienced a swift transformation over the past decade, evolving from a niche market into a high-capitalised fan economy predominantly driven by idol survival shows. This paper investigates the intricate and dynamic landscape of C-pop as a significant medium for cultural negotiation and identity formation in the 21st century. In addition to providing a succinct overview of the fundamental issues associated with C-pop and its historical development, this study examines how it functions as an intermediary between diverse cultures and societies, and as a vital social arena for contemporary Chinese youth to navigate the tensions between individualism and collectivism. Ultimately, the paper proposes a framework for comprehending the manner in which Chinese soft power is negotiated and consumed amid a period of rapid digital, cultural, and social transformation.

Keywords: C-pop, idols, imageries, fan culture, amalgamation, English.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the *idol* (偶像, ǒu xiàng) in China represents not merely a particular evolution within the realm of pop music but also an important social and economic phenomenon. Despite the Chinese popular music's (C-pop) well-established history, the contemporary idol system is heavily influenced by the Korean pop music (K-pop) paradigm. The platforms, which emerged around 2018, have substantially transformed the Chinese entertainment sector into a *fan economy* (粉丝经济, fěn sī jīng jì)², in which revenue is derived directly from fan

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² See Jiang (2024).

activities, including voting, streaming, and purchasing branded merchandise, and subsequently allocated to entertainment firms and streaming services.

The authors' interest in China, particularly in C-pop, stems from an effort to connect it to their ongoing research, which primarily focuses on comparative and contrastive topics in Anglophone linguistic, cultural and translational issues (Muhić 2023; Stević & Babić 2025).

Nevertheless, the Chinese idol industry operates under unique pressures. While K-pop has undergone considerable international expansion, C-pop has encountered difficulties in acquiring equivalent global recognition, mainly due to legal regulations and local market commitment. Nevertheless, recent events in the C-pop scene strongly vouch in favour of its establishing itself as a representation of the new Chinese society and openness to other markets and audiences.

2. C-pop: An authentic version going global?!

C-pop, or Chinese popular music, is a broad umbrella term that encompasses Mandopop, Cantopop, and Hokkien pop³. Its rise is not just a story of catchy melodies but also a reflection of the massive shifts in China's economic power, technological leapfrogging, and a growing desire for cultural self-expression.

The origins of present-day industry can be traced to the early 20th century in Shanghai, where *Shidaiqu* (時代曲, *shí dài qū*, *music/songs of the era*) integrated Chinese folk music with Western jazz. However, its emergence was significant in the late 1970s and 1980s, during the *Gangtai* (港臺, *gǎng tái*) era. Hong Kong and Taiwan served as the primary centres of innovation, while Mainland China was still opening its doors. Renowned artists such as Teresa Teng (鄧麗君, *Dèng Lìjūn*, 鄧麗筠, *Teng Li-yun*) acted as a cultural mediator, for their songs crossed borders and illustrated the power that music has in transcending all types of boundaries. Later on, the *Four Heavenly Kings of Hong Kong*⁴ dominated the 1990s, establishing idol culture and internationalising the C-pop genre through their unique ways of expressing their artistic selves.

At the turn of the millennium, the locus of cultural influence shifted toward PR China. This period was characterised by authors such as Jay Chou⁵ (周杰倫, *Zhōu Jiélún*, *Chou Chieh-lun*), whose musical expression integrated R&B

³For more details about Chinese pop music, see Moskowitz (2010).

⁴Jacky Cheung Hok-yau (张学友, *張學友*), Andy Lau Tak-wah (劉德華, *劉德華*), Aaron Kwok Fu-shing (郭富城), and Leon Lai Ming (黎明).

⁵See Lin (2013).

(Rhythm and Blues) with traditional Chinese instruments and classical poetry, a style frequently referred to as *Zhongguo feng music* or *Chinese style (China Wind)* (中国风, zhōng guó fēng). As a further matter, Chou was not merely a successful artist. He endowed C-pop with a unique sonic identity that was not a simple imitation of a Western-style matrix, but rather a creation of ingrained Chinese style and atmosphere.

The 2010s present the most vigorous period of growth, propelled by the digital revolution in which China embraced a mobile-first ecosystem. Social media platforms such as *Weibo* (微博, wēi bó) and streaming conglomerates like *Tencent Music* (腾讯音乐娱乐集团, téng xùn yīn lè yú lè jí tuán) transformed the way music was consumed, thus opening paths for novel ways of expression and performance.

Today, the rise of C-pop is characterised by diversity and *cultural confidence*⁶ (文化自信, wén huà zì xìn)⁷. The industry has advanced beyond generic pop music to encompass flourishing sub-genres such as Chinese hip-hop (popularised by *The Rap of China*⁸), indie rock, and electronic music. Digital platforms like *TikTok* have transformed niche⁹ tracks into viral global hits, enabling Chinese artists to gain international recognition without the support of traditional record labels.

C-pop's development ultimately represents a narrative of reclamation. It has evolved beyond its previous status as an industry overshadowed by neighbouring regions. It is now a formidable multi-billion-dollar industry that blends China's historical heritage with innovations. As Chinese artists increasingly collaborate with international stars and perform at leading global platforms such as *Coachella*, C-pop is establishing itself not merely as a regional phenomenon but as a lasting anchor of the global musical domain.

On the whole, the present-day push towards authenticity within C-pop balances artistic expression with specific Chinese national characteristics while simultaneously adapting itself to global music trends. Its authenticity is grounded in continuous negotiations among three influential forces: cultural heritage, foreign entertainment paradigms, and government regulations¹⁰. Although there is a risk

⁶ <https://baike.baidu.com/en/item/Cultural%20confidence/1426042>.

⁷ See Lin (2025) for more information.

⁸ *The Rap of China* (中国新说唱, zhōng guó xīn shuō chàng) is a Chinese rap competition show produced by iQiyi. The show was carried out in the form of three groups of producers Kris Wu, Will Pan, MC HotDog and Chang Chen-yue judging the performance of the participating students, and received great attention. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rap_of_China.

⁹ niche market: a small area of trade within the economy, often involving specialized products. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/niche-market>.

¹⁰ See Barile & Saviano (2015).

of it becoming a manufactured product due to strict regulatory measures and the emulation of K-pop, its capacity to integrate deeply rooted Chinese aesthetics with contemporary musical styles grants it a distinctive, authentic identity. The evolution and development of this genre warrant thorough examination.

3. The C-pop idol (factory)

The development of C-pop idols is characterised by the adoption of South Korean trainee systems¹¹, while concurrently adapting to Chinese capital and regulations.

Early 21st-century Chinese pop was predominantly led by solo artists; however, contemporary C-pop emphasises the prominence of groups proficient in dance, singing, and media etiquette. The adaptation of the K-pop model is apparent in talent acquisition, financial backing from Korean corporations, and the implementation of the *Produce 101*¹² format through shows such as *Idol Producer*¹³. As observed in the evolution of *Chuang Asia*¹⁴, these formats facilitate rapid stardom, elevating ordinary trainees to celebrity status through viewer-driven voting.

The C-pop idol industry predominantly depends on the *fan circle* (粉丝圈, fēn sī quān)¹⁵, where supporters proactively promote their idols. Fan labour is vital and encompasses activities such as shipping¹⁶ [fans], voting, and managing social media platforms. Fan clubs are not merely consumers. They also function as organisers

¹¹ More on some aspects of the system see in Lee et al. (2006).

¹² *Produce 101* is a reality television talent competition franchise created by South Korean entertainment conglomerate CJ E&M, based around the formation of a K-pop girl group or boy group. The franchise began in 2016 and has since expanded to China, Japan and Thailand. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Produce_101.

¹³ *Idol Producer* (偶像练习生, ǒu xiàng liànxí shēng) is a 2018 Chinese reality boy group survival show, which premiered on January 19, 2018, on iQIYI. It is presented by Lay Zhang with Li Ronghao, Jackson Wang, MC Jin, Cheng Xiao and Zhou Jieqiong serving as mentors. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idol_Producer.

¹⁴ *Chuang Asia: Thailand* (创造营亚洲, chuàng yào yíng yà zhōu), also known as *Chuang Asia 2024*, is a Chinese/Thai reality competition show by Tencent, and co-licensed in Thai by The One Enterprise (ONEE) and Kantana Motion Pictures. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chuang_Asia:_Thailand.

¹⁵ Fan circle, often abbreviated as 饭圈 (fàn quān), is a Chinese term that translates directly to “fan circle”, “fandom”, or “fandom community” in English. Source: <https://baike.baidu.com>. For more information about fan culture, see Liu (2022).

¹⁶ Shipping (derived from the word *relationship*) is the desire by followers of a fandom for two or more individuals, either real-life people or fictional characters, to be in a relationship. It often takes the form of unofficial creative works, including fan fiction and fan art. Shipping may depict pairings that are opposite-sex, same-sex, polyamorous, or love-hate relationships. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shipping_\(fandom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shipping_(fandom)).

whilst accumulating substantial capital to secure marketing opportunities or to purchase products embedded with voting codes. This practice brought to light some of its downsides, culminating in a significant event known as the *milk-pouring incident*¹⁷, during which fans disposed of large quantities of milk to extract voting codes from the bottles.

In recent years, the Chinese government has initiated a comprehensive and systematic crackdown on what it deems *toxic fan culture*¹⁸, with the objective of rectifying the disorderly and increasingly extreme conduct prevailing within celebrity fan communities. Formerly characterised by vehement enthusiasm, Chinese fandoms¹⁹ have evolved into highly organised, capital-oriented structures renowned for mobilising supporters to expend substantial financial resources, assault critics, and partake in cyberbullying. The crackdown, launched predominantly in 2021 following major celebrity scandals and reemphasised around 2024, aims to suppress this fan circle chaos and safeguard public order and the mental well-being of young individuals.

The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC, 国家互联网信息办公室, guó jiā hù lián wǎng xìn xī bàn gōng shì) has taken unprecedented actions, banning celebrity popularity ranking lists, cancelling variety show voting mechanisms that encourage paid voting, and targeting fan circle leaders who spread rumours²⁰. Major social media platforms like Sina Weibo (新浪微博, xīn làng wēi bó) have shut down thousands of accounts engaged in heated fan wars and deleted millions of pieces of harmful information. Furthermore, authorities have prohibited the commercial exploitation of minors within fandoms, specifically targeting practices that induce the young generation to waste money on idol-endorsed products. While these measures have been welcomed by individuals advocating for a more purified online environment, the overarching objective remains to transition fan conduct from unquestioning idolisation to rational involvement, thereby addressing the issues of toxic fandom, including illegal data manipulation and stalking. Although the enforcement actions have lessened the visibility of fan communities, they have also demanded the implementation of a more discreet mode of operation, indicating a substantial cultural transformation within China's entertainment industry.

¹⁷ For more details, see Han (2021), Chu (2017), Chan (2009), Taylor (2008).

¹⁸ See Forner et al. (2025), Xu and Ling (2026).

¹⁹ See, for example, Dan et al. (2023) and Cui & Wu (2025).

²⁰ See <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1232634.shtml>. Accessed: 5th March, 2026; <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/608576>. Accessed: 4th April, 2026.

This concise overview of the fundamental anatomy of C-pop fandom should necessarily include observations on a recent development exemplified by the emergence of virtual idols. It has transitioned from a niche subculture into a prominent industry phenomenon, driven by advancements in artificial intelligence, motion capture technology, and high-speed 5G networks²¹. Unlike conventional celebrities, virtual idols such as Luo Tianyi²² and groups like *A-SOUL*²³ deliver flawless, scandal-free performances and maintain continuous engagement, thereby appealing strongly to China's digitally native Generation Z. The market for virtual humans in China is experiencing rapid expansion, with numerous digital stars and virtual influencers emerging on platforms such as Bilibili (哔哩哔哩, *bì lì bì lì*) and Douyin (抖音, *dǒu yīn*), creating significant commercial value for brands seeking innovative marketing strategies. These digital personas go beyond mere animation. Many utilise motion capture technology involving real human performers behind the virtual avatars, thus providing artistic flexibility and a relatable, human touch. Brands increasingly prefer them for endorsements, fashion campaigns, and e-commerce livestreams because they can engage fans interactively while reducing the risks associated with human celebrities. The industry's growth is partly attributable to the *metaverse trend*²⁴, in which these idols perform holographically, enabling fans to experience a heightened sense of proximity within virtual spaces.

As technological advancements pursue their course, virtual idols in China are transitioning from two-dimensional representations to high-fidelity, three-dimensional realism, thereby ensuring a consistent, highly customisable brand image²⁵. Their ability to engage audiences live through streaming, thus allowing fans to influence content and character growth, promotes both strong loyalty and significant economic involvement. This trend mirrors a wider cultural shift in which digital personalities challenge traditional ideas of fame, blending cutting-edge visuals with classic cultural motifs to attract a broader range of followers. It is expected that virtual performers will remain essential to China's entertainment scene, serving as a link between technological advances and traditional art(s) and as a point of recognition of Chinese uniqueness in the global entertainment matrix.

²¹ See Huang et al. (2026) and Park et al. (2026).

²² Luo Tianyi (洛天依, *luò tiān yī*) is a Chinese Vocaloid developed formerly by Bplats, Inc. under the Yamaha Corporation, and was created in collaboration with Shanghai Henian Information Technology.

²³ See <https://technode.com/2022/05/16/virtual-idol-group-a-soul-prompts-overwork-debate-after-canceling-a-virtual-member/>.

²⁴ Yunzhu et al. (2025) call this kind of interaction *para-social*.

²⁵ Source: <https://hyper.ai/en/news/13884>.

4. The C-Pop Imagery

The imagery associated with C-pop constitutes a rich and multifaceted tapestry that combines deeply rooted traditional Chinese aesthetics with contemporary visual elements. This reflects the genre's rapid development from regional *Shidaiqu* to a globalised, multimedia phenomenon. Characterised by a *Zhongguo feng music* trend, this imagery seamlessly integrates modern pop arrangements with traditional instruments such as the *guzheng*, *pipa*, or *dizi*, often set against backgrounds of antique architecture, calligraphy, and silk fashion, thereby creating a nostalgic yet futuristic aesthetic that appeals globally while feeling uniquely and innately Chinese. Groundbreaking artists, like aforementioned Jay Chou, have contributed significantly to this visual language by utilising music videos to depict historical and martial arts narratives, serving as a visual bridge between the past and present. The imagery frequently centres on themes of idealised love, urban emotional narratives, and personal aspirations, oftentimes featuring attractive idol figures embodying a youthful, positive, and energetic visual persona. This modern aesthetics employs vibrant, techno-house-inspired visuals for nightclub scenes, contrasted with softer, ballad-inspired imagery. Additionally, the emergence of idol competition shows has nurtured a visual culture characterised by rigorous training, dedicated fandom, and the development of *visuals*²⁶.

Beyond the pop idol aesthetic, C-pop imagery is increasingly adopting globalised and avant-garde forms, with select artists integrating international street-wear, hip-hop elements, and experimental visual techniques that deviate from traditional beauty standards, as exemplified by higher-energy, hip-hop-influenced acts²⁷. This amalgamation of styles is essential to C-pop's initiative to go global, in which distinctive, and occasionally subversive, visual concepts are devised to engage international audiences, distinguishing it from the heavily manufactured, brightly visualised characteristics typically associated with the K-pop industry.

²⁶ The visual = usually 1 member, sometimes 2 or 3, depending on the size of the group, who has an above-average (for idol standards) level of beauty, or who stands out in some way that objectively elevates them visually from the rest of the group. They are sometimes, but not always, also the centre and/or face of the group, and they usually fit Korean beauty standards the most, but again, not always. Source: [https://www.reddit.com/r/kpophelp/comments/145vbg0/when_people_say_visuals_what_exactly_do_they_mean/#:~:text=The%20visual%20=%20usually%20one%20member%2C%20sometimes,average%20\(for%20idol%20standards%20\)%20level%20of](https://www.reddit.com/r/kpophelp/comments/145vbg0/when_people_say_visuals_what_exactly_do_they_mean/#:~:text=The%20visual%20=%20usually%20one%20member%2C%20sometimes,average%20(for%20idol%20standards%20)%20level%20of).

²⁷ The most viewed stagings in this year's (2026) *CMG Spring Festival Gala* were performances by Wang Yibo (王一博) and AI Humanoids. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTzM9IlkUFs#:~:text=Subscribe%20to%20us%20on%20YouTube,com/v...; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_noZg4UI_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTzM9IlkUFs#:~:text=Subscribe%20to%20us%20on%20YouTube,com/v...;https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_noZg4UI_Q).

Consequently, the visual identity serves as an expression of Chinese soft power, continually balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the adoption of a dynamic, fashionable, and often digital-centric aesthetics prevalent in the present-day global entertainment stage.

5. Cultural amalgamation²⁸ and/or cultural appropriation²⁹: the place of English (lexis) in C-pop

The integration of English vocabulary and expressions into C-pop has evolved from a marginal phenomenon to a characteristic feature of the contemporary genre, frequently supplanting Chinese terms to achieve both aesthetic and strategic aims. This code-switching involves inserting English words such as *baby*, *crazy*, *love*, *bye*, *light*, etc., or acronyms such as *OK*, *OMG*, *DJ*, *K.O.*, etc., into lyrics, sometimes replacing Chinese equivalents that may sound overly explicit or less rhythmically suitable. Lyricists and producers often use English to boost a song's youthful coolness or Western appeal, permeating it with a modern, cosmopolitan ambience that resonates with younger, urban audiences who are primarily influenced by Western popular culture and Anglocentric music.

Beyond mere style, English is often chosen for its phonetic adaptability, which allows singers to utilise sharp, rhythmic sounds that are harder to achieve within Chinese's tonal structure. Phrases like *I love you* or *come on* are often deemed easier to digest aurally or less emotionally heavy than their Chinese counterparts, helping avoid the sometimes overly serious or dramatic tone that Chinese can take in pop music. This practice is increasingly common among singers who are *ABCs* (American-born Chinese) or those who are aiming for international appeal, using English as a bridge to reach global audiences on streaming platforms like *Spotify* or *TikTok*. The change of tone and pitch during code switching or the usage of mixed lexis also allows the artist to show “a form of cultural expression, reflecting the artist's background and the interconnectedness of different linguistic and musical traditions” (Yuhui, 2023:p.59)³⁰.

²⁸ Cultural amalgamation refers to the blending of two or more cultures to create a new, unique culture, often described using the melting pot theory. Source: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/video/what-is-cultural-amalgamation.html#:~:text=Video%20Summary%20for%20Cultural%20Amalgamation,often%20becomes%20cultural%20assimilation%20instead.>

²⁹ Cultural appropriation takes place when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-cultural-appropriation>. See also Kim (2024).

³⁰ For more information about English-Chinese code switching in pop songs, see Yuhui (2023).

Furthermore, the strategic use of English in C-pop hooks³¹ facilitates artists in appealing to an international audience that may not fully comprehend the song but can readily recognise and sing along to a familiar English chorus. This method also exemplifies a form of cultural amalgamation, resulting in a linguistic hybrid that mirrors the internationalisation of Chinese music and the expanding, interconnected nature of youth culture, wherein English functions as a global lingua franca. Although some listeners might find excessive or poorly articulated English distracting, the predominant trend demonstrates a continual integration of languages, with the occasional impactful English word regarded as an ingenious and essential instrument to enhance the overall aesthetic of a contemporary Chinese-language composition.

The prominence of the English language in Asian pop culture in contemporary academic research is evidenced by the growing number of scientific articles dedicated to this topic. Moody (2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2021) asserts that English's role in Asia is a critical component of globalisation, promoting modern identity and popular culture across the continent. Consequently, popular culture functions as a channel for bilingual creativity. Furthermore, Moody elucidates how “performative English” in Asian pop culture integrates local authenticity with global authority, asserting that

“[...] the degree that pop culture is deemed as “linguistically authentic,” the validation of language will both depend upon and highlight language ideologies. There are, broadly speaking, two channels through which language ideologies within the various discourses related to popular culture are most easily observed: within the performative channel, which examines the influence of language ideologies upon language choice in the production of pop culture artifacts, and the affiliative channel, which examines the reception and reactions toward language in pop culture artifacts. These two channels do not represent competing methods to examine language ideologies in popular culture; language ideologies in any particular instance of pop culture discourse can and should be examined simultaneously in both the performative and affiliative channels.” (2013:pp.1–2)

Linguistically bounded research has also been supported by studies of C-pop from various perspectives. Hu and Yang (2017) investigated the representation and perception of mood in C-pop music (MMR); Zha (1995) analysed the impact of selected media on culture; Matusitz (2009) studied pop and rock music along

³¹ A hook is a musical idea, often a short riff, passage, or phrase, that is used in popular music to make a song appealing and to “catch the ear of the listener.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hook_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hook_(music)).

with their symbolic meanings; and Weixin and Smithitam (2024) explored the development and current status of Chinese pop music within China.

Although C-pop is increasingly recognised as a distinct genre, its development, particularly within the realm of idol music, often exhibits troubling patterns of appropriation similar to those observed in K-pop. This raises significant concerns regarding the commodification of Black culture, particularly concerning external attributes of artists, such as hairstyles, fashion, and clothing, which are currently among the public's primary concerns. Nonetheless, it remains a subject of debate whether this phenomenon should be interpreted in this specific manner or merely as a form of personal expression by the artists, considering that the industry's proactive efforts to appeal to an international audience may underpin such choices.

6. The materialisation of the amalgam a.k.a. Jackson Wang (王嘉爾, Wang Ga Yee)

The appeal of Jackson Wang's persona resides not solely in his musical endeavours but also in his biography, which merits analysis as a representation of contemporary C-pop idols and fandom trends. As a multifaceted global superstar (his roles include rapper, singer, dancer, producer, creative director, and fashion designer), his transition from an Olympic-level fencer to a K-pop idol and, subsequently, a pioneering Chinese solo artist exemplifies his unwavering dedication and artistic vision, which he so readily shares with the public in his interviews. Jackson Wang's rise to international fame has allowed him to transcend the conventional boundaries of an idol, establishing himself as a cultural icon that bridges Asian and Western entertainment scenes.

Jackson Wang's musical repertoire extends beyond memorable hooks to reflect his life experiences, personal development, and unwavering dedication. Through Team Wang³², he has established a platform to deliver a distinctive sound that seamlessly connects pop sensibilities with introspective, often sombre lyricism. His artistic evolution from "Papillon"³³ to the Magic Man³⁴ era exemplifies an artist audacious enough to challenge conventions and explore personal vulnerabilities, thereby rendering his oeuvre a genuinely authentic portrayal of his journeys, both personal and artistic.

Wang's songs are characterised by a distinctive vocal quality, frequently described as husky and wistful, which lends emotional depth to his compositions.

³² https://www.twd-official.com/?srsltid=AfmBOop_hRmiTZ8-xxk56ocJKsGWqx_SLIgsS_fj7d-6QIiFO8dZCAty.

³³ <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Jackson-Wang/Papillon>.

³⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_Man_\(Jackson_Wang_album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_Man_(Jackson_Wang_album)).

His songwriting often investigates the tension between his public persona and his authentic, vulnerable self. Additionally, given that he frequently writes the scripts and directs his music videos, his songs are intricately linked to visual storytelling, making the product experience more wholesome and distinctive. This, coupled with his high-energy performances, creates a comprehensive and immersive artistic experience, which seems a prerequisite for staying at the top of the congested Asian and global music market.

Furthermore, his multilingual identity warrants examination of the language in his songs, with particular focus on the themes he chooses and the fundamental vocabulary he uses. Considering Jackson's assertion of proficiency in Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, English, and Shanghainese, his songs are regarded as representative of a multilingual and multicultural perspective typical of contemporary C-, K-, and other pop artists. The examples extracted from the corpus provided here focus on the language's adaptability to the target audience while maintaining authenticity, self-expression, and recognition. This methodology markedly contrasts with the traditional perception of an idol as a manufactured entity within the Asian music industry, where origins, work environments, and outcomes are predominantly shaped by external factors.

Key themes in Wang's song explore the binaries of vulnerability and self-discovery, toxic love and heartbreak, independence and passion, escapism and letting loose, as well as the complexity of the *Magic Man*³⁵ a persona we identify him with.

When analysing the lyrics of "Made me a Man"³⁶, for instance, the juxtaposition between the simplicity of the phrasing and the complexity of the issues described creates an overwhelming impression. Additionally, there is the reversibility of the expected events ("I learned how to run before I could walk") and the utilisation of a simple conjunction, *but*.

A notable aspect of Wang's expression is the use of profane language, which is quite atypical within the genre of mainstream pop music, as English generally

³⁵ In a 2022 interview given to *Rolling Stone*, Jackson Wang claims: "I think [Magic Man] is the ultimate form. Because I went through all this stuff around me, in every way possible [...] I've been through so much that people know about and some people don't know about. It's like fighting through but it's the different stages of fighting through and ultimately, I became this adjective of a feeling, this abstract image of 'Magic Man.' [...] I think a Magic Man to everybody is the ultimate form of yourself, of fighting through everything. Your loneliness, your sadness, your obstacles. You've just got to fight through that and be you. And then you're the Magic Man. [...] The message is that everyone goes through stuff, everyone has their own problems. Sometimes it's okay to say you're not okay. And you can solve it, you can conquer it, you can be the Magic Man, you will be that ultimate form of yourself." Source: <https://rollingstoneindia.com/jackson-wang-the-rolling-stone-interview/>.

³⁶ <https://genius.com/Jackson-wang-made-me-a-man-lyrics>.

discourages its use in works targeted at younger audiences. Moreover, pop music, even rap (often regarded as a rebellious genre), primarily employs such language to attract listeners. Nonetheless, regardless of one's fluency, questions arise regarding the use and potential overuse of profane language. Is the purpose merely to attract a larger audience, or is there another motive? These questions are not easily answered, as in later works such as "100 Ways"³⁷, the lyrics serve merely as an accompaniment to the overall atmosphere created by the musical background.

Jackson Wang presents one of the most intriguing contrasts in modern pop culture, functioning simultaneously as a high-energy, universally beloved idol and a deeply introspective, sometimes tortured artist. Comparing Jackson Wang, the idol, to the lyrics of his solo music is to examine the duality of a performer who has learned to leverage the polish of K-pop fame to fund and promote a raw, darker musical expression of his self-imposed representation to global audiences as "Jackson Wang from China", that being his signature phrase highlighting his pride in his heritage and his mission to represent Chinese culture in the global music scene.

As the idol persona, he is a typical present-day global superstar, charismatic, polished, accessible, and, above all, confident. The duality of his persona is, therefore, seen in his lyrics, for they are quite the opposite: they are personal, they roam between the feelings of loneliness and exhaustion, which are read as raw dictionary entries of a man who challenges and questions the position of an idol and of stardom in general.

Trotta (2018) argued in favour of studying language in pop culture through the modification of existing linguistic approaches, as the language of pop culture often reflects everyday spoken language. It allows structures that are considered ungrammatical in standard speech but are perfectly appropriate within their contextual usage. Since the aim of this article is to explore the possibility of conducting an in-depth analysis of C-pop songs written in English and understanding the density of lyrical forms used in them, the examples presented are solely for illustrative purposes. Nevertheless, it is apparent that contemporary experiences necessitate a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, which should be examined through a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach employing linguistic tools in order to understand the influence that C-pop has had and will continue to have in bridging the cultural divide between the East and the West.

³⁷ <https://genius.com/Jackson-wang-100-ways-lyrics>.

7. Conclusion

C-pop epitomises a distinctive cultural phenomenon that is frequently analysed from a glocal perspective. The industry surrounding C-pop fans has evolved from initial acceptance to a refined fan economy actively engaging with a transition towards more wholesome content. Despite regulatory measures that may have posed considerable challenges, these have concurrently stimulated innovation, exemplified by the rise of virtual idols and the internationalisation of production hubs in Southeast Asia. Regarding their future, C-pop idols ought to complete their transition from mere performers to wholesome representations of contemporary Chinese youth culture, operating within the parameters of success and accountability. The issues addressed in this paper relate to the current binary aspects of C-pop research, including global soft power, market expansion, virtual and AI idols, digital fandom, social control, and identities within local contexts. However, the breadth of these topics suggests that this preliminary exploration calls for investigating, analysing, and arguing C-pop issues that are yet to be uncovered. Future research on C-pop should prioritise understanding its unique cultural identity rather than solely comparing its commercial performance with K-pop's, therefrom establishing it as a distinct and evolving global cultural entity, ultimately fostering a comprehensive enquiry into this somewhat under-explored phenomenon.

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О Ц-ПОПУ: ИДЕАЛИ, ИДОЛИ, ИДЕЈЕ

Резиме

Кинеска популарна музика (Ц-поп) прошла је кроз брзу трансформацију током посљедњих десетак година, прелазећи са тржишне нише на високо капитализовану економију обожаваца коју покрећу емисије посвећене „идолима”. Рад истражује сложени пејзаж кинеске популарне музике која представља моћни културални медијум, али и основу за изградњу идентитета у 21. вијеку. Поред кратког прегледа основних питања везаних за Ц-поп и његову историју, рад анализира и како он посредује између култура и друштава, те како служи као кључни друштвени простор кинеској младој генерацији за маневрисање унутар личног расцјепа између индивидуализма и колективизма. Коначно, рад нуди оквир за разумијевање кинеске меке моћи у ери брзих дигиталних, културних и друштвених промјена.

► *Кључне ријечи:* Ц-поп, идоли, слике, култура фанова, амалгамација, енглески језик.