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Reinterpreting Chineseness: Diasporic Chinese Artists between National Narratives and Cross-Cultural Communication in Contemporary Mandopop

(Mentafsir Semula Kecinaan: Artis Cina Diaspora antara Naratif Nasional dan Komunikasi Rentas Budaya dalam Mandopop Kontemporari)

Jiang Ainan, Shazlin Amir Hamzah & Nurul Akqmie Badrul Hisham
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), The National University of Malaysia (UKM)

Jiang Ainan (*Corresponding Author)
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), The National University of Malaysia (UKM)
p120256@siswa.ukm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how diasporic Chinese artists reinterpret Chineseness within national narratives and cross-cultural communication. It focuses on Wang Leehom's Heaven and Earth Dragon (2019) and JJ Lin's The Story of Us (2021). The paper applies Machin's multimodal framework to analyze how sound, lyrics, and visuals construct cultural meaning and evoke emotional resonance. The findings show that diasporic Chinese artists employ two parallel paths of expression. One path builds grand cultural narratives through traditional instruments, historical imagery, and national symbols. The other conveys intercultural empathy through emotional storytelling, melodic structure, and visual poetics. These paths complement each other and form a multilayered structure of Chineseness in contemporary Mandopop. The paper further argues that the artists' cultural identities have shifted from self-oriented expressions of being Chinese to representative expressions of representing Chinese. Through this transformation, diasporic Chinese artists redefine how Chineseness is articulated between national discourse and global communication, allowing it to embody both symbolic significance and emotional universality.

Keywords: Chineseness; diasporic Chinese artists; Mandopop; national narrative; cross-cultural communication

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini mengkaji bagaimana artis Cina diaspora mentafsir semula Chineseness dalam naratif nasional dan komunikasi rentas budaya. Fokus kajian adalah lagu Heaven and Earth Dragon (2019) oleh Wang Leehom dan The Story of Us (2021) oleh JJ Lin. Makalah ini menggunakan kerangka multimodal Machin untuk menganalisis bagaimana bunyi, lirik, dan visual membina makna budaya serta membangkitkan resonans emosi. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa artis Cina diaspora menggunakan dua laluan ekspresi yang selari. Satu laluan membina naratif budaya yang agung melalui alat muzik tradisional, imej sejarah, dan simbol nasional. Laluan lain pula menyampaikan empati rentas budaya melalui

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penceritaan emosi, struktur melodi, dan puisi visual. Kedua-dua laluan ini saling melengkapi dan membentuk struktur Chineseness yang berlapis dalam Mandopop kontemporari. Makalah ini seterusnya berhujah bahawa identiti budaya artis telah beralih daripada ekspresi menjadi Cina kepada ekspresi mewakili Cina. Melalui transformasi ini, artis Cina diaspora mentakrifkan semula bagaimana Chineseness diartikulasikan antara wacana nasional dan komunikasi global.

Kata kunci: Chineseness; artis Cina diaspora; Mandopop; naratif nasional; komunikasi rentas budaya

INTRODUCTION

In an era of intensified global cultural flows and digital communication, Mandarin popular music has become a central arena for articulating Chineseness. Since the rise of China Wind pop music in the early 2000s, this musical style has fused traditional Chinese cultural symbols with Western genres such as R&B, hip-hop, and folk. The resulting hybrid aesthetic combines traditional and modern sensibilities, local and transnational elements. It has enhanced the global recognizability of Mandarin pop and reshaped the cultural imagination of Chinese cultural identity in global popular music (Fan et al. 2024).

China Wind pop music is not merely a musical style but a cultural practice through which Chineseness is reproduced and consumed. In its early phase, it was driven by diasporic Chinese artists active within transnational music industries. These artists negotiated their positions across language, identity, and market boundaries (Chen 2012; Wang 2012) and articulated a globally recognizable notion of "Cultural China" through their musical works (Huang 2023: 34). Although the commercial momentum of China Wind pop music waned during the 2010s, the reproduction of Chineseness persisted (Fan 2022; Lin 2020). Internationally influential creators began to pursue more fluid and adaptive modes of identity expression in the global market. Their works employed hybrid and cross-contextual aesthetic strategies that de-emphasized historical symbols and national imagery, reconfiguring Chineseness through processes of de-stylization and aesthetic reorientation.

In recent years, the political vision of the Chinese Dream, which envisions the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, has become a central framework in China's cultural narrative (Carrai 2021). Within this narrative, Mandarin popular music functions as a symbolic vehicle for expressing national identity and cultural confidence, and as a major medium of China's cultural communication (He 2023: 20). Wang Leehom's (2021) *Heaven and Earth Dragon* and JJ Lin's (2019) *The Story of Us* exemplify this shift. The former served as the theme song for the documentary The Forbidden City, produced by official cultural institutions, while the latter was created for the Palace Museum's cultural innovation project. Both works reveal new forms of collaboration between diasporic Chinese creators and state narratives, raising a central question: when diasporic Chinese artists participate in state narratives, how is Chineseness reconstructed and redefined in popular music?

Scholars have examined the formation and transformation of Chineseness from multiple perspectives. Some have analyzed how Chineseness is constructed and negotiated through musical texts and cultural symbols in the context of globalization (De Kloet 2005, 2010; Fung 2008). Others have focused on how diasporic artists negotiate cultural identity through hybrid strategies in cross-contextual creation (Chen 2012; Wang 2012; Wang 2023). Studies have also shown that Chineseness has taken on a functional role within the interplay of state cultural policies and the music industry (Lin 2020), and that it is continually recontextualized and emotionally reinterpreted across different social environments (Chow & De Kloet 2013; Fan et al. 2025; Lin & Um 2017; Lin 2019). However, previous research has largely

concentrated on textual representation or artistic strategies, offering limited insight into how the cultural functions of Chineseness are reshaped when diaspora and state narratives intersect, and how its meanings are constructed within digital circulation and cross-cultural reception.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CHINESENESS AS CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Scholars have examined Chineseness in popular music as a creative process of cultural hybridization. Fan, Wei, Fee, Mahamed and Nie (2024) define China Wind music as a form of "Chinese crossover" and "hybrid thinking." They emphasize the interaction of sound, lyrics, and imagery that allows traditional cultural elements to gain new aesthetic meanings in contemporary pop contexts. Huang (2023) argues that China Wind music constructs an "imagined Cultural China" through the symbolic collaboration of music and visual narratives. De Kloet (2010) examines Chinese popular music from the perspective of youth culture and globalization. He shows that Chinese music scenes result from the interaction between global and local forces and that young musicians negotiate fluid identities through creative practice. Chineseness is therefore a culturally hybrid form strategically reconstructed during creation rather than a fixed set of national symbols.

IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AND CULTURAL MEDIATION AMONG DIASPORIC CHINESE ARTISTS

Diasporic Chinese artists play a key role in shaping and transmitting Chineseness. Chen (2012) compares Wang Leehom and Vanness Wu and shows how diasporic musicians negotiate between Americanness and Chineseness by managing cultural capital and symbolic resources. Wang (2012) demonstrates that Wang Leehom's concept of "Chinked-out" represents a global branding strategy that commercializes Chinese culture and constructs dual identities for Chinese pop stars. Wang (2023) analyzes the marketing of diasporic artists and argues that race and gender identities are commodified to shape a "global Chinese" image in transnational media industries. These studies reveal the multilayered negotiation between individual strategy, market structure, and cultural representation, showing that diasporic creators function as intermediaries between Chinese and global cultural systems.

RE-CENTERING OF CHINESENESS IN NATIONAL NARRATIVES AND SOFT NATIONALISM

Recent studies indicate that Chineseness has become a central resource in national cultural communication and soft power construction. Lin (2020) argues that after the decline of China Wind as a commercial style, Chineseness has shifted from an aesthetic label to a functional element within cultural policy and industrial systems, showing a trend of re-centering. Fan (2022) suggests that recent Chinese popular music promotes desymbolization by replacing explicit cultural signs with emotional and aesthetic experiences. He (2023) traces the development of Mandopop since the 1980s and demonstrates that Chineseness has remained closely linked to national identity and cultural confidence. Xiao, Davis and Dong (2023) introduce the concept of soft nationalism through an analysis of digital short videos. They reveal that national sentiment is rearticulated through emotional and everyday expressions on online platforms. Together these studies show that Chineseness has been refashioned as both a political and communicative framework in contemporary China.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THE REINTERPRETATION OF MEANING BY CROSS-CULTURAL AUDIENCES

The spread of digital media has reshaped the meanings of Chineseness through audience interaction and participatory culture. Lin and Um (2017) find that young audiences in Taiwan negotiate between Chineseness and Taiwaneseness, illustrating that popular music serves as a flexible space for identity formation. Chow and De Kloet (2013) analyze Chinese Wind music videos in Hong Kong and show that audiences experience both cultural resonance and distance, reflecting a localized form of global viewing. Fan et al. (2025) examine participatory music practices among Chinese millennials and identify a mechanism of emotion, memory, and participation that enables young listeners to reinterpret Chineseness within digital environments. These studies reveal that audience engagement and digital participation have become central to the reconfiguration of Chineseness in the contemporary cultural landscape.

Existing research has expanded the discussion of Chineseness from textual and aesthetic analysis to cross-cultural negotiation, national communication, and audience interpretation. Two major gaps remain: (1) Most studies focus on creators and textual production and have not fully examined how diasporic artists interact with national narratives or how cross-cultural audiences perceive and emotionally respond to Chineseness in digital environments. (2) Previous studies often approach the topic from a single dimension and lack an integrated perspective that connects production, circulation, and reception. This study applies Machin's (2010) multimodal analytical framework and cross-cultural commentary to construct a three-dimensional approach that explores how diasporic Chinese artists reconstruct Chineseness through the interaction of national discourse and global circulation.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted Machin's (2010) multimodal analysis as the primary method. The approach viewed popular music as a cultural product constructed through the interaction of sound, language, and image. Melody, rhythm, lyrics, and visual elements interacted within a symbolic system to create meanings that were simultaneously heard and seen.

Multimodal analysis emphasized the complementarity among different modes and provided a means to identify how Chineseness was expressed in specific musical texts. The analysis included two sets of materials:

(1) the music works *Heaven and Earth Dragon* (Wang Leehom 2021) and *The Story of Us* (JJ Lin 2019), obtained from the artists' official YouTube channels.

(2) cross-cultural audience comments collected from the same platform.

RESEARCH SUBJECTS AND CONTEXT

This paper focused on two diasporic Chinese artists, Wang Leehom (Chinese American) and JJ Lin (Singaporean Chinese). They represented distinct creative trajectories within the context of China Wind pop music. Their works were supported or produced by official cultural institutions and circulated widely on mainstream and digital media platforms, illustrating how diasporic Chinese creators interacted with state cultural narratives.

DATA COLLECTION AND SELECTION

The data included official YouTube music videos and audience comments as supplementary evidence of digital reception. On August 30, 2025, all publicly available comments under the two videos were collected, totalling more than 5,000 entries. A total of 172 representative

comments were selected, including 69 for Heaven and Earth Dragon and 103 for The Story of Us.

The selection criteria were as follows:
(1) comments discussing the music, lyrics, or visual presentation;
(2) comments written in diverse languages (Chinese, English, or bilingual);
(3) comments showing identifiable cultural or regional perspectives.

The comments were manually screened and categorized but not statistically coded. They were used to verify how cross-cultural audiences recognized and interpreted symbols of Chineseness rather than to provide quantitative data.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The analysis followed Machin's (2010) multimodal framework and was conducted at three levels.

(1) Sound: The analysis examined melody, mode, and instrumentation, focusing on the integration of traditional Chinese instruments and modern arrangements to reveal the sonic structure of Chineseness.

(2) Language: The lyrics were interpreted line by line to analyse symbolism, metaphor, and narrative patterns, identifying how cultural identity was constructed through themes of nationhood and emotion.

(3) Image: The videos were examined frame by frame for colour, composition, spatial design, and cultural symbols to show how visual representation reinforced or reframed Chineseness. Audience comments were incorporated across these levels to illustrate how viewers from different cultural backgrounds perceived and emotionally responded to Chinese cultural symbols, demonstrating how musical texts were received within digital environments.

ETHICS AND RESEARCH REFLEXIVITY

All data were obtained from publicly accessible platforms. The study followed academic ethical standards, anonymized user information, and maintained contextual sensitivity. Repeated listening, comparison, and cross-checking were conducted to ensure the consistency and reliability of interpretation.

BACKGROUND OF ARTISTS

Wang Leehom was born in Rochester, New York, and received a Western education and musical training from an early age. He studied at Williams College and later at Berklee College of Music, where he majored in classical, jazz, and pop music (CNN 2006). This academic background gave him a solid theoretical foundation and a broad creative vision. It also prepared him for cross-cultural work in the Mandopop industry. Cultural identity was a central theme in his life. In several interviews, he mentioned that as a child he experienced racial discrimination and that music became his way to gain respect and express who he was (Oxford Union 2013). At seventeen, he entered the Chinese pop market, learned Mandarin, and sought connection with Chinese culture through his music (CNN 2006). His return was not limited to learning the language. He mastered traditional instruments such as the guzheng, erhu, and pipa, and used them in live performances and production (Chen 2012). He also made field trips to Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang to collect local sounds and ethnic musical elements (Saturday Conversation 2017). In his Oxford Union speech, he said, "As a product of both Eastern and Western cultures, I want to help foster understanding between the

two. The relationship between East and West can be mended through pop culture" (Oxford Union 2013). In his music, Wang explored artistic fusion between Chinese and Western elements. His 2004 album *Shangri-La* introduced the concept of "Chinked-out," a hip-hop style that incorporated traditional Chinese sounds to create a distinct musical identity (CNN 2006). In the album preface, he wrote, "Chinese pop lacks a strong sonic identity. We can draw from the rich resources of Chinese culture to create our own sound" (Wang 2004). His 2005 album *Heroes of Earth* continued this idea by blending Peking opera (京剧) and Kun opera (昆曲) singing with hip-hop rhythms (CNN 2006). In 2010, *Bo Ya Cuts the Strings* took inspiration from the ancient story of Boya (伯牙) and Ziqi (子期). The song featured the *guzheng*(古筝) as the main instrument and united emotion with musical structure (Wang 2010). Wang's creative path shows how a cross-cultural identity can be reshaped through musical practice.

JJ Lin was born into a Chinese Singaporean family and grew up in a multilingual and multicultural society. Both of his parents were members of a Chinese orchestra, with his mother playing the pipa and his father playing the erhu, and this musical family background laid the foundation for his artistic development. He began learning piano at the age of four. As he explained in his talk at Berklee College of Music, his experience navigating both English and Mandarin shaped his approach to melody and lyrical flow, as the two languages carry fundamentally different rhythmic and tonal qualities that directly influence musical composition. His musical career developed through practice and industry training. Early in his career, he formed a band with his brother and enrolled in a vocal training program organized by his first record label (Berklee College of Music 2025). Over time, he formed his own creative approach that focused on melody and emotion rather than technical innovation. He described music as a medium for conveying emotions and expressed a wish for more people to appreciate the beauty of Chinese culture (Men's Folio 2016; Eastern Standard Times 2024). Lin's engagement with Chinese culture in his music was lyrical and symbolic. His 2004 song *River South* used the *dongxiao* (洞箫) and *guzheng* to create poetic images of the Jiangnan region and the spirit of the *xia*(侠), a traditional figure of loyalty and restraint (Lin 2004). In 2006, *Cao Cao* portrayed a historical figure through a mix of rock and ancient themes (Lin 2006). In 2008, *Tale of the Red Cliff* reinterpreted a classical story through soft melodies and romantic lyrics (Lin 2008). These works show that Lin expressed Chineseness through emotional storytelling and poetic imagery rather than explicit cultural symbols. In interviews, he said that the emotional appeal of Mandopop could cross regional and linguistic boundaries because "diasporic Chinese communities share a deep sense of sentimentality" (Hypebeast 2022). His music focused on love, family, and personal emotion, building cultural connection through shared feeling rather than symbolic representation.

In their early China Wind works, both Wang Leehom and JJ Lin used strategic expressions of Chineseness in the Mandopop market. This expression worked as both self-representation and cultural marketing by combining traditional symbols, ethnic sounds, and pop aesthetics to increase cultural visibility and commercial appeal. In recent years, however, both artists have shifted toward national narratives and official cultural projects. This change shows a move from individual identity expression to collective cultural representation.

Wang's *Heaven and Earth Dragon* was included in the soundtrack of the documentary *The Forbidden City*, which presented six centuries of imperial history through a panoramic narrative. The album contained twelve theme songs written and performed by twelve artist groups. As the final track, *Heaven and Earth Dragon* adopted a broad historical perspective to celebrate the sense of mission among the descendants of Yan and Huang (炎黄子孙) to pass on Chinese civilization from generation to generation (China Daily 2021). JJ Lin's *The*

Story of Us served as the theme song for the Palace Museum's cultural project "Gong Xi: Dragon and Phoenix Present Auspiciousness" (宫囍龙凤呈祥). The project drew on traditional imperial wedding rituals and presented auspicious cultural elements through digital media exhibitions, academic forums, and themed creative products (People's Daily Online 2019).

These two works show a new form of collaboration between popular music and national culture. They also illustrate how diasporic Chinese artists reinterpret Chineseness through musical practice. The following section analyses these two works and explores how Chineseness is reconstructed through musical, lyrical, and visual dimensions.

FINDINGS

HEAVEN AND EARTH DRAGON

Heaven and Earth Dragon is built upon the Chinese pentatonic scale, which consists of five tones known as *gong* (宫), *shang* (商), *jue* (角), *zhi* (徵), and *yu* (羽). These tones correspond approximately to do, re, mi, sol, and la in Western *solfège*. By omitting the fourth and seventh degrees, the scale creates a concise, stable, and consonant tonal system (Lu-Ting & Kuo-Huang 1982). The pentatonic scale is not only a fundamental structural feature of Chinese traditional music but also a melodic pattern widely perceived by international listeners as a marker of Chinese style (Zhang et al. 2022). This work features traditional Chinese instruments such as *guzheng*, *erhu* (二胡), *pipa* (琵琶), *dizi* (笛子), *xiao* (箫), and Chinese drums (中国鼓) as the foundation of the melodic and harmonic structure. These instruments establish the cultural tone and serve essential structural functions in shaping melody, rhythm, and musical texture. In mainstream pop music, instrumentation plays a key role in determining a song's sonic identity and commercial appeal, typically featuring Western instruments including guitar, synthesizer, bass, and drums (Nunes & Ordanini 2014). In this piece, those functions are reassigned to Chinese instruments, resulting in a fusion style where Chinese timbres take the leading role and Western instrumentation provides support. The introduction presents a soundscape shaped by the bright and expansive tones of the *dizi* and *xiao*, evoking a sense of historical depth and spatial openness. The entry of Chinese drums provides strong rhythmic propulsion and creates a ceremonial and epic atmosphere. In the verse section, the *pipa* guides harmonic movement through broken chords, while the *guzheng* adds melodic embellishments that form layered musical textures. The *dizi* intensifies the brightness of the upper register, and the *erhu* reinforces the lower range with emotional resonance. These instruments interact closely to produce a cohesive and balanced sound. In the chorus, the *guzheng*, *dizi*, and *xiao* alternate in delivering melodic lines that enrich the musical layers and increase the sense of ethnic colour. The Chinese drums maintain rhythmic drive and amplify both the emotional intensity and the symbolic force of the refrain. (see Table 1)

TABLE 1. Instrumental Arrangement of Chinese and Western Instruments in Heaven and Earth Dragon

Instrument Type/Structure	Intro	Verse1	Chorus 1	Interlude	Verse2	Chorus2	Bridge	Chorus3
Chinese Instrument	D X C.D.	D P G	D C.D.		P G E	D G C.D.	D X C.D.	D X G C.D.

Instrument Type/Structure	Intro	Verse1	Chorus 1	Interlude	Verse2	Chorus2	Bridge	Chorus3
Western Instrument	Str. Bass D.S.	D.S.	Str. Bass D.S.		E.G. D.S.	Str. Bass D.S.	Str. Bass E.G. D.S.	Str. Bass E.G. D.S.

Note: D = *Dizi*; X = *Xiao*; P = *Pipa*; G = *Guzheng*; E = *Erhu*; C.D. = Chinese Drum; Str. = Strings; E.G. = Electric Guitar; D.S. = Drum Set

Most audiences did not use technical musical terms but frequently described the work as "epic" and "cinematic."

> *"I imagine this is the type of song that would win Eurovision. It's so powerful and epic! Love from Romania"*

> *"Even I don't know Chinese language, but I love Chinese songs, love from Indonesia"*

These responses show that audiences were drawn to the grand atmosphere of the work. Their emotional reactions focused on the scale and intensity of the sound.

The lyrics of *Heaven and Earth Dragon* opens with the image of dragon scales, invoking the dragon as a national totem and infusing the work with symbolic identity and cultural continuity. This text incorporates a wide range of recognizable Chinese cultural references, including architectural icons like the Forbidden City (紫禁城) and the Nine-Dragon Wall (九龙壁), artistic elements such as the *guqin* (古琴) and ink splashes (泼墨), and identity-marked phrases like "ancestral bloodline" (民族血脉), "descendants of the dragon" (龙的传人) and "Chinese spirit" (中华魂). These expressions make Chineseness strongly perceptible at the textual level. The work thematically foregrounds historical inheritance and national revival. The phrase "six hundred years" evokes a deep sense of time, drawing attention to the rise and fall of Chinese civilization and reflecting emotional investment in its continuity. Confucian ideals such as moral integrity, Daoist notions of inner calm and natural order, and dialectical wisdom expressed in lines like "small acts yield great results" (以小成其大) contribute to a layered structure of traditional cultural values. Its lyrical trajectory moves from past to present, collective to individual, symbolic to experiential, shaping a multidimensional space of cultural identity. The tone remains solemn and assertive, conveying cultural confidence and inner strength.

Comments from diasporic Chinese audiences revealed deep emotional resonance with these images of Chineseness:

> "我是马来西亚华人，一句'将民族的命运，昂首抬起再次复兴'让我湿红了眼，不管如何，我们都是华夏民族。" (I'm a Malaysian Chinese. The line 'revive our nation with pride and strength' brought tears to my eyes. No matter what, we are all descendants of *Huaxia*[1].)

> *"Tôi là người Việt Nam gốc Hoa, và Trung Quốc luôn là đất mẹ trong tim của tôi."* (I am a Vietnamese Chinese. China has always been the motherland in my heart.)

These responses suggest that the lyrics reactivated cultural memory and identity attachment within diasporic Chinese communities. As Zhang-Cziráková (2023) observes, the dragon's symbolism transcends national borders, serving as a cultural link among Chinese communities worldwide. This symbolic meaning is vividly embodied in the work.

The music video for *Heaven and Earth Dragon* features extensive on-site footage of the Forbidden City. It captures iconic landmarks such as the Nine-Dragon Wall (九龙壁), the

[1] *Huaxia* (华夏) is an ancient cultural identity referring to the early Chinese civilization.

Gate of Divine Prowess (神武门), and the Hall of Supreme Harmony (太和殿). Shifts in weather including sunrise, snowfall, and rain highlight the architectural beauty and temporal depth of the setting. Dragon shadows interact with Wang Leehom. Modern costumes incorporating dragon-scale patterns reinforce the symbolic significance of the dragon in Chinese culture. The video alternates between historical and contemporary imagery. This cross-temporal narrative emphasizes civilizational continuity. Scenes of Wang Leehom ascending palace steps or striking ceremonial drums suggest a connection between personal expression and national identity. The visual design blends ink-wash aesthetics with modern digital effects. This balance between tradition and modernity anchors the work in a rich cultural and historical context. Comments from international audiences were largely positive, noting the visual grandeur and the strong sense of cultural imagery in the music video.

> *"Wow This MV just makes me wanna go visit China someday. Very impressive and fabulous!"*
>
> *"su cultura ver y poder disfrutar aunque sea por sus videos me sorprende mucho es un espectaculo maravilloso."* (Their culture is beautiful, and being able to see and enjoy it even through their videos amazes me. It's a wonderful spectacle.)

However, some viewers also noted,

> *"Nice video but it sounds too patriotic."*

These responses indicate that when national narratives intertwine closely with visual art, cross-cultural audiences may experience a tension between aesthetic appreciation and emotional distance. This contrast reveals the limits of global receptivity faced by state-oriented cultural expression.

THE STORY OF US

The Story of Us does not use the traditional Chinese pentatonic mode. Instead, the work creates a subtle Chinese aesthetic through frequent use of scalar shift. This approach involves slight adjustments in pitch structure rather than full modulation, shaping the melodic colour and emotional tension in nuanced ways (Temperley 2011). The instrumentation follows a standard pop arrangement, with piano, strings, electric guitar, and drum set forming the main sonic framework. Traditional Chinese instruments such as the *guzheng* and *erhu* play a secondary role, used mainly to enhance atmosphere and emotional depth rather than to drive melodic or harmonic development. The arrangement focuses on interaction between Chinese and Western instruments. For example, the dialogue between *erhu* and Western strings emphasizes sonic cohesion. Chinese elements are not highlighted as cultural symbols but emerge naturally through the interplay of sounds within the work. (see Table 2)

TABLE 2. Instrumental Arrangement of Chinese and Western Instruments in The Story of Us

Instrument Type/Structure	Intro	V1	PC1	C1	V2	PC2	C2	B	C3
Chinese Instruments	G E		G		E	E	E		E
Western Instruments	P Str.	P Str.	P Str. Gtr.	P Str. Gtr.	P Str. Gtr. D.S.	P Str. Gtr. D.S.	P Str. Gtr. D.S.	P Str. Gtr. D.S.	P Str. Gtr. D.S.

Note: V = Verse; PC = Pre-Chorus; C = Chorus; B = Bridge; G = *Guzheng*; E = *Erhu*; P = Piano; Str. = Strings; Gtr. = Guitar; D.S. = Drum Set

Comments from cross-cultural audiences on YouTube revealed strong emotional engagement with the work's sound and mood.

> *"Why am I crying? I don't even understand the lyrics! It's so touching."*
>
> *"The erhu at the beginning makes the song more emotional."*
>
> *"The best part of Chinese songs is always the traditional instruments."*

These responses show that audiences who did not understand the lyrics were drawn to the expressive tone and emotional warmth of traditional Chinese instruments. The timbre created aesthetic attraction that encouraged listeners from different backgrounds to connect emotionally with the music and produced a subtle sense of intercultural intimacy (Johan 2020) among cross-cultural audiences.

The lyrics of *The Story of Us* do not rely on overt cultural symbols. Instead, they convey a restrained vision of Chinese love and family through subtle emotional narratives and everyday language. The work traces a romantic progression from "one person" to "us", emphasizing intimacy, belonging, and emotional commitment. This reflects a deeply rooted cultural orientation toward family-centered relationships and understated emotional expression. Lines such as "once married, we are family forever" (过了门 永远是一家人) and "what warms my hands is tea; what warms my heart is your words" (暖手的是热茶 暖心的是你一句好话) express warmth, devotion, and an ideal of enduring connection. The text conveys cultural meaning through poetic and implicit references. "Holding your hand" (执子之手) originates from *The Book of Songs* and is a classical metaphor for lasting love in Chinese literature. The term "mortal world" (红尘) draws from Buddhist philosophy to evoke impermanence and transcendence. "Wishing to be a family again in the next life" (盼来生 依然是 一家人) reflects beliefs in reincarnation and the continuity of kinship.

In the comments, international audiences frequently expressed difficulty understanding the lyrics:

> *"Can you please provide English subtitles I love your songs and voice but can't understand the meaning."*
>
> *"I really love Chinese music but... I don't understand what are they saying."*

These responses show that the song achieved strong cross-cultural emotional appeal through melody and mood, yet a gap emerged at the semantic level. The absence of clear cultural cues and translation mechanisms made it difficult for international listeners to grasp the deeper cultural meanings of the lyrics.

The music video of *The Story of Us* uses ink-wash animation to create a distinct Chinese visual aesthetic. It features images such as the jade rabbit, snowy mountains, classical courtyards, and ornamental details. Characters wear traditional clothing while keeping modern hairstyles. The scene of JJ Lin holding an oil-paper umbrella conveys a sense of temporal layering. Objects like calligraphy brushes, scrolls, and inkstones appear throughout the video. These elements do not serve as overt cultural symbols but subtly evoke a sense of cultural memory. The narrative unfolds through alternating scenes of past and present. It tells a simple yet touching love story. Chinese culture emerges naturally through the interplay of imagery and emotion.

In the comments, international audiences were deeply moved by the emotional and visual atmosphere of the music video:

> *"This MV is like a movie... it touches me and squeezes my heart... saddd this is heart-quenching pain."*

> *"The MV is really good. It makes the song even more meaningful and heartwarming."*

Some viewers showed cultural misunderstanding:

> *"I don't understand Chinese but the song is still good. Small question: did the guy go out to look for carrots?"*

These reactions show that the MV generated emotional and aesthetic resonance across cultures. However, audiences without cultural context interpreted symbolic images literally and demonstrated cultural misreading.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper examines the works *Heaven and Earth Dragon* by Wang Leehom and *The Story of Us* by JJ Lin through multimodal analysis and cross-cultural audience interpretation. The findings show that Chineseness in contemporary popular music is reconstructed through two paths: cultural symbolism and emotional narration. For overseas Chinese audiences, it evokes cultural memory, national sentiment, and identity belonging. For international audiences, it works through musical and visual aesthetics that create emotional resonance and promote cultural communication. Chineseness has moved beyond reproducing traditional symbols and now functions as a dynamic cultural practice combining aesthetic, communicative, and affective meanings within both national and global contexts.

Unlike Lin (2020) and Fan (2022) who examined commercial and aesthetic strategies in negotiating Chineseness, this study finds that diasporic Chinese artists act as both creators and cultural representatives. Their role has shifted from being Chinese, which seeks cultural roots through marketing and performance of Chineseness in the Chinese market (Chen 2012; Wang 2012; Wang 2023) to representing Chinese, which speaks for Chinese culture on the global stage. This change shows that these artists no longer affirm identity by reproducing cultural symbols. They redefine Chineseness through intercultural creative practice and turn it into an accessible and emotionally engaging cultural language.

As Wang Leehom said in an interview about *Heaven and Earth Dragon* (Kuwo Music 2021):

> *"I hope Mandarin music can reach the global stage not only in artistic or classical domains but also in popular culture. Popular music is the most influential form and reflects a culture's soft power. I hope more Chinese artists and songs will reach global audiences and share moving stories and melodies with the world."*

The interview highlights how diasporic Chinese artists act as cultural translators and ambassadors. It also reflects the shift of Chineseness from national symbolism to soft nationalism (Xiao et al. 2023).

This paper has several limitations. First, it examines only two songs, which restricts the scope of analysis and cannot fully capture the broader trends of China Wind pop music. Second, the representation of diasporic Chinese artists is limited and does not include a wider range of regions or creative styles. Third, audience responses are used only as supplementary evidence, without systematic online ethnography or in-depth interviews that could offer a more comprehensive view of cross-cultural reception. Future research should expand the dataset, include more artists and media forms, and apply digital ethnographic methods to explore how Chineseness continues to be reconstructed within global popular culture.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines how diasporic Chinese artists reconstruct Chineseness within national narratives and global contexts. Through analyses of Wang Leehom's *Heaven and Earth Dragon* and JJ Lin's *The Story of Us*, it identifies two main paths of reinterpretation: cultural symbolism and emotional narration. These paths show that Chineseness functions as both a medium of national representation and an affective language connecting global audiences. The findings indicate that popular music has become an arena where national discourse and transnational creativity meet. The identity practice of diasporic Chinese artists has shifted from self-expression to cultural representation, reflecting their active role in global communication. As China's cultural communication strategies increasingly include the Chinese diaspora in global narratives, how the creative practices of diasporic artists will evolve in popular music remains an open question. How the expression and reception of Chineseness will continue to develop in global contexts also requires sustained exploration.

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Jiang Ainan (corresponding author)
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)
The National University of Malaysia (UKM)
Email: p120256@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Shazlin Amir Hamzah
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)
The National University of Malaysia (UKM)
Email: shazlin@ukm.edu.my

Nurul Akqmie Badrul Hisham
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)
The National University of Malaysia (UKM)
Email: akqmiehisham@ukm.edu.my