**English and identity in East Asian popular music**

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**Publishing a paper**

- 2007 – Project on English in HK pop (Benson & Chik 2011)
- 2008 – Side project on Asian English pop
- 2009 – ‘Sexy, naughty, bitchy...’ presented at IASPM conference
- 2010 – ‘English and identity in East Asian popular music’ submitted to *Popular Music*
- 2011 – revised
- 2012 – published (I hope!)

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**Utada Hikaru**

- b. 1983 - daughter of Japanese parents, grew up in New York (bilingual)
- 1998 - released English album in US *(Precious as Cubic U)*
- 1999 – released Japanese album (*First Love*), all-time best-selling album
- 2000-2003 – released two more Japanese albums
- 2004 – released English album *(Exodus as Utada)* - #169 Billboard, #1 Japan, hit across East Asia

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**Sexy, Naughty, Bitchy** – Tata Young (2004)

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**Easy Breezy**

I still remember the ways that you touched me  
Now I know I don’t mean anything to you  
You’re Easy Breezy and I’m Japaneesy  
Soon you’ll mean exactly nothing to me

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**Easy Breezy** – Utada (Japan) (2004)
YouTube comments on Easy Breezy

- Why is she singing English?
- "You’re easy breezy and I’m Japanese"??? Oh hel no. Asian card REVOKED!!!!!!!
- I liked her Japanese songs (lyric and melody wise) but her American album just sucked. Japanese? wtf. I was embarrassed to play this song in front of people... She’s half-assedly trying to look sexy here and its not working... obviously. urgh too much make up. better luck next time.

‘Sexy, naughty, bitchy…’

Conference paper abstract...

- ...paper focuses on the identity work triggered off as commenters ask:
  - Should these singers sing in English?
  - Are they ‘really’ East Asian?
  - Should they be so up-front in their presentations of East Asian female sexuality?
- ...by destabilizing familiar triangulations of language, ethnic and gender identity, these MVs also destabilize relationships between popular music and place as East Asia is increasingly represented as a single, transnational and globalized space.

‘English and identity in EA popular music’

Journal paper abstract...

- Linguistic diversity is an obstacle to transnational flows in East Asian popular music
- Paper reviews strategies to overcome language barriers (incl. use of English)
- Using English is problematic because it involves negotiation of new identities with audience
- YouTube comments illustrate how language, ethnic and gender identities are problematized

Frameworks

- Cultural globalization
  - Transnational flows – East Asia popular culture? (Chua 2004; Iwabuchi 2002)
- Language choice and identity
  - ‘whenever singers use a particular language or language variety they are exploring, performing, or enacting a social identity rather than merely describing it’ (Berger 2003)
- Active audience theory
  - audiences as ‘dynamic creators of significance’ rather than ‘receptors of textual meaning’ (Barker 2004)

Language in Asian pop

- Language-based styles/genres
  - J-pop, K-pop, Cantopop, Mandopop
- First language preference
- Linguistically diverse regional market – Japan/Korea to Indonesia + diasporas
- Language strategies....

Language strategies

- Exporting original language recordings
  - JYP, Honey
- Re-recording in local languages by local artists
  - Jackie Cheung, 頭髮亂了
- Recording in language of the market
  - Eason Chan 我愛你
- Recording in English...
Asian artists using English

- Coco Lee, Jackie Cheung, Alan Tam, Sandy Lam & Leslie Cheung, Khalil Fong, Shinga Lin (HK)
- Faye Wong – Eyes On Me (Final Fantasy VIII) (China)
- Utada Hikaru, Koda Kumi, Tokyo Jihen, Misia, Dreams Come True (Japan)
- Jolin Tsai, Faith Yang (Taiwan)
- Wonder Girls, Generation Girls (Korea)

Language strategies and identity

- Language strategies may be commercially or artistically motivated
- Bi-directional / collaborative
  - artist uses audience language / audience uses artist language
  - re-negotiation of identities involved
- English represents ‘third’ strategy
  - depends on audience accepting singer’s ‘right’ to sing in English

Methodology

- examined 2,500 comments
- selected repetitive routines (300 exchanges)
- identified positions on three emergent themes (language, ethnicity, gender)
- exploratory and tentative in claims for representativeness
- reliability based on data saturation
- + reading of video

Easy Breezy – Utada (Japan) (2004)

...at the pool

....driving her ferrari
...wearing red lipstick

New identities
...both artists adopted new identities, which were encoded at a number of semiotic levels, but anchored in English-language lyrics that asserted their sexual independence...

People think it’s intimidating
When a girl is cool with her sexuality
I’m a 180 to the stereotype girls
Like staying at home and being innocent

Language problematizes identity
• Utada’s ‘perfect voice is being americanized’
• ‘I kinda like it when she mixes Japanese and English not full English’
• ‘Why is she singing english?’
• ‘She should really stick with the Japanese singing or a Japanesey voice singing in english’

Language problematizes identity
A: ‘I love it when artists make their OWN kind of music’
B: ‘I mean do you expect asians to be running around playing traditional asian instruments, really’
A: ‘the least they can do is speak in an asian language’

...problematizes ethnicity
• Utada’s music ‘has gone downhill since she went american’
• ‘That does NOT sound like a japanese voice. Wow. Sounds like a black woman’
• ‘A WHITE BOY?! EW! THAT JUST DOESN’T GO ALONG WITH UTADA’
• ‘I don’t like this video... coz I they make her fall for WHIT BOYS. SHIT!!!!’
• “You’re easy breezy and I’m Japaneze”? Oh hel no. Asian card REVOKED!!!!!!!

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English & Identity in East Asian Pop Music - Phil Benson
...problematizes ethnicity & gender

- ‘this is a side of utada i’d never thought i’d see... she looks better without makeup (well, without the cheezy-japenesey lip gloss)... Her face is painted like a whore’
- ‘OMG! Japanese girl...easy to fuck? and in English! If that is what she sings here, I am shocked as a Japanese man...sigh’

Conclusions

- Language choices are systemically tied up with ethnic and gender identities
  - English preferred by female singers and often associated with sexual assertiveness
- YouTube serves as a transnational space for negotiation of identity issues that matches the scale of the market
- Evidence of orientation to identity and of language, ethnicity and gender as key themes in audience responses

Conclusions

- Utada and Tata Young’s use of English is not taken for granted, because
  - audiences are primed to see them as Asian language performers
  - artists project alternative language, ethnic and gender identities through English
- Comments point to ‘transnational turbulence, stirred up by artists’ projections of alternative identities...that provoke questions of what it means to be an East Asian female in an increasingly English-speaking world’.

References