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Jay Chou is a megastar in Asia and fills arenas in Europe – so who is he?

The Mandopop singer loves Chopin, collects western art and combines traditional Chinese music with rap, country and salsa



课前思考题

1. 周杰伦目前在国际音乐界的地位如何？
2. 周杰伦的音乐有何特点？
3. 周杰伦和西方文化有何渊源？



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1. One of the world's biggest pop stars has just played a series of sold-out arena dates in London and Paris. Nothing unusual about that — except that the shows went unreviewed in either country and the identity of the star is liable to provoke blank looks on the streets of both cities. He is Jay Chou, king of Mandopop, a huge name in Asia and among the Chinese diaspora but little known elsewhere.

2. Chou, 45, is up there with pop's heaviest hitters in terms of sales figures. He came ninth in the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry's top 10 most successful global artists in 2022, one place ahead of Ed Sheeran. After marrying the actress-model Hannah Quinlivan in 2015 in a Yorkshire abbey — the reception was held at the palatial stately home, Castle Howard — he sparked a tourist boom in the northern English county.



3.Raised in Linkou District near Taipei, Chou sings in Mandarin. Mandopop and its Cantonese equivalent, Cantopop, are subsets of Chinese pop, or C-pop, whose roots stretch back almost 100 years. The first Chinese pop song is considered to be a charming light jazz dance number from 1927 called “Mao mao yu”, which was influenced by western pop but used Chinese pentatonic scales.

4.A similar fusion can be heard in Chou's music. At the first of his two shows at London's O2 Arena, there were catchy rap tracks with a dance troupe doing some slightly ungainly breakdancing. Then the next moment, to an “oooh” from the seats around me, the spotlight picked out Chou playing the guzheng, a Chinese plucked zither.

5.When he sang, English subtitles were projected on to backing screens. The subtitling had limited use, judging by the amount of people in the 20,000-capacity venue who were singing along. But the outreach signalled intent. Last year, Mandopop streams went up 45 per cent on Spotify, which is unavailable in China. Perhaps Jay Chou's name will not meet with blank looks in European cities for much longer.



6.If so, the interest will be reciprocal, as Chou has a keen interest in western culture. Brought up by schoolteacher parents, he learnt classical piano and cello as a child. Chopin is his favourite composer. In 2007, he directed and starred in the hit film Secret about a piano prodigy: references to Chopin are seeded throughout it.

7.The title of his latest album, Greatest Works of Art, alludes to his formidable art collection. According to a CNN report in 2021, a Picasso painting hangs in his office and a work by Jean-Michel Basquiat has pride of place in the living room of his Taipei home. A Peter Doig painting looks down over a transparent piano. He credits his mother, who taught art, as the inspiration for his collecting.

8.Having begun his career as a professional songwriter, he has been a star since his debut album Jay came out in 2000. His Chinesified blend of styles — including, at the O2 Arena, songs based on country music hoedowns and Cuban salsa — has been so influential on the sound of Mandopop that it has generated its own classification, “Chou Style”. He also has his own record label. In December he signed a “strategic partnership” with Universal Music Greater China, a division of the world's biggest record label.



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9.Mandopop's main production hub is Taiwan, but its largest market lies across the strait in Chinese Mainland. Like other Mandopop stars, Chou tries to avoid entanglement in the tense relations between Chinese Mainland and Taiwan. Politics was absent from the songs in his setlist at the O2 Arena, which were mostly themed around love affairs and break-ups, the staple subjects of pop music across the ages.

10.Chou has a smoothly emotive voice, well-suited to the ballads that make up a good portion of his repertoire. The words are mostly written by lyricist Vincent Fang, the Bernie Taupin to his Elton John: they first linked up when Chou was working as a professional songwriter. Fang's lyrics have a sophisticated dimension, drawing on the nature imagery of traditional Chinese poetry (as did "Mao mao yu", aka "Drizzle", in 1927).

11.To this western observer, much of the staging at the O2 Arena was like any arena pop spectacle with confetti, pyrotechnics, costume changes and group choreography. Other sections were less familiar, however.

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12. The audience was all seated, which damped the otherwise fervent atmosphere. At one point, Chou and several guest singers bantered with fans and sang requests, like a light entertainment variety show. People waved glowing plastic hearts on sticks, a common prop in South Korean K-pop. "Jay" was written on the hearts in Roman script alongside Chinese characters. For two hours, a corner of London was a portal into the realm that belongs to the king of Mandopop.