

When China Met Rock and Roll: Globalization and Localization in the 1980s' Post-Mao Era

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Abstract: This paper explores the emergence of Chinese rock music in the 1980s, emphasizing its complex interplay with American rock influences and the socio-cultural transformations in post-Mao China. Pioneering Chinese rock musicians not only embraced and imitated American rock but also adapted its themes and styles to resonate with local realities, reflecting a unique process of globalization. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's concept of cultural "scapes", the analysis highlights how the reform and opening-up policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping facilitated the flow of Western music and ideas into China, paving the way for a new cultural landscape. The disillusionment with Maoist ideologies and the desire for individualism among the youth fueled a distinct rock movement characterized by a paradoxical relationship with both traditional Chinese culture and Western influences. Through the works of artists like Cui Jian, the paper illustrates how Chinese rock music became a powerful medium for expressing the aspirations and frustrations of a generation navigating the complexities of modernization and identity. Ultimately, this study underscores the localized adaptation of a global genre, showcasing how the Chinese rock music scene emerged as a reflection of the country's unique historical and cultural context.

Keywords: Music; Chinese music; Globalization; Social change; Cultural globalization; Cultural adaptation

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1. Introduction

Pioneers of Chinese rock music in the 1980s were significantly influenced by American rock music, which formed the basis of the music genre and helped develop the music text and context. Chinese rock music not only embraced and imitated American rock music from the 1960s but also adapted the context and text of American rock music to current local circumstances. Moreover, rock music also experienced globalization due to the post-Mao generation's unique mental status, new government policies, and the profound change in social customs after the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the globalization of rock music in China from the 1980s not only reflects how and why the

globalization of a certain genre of music takes place, but it also provides a unique insight into how a foreign genre of music is localized and adapted to the current social and cultural circumstances.

2. The beginning of Chinese rock music

History and the social circumstances in the early era of Chinese rock music are important since they shed light on how it is accepted and shaped by local factors. As Arjun Appadurai points out, there are five different “scapes” of how contemporary culture becomes globalized: mediascapes (flows of popular culture), financescapes (flows of money), technoscapes (flows of technology), ethnoscapes (flows of people), and ideoscapes (flows of ideology), music as a form of culture also applies ^[1]. In addition, these scapes are all highly related to social factors since different social statuses have different media cultures, economic statuses, ethnic groups, and unique cultures. For example, reggae and gospel music are being embraced by Japanese youth as a form of counterculture and identity-making, offering a way to engage with global Black culture despite Japan’s ethnic homogeneity, resonating with Japanese audiences as a symbol of rebellion and cultural resistance ^[2]. Therefore, examining the historical and social circumstances could reveal how globalized rock music came to China and fundamentally changed into a distinguished local rock music genre.

The beginning and development of Chinese rock music are deeply associated with the unique and changing social circumstances at the start of the post-Mao era. Arjun Appadurai’s concept is still useful in analyzing the relationship, as all five scapes are present throughout the flow of Western rock music into Mainland China and during the reform and opening-up period — the most profound event in the post-Mao era which had a great influence on the making of all scapes.

Deng Xiaoping initiated the reform and opening-up movement in 1977, ushering in a huge-scale reform in the economy, culture, politics, and ideology of the country. The movement is most famous for its agricultural reform in the countryside. The decentralization of government controls in the economy “xiaokang” (moderately prosperous society), with light industry as the foundation of the national economy instead of heavy industries, was taken as a guide for future development ^[3]. Along with internal reforms, the opening up referred to opening the door for foreign businesses to boost the economy and the country welcomed foreign investment beyond those from socialist countries for the first time ^[4]. Special Economic Zones were planned for foreign investment that suffered fewer shackles from the bureaucratic and national regulations and interventions prevalent in the Mao era that might hamper economic growth ^[5].

Along with the economic opening up, cultural and social aspects undoubtedly occurred. During the movement, the Chinese government formally established diplomatic relations with the United States and many other Western and “capitalist” countries ^[6]. This is strong proof that the Chinese government wanted to re-enter the wider economic and cultural world. During the reform period, Western and capitalist ideas and pop culture, regarded as dangerous and hedonistic in the Mao era, were imported to China from other parts of the world.

In this situation, Chinese leaders abandoned Maoist ideas, which argue that “literature and art are subordinate to politics”, and adjusted the attitude of the CCP toward culture, which means that culture cannot be subordinate to politics. However, it still cannot be separated from politics. The primary leader at the time, Deng Xiaoping, advocated that cultural and academic areas should contain “a hundred schools of different and contented thoughts and blossoming of a hundred flowers”; namely, post-Mao China should have a relatively free environment for culture ^[7]. Thus, during the first decade of the post-Mao era, the relatively free cultural policy made the entrance of

Western culture, such as Western literature, art, and philosophy, possible. Along with the transmission of science and knowledge, the first wave of cultural imports arrived simultaneously on college campuses.

Therefore, the cultural policy in the 1980s heralded the entrance of Western pop music like the Beatles, The Carpenters, Michael Jackson, and Madonna, as well as TV shows, East Asian pop music, comics, and cartoons from Hong Kong, Taiwan region, Japan, and South Korea. These are the mediascapes through which rock music flowed into China^[8]. Moreover, China changed from its previous locked-down border and instead welcomed foreign visitors, workers, and students. When the education for students studying in China was restored, developed, and regulated, international students became an important cultural source and window to the Western world for the young generation^[9]. While they could bring Western music to Chinese colleges, rock musicians from the West also contributed to developing Chinese rock culture via the influence of albums and live concerts. For example, the British pop rock band Wham's visit to China in 1985 was a groundbreaking musical tour and a strong initiation of the spread of Western rock music. After this groundbreaking tour, the flow of musicians to China became more frequent^[10].

Economic reform in the post-Mao era boosted the previously undeveloped Chinese market. The concept of socialism with Chinese characteristics adopted private ownership of businesses, free-market policies, and global cooperation for the first time since the PRC was formed^[11]. Private businesses and foreign investments quickly grew to make up a greater percentage of the economy and improved the income and accessibility to all kinds of goods in China. Investors in music, such as Polygram, JVC, and Rock Records from Hong Kong and Taiwan region, could access the mainland market and provide financial support for Chinese rock music pioneers like Cuijian and Heibao^[8]. These are the financescapes of the globalization of rock music in China. While musical entertainment companies produced copies of albums of Chinese rock pioneers and Hong Kong and Western rock music, they required the Chinese to use new entertainment technologies.

Thus, the opening-up part of the reform and opening-up period contributed to the technoscape of Chinese rock music. The Chinese public could access modern electronics for daily use and the concept of the new "three big stuff" for a family became a television, a washing machine, and a refrigerator, distinguished from the old triad of a bicycle, a sewing machine, and a machine watch^[12]. The public could use technology for entertainment in this new era rather than focusing on utility. Technologies like radios, CD players, and Walkman cassette players were available, which formed the necessary infrastructure for the spread and development of rock music among the public.

These four scapes built the material foundation for the Chinese rock music community since they enabled the public to physically and legally access Western rock music. The accessibility made the young Chinese generation, which formed the first Chinese rock music community, aware of the existence of Western rock music and enabled them to understand its musical techniques and texts^[13]. That knowledge undoubtedly formed the basis for Chinese rock musicians to create Chinese rock music.

As discussed above, the ideoscape was deeply associated with the reform and opening-up movement's culture policy, which was a total shift from the far-left cultural revolution period that left no room for entertainment without political and socialist ideology propaganda. When Western ideas of rebellion, individualism, and liberty came, the authority could not control the flow of ideas. In general, the authority took a moderate stand, as Deng says: "Culture cannot be subordinate to politics but cannot be separated from politics." Instead, Chinese authorities regarded the flow of Western rock music, like the ice-breaking concerts of the Wham, as an opportunity to express the determination of Chinese leaders to open up to the world and as propaganda for a less rigid and more open

social and cultural atmosphere compared to Mao's ideology^[14].

Due to the relatively fewer restrictions in cultural and ideological fields, new and rebellious texts from Western rock music, such as freedom, masculinity, rebellion, and protest against authority, were prospering among the younger generation. New ideas embedded within rock music, like questions of confinement in China's past and current, rebellion against collectivism, and praise for individual love and freedom, formed another part of the ideoscape; the ideoscape that was crucial in shaping the meaning behind the text of the Chinese rock music community. The spirit of Chinese rock music was the continuation of American rock music in the context of the progressive social movement in the 1960s, which had social messages and inspiring purposes and found a large audience among the young generation with an eagerness for rebellion^[8].

The social context that cultivated American rock music in the 1960s is similar to Chinese society in the 1980s. In the 1960s, the young American generation expanded in influence; young people fueled the counter-culture social movements of the 1960s and music was essential to expressing an equal and ideal multicultural society, which the progressive movement supported. The rise of rock music was also boosted by technological advancements^[14]. Moreover, the young generation's opposition to American intervention in Vietnam and promotion of racial equality and civil rights generated critiques of the military and industrial complex's dominant position in American political, economic, and cultural life. The overstated priority of the military overshadowed social issues like racial equality and social welfare and brought aggressive and violent military values to American culture.

In China, the post-Mao era combines reforms and retreats^[16]. While the economic reform was successful and the society became more open towards liberal ideas, the political status of China remained largely unchanged compared to the generation of Mao, and corruption and inflation made people's standard of living decrease after the initial improvement^[16]. Therefore, rock music and other cultural movements, like the book Salon of Western Thinkers, represented the young generation's rebellion against authoritarianism, political corruption, and looser but still strict cultural confinement. Therefore, when songs with marks of the social movements of the 1960s, like "We Shall Overcome" and "Blowin' in the Wind" came to China, the young generation could easily understand and apply their inner context, like the work of Cuijian and Heibao^[16].

The arrival of rock music in China began as part of a wider globalized process: five scapes existing in the globalization that happened in China built the foundation for the process and the similarity in the social context and the young generation's ideology between China and America made rising Chinese rock music a continuation of 1960s American rock music in spirit.

3. The making of Chinese rock music

Even though Chinese rock music was hugely influenced by American rock music from the 1960s, it does not entirely follow the American pattern. Chinese audiences and musicians applied their experiences to modify the text and context of 1960s rock and pop music from America and other English-speaking nations. While young generations from both countries and periods wanted to re-evaluate the current culture of their nation, the history and current social situations of both countries and social situations were different. They thus shaped the unique Chinese rock music style.

Teng argues that Chinese rock music in the 1980s mobilized Chinese traditional culture, including literature and musical forms, and marks the mobilization as a unique aspect of early Chinese rock music^[16]. However, in the

same article, Teng mentioned that many scholars described the making of Chinese rock music as “anti-traditional” and “counterculture”^[16]. This paradox was created by the particular social context in 1980s China: while the situation is similar to that of its American counterparts, the re-evaluation in China was more radical.

The death of Chairman Mao — known as the “Sun in the Hearts” of the Chinese and the most important founding father and leader of the People’s Republic of China, was a huge blow to many Chinese people. His ideas and policies, known to everyone in China, were out of the public vision under Deng’s reform and opening-up policy. Mao’s ideologies and proposals, for example, wiping out the influence of ancient Chinese traditions and the total condemnation of Western capitalist ideas, were rejected after his death. Society in the Mao era was guided to being collective and controlled. However, in the post-Mao era, people were encouraged to put individuals first and the society seemed to be out of governmental control by witnessing the flow of foreign capital and ideas^[14].

The disillusionment towards Maoism and the past and the disorientation towards new things emerged in the reforms and opening-up era. Taking the “tradition” that was widely discussed as a theme in Chinese rock music as an example epitomizes this sense of disillusionment. The ten-year Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 was under Mao’s order of “class struggle” and ancient Chinese traditions and artifacts were destroyed or taken away for the “revolution”^[14]. In the post-Mao era, those condemned “backward” traditions reappeared in public and the authorities began to admit that ancient traditional practices and artifacts were essential to the formation of Chinese identity^[17]. Thus, the “tradition” that Chinese rock music wanted to address is an ancient Chinese tradition; Chinese rock music wanted to be “anti” the tradition of Maoism — a culture with strong socialist political propaganda in the past — and the unchanged system of government.

However, at the same time, the strange but novel Western culture and modernity came and made the post-Mao generation question their nation’s traditions: Westerners, with their culture, were advanced and lived a good life and the Chinese adhering to their classic culture and following socialism were underdeveloped and lived a poor life. The comparison alone might be proof that Western culture and traditions were better than Chinese culture and traditions were for the Chinese. The disillusion towards both classic and socialist traditions and the disorientation towards the domestic tradition and foreign culture could be easily grasped by music.

The works of Cuijian, the father of Chinese rock music, are great representations of disillusionment and disorientation that form the theme and spirit of Chinese rock music. In the post-Mao era, a large proportion of new Chinese pop music in the mid-1980s was influenced by pop music from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, which tended to use romantic and historical topics as themes. While pop music from these three areas had Western roots, Chinese musicians still tended to utilize classical and folk instruments from ancient China. However, Cuijian’s first hits had strong Western pop elements, including “disco-rooted quarter-note throb of the kick drum” and acoustic or electric guitars. The theme of these songs had a political and educative message, instead of purely apolitical romances and histories like Bob Dylan’s songs in the 1960s^[18]. Meanwhile, the voice of Cui is also distinguished: it was a new and original Chinese voice, not shouting out slogans like good socialist comrades, speaking softly like pop singers or the highly trained voices of national vocalists. Instead, he was thought of as having a singing technique like Bob Dylan, with his deep and hoarse groan conveying the post-Mao generation’s pains, tensions, and doubts like the lyrics and metaphors of his songs.

In his signature song, “Nothing to My Name”, the lyrics and meanings have received various interpretations, as some have interpreted it as a song about love and desire while others see it as a political metaphor, which Cui addresses to the Chinese nation as to a girl^[19]. In the song, the narrator says that he is worried that he has nothing to give to the girl that he loves. “Nothing” is a metaphor for the lack of material resources like the song’s audience

— young students and workers who did not economically benefit from new policies suffered from limited resources to marry, live happily with lovers, or attract others ^[20].

Meanwhile, the word “nothing” also suggests the young generation did not only get nothing in the new era but also retained nothing from the Mao era, which was opposite to the propaganda of Mao’s collectivism and the reforms and opening-up movement’s concept of a “moderately prosperous society.” “Nothing” is a great word for expressing disillusionment. Furthermore, the symbols used in this song conveyed the bewilderment of this generation due to the rapid Chinese transformation into a modern society connecting with the international community, as the line “the earth is turning under your feet” indicates. Then, there is disillusionment with traditional ideas, from the classic Confucianist ideas of obedience to the socialist ideas of conformism and asceticism, due to new knowledge of seductive foreign concepts like liberty and individualism, as suggested by lines like “the waters of life are flowing free” ^[21].

Ultimately, the lyrics express Cui’s desire for Western concepts of individualism. Even though the song begins with doubts about whether the girl will accept him, the narrator later becomes more confident and he says he will “grab her hands” and assume the girl “will go with him.” However, the doubts and disorientation still exist in the last lines; the narrator asks the girl, “Do you really mean to tell me, You love me as I (have noted)?” On an individual and social level, Cui was still determining whether the young generation could pursue individual love without material. At the political level, even though Cui was disillusioned with the past and present, he still had the hope that the nation would support the young generation’s pursuit of new values and bring change and development as the young generation wanted. However, he remained doubtful and disoriented due to the current complex situation.

The paradoxical mentality that the song expresses distinguishes Chinese rock music: it is the product of China’s unique historical period and thousands-year-long history. While Cuijian expressed his doubts about classical and communist traditions in “Nothing to My Name”, he still used classic Chinese instruments and he did not reject communist elements in his clothing and works. Classic Chinese instruments like the gu-zheng (zither) and xiao (flute) are important features of his future songs, even though he insisted that he wrote pure rock music ^[22–23]. In addition, while his songs expressed his disobedience towards the restrictions of free expression in Mao’s era, he wore the military hat of the Chinese army, made posters with strong communist elements, and used Mao’s people’s guerrilla warfare as a creative source for his posters. Cuijian’s followers carried this paradox and became the essential source for rock musicians to explore and create their distinguished works.

There were still rock musicians like Cuijian and Heyong who continued to create works with strong ideological and political implications, expression, and non-commercial forms of production. Their work represents the rebellion against the undesired reality after the disillusionment and the determination of resistance to face the disorientation ^[24]. There were also musicians like the band Heibao, who did not express their rebellion against the authority but focused on the expression of individualistic love and alternative lifestyles tolerated by the authority. They wanted to ignore or self-mitigate the disillusionment and disorientation by focusing on individual emotions.

Surprisingly, the Chinese government sought to control the rebellious rock music tide and the state supported some rock musicians. The most famous band supported by the state was the Tang dynasty, whose name came from the most powerful classic Chinese dynasty, Tang. The band was professional and apolitical, and they embraced Chinese traditional music forms like using classic Chinese in their lyrics, chanting lines from famous poets, and assimilating Peking opera tones. Their songs aimed to praise the glorious Chinese past and raise nationalistic pride. They rejected disillusionment by praising the traditional values of the past and quickly found their place amid the

disorientation. As Ding Wu, the guitar player for the Tang Dynasty said in an interview: “Rock is based on the blues, and we can never play the blues as well as an American. It is just not in our blood. We can imitate it, but eventually, we will have to go back to the music we grew up with, to traditional Chinese music”^[25].

4. Conclusion

The rise of Chinese rock music began with the Chinese opening up to the international community. It was a typical example of globalization: social context and policies built a stage for the flow of rock music and the ideas of American rock music from the 1960s. However, Chinese musicians and society shaped globalized rock music, making it a unique genre. The rapidly transformative 1980s disillusioned the young Chinese generation towards their country’s past and disoriented them toward new emerging ideas. Those emotions and a paradoxical mentality toward everything became the source of Chinese rock music. The making of Chinese rock music is a great example of globalization defined by Joan Ferrante, that locality, in this case, the post-Mao young generation and the social context they lived, reacts to a foreign thing, (Western rock music) and produces a heterogeneous and unique cultural product — Chinese rock music^[26].

Disclosure statement

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