

Nationalism in Chinese Popular Music

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Abstract: Nationalism is an ideology that has emerged in modern times. James Clifford categorizes nationalism into four stages. This article correlates Clifford's four stages of nationalism with four periods in Chinese popular music history: the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic years, the May Fourth Movement period, the period from the "September 18 Incident" to the end of the Anti-Japanese War and the beginning of the Liberation War, and the period from the founding of the nation to the present day. It explores the different ideologies manifested in Chinese popular music during these four periods, as well as the Chinese nation's pursuit of independence, strength, unity, and development.

1. Introduction

Nationalism is regarded as one of the most significant socio-political phenomena in the past two centuries. It is an ideology that emerged in modern times, predominantly in the 19th century. Scholars have extensively discussed the definition of nationalism. According to Li Hongtu^[1], nationalism is an ideological concept based on ethnic sentiments. It encompasses one's love, loyalty, and devotion to the national community, as well as the pursuit and ideals of national unity, independence, strength, survival, and development. Nationalism has the unique ability to bridge the gap between music and culture, surpassing any other forms of identity. Renowned British sociologist Anthony D. Smith incorporates the cultural and social aspects of language, beliefs, emotions, and consciousness centered around the nation into the definition of nationalism. He argues that a comprehensive overview of nationalism should encompass the formation and development of a nation, the sense of belonging, and the language and symbols embedded within the emotional memory of the nation. Moreover, the social and political activities undertaken to advance national interests represent the universal or particularistic beliefs and ideologies of a nation^[2].

Clifford divides nationalism into four stages: the stage of formation and solidification of nationalism; the period when nationalists achieve victory; the stage of nationalists establishing their own nation; and the post-founding period, during which nationalists realize the necessity of establishing and maintaining relations with other nations in a non-standard society^[3].

We can correlate China's history with these four stages. The first stage corresponds to the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic era, which marked the formation of modern Chinese nationalism. It was a phase characterized by the blending of new and old forms of nationalism, with a focus on opposing both domestic and foreign ethnic oppression, and a fusion of nationalism and democracy^[4].

The second stage corresponds to the May Fourth Movement period, which was a crucial phase in

the development of modern Chinese nationalism. During this time, the Chinese people united with anti-imperialist and anti-feudal forces, searching for the reasons behind the intellectual and cultural backwardness of the Chinese nation. It was a period of diverse trends as various political and ideological movements began to intertwine.

The third stage corresponds to the period from the "September 18 Incident" to the end of the Anti-Japanese War and the beginning of the Liberation War. It was the pinnacle stage of modern Chinese nationalism. In terms of ideology and culture, there was a shift from reflection and criticism of traditional culture to exploration and promotion. Faced with the escalating national crisis, the primary task was to unite the people and inspire their awareness of resisting Japanese aggression. Traditional culture, as the crystallization of thousands of years of Chinese history and struggle, naturally became a powerful weapon to boost morale, enhance national confidence, cohesion, and withstand Japanese aggression. Cultural historiography flourished, with numerous works on Chinese cultural history emerging. Various social classes, parties, factions, and political forces gradually rallied under the banner of the national united front, forming a united front to resist the common enemy. After repelling the shared enemy, the Chinese people began to explore the path of liberation that belonged to China itself.

The fourth period corresponds to the time from the nation's founding to the present day. Contemporary Chinese nationalism is complex and multi-layered. At the national level, nationalism primarily manifests itself in political, economic, cultural, and technological competition during foreign interactions. At the ethnological level, it is characterized by Han-centered nationalism, ethnic exclusionism, and separatist tendencies^[5].

2. The Chinese popular music during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic era

School songs were the result of Chinese modern music's exposure to Western influences under the impact of nationalist sentiments. School anthems emerged as a form of song accompanying the rise of new schools in our country. They served as a significant milestone in the development of modern Chinese music. The term "school anthem" refers to the songs taught in music classes in Chinese schools between 1898 and 1919. Subsequently, due to their rapid development and prosperity, they spread throughout society. Most of these songs adopted foreign melodies and were filled with Chinese lyrics reflecting new ideas and culture. Chinese writers rarely had their own melodies. It formed a new type of song that possessed popular elegance distinct from traditional music.

The content of school songs generally encompassed the patriotic spirit of enriching the nation, strengthening the military, and resisting enemies; exalting the victory of overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a republican government; providing military and national education to primary and secondary school students; advocating women's liberation and self-reliance; promoting the study of a new culture and advocating breaking with the old and establishing the new; educating young people to strive for learning, love life, and nature; advocating loyalty to the army, and respecting Confucius and other feudal ethics^[6].

The school crisis and school songs were the initial products of Chinese modern music's early adoption of Western influences against the backdrop of the nation's struggle for survival^[7]. At the same time, school songs served as an important symbol of the initial stage of our country's new music culture, embodying the nationalist consciousness and content of the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic era. They introduced Western ideas and culture to the Chinese public, cultivating the first group of modern music educators in China, and laying the foundation for subsequent Chinese popular music.

3. Chinese popular music during the May Fourth Movement era

Chinese folk songs are an important reflection of the lives and production of the Chinese working people, with a long history. They are songs created and sung by the laboring people in their daily lives and work. These songs spread through oral communication between individuals, undergoing constant selection, transformation, processing, and refinement in the process of communication. Their content mainly reflects the urban population's views on life and political struggles at that time. Among them, xiaodiao (a traditional Chinese tune) had the most significant influence on Chinese popular music. Many early popular songs incorporated melodies based on traditional xiaodiao as the foundation for composition, combined with lyrics, and added elements of popular music in the musical arrangements.

During the May Fourth Movement, China's first popular music piece was born. It was called "Mao Yu" and was composed by Li Jinhui. "Mao Yu" had typical characteristics of Chinese folk tunes, with accompaniment from the Western-style bands prevalent in Shanghai at that time. The first edition of "Mao Yu" was recorded just before the Nanyang tour of the Chinese Song and Dance Ensemble. It is worth noting that the record was labeled as "school music"^[8]. This indicates that school songs laid the foundation for the development of Chinese popular music. The singing style continued the traditional folk tune singing style, with a thin and high-pitched voice, as described by Mr. Lu Xun as a "cat-like voice of a strangled chicken." In terms of lyrics, it boldly depicted innocent love between men and women, reflecting the awakening of new women breaking free from long-standing feudalistic ideas during the May Fourth Movement.

The popular songs of the May Fourth era embodied a new aesthetic spirit. They not only represented a commercial and entertainment culture but also embodied the nationalist spirit of the "May Fourth Spirit." Chen Wei and Gui Qiang^[9] argued that the popular music of that time was inspired by the Enlightenment movement and pursued freedom, equality, and personal liberation. Guided by public consciousness, they actively explored the popularization and artistic expression of popular songs, representing the Chinese nation's search for the reasons behind the backwardness of Chinese thought and culture and their integration with various political and ideological movements. Driven by patriotism, they became an unremitting cry for national salvation and liberation.

4. Chinese Popular Music from the "September 18 Incident" to the Anti-Japanese War Period

The symbol of a nation can appear distinct from others through the objects it encompasses—the nation itself. However, it can also be manifested through the precision and vividness of its symbols^[10]. During this period, China went through the Anti-Japanese War and the Liberation War. In such a turbulent era, Chinese popular music flourished and entered its golden age, commonly referred to as the "Shanghai period." The popular music of this era mainly consisted of jazz, folk tunes with ethnic styles, and theatrical and artistic songs.

Jazz, a significant representative of American popular music, originated in New Orleans and gained popularity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. With the growing influence of American jazz, it reached Shanghai around the 1920s. Due to its distinctive dance rhythms, jazz quickly became popular in Shanghai's dance halls and spread through records and other forms of media.

Under the influence of record companies, some composers began to experiment with creating popular songs. They gradually incorporated jazz elements into their music, particularly in arrangement, utilizing jazz bands or fusion of Eastern and Western accompaniment arrangements. In terms of instruments, they also started using Western instruments such as the piano and saxophone, while substituting percussion instruments like drums, woodblocks, and clappers for the drum set. Violin, yangqin (hammered dulcimer), pipa (Chinese lute), and guzheng (Chinese zither) were used instead of the guitar. With the accompaniment of jazz bands, the concept of jazz harmony

gradually emerged in Chinese compositions.

In terms of rhythm, Chinese popular music was also influenced by jazz. The use of the off-beat rhythm in a 4/4 time signature was widely employed to create a lively and dynamic rhythm. Some new popular songs presented a distinct contrast in harmony and rhythm compared to traditional Chinese music. The concept of Chinese popular music became more defined as it incorporated elements of jazz. Therefore, jazz played a pivotal role in the development of Chinese popular music, and as a result, a significant number of jazz-inspired popular music compositions emerged in the 1930s and 1940s.

After the May Fourth Movement, numerous foreign musicians came to China to perform or settle abroad. They imparted their skills to Chinese music scholars, and some overseas musicians returned to China to establish professional music schools. As a result, Western music composition techniques gradually found their way into the works of Chinese composers. Western music theories, such as music theory, harmony, composition, vocal studies, piano, and violin, were introduced as core courses in music education. Notably, the Music Department of the Shanghai Academy of Normal University, established in 1919, and the "Shanghai National Conservatory of Music" (later renamed the "National Conservatory of Music" in 1929) exerted significant influence in this regard. The impact was also evident in the realm of popular song composition. For instance, many popular songs borrowed the arrangement techniques employed in art songs. An exemplary illustration is the song "Fire of Love" with lyrics by Tao Qin, composed by Chen Gexin, and performed by Bai Guang. The introduction of this song was adapted from Brahms' "Hungarian Dance." ^[11]

It is apparent that popular music during the wartime period underwent substantial Westernization. In terms of content, particularly during the eight years of the Anti-Japanese War, love and romance predominantly took center stage. The sensitivity of political issues affected popular songs, as expressing certain ideas directly was hindered by the suppression from the aggressors. Amidst the populace's struggle to evade danger and their longing for peace during this protracted period, popular music emerged as a vessel for cathartic release from their burdensome feelings.

5. The popular music in China from the founding of the nation until today

In the early years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the center of development for Chinese popular music shifted from Shanghai to Hong Kong, hence it was also referred to as the "Hong Kong period." From the late 1940s to the early 1950s, the music style primarily emphasized gentleness, with compositions influenced by traditional operatic elements. In the 1960s, Taiwanese pop music emerged, characterized by lively melodies and relaxed rhythms. The folk song movement of the 1970s propelled Taiwanese pop music into a new era with a fresh outlook. During this period, many thoughtful young individuals began to explore indigenous cultural perspectives. Although the folk song movement lasted only a brief five to six years, it elevated the quality of Taiwanese popular music. In an era when Taiwanese culture and politics were still restricted, concepts of longing for one's homeland, freedom, and equality were conveyed through music. A group of students raised the banner of inheriting and revitalizing traditional culture, secretly upholding these ideals through their own creative works in order to create their unique cultural expressions^[12]. Simultaneously, the 1970s witnessed the emergence of numerous music works with a strong sense of "Chinese spirit." The term "Chinese spirit" refers to the direct expression of nationalism in the lyrics. Such popular songs were not uncommon, with several outstanding works gaining wide popularity and a devoted audience^[12].

The integration of culture and commerce in the 1980s became a prominent characteristic of Taiwanese popular music. The number of record companies grew rapidly, and music became increasingly commercialized. This phenomenon reflected the cultural landscape of a rapidly

developing Chinese economy. In pursuit of greater business opportunities, Taiwanese popular music of this period primarily followed a melodic love song route, with relatively simple and easily comprehensible lyrical themes. The melodies became simpler, more accessible, and catchy, while the lyrics became less metaphorical, focusing on depicting everyday life^[13]. Mass culture refers to cultural products that are produced in bulk for the purpose of entertaining and profiting from the general public within a market economy^[14].

Music culture, which was once constrained by politics and geography, has now transcended those barriers. New music forms are emerging, blending traditional or societal music with other genres to create a fusion and hybrid musical style. Globalization has facilitated significant mobility and interconnectedness, with formerly isolated communities now connected through various forms of transportation and communication. Cultural fusion, hybridity, and the globalization of diverse cultural knowledge have become common features of our globalized world. Culture also evolves with the development of globalization, as no local culture remains frozen in time, and local communities are no longer waiting for ethnophilosophers to capture the immeasurable essence of what Marina Tsvetayeva once referred to as the "reality of life".

In the 1990s and the late 2000s, Chinese popular music aligned itself with global popular music trends. As the economy experienced significant development, people began searching for national confidence and exploring the modernization of their own cultural heritage. This led to a diversification of Chinese popular music, incorporating elements from classical music, traditional Chinese music, and other multicultural sources. Chinese popular music started to develop its own unique style based on foreign musical influences. Artists like Jay Chou emerged as representatives of this movement, breaking away from the traditional love song route and expanding the content of popular music to encompass broader themes such as society, culture, and history.

6. Conclusion

During the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, the foundation of Chinese popular music was laid by the emergence of school songs. Subsequently, China began to embrace a significant influx of Western culture. In the era of the May Fourth Movement, music advocated for the breaking of feudal restrictions and embodied the nationalist spirit of the new culture. During the periods of the Anti-Japanese War and the Liberation War, Chinese popular music largely became Westernized. Some songs reflected the patriotic spirit of the nation, while others focused on themes of love, serving as a means of emotional release during the war-torn period. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong became the main center for popular music, and Chinese pop music began to embrace an international trend. As it developed, Chinese popular music gradually incorporated distinctive Chinese characteristics.

While Chinese popular music was awakened under the influence of Western international music, its development reveals that the aesthetic of Chinese pop music is a modernization of China's own aesthetic tradition. It is a cultural product of the Chinese nation and an integral part of China's musical culture. Throughout the long history of China's development, each era has had its own manifestation of democracy. And within that context, the music reflects the democratic spirit and thoughts of people at different times, as well as their pursuits and passions. Currently, Chinese nationalism is significantly reflected in popular culture, including popular music.

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