

Guochao music and new Chinese identities: Gender, generation, and nation

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Abstract

Guochao (国潮) is used to describe a type of ‘Chinese chic’ that values Chinese brand clothing and consumer products incorporating traditional Chinese and international stylistic elements. It is associated with a young generation embracing aspects of traditional Chinese culture and global styles, whilst selectively following foreign trends, whether from the ‘west’ (North America and Europe) or the ‘east’ (South Korea and Japan). Guochao music has been promoted at festivals, on albums, across social media, in performances, and in variety and talent shows. It is a hybrid style that creates musical dialogues linking traditional Chinese forms, practices, and instrumentation, with international pop music, particularly electronic dance music (EDM) and hip hop. Although allowing imaginative musical mixtures, guochao has been adopted to re-assert a dominant masculine identity, apparent on variety shows ‘Guochao music of China’ (中国潮音) and ‘Young Man of Chinese National Style’ (国风美少年), that marginalize female singers/ musicians. This paper interrogates the gendered, generational and nationalistic dynamics of guochao music by drawing from research on netizens of major platforms, analysis of variety shows, albums covers and tracks, and an investigation of music industry practices.

Keywords

Guochao, China, national identity, gender, generation

In recent years guochao has been written about in both China and overseas media as a type of Chinese ‘chic’ or ‘cool’ that incorporates traditional Chinese and international stylistic elements. It is associated with a young generation that embrace elements of traditional Chinese culture along with aspects of global styles, whether from the ‘west’ (North America and Europe) or the ‘east’ (South Korea and Japan). Very few scholars have addressed this style at the present time. Haiyan Xing (2021) focused on how young people of Generation Z are constructing a guochao self-image through consuming clothes, food and music. Xing concluded that they are constructing an identity within a consumerist subculture, signalling an awareness of traditions whilst displaying a knowledge of fashionable world trends. Haiping Liang (2022) also suggested that guochao consumption aspires to a type of distinction and affiliation to a small circle of people defined by symbolic consumption. However, these studies focused on the broad category of guochao. In this paper we are specifically concerned with guochao music as it has been promoted at festivals and performances, on albums, across social media, and in variety and talent shows.

Guochao music can be heard as part of a recent development from the broader category of zhongguofeng music(中国风), popular since the early 2000s. This entailed the fusion of traditional Chinese culture with international popular music styles, illustrated when Fang Wenshan (方文山) and Jay Chou(周杰伦) collaborated on a series of songs such as ‘Dongfengpo’(东风破), and ‘Hair Like Snow’(发如雪). With the transformation of media technologies, guochao music can be heard as a variation of zhongguofeng music, more closely linked to electronic dance music and hip hop.

Guochao is a hybrid style that creates musical dialogues linking traditional Chinese forms, practices, and instrumentation, with international pop music, particularly electronic dance music and hip hop, like we mentioned before. Although it can allow imaginative musical mixtures, guochao has been adopted to re-assert a dominant masculine identity, apparent on variety shows ‘Guochao Music of China’ (中国潮音) and ‘Young Man of Chinese National Style’ (国风美少年), and this can marginalize female singers and musicians. This project interrogates the gendered, generational, and nationalistic dynamics of guochao music by drawing from research on netizens of major platforms, analysis of variety shows and albums covers and tracks, and an investigation of music industry practices. The paper contributes to studies of popular music in China, and debates about the specific ways in which national identities are articulated in cultural representations and musical styles. In this short presentation we can only provide a summary of the research and arguments.

Guochao style and its representations are associated with the post-90s generation (people born after 1990) who have played an important role in promoting the music as a fashion and creative practice. Guochao music is presented with distinctly ‘masculine’ visual and sonic codes. In the publicity images for the variety show ‘Guochao Music of China’ men are presented in the centre and there is only one woman. The posters for ‘Young Man of Chinese National Style’ feature a giant dragon which is portrayed in a masculine and aggressive manner.

Guochao music, as a hybrid style, has aroused feelings of national identity among a large number of Chinese youth, yet different groups and individuals have been able to imagine national images in their own ways. The study begins to explore expressions of subjectivity by musicians and consumers as they construct national identities through guochao music as a result of their continuous negotiations within multiple layers of identities and different social roles.

This paper is based on information and data collected from two months of online observation of the audience of ‘Guochao Music of China’ (music variety discussion forums and streaming platforms discussion forums), two in-depth interviews with guochao musicians and eight interviews with guochao fans (conducted by Yuting Chen). These respondents were selected because they had the most upvoted entries in the comments section of ‘Guochao Music of China’ and ‘Young Man of Chinese National Style’, and on the streaming platform of guochao music on the Netease Cloud Music platform in China. Their ages ranged from 18 years old to 35 years old, and they participated voluntarily and consented to their contributions being used in this research. We will identify three themes that have emerged from the research – generation, gender, and nationality.

Intergenerational dynamics: rejuvenation, resistance, and transmission

Generational characteristics are an important factor in marking out structural differences in society. Responses to economic and social changes and technological advances can have a profound impact upon intergenerational relations. In recent years, China has undergone a period of social transformation and rapid upgrading of internet, mobile devices, and information technology. These factors have led to significant differences between generations in terms of beliefs, values, aesthetic orientations, and behavioural patterns, deepening the gap between Chinese young people aged 18 to 35 and their parents.

For example, electronic dance music and hip hop music have emerged in China in recent years. Young people have taken the lead in fusing these genres with traditional Chinese music to create guochao as their own distinctive label and symbol, creating a subcultural space to differentiate themselves from their parents.

An example here would be the young rapper Duo Lei/Su Han’s (多雷/宿涵) guochao music work ‘Shuimu Tao’. The title of the song ‘Shuimu Tao’ (水木道), refers to ‘shuimu’ which represents ‘Tsing Hua University’ (a highly ranked university in mainland China) and to ‘Tao’ the ancient yet enduring Chinese Taoist philosophy. The album cover seeks to visually represent the way that it is a rap song with strong Chinese characteristics. The cover is based on ‘Chinese Red’, while the background pattern features a ‘Chinese Dragon’ and the appearance of ancient Chinese architecture. In addition, at the centre of the picture are the two singers and creators. However, they are not wearing traditional clothes that would communicate Chinese characteristics such as Han suit, Mao suit, long gown and mandarin coat (长袍马褂) preferred by the older Chinese generations. On the contrary, in their dress they adopt international styles associated with the outfits of the genre of rap, notably hoodies, sneakers, and overalls. Musically, the composition of the song incorporates the performance of Chinese zither (古筝), bamboo flute (竹笛) and pipa (琵琶) similar to a lute, as well as electric drums (especially fast-rolling hi-hat) and electronic synthesizers. These latter technologies initially developed in Japan, the USA and Europe, and the styles were popularized by African-American musicians and now used internationally.

Lyricaly, we can hear the following expressions:

用一石激起千层波浪, 教授循环我的说唱
The professor is listening to my hiphop on loop

论才华横溢吾辈继承自绝学钱钟书
On the talent of my generation inherited from Zhongshu Qian - a renowned 20th century Chinese literary scholar and writer, known for his wit and erudition

蔑视将相王侯, 我站在历史的路口
Standing at a crossroads of history, we are contemptuous for kings, dukes, generals and premiers

你眼眸在颤抖, 老捕头已佝偻
The old Civil servant is aging now

歌词婉约的感觉由孔夫子来书写
Implicit beauty is the business of Confucius

高傲的精神我们总是代代传承
We inherit our proud spirit from generation to generation

The lyrics of the entire song have both a literary eloquence and unrestrained poetic commentary, which in certain respects inherits the graceful beauty of literary and philosophical themes that would be familiar to their parents. Imagery, linguistic idioms, and syntactical structures are drawn from classical Chinese poetry, such as the poetry of Li Bai (李白) and Du Fu (杜甫), and the literary works of Qian Zhongshu (钱钟书) and Lu Xun (鲁迅), notably the latter's 'Diary of a Madman' (狂人日记). Such references offer a profound sense of cultural heritage, and express respect for artistic predecessors and the legacies of traditional culture. At the same time, other lyrical tropes are more in keeping with generational experiences typically expressed in rap styles, such as 'contempt for princes and generals', 'the professor listen to my rap on loop' and 'The old Civil servant is aging now'. These offer a starker contrast from the traditional Chinese values of 'respecting teachers or elders', 'modesty' and 'valuing harmony'. They especially emphasize the two characteristics of 'self-confidence, even conceit' and 'resistance to authority from parents, teachers, or elders'. By incorporating the phrase 'A hundred years of prosperity depends on classicality and resistance' (百年的兴旺靠古典和嚣张), the song offers a multi-layered sense of intergenerational history that works across any assumed binary oppositions of modernity and tradition. It synthesises contemporary experience with classics in a way that offers a more philosophically conciliatory sensibility than the aggressive orthodoxies of much rap music.

Hence, it is an example of a generation of young people attempting to construct a new dynamic Chinese youth identity by wandering between the inheritance of classical aesthetics and values, and following trends in international popular musical, a theme that also emerged from interviews with participants.

Symbolic masculinities and femininities in guochao style

To some extent guochao music has become a symbol representing an image of a new type of national temperament, and the gendered dynamics of the practices and representations are an important aspect. Whether it is the popular music reality show 'Young Man of National Style' or 'Guochao Music of China', female singers, musicians, and even the judges are always in a marginal position. We can find this from the show name, the number of female contestants, the programme footage, and the competition results.

'Young Man of National Style' directly uses the word 'man' in the name of the show, referring to the male in a narrow sense of the term. The proportion of female judges and contestants is also small too, let alone the number who eventually reach the finals. According to our observations, the proportion of female participants (judges and contestants) accounts for 33%, 40%, 20% and 28% respectively in the two variety shows. Only 20% of female contestants reached the top 5 in both finals.

The show's theme song 'Here Comes Guochao' makes use of masculine codes in orchestration, voice, and lyrics. The listener can barely hear the female voice, and the arrangement emphasizes the traditional assertive timbre sonically associated with men. The orchestrator has used traditional Chinese instruments associated with

aggressive timbres, such as Chinese drum(中国大鼓)and suona (唢呐). The first sentence of the lyrics, '*Sir, it's time to take the stage*', uses the male title 'sir' and does not mention women.

When considering the music stage performance of 'Young Man of National Style' as examples, we find that the more popular female music works are as follows: 'Hongzhaoyuan'(红昭愿)performed by Ju Jingyi(鞠婧祎), 'Green Snake' (青蛇) (a beautiful Snake Demon from China folklore) performed by Liu Muzi /Zeng Xueyao(刘木子/曾雪瑶). In the stage performance of 'Hongzhaoyuan'(红昭愿), Ju Jingyi is presented in a conventional sexualized manner with a bare midriff and a red translucent gauze dress, waving a Chinese style fan, singing with a sweet soft voice, dancing while running a hand through her long black hair, and wiggling her bottom to accentuate the curve of her body.

In addition, the lyrics have something in common: all are related to 'love' and 'waiting and missing'. For example, the lyrics to 'Hongzhaoyuan'(红昭愿)include '*somewhere by the bridge, the spring breeze bypasses the tip of his hair, sending him the embroidery, and plans to make up for marriage dowry.*' In 'Green Snake'(青蛇)we hear the following phrase, '*my sister practiced her supernatural power in the green hills for love, took off her scales and came to the human world just to be reunited with him*'. The images of women in these works are fixed and flat. They are all passive beautiful images waiting for their right one to come, and longing to be redeemed. In the endless waiting, their self-subject consciousness is presented as dependent upon its fulfilment by men.

When we compare the guochao music works of men, we find a completely different dynamic and imagery. For example, the lyrics to 'Youth Beijing'(少年北京) include '*No matter whoever you are, do whatever you like*' emphasizes a dashing young man who is independent and at ease with himself. In 'A Man Must Be Strong'(男儿当自强) the lyrics '*Be a strong man*' and '*try everything for my dream*', as well as the Chinese drums used in the stage performance (a majestic and aggressive musical instrument), all reinforce a specific type of self-determining assertive masculinity. This autonomous masculine identity is reinforced in the song 'Climbing High'(登高) by The Tailor (裁缝铺乐队) that borrows lines from the poems of ancient Chinese poets Du Fu (杜甫) and Li Bai (李白), '*the times are hard and my hair are as white as frost. I was born to be useful. Even if I had exhausted thousands of gold, I would get it again*'(天生我材必有用, 千金散尽还复来). These lyrics portray men as active in the world, people with ambition forging their own destiny. Another example of men's active, diverse and assertive representation during performances can be found in 'Lovely Childhood'(满怀可爱的童年) by Zhang Gasong (张尕怂) and Jiang Liang (蒋亮), two musicians dressed absurdly and cartoonishly, each holding their own national musical instruments, and integrating folk nursery rhymes whilst singing in dialects.

Unlike women's performances, which show them as troubled by love and longing, the lyrics and visual representations show men in a more diverse and rich way, from the leisurely carefree independent player to the disillusioned thinker with world issues in mind, and the warrior who defends his country. Love is not their only theme.

However, there has been a reaction against this that can be viewed as a feminist response to the masculinities of guochao music. In August 2022, VaVa, a well-known female rapper in mainland China, released a new rap song called 'Hua Mulan'(花木兰), which utilises trap-type beats with adaptations of ancient poems, and the ancient Chinese story of Hua Mulan who went to war in place of her father in the army, rapping '*She holds the flaming spear in her hand and lives and dies with the city.*' The song is an attempt to challenge the monotonous images of women in existing guochao music. It is also worth noting that on the day the song was released, VaVa posted it on her Weibo account and said, 'I'm always ready to go out for my country if I need to'.

VaVa's comments caused controversy, highlighted the tensions in the masculine and feminine representations, and revealed the censure that female musicians will receive if they try to challenge such assumptions in the name of national identity and belonging. Similar to debates about Beyonce, Lady Gaga and Madonna, female musicians who assertively proclaim feminist values and challenge dominant masculine representations are often accused of 'commodity feminism'. Jin Cao and Shimou Dai have argued that in a consumer society, any woman's attempt to seek self-possession in the online arena can be compromised by consumerism and be perceived as 'pseudo-feminism' (Jin Cao and Shimou Dai, 2022). Hence, female musicians face the burden that genuine feminist claims and advocacy still struggle to survive under the entrenched patriarchy and the inevitable commercial ideology.

Imaginary masculine and feminine national identities

EDM, hip-hop music, and other styles of pop music, have been successfully localised, with lyrics, vocal styles and instrumentation adapted to the Chinese context to become what fans understand as 'our own guochao music'.

Each musician presents his or her own imagined national identity in their particular way, either as a rebellious, carefree player, or a thinker with the wider world and public in mind, or as a beautiful sensual woman in dialogue

with the wider world of Chinese and international popular cultural styles. Nevertheless, the identity of women in this representation of national identity is flat and restricted.

The male musicians select very specific poetic elements from the Classical tradition, and do not draw on the softer and more vulnerable aspects of masculinity that can also be found in the poems of Li Bai and Du Fu, for example. The male musicians are permitted a wider range of behaviours and actions, roles, identities and visual images. The male subjectivity is presented as more assertive, outward facing, untroubled yet also outwardly philosophical, as if more independent. In contrast, the women's subjectivity is presented as more passive, inward directing, and dependent upon the man.

Yet, here again, the situation is not stable and is open to change. The influence of debates about gender and feminism can be observed in variety TV shows such as 'Sisters Riding the Winds and Breaking the Waves' (乘风破浪的姐姐), 'I am an actress' (我是女演员) and 'I heard her say' (听见她说) all attempt to promote women's independence and challenge existing male assertions of power. However, such attempts have not necessarily been recognized favourably by audiences. The challenge to older ideas continually confronts the reassertion of existing patriarchal social values and accusations of commercial 'pseudo-feminism'. Yet, we still detect an attempt to confront the issues and to struggle for change.

Concluding reflections

This has been a brief summary of key themes that have emerged from research-in-progress on guochao music in China. It raises many questions that are beyond this presentation, and which we are continuing to research further. We end with three speculative reflections to extend the questions we have raised in this paper. These concern the themes of nationalism and Chinese national identity, representations of masculine and feminine identities, and the possibilities for Chinese cool.

An important question concerns why these practices, representations, and images have been adopted during this recent specific period. We can begin answering this question by thinking about the way that national identities are always about more than a country or a geographical place, and formed according to specific relationships, and circumstances. In guochao music the nation is imagined through generational perspectives, and narrow gendered representations. In part, this may be a response to the way that China has experienced a period of rapid development over the past 20-30 years, and the circumstances of Chinese youth growing up witnessing economic development, scientific and technological progress, and cultural prosperity, as these changes have contributed to a strong sense of national pride. This sensibility has been encouraged by the Chinese government through the discourse of 'cultural self-confidence', a term reportedly used by President Xi Jinping just prior to the presentation of this paper at the Conference. The report of the 19th CPC National Congress highlighted the need to 'promote the creative transformation and innovative development of excellent Chinese traditional culture'. Here, guochao is in part a reaction to the Government's attention to the inheritance and innovation of Chinese traditional. Yet, the Government are also responding to trends that have emerged from Chinese people and creative practitioners who have sought inspiration by breathing new meanings into older traditions, and using these older elements to revitalise popular styles.

A further issue here concerns the way guochao has become associated with restricted representations of masculinity and femininity, seemingly a reaction against any gains made by feminists and a reassertion of harder masculine styles possibly against the more androgynous, softer, and ambivalent masculine styles associated with pop idols in recent years.

A final point to reflect upon concerns the way that popular songs blur distinctions between real and imaginary, fact and fiction, documentary and drama, and offer an imaginative glimpse of possibilities. Guochao songs – like all art – create myths and narratives that offer ways of understanding lives and experiences. Guochao draws from Chinese history and tradition, and international pop styles, and offers one representation of a new, stylized, and hybrid Chinese identity. Perhaps this contains the seeds of a future more global 'Chinese cool' (an issue sometimes discussed in media commentary).

During the 1980s Japanese technologies, food, furniture, and popular culture gained an international reputation as cool. Then, some twenty years later, it was the turn of South Korea and the Korean wave (hallyu) to gain international recognition as cool. Could Chinese fashions, food, technologies, products, and popular culture ever be cool, internationally, in the same way? One crucial difference might be that, during these earlier decades, the Japanese and South Korean Governments both invested economically and promoted their fashions, products, and popular culture internationally. Will guochao music become part of a story whereby creative people draw from

Chinese traditional characteristics to update and transform the world's aging impression of the phrase 'made in China'? At the moment, China cannot be remotely compared to the cultural exports achieved by Japan or Korea in previous years, and there's little evidence that this would be prominent in Government priorities. But, as popular styles continue to develop in dialogue with the past and other places, our brief study suggests that such creative possibilities exist with the Chinese people.

Note: Well-known people (poets, novelists, singers) are named as they are recognized in traditional Chinese with family name first (i.e. Qian Zhongshu). Scholars are cited with given name first, and listed alphabetically according to family name (as per general international English language conventions).

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