

Rock and China: From Cui Jian to Second Hand Rose

Yi Wu

School of Music, East China Normal University

3088132975@qq.com

Abstract. Whether it's mainland China's Hao Fang or Taiwan's Zhang Tiezhi, they are both committed to constructing a "resistance" narrative to describe the rise and development of rock music. [1] Zhang Tiezhi believes that the emergence of rock music in mainland China has already "carried the banner of enlightenment." [2] He also mentioned that rock music, together with poetry, films, the documentary "River Elegy," and the book series "Toward the Future," collectively constituted the "enlightenment power of the chaotic era." [2] However, as part of the cultural mosaic of mainland China in the 1980s, how was rock music shaped, reconstructed, and utilized in the power system of commerce, culture, and politics? How does rock music interact and create tension with other cultural phenomena? With the tremendous changes in Chinese society in the 21st century, facing different historical contexts, has Chinese rock music also undergone changes? Unfortunately, Zhang did not delve into these questions seriously, and at the same time, mainland Chinese rock musicians have not included these questions in their thinking. This paper selects Cui Jian and the Second Hand Rose band as representatives of Chinese rock music in different periods. Through the theoretical perspectives of political philosophy, sociology, and history, it analyzes their lyrical texts and historical backgrounds, delving into Cui Jian's unique understanding of "revolution" and "capitalism" as a rock superstar of the 1980s, and how this understanding has shaped the unique "sensory structure" of Chinese rock musicians. At the same time, this paper aims to provide some insights for the future development of Chinese rock music.

Keywords: Chinese rock; sensory structure; Cui Jian; Second Hand Rose

1. Cui Jian: A "Elite" Sensory Structure

1.1. Background

During the era of Mao Zedong, mainland China experienced the prolonged phase of the "Cultural Revolution," during which the party strictly controlled the development and dissemination of culture. During this period, music primarily took the form of revolutionary songs, expressing themes such as "anti-imperialism" and "revolution," which were regarded as important historical missions by socialist China. Later, the music of this period was often criticized as "suppressing individual emotions" in essence [3]. At the end of the 1970s to the early 1980s, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, mainland China's policy of "reform and opening up" gradually deepened, marking a period of rapid transformation in social thought and culture. During this period, China transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy, while facing conflicts and integration between tradition and modernity, feudalism and capitalism. At the same time, new forms of music began to emerge in this soil that had been previously shrouded by the singular emotions of the Cultural Revolution.

At the end of the 1970s, represented by Teresa Teng, music from Hong Kong and Taiwan allowed a generation of Chinese people to discover for the first time that music could serve as a channel for personal emotional release. However, as a product influenced by both the political and economic order of Taiwan and the Japanese music industry [4], the emotional needs embodied in Hong Kong and Taiwan music were actually alienation demands constructed by bourgeois cultural language, but in mainland society, they were highly idealized as the genuine needs of humanity. Under postmodern conditions, the production and reproduction of desire are not only economic activities but also involve cultural and social domains, deeply influenced by the market and capital. In this context, the characteristics of "Chinese postmodernism" mentioned by Wang Hui in "Intellectual Situation in Contemporary China and Problems of Modernity" were widely accepted after the reform and opening up, that is, all needs unrelated to revolutionary ideology were regarded as the real needs of the people, and the "market," which is opposed to "revolution," naturally became a key point for ideological deconstruction. Teresa Teng's songs coincidentally satisfied people's

desires for a “non-revolutionary” life of ease, leisure, affluence, and individualization at that time. The clichés in the songs were transformed into a reflection of the “brave new world” in the hearts of the Chinese people under specific historical circumstances, which undoubtedly constituted a historical dislocation phenomenon.

1.2. “Rebel” Cui Jian

Cui Jian, hailed as a pioneer and symbol of Chinese rock music, was born in Beijing in 1961 and rose to prominence in the late 1980s. His music and actions have had a profound impact on rock music in China and even across Asia, earning him the title of “Father of Chinese Rock.” Unlike Teresa Teng, Cui Jian did not occupy a liberated position after the “reform and opening up” due to historical dislocation. Instead, like the intellectuals of the 1980s, he consciously took on the role of a “rebel.” Whether it was his early lyrics criticizing the “revolution,” his performance at Tiananmen Square in 1989, or the iconic image of a man blindfolded with red cloth on the cover of the album “I Walk This Road Alone,” all demonstrated his strong cultural rebellion and avant-garde spirit.

Like the intellectuals of the 1980s Enlightenment, Cui Jian regarded the “revolution” as a feudal history opposed to modern society, describing the Chinese society not subject to the norms of capitalist modernity as “ignorant,” and metaphorically likening the people in this society to those with their eyes covered by “a piece of red cloth.” This viewpoint eventually became a unique sensory structure of Cui Jian and subsequent rock musicians, exerting a lasting influence on the creative production of rock music in mainland China.

The concept of “sensory structure” proposed by Raymond Williams refers to a loose structure aimed at understanding the “associations of a generation or a period,” [5] which is a cultural assumption. If the “magical means” [6] bridging the gap between “ethics and experience” in 19th-century novels are seen as the adhesive, then viewing “revolution” from the perspective of civilization/modernity as a historical remnant of feudalism/pre-modernity becomes the shared “sensory structure” of Chinese rock musicians. In this structure, the aftermath of the “revolution” is seen as stitching together the contradictions and fractures of the “post-revolution” era that cannot be explained by the “empty signifiers.”

1.3. Analysis of Lyric Texts

He Guimei pointed out that modern consciousness, as a universal social consensus, is jointly possessed by humanistic intellectuals and state power [7]. From this perspective, Cui Jian’s so-called rebellion is actually a collusion with the government. Cui Jian’s early works, such as “Greenhouse Girl,” expressing longing for oceanic civilization, and “Piece of Red Cloth,” expressing the desire to break free from the closed past and to see the world, are actually reminders to socialist China of the original intention of “world revolution” and a reflection of the policy of China’s reintegration into the global capitalist system in terms of cultural ideology. Here, Cui Jian did not transcend the national ideology but only served as a mouthpiece for the government.

As time passed, Chinese society underwent tremendous changes, and social contradictions became more complex. However, Cui Jian never gave up the notion of equating “revolution” with feudal/pre-modern times. When promoting the album “Show Your Color,” he once said, “As long as Mao Zedong’s portrait hangs on Tiananmen Square, none of you can claim to be young. We are all of the same generation.” [8] This statement symbolically covers up the ideological rupture before and after the reform and opening up, implying that Mao Zedong’s portrait on the Tiananmen Gate Tower is evidence that China continues to exist in a feudal/pre-modern society. However, he failed to recognize how the “socialist ideology” (including Mao’s image) in “post-revolutionary” China truly functions as an ideology. In fact, “post-socialist” China mainly follows neoliberal principles in institutional operations, policy implementation, and market protection, and the proletariat, which was once a symbol of state power, has been marginalized.

In the face of social change, Cui Jian was still constrained by the past “sensory structure” and failed to fully understand the paradox between Chinese reality and official ideology. His 2005 song “Rural Encirclement of the City” criticized the unequal development between urban and rural areas and the discrimination of urban dwellers against rural people, reflecting a keen insight into the era’s context. However, influenced by the previous “sensory structure,” his accusations against urban dwellers were limited to “all sorts of movements are damn well made by you” and “having knowledge and having conscience are two different things,” replacing structural criticism with moral condemnation. This not only fell into the fantasy of relying on morally perfect middle class to solve problems but also overlooked the unequal relations under the capitalist economic system at that time.

Furthermore, as he sings in “Blue Sky Bones,” from a literal interpretation of the lyrics, red, yellow, and blue are used to symbolize the heart, body, and wisdom, respectively. A deeper analysis of Cui Jian’s political experience reveals that these three colors represent three different historical periods. Red symbolizes China’s “revolutionary” era but does not receive favor from Cui Jian. He believes that “years of political movements have made people tired of red” and that “red has been contaminated by blood,” symbolizing filth and dirt, a burden that Cui Jian has been trying to escape from since “Piece of Red Cloth.” Yellow represents the temporal order of ordinary people unaffected by Western enlightenment. In this context, Cui Jian experiences the numbness of Chinese people’s long-standing “ignorance and compliance with the emperor’s will.” In comparison, blue evokes Cui Jian’s rationality and strength, representing both the color of the sky and the sea. As Cui Jian sings in “Greenhouse Girl,” “You ask me where I’m going, I point in the direction of the sea.” The “oceanic civilization” symbolized by blue breaks the historical continuity represented by yellow and red. Cui Jian endeavors to use the rational power of the Enlightenment era to break free from the eras represented by these two colors, attempting to shed traditional feudal constraints and pursue the modernity of capitalism. This

process is seen as an inevitable path for the development of Chinese society, but it overlooks the complex relationship between Chinese tradition and modernity, localization, and Westernization.

2. Second Hand Rose: An Alternative Continuation of the “Elite” Sensory Structure

2.1. “Red Matches Green”: A Northeastern Cultural Imagination

The Second Hand Rose, a Chinese rock band established in 1999, has carved out a niche in the Chinese music scene with its unique musical style and stage performances. The band’s name derives from a romanticized imagination of the “second-hand market,” symbolizing the beauty and nostalgia found in old items. In their music creation, Second Hand Rose integrates traditional Northeastern opera forms—Song and Dance Duet. From the bold and unrestrained tunes to the playful and sexualized lyrics, not only does this add uniqueness to the band’s style, but it also serves as an expression of Northeastern culture.

In modern times, Northeast China has played a significant role in China’s industrial development. Li Duan mentioned in “Inside and Outside Shanhai Guan”: “As the only region in the country with a modern socioeconomic foundation, Northeast China has hardly produced any obvious superstructure with modern social characteristics, which is a paradox.” [9] During the socialist era of 1950s to 1970s, this “paradox” was reversed. Northeast China not only became the most important industrial base of New China and the birthplace of socialist industrialization but also the main space for socialist cultural narratives. [10] However, outside the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, Northeast China was not regarded as a cultural label with modernity. After the reform and opening up, with the decline of the Northeast’s industrial economy and the rise of the economy in the South, the Northeast region once again fell into a geographical space representing backwardness, ignorance, and rural elements of pre-modernity. This situation has persisted until now.

The Second-Hand Rose band consolidates the expression of Northeastern culture in the new era by playing characters that contradict modernity. In a speech, Liang Long (the lead singer of the band) once said, “I am very happy that so many good friends are here today to listen to me singing Northeastern Song and Dance Duet storytelling.” “Singing Northeastern Song and Dance Duet” and “storytelling” not only reflect Liang Long’s humorous style but also show his conscious construction of his own identity. If rock stars are seen as modern identities with Western avant-garde features, then the image of “singing Northeastern Song and Dance Duet” presents a vivid portrait of rural Northeastern farmers with distinct local characteristics.

After successfully incorporating elements of Northeastern Song and Dance Duet, Second Hand Rose further strengthened its “Northeastern impression.” They created a brand called “Red Matches Green,” where the combination of red and green symbolizes a rustic style. Seasoned fans attending Second Hand Rose concerts often wear flower-patterned clothes in red and green, holding red or green fans, creating a unique blend of tradition and modernity in the urban livehouse scene. Additionally, an interesting contemporary art piece designed by Liang Long is a cement pipe painted with “Red Matches Green” paint. Liang Long stated that the cement pipe represents his unique childhood memories of Northeast China, symbolizing the glorious history of Northeastern industry, but now has become an unplaceable historical relic.

The language of the Mao Zedong era is also considered a historical relic. In the song “Xian Er,” Second Hand Rose adapted Mao Zedong’s words “The East is not bright, the West is bright; if the South is dark, the North is bright,” forming the narrative structure “The East is not bright, the West is bright; sunset, I bask in sorrow.” Mao Zedong, even during the revolutionary period, believed in a brighter future even when unable to see the sunlight, whereas Second Hand Rose today does not know where the light is. “Sunset” and “sorrow” reflect the bleak environment and sense of loss. In “Tiao Da Shen,” there is also a portrayal of East-West contrasts: “Looking from the east building to the west; poverty looks at wealth,” reflecting the contrast between the poverty of socialist China and Western capitalism, juxtaposing former comradeship and revolutionary beliefs with today’s life in an ironic contrast. Just like the cement pipe, it is only when it is seen as a pre-modern historical relic that we can understand the vast gap between the historical periods before and after the reform and opening up.

2.2. From Cui Jian to Second Hand Rose

For cultural elites like Cui Jian, the capitalist world, symbolizing reason and wisdom, seems like a vibrant spring. In the representative song of mainland China’s reform and opening up, “The Story of Spring,” the lyrics depict China “taking bold new strides, entering a spring of myriad changes.” However, Second Hand Rose, with a different class background from Cui Jian, questions the legitimacy of “spring” in another interpretation of “The Story of Spring.” Unlike Cui Jian, who comes from a courtyard background, Liang Long, the lead singer of Second Hand Rose from a working-class family in Northeast China, does not feel the so-called “infinite power” brought by “spring.” “The Story of Spring,” constructed by the state apparatus, is either a tangible reality or an elusive dream for Liang Long, who is in economically depressed Northeast China, leaving him confused and puzzled. Unlike the official version sung fervently by the state singer Dong Wenhua, “entering a spring of myriad changes,” the Second-Hand Rose version is slow-paced, accompanied by Liang Long’s unique soft and melancholic voice, creating a sense of powerlessness.

The official version of “The Story of Spring” epically narrates the changes brought to China by Deng Xiaoping’s “Southern Tour Speech”: “An old man drew a circle by the South China Sea, and cities rose miraculously, gathering wealth” and “This old man wrote poems by the South China Sea.” Through this song, Second Hand Rose questions whether “the story really has that

immortal being” and aims to deconstruct the myth of reform and opening up centered around Deng Xiaoping. In contemporary mainland China after the reform and opening up, as sung by Second Hand Rose, there are both people who “sing” and “write poems” joyfully and those trapped in “fantasies” manufactured by the state apparatus and those injured as sacrifices of reform.

Therefore, compared to Cui Jian, Second Hand Rose can delve deeper into the realities of grassroots people’s lives. In another song of theirs, “Fate,” Second Hand Rose expresses the inner state of people who hustle for a living: “Are we busy every day just for a meal? Is it only brocade and silk in our dreams?” In modern Chinese society, from white-collar workers to ordinary laborers, they all face exhausted bodies and empty hearts. The lack of ideals makes it difficult for them to find meaning in life. “Days won’t always be sunny, years harvest sourer than vinegar,” reflecting a sense of helplessness in life-consuming life. Under this pressure, Liang Long repeatedly chants “Survival! Fate!” depicting an inescapable cycle of destiny.

If Cui Jian’s music has always been dedicated to constructing an idealized subject, then the music of Second Hand Rose reveals the illusion of the subject. Althusser once pointed out: “The subject is the basic category constituting ideology,” because “the function of all ideologies is to ‘constitute’ the specific individual as a subject.” In “Allowing Some Artists to Get Rich,” Second Hand Rose specifically reveals this ideological function:

*I was forced to be a worker
I was forced to be a merchant
I was forced to play rock and roll
I was forced to be a waste
Allow our country’s peasants to get rich first
Allow our country’s beauties to get rich first
Allow my family’s servants to get rich first
Allow our country’s artists to get rich first*

Althusser believes: “All ideologies function through the category of the subject, summoning or calling the specific individual as a subject.” [11] Second Hand Rose profoundly points out that during the socialist construction and reform and opening-up period, the ideological state apparatus defined the Chinese people respectively as “workers” and “merchants,” while the actual subject disappeared in this nomenclature to meet the needs of official rule. The word “forced” reflects the passivity and helplessness of individuals in the face of the ideological state apparatus, contrasting sharply with the subjectivity expressed by Cui Jian in “False Monk,” “I want to walk from the south to the north, and even from white to black,” and in “Rock on the New Long March,” “With my head down, I walk forward, searching for myself.” In the market environment after the reform and opening up, individuals do not have true freedom of choice, and whether one becomes wealthy or not depends entirely on the “permission” of power. Second Hand Rose here declares the uselessness of human beings and the falseness of the subject, in fact, under the summons of the ideological state apparatus, everyone becomes a passive “waste.”

“White Flower” is a song by Second Hand Rose paying tribute to Aung San Suu Kyi. Liang Long mentioned in his monologue “Yi Xi” (2015.7.6): “‘White Flower’ is the only relatively politicized song in our band.” In the song, Aung San Suu Kyi is depicted as the pure “white flower.” She is a complex and contradictory figure in mainland China, widely covered by the media on one hand, and on the other hand, her identity as a “democracy fighter” and Nobel Peace Prize laureate is considered taboo by the authorities. The film “Aung San Suu Kyi” directed by Luc Besson quickly became a banned film, and Second Hand Rose faced official inquiries for performing “White Flower” in public. Liang Long stated that he was moved to create “White Flower” after reading reports about Aung San Suu Kyi in “Sanlian Life Weekly.” In “White Flower,” Second Hand Rose abandons their usual teasing and humorous style and instead adopts a romantic expression.

Among all the songs of Second Hand Rose, “White Flower” is the only single that uses the word “revolution.” As mentioned earlier, in China during the reform and opening-up period, “revolution” was seen as an anti-modern movement, and its influence was jointly expelled from the public view by the authorities and cultural elites. In the new era of Chinese society, the primary goal has shifted from anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism and the establishment of a utopian-style egalitarian society to integration into the global system and pursuit of socio-economic development. “Depoliticization” has become a prevalent state from officialdom to the grassroots. When discussing the creation of “White Flower” in “Yi Xi,” Liang Long described politics as “like a piece of candy, something everyone is scrambling for.” The vulgarization of the political concept reflects the general public’s alienation from politics. The words “youth” and “blaze” borrowed from past revolutionary songs in “White Flower” are an attempt by Second Hand Rose to shape a new “revolutionary” image on the ruins of revolutionary China, an image that is both the “democracy fighter” and peace activist promoted by Western society and conforms to the ideal political figure in the minds of ordinary Chinese people.

Compared to Cui Jian, Second Hand Rose appears more distant in politics, yet to some extent, they still continue the “feeling structure” of the Cui Jian era. “Revolution” still does not specifically refer to the socialist revolution represented by the past Chinese revolution but has been absorbed by capitalism and transferred to the context of “subverting all non-representative democratic societies.”

3. Conclusion

Liang Long mentioned in an interview with “Music for You”: “Chinese rock music seems to be seeking survival in a dilemma. It cannot directly resist because there are many restrictions in reality. However, it still needs to resist. Perhaps this pressure in the

dilemma is the unique expression of Chinese rock music.” In fact, this is not only the case in China; globally, rock music rarely participates in resistance activities. In China, rock music has also failed to fulfill its mission of “resistance.”

Liang Long pointed out that Chinese rock music is in a dilemma: on the one hand, the inherent spirit of “resistance” in rock music prompts it to respond to social injustices; on the other hand, Chinese rock musicians face a social environment of strict official control, where even simple social criticism is fraught with risks. Therefore, musicians like Li Zhi and Yao Band have emerged, expressing dissatisfaction through metaphors and using negative emotions as a form of resistance. However, Chinese rock musicians are usually constrained by the “feeling structure” dominated by intellectuals since the Cultural Revolution. When criticizing, they mainly adopt a modern/pre-modern perspective to satirize the rule of the Communist Party, but they overlook actual class, gender, and ethnic conflicts, merely adding a footnote to elite culture.

Therefore, for Second Hand Rose and other Chinese rock musicians, the reality of China and this elite-style “resistance” together constitute the true “dilemma” they face. Recognizing this “dilemma” and transforming it into creative tension are the topics that Second Hand Rose and Chinese rock musicians should deeply contemplate in the future.

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