

Chapter 4

Style as Identity Politics in China: A Fresh Look at Rocker Cui Jian and Rapper GAI

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ABSTRACT

Cui Jian is the most famous Chinese rocker. GAI won the championship in China's very first rapping competition, "The Rap of China." This chapter examines the styles of both stars to explore how they use unique styles to express and negotiate their identity within China's broader political context. Cui Jian's endorsement of the socialist idealism and hence the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gives him some leeway in advocating for independent expression. GAI's gangsta swagger, on the other hand, was deemed subversive by the authorities and he was banned. Cui was able to maintain his style while GAI was forced to change. The chapter argues that musicians' styles mark their identity, which is in constant negotiation with the broader political environment. In China, it's about whether the musician's identity is compatible with the ruling party's hegemony. Cui and GAI provide two cases demonstrating how Chinese musicians negotiate their identity politics within the broader power structure.

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INTRODUCTION

Known as “the Father of Chinese Rock ‘n Roll” (Ho, 2006; Jones, 1992; Matusitz, 2010), Cui Jian (Cui is the last name) is the most famous Chinese rocker, who “shouted the first sound of China’s rock music” (Yao & Yang, 2010). GAI is the stage name of the rapper Zhou Yan (Zhou is the last name). In 2017, GAI won the championship of China’s first rapping competition, “The Rap of China” (hereafter “The Rap”), streamed on iQiyi, one of China’s main streaming services. He quickly became the face of China’s burgeoning hip hop culture. This chapter examines the styles of these two stars to explore how they use their distinct styles to express and negotiate their identity within China’s broader political environment and context.

The Rocker and The Rapper

Cui Jian was born in 1961 in a suburb of Beijing to a family of ethnic Korean (Jiang, 2002; Yao & Yang, 2010; Zhao, 1992). His father was a military officer and played trumpet in the Beijing Airforce band. His mother was a member of the state-run Central Ethnic Minority Dance and Song Troupe (Zhao, 1992). In other words, his parents were state employed artists who were generally regarded as the elites among performers in China. Cui received his early music education from his father and later became a professional trumpet player in the Beijing Dance and Song Troupe, the predecessor of the Beijing Symphony Orchestra, also state-run (“Rock in Berlin,” 1993; Yao & Yang, 2010). Like his parents, Cui started as a state-employed musician, part of the state cultural apparatus. His emergence as a rock star was the outcome of particular social, historical, and political conditions.

When China’s Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) ended, the then party leader, Deng Xiaoping, advocated for “emancipation of thoughts” from the rigid socialist doctrines of Mao’s era, which overemphasized ideological positioning and class struggles as the philosophy of governance, patriotism, and nationalism. Instead, Deng called for economic, political, and cultural liberalization (Hutchings, 2001). This was the beginning of China’s reform and opening-up era. The new policies opened China to the outside world, including pop music from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West. From 1978 to 1980, China was flooded with imported cassette tapes and television programs, the most prominent being the music of The Beatles, The Carpenters, Michael Jackson, and Madonna (de Kloet, 2005a; Jones, 1992). The 1980s also saw the rise of the so-called Northwest Wind music, which blends folk music style of the Northwest Loess Plateau with Hong Kong and Taiwan pop (Brace & Friedlander, 1992; de Kloet 2005a, 2005c; Jones, 1992).

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