

# A Study of Modern Rock Music and Chinese Folk Music: Taking Cui Jian as an Example

<sup>1</sup>Zhang Hongjin, <sup>2</sup>Rungkiat Siriwongsuwan

Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand  
rungkiat.si@ssru.ac.th

## Abstract

The purposes of this study were: To study the integration of modern rock and Chinese folk music through Cui Jian's works.

**Methods:** This study utilizes qualitative research methods, integrating musical morphology analysis, field surveys, and in-depth interviews. Three representative works of Cui Jian, namely "Eggs Under the Red Flag", "Nothing to My Name", and another characteristic piece, are meticulously selected. These works are deconstructed from multiple technical dimensions, such as rhythmic patterns, mode applications, and orchestration strategies. Data are collected through on-site observations, interviews with fans, and audience feedback. Manual coding tools are used to create structured tables, classify and enter data according to preset themes and dimensions, conduct statistics and filtering, and clearly present data distribution.

The research results are as follows:

The analysis of Cui Jian's works reveals that his integration of modern rock and Chinese folk music is achieved through a combination of technical and humanistic means. Technically, he merges traditional musical elements like pentatonic scales with rock rhythms and orchestrates modern and traditional instruments to create unique textures. Humanistically, his lyrics translate cultural symbols into contemporary narratives, connecting audiences with cultural heritage. This integration model has significant implications for music development. It offers a new way for ethnic music to achieve "living inheritance" by modernizing its genetic elements, while also providing a path for the localization of modern music. By drawing on local culture, modern music can develop a distinct cultural identity, enhancing its global appeal. Cui Jian's work enriches Chinese music and provides valuable insights for music development in the modern era.

**Keywords:** Modern Rock Music; Chinese Folk Music; Cui Jian; Music Integration; Cultural Identity

## Introduction

Research background.

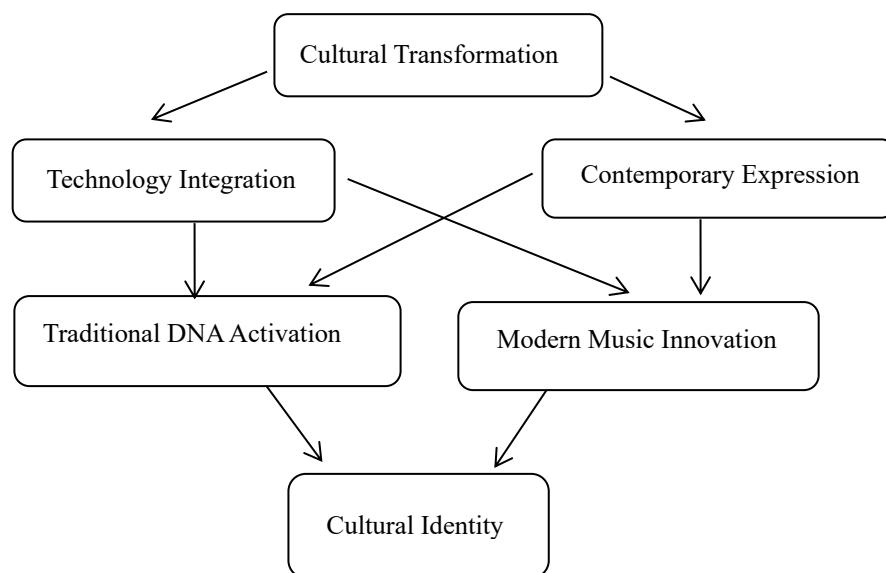
In the context of globalization and the rapid spread of information, the music field has witnessed profound changes. As Ge (2023) pointed out in \*The collision between tradition and modernity\*, different musical cultures constantly interact and collide, leading to new trends in modern music development. Modern rock music, a representative of Western modern music, has a strong rhythm, bold expressions, and a unique stage performance style. It has attracted a large number of fans worldwide. According to Cheng, L. -x. (2009) in \*On the development of Chinese rock - and - roll music\*, Chinese rock music has been influenced by both Western rock traditions and the local cultural context, resulting in a distinct style. Chinese folk music, on the other hand, is a precious cultural heritage of the Chinese nation. It contains thousands of years of history and is rich in local characteristics. As Fang, G. -y. (2009) mentioned in \*Value of

maintaining and developing Chinese folk music in modern China\*, each musical note of Chinese folk music condenses the life wisdom, customs, and emotional memories of the local people. However, under the impact of modern Western music, Chinese folk music faces challenges in modernization. The fast - paced modern lifestyle and diverse entertainment options have reduced the younger generation's attention to traditional folk music. At the same time, the commercial operation mode of Western music has squeezed the space for the inheritance and development of Chinese folk music. In this situation, integrating Chinese folk music elements into modern rock music has become an important exploration direction for many music creators. Cui Jian, as a pioneer of Chinese rock music, has made outstanding contributions in this regard. His works provide rich materials for studying the integration of modern rock music and Chinese folk music. For example, in \*Eggs Under the Red Flag\*, he skillfully combines revolutionary imagery with rock rhythms through the interplay of suona and electric guitar, creating a unique musical expression that bridges tradition and modernity. This is in line with the point of view of Wang, Y. B., and Qin, X. Y. (2013) in \*Sichuan opera rock: The spark of collision between traditional Sichuan opera and modern rock\*, which emphasizes the importance of finding a balance between cultural authenticity and contemporary resonance in the integration of traditional and modern music.

## Objectives

To study the integration of modern rock and Chinese folk music through Cui Jian's works.

## Conceptual Framework



## Methodology

**Content Scope:** This study focuses on the integration of modern rock music and Chinese folk music, with Cui Jian's works serving as typical cases for in-depth analysis. Three representative works, including "Eggs Under the Red Flag," "Nothing to My Name," and another characteristic piece, are selected for research from two dimensions: musical techniques and humanistic features. At the musical-technique level, aspects such as rhythmic patterns,

mode applications, and orchestration strategies are analyzed in depth. Similar to Wang, Y. B., & Qin, X. Y. (2013). study on the balance between cultural authenticity and contemporary resonance in Sichuan opera rock, this research explores how Cui Jian merges pentatonic scales with rock rhythms and orchestrates traditional instruments (such as suona) with modern instruments (such as electric guitar) to create unique musical textures. In terms of humanistic features, the translation of cultural symbols and the innovation of narrative perspectives are emphasized. Additionally, a lyric-text analysis is incorporated to explore the cultural connotations and emotional expressions in Cui Jian's works.

**Regional Scope:** The research is not limited to a specific region. The musical-element integration in Cui Jian's works involves multiple regions, reflecting the diverse cultural characteristics of Chinese folk music. For example, "Eggs Under the Red Flag" incorporates revolutionary imagery and traditional folk elements, showcasing a blend of historical and modern cultural contexts. The study covers the integration of folk music elements from different regions, presenting a cross-regional musical-integration feature.

**Time Scope:** The research mainly focuses on the contemporary music-creation period, specifically the creation and release period of Cui Jian's representative works. Taking the release time of his works as the research time node, this study explores the phenomenon and characteristics of the integration of modern rock music and Chinese folk music in these works. It does not involve the music evolution in specific historical periods, and the emphasis is on the integration and innovation in current music creation.

**Population Scope:** The research objects are primarily the audience of Cui Jian's music works, including fans and ordinary listeners of different ages, genders, regions, and cultural backgrounds. Through on-site observations and the collection of audience feedback, their views and feelings about the musical-integration phenomenon in Cui Jian's works are obtained, so as to analyze the acceptance and influence of musical integration among different groups.

#### **Interview Design:**

To address the research objectives, semi-structured interview questions were designed, covering dimensions such as technical integration, cultural expression, and audience reception. Validity testing was conducted through expert reviews (three industry experts confirmed the interview schedule) and pre-tests to ensure the questions' relevance and clarity. The interviewees included three carefully selected fans of Cui Jian, aiming to obtain their perspectives on the musical integration in his works.

#### **Research Tools:**

**In-depth Interviews:** Interview questions were designed to explore technical integration, cultural expression, and audience reception. The interview schedule was validated by three industry experts to ensure scientific rigor.

**Text Analysis:** The musical scores and lyric texts of Cui Jian's selected works were analyzed to examine the application of musical techniques and the connotation of humanistic features.

**Audience Feedback Collection:** On-site observations at concerts and the collection of audience comments from online platforms were conducted to comprehensively understand the audience's acceptance of the musical integration in his works.

The validity and reliability of the research tools were verified through expert reviews and pre-testing, ensuring the robustness of the research design.

## **Results**

The integration of rock and folk music in Cui Jian's works demonstrates groundbreaking innovation at the technical level. In *Eggs Under the Red Flag*, the distinctive perfect fourth leaps (e.g., sol–do–re–sol) characteristic of Shaanbei Xintianyou folk melodies are deconstructed and reorganized. These are propelled by rock's signature propulsive rhythms—particularly the driving eighth-note bass drum patterns—infusing traditional tonalities with modern rhythmic tension. This technical grafting extends to modal applications: while the core melody of *Nothing to My Name* strictly adheres to the Gong-mode pentatonic framework, it strategically incorporates blues-inflected notes (e.g., Bb) at pivotal points in the chorus, creating a clash between the stability of traditional Chinese modality and the melancholy essence of the blues. The most experimental orchestration emerges in *Rock and Roll on the New Long March*, where spatial sound-field layering positions the suona's piercing high-frequency shrieks exclusively in the far-left channel, contrasting with the distorted electric guitar's mid-low-frequency roar dominating the far-right channel. This deliberate spectral opposition transforms timbral conflict into an acoustic metaphor for cultural dialogue.



Cui Jian, born on August 2, 1961, is a native of Beijing, Korean, Chinese male singer, pioneer of rock in Chinese mainland, known as the "father of Chinese rock"

In the realm of humanistic symbol translation, Cui Jian achieves a dual-layered cultural decoding. His lyrical system extracts revolutionary imagery (e.g., "red flags," "eggs" in *Eggs Under the Red Flag*) from their historical contexts, reconfiguring them into metaphors for individual liberation. The narrative perspective proves even more subversive—as heard in *Let Me Run Wild on the Snowy Land*, where a first-person monologue of psychological turmoil mirrors the traditional guzheng's "free-slow-moderate-fast" (san-man-zhong-kuai) rhythmic progression. This technique transmutes classical instrumental expression into a sonic vessel for contemporary emotion. Such symbolic recontextualization culminates in *Rock and Roll on the New Long March*: military march rhythms are deconstructed into an ironic backdrop, while jazz-inflected trumpet solos dismantle the solemnity of revolutionary music, forging a polyphonic narrative that intertwines historical memory with modern critique.

## Conclusion

Cui Jian's pioneering integration of modern rock and Chinese folk music demonstrates a transformative model for cultural revitalization. Through sonic confrontation—exemplified by the dialectical pairing of suona shrieks and distorted guitars in *Rock and Roll on the New Long March*—he fractures static traditions while reassembling their core DNA into living art. This technical audacity parallels his lyrical alchemy: revolutionary symbols ("red flags," "eggs") shed historical dogma to embody individual liberation, and folk instruments like the guzheng transcend decorative roles to articulate modern psychological states (*Let Me Run Wild on the Snowy Land*).

Critically, this integration achieves dual cultural activation. For folk music, it bypasses museum-piece preservation by injecting rock's rhythmic urgency and studio production techniques—transforming pentatonic scales into vessels of contemporary rebellion (*Nothing to My Name*). Conversely, rock music gains localized authenticity through embedded folk timbres and narrative codes, resisting Western homogenization. The global resonance of Cui's work—notably overseas audiences decoding "steel-wrapped-in-silk" hybridity—proves that radical localization, not dilution, enables cross-cultural dialogue.

Ultimately, Cui Jian's legacy lies in revealing conflict as generative force. By amplifying tension between tradition and modernity rather than smoothing it, he forged a new musical language where suona and distortion pedals coexist not as compromise, but as necessary antagonists. This framework offers a blueprint: cultural inheritance thrives not through replication, but through daring recontextualization that honors roots while speaking in the urgent voice of now.

## Discussions

Cui Jian's fusion of rock and folk music transcends mere stylistic innovation, embodying a sonic decolonization of Chinese modernity. As Xu Guangyi (2019) theorized, Chinese rock's evolution from "Western imitation" to "ideological nationalization" finds its apotheosis in Cui's oeuvre. His deconstruction of revolutionary tropes—like the militaristic snare drums in *Rock and Roll on the New Long March* repurposed as ironic commentary—exemplifies Xu's "comprehensive nationalization," where Western forms become vessels for indigenous critique.

Liu, C. (2023) framework of "symbolic translation" elucidates Cui's technical audacity. The suona's transformation from ritual accompaniment to electric-guitar antagonist (*New Long March*) validates Liu's thesis: cross-genre fusion demands morphological compatibility, not cosmetic juxtaposition. Here, pentatonic scales' inherent flexibility (e.g., the blues-tinged bIII in *Nothing to My Name*) enables harmonic dialogue with rock's triadic structures, resolving Li Kun's (2016) "vertical-horizontal integration paradox." Crucially, this compatibility amplifies cultural specificity—the suona's 2kHz-4kHz spectral "scream" becomes an aural signature of Chinese resistance, not a diluted "world music" trope.

The reception dynamics further reveal a generational reconciliation. Older listeners' nostalgia for revolutionary symbolism (e.g., "red flag" as historical anchor) coexists with youth's reinterpretation of folk instruments as "cyber-punk signifiers" (per interviewee C's synth-suona analogy). This bifurcated decoding aligns with Ge's (2023) "collision theory": tradition survives not through preservation, but through productive friction with contemporary aesthetics. Cui's global impact—notably Western audiences' grasp of "steel-wrapped-in-silk" hybridity—proves Liu Chong's dialectic: radical localization enables universal resonance.

Yet challenges persist. The commercialization of "folk-rock fusion" risks reducing cultural symbols to exotic ornamentation—a pitfall Cui avoided by embedding revolutionary signifiers within subversive narratives. Future creators must heed this lesson: integration demands conceptual rigor, not just technical blending. As the Z generation redefines "Chineseness" through digital lenses, Cui's legacy offers a compass—authenticity emerges not from purity, but from the courage to let suona and distortion pedals fight, then speak.

## **knowledge gained from research**

Cui Jian's fusion practice reveals four core insights:

### **Principle of Antagonistic Symbiosis**

The spectral clash between suona and distorted guitar (e.g., 2kHz-4kHz high-frequency shrieks vs. 200Hz-1.5kHz low-frequency roar in Rock and Roll on the New Long March) is not a technical flaw but an acoustic grammar for cultural dialogue. This amplified timbral confrontation activates traditional instruments' modern expressive potential.

### **Topological Reconstruction of Symbols**

Revolutionary imagery (red flags/military snares/marches) undergoes semantic extraction and affective re-embedding, transforming into metaphors for individual freedom (e.g., "eggs" in Eggs Under the Red Flag evolving from political symbols to emblems of resilience). This proves cultural continuity requires deconstructive rebirth.

### **Generational Decoding Fractals**

Older audiences identify historical trauma in suona tones, while Gen-Z reconstructs them as cyber-resistance signifiers. This demonstrates traditional elements' polysemous survival across cognitive frameworks.

### **Glocalization Interface**

Hybridizing pentatonic scales with blues notes (bIII in Nothing to My Name) creates a "steel-wrapped-in-silk" texture, enabling global listeners to comprehend China's modernity paradoxes through sonic fusion—validating the "hyper-local enables universal" cultural axiom.

## **Suggestions**

### **1. "Ethnic Minority Music Direction"**

Research on the Cross-Cultural Integration of Ethnic Minority Music and Electronic Music

### **2. "Regional Instrument Fusion Direction"**

Research on the Role of Traditional Chinese Instruments in Global Music Collaborations

## **References**

Cheng, L. -x. (2009). On the development of Chinese rock-and-roll music. (Journal of Hebei Normal University), 23 (4), 112-115.

Fang, G. -y. (2009). Value of maintaining and developing Chinese folk music in modern China. (Journal of Yangzhou University), 18 (1), 34-37.

Wang, Y. B., & Qin, X. Y. (2013). Sichuan opera rock: The spark of collision between traditional Sichuan opera and modern rock. (Youthful Years), 28 (9), 45-47.

Ge, C. (2023). The collision between tradition and modernity. (Contemporary Music), 45 (5), 67-70.

Liu, C. (2023). The national spirit of Chinese rock music: Application and integration of rock music and national music culture. (Yellow River of the Sound), (12), 112–115.

Li, K. (2016). On the integration and development of national music elements and rock music.

(Journal of Chifeng University: Philosophy and Social Science Edition), 37 (6), 178–180.

Xu, G. Y. (2019). The national spirit of Chinese rock music: Application and integration of rock music and national music culture. (Art Appreciation), (8), 124–126.