

Spring 2016

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Repository Citation

Liu, Z. (2016). Cui Jian: Extolling idealism yet advocating for freedom through rock music in China. *International Communication Research Journal*, 51(1), 3-20.

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Cui Jian: Extolling Idealism Yet Advocating for Freedom through Rock Music in China

By Zhaoxi Liu

Examining Cui Jian's songs as text, this study attempted to provide a reading of its political meaning that is different from many previous studies. Through a textual analysis of the revolutionary symbols in four of Cui's hits, this study found that the political meaning of Cui's songs is much more nuanced than a simple oppositional message, as he simultaneously endorses the Communist rule for its idealism and disavows it for its political suppression. Being China's first rocker, Cui Jian is politicized by the social discourse surrounding him as well as his own expressions, as he pursues his idealism and identity in the particular political and social context of China.

Cui Jian (Cui is the last name) is known as "the Father of Chinese Rock 'n Roll" (Ho, 2006; Jones, 1992; Matusitz, 2010). In China, his name is the synonym for rock music (Brace, 1991). He is also perhaps the most studied contemporary Chinese musician by Western scholars, who have discussed his political significance. In these studies, Cui Jian has been hailed as a hero (Wong, 1996), a rebel (Matusitz 2010), defiant of the Communist rule (Jaivin, 1991), and the spokesperson for the disenfranchised younger generation in China (Wong, 1996), among other labels. There is, however, a chance that such an overwhelming emphasis on the political opposition of Cui's music eludes a more nuanced reading of China's most famous rock star.

The reading of Cui's biggest hit, "I Have Nothing" (a.k.a. "Nothing to My Name"), for example, has been highly politicized. The song was widely interpreted, by the audience and scholars alike, as expressing the younger generation's anger over lack of freedom, individuality, political rights, as well as material possession. The fact that the song was played and sung by student protesters in the Tiananmen Square in 1989 was cited as further proof of the political message of the song (Brace, 1991; Matusitz,

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2010). However, Cui Jian denies that “I Have Nothing” addresses the government, or that the song is about having no freedom and democracy (Jones, 1992). During a television interview, Cui Jian said “I have nothing” is “just a love song” (“Cui Jian: I Have Nothing,” 2005). Music critic Li Wan also contended that the song “is not even a rock song. It is just a Northwestern folk style love song, but was attached with too much content later” (Yu, 2012).

Such different interpretations of Cui’s songs testify to the nature of his songs as *text* rather than just *work*, as differentiated by Barthes (1986) in his essay “From Work to Text.” Treating Cui’s songs as text, this study intends to explore the possibility of a different reading of the political meaning of Cui Jian, particularly through examining his use of Communist revolutionary symbols. This study aims at two goals. One, it strives to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the political meaning of the songs written by China’s most famous rocker, upon the 30th anniversary of his debut. Two, it intends to demonstrate the interpretative power of treating musician’s work as text.

How did Cui Jian Come Along?

Cui Jian was born in 1961 in a suburb of Beijing (Jiang, 2002; Zhao, 1992). His father was a trumpet player of honor in the band of the Beijing Airforce and therefore was essentially a military officer. His mother, an ethnic Korean, was a member of the state-run Central Ethnic Minority Dance and Song Troupe (Zhao, 1992). In other words, both of his parents were state employed artists. Cui received his early music education from his father and later became a professional trumpet player himself. His emergence as a rock star was the outcome of certain social, historical and political conditions.

China’s reform and opening up in the 1980s allowed music from outside China to enter the country. From 1978 to 1980, China was flooded with imported cassette tapes and television programs that brought the music of The Beatles, The Carpenters, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and especially pop music from Hong Kong and Taiwan (Brace, 1991; Clark, 2012; de Kloet, 2005a; de Kloet, 2005b; Jones, 1992). In April 1985, the British pop group Wham staged China’s first rock concert (Jaivin, 1991). Meanwhile, Cui himself

made friends with some foreign musicians who introduced him to the genre of rock 'n roll (Chong, 1991). He started to write his own songs, including "I Have Nothing," which he performed in the Beijing Capital Stadium with nearly 100 other pop singers to commemorate the International Year of Peace in 1986 (Clark, 2012; Yu, 2012). That night, the 25-year-old emerging rock singer appeared on the stage with a blue, traditional Chinese style overcoat that belonged to the father of one of his band members, with one leg of his pants still tucked into his sock. "[We] got on the stage very awkwardly," he once told a reporter ("Rock Singer Cui Jian," 2012). "I used to ask non-stop: when you will come with me!" On the stage of the Capital Stadium, facing thousands of listeners, Cui Jian shouted with his rough, raspy voice. Chinese rock 'n roll was born.

Theoretical Framework: Reading Cui Jian's Songs as Text

This study deems the lyrics of Cui Jian's songs as *text*, rather than just the musician's *work*. Barthes' (1986) holds that the *work* is seen, while the *text* is demonstrated, spoken according to certain rules. As stated by Barthes, "the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language: it exists only when caught up in a discourse" (p. 57). In other words, the work is the physical substance, such as a copy of book, whereas the text is the meaning that is subject to interpretation. Based on Barthes' theory of work vs. text, the following are five key points regarding treating the lyrics as text, which sets the parameters for the theoretical framework for this study.

First, this study is an activity and production that allows the researcher to experience the text. As a matter fact, "*the Text is experienced only in an activity, in a production*" [italics in original] (Barthes, 1986, p. 58). The particular reading of the text (i.e. the lyrics) as presented in this study is informed by the song writer's own experience and statements. However, such a reading is *not* to claim the most authoritative or right version of the meaning of the text, but to present another possible reading of the text, particularly its political meaning.

Second, the focus of the study is on the symbolic nature of the lyrics, because "*a work whose integrally symbolic nature one conceives,*

perceives, and receives is a text" [italics in original] (Barthes, 1986, p. 59). In other words, in this study, in this particular experience of the text, the researcher treats the lyrics as the signifier. The text itself is metonymic, full of "associations, contiguities, cross-references" (Barthes, 1986, p. 59), which allows the text to liberate its symbolic energy. This study also does not go through every single song that Cui has written, which is not feasible for a research paper. Rather, the reading focuses on the use of Communist revolutionary symbols in four of the Cui's hits.

Third, the "Text is plural" (Barthes, 1986, p. 59), which means it contains multiple meanings that enable multiple readings, lending itself "to a diffraction of meanings" (Barthes, 1986, p. 61). In the case of Cui's songs, there are at least two kinds of readings of the text: that from the musician himself, and that from everybody else. The reading presented in this study belongs to the latter, albeit informed by the former, and provides yet another different experience of the text. "This is what happens in the Text: it can be Text only in its differences," states Barthes (1986, p. 60). Such differences are not from one text to another, but within the same text, due to the plural meanings read by people.

It is therefore not surprising that there have been different interpretations of the political meaning of Cui's songs. The lyrics are often "interpreted as politically oppositional" (Brace, 1991, p.52) by the audience, but Cui Jian himself "vehemently denies that his work contains any overt political content, and dismisses political uses of his music by audiences as 'their own business'" (Jones, 1992, p.132). In a 1990 press conference, Cui said he did not want to talk about politics, and that "politics is not my work" (Wong, 1996, p.23). Instead, he said, "they [the songs] are more personal. It's just the truth, the modern truth. I talk about life in China" (Mitchell, 1995).

Fourth, following the previous point, the text "can be read without its father's guarantee," which is the opposite of the *work*. In the case of the *work*, the "author is reputed to be the father and the owner of his work; literary science thus teaches us to respect the manuscript and the author's declared intentions" (Barthes, 1986, p. 61). As *text*, the lyrics can take on its own life to have plural meanings when read by different people, despite the song writer's intended meaning.

Cui Jian is a case in point. For the audience, "Cui Jian says things that we all feel, but cannot say. We all hate the government. Cui Jian speaks for us. He says my feelings" (Brace, 1991, p. 61). And yet for Cui Jian himself, "We never meant that we express for you...It is that we expressed for ourselves, and we share with them" ("Arts China," 2010). In an interview with China's online news provider Tencent, Cui said: "I think any work, such as a movie, is just like a child. When you interact with the child, it really has no relationship with the author. Or, even, such relationship is reserved" ("Cui Jian: I Have Nothing," 2005). In this study, the researcher does refer to the song writer's intention but does not seek to reclaim the ownership of the work on behalf of the song writer; rather, the purpose of the study is to provide another possible reading of the text.

Finally, beyond the previous points derived from Barthes' writing, this study intends to add one more point: the text is experienced within specific cultural, social and historical contexts, which play a big role in determining what kind of experience with the text people will have. Cui Jian once said, "Our influence is caused by historical reasons, because for a long time nobody expressed individual feelings" ("Rock Singer Cui Jian," 2012). Cui's music emerged in a particular historical context: the post-Cultural Revolution China embarking on a new voyage of opening up and reform (Hutchings, 2001). College students in Beijing in 1989 appropriated Cui Jian's songs as a tool for ideological struggle, to express their sense of loss and disorientation at a time of change, mixed with promises of a better future and the reality of corruption and discontent (Jones, 1992). Some intellectuals interpreted Cui's lyrics as thinly-veiled political criticism of life in modern China in general, and of the government and its policies in particular (Brace, 1991). For the authorities, the sheer expression of one's real thinking and emotion was challenging the established ideological order that emphasized following the guidelines of the Party rather than the individual's own ideas. In addition, as a cultural tradition, the overall interpretive framework in China, for centuries, has the tendency of looking for indirect, subtle, disguised and yet powerful, oppositional political comments in ostensibly innocuous expressions, such as poems, and now, lyrics (Brace & Friedlander, 1992). Together, the particular context of

China renders the experience of Cui's text political in one way or another, for both the audience and the song writer himself.

The aforementioned five points are the basic theoretical premises upon which this analysis is conducted to answer the research question:

RQ: What is the political meaning of the text of Cui Jian's songs informed by the song writer's own perspective?

Methods of Analysis

Cui's lyrics, as plural text, are full of ambiguity (Brace, 1991; Jones, 1992; Wong, 1996), which offers a wide range of symbolic material for the audience to interpret (Matusitz, 2010). Some of the most ambiguous symbols in his work are related to the Communist revolution and therefore the songs chosen for this analysis are the ones with a clear reference to the Communist revolution. They are from Cui's first three albums. The reason for choosing the first three albums is because those are his most popular albums and mark the heyday of his career as a rock star. Cui's popularity started to decline after his fourth album ("*20141010 Qiangqiang Three Men Talk*," 2014). The first album, *Rock 'n Roll on the Road of the New Long March*, was released in 1989, just a couple of months before the student demonstration. The second album, *Solution*, was released in 1991. *Balls under the Red Flag*, the third album, was released in 1994 but it was soon banned by the authorities, due to its explicit reference to various social issues. Both *Solution* and *Balls under the Red Flag* were re-released in 2005 (Yang, 2005). Four songs in these albums have clear reference to the revolution, as indicated in the song titles: "Rock 'n Roll on the Road of the New Long March," "A Piece of Red Cloth," "Nan Ni Wan," and "Balls under the Red Flag."

The Long March (1934-1935) is one of the most glorious episodes in the Communist revolutionary history. It has been featured in all sorts of Chinese Party propaganda channels, from modernized Peking Opera, novels, songs, to TV shows and movies. It was a year-long military retreat stretching thousands of miles from southern to northern China, when the Communist military force was forced to leave its southern base under the attack of the Nationalists. Red is the color for the Chinese Communists

and their revolution. The Communist military force was initially called the Red Army. Their flag was red; their uniform featured a red star on the hat; the color of the national flag of the People's Republic is also red. Therefore, the Long March, the red cloth and the red flag are all explicit reference to the Communist revolution.

Cui Jian's cover of "Nan Ni Wan" is the rock version of a classic revolutionary song, written in 1943 by He Jingzhi, not by Cui Jian. This song depicts the "Grand Production Movement" in a Communist base, Nan Ni Wan, where the peasants and soldiers labored shoulder-by-shoulder to produce enough food and cotton to sustain themselves amid the blockade by the Japanese and the Nationalist armies.

The qualitative textual analysis tool was used to analyze three of the four aforementioned songs' lyrics, with "Nan Ni Wan" analyzed only for its revolutionary reference because it is not written by Cui Jian. Pauly (1991, p. 11) holds that "the topic of all qualitative research is the making of meaning." Consequently, the qualitative researcher can study his or her subject in three main ways: as a product, as a practice, or as a commentary. This study analyzed Cui Jian's song lyrics as a mass communication product and endeavored to decipher the symbolic forms through which the lyrics render experiences (Pauly, 1991). In other words, the analysis read the lyrics as text and interpreted the meaning of the text.

Since the lyrics are considered media texts that are essentially symbolic, and the focus of this analysis is the revolutionary symbols in the text, semiotics was also useful for the analysis. Based on semiotics, words and referred objects in the lyrics are considered the signifier, and the main task of the analysis is to seek the signified, the said. The said, or the meaning of the lyrics, is more about the connotation—the extensive and inferred meaning, the cultural and political significance, rather than the denotation—the basic, direct meaning, of the symbols (Danesi, 2004; Massik & Solomon, 2012).

This researcher therefore read and examined the lyrics of Cui Jian's songs and sought to interpret the meaning of the revolutionary symbols—that is, the connotation—through referring, associating and connecting the lyrics to other texts and facts, including relevant literature, the musician's life experience,

appearances, and media interviews, as well as the broader social and political contexts. For the purpose of this study, the reading and interpretation focused on the political significance of the text. The lyrics and Cui Jian's interviews are in Chinese and translated by the researcher, whose first language is Chinese.

Analysis of Revolutionary Symbols in the Songs

Using symbolic forms related to the Communist revolution is a distinct feature of Cui Jian's text. Other studies have interpreted such appropriation of the Communist revolutionary elements as political opposition toward the Communist government, calling "Rock 'n Roll on the Road of New Long March" a satire on the mystification of Long March (1934-1935) (Chong, 1991), or "A Piece of Red Cloth" an "open confrontation" with the government (Ho, 2006). As stated before, text is plural and susceptible to multiple readings and interpretations. In this researcher's experience with the text, these symbols signify the revolutionary spirit and idealism once propagated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The following analysis focuses on the lyrics of three songs written by Cui Jian. For "Nan Ni Wan," it suffices to note that Cui's cover of this old revolutionary song is beautiful and emotional, with no trace of any sort of mocking or satire. Nan Ni Wan is a symbol of the perseverance of the Communist revolutionaries under extreme hardship, and singing the song in such a nostalgic way is a tribute to the revolutionary legacy.

"Rock 'n Roll on the Road of the New Long March"

After the Cultural Revolution, the old system broke down and the leftist value system collapsed. There is a desire to find something new. But what is it and where? People don't know. That is the feeling that this song tries to express. It can be interpreted as the musician's contemplation of the new situation (Yu, 2012). The song also expresses an interesting nostalgia about the former Chinese leader, Mao (Brace & Friedlander, 1992).

"Lower the head, walk forward, looking for myself; walk back, walk forth, having no base." In this opening phrase, the Long March is a metaphor for the new Long March of searching for

one's own identity in the fast changing society. "Ask the sky, ask the earth, how many miles are still ahead? Plead to the wind, plead to the rain, leave me quickly." The journey in search of the new identity, just as the journey of the Long March, is long, sinuous, and dreadful. "So many mountains, so many waters, can't tell west or east; so many people, so many mouths, can't tell right or wrong." The Red Army had to deal with the harsh nature and military struggle; the new generation will have to navigate the perplexing and confusing new era, which is no less challenging and arduous.

"Walking and thinking, the snow mountain and the great swamp; walking and singing, the leader Chairman Mao." The snow mountain and the great swamp were among the most lethal obstacles the Red Army encountered, and conquered, during the Long March. Many people lost their lives in the mountain or the swamp. Thinking about how the Red Army, under the leadership of Chairman Mao, was able to overcome such extreme hardship is inspiring when facing the challenges of the new Long March. "Our real Long March," the musician once said during an interview, "is to learn to express ourselves directly and honestly" (Chong, 1991).

Overall, the term "Long March" in the text is the signifier, and the signified is the revolutionary spirit demonstrated through the Long March. Such revolutionary spirit, in turn, serves as an inspiration: the Red Army conquered 6,000 miles of harsh nature, military strikes and human hardship to survive, with nothing but millet and rifles and perseverance. The new generation can learn something from it.

"A Piece of Red Cloth"

This song and the way it was performed, with Cui Jian blindfolded with a piece of red cloth, is seen by many as criticizing governmental abuse of power, corruption, inefficiency and insensitivity (Brace & Friedlander, 1992; de Kloet, 2005a) and therefore is "undoubtedly anti-government" (Brace & Friedlander, 1992, p. 124). Cui Jian himself, however, would not agree. "Many people think it is a political song, but it is very emotional. In the last verse I feel that the land is dry and I feel very thirsty. It is for a girl, for a country. Both" (Sebag-Montefiore, 2014).

"That day you used a piece of red cloth, covered my eyes and

the sky. You asked me what I saw, I said I saw happiness. This feeling really made me comfortable; it made me forget that I had no place to live. You asked me where I still wanted to go, I said I would go your way." These verses can be easily interpreted as a censure of the Communist propaganda: how they misguided the people, turning people into blind believers of whatever the Party told them, regardless of the reality, such as during the Great Leap Forward campaign, which eventually led to the nationwide famine in the early 1960s.

However, in the song, the singer appears to have lost the strength to rebel. Part of the reason is: "I feel you are not iron, but is as strong and rigid as iron. I feel you have blood in your body, because your hands are warm." This expresses a sense of submission to the power (Jones, 1992). The passion and idealism characterizing the Communist revolution might be what makes it so strong and warm. And yet, another side of the strength is suppression: "I feel like I want to drink some water, but your mouth blocked mine."

"I can't walk and I can't cry, because my body has dried out. I will accompany you like this forever, because I know your pain the best." This last verse expresses both protest and love. The singer is not happy that he is being controlled and his expression suppressed. And yet, he is willing to accept the control because he understands the extraordinary struggle the CCP went through in order to establish a new country. In this verse, the "you" might have changed to mean not just the Party or the government, but the country, the motherland. Yes, living in this country means subjecting yourself to a fair amount of control, but the singer will not leave or escape because he knows how much pain the country has suffered. Here, the singer's family background is relevant. Coming from a family of military artists, he is one of the red kids: children of the revolutionaries. The red cloth is the signifier, and the signified is both political control and a sense of passion, both protest and submission from the person whose eyes are covered by it.

"Balls under the Red Flag"

In Chinese, "Balls under the Red Flag" is actually "Eggs under the Red Flag," which can also be read as "Eggs laid by the Red

flag." Cui Jian played with words here. The cover photo of the album shows an egg shaped uterus with a fetus inside.

"Sudden opening up, is actually not that sudden. Now the opportunity is here, but who knows what to do? The red flag is still flopping in the air, without a fixed direction. The revolution is still ongoing, and the old guy has more strength." This opening verse juxtaposes the new policy of opening-up with the old notion of revolution. Red flag is the symbol of the Communist revolution. The revolution is not over, because the Communist Party's promise of a strong and prosperous China has yet to be fully delivered, but the country and people are already lost, not sure which direction to go, especially the younger generation.

"Money is flying in the air; we have no ideals." This is a direct indictment of China's problem in the new era: too much focus on money, but very little talk of ideals. Ideals are very much emphasized throughout the Communist revolution and Mao's era. Part of the reason for Mao to wage the Cultural Revolution was to ensure his revolutionary ideals would not be replaced by bourgeois pragmatism. Cui Jian grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and the kind of hyper idealist discourse was very likely to have had an impact on him. The song can be read as the song writer using the Communist idealism to criticize the lack thereof in the new era, trying to make people realize what is missing, and questioning whether the society is really heading to the right direction. Cui Jian once said in an interview: "consumerist culture is what China [traditional culture] opposes most...Consumerism is ugly" ("Cui Jian Unusual Talk Part 4," 2009).

"In the heart we know clearly, whose descendants we are," the song goes on. Many people of Cui's generation are direct descendants of veterans of the revolution, who are referred to in the song: "Mommy is still alive; papa is the flag pole." Flag pole means that the father is the one who holds the flag; in other words, a revolutionary veteran. Of course this line might not be a direct mentioning of his own parents, but it nevertheless indicates that the older generation is still here, and how can we discard all the idealism? The lyrics remind his generation of their roots and identity, against the backdrop of a fast changing and yet fast corrupting society.

"We are no longer pawns, walking the marks drawn by others."

It is time to search for a new identity with independent spirit. "The reality is like a rock, and the spirit is like an egg. Although the rock is hard, but only the egg is life." Having the spirit is the key to a new life, which is signified by the egg. But what kind of spirit? In this song, the spirit is signified by the red flag, a revolutionary symbol, and therefore connects with the revolutionary legacy, including idealism: sacrifice, perseverance and aspirations for a stronger Chinese nation. The song bemoans the lack of these ideals in the money-obsessed society and calls for their return for a brighter future of the country. "If ask what we are: eggs laid by the red flag." This closing verse is to remind himself, as well as his audience, not to forget their roots: we are the descendant of the revolutionary generation.

Connotation of the Symbolic Text: Idealism and Identity

Having discussed the signifier and signified in the lyrics, this section further explores the connotation, or the inferred political significance, of the symbolic text of these songs, in conjunction with the musician's life experience, press interviews, critics' comments, and the broader social and political contexts. Two main aspects emerge from the examination: idealism and identity.

One thing these revolutionary symbols evoke is a nostalgia for the lost idealism. As such, Cui's music does not challenge the legitimacy of the CCP's rule. Rather, the repeated use of symbols of the Communist revolution reminds people of the extraordinary struggle, when the post-Cultural Revolution society, in the lure of consumerism and money, is forgetting that part of the history and its spiritual legacy. He once said in an interview that his grandfather's generation believed in tradition; his father's generation believed in Mao. But, "my generation, I really think they believe in nothing. It's empty" (Wong, 1996, p. 23). Rock 'n roll, to Cui Jian, is an expression of idealism. The Communist revolution is also laden with talks of idealism: the aspiration to build a brand new country that allows the Chinese people to stand tall in the world, and to realize the dream of national rejuvenation. From age 5 to 15, the most critical years for one's physical, cognitive and emotional development, Cui experienced the Cultural Revolution, when the socialist idealism was hyped

to its extreme. He was raised with an ideal of socialism (Matusitz, 2010).

Post Cultural Revolution Cui Jian, like many other people in China, experienced a lot of confusion, as the reform and opening up represented a 180-degree shift of the policies, purposes and goals of the Party, the government and the country (Hutchings, 2001). Mao's era was so ideologically oriented, all about world views, philosophies, values, and of course, revolutionary ideals. The reform era, in contrast, was mostly economic oriented, and the quest for ideals was supplanted by the quest for money. Cui, as well as other musicians in China, is troubled when he sees consumerism taking the place of idealism (Baranovich, 2003). Such an uneasiness is well depicted by Jiang Xiaoyu, one of Cui's close friends and concert planner:

He loathes the golden color tone that is now worshiped as the trend, because that symbolizes money and commerce. He would rather have the red color, which represents idealism. He even fantasizes that rock 'n roll can rebuild young people's "red idealism" (Jiang, 2002).

And therefore, on the issue of idealism, Cui endorses the CCP for its revolutionary legacy.

The revolutionary symbols, which Cui uses to extol idealism, are also an important part of his identity, evident in his appropriation of these symbols not merely in his songs, but also his wardrobe. He used to wear a green People's Liberation Army (PLA) uniform jacket at live performances and in music videos. He also blindfolded himself with a piece of red cloth when performing "A Piece of Red Cloth." He no longer wears the PLA jacket. Instead, he shows up pretty much everywhere - press conferences, TV interviews, concerts, and international film festivals (he now makes films), wearing a white baseball cap with a bright red star fixed right at the front.

The PLA uniform is interpreted by some scholars as an expression of "his hatred toward Mao" (Mutusitz, 2010, p. 163) or "a subversive sartorial recontextualization" (Jones, 1992, p. 119). This researcher, however, sees it as an expression of nostalgia.

The green PLA uniform is something Cui had worn during his boyhood, as seen in some of his past photos. When he put it on again as a performer, he was giving a nod to his past. As he grows older, he no longer wears the green uniform. But the red star, fixed on the white baseball hat that he's been wearing since the early 2000s, is still there. He chose the red star because, again, he once wore it as a child and it is a clear reference to the revolution.

These revolutionary symbols, in the lyrics and on the outfit, set Cui Jian apart from pop singers, who mostly wear sleek, fashionable clothes. They differentiate his generation from other generations in China, as his was born and raised under the red flag, thus "the egg laid by the red flag." Globally, the revolutionary elements give him an unmistakable, distinct Chinese identity (de Kloet, 2005a). Music critic Li Wan says of Cui Jian's music: "you know it is from the red China as soon as you hear it" (Yu, 2012).

While using the Communist revolutionary legacy to mark his identity, Cui Jian resents the Community rule precisely on the issue of identity. His emphasis on identity is closely related to his advocacy for authenticity, sincere self-expression, and individual freedom, which puts him at odds with the CCP on the issue of censorship. To Cui Jian, too much control of freedom of expression not only stifles creativity and but also undermines honesty, as people are forced to disguise and distort what they really want to express out of fear of political persecution. "It is such a terrible, ugly thing," Cui once said of censorship (Sebag-Montefiore, 2014). His proclaimed identity as an artist puts him in a counter hegemonic political position because, as he once said himself, the goal of politics is to control, whereas artists are anti-control (Wong, 1996).

"What China really needs is artists: people who has imagination; people who has creativity," says Cui Jian ("Rock Singer Cui Jian," 2012). And it is his dream that "there is truly a group of artists emerging" in China, and a true artist will make people realize or experience the meaning of life ("Arts China," 2010). In order to allow more artists to emerge, the authorities should allow more freedom of expression. "Free thinking will bring creativity," he says ("Arts China," 2010). He therefore calls for a system that "really protects free thinkers; that is the true treasure of the nation. 1.4 billion people, no thinker, no free thinker, no dangerous free

thinker, this nation is a manufacturing nation,...manufacturing other people's [ideas]" ("Cui Jian Unusual Talk Part 7," 2009).

In sum, to answer the research question, the political meaning of Cui Jian's songs, when read as text and informed by the musician's own perspective, contains two main aspects: idealism and identity. He endorses the Party's idealist legacy but opposes its authoritarian suppression of freedom of expression because it deprives people of establishing their true identity and stifles their creativity. Meanwhile, Communist revolution inspired idealism has become part of Cui's identity, and identity, which entails freedom and creativity, is also part of Cui's vision of an ideal China. Overall, his political messages are "far more ambiguous than a simple condemnation of the CCP" (Jones, 1992, p. 148). Idealism and identity are not inherently political. And yet, in a largely authoritarian society, these messages inescapably touch the nerve of the authorities and the public, and are so prone to be interpreted as highly political.

Conclusion

Examining Cui Jian's songs as text, this study has attempted to provide a reading of its political connotation that is different from many previous studies. Through a textual analysis of the revolutionary symbols in four of Cui's songs, this study concludes that the political meaning of Cui's music is much more nuanced and complicated than a simple oppositional message, as he simultaneously endorses the Communist rule for its idealism and disavows it for its political suppression. He does all this with the intention of being a musician, an artist, not a political figure.

Yet, within the specific social and political context of China, what Cui Jian stands for inevitably renders his text political. Through evoking nostalgia, Cui Jian extols the idealism of the CCP's revolutionary past. The gist of the idealism is a better society, a better-off Chinese nation, which in Cui Jian's mind entails the freedom to express one's true views and establish one's identity, with honesty, authenticity and creativity. Under an authoritarian system that strives to control, Cui Jian advocates for more freedom and less control. His political message, therefore, is at the same time legitimizing and counter hegemonic. The political

significance of Cui Jian's symbolic text is further intensified when it is read in different ways by different people, out of the control of the song writer. As a result, "seemingly innocuous love songs are capable of becoming burning torches of political commitment. Songs meant to influence affective and conceptual development one way can be immediately, or at a later time, subverted into the service of oppositional positions" (Brace & Friedlander, 1992, p. 124).

This study makes a couple of theoretical contributions. One of them is demonstrating that reading a musician's work as text allows more dynamic intellectual inquiry and more nuanced understanding of the political significance of music. Lyrics of songs are plural text rather than just finite work, and this study itself provides a different experience with the text, informed by the musician's own thinking, demonstrating the possibility of a different interpretation of the text. Another contribution of this study is the theoretical lesson that the reading of the text is socially, historically and culturally specific. The contextual conditions, as shown in the study, constitute a major factor in determining the political implication of Cui's songs.

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