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Language and music

November 1984, the weather was turning cold in Beijing and people on the street started to put on coats. In a small shabby restaurant, Jian Cui and his band just finished the last note of their new song of his new album: Rock N' Roll on the Road of Long March. Some people dropped the chopsticks in their hands and stood up, shouting and cheering for the singer. For many of them, it was their very first time to hear Chinese rock music. It is true that people's everyday life is surrounded by music and would be influenced by music they hear. Moreover, people who speak different languages or dialects have the ability to create unique music – they even perceive music in their own ways. That is because language is one of the most important and indispensable elements that shape our identities. People growing up within different language environments gain different cultural identities, and they think, behave and live in different ways. Interestingly, there is an obvious yet implicitly plotted relationship between language and music. The main reason so many kinds of music in different countries and cultures have their own unique qualities and charisma is because they are created by people in different languages. Even a same music genre can be endowed with unique characteristics and styles when it is composed and played by different language speakers. Language plays an essential role in music creation and has great impact on our society by influencing how people perceive, treat and interact with music.

During the last century, western rock music developed and grew at an unprecedented rate with booming success in many parts of the world including England, America, European countries, China and so on. And the 1980s was definitely a decade of milestone in the history

of rock n' roll industry. It is the time when numerous great rock bands defined themselves and wrote their own stories in rock n' roll history. The rock n' roll industry was developing at an increasing rate and enlarging its impact every hour of every day. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, established in Cleveland, OH in 1983, as researcher Andy mentioned, "bolstered the critical acclaim of a select body of rock artists through featured exhibitions and permanent displays" and "Many of the artists inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame each year first rose to prominence during the rock revolution of the late 1960s" (p.479). After English rock n' roll music's great success in North America and Europe, it expanded its global influence and started to spread to China.

During the 1980s in China, English language education just started at a slow rate, and English was not widely understood. And this fact directly affected the spread of rock music in China. As researcher Mingjian stated, during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the learning of foreign ideas including foreign languages was condemned. Despite some facilitating events such as the recognition of China's membership of the United Nations in 1971 and the US president Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972, English language education was still not given enough attention. It was only after the end of the Cultural Revolution that China could speed up its process of modernization through opening itself up to the Western world after a long time of isolation (p.62). While the English started gradually, the emphasis on English education in China only emerged after 1979 when the Cultural Revolution ended.

This language difference, the gap between western rock music and Chinese audience, was quite huge and was not immediately able to be resolved and thus discouraged the audience and affected the spread of rock music in China in the 1980s. When the domestic radio stations broadcast one of the first rock songs like 'Let it be' by the Beatles, the main audience was composed of college students around 20 years old and the graduated ones who just finished their study and started to work. In no doubts, at that time in China, those people were the most

progressive ones in the society, which perfectly matched the progressive spirit of rock n' roll. In spite the fact that they showed great passion about newly-introduced western rock music, many of them couldn't understand most of the lyrics because foreign language education was just at the burgeoning stage at that time, which means people had limited English vocabulary and could not understand the meaning of English songs sometimes. It is undeniable that if any one of the components of music is obstructed, such as rhythm, lyrics and melody, it would not lead to the true understanding of the essence of the music and certainly would not be beneficial to the development and prosperity of the music. This embarrassing situation for Chinese rock n' roll fans, if not made the domestic rock music industry stagnant, at least led to the poor understanding of the lyrics, posed an invisible wall for many of the audience and slowed down the prosperity of rock music in China. In this case, language played an essential role in affecting Chinese rock music audience.

This language difference not only appeared as a problem to Chinese rock music audience in the 1980s, but also became a tricky and serious issue to domestic artists who tried to create their own Chinese rock n' roll. Early Chinese rock music musicians traveled abroad to watch concerts of their favorite rock n' roll bands and brought CD albums back to China and studied them. It is true that the very first wave of western rock music was brought by those albums looped on and on in some small bars hidden in the shadow of the city, where a bunch of young man who had worn their hair long since months ago sat in circle listening to the rock songs and talking about starting their own rock n' roll band. Poor English education was not a huge problem to many of the musicians. They couldn't understand the lyrics quite well but learned step by step while getting in touch with western rock music. At that time, even some of the musicians themselves didn't know that several decades later, which is nowadays, their names would be well-known by the public and they would make great impact on Chinese rock music. Jian Cui, the godfather of Chinese rock n' roll, who started the early rock music trend in the

1980s, was one of the most important rock music composers, vocalists and guitarists in the history. When Jian Cui and other musicians analyzed western rock music and tried to imitate some elements of it to help their own rock music composition, they found that for some reasons it was impossible to achieve their goal. They realized that there existed some inherent difference and discrepancy between English and Chinese rock music. And the difference made it fundamentally impossible to create Chinese rock based on the existent patterns of western rock. Some fundamental difference, at the linguistic level, between the mechanism of which English and Chinese work kicked in and played a huge role in music composition.

At the linguistic level, English and Chinese work with very different mechanisms and have a lot of inherent differences. As researcher Robert stated, a major difference between English and Chinese is that Chinese is one of the typical “tone languages”, which “include lexical items differing only in their relative pitch or pitch pattern” and “make up approximately half of the world's languages and are common throughout sub-Saharan Africa and Asia (the most widely spoken language of this type is Mandarin Chinese)” (p.487). He also declared that although English does not use pitch lexically, it does involve intonation difference to signal different meanings, for example, it differs between something is a question or a statement in English (Robert, p.487). However, it is clear that English and Chinese rely on different tone mechanisms and this difference certainly shows some traces in the rock music in the 1980s. Besides, there are also many other features and factors worth considered such as the ability to process lexical tone, prosodic changes and the like, which may vary quite drastically between different languages. All those different language mechanisms differences became a strong obstacle when domestic rock artists attempted to imitate western rock music. As a matter of fact, imitation is an appropriate standard learning strategy especially when people start from scratch. When it came from rock songs in English to Chinese, many rules just could not apply anymore and it bothered many Chinese rock musicians for a long time. As long as Chinese

rock n' roll musicians could not come up with effective solutions, Chinese rock music composition would keep crawling, struggling and facing great challenges. Language difference has created an all-time issue that how Chinese rock music can absorb essence of western rock music and at the same time create great original works with unique qualities of Chinese.

Although throughout the history language difference in some ways served as a catalyst to more original rock music creation in China that combined some essence of western rock and some elements of Mandarin, language difference had been a barrier constraining Chinese rock n' roll from achieving global success. The language difference-the divergence between mechanisms of English and Chinese-is definitely one of the most important reasons why Chinese rock n' roll is under great challenge who is still struggling its way to real world class level. Chinese rock has been developed for nearly forty years since the first rock n' roll trend in the last century, led by Jian Cui, the godfather of Chinese rock music. Admittedly, during these past years, many great Chinese rock n' roll musicians come and go. And many of them created fantastic music, achieved tremendous album sales, and wrote their own stories to the rock n' roll history in China. However, it has been thirty years since the foundation of Black Panther, one of the most important hard rock and metal band in China. It has been thirty-two years since the release of Jian Cui's first album: Rock N' Roll on the Road of Long March. And the "stone-cold" fact is that Chinese musicians had never made to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ever. There is still a long way to go because Chinese rock music have not succeeded in becoming internationally influential and famous.

When certain music genre in one language travels to another country or group of people who speak a different language and want to produce the music in their language, they need to figure out what the difference is between two languages and how music rules can change because of this language difference. Only by understanding the important role that language plays in music perception and creation can people create music their own unique qualities and

thus can they enjoy a variety of different music. For the musicians, there're a lot of things that need to be taken into consideration due to this "language difference" and it's definitely not only about simply transplant one language to another to create their own music in their own language. If all the audience can hear is music of one language, there's minimal music diversity and minimal benefit to people's life. Language difference had created serious problems for Chinese rock music industry and could become the same tricky issue to many other musicians around the world.

Globally, we have to pay attention to this language difference, which is causing big music composition challenge, because music plays an important role in everybody's daily life. There are numerous evidence and researches about how music can affect people's psychological well-being and daily life. Researcher Adam believed that "the main reasons for enjoying rock dancing, besides body movement and involvement with the music, were involvement with the partner and a feeling of togetherness" (p.52). Adam's main idea was that music can "positively contribute to one living a more optimally flourishing life with greater psychological well-being" in terms of four aspects including people's positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. In general, if people cannot find a way to deal with the music creation challenge brought by language difference, there's still difficult to create music of their own language and certainly cannot enjoy music of many different kinds of language. This would reduce the music diversity and is not beneficial to the overall well-being of people's daily life. As a whole, language plays an important role in music creation and can affect how people perceive and create music.

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