

Performing Chineseness: Constructing "Chinese" through Music Entertainment Programs

★ By Cynthia Lu (吕月), mentored by Professor Kyle Shernuk (余仁强) at Georgetown University



01 Introduction

What it means to be Chinese has never had a fixed or static definition. Understanding the boundaries of "Chineseness" and the elements that construct it are crucial to comprehend the underpinnings of Chinese society. In the early days of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the party-state almost unilaterally dictated a homogenized, Han-centric version of Chineseness [1]. However, as the number of avenues for individuals to negotiate Chineseness grew, the party-state's monopoly on shaping Chineseness began to weaken [2].

It is against this backdrop of diversification that this study examines the various forms of contemporary Chineseness. I investigate constructions of Chineseness through both the lens of music-entertainment programs broadcast on Chinese Central Television (CCTV) and the media that discusses these performances—two outlets responsible for formulating some of the most influential and pervasive contemporary articulations of Chineseness.

For this study, a focus is placed on musical entertainment programs due to their role in constructing the official, party-state version of Chineseness: CCTV is the predominant state television broadcaster in the PRC and has been explicitly defined as a "mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [3]." On the other hand, a focus is also placed on the media that follows these programs—including netizens on online forums, artist interviews, and international journalism—because they provide platforms for ethnic minority performers to negotiate their own identities outside the purview of the party-state. This allows them to articulate versions of Chineseness that contradict, subvert, or otherwise divert from party-state narratives.



2022 Finale: The 2022 contestants sing "Chinese People (中国人)" with their hands on their hearts. The lyrics state: "The same tears, the same pain... the same blood, the same race. We still have a dream, that together we will realize" [15]

02 Case Studies Used

Hanggai 杭盖:
Mongolian band,
Champion of
Sing My Song
(中国好歌曲)
2015



Tenzin Nyima 旦增尼玛:
Mongolian Singer /
Songwriter,
Champion of
Sing! China (中国
好声音) 2018



Tséwang Norbu 才旺罗布:
Tibetan Singer /
Songwriter, Top
11 in Sing! China
(中国好声音)
2021



03 Party-State Chineseness on CCTV

For the CCP, Chineseness is characterized by pluralistic unity, a Han-centered Chinese Dream, and Hanicization. These discourses essentialize the representation of ethnic minority identity in the PRC while privileging the Han and the party-state.

1. Pluralistic unity (duoyuan yiti 多元一体) [4]: China is framed as a nation that encompasses its 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities. Ethnic differences are subsidiary to unity and national stability [5].

On CCTV: When asked why they are competing, Hanggai responds that they must share their Chinese music on 中国好歌曲 (which literally translates to "Good Songs of China") [6]. Here, Mongolian culture is attributed to a broader Chinese culture, which illustrates the privileging of the PRC above Mongolia and furthers the notion of *duoyuan yiti*.

2. Chinese Dream (zhongguo meng 中国梦): Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream surrounds pursuing the rejuvenation of the nation [7]. Although "Chinese Dream" implies applicability across the PRC, it actually aligns with Han and party-state values such that the ability of ethnic minorities to realize the Chinese Dream is contested.

On CCTV: Nyima performed at the Beijing National Stadium (Bird's Nest)—which holds symbolic importance for the party-state—only after leaving Tibet, speaking Mandarin, wearing Western clothing, and waving goodbye to his family and culture [8] [9]. The narrative is that ethnic minorities may only realize the Chinese dream by leaving their cultural heritage and toward Han Chineseness.

3. 2nd Generation Ethnic Policy (di'erdai minzu zhengce 第二代民族政策): In this unofficial policy, contemporary Chineseness is synonymous with assimilation into Han society; minorities are celebrated when they are perceived to have adopted Han culture [10].

On CCTV: After performing a Tibetan song, the judges tell Norbu: "The younger generation has a responsibility to bring cultural elements of the contemporary era, ethnic minorities, and the homeland together, to demonstrate their love for the homeland... and national culture" [11]. This statement asserts that minorities should bring cultural practices into national, party-state ideals, encouraging assimilation into Han society.

04 Individual Negotiation of Chineseness outside Officialdom

When articulating their ethnic identities, some minority artists work within the framework of party-state Chineseness, whereas others contend with Chineseness to shape new alternative identities. Non-official discourses tend to fall within two camps:

1. Expanding CCP Chineseness: A conciliatory stance is taken on amalgamation into party-state Chineseness [12], where ethnic identity may only be expressed when it is neutralized to align with the nation.

On CCTV: Throughout his time competing, Nyima repeatedly voices his desire to share his mountain songs (*shange*, 山歌) with the world, without attributing *shange* to the PRC [8]. This can be read as an attempt to carve new space for Tibetan culture within Chineseness, as opposed to subsuming Tibetan culture within party-state Chineseness. Nyima navigates his ethnic minority identity without subverting or aligning fully with Chineseness.

2. Identity Outside State-Promoted Chineseness: Ethnic minorities aim to create new articulations of ethnic minority identity that exist outside the purview of party-state Chineseness. These voices may only be expressed outside the purview of the CCP.

On CCTV: In a US interview, Hanggai explains: "If you don't speak Chinese, you can't survive... Many [Mongolians] have gradually been subjected to a very strong cultural invasion by an oppressive culture [13]." Hanggai portrays party-state Chineseness as an assimilationist force and rejects the notion that Mongolians must assimilate into Han Chineseness.

On CCTV: In February 2022, Norbu self-immolated in front of the Potala Palace, a location that bears symbolic meaning in the fight for Tibetan independence. Although CCP censorship has left much unknown about his act, sources report that he chanted "Tibet wants to be free" before setting himself on fire [14]. Here, Norbu renounces the party-state and frames Chineseness as a force that denies Tibetans the opportunity for freedom.

★ Conclusion

This paper argues that party-state Chineseness in the PRC has grown increasingly divergent from individual articulations of ethnic identity. With regard to the CCP, Chineseness continues to be defined by policy objectives such as pluralistic unity, the Chinese Dream, and the unofficial 2nd Generation Ethnic Policy. Among ethnic minorities, the construction of identity has grown more fragmented. Some navigate their identity within the party-state framework through conciliatory amalgamation, neutralized alterity, and other presentations that privilege national identity above ethnic identity. Others subvert Chineseness outside the purview of the party-state, denouncing it as an assimilationist force, privileging ethnic identity above national identity, and otherwise refusing to dilute their identity to fit within Chineseness.

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