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Remixed Modernity:

Disco Culture and Mainland China in the Early Reform Era (1980s–1990s)

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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How did disco culture, a sexualized and subversive form of late-night entertainment, become a nationalist symbol highlighting “socialist spiritual civilization” during China’s early reform era? Centering on the keywords “remix” and “modernity,” this thesis examines the changing connotations of “disco” as presented in the *People’s Daily* and investigates two types of disco-based remixed cultural production in the 1980s and 1990s: the song “Xintianyou” and the practice of senior disco. Reflecting on the production and mediation of these two cultural phenomena in post-Mao society, this thesis argues that the recontextualization of disco culture in China reveals the efforts of both the official government and the general public to reconcile nationalism and globalization, as well as politics and entertainment, as the country navigated its way toward modernization amidst cultural dissolution in the late 20th century.

The thesis of Qingyi Sun is approved.

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I. Introduction¹

Welcomed by a big round of applause, a group of Young Pioneers of China appeared on stage, snapping and swaying to the disco beats. With music pulsing through the air, the elderly dancers entered the stage on a conveyor belt. Taking over the spotlight from the children, they swung their arms and shook their hips for a glorious 30 seconds. With a quick cut of the camera, some young break-dancers burst onto the stage, shaking and spinning with impressive skills. The lead dancer, microphone in hand, took the center and began to sing.

The scene described above appeared in the 1989 Chinese Central Television (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala—an annual live event broadcast nationwide on the eve of the Lunar New Year (Figure 1).² The five-minute dance was co-performed by the CCTV Galaxy Children’s Art Troupe, the Beijing-based “Panjiayuan (潘家园) Senior Disco Team,” military and college dancers, and “China’s first hip-hop star” Tao Jin, who not only led the dance, but also just starred in the popular breakdance-themed film *Rock Kids (Yaogun qingnian, 摇滚青年)*.³ Titled “Let’s Dance,” the performance highlighted a sense of elation and emulation that emerged as the nation reencountered Western culture and values in the early reform era.⁴ For nearly three decades, the

¹ For items published in Chinese by authors with Chinese names, the citation will list the author’s surname first. Translations are all by the author, unless otherwise attributed.

² “Tiaoqilai Tao Jin” 《跳起来》陶金 [“Let’s Dance” Tao Jin], accessed October 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay5D2jZL8nY&list=PLXQgvG0bchMMeN2QwvMnhlPz2XsBZBHnE&index=16>.

³ Emily Wilcox, “Moonwalking in Beijing: Michael Jackson, *Piliwu*, and the Origins of Chinese Hip-hop,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 23, no.2 (2022): 302–21.

⁴ Interestingly, the (re)entry of Western culture and values in the late 1970s was not widely welcomed by the Chinese. Just a decade before the “Let’s Dance” performance, dancing to disco or jazz music was accepted but not widely appreciated in Chinese society. This was particularly the case for women, whose tight-fitting outfits were subject to criticism from their peers, and whose performances would be deemed as promiscuous by the audience. See Vera Schwarcz, *Long Road Home: A China Journal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 9–10.

Chinese people in general had limited exposure to Western culture, as the latter was often deemed “bourgeois” and “decadent.”⁵ Starting from the late 1970s, and facilitated by the launch of the reform and opening up policy, an influx of foreign culture began permeating the country’s border.



(Figure 1. Disco dancing in “Let’s Dance”)⁶ (Figure 2. Disco scene from *Saturday Night Fever*)⁷

Disco, a musical genre characterized by its syncopated rhythms, four-on-the-floor beats, and the use of synthesizers, was one of the aspects of foreign culture that found its way into China during the early reform era. Originating from the nightclubs of New York City in the late 1960s, disco music was usually accompanied by a sizable crowd of people dancing under a mirror ball, a practice that was often associated with indulgence and decadence.⁸ Initially performed by members of the African American, Latino, and gay communities, disco served as a critical tool for socially marginalized groups to “ditch predictable social scripts” and broaden the contours of

⁵ For over two decades after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the primary criteria for assessing artistic merit were based on Chairman Mao Zedong’s 1942 Yan’an talks on literature and art. According to Mao, any artwork that was considered to have significant value had to align with the socialist revolutionary agenda. See “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art,” accessed October 3, 2022, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm.

⁶ Screenshot by the author.

⁷ Screenshot by the author.

⁸ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Farber and Farber, 2005), 4.

identity and expression.⁹ Therefore, disco was often associated with the rejection of societal norms. With the release of the film *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977, the popularity of disco skyrocketed, making it one of the defining musical genres in the US embraced by a larger audience (Figure 2). Moreover, it was around the same time that disco culture embarked on a “global journey.” Through transnational circulation and reproduction, disco began to be “reimagined outside of its Anglophone manifestation” with the acquisition of new forms and meaning.¹⁰



(Figure 3. Disco party in Beijing, 1980)¹¹ (Figure 4. A dance-ban notice in Beijing in 1982)¹²

Upon its introduction to China in the early 1980s, disco gradually took root in society. The Chinese name of disco was *disike* (迪斯科), a direct transliteration from its English name, which added to the exotic appeal of the foreign practice. Initially, disco emerged as a small-scale,

⁹ Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2010), 27.

¹⁰ Flora Pitrolo and Marko Zubak, eds., *Global Dance Cultures in the 1970s and 1980s: Disco Heterotopias*, (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 1–2.

¹¹ See “OCAT Institute announces ‘Stars 1979’ focusing on the Stars’ first exhibition,” accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.cafa.com.cn/en/news/details/8326840#images-1>. This photo was taken by Li Xiaobin at Yuanmingyuan Park.

¹² The sign reads: “*Huaquan* (划拳), *xingling* (行令), playing music and dancing are prohibited.” Both *huaquan* and *xingling* are games that people play while drinking. See Li Xiaobin, *Biange zai Zhongguo, 1976-1986 变革在中国 1976-1986* [Changes in China 1976-1986] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang sheying chubanshe, 2003), 106.

grassroots activity where individuals would gather around and dance to cassette tapes. Such an activity was first embraced by open-minded youngsters who were attracted to the liberating beats and spontaneous bodily movements. For instance, in the spring of 1980, young people from avant-garde art organizations such as “The Stars Art Group” (*Xingxing huahui*, 星星画会) and “The April Photography Society” (*Siyue yinghui*, 四月影会), as well as foreigners from the embassy district, would routinely congregate at Yuanmingyuan Park in Beijing to dance (Figure 3). However, due to its sexually charged and subversive nature, disco culture was not warmly welcomed by the official government. Concerned about disco’s potential negative impact on the social order, the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Culture jointly released a notice on June 14, 1980, prohibiting the organization of commercial and spontaneous dance parties in public spaces (Figure 4).¹³ As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took a more conservative stance toward reform, disco culture became one of the major targets of the crackdown. During the “strike hard” anti-crime campaign (*yanda*, 严打) in 1983, the Beijing local government released a brochure that labeled disco dancing a “corrupt bourgeois dance.”¹⁴ Additionally, during the anti-spiritual pollution campaign in 1983, disco was listed as a type of culture to be censored.¹⁵ As the individuals were fearful of potential punishment for participating in disco dancing, the

¹³ Zhongguo renmin daxue falüxi xingfa jiaoyanshi ziliaoshi, ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xingfa ziliao zhaibian* 中华人民共和国刑法资料摘编 [Selected criminal laws from the People’s Republic of China] (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1982), 449–50.

¹⁴ “1981 nian women zai liumang zui de bianyuan beng guo di” 1981 年我们在流氓罪的边缘蹦过迪 [In 1981, we discoed on the edge of hooliganism], accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.biede.com/1981-the-crime-of-disco/>.

¹⁵ Wang Yong, *Zhongguo sixiang wenhua bainian shi* 中国思想文化百年史 [Chinese Intellectual History in a Hundred Years] (Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2018), 326. The anti-spiritual pollution campaign was officially concluded in December 1983.

development of disco culture in China came to a halt.



(Figure 5. Dance hall in Shenzhen in the 1990s)¹⁶ (Figure 6. Dance hall in Beijing in 1995)¹⁷

However, as the mid-1980s underwent a shift in political climate within the Party, the government's public attitude toward disco culture gradually changed. Following Party leader Deng Xiaoping's tour to Shenzhen, Premier Zhao Ziyang's visit to the US, and the reciprocal visit of US president Ronald Reagan, the hardliners within the CCP partially lost power.¹⁸ This resulted in a gradual loosening of the Party's stringent policy on disco dancing. As the government officially lifted its ban on dance halls in 1984, the country witnessed a surge of dance culture. In Shanghai, ballroom dancing (*jiaoyi wu*, 交谊舞), a practice that was first introduced into the city in the late

¹⁶ See Qin Sitang, "Jia Zhangke pianai de disike li yaobai zhe yidaren de rexue he yuwang" 贾樟柯偏爱的迪斯科里摇摆着一代人的热血和欲望 [Jia Zhangke's favored disco music swings with the passion and desire of a generation], accessed March 20, 2023, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2492114.

¹⁷ See Hou Shasha, "1980 nian Beijing jietou tiaopi disike Beijing ribao ceng zheyang pinglun" 1980年 北京街头跳起迪斯科 北京日报曾这样评论 [The streets of Beijing witnessed disco dancing in 1980, and the *Beijing Daily* made the following comment], accessed March 30, 2023, <https://ie.bjd.com.cn/a/201912/26/AP5e045c58e4b078ea69251794.html>. The photo was taken by Peter Turnley.

¹⁸ Jing Li, *China's America: The Chinese View the United States 1900-2000* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 137.

19th century, began to resurface in commercial dance halls and on the streets.¹⁹ In Beijing, community-initiated *yangge* (秧歌) dance started to take place in car parks and public squares at dusk. Such activities were often organized through “informal networks” of friends and neighbors, with recently retired individuals being the primary participants.²⁰ Alongside the revival of ballroom dancing and the flourishing of traditional folk dancing, disco culture was also spreading across the country on a larger scale. More disco dance clubs began to emerge in major cities in China (Figure 5, Figure 6).²¹ The popularity of disco was further fueled by imported films, in particular the Indian film *Disco Dancer* and the Hollywood film *Breakin’*, which conveyed a message of individual liberation that resonated with Chinese youths.²² Moreover, the music market in China witnessed an increase in the availability of disco music, which included foreign songs,

¹⁹ “Bashi niandai laoren jietou jiaoyi wu” 八十年代老人街头交谊舞 [The elderly’s social dancing in the 1980s], accessed April 11, 2023, <http://photo.sina.com.cn/zl/oldphotos/2015-12-24/doc-ixmykrf2259950.shtml>.

²⁰ Florence Graezer and Dianna Martin, “The ‘Yangge’ in Contemporary China: Popular Daily Activity and Neighbourhood Community Life.” *China Perspectives*, no. 24 (1999): 31–43.

²¹ Nimrod Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978-1997* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 16. Orville Schell, *Discos and Democracy: China in the Throes of Reform* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 352–55. In fact, as disco reached the pinnacle of its popularity in the mid-1990s, many ballroom dance halls were prompted to adapt their strategies to maintain profits. Some chose to include high-tempo dance music into the live band’s repertoire, while others decided to fully “convert their dance floors to discos.” See James Farrer and Andrew David Field, *Shanghai Nightscapes: A Nocturnal Biography of a Global* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 54–56.

²² Qian Wang, “Ali Baba, Genghis Khan, and Jimmy, Who are they!? The Transnational and Trans-regional Production of Modernity in 1980s’ Chinese Disco,” *Global Media and China* 4, no.4 (December 2019): 469. While discussing disco culture in China, it’s important to note that, introduced into China around the same time, disco, pop and rock were often “lumped together” and were “one and the same” to “the authorities and 95 percent of the listening public,” as they all represented “contemporary music imported from the West.” See Peter Riggs, “Country Report: China,” *Popular Music and Society* 16, no.4 (1992): 11–36.

cover versions rendered by Chinese singers, and locally produced original ones.²³ Such a phenomenon was closely linked to the decentralization of the “sound regime” in post-Mao Chinese society, in which grassroots individuals could actively participate in sound production and distribution through the use of cassettes and recorders.²⁴ The practices of individual dubbing, erasing, and re-dubbing played a pivotal role in facilitating the nationwide dissemination of disco culture on a sonic level.

In scholarly discussions on the disco culture in China, the concept of “modernity” has emerged as a significant term, a term that is inextricably linked to Western economic, political, and cultural domination since the 20th century. Orville Schell has observed that disco, as a Western performance, served as a symbol of “modernity” for Chinese urban youths. Through participating in disco, these young people were able to explore and satisfy their imaginations of the world outside China.²⁵ Focusing on the sociability fostered within the dance hall, James Farrer has argued that disco dancing allowed Chinese youths to engage in a form of transnational modern “sexual excitement,” through which they could explore the cosmopolitan ideals of “sexual autonomy and desirability.”²⁶ Examining the transnational co-production of disco culture, Qian Wang contends that the Chinese disco fever was facilitated by the disco music and film produced outside the US,

²³ Wang, “Ali Baba, Genghis Khan, and Jimmy,” 462-476. Qian Wang, “Dancing Desire, Dancing Revolution,” in *Global Dance Cultures in the 1970s and 1980s: Disco Heterotopias*, edited by Flora Pitrolo and Marko Zubak (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 152–53.

²⁴ Chuan Xu, “From Sonic Models to Sonic Hooligans: Magnetic Tape and the Unraveling of the Mao-Era Sound Regime, 1958–1983,” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 13, no.3 (2019): 391–412.

²⁵ Schell, *Discos and Democracy*, 355.

²⁶ James Farrer, “Disco ‘Super-culture’: Consuming Foreign Sex in the Chinese Disco.” *Sexualities* 2, no. 2 (1999): 147–165. James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

which nonetheless constructed people's imagination of a modern Westernized culture and justified Chinese people's pursuit of sexual desire, materialism, and exoticism in the early reform era.²⁷

Current scholarly discussions have been predominantly centered around scrutinizing the modernity of disco culture as an exotic form and practice derived from or imagined as the West and reduplicated in China. However, the emergence of disco culture at the Spring Festival Gala represents a facet of modernity that has yet to be fully examined. The Spring Festival Gala is a recurring nationwide celebration steeped in "metaphors, symbols and rituals."²⁸ Through collaboration between the central government and professional or grassroots performers, the gala fosters a sense of community that not only presents a pleasurable escape from everyday work, but also reinforces the political agenda of the Communist Party. And one of the prevailing themes of the gala in the early reform era revolved around a nationalist discourse aspiring for China's integration in the modernized world.²⁹ Such a theme was evident in the lyrics written and sung by Tao Jin in "Let's Dance," which went "shake, shake, 1989, shake off the past," underscoring the convergence of disco's free-spiritedness and the forward-looking nature of modernization.³⁰ It is noteworthy that "Let's Dance" was not the first disco-themed performance to be featured at the gala. The preceding year, Chinese singer Cheng Lin (程琳) performed a song named "Missing You Forever" (*Sinian dao yongyuan*, 思念到永远). The song was better known as "Xintianyou"

²⁷ Wang, "Ali Baba, Genghis Khan, and Jimmy," 468–71.

²⁸ Zhongdang Pan, "Enacting the Family-Nation on a Global Stage: An Analysis of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala," in *Reorienting Global Communication: Indian and Chinese Media Beyond Borders*, edited by Michael Curtin, and Hemant Shah, 240–59 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

²⁹ Min Wang, "Between the Past and the Future: The Rise of Nationalist Discourse at the 1983 CCTV Spring Festival Gala," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (April 2022): 203–19.

³⁰ The original lyrics are "摇摇摇摇 摆摆摆摆 一九八九 过去的一切都不会带走。"

(*Xintianyou*, 信天游) which highlighted the fusion of Northern Shaanxi folk tunes and disco and rock beats. And even more performances featuring disco elements emerged on stage in the 1990s.³¹ These phenomena raise a compelling question: how did disco, a foreign, sexualized, and subversive form of late-night entertainment, come to symbolize the ideals of modernization during China's early reform era?

To fully comprehend the connection between disco culture and the country's navigation of modernization, I invoke the term "remix" as a conceptual framework through which to examine both disco-related cultural phenomena and post-Mao Chinese society. To begin with, "remix" refers to a series of actions involving the appropriation of extant materials, "manipulation or editing," and "recombining . . . the sampled element with other elements" as part of a new work.³² This practice originated from the musical experimentation of disco DJs in the 1970s, giving rise to disco music's "promiscuous and omnivorous" nature.³³ Such a characteristic not only shaped the development of disco culture within a single cultural context, but also fueled disco's absorption of foreign elements during its transnational circulation. As exemplified by the song "Xintianyou" and the disco-dancing seniors, a demographic not typically associated with disco in a Western context, the arrival of disco culture in China resulted in not only the replication of Western performances but also the development of new disco-based remixed cultural expressions.

Significantly, "Xintianyou" and senior disco were not just two performances created for

³¹ For example, the 1990 Spring Festival Gala featured a children's dance performance titled "Peking Opera Disco" (*jingju disike*, 京剧迪斯科), where a fusion of opera and disco moves were performed. For the performance, see "Jingju disike" 京剧迪斯科 [Peking Opera Disco], accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGMATXxtVF4>.

³² Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine Burrough, eds., *Keywords in Remix Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 260.

³³ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 30.

the gala, but were two popular cultural phenomena pervading China's early reform era. The former was a song labelled "Northwest wind" (*xibeifeng*, 西北风), a musical genre that dominated the Chinese market from the mid-1980s to the 1990s, which highlighted the repackaging of Northwest musical elements with disco and rock beats.³⁴ The latter referred to a nationwide healthy form of exercise practiced by the middle-aged and elderly people, which featured the repackaging of disco with traditional Chinese cultural elements.³⁵ So how should the popularity of such cultural phenomena and their adaptation on the stage of the Spring Festival Gala be understood? In addition to examining the artistic features of "Xintianyou" and senior disco, this thesis employs the concept of "remix" to analyze the emergence and mediation of such cultural production in post-Mao Chinese society. Using "remix" as a lens further reveals not only the dynamics between the state and society in the co-production of "Xintianyou" and senior disco, but also the characteristics of

³⁴ "Northwest wind" songs are characterized by a fast tempo, a strong bass line, and forceful vocal delivery. According to the *People's Daily*, the "Northwest wind" musical style emerged in China in 1986, as exemplified by the release of two songs: "Xintianyou" and "Nothing to My Name" (*Yi wu suo you*, 一无所有), a song created and performed by Chinese rock singer Cui Jian (崔健). As will be discussed in Chapter III, while "Northwest wind" songs portrayed a nostalgic vision of a primitive "Chineseness," they often conveyed criticism toward the communist regime and trivialized the latter's authority. Such criticism embedded in "Northwest wind" songs led to a decline of the genre's popularity in the early 1990s, when the CCP adopted a more conservative cultural policy following its crackdown on the student-led protest in June 1989. See Jin Zhaojun, "Feng cong nali lai?—Ping getan 'xibeifeng'" 风从哪里来?——评歌坛“西北风” [Where is the Wind Coming From?—Commenting on the Pop Scene's "Northwest Wind"], *Renmin ribao*, August 23, 1988, 5. Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, 18–26.

³⁵ The term "senior" in this paper refers to both middle-aged and elderly people. According to the age classification outlined in a disco handbook, individuals between the ages of 45 and 59 are categorized as being in the early stage of aging (*chulao*, 初老) or middle-aged (*zhongnian*, 中年), while individuals at and above the age of 60 are considered elderly (*laonian*, 老年). These two groups constitute the primary participants in senior disco. Such a practice does not target people whose physical and mental strengths are still developing or at their peak, such as young people, who are often seen engaging in disco dancing in the Western context. See Cui Xifang and Wang Huaiyu, *Zhonglaonian jianshen disike* 中老年健身迪斯科 [Disco for the middle-aged and the elderly], Tianjin: Tianjin kexue jishu chubanshe, 1991.

post-Mao society, where remnants of Maoist ideology, social structures, and practices continue to endure.

Centering on the keywords “remix” and “modernity,” the thesis will examine the localization of disco culture in China and its integration into the discourse of modernization in the early reform era. Chapter II, “From Marginalization to Assimilation,” traces the changing semiotics of “disco” as presented in the Party-affiliated newspaper the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao*, 人民日报) in the 1980s. Through exploring how disco was initially depicted as a culture disapproved of by the central government, but gradually became a desirable and modernized practice for appropriation, this chapter examines the historical context that facilitated the emergence of disco-based remixed cultural production. The following two chapters will probe into two specific cases of such remixed cultural production. Chapter III, “Music and Root-Seeking,” offers a close analysis of the first case, the song “Xintianyou.” Through delving into the evolution of the *xintianyou* musical genre since the early 20th century, and analyzing the modern version, including its adaptation for the 1988 Spring Festival Gala, this chapter investigates how disco was a powerful tool that enabled both musicians and the Party to reorient themselves amid displacement in the early reform era. Chapter IV, “Body and Nation,” examines the second case, the practice of senior disco. Through examining the description, promotion, and organization of senior disco, this chapter illustrates how disco dancing was reconfigured into a nationalist performance and a government-sponsored reciprocal mass culture targeting the middle-aged and the elderly. Based on the analysis of two case studies—“Xintianyou” and senior disco—the thesis argues that both cultural phenomena highlighted a form of “remixed modernity.” The term refers to the artistic feature of the cultural production, the collaboration between the state and society during the creation process, and the characteristic of post-Mao society, where Maoist residues still

resonated. Ultimately, disco-based remixed cultural production reveals the efforts of both the official government and the general public to reconcile nationalism and globalization, as well as politics and entertainment, as the country navigated its way toward modernization amidst cultural dissolution in the late 20th century.

II. From Marginalization to Assimilation: “Disco” in the *People’s Daily* in the 1980s

The emergence, rejection, and gradual acceptance of disco culture in China during the early 1980s were shaped by the fluctuation of power dynamics within the CCP. Yet how was the change in official attitude toward disco conveyed to the wider audience? When did the general public begin to realize that disco culture could be embraced rather than shunned? One way for people to get informed of the CCP’s evolving stance on disco was through the media, in particular, the *People’s Daily*. As Gunther Kress notes, the newspapers shape people’s understanding of reality through subjecting all events of “the physical and experiential world” to ideological processing.³⁶ Founded by the CCP in 1946, the *People’s Daily*, has long served as a vehicle for the central government’s discourse on the social and cultural environment in modern China. Through the publication of news and commentaries, the *People’s Daily* mediated reality in accordance with the ideological structure of the state, thereby further consolidating the ideological structure. In examining the *People’s Daily*’s portrayal of the US from 1979 to 1989, Jing Li has pointed out that the newspaper frequently swung between presenting the US as “an advanced country” from which China could learn and as “an atrocious influence” that brought social and political problems to China.³⁷ Similarly, the portrayals of disco culture, a type of Western cultural production, also underwent certain changes. Such portrayals were featured in both national and international news, as well as in various commentaries on disco-related films and literary works. Through examining these entries, this section presents how disco started as a type of culture that was marginalized by the officials as an impediment to China’s modernization, but gradually gained recognition as a

³⁶ Gunther Kress, “Linguistic Processes and the Mediation of ‘Reality’: The Politics of Newspaper Language,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, no. 40 (1983): 43–58.

³⁷ Jing Li, *China’s America: The Chinese View the United States 1900-2000* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 121–44.

valuable practice that could contribute to the country's modernization. The transformation in the semiotics of disco was also accompanied by a shift in the official attitude toward disco-based remixed cultural production, which transitioned from rejection to appropriation.

Before the Mid-1980s

When disco first appeared in the *People's Daily* on January 15, 1980, it was mentioned as a cultural phenomenon not in China, but in post-colonial Egypt. In the article titled "Viewing Egypt from Cairo," Lin Jiaoming (林皎明), a foreign correspondent for the *People's Daily* stationed in Cairo, described how Cairo's commercial center was crowded with dazzling neon lights, American film posters, and "noisy disco music."³⁸ Conveying mixed feelings toward the transformation of a country with a rich historical legacy into a consumer society, Lin concluded the article with an exclamation: How can an emerging developing country just get rid of the relics of the old era, and why can it not find its own path toward the creation of a new civilization based on its roots?

Lin's concern for post-colonial Egypt was likely a projection of his own reflection on the outlook of China during the same period, as the latter was undergoing a similar cultural dissolution. In the 1980s, China was swept by a wave of "cultural reassessment," which was closely associated with the identity crisis experienced by intellectuals as the country gradually emerged from Mao's Revolution. The downfall of the "Gang of Four" instilled a sense of disillusionment among intellectuals, who embarked on exploring China's crumbling cultural past in search of a prognosis for the country. Lin's article exemplifies one end of the spectrum within the movement, which was to seek enduring values ingrained in Chinese traditions that could guide the country's path toward

³⁸ Lin Jiaomiao, "Cong Kailuo kan Aiji" 从开罗看埃及 [Viewing Egypt from Cairo], *Renmin ribao*, January 15, 1980, 5.

modernization.³⁹ The cultural dissolution was further exacerbated by the influx of Western culture. Similar to what happened in Egypt, China witnessed the introduction of not only foreign cultural production, but also new ideas and practices on a political and ideological level. These new values not only prompted intellectuals to reflect on the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, but were also a concern for the CCP, which sought to maintain its political ideology and legitimacy. Therefore, as hinted at by the usage of the adjective “noisy,” disco in Lin’s context represented an ailment of the West that was spread to foreign countries during globalization and further disturbed the local cultural and social landscape. However, with private entrepreneurship and customers gaining a central role amid accelerated economic growth, the CCP in the 1980s recognized the impossibility of countering or reversing incorporation into the global capitalist economy.⁴⁰ Consequently, just like Egypt, China’s primary task became how to navigate its way toward building a modern state while preserving its traditions, including the legitimacy of the socialist

³⁹ Situated at the same end of the spectrum was the Chinese historian Pang Pu 庞朴. In 1982, Pang published an article in the *People’s Daily* emphasizing the importance of studying Chinese cultural history and promoting, inheriting, and developing Chinese culture (*Zhongguo wenhua*, 中国文化). See Pang Pu, “Yinggai zhuyi wenhuashi de yanjiu” 应该注意文化史的研究 [Significance of cultural history studies], *Renmin ribao*, August 26, 1982, 8. However, on other end of the spectrum, there were intellectuals who sought to identify the enduring ailment rooted in Chinese civilization and called for an iconoclastic negation of “Chinese experience in toto.” Such sentiments reached their peak with the release of the documentary *River Elegy* (*He shang*, 河殇) in 1988. The documentary claimed that for China to achieve modernization, the country should abandon its “inland, earth-bound worldview” and embrace “a revolutionary orientation linked to the sea, commerce, and contact with the outside world.” While this documentary questioned the foundations of Chinese civilization, it is important to note that, intellectuals in China encountered challenges in directly criticizing the shortcomings of the communist regime due to the political climate. As a result, the “Grand Traditions” of China’s imperial past often became a convenient scapegoat for the problems encountered by socialist China. The documentary faced official denunciation in July 1989. See Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 4–5, 23–25.

⁴⁰ Deborah Davis, *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

political framework, in the face of rising Westernization and commercialization, whose threatening potential was symbolized by disco culture.

Following the tone set by Lin, the negative aspects of disco were accentuated in the *People's Daily* in subsequent years, which manifested in several respects. To begin with, the travel reports and personal reflections published in the *People's Daily* depicted disco-dancing Chinese youngsters as wasting their time on frivolous activities. In an article titled “Spring in Jinjiang,” the author commended the transformation of a sunglasses-wearing, long-haired disco dancer into a factory worker, which he believed demonstrated how “ambitions illuminated the soul of a young man.”⁴¹ In a similar vein, a factory worker named Liu Yan (刘艳) wrote an essay reflecting on how she failed a required exam, attributing it to “losing herself” to the temptation of various fashionable trends, namely bell-bottom jeans and disco. Furthermore, the worker recognized her digression from her childhood dream of building her homeland, and decided to change herself and retake the exam.⁴² In both articles, the practice of disco was described as a negative activity that led the authors away from their personal aspirations. Interestingly, both articles mentioned the (potential) betterment of the protagonists, thereby framing disco as a negative activity from which the youths ultimately broke away.

Negative representations of disco-dancing people were not only featured in personal essays, but also observed in the film reviews published by the *People's Daily*, specifically on the film *Tianshan Mountain Trek* (*Tianshan xing*, 天山行) (1982) directed by Jing Mukui (景慕逵). Adapted from the short story “‘Soldiers’ from Tian Mountain” (*Tianshan shen chu de “dabing”*,

⁴¹ Liu Zhengtai, “Jinjiang chun” 锦江春 [Spring in Jinjiang], *Renmin ribao*, April 2, 1981, 8.

⁴² Liu Yan, “Kaoshi zhihou” 考试之后 [After the exam], *Renmin ribao*, November 8, 1982, 8.

天山深处的“大兵”), the film followed the story of Zheng Zhitong (郑志桐), a Xinjiang-based military engineer who completed his studies at the Beijing School of Military Engineering, and his girlfriend Li Qian (李倩), who worked in Beijing. Released around Army Day (August 1) in 1982, the film highlighted the revolutionary spirit demonstrated by Zheng, who prioritized the construction projects in Tian Mountain over his personal relationship.⁴³

The film featured a disco dancing scene, which was noted in two reviews. During a class reunion in Beijing, one of Zheng's friends suggested disco dancing. Refraining from joining in, Zheng chose to sit aside and reminisce about his soldier friends working in the harsh environment of Tian Mountain. The film alternates between shots of the urban dance hall and the rural Tian Mountain, highlighting the disparities between two settings. For instance, a close-up shot of the soldiers walking through half-frozen ponds is juxtaposed with another shot of Zheng's friends performing disco steps (Figure 7).⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the disco beats played in the background are mixed with the sound of a hammer striking the snow-covered ground. As Zheng's memory of his fellow soldiers intensifies, he can no longer tolerate the urban culture surrounding him and ultimately departs from the dance hall. Zheng's disassociation from disco dancing was noted in both film reviews. The film critic Cheng Birong (程必荣) commended Zheng's unwavering self-discipline and elevated aesthetic standards, and Zhang Chenghuan (张澄寰) and Duan Haiyan (段海燕) acknowledged the film's effective use of montage to highlight Zheng's rejection of disco

⁴³ I have not been able to verify the exact release date for the film. The approximate date can be inferred from an article published in the *People's Daily*, which states that *Tianshan Mountain Trek*, together with other military-themed films, would be released around August 1, 1982. See “Quanguo shangying yipi junshi tical yingpian” 全国上映一批军事题材影片 [Military-themed films to be released nationwide], *Renmin ribao*, July 16, 1982, 4.

⁴⁴ For the aforementioned disco scene, see *Tianshan xing* 天山行 [Tianshan Mountain Trek], accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAAnL7oe4kuk> (1:09:24–1:10:20).

dancing and devotion to revolutionary causes.⁴⁵ Once again, disco was portrayed as a symbol of decadence, a type of practice denounced for conflicting with revolutionary spirit.



(Figure 7. *Tianshan Mountain Trek* montage)⁴⁶

In addition to discussions about disco dancing in China, the *People's Daily* also featured numerous articles that portrayed disco dancing in foreign countries in a negative light. For example, a news report from May 1983 documented the death of a disco-dancing teenager in Britain, who was said to have died from a concussion after dancing for over three hours.⁴⁷ An article on the cultural landscape in Chile ruefully pointed out that the local Chilean dance was replaced by the fast-paced, drum-heavy disco.⁴⁸ Another news report recording a summer concert in Greece noted that while disco music prevailed in the country, the folk music performance stood out and

⁴⁵ Cheng Birong, “Ganren de xingxiang chonggao de xinnian—zan caise gushi pian *Tianshan xing*” 感人的形象 崇高的信念——赞彩色故事片《天山行》 [Touching Image, Lofty Belief—A praise for the color feature film *Tianshan xing*], *Renmin ribao*, July 25, 1982, 5. Zhang Chenghuan, Duan Haiyan, “Wei yidai xinren ouge—ping caise gushi pian *Tianshan xing*” 为一代新人讴歌——评彩色故事片《天山行》 [Praising the new generation—On the color feature film *Tian Shan Xing*], *Renmin ribao*, July 28, 1982, 5

⁴⁶ Screenshot by author.

⁴⁷ “Xiao wumi de beiju” 小舞迷的悲剧 [The tragedy of a young dance enthusiast], *Renmin ribao*, May 26, 1983, 7.

⁴⁸ “Shengdiyage yitiao jie” 圣地亚哥一条街 [A road in San Diego], *Renmin ribao*, June 6, 1983, 7.

resonated with the audience.⁴⁹ As shown in these entries, disco culture was depicted as a hazardous foreign culture that not only posed risks to a person's physical health, but also threatened to displace a nation's indigenous culture. Additionally, weeks before the launch of the anti-spiritual pollution campaign, mentioned in the previous section, the *People's Daily* published a news article on the Soviet Union's rectification of popular music performance groups that adapted Russian folk songs into disco music.⁵⁰ These groups' adaptation practices could be viewed as an effort to produce disco-styled remixed folk music. However, as quoted by the *People's Daily*, the Soviet Union's newspaper pointed out that such adaptation had rendered the beautiful tunes "tasteless and insipid," thus replacing "true artistic expressions."⁵¹ In other words, the disco-based remix practice was seen as a degradation of folk culture. The alignment of this article with conservative ideology could be viewed as providing legitimacy for the launch of the anti-spiritual pollution campaign within China in the subsequent months.

In general, throughout the early 1980s, the *People's Daily* primarily presented a negative portrayal of disco culture. By framing it as a decadent aspect of Western culture, the newspaper depicted disco as a form of cultural practice that diverted young people from realizing their personal aspirations, was not engaged in by hard-working soldiers, and that posed a threat to native culture (Table 1, Column 1). These narratives, which were heavily influenced by conservative ideology within the Party, constructed disco culture as a fundamental impediment to the country's

⁴⁹ "Tamen wei lixiang er gechang—Ji xila gechangjia Panuosi Zhaweilasi fufu" 他们为理想而歌唱——记希腊歌唱家帕诺斯扎魏拉斯夫妇 [They sang for their ideals—On the Greece singers Panos Tzavellas and his wife], *Renmin ribao*, December 11, 1983, 7.

⁵⁰ "Sulian zhengdun liuxing yinyue yanchu tuanti" 苏联整顿流行音乐演出团体 [The Soviet Union rectifies its popular music performance groups], *Renmin ribao*, September 16, 1983, 7.

⁵¹ "Sulian zhengdun liuxing yinyue yanchu tuanti," *Renmin ribao*, September 16, 1983, 7.

modernization. The disassociation between disco and modernization further resulted in the negation of disco-based remixed cultural production.

Before the mid-1980s (Impeding the modernization of China)	After the mid-1980s (Contributing to the modernization of China)
Distracting the young people	Enriching the lives of young people
Not adopted by the soldiers	Practiced in the army
Incompatible with indigenous culture	Remixed into indigenous culture

(Table 1. The changing connotations of “disco” in the *People’s Daily* in the 1980s)

After the Mid-1980s

Starting from the mid-1980s, with the partial retreat of Party hardliners, a discernible transformation in the representation of disco culture took place in the *People’s Daily*. While sporadic entries on the negativity of disco still existed, descriptions of the favorable facets of disco began to appear. Such a shifting attitude toward disco was evident in three aspects, all marking a departure from the prior stigmatization of disco culture (Table 1, Column 2).

To begin with, disco dancing was no longer portrayed as a temptation for young people but as a legitimate leisure activity. For example, several articles describing disco dancing in the city of Shenzhen, where a special economic zone had been established, appeared in the *People’s Daily*. An article published in 1984 described the daily routine of Shenzhen youths. According to the author, these people were actively working in the special economic zone during the day, and would go to disco clubs in new clothes at night, which showcased how the reform and opening up policy had enriched people’s everyday lives.⁵² Therefore, disco dancing was no longer an impediment to

⁵² Chen Canyon, “Nan damen fengguang” 南大门风光 [A view of the Southern gate], *Renmin ribao*, October 23, 1984, 8.

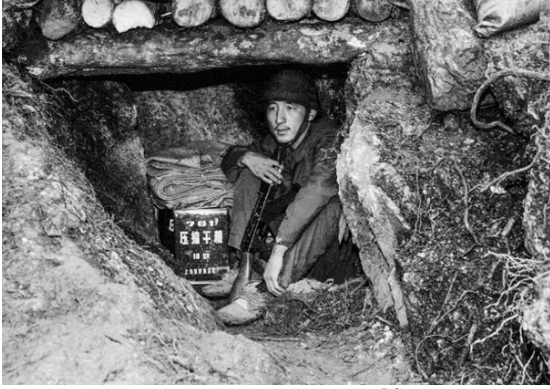
people's contribution to the modernization of the country, but a necessary retreat or complement for hard-working people. In describing the development of the city of Chengdu, an article mentioned how “unique disco dance halls” were established in the city.⁵³ Similarly, disco dancing was not viewed as incompatible with China's course of modernization, but a positive activity reflecting the vitality of a modern city. In other words, the connotation of disco shifted from decadence and excess to productivity and advancement.

Moreover, while disco was portrayed as a type of urban culture that could not be integrated into the everyday lives of soldiers, as depicted in the film *Tianshan Mountain Trek*, such a conflict was resolved with the emergence of a military disco performance titled “Disco in the cat-ear cave” (*Maoerdong disike*, 猫耳洞迪斯科) in late 1985. The “cat-ear-shaped cave” referred to the self-defense caves used in wars, in particular during the Sino-Vietnamese War (Figure 8). Such disco music was initially performed by the “Sound from the cat-ear cave” band (*Maoerdong zhisheng yuetuan*, 猫耳洞之声乐团), which consisted of soldiers fighting at the frontline of Lao Mountain (崂山) (Figure 9). These soldiers would use biscuit containers, shell casings, and wine bottles to create music and boost morale within the army. The CCP soon recognized this performance and invited the band to perform in Beijing.⁵⁴ The disco-dancing soldiers were further featured in the Sino-Vietnamese-War-themed TV show *Triumph at Midnight* (*Kaixuan zai ziye*, 凯旋在子夜). A review of the TV show, which was published in December 1986, pointed out how these soldiers

⁵³ “Chengdu zhiye” 成都之夜 [A night in Chengdu], *Renmin ribao*, November 9, 1986, 2.

⁵⁴ Li Shuangtai, Zhang Shanju, “Maoerdong zhisheng zhenfen renxin” 猫耳洞之声振奋人心 [Sound from the cat-ear cave boosted soldiers' morale], *Renmin ribao*, December 22, 1986, 1.

were showing their “beautiful hearts” as they discoed with vitality.⁵⁵ Therefore, the popularity of disco dancing among Chinese soldiers helped break down the stereotype of soldiers as rigid and unthinking automatons, and highlighted their creativity and humanity.



(Figure 8. A cat-ear cave)⁵⁶



(Figure 9. The “Sound from the cat-ear cave” band)⁵⁷

Addressing the practice of disco in the army, Wang has pointed out how it showcased the connotations of disco culture as possessing “military spirit” and “masculine patriotism.”⁵⁸ Interestingly, Wang’s observation reveals disco’s departure from its original role as a practice that “reshaped dominant modes of masculinity” through opening the possibilities for the demonstration of “gay pleasure and style” in the Western context.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Peter Riggs has noted that during an era in which Chinese youths showed little interest in joining the military, such a disco-based

⁵⁵ Cai Changwei, “Jingli, wenming zhi shi” 敬礼，文明之师 [Salute to the civilized military], *Renmin ribao*, December 30, 1986, 8.

⁵⁶ Gujin qianqiu shi, “1978 nian yuenan yongbing baiwan weihe pubian shiyong maodong bugan yu wojun zhengmian duizhan” 1978 年越南拥兵百万，为何普遍使用猫耳洞，不敢与我军正面对战？ (Why did Vietnam, with a million troops in 1978, generally use cat-ear caves and avoid frontal confrontations with our army?), accessed March 24, 2023, https://k.sina.com.cn/article_6542136081_185f11311001014iof.html#/.

⁵⁷ Accessed March 24, 2023, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20221003A075ZO00>.

⁵⁸ Qian Wang, “Dancing Desire, Dancing Revolution,” 154–55.

⁵⁹ Diana L. Mankowski, “Gendering the Disco Inferno: Sexual Revolution, Liberation, and Popular Culture in 1970s America” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010), xi.

military performance served as a recruiting strategy targeting the taste of the young people.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in China, the military played a significant role beyond serving as a means of national defense. Along with the peasants and workers, they constituted the foundation and legitimacy of the CCP's political regime and remained central in the various mass mobilization campaigns throughout the Mao era. Therefore, as highlighted in Mao Zedong's 1942 "Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art," the soldiers enjoyed a key role in evaluating the standards of cultural production in China: the cultural production accepted and embraced by soldiers was always regarded as of high standard, since the soldiers formed the primary audience for artistic creation.⁶¹ To sum up, the fact that disco dancing became an activity enjoyed by the soldiers demonstrated not only the masculine aspect of disco culture, but also its elevation to a legitimate culture as viewed by the Party. In other words, the disco performance organized by soldiers signaled a growing openness to disco culture by the CCP; it was no longer incompatible with the Party's political agenda.

What's more, while disco was originally pictured as a dangerous foreign influence that could undermine existing local culture, more news reports on the assimilation of disco into the indigenous cultural landscape and various forms of disco-based remixed cultural production started to appear. An article describing a train trip in Inner Mongolia suggested visitors dance in accordance with the disco beat in the Tengger Desert.⁶² Another article titled "A trip to Xinjiang"

⁶⁰ Interestingly, Riggs found such a performance hilarious but "in the long run rather disturbing." See Peter Riggs, "Country Report," 18–19.

⁶¹ See "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art," accessed October 3, 2022, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm.

⁶² Gao Hongbo, "Tenggeli de huhuan" 腾格里的呼唤 [The call of the Tengger Desert], *Renmin ribao*, October 7, 1985.

noted that “the melody of the dombra and the rhythm of disco wonderfully fused” in the hearts of visitors.⁶³ Additionally, a report on the development of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region documented the efforts of the local Zhuang people to produce disco-style folk performances with two-stringed fiddles, three-stringed plucked instruments, and electronic instruments. According to the report, such renovated traditional folk songs and dance captivated the attention of the audience, and demonstrated disco’s ability to enrich folk culture.⁶⁴ In addition to the integration of disco into the culture of ethnic minorities, an article published in 1985 mentioned how some crosstalk (*xiangsheng*, 相声) performers attempted to integrate disco culture into their performances.⁶⁵ Therefore, contrary to its original image as a pollutant to folk culture, disco became a type of culture that could blend into the local culture and even complement the latter. The open attitude toward disco’s marriage with local cultural elements was fundamental to the emergence of more disco-based remixed cultural production, including “Xintianyou” and senior disco, in the late 1980s.

The depiction of the association between disco culture and China’s modernization efforts was most prominent in an essay published right before the Lunar New Year in 1988, which would be the Year of the Dragon. The essay drew a comparison between the dragon’s spirit, the vigor of reform, and the dynamic of disco:

Throughout the years of reform, the descendants of the dragon maintained the momentum and spirit of the soaring dragon. It is certain that there is no conflict between this style and the style of disco. A nation that enjoys singing and dancing not only demonstrates the

⁶³ Xiao Xue, “Xinjiang xing” 新疆行 [A trip to Xinjiang], *Renmin ribao*, October 3, 1986, 8. Dombra is a string instrumentation in Central Asia.

⁶⁴ Shu Yu and Wang Dong, “Zhuangxiang wuchu bu feige” 壮乡无处不飞歌 [Songs flying all over the homeland of the Zhuang nationality], *Renmin ribao*, June 14, 1987, 4.

⁶⁵ Tan Fen, “Fazhan xiangsheng yishu qianjian” 发展相声艺术浅见 [A few thoughts on the development of crosstalk], *Renmin ribao*, November 4, 1985, 7.

brilliance of its material civilization (*wuzhi wenming*, 物质文明), but also exhibits the glow of its spiritual civilization (*jingshen wenming*, 精神文明)—only through breaking free from numerous old customs and all kinds of spiritual shackles can there be a diverse cultural landscape. With its forceful and rhythmic pulse, the surging rhythms of disco and its expanding appeal may merge into the tide of reform.⁶⁶

As illustrated in the paragraph above, disco dancing was integrated into the discourse of reform in post-Mao China. Not only did disco as a type of entertainment highlight the cultural renewal of the country, it also reflected the country's ongoing journey toward modernization. Two keywords are inserted into the above paragraph, "material civilization" and "spiritual civilization," both of which were central to the "two civilizations" (*liang ge wenming*, 两个文明) rhetoric of the reform era political agenda. Proposed by the CCP in the early 1980s, "two civilizations" referred to the "balanced development" (*pingheng de fazhan*, 平衡的发展) between "material civilization" and "spiritual civilization." As observed by Nicholas Dynon, the former referred to "progress in economic wellbeing," while the latter, often termed "socialist spiritual civilization," represented the "modernization of the Chinese citizenry."⁶⁷ This political principle highlighted the CCP's effort to emphasize the cultivation of socialist morality culture amid economic growth.⁶⁸ Therefore, through drawing an analogy between disco, reform, and the dragon, the essay highlighted how disco culture was compatible with the course of socialist modernization in the early reform era. In fact, such a trinity was adopted by the 1988 Spring Festival Gala as the core theme of the event, in

⁶⁶ Wang Jintang, "Longnian disike xiixiang" 龙年迪斯科遐想 [A few thoughts on the year of the dragon], *Renmin ribao*, February 11, 1988, 8. In the article, the author also mentioned how his friends discouraged him from publishing works depicting the positive side of disco a few years previously, which alluded to the officials' changing attitude toward the representation of disco culture.

⁶⁷ Nicholas Dynon, "'Four Civilizations' and the Evolution of Post-Mao Chinese Socialist Ideology." *The China Journal*, no.60 (August 2008): 83–109.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

which the song “Xintianyou” was performed. Furthermore, the association between “spiritual civilization” and disco was also promulgated in the promotion of senior disco. Both of these phenomena will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters.

The inclusion of disco culture in the discourse of China’s modernization in the early reform era signaled the CCP’s adoption of a more liberal attitude toward disco culture. With the state media portraying disco as contributing to the modernization of China in the second half of the 1980s, both “Xintianyou” and senior disco made their debut in the *People’s Daily*. A news report published in September 1987 recorded the opening ceremony of the first Chinese Art Festival, which was attended by Premier Zhao Ziyang and featured the performance of “Xintianyou.”⁶⁹ In the same year, an article introducing the cultural activities practiced by the Shanghainese was published, which featured senior disco as one example.⁷⁰ It is worth noting that the second half of the 1980s was a time of political turbulence, with occasional protests led by students dissatisfied with the degree of reform that ultimately culminated in the summer of 1989. As Jing Li has pointed out, the *People’s Daily* editorial staff carefully modified any media coverage of political and cultural aspects related to the US, in the hope of avoiding further political eruptions. Nonetheless, news reports on the song “Xintianyou” and the practice of senior disco persisted into the 1990s. With disco disassociated from its original context, the popularity of disco-based remixed cultural production continued to grow.

⁶⁹ Miao Ye, “Zai kaifang de chaoliu zhong qiu fazhan—dui woguo tongshu yinyue chuanguo wenti de sikao” 在开放的潮流中求发展——对我国通俗音乐创作问题的思考 [Seeking development in the tide of opening up: reflections on the creation of popular music in China], *Renmin ribao*, January 5, 1988, 5.

⁷⁰ Zhao Lanying, “Shanghai ren shifenzhiyi shouru yongyu wenhua xiaofei” 上海人十分之一收入用来文化消费 [One-tenth of the Shanghai residents’ income is spent on cultural consumption], *Renmin ribao*, July 27, 1989, 3.

III. Music and Root-Seeking: Revisiting “Xintianyou”

On December 24, 1988, the *People’s Daily* published a list of “Golden Songs in the New Decade” (*xin shiqi shinian jinqubang*, 新时期十年金曲榜), which featured the most popular thirty Chinese songs and ten foreign songs as voted by readers. Receiving 138,514 votes, “Xintianyou” ranked ninth on the first list.⁷¹ With music composed by Xie Chengqiang (解承强) and lyrics co-written by Liu Zhiwen (刘志文) and Hou Dejian (侯德健), “Xintianyou” was one of the pioneering masterpieces in the “Northwest wind” genre of popular music.⁷² The song featured a combination of disco and rock beats with the melodic patterns of *xintianyou*, a Northern Shaanxi folk tune estimated to have existed in the northern part of modern-day Shaanxi Province since the late-Yuan or early-Ming dynasty.⁷³ Such a fusion was also manifested in the instrumentation of the music, which included both *suona* (唢呐), a double reed folk instrument commonly found in Northern

⁷¹ “Xinshiqi shinian jinqu bang” 新时期十年金曲榜 [Top 10 songs of the new decade], *Renmin ribao*, December 24, 1988, 8.

⁷² Jin Zhaojun, “Feng cong nali lai” 风从哪里来 [Where does the wind come from], *Renmin ribao*, August 23, 1988, 5. The lyrics of “Xintianyou” underwent one change before attaining the version with which contemporary audiences are familiar. The first version was released in 1986. With the lyrics written by Liu Zhiwen, the song was performed by the Guangzhou-based singer Wang Si. The second version was released in 1987. With the lyrics written by Hou Dejian, the song was performed by Cheng Lin, Hou’s girlfriend. The song gained wide popularity after the release of the second version, which is the focus of this chapter.

⁷³ Gao Jie, “Shanbei xintianyou yuanliu shu” 陕北信天游源流疏 [An investigation of the origins of *xintianyou*], *Yan’an daxue xuebao (shehuikexue ban)*, no. 4 (1998): 47–50. Chen Yanzhi, “Xintianyou qianlun” 信天游浅论 [A brief analysis of *xintianyou*], *Zhongguo yinyue* 3, no. 3 (1981): 27–28. *Xintianyou*, which means “rambling in the sky,” is an umbrella term for a series of folk tunes that share similar lyrical structures and melodic patterns. The lyrics of *xintianyou* are not limited to a certain format, but usually there are seven, ten, or eleven characters per line. Two sentences constitute a verse, with the first describing the natural scenery and the second providing the message of the song. The lyrics are written with the linguistic characteristics of Northern Shaanxi, and the songs are performed in a high pitch and impassioned style.

China and other locations, and the electric guitar. While the song is sung in standard Mandarin, the vocal delivery is liberating and unrestrained, which closely resembles the perceived characteristics of Northwest folk songs.⁷⁴

Contemporary scholars have analyzed the popularity of the “Northwest wind” genre from the perspectives of both the general public and intellectuals. Addressing Roland Bathes’ conception of “the grain of the voice,” Andrew Jones, Mercedes Dujunco, and Ying Xiao point out that the instrumentation, “rough vocal quality,” and disco and rock beats create an electrifying effect that hints at the physicality of the body and the pleasure derived from bodily movement.⁷⁵ In addition to the stimulating effect, both Nimrod Baranovitch and Dujunco have explored the appeal of “Northwest wind” by viewing it as a revitalization of China’s past, a practice adopted by the intellectuals in response to the cultural dissolution in the early reform era.⁷⁶ With a focus on “Xintianyou,” Baranovitch points out how the song featured the repackaging of Northwest culture, a culture emerging from the mythic “Yellow Earth Plateau” (*huangtu gaoyuan*, 黄土高原), which was also known as “the cradle of Chinese civilization.”⁷⁷ With its predominantly masculine and rugged rendering, the tune served as a vehicle for the Chinese to reclaim Mainland China’s

⁷⁴ Sun Shao, “Cong Zhongguo dangdai tongsu gequ xintianyou de chuangzuo kan shanbei minge de jicheng yu fazhan” 从中国当代通俗歌曲信天游的创作看陕北民歌的继承与发展 [The heritage and development of traditional songs in Northern Shaanxi as seen in the popular song Xintianyou], *Jiaoxiang: Xi’an yinyue xueyuan xuebao* 62, no. 4 (January 1993): 15-18.

⁷⁵ Andrew Jones, *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1992), 58-59. Mercedes M. Dujunco, “Hybridity and Disjuncture in Mainland Chinese Popular Music,” in *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia*, eds. Timothy J. Craig and Richard King (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 33. Ying Xiao, *China in the Mix: Cinema, Sound, and Popular Culture in the Age of Globalization* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 51.

⁷⁶ Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices*, 19–21.

⁷⁷ Dujunco, “Hybridity and Disjuncture,” 31–32. Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices*, 21.

“historic cultural hegemony” in competition with the Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular music styles that had found their way into society since the late 1970s, and which emphasized a more soft, feminine, and melancholy way of singing. Aside from the nationalist sentiments, Baranovitch also points out how the lyrics in “Xintianyou” presents a sense of “loss and longing” embedded in the intellectuals’ attempt to reconnect with the Chinese civilization’s lost past.⁷⁸

A popular discourse featured in the analysis of the “Northwest wind” genre is “root-seeking,” which is often elaborated through a synchronic analysis of “Northwest wind” as a musical genre within the early reform era.⁷⁹ Within such a framework, “Xintianyou” is often viewed in parallel with other songs within the genre. However, it should be noted that “Northwest wind” was an ascriptive umbrella term referring to a heterogeneous group of songs, with certain musicians “strongly deny(ing)” their work belonged to the genre.⁸⁰ Therefore, discussing “Xintianyou” through drawing parallels within the “same genre” may limit the analysis of songs within a predefined ideological framework and overlook the distinctive features rooted in the production of individual pieces. “Xintianyou,” for example, was not only a piece of music created

⁷⁸ Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices*, 20–21. A detailed analysis of the lyrics will be provided in the section “The Evolution of *Xintianyou*.” As will be discussed, the “loss and longing” expressed in the lyrics of “Xintianyou” signifies not only a reconnection with the past but also a departure from the political overtones associated with the *xintianyou* musical genre since the early 20th century.

⁷⁹ The root-seeking craze swept China in the mid-1980s, which manifested in various forms of artistic expressions such as literature, film, and songs. These works often feature symbolic representation of the “yellow earth” and the Yellow River. See Ying Xiao, *China in the Mix: Cinema, Sound, and Popular Culture in the Age of Globalization* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 47–48.

⁸⁰ For example, although people have long referred to Cui Jian’s songs as “Northwest wind” songs, according to Cui, his works, which shared some characteristics with “Northwest wind” songs, were in fact purely rock and roll music (*yaogun yinyue*, 摇滚音乐). See Timothy Lane Brace, “Modernity and Music in Contemporary China: Crisis, Identity and the Politics of Style” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin), 1992, 165.

in the early reform era, but also belonged to a musical genre (*xintianyou*) that dominated the CCP's regime throughout the 20th century. How, then, does the historical legacy embedded within the song add to the comprehension of "Xintianyou" as a modern song? Meanwhile, as mentioned in the introduction, "Xintianyou" was not only disseminated through cassettes and DVDs, but also performed on the stage of the Spring Festival Gala with certain reconfigurations. If, as Dujunco and Baranovitch argue, Northern Wind songs featured the coexistence of nationalist pride, and disillusion and uncertainty for the future, how were such ideologies reconciled on the stage of the Spring Festival Gala, which highlighted the official discourse of the nation's modernization? This chapter will expand on the denotations of "root-seeking" embedded within "Xintianyou" through tracing the genealogy of *xintianyou* as a genre throughout the 20th century and examining the song's adaptation at the Spring Festival Gala in 1988. The chapter argues that the birth of "Xintianyou" went beyond a modern revival of traditional folk music, as it marked the intellectuals' reclamation of the genre's grassroots narrative while breaking free from the political constraints imposed on it in the early 20th century. However, the repackaging of the song at the Spring Festival Gala, with the former modified into a performance highlighting the vitality of traditional Chinese values and culture, reappropriated the song for the CCP's political agenda.

The Evolution of Xintianyou

Reflecting on the motivation behind creating "Xintianyou," composer Xie Chengqiang highlighted the presence of a certain "defiance." With many people opposing the development of popular music, Xie decided to create modern popular music firmly grounded in a "most traditional

foundation.”⁸¹ “Xintianyou” borrowed the melodic structure of a propagandist *xintianyou* song titled “Some Guerrilla Troops Have Come Down from Heng Mountain” (*Hengshan li xialai xie youjidui*, 横山里下来些游击队), which was created in Northern Shaanxi in the 1930s. The creation of the propagandist song was further based on the modification of existing *xintianyou* tunes, which was an integral part of the oral tradition of the people residing in the northern region of contemporary Shaanxi Province.⁸² Initially, *xintianyou* primarily featured depictions of the peasants’ daily lives, covering themes such as labor, love and marriage, and environmental conditions (including natural disasters). These songs acted as a medium for catharsis that allowed peasants to alleviate hardships and sorrows of everyday life or to aspire for a better life in the future.⁸³ However, in the early 20th century, as evinced in the creation of “Some Guerrilla Troops Have Come Down from Heng Mountain,” the themes covered by *xintianyou* started to shift away from personal catharsis to include the CCP’s political ideology.

“Some Guerrilla Troops Have Come Down from Heng Mountain” was not the only *xintianyou*-themed red song created during the 1930s—this was an era that witnessed a large-scale emergence of communist propaganda songs based on the modification of *xintianyou*. As illustrated in director Chen Kaige’s film *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 黄土地) (1984), one of the most representative works created amid the aforementioned root-seeking movement in the early reform

⁸¹ Zheng Kai, “Zhongguo liuxing yinyue minzhuhua moshi yanjiu—yi ‘xibeifeng’ weili” 中国流行音乐民主化模式研究——以“西北风”为例 [On the democratization model of Chinese popular music: A Case Study of “Northwest wind”], *Zhongguo xiaowai jiaoyu*, no. 14 (2010): 163.

⁸² Meng Hong, “Hongge ‘hengshan li xialai xie youjidui’ de taiqian muhou” 红歌《横山里下来些游击队》的台前幕后 [Stories behind the Red song: Some guerrilla troops have come down from Heng Mountain], *Dangshi wenyuan*, no. 6 (2018): 45–47.

⁸³ Yuan Zhanzhao and Yao Zhengkuan, “Gupu de shanbei minsu wenhua” 古朴的陕北民俗文化 [Rustic Northern Shaanxi folk culture], *Yan’an jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao*, no. 2 (2001): 24–26.

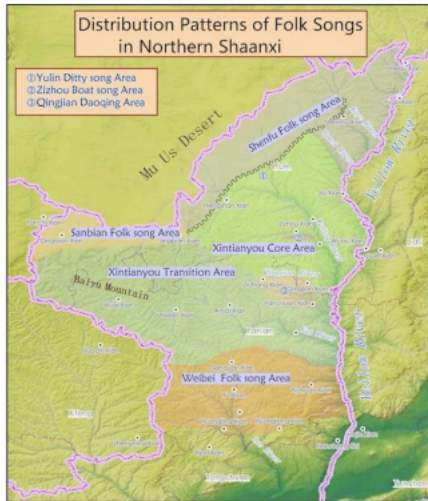
era, communist soldiers were dispatched into local villages in the 1930s with the task of collecting folk melodies, rewriting the lyrics with communist values and ideals, and disseminating the new educational lyrics among the masses.⁸⁴ Such an attempt was hinted at in the metamorphosis of a recurring *xintianyou* song named “Song of the daughter” (*Nüer ge*, 女儿歌). Performed by the female protagonist Cuiqiao (翠巧), the original song depicted a daughter’s lamentation at her fate of being forced into a prearranged marriage, which is captured in the line “In June the Yellow River [still] has not thawed; my father is forcing me to marry against my will.”⁸⁵ However, when the same melody appears at the end of the film, a new line of lyrics is substituted: “The rooster flies over the wall; our Communist Party is the savior for all.”⁸⁶ While the first song is a depiction of Cuiqiao’s sorrows regarding the arranged marriage, the second one provides a cure for such sorrows. This example showcases how the *xintianyou* song was transformed from a piece imbued with personal grief to one justifying the ruling power of the Communist Party.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ For the film, see *Huang tudi* 黄土地 [Yellow Earth], accessed November 22, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YKbe9oOMQM.

⁸⁵ The original lyrics are “六月里黄河冰不化，扭着我成亲是我大。” Zhao Jiping, “Dianying huang tudi yinyue chuanguo zhaji” 电影《黄土地》音乐创作札记 [On the Music for *Yellow Earth*], in *Zhao Jiping yinyue chuanguo yanjiu wenji* 赵季平音乐创作研究文集 [A collection of Zhao Jiping’s research on music], ed. Ma Bo (Shanghai: Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2019), 487–92.

⁸⁶ The original lyrics are “芦花子公鸡飞上墙，救万民靠咱共产党。”

⁸⁷ In addition to the songs featured in *Yellow Earth*, a similar example can be found in the state-sponsored musical journal *Xinyinyue yuekan*, which published a piece of *xintianyou* that featured the lyrics “I am bringing the guerrillas home” (*wo ba na youjidui jiehui le jia*, 我把那游击队接回了家). Such a line highlighted the solidarity between the peasants and the Eighth-Route Army soldiers. See “Xintianyou” 信天游 [Xintianyou], *Xinyinyue yuekan* 6, no. 2 (1946), 5.



(Figure 10. Distribution of *xintianyou*)⁸⁸



(Figure 11. Map of the Long March)⁸⁹

The emergence of *xintianyou* as “Red songs” was rooted in the geographical locale of the CCP in the 1930s, and the Party’s understanding of its cultural governance and political legitimacy. Starting from the mid-1930s, as the Red Army gathered in Northern Shaanxi at the terminus of the Long March, the region became the power base from which the communist soldiers reached out to mobilize local peasants to resist the rule of the Nationalist government and the Japanese troops; the locale coincided with the distribution of *xintianyou* (Figure 10, Figure 11). Meanwhile, as exemplified in Mao’s Yan’an Talks, art was to become “powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people . . . and attacking the enemy.”⁹⁰ Therefore, politicizing art became a key means adopted by the CCP to consolidate its power.⁹¹ As the political legitimacy of the Party was

⁸⁸ Xiaohong Zhang and Wuli Xue. “Soundscape and Local Memory: The Case-Study of Folk Song in Northern Shaanxi,” XXXII Congresso Geografico Italiano: 1691. 2017.

⁸⁹ See “The Long March in China: 1934-1935,” accessed November 10, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_March#/media/File:Map_of_the_Long_March_1934-1935-en.svg.

⁹⁰ “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art,” accessed November 10, 2022, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm.

⁹¹ “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” accessed December 1, 2022, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

deeply rooted in the recognition of peasants, soldiers and workers, the arts generated by those lower classes were regarded as displaying high artistic excellence. This philosophy resulted in the collection of *xintianyou* songs, which the Party soldiers could easily access and progressively modify into socialist educational tools. The rewriting of the lyrics facilitated the dissemination of political teaching, and the fact that the Red songs were derived from folk tunes, in turn, showcased the masses' support for the Party, which further bolstered the Party's legitimacy and consolidated its role as savior of the oppressed lower classes.

Following the victory of the CCP over the Nationalists and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the political reappropriation of *xintianyou* continued. During the Great Leap Forward, when people were mobilized to participate in agricultural and industrial production, they were also called upon to write poetry to celebrate the accomplishments of the campaign.⁹² Notably, *xintianyou* songs were featured in such creations, which, aside from their musical nature, began to be viewed as a subgenre of poetry. In 1958, Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province, released a pamphlet with a collection of Great Leap Forward poems. The collection featured a poem written in the style of *xintianyou*, which was subsequently published in the *People's Daily*.⁹³ The poem started with the following verses:

Sing the song of the Great Leap Forward all year long, and pots large and small are never empty; sing the song of the Great Leap Forward for two years long, and granaries large and small overflow and are full.

While *xintianyou* literally translates to “rambling in the sky,” this poem, which starts with “sing the song of the Great Leap Forward all year long,” and ends with “sing the song of the Great

⁹² S. H. Chen, “Multiplicity in Uniformity: Poetry and the Great Leap Forward,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 3 (1960): 1–15.

⁹³ See “Xin Xintianyou” 新信天游 [New *xintianyou*], *Renmin ribao*, July 9, 1958, 8.

Leap Forward for a decade long,” depicts a clear revolutionary trajectory that the masses should follow. Moreover, instead of focusing on everyday sorrows and hardships, the poem presents a joyful utopian vision of agricultural prosperity in China after the launch of the campaign. Through extolling the promising outcome of the Great Leap Forward, the poem served as a tool for indoctrinating and mobilizing the masses during the campaign. A few months after the publication of this piece, the *People’s Daily* featured another *xintianyou* song that praised the superiority of the people’s commune system, which included the following verses:

Xintianyou should first sing of the Communist Party, just as little children first call out to their mothers . . . Where does a happy life come from? It all relies on the Party to point out the right direction . . . The stars revolve around the sun in the sky, just like we shall always follow the Communist Party.⁹⁴

Through likening the Communist Party to both a maternal figure and the sun, this piece establishes a naturalized association between the Party and its supporters. By normalizing the masses’ loyalty toward the Party, this piece again showcases a strong allegiance to the Communist Party’s political objectives. Meanwhile, this song deploys the collective pronoun “us” (*zan*, 咱), which downplays individual agency and highlights the speaker’s identity within the collective framework that was crucial to the Communist Party’s political agenda. In addition, similar to the first song, this piece also follows a well-organized linear narrative structure that highlights the importance of following the Communist Party’s leadership to achieve ultimate happiness. Regardless of the authenticity of the sentiments expressed, these new *xintianyou* songs utilize the “naturalness” and “spontaneity” associated with the folk genre to construct a “collective consciousness” dedicated to serving the Communist’s regime.⁹⁵ They not only showcase the

⁹⁴ Zhu Xuzhong, “Xintianyou” 信天游 [Xintianyou], *Renmin ribao*, March 22, 1959, 8.

⁹⁵ Chen, “Multiplicity in Uniformity,” 10.

masses' affection for the Party, but also function as propaganda that can be deployed to further encourage the masses' support for political campaigns.⁹⁶

Notably, the republication of *xintianyou* in pamphlets and newspapers signified how *xintianyou* rose from a purely oral tradition with regional specificity to a written form that could be disseminated through print media. With *xintianyou*'s appearance in the *People's Daily*, the genre managed to transcend geographical boundaries and establish a nationwide reputation. This further led to the emergence of performing *xintianyou* as a national cultural practice. In 1951, some students at a school in the city of Chongqing questioned the necessity and value of political studies and posted a couplet suggesting that occasionally dancing *yangge* and singing *xintianyou* could fulfill the political studies requirement.⁹⁷ *Yangge*, which will also be discussed in the next chapter, represented a politically correct form of dance widely practiced throughout the country, even though it originated as a regional dance in Northeast China. Similarly, *xintianyou*, which originated as a regional performance, became a tool for performing loyalty to the Party and was appropriated by individuals living outside the Northern Shaanxi area.

The increased political overtones of *xintianyou* were accompanied by the genre's diminished role as a medium for lower-class people to voice their dissatisfaction with the political and social environment in China. On May 10, 1957, when the "Speaking Out Freely" (*daming*

⁹⁶ More *xintianyou* songs emerged during the Cultural Revolution. For example, in 1968, a Red Guard in Shaanxi wrote a poem in the style of *xintianyou*. The poem featured the verses "O the wind that blows in the direction of north, please blow more slowly and carry my words to the city of Beijing; the mountains in Yan'an are decorated with red flags, and we revolutionaries miss Chairman Mao so much." Chinese Contemporary Political Campaigns Database, Chinese Cultural Revolution Database, December 1968.

⁹⁷ The couplet went "If there's nothing to do, do *yangge* dance; after a satisfying meal, sing *xintianyou*." See Chinese Contemporary Political Campaigns Database, Database of the Chinese Political Campaigns in the 1950s: From Land Reform to State-Private Partnership, 1949-1956. November 28, 1951.

defang, 大鸣大放) political movement swept across the nation, students from the Hefei Normal College put up a *xintianyou*-themed “big character poster” (*dazibao*, 大字报), which included the following verses:

Clouds gather in the sky, it’s going to rain; I speak for farmers, who bear all the pain . . .
They say that workers and farmers unite, but in reality, farmers are slaves in plight.⁹⁸

Using the first-person singular pronoun “I” (*wo*, 我), this piece speaks for the farmers who were struggling with their living conditions. It criticized the CCP for neglecting the farmers’ well-being and emphasized the need to address the improvement of the farmer’s livelihood. However, the call for more equality between farmers and workers was characterized by the internal reference report as “insulting” (*ruma*, 辱骂) the Party, as it incited opposition between farmers and workers. Since the alliance between farmers and workers remained central to the CCP’s official discourse, destabilizing such an alliance posed a threat to the political stability of the regime. The Party’s criticism of this song showcases the CCP’s interest is mobilizing *xintianyou* for propaganda purposes over serving the actual needs of the peasants.

Following the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, the country witnessed an emergence of ambiguous, even skeptical, attitudes toward the socialist regime. While some of such sentiments were explicitly articulated in words, others assumed an ambivalent presence in various forms of cultural production, including the aforementioned film *Yellow Earth*.⁹⁹ The end of the film features a scene in which Cuiqiao walks toward the turbulent river

⁹⁸ This was a report released by the Xinhua News Agency for internal Party reference, see Chinese Contemporary Political Campaigns Database, Chinese Anti-Rightist Campaign Database, 1957–, May 10, 1957.

⁹⁹ For criticism of the socialist regime that was articulated in words, see Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard, “The Democracy Movement in China, 1978-1979: Opposition Movements, Wall Poster Campaigns, and Underground Journals.” *Asian Survey* 21, no. 7 (1981): 747–74.

while humming the new revolutionary song learned from the Communist soldier. As Xiao observes, the last line sung by Cuiqiao is “the Communist Party is the savior of all,” yet the last syllable of the song—*dang* (党), which means the “Party”—is drowned out by the sound of the river.¹⁰⁰ Xiao notes that the disintegration of the song, in particular the key term “Communist Party,” coupled with Cui’s possible act of suicide, adds to the film’s problematization and satire of the “ambivalent relations between the Party and the people.”¹⁰¹

Examined in comparison with the nuanced portrayal of revolutionary songs in *Yellow Earth*, the new creation of “Xintianyou” in the 1980s can be viewed as an effort to move the folk genre beyond its sole task of political messaging. While previous *xintianyou* pieces highlighted conforming to political ideology, the modern piece featured a deviation from such normalized political functions. Such deviation is evident not only in the use of disco and rock beats, which brought new sonic features to the folk genre, but also in the lyrics. An excerpt of one such set of lyrics is listed below:

I lower my head
Bowling to the ravine
Searching for the far gone past
The ravine is filled with sand
I can’t seem to find my childhood

I raise my head
Facing the blue sky
Searching for the far gone past
Carefree white clouds travel as they wish
Nothing has changed

Wild geese heard my song
Small stream kissed my face
The red flowers of the mountain lily open and then fall

¹⁰⁰ Xiao, *China in the Mix*, 33.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Time and again...¹⁰²

In his discussion of “Xintianyou,” Baranovitch briefly touches upon how the lyrics are imbued with a sense of “loss and longing” for the past.¹⁰³ Yet a closer examination of the lyrics in comparison with previous *xintianyou* pieces demonstrates how the song depicts deviation

from the collective narratives and revolutionary messaging of the Mao era. As shown above, the first two sections of the song begin with the first-person pronoun “I” (*wo*, 我), which highlights the presence of individual voice and agency that differs from the collective body featured in the revolutionary *xintianyou*. To some extent, the emphasis on “private sentiment” as performed by a female singer, resonates with the style of Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng, whose songs also highlight the personal aspect of emotion.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, while Teng’s soft and sentimental rendering “embodied the lost graces of an idealized Chinese womanhood,” the individuality conveyed through Cheng’s voice offered an expansion of the idealized womanhood to include a rougher and more assertive female persona.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile, “Xintianyou” evokes a profound sense of aimlessness wandering, which is a stark departure from its Mao-era counterparts that were laden with aspiration for clear communist goals. The previously mentioned political *xintianyou* pieces were all preaching

¹⁰² The second and third sections are Baranovitch’s translation, See Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices*, 19. The first section is translated by the author based on Baranovitch’s translation of the following two sections. For the Chinese lyrics, see Feng Jiping, *Gequ shangxi yu gechang shijian* 歌曲赏析与歌唱实践 [An analysis of songs and the practice of singing] (Shanghai: Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2020), 106–7.

¹⁰³ Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices*, 21.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Jones, *Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 185.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, *Circuit Listening*, 186.

unwavering devotion to either the CCP's leadership or its political campaigns, as both were believed to guarantee a bright prospect for the country and its people. In contrast, "Xintianyou" manifests greater uncertainties regarding the country's future. Such uncertainties are conveyed through verbs such as "lower," "raise," and "search for," which highlight the aimlessness of individuals who were not moving according to the predetermined revolutionary trajectory. The rejection of temporal linearity is further evinced in the lyrics describing the blooming and wilting of flowers, and the expression "time and again" (*yibian you yibian*, 一遍又一遍), which emphasizes the repetitiveness of time without a clear objective. Meanwhile, different from the Maoist pieces that highlighted great changes brought by the Communist Party to the general public, the expression "nothing has changed" is a questioning, if not a negation, of the positive influence of the Communist Party's regime on people's lives.

Therefore, while Xie Chengqiang's impetus for creating the music of "Xintianyou" was to challenge the normative way of producing popular music, the outcome of the song went beyond a mere redefinition of the notion of "popular songs," as the production process also reshaped the genre of *xintianyou*. While *xintianyou* emerged as a grassroots catharsis for the peasants' personal sentiments, it was elevated by the CCP into a politically correct form of art that demonstrated the legitimacy of the Party through representing the voices of the peasants as an abstract unity. As a disco-infused reinvention, "Xintianyou" emancipated the genre from the political constraints imposed on it since the 1930s. To be sure, the creation of new "Xintianyou" did not change the essence of *xintianyou*, which was, and still is, regarded as a type of Red genre associated with praising the merits of the CCP. Nonetheless, the new "Xintianyou" liberated the genre by reopening up the possibilities of the content that could fit under the title "Xintianyou." Therefore, the root-seeking embedded within the creation of the song not only lay in the revitalization of

traditional Chinese musical elements, but also referred to the practice of reinstating the song's original function as a vehicle through which to express voices emanating from the people.

The Adaptation of “Xintianyou”

On a July afternoon in 1987, after two years of absence from the public, singer Cheng Lin reappeared in Beijing with her partner, Taiwanese musician Hou Dejian.¹⁰⁶ Together, the couple presented the new album *Cheng Lin's New Songs 1987* (*Cheng Lin xinge 1987*, 程琳新歌 1987) to news reporters, in which the song “Xintianyou” was featured.¹⁰⁷ Prior to their hiatus, both Cheng and Hou were affiliated with the state-sponsored, Beijing-based Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble (*Dongfang gewutuan*, 东方歌舞团), where Cheng was a solo singer and Hou a musical director. However, after Hou, who yearned to pursue his dreams without being restricted by the “system” (*tizhi*, 体制), had a falling out with the head of the ensemble, the couple departed the ensemble and relocated to Guangzhou in 1985.¹⁰⁸ And it was during their stay in Guangzhou that “Xintianyou” was recorded. Interestingly, while created during a period of “isolation from the rest of the world” (*yinju*, 隐居), “Xintianyou” ultimately caught the attention of the production team

¹⁰⁶ Hu Sisheng, *Mi zhong mi ren zhong ren* 谜中谜 人中人 [Riddle in the riddle, person in the person] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei kexue jishu chubanshe, 1989), 189.

¹⁰⁷ For the recording of Cheng's “Xintianyou,” see “Cheng Lin xinge 1987” 程琳《新歌 1987》 [Cheng Lin's New Songs 1987], accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ne411L7ij/?spm_id_from=333.337.searchcard.all.click&vd_source=13ec79d23d58793fe9ffac3ba72e23b6.

¹⁰⁸ Li Jun, ed., *Yishu yu aiqing xiaji* 艺术与爱情 下集 [Arts and love II] (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1988), 213–15.

of the Spring Festival Gala, who decided to bring the performance to the national stage in 1988.¹⁰⁹ However, as discussed in the previous section, the song “Xintianyou” hinted at a deviation from the political discourse that the Communist Party associated with the musical genre of *xintianyou*. Meanwhile, the Spring Festival Gala acted as a space in which images of “harmony, unity, and the benevolent rule of the Communist Party” were promoted.¹¹⁰ So how could the song fit into the ideological framework of the gala? Based on the comparison of Cheng’s original recording and her performance during the gala, coupled with Cheng’s recollection of the adaptation process, this section argues that through musical rearrangement and the addition of visual and performative elements, “Xintianyou” was repackaged into a performance highlighting familial affection, patriotism, and the vitality of folk culture.¹¹¹

To begin with, the music for the gala’s rendition of “Xintianyou” underwent a rearrangement from its original version, which the production team deemed too “avant-garde” (*qianwei*, 前卫).¹¹² Such a rearrangement was most evident at the beginning of the song. While both versions featured the use of *suona* before the start of the first verse, the instrumentation

¹⁰⁹ From an interview conducted by Chen Yannni, see Chen Yannni, *Meiguo zhihou shang* 美国之后 上 [After Visiting the US I] (Beijing: Zuoqia chubanshe, 2000), 265. For the gala version of “Xintianyou”, see “Sinian dao yongyuan Cheng Lin” 《思念到永远》程琳 [Missing you forever Cheng Lin], accessed April 24, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FglFmkOh_80.

¹¹⁰ Pan, “Enacting the Family-Nation on a Global Stage,” 240.

¹¹¹ Cheng mentioned the adaptation process while attending a TV show named *Chinese Arts* (*Zhongguo wenyi*, 中国文艺). For a selection of Cheng’s responses in the interview, see “Cheng Lin: Xintianyou dangnian yingxiang da Li Yanliang jiushi shou zheshou ge de yingxiang xia congyi de” 程琳: 《信天游》当年影响大, 李延亮就是受这首歌的影响下从艺的 [Cheng Lin: “Xintianyou” had a significant impact at that time. Yi Yanliang was inspired by the song to pursue a career in music], accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.sohu.com/a/642139447_121634208.

¹¹² “Cheng Lin,” accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.sohu.com/a/642139447_121634208.

employed before the start of *suona* was different. In the original composition, the song opened with an electric guitar, which was accompanied by heavy drum beats, thus establishing a rebellious tone. By contrast, the gala's rendition started with mellow bird chirping sounds, blended with light electronic music and traditional percussion. Additionally, a playful human voice chorus was incorporated into the medley. Through utilizing more natural and traditional sonic elements, the new version produced a pleasant and soothing effect. In contrast to the original version's rebellious tone, the gala's version highlighted a sense of harmony that aligned with the core theme of the Spring Festival Gala. As for the rock beats and the electric guitar featured in the original composition, they were not entirely abandoned in the gala's version, but their entries into the song were postponed. The former appeared in the second half of the first verse, and the latter only gained prominence in the interlude following the first chorus. Therefore, through partially preserving the rhythmic feature of the original song, the new version managed to attain the modern form of the music while reducing the rebellious aspect of the original version. Cheng did not explicitly state whether the gala production team's decision to rearrange the song was due to concerns about the potentially corruptive and debasing impact of the provocative musical elements or considerations regarding the audience's taste and reception of such an avant-garde arrangement. However, weeks before the song's appearance in the Spring Festival Gala, the musicologist Miao Ye (繆也) described the song as having "quickly resonated with the audience."¹¹³ Therefore, it can be inferred that what the production team was primarily concerned with might be the first factor. In fact, such a concern most likely targeted the rock-style musical arrangement in "Xintianyou." Similar to disco, rock culture was also introduced to China in the early reform era. However, this musical genre often conveyed connotations of repudiating the "prescriptive power of traditional

¹¹³ Miao Ye, "Zai kaifang de chaoliu zhong qiu fazhan," 5.

culture,” a sentiment embraced by both musicians and audiences, which eventually transformed into “public expressions of political dissent” in the late 1980s.¹¹⁴ Therefore, the reorganization of musical elements in “Xintianyou” could be understood as a precaution taken by the gala’s production team to ensure that the performance did not provoke political sensitivities. Nonetheless, while the rock-style music might have been subjected to ideological scrutiny from the gala, the elements of disco, on the contrary, were magnified in the new performance.

Another adjustment made to the song was related to its title. The original version adopted the name of the folk genre from which the melodic pattern was derived. However, the name of the gala’s performance was changed to “Missing You Forever,” taken directly from a line in the song. As recalled by Cheng, the change of name was to align the song with the “core melody” (*zhu xuanlü*, 主旋律) of the Spring Festival Gala, which was “familial affection” (*qingqing*, 亲情). The emphasis placed on familial affection could be understood from several aspects. To begin with, such a theme directly reflected one of the key traditions of the Spring Festival Gala, which was family reunion. However, the emphasis on familial affection on the stage conveyed more than a single reference to the holiday tradition. Through publicizing a private emotion, the gala addressed the conjoined discourses of family and patriotism. This association, highlighting a “dynamic interplay between family and state,” was deeply rooted in Confucian traditions and had permeated Chinese history for centuries.¹¹⁵ In fact, such an association was also discernable in the rhetoric utilized in official speeches and documents published around the same time, which featured the expression “Chinese sons and daughters” (*zhonghua ernü*, 中华儿女), a patriotic expression

¹¹⁴ Jones, *Like a Knife*, 115–149.

¹¹⁵ Wei-Ming Tu, “Multiple Modernities—Implications of the Rise of “Confucian” East Asia,” in *Chinese Ethnics in a Global Context: Moral Bases of Contemporary Societies*, ed. Karl-Heinz Pohl and Anselm W. Müller (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 65.

highlighting the unity among the Chinese people through describing the state as a family.¹¹⁶ In addition, 1988 was the Year of the Dragon, which symbolized a shared identity among the Chinese nationalities. Accordingly, the backdrop of the gala's stage was designed to feature two golden dragons. Performed against such a backdrop that visualized the cultural root of the Chinese, the new version became a reminder of the shared national identity of the audience. Looking back at the original version of "Xintianyou," the line "missing you forever," without a specific designated object, could refer to personal pursuit of "a desired imaginary past and a longed-for collective existence."¹¹⁷ Yet, the adaptation of the song transfigured one intellectual's quest for an idealized past and identity into a sentiment that could be projected onto a wider audience. Accordingly, the "loss and longing" embedded within the original lyrics were transformed into a collective and fulfilling sense of "prosperity and positivity" signifying a shared cultural heritage.

In the process of repackaging the song into a stage performance, the addition of visual elements also played a vital role. While the music arrangement toned down the rock aspect of the song, the stage performance still incorporated modern disco-related elements. As previously mentioned, the stage of the gala featured two golden dragons. Situated between the dragons was a rotating golden ball hung from the ceiling, and this design reminded the audience of the Chinese idiom "two dragons playing with a pearl" (*shuanglong xizhu*, 双龙戏珠). Interestingly, the stage

¹¹⁶ For one of the examples, see Liu Yandong, "Tuanjie yiqie ai guo ai shehuizhuyi de zhonghua qingnian wei shehui de wending fazhan he zuguo de fanrong tongyi er fengdou—zai zhonghua quanguo qingnian lianhehui di qi jie weiyuanhui di yi ci quanti huiyi shang de gongzuo baogao (zhaiyao)" 团结一切爱国爱社会主义的中华青年 为社会的稳定发展和祖国的繁荣统一而奋斗——在中华全国青年联合会第七届委员会第一次全体会议上的工作报告（摘要） [Unite all patriotic and socialist Chinese youths and strive for the stable development of society and the prosperity and unity of the country—A work report at the first plenary session of the seventh committee of the All-China Youth Federation (Excerpt)], *Renmin ribao*, August 26, 1990, 5.

¹¹⁷ Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, 21.

featured a second “pearl,” which was a spinning disco ball that was also suspended from the ceiling (Figure 12). In addition to the disco ball, additional stage lights were used to cast colorful moving dots on the stage, which created an immersive dance-floor-like atmosphere. Meanwhile, Cheng Lin’s costume also contributed to the visual appeal of the performance (Figure 13). Cheng wore a black dress with golden dots, which matched the pattern of the bow she wore at the back of her head. These dots, shimmering under the stage light, reflected the glamour of disco dancing. The presence of the disco elements, dragons and the golden pearl called to mind the metaphorical association between the spirit of the dragon, reform, and disco, as discussed in the aforementioned article published in the *People’s Daily*.¹¹⁸



(Figure 12. “Missing You Forever”)¹¹⁹



(Figure 13. Performers’ costumes)¹²⁰

In addition to incorporating disco elements, the performance also emphasized the song’s folk roots. Accompanying Cheng’s solo singing was a group of male dancers in white Shaanxi-style shirts and pants with waistbelts, which resembled the attire of laboring peasants (Figure 13). Interestingly, what the dancers performed was a fusion of moves from *yangge* dance, Mongolian

¹¹⁸ Wang, “Longnian disike xiexiang,” 8.

¹¹⁹ Screenshot by the author. The disco ball can be seen in the upper right corner of the image.

¹²⁰ Screenshot by the author.

dance, and modern dance. Such a combination of cultural elements was different from other performances that usually focused on rendering a single form of regional culture. For example, the performance that directly followed “Missing You Forever” was “Watch Yangge” (*Kan yangge*, 看秧歌), a *yangge* dance performed by Shanxi Province Opera and Drama Dance Theater. Through presenting the regional specificity of folk culture, performances such as “Watch Yangge” were often associated with exemplifying regional diversity and inclusivity within China. However, through downplaying the regional specificity, what “Missing You Forever” showcased, in both costumes and dance moves, was the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, which highlighted the modern repackaging of folk culture in general. In fact, the modern rendition of traditional Chinese culture, together with the emphasis on familial affection and patriotism, demonstrated a key policy in the development of “spiritual civilization,” or the “modernization of the Chinese citizenry, ” which was the “positive repackaging of China’s cultural traditions” amid cultural dissolution.¹²¹ In other words, through the creation of “Missing You Forever,” the Party managed to promote the values deeply rooted in Chinese culture and convey the message of the cohesion and vitality of Chinese civilization.

“Music, the quintessential mass activity, like the crowd, is simultaneously a threat and a necessary source of legitimacy; trying to channel it is a risk that every system of power must run.” Jacques Attali’s summarization of music’s nature clearly delineates the relationship between music and power.¹²² Music is always a source of empowerment, which enables both individuals and the central government to realize either personal goals or political objectives. While “Xintianyou”

¹²¹ Dynon, “Four Civilizations,” 84.

¹²² Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 14.

hints at the intellectuals' effort to lead the folk genre away from the official political discourse of the CCP, the adaptation of "Xintianyou" as "Missing Your Forever" demonstrates the CCP's reincorporation of the song into the political agenda in post-Mao China. Such a practice is reminiscent of the repackaging of folk songs into propaganda songs, a discourse that has permeated the communist culture since the early 20th century. In "Xintianyou," disco culture represents the subversive power to digress from the political norms associated with the folk genre *xintianyou*. In "Missing You Forever," disco culture symbolizes a sense of advancement that is linked to the spirit of reform. While root-seeking in "Xintianyou" is associated with knight-errantry and uncertainties, root-seeking in "Missing You Forever" demonstrates the action of root-consolidating that, through highlighting traditional Chinese values and culture, constitutes a solid foundation that could propel the nation toward socialist modernization.

Following the release of "Xintianyou," a wave of modernized folk or traditional songs surfaced in the late 20th century. Some of the notable works included singer Cui Jian's rendition of the revolutionary song "South Muddy Bay" (*Nanniwan*, 南泥湾) with rock instrumentation and *The Red Sun* (*Hong taiyang*, 红太阳), a pop music album featuring remixed versions of Maoist red songs. These pieces, garnering both praise and criticism, stirred up public discussions on popular culture, taste, and memory.¹²³ As the sonic landscape of China was gradually reshaped,

¹²³ Cui first performed the rock version of "South Muddy Bay" in January 1987, which reportedly angered a "veteran revolutionary." Cui's performance was criticized as "Rendering the Red Song in a Pop Fashion" (*hongge huangchang*, 红歌黄唱), resulting in no concerts daring to book him throughout the entire year. See Woei Lien Chong, "Young China's Voice of the 1980s: Rock Star Cui Jian." *China Information* 6, no. 1 (1991): 55. While "Xintianyou" also features the repackaging of folk tunes with rock elements, it managed to avoid the *hongge huangchang* criticism. Unlike Cui's rendition of "Nanniwan," with the latter being a well-known revolutionary song, "Xintianyou" features the rearrangement of *xintianyou*, a genre characterized by varying tunes and different lyrics. Furthermore, in "Xintianyou," the old tune has been so intricately remodified that only professional musicologists familiar with *xintianyou* tunes are able to identify the *xintianyou* elements. The nature of *xintianyou* and the remodeling of the old tune prevented

the presence of disco culture also unleashed a new era of bodily sensations and movements in Chinese society. Interestingly, this new form of performance did not just catch the attention of the younger generation, but it also sparked a surprising fascination among the middle-aged and the elderly.

the new piece from sounding like a degradation of revolutionary songs, which further shielded the musicians from the criticism that befell Cui. For a musical analysis of “Xintianyou,” see Sun Shao, “Cong Zhongguo dangdai tongsu gequ xintianyou de chuanguo kan shanbei mingde jicheng yu fazhan,” 15–18.

IV. Body and Nation: The Practice of Senior Disco

In April 1644, Chongzhen, the last emperor of the Ming dynasty, chose to end his life on Coal Hill (*Mei shan*, 煤山) as the rebel forces of Li Zicheng stormed the gates of the empire's capital. Fast forward two centuries, and the magnificent Holy Trinity Cathedral, designed by the acclaimed British architect George Gilbert Scott, was built in Shanghai, a city opened up as a treaty-port after China's defeat in the First Opium War. However, little did Emperor Chongzhen or Scott know that these two completely unrelated sites, separated by time and space, would forge an unexpected connection in the late 20th century—both were taken over by local senior citizens in Beijing and Shanghai as the headquarters of their daily disco practices.

While “senior disco” has received limited scholarly attention, its modern-day derivative, “square dance” (*guangchang wu*, 广场舞)—daily outdoor dancing exercise dominated by middle-aged and elderly women—has been studied by a few scholars.¹²⁴ From a cultural perspective, Emily Wilcox has noted how Chinese classical and folk dance has formed the core component of “square dancing.”¹²⁵ Addressing the economic reform and social transformation in Chengdu in the late 20th century, Claudia Huang has argued that square dancing helped Chinese women cope with “diminishing social welfare programs” and “changes in family structure” and enabled these

¹²⁴ In the US, square dance refers to a type of social dance in which four couples of dancers form a square and dance to the steps announced by a person known as the “caller.” See “All about Square Dance: A Brief History of Square Dance,” <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/square-dance-explained#7fL3zhL8fFqRufdyIUaY7t>, accessed June 10, 2023. In Chinese square dance, the term “square” refers to the location where the dance is mostly performed—public squares. Chinese square dance shares many similarities with senior disco regarding its organization and participants, except that the former does not necessarily feature disco moves or music.

¹²⁵ Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 4.

women to practice self-cultivation.¹²⁶ Focusing on the dancing phenomenon in Guangzhou, Minhui Lin, Jigang Bao, and Erwei Dong's study points out the association between square dancing and the elderly women's resistance to the "commercialization and scarcity of leisure space."¹²⁷

While scholars have addressed square dancing as a phenomenon in the 21st century, what has been overlooked is that the prototype of square dancing, senior disco, emerged in China in the mid-1980s (Figures 14–17). As the name suggests, the practice was closely associated with the introduction of disco culture in China. As described in the senior disco handbooks, in Beijing, numerous enthusiastic old people would dance on a daily basis at Jingshan Park, where the last emperor of the Ming dynasty committed suicide.¹²⁸ In Shanghai, the practice of senior disco first appeared in the courtyard of Holy Trinity Cathedral, where over sixty disco classes were held, hosting more than 7,000 participants in just four years.¹²⁹ Harbin, a city with 251 officially registered senior disco dance teams, had at least 10,000 senior disco dancers every day in 1988.¹³⁰ Interestingly, just as every public park was "taken over" by senior dancers, senior disco was

¹²⁶ Claudia Huang, "Self-cultivation and Society Among Retired Women in Urban China" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2019).

¹²⁷ Minhui Lin, Jigang Bao, and Erwei Dong, "Dancing in Public Spaces: An Exploratory Study on China's Grooving Grannies." *Leisure Studies* 39, no. 4 (2020): 545–57.

¹²⁸ Jingshan (景山) and Coal Hill refer to the same hill. Ying Qilong, Liu Jianling, and Huang Jianxin, eds., *Laonianren wenhua yule zhinan* 老年人文化娱乐指南 [A guide to seniors' entertainment] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1994), 126.

¹²⁹ Jin Yikai, *Lantu fangge* 蓝图放歌 [Singing for the blueprints] (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2002), 388–95.

¹³⁰ Lin Gang, "Haerbin chenlian suo jian" 哈尔滨晨练所见 [What I see during the morning exercise at Harbin], *Renmin ribao*, March 1, 1988, 3. Yin Xiang, ed., *Laonian disike jianshenwu* 老年迪斯科健身舞 [Senior Disco Exercise Dance] (Harbin: Heilongjiang kexue jishu chubanshe, 1988), 1.

promoted in the *People's Daily* as a type of practice that contributed to the development of “socialist spiritual civilization.”¹³¹



(Figure 14. Senior disco in Beijing)¹³²



(Figure 15. Senior disco in Shanghai)¹³³



(Figure 16. Senior disco in Xi'an)¹³⁴



(Figure 17. Senior disco in Harbin)¹³⁵

¹³¹ “Chengshi jingshen wenming jianshe de yitiao youxiao tujing” 城市精神文明建设的一条有效途径 [One efficient method of developing a city’s spiritual civilization], *Renmin ribao*, June 19, 1988, 3.

¹³² Qin Sitang, “Jia Zhangke,” accessed March 20, 2023, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2492114.

¹³³ “Bashi niandai laoren jietou jiaoyiwu,” accessed April 11, 2023, http://photo.sina.com.cn/zl/old_photos/2015-12-24/doc-ifxmykrf2259950.shtml. This picture was taken no earlier than 1987.

¹³⁴ The photo was taken in 1998. See “Hu Wugong jishi sheying zuopin shangxi” 胡武功纪实摄影作品赏析 [Appreciation of Hu Wugong’s documentary photography], accessed April 11, 2023. https://www.sohu.com/a/222912467_784145.

¹³⁵ Yin Xiang, ed., *Laonian disike jianshenwu* 老年迪斯科健身舞 [Senior disco exercise dance] (Harbin: Heilongjiang kexue jishu chubanshe, 1988). As depicted in four photos, the participants in senior disco include both women and men, although women seem to have slightly more

The popularity of senior disco has been addressed by scholars such as Schell and Susan Brownell, both of whom note how the dancers felt invigorated through the practice of disco.¹³⁶ Additionally, Wang touches upon the omnipresence of senior disco guidebooks and the airing of senior disco teaching TV programs in the 1980s and 1990s. However, one critical question remains unanswered: What facilitated the transformation of disco from a decadent and sexualized form of late-night indoor entertainment dominated by young people to a modern and healthy form of daytime outdoor calisthenic dancing favored by seniors and encouraged by the government? Drawing on senior disco handbooks, newspapers, diaries, and other relevant literature, this chapter argues that senior disco was characterized by the remix of disco's original elements with indigenous Chinese culture and values. Such a type of remix facilitated the reformulation of disco's origin and moves, the promotion of senior disco, and the reorganization of disco performance, all aligning the practice of senior disco with the ideological framework in post-Mao China.

A Nationalist Performance

“Check the clock, mop the floor, put on the sock, do the laundry.” At first glance, these phrases seem to be basic instructions in a housewife's guidebook. In fact, they are the names of different disco moves described in *Disco Dance for the Elderly*—a senior disco handbook published in Beijing in 1988.¹³⁷ With the emergence of a more positive image of disco in the mid-1980s,

prominence. This observation aligns with Brownell's assertion that “the majority of elderly disco dancers were female.” Brownell further highlights that engaging in senior disco could help alleviate intergenerational conflicts between elderly women and their daughters-in-law. See Brownell, *Training the Body for China*, 280–82.

¹³⁶ Schell, *Discos and Democracy*, 352-355. Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China*, 280.

¹³⁷ Feng Qing, ed., *Laonian disike wu* 老年迪斯科舞 [Disco dance for the elderly] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1988), 22–25.

numerous senior disco handbooks were created and distributed throughout the market. Compiled by experts such as retired sports coaches, gymnasts, *tai-chi* masters, theater actors and dancers, these handbooks featured detailed descriptions of fundamental disco moves and more complex combinations, often accompanied by photos or drawn illustrations of dancers' movements. These handbooks not only served as crucial tools in disseminating disco-related knowledge, but also played an essential part in modifying the origin and choreographic features of disco, which reformulated the latter into a nationalist performance compatible with social values in post-Mao China.

To begin with, the origin of disco was carefully rephrased in handbooks that utilized Mao-era terminology to describe legitimate and “healthy” art forms. As previously mentioned, originating from a fusion of gay, Latino and African American cultures, disco was a tool for socially marginalized groups to “ditch predictable social scripts.”¹³⁸ In other words, disco was characterized by its sexually charged and rebellious nature. However, such subversiveness was downplayed or filtered out in the handbooks published in the late 20th century.¹³⁹ For example, one guide titled *Disco for the Middle-Aged and Elderly* explains the origin of disco as follows:

[Disco] originated as American folk (*minjian*, 民间) culture. It gained popularity in small towns and was initially performed by the Black people and “laboring youths” (*laodong qingnian*, 劳动青年). The dance features free, rhythmic, and dynamic moves. While dancing to the music, the dancers usually improvise by infusing their emotions (*qing*, 情) into the dance and expressing their ideas through moves.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 27.

¹³⁹ Some guides would mention the negative aspects of disco culture, which were downplayed to a minimal degree. One guide mentioned how, “regrettably,” some people would show “inappropriate movements” while performing disco, see Zheng Zhaojian and Lü Tieli, eds., *Zhonglaonian disike jijin* 中老年迪斯科集锦 [A collection of disco routines for the middle-aged and the elderly] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1989), “foreword.”

¹⁴⁰ Xu Erchong, ed., *Zhonglaonian Disike* 中老年迪斯科 [Disco for the middle-aged and elderly] (Beijing: Jindun chubanshe, 1995), “foreword.”

As showcased in the description, the homosexuality embedded in disco dance was elided, with the subversive nature of disco dancing reframed as a mere integration of “emotions” into dance. In addition, through referring to disco as a type of “folk culture” practiced by the “laboring youths,” the “working-class” grassroots nature of disco was highlighted. Similarly, a guide published in 1988 points out that disco was first practiced by people from the lower echelon of society (*xiaceng shehui*, 下层社会) in the US and featured many African and Latino dancing routines.¹⁴¹ Another guide published in the same year addresses disco as a type of common people’s dance (*pingmin wudao*, 平民舞蹈) that originated in Africa.¹⁴²

The stress on the “folk-ness” of disco culture and the “class” of its “inventors” echoed the core idea in the aforementioned Yan’an talks, which extolled the value of folk culture produced by lower-class laboring populations consisting of workers, soldiers, and peasants.¹⁴³ Therefore, addressing how disco was produced by laboring, lower-class people elevated disco to a culture that met the standard of artistic excellence that had dominated China for three decades. The “elevation” of disco was also accompanied by the utilization of analogies. One of the handbooks published in Heilongjiang Province compares disco to *yangge* dance, a folk dance featuring many disco-like hip movements in North China. Notably, *yangge* emerged as a type of “non-elite” performance practiced by poor peasants, which was reformulated in the 1940s by the CCP into a

¹⁴¹ Sheng Yong, ed., *Laonian disike jicui* 老年迪斯科集萃 [A collection of senior disco routines] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1988), 1.

¹⁴² Yin Xiang, *Laonian disike jianshenwu*, 1.

¹⁴³ See “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art,” accessed October 3, 2022, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm.

socialist performance highlighting the revolutionary spirit of the masses.¹⁴⁴ Thus, comparing disco to *yangge* not only served to address the choreographic similarities between the two performances, which could facilitate readers' understanding of foreign culture, but was also a way of transferring the ideological implications embedded in *yangge* onto disco, thereby shaping the latter into a practice compatible with the socialist cultural environment.


In addition to accentuating the “folk-ness” of disco, the emphasis on disco’s association with African, African American, and Latino culture is also discernible in the aforementioned handbooks, with some simply referring to “African American” as “African.” Such reference to disco’s foreign aspects aligned with the CCP’s narrative since the mid-20th century, during which it asserted longstanding solidarity between the People’s Republic of China and its “comrades” in Africa and Latin America.¹⁴⁵ Even during the height of anti-American sentiment in the 1960s, African and Latin Americans enjoyed a relatively favorable image in Chinese official media. The CCP supported their struggle for equality and portrayed it within the greater framework of struggling against capitalism and imperialism. With the presence of such solidarity, the value of the cultural products created by African and Latin Americans was continuously extolled.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, the transmission of disco culture from the US to China resulted in a transformation of its evaluation as the culture was recontextualized in a different reference framework. In the US,

¹⁴⁴ Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 24–26.

¹⁴⁵ Zhu De, “Jinian dang de sishi zhounian” 纪念党的四十周年 [In memory of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party], *Renmin ribao*, July 1, 1961, 3.

¹⁴⁶ For two of the examples in the late 1970s, see “Rang Feizhou minzu wenhua yishu shengkai canlan de huaduo” 让非洲民族文化艺术盛开灿烂的花朵 [Let African folk culture blossom], *Renmin ribao*, February 17, 1977, 5. Chen Shuliang, “Youyi de huaduo—Zhu Moxige minjian gongyi meishu zhanlan kaimu” 友谊的花朵——祝墨西哥民间工艺美术展览开幕 [Flowers of friendship—Celebrating the opening of the Mexican Folk Art Exhibition], *Renmin ribao*, October 27, 1978, 6.

disco, given its association with African American culture, was viewed as a subversive force that empowered marginalized racial groups. But in China, the emphasis on such an association instead hinted at disco's potential legitimacy as a mainstream cultural phenomenon. There are various possible explanations for the existence of Maoist rhetoric in the handbooks: it could be the editors' deliberate attempt to conservatively justify the value of disco, or merely the legacy of persistent linguistic habits of the Mao era. Nonetheless, such descriptions demonstrated the legitimacy of disco as a foreign practice to the readers, and laid the foundation for the promotion of senior disco.

"Mop the Floor"	"The Sway"	"Exhilarated"	"Hip Swirl" #1
			
"Put on the Sock"	"Lift"	"Look into the Mirror"	"The Roach Step"
			

(Table 2. A comparison of the similar moves in *Disco Dance for the Elderly* and *The Complete Guide to Disco Dancing*)¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Pictures in the white columns are from Feng, *Laonian disikewu*; Lu Hongbin, *Laonian disike jianshencao* 老年迪斯科健身操 [The senior disco exercises] (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue puji chubanshe, 1987); Pictures in the grey columns are from Karen Lustgarten, *The Complete Guide to Disco Dancing* (New York: Warner Books, 1978). Interestingly, a majority of the handbooks featured demonstrations of the moves by female dancers, which echoes the gender pattern in modern-day square dance.

Descriptions of disco's origins were usually featured in the "foreword" section of the handbooks, after which detailed depictions of dance moves would be introduced. A close examination of the moves shows that a large number of them featured a remix of simplified disco steps with traditional Chinese cultural practices. To begin with, while many of the moves introduced in handbooks were direct borrowings from the original disco moves popular in the US, a majority of them were rechoreographed with reduced speed and range of motion to be "in line with the physical and psychological capabilities of the elderly."¹⁴⁸ Consequently, such modification resulted in the desexualization of disco moves, as the moves were rendered in a slower and less provocative manner. Meanwhile, as demonstrated at the beginning of this section, a few handbooks even reconfigured disco moves into actions imitating daily activities and named them after the corresponding chores (Table 2). This remodification again highlighted the departure of senior disco from its Western counterpart, where disco dancing was often referred to as a visceral experience signifying an escape from reality or the normative daily routine.¹⁴⁹ By contrast, the naming of disco moves as everyday chores recontextualized disco culture as a benign daily practice, which further resulted in the elimination of the subversiveness of the original dance.


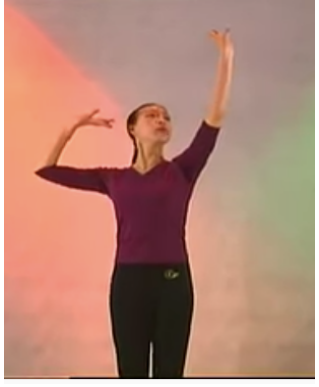

Apart from the simplification of disco moves, senior disco also featured imitation or assimilation of Chinese cultural practices. One handbook published in 1988 incorporates into senior disco moves that could stimulate acupuncture points (*xuewei*, 穴位), a common practice in Traditional Chinese Medicine, which was believed to generate health benefits.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile,

¹⁴⁸ Sheng, *Laonian disike jicui*, 2.

¹⁴⁹ Dinzey-Flores, Zaire Zenit. "De la Disco al Caserío: Urban Spatial Aesthetics and Policy to the Beat of Reggaetón." *Centro Journal* 20, no. 2 (2008): 35–69; Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 27.

¹⁵⁰ Liu Chengluan, *Zhonglaonian jianshen disike* 中老年健身迪斯科 [Fitness disco for the middle-aged and the elderly] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1988), 3.

many other books merged the simplified disco steps with moves featured in *tai-chi*, *qigong*, martial arts, classical dance, and folk dance from different ethnic groups.¹⁵¹ Take the handbook *A Collection of Senior Disco Dances*, for example. Its cover features images of a dancer demonstrating four disco moves, with three of them matching existing Chinese cultural practices (Table 3): the largest photo on the cover noticeably resembles a move in *qigong*; the picture in the upper left corner mirrors a classic move in Xinjiang (Uyghur) Dance; and the photo in the upper right corner imitates the signature position in peacock dance, a type of folk dance practiced by the Dai ethnic minorities in Southern China.

Senior disco handbook cover	<i>Baduanjin</i> (<i>qigong</i> , 气功)	Xinjiang (Uyghur) dance	Peacock dance
			

(Table 3. The assimilation of *Baduanjin* (八段锦), Xinjiang dance and peacock dance in senior disco)¹⁵²

As previously mentioned, a majority of the handbooks were compiled by Chinese dance experts, which may have contributed to the incorporation of various Chinese cultural practices into

¹⁵¹ Sheng, *Laonian disike jicui*, 2.

¹⁵² Screenshots captured by the author. The first picture (from left to right) is the cover of the handbook *Laonian disike jicui* edited by Sheng Yong. The second and third pictures are screenshots captured from two videos. For the first video, see “Baduanjin” 八段锦 [Baduanjin], accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDIx22h2TBc>; for the second video, see “Chinese Xinjiang Dance Tutorial,” accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GP7XoezfOOo>. The fourth picture, a mirror image of the original, was found at “Daizu wu” 傣族舞 [Dai dance], accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.meipian.cn/2v9k9bxq>.

senior disco. Noticeably, such assimilation is reminiscent of one of the “defining characteristics” of Chinese dance as proposed by the Chinese dancer Dai Ailian (戴爱莲) at the Frontier Music and Dance Plenary in 1946, which Wilcox refers to as “ethnic and spatial inclusivity.” In her theorization of Chinese dance, which was built on the concept of the “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*, 中华民族), Dai emphasized the importance of taking inspiration “from all existing local performance in China” and “from Han and non-Han sources in every geographic region.”¹⁵³ Featuring the incorporation of Chinese cultural practices, the creation of senior disco paralleled Dai’s principle of inclusivity, which was expanded to include not only various ethnic minority dances, but also traditional Chinese exercise culture. Addressing the heavy presence of Chinese cultural elements within senior disco, some handbooks proudly pointed out that senior disco was a valuable creation of the “Chinese nation,” where Chinese wisdom was manifested.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, senior disco was shaped into a nationalist performance that highlighted the value of traditional Chinese culture and reinforced the solidarity between the Han ethnic group and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the reinvention of disco based on the assimilation of Chinese culture again demonstrated the aforementioned aspect of the socialist morality culture, which was the “positive repackaging of Chinese cultural traditions.” In other words, senior disco, which featured the blending of traditional Chinese moves with modern beats, showcased the revival and modernization of Chinese culture that had been accumulated throughout history. Accordingly, consisting of the remodified traditional moves, the practice of senior disco symbolized a solution to the displacement and fragmentation of national cultural identity amid globalization in the early

¹⁵³ Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 39.

¹⁵⁴ See Sheng, *Laonian disike jicui*, 2; Chen Lianyu and Li Huizhu, *Huaxia zhonglaonian disike* 华夏中老年迪斯科 [Chinese disco for the middle-aged and the elderly] (Beijing: Nongcun duwu chubanshe, 1988), “foreword.”

reform era.

To sum up, senior disco is a type of reformulated performance based on the rewording of disco's origin and choreographing of the original moves. The former involved utilizing Mao-era rhetoric, and the latter entailed the simplification of the moves and the integration of indigenous Chinese practices. These approaches highlighted the recontextualization of disco in both semiotic and kinesthetic aspects within post-Mao Chinese society, which not only rendered disco as a type of performance more comprehensible, imitable, and aesthetically acceptable to the general public, but also shaped it into a practice compatible with the ideological framework of the reform era.

A Collective Lifestyle

Seeing these senior citizens dancing in the rising sun, I cannot help but admit that such people are also the tough ones in life. At that moment, an impulse to break old habits and embark on a new life arises in my heart.¹⁵⁵

Addressing the stories written by Mu Shiyong (穆时英) in the 1930s, Leo Ou-fan Lee points out how dance halls were reconfigured as a prominent spectacle where “human pathos” was played out.¹⁵⁶ Interestingly, half a century later, dancing resurfaced as a topic of literacy creation, with senior disco featured as a recurring motif exemplifying the “ethos” of the early reform era. The quotation above is an excerpt from a full-score essay written for the 1988 National College Entrance Examination—an annual exam required for entrance to nearly all undergraduate programs in Mainland China. Based on the given topic “habit,” this essay depicted how the author

¹⁵⁵ Lao Zi and Mei Shan, eds., *Gaokao manfen zuowen 100 pian* 高考满分作文 100 篇 [One hundred full-score college entrance examination essays] (Beijing: Xin shijie chubanshe, 1995), 129–31.

¹⁵⁶ Leo Ou-fan Lee, “City and Country in Chinese Fiction: An Historical Survey.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and the City*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 639–59.

observed her mother getting rid of her old habit of preparing breakfast for the family and acquiring the new habit of practicing senior disco in the morning. In fact, similar narrative structures can be found in various literary works, in which seniors were depicted as being “accidentally” exposed to senior disco and subsequently taking it up. For example, a primary school student’s journal published in 1988 recorded how her clumsy grandma wanted to learn senior disco after watching the other senior citizens dancing, and succeeded in managing the dance and even performing it on stage.¹⁵⁷ A fictional diary published in a senior citizens’ guidebook described how a retired Party cadre appeared younger and more spirited after practicing disco, and was imitated by his friends.¹⁵⁸ So how was the practice of senior disco transformed into a desirable modern lifestyle for seniors? Addressing the promotion of senior disco in the handbooks and the organization of the practice, this section argues that Mao-era residues in post-Mao China played a key role in shaping senior disco into a reciprocal mass culture that resonated with the cultivation of “spiritual civilization.”

To begin with, senior disco was highlighted by handbooks as an ideal integration of entertainment, exercise and medical treatment that guaranteed dancers’ physical and mental benefits. *A Collection of Senior Routines*, for instance, devotes one chapter to elaborate on the positive effects of disco on seniors’ respiratory, digestive, and nervous systems.¹⁵⁹ The handbook further uses another chapter to lay out the effectiveness of senior disco in combating common geriatric diseases such as “heart disease, high blood pressure . . . and benign prostatic

¹⁵⁷ Peng Jun ed., *Quanguo xiaoxuesheng youxiu zuowen wenku* 全国小学生优秀作文文库 [A collection of outstanding essays written by elementary school students] (Nanning: Guangxi minzu chubanshe, 1996), 106–7.

¹⁵⁸ Liang Xiaohui, Feng Lijuan, and Zhang Jiliang, eds., *Laonian riji* 老年日记 [A senior’s diary] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 1992), 40.

¹⁵⁹ Sheng, *Laonian disike jicui*, 3–4.

hyperplasia.”¹⁶⁰ Meanwhile, addressing the unrestrained choreographic characteristics of disco, many other guides point out how practicing disco aided in invoking “relaxation, joy, and self-liberation” within the dancers and helped them retain mental health in the face of retirement and the passing of youth.¹⁶¹ With the goal of “arranging a second life” for the elderly, one handbook states that senior disco could ultimately “promote people’s communication, facilitate the formation of friendship, and produce a harmonious atmosphere.”¹⁶² As illustrated by the handbooks, practicing senior disco was not only a solution to the loneliness and nihilism experienced by retired senior citizens, but also a catalyst for the building of a peaceful society.

At first glance, listing mental and physical benefits in the handbooks appears to have been a marketing technique for promoting senior disco and handbooks. Claims that practicing disco could help heal certain ailments should also be viewed with skepticism. However, a review of senior citizens’ own testimony validates some of the benefits cited. Both Schell and Brownell have observed how seniors, ranging from Party cadres to the ordinary public, felt their lives to be “enriched” and “glow(ing) with youthful vigor” after practicing disco.¹⁶³ In Chinese culture, the normative seniors’ entertainment mostly consisted of *tai-chi* or walking with caged birds (*liu niao*, 遛鸟).¹⁶⁴ In contrast, senior disco provided the seniors with the opportunity to experiment with

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 5–7.

¹⁶¹ Liu, Yizhen, Wang Lin, and Long Lanxian, eds., *Zhonglaonian disike* 中老年迪斯科 [Disco for the middle-aged and the elderly] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1988), 2; Sheng, *Laonian disike jicui*, 2.

¹⁶² Xu, *Zhonglaonian disike*, “foreword.”

¹⁶³ Schell, *Discos and Democracy*, 352–55. Brownell, *Training the Body for China*, 280.

¹⁶⁴ Lu Yuanzhen, “Guanyu laonian disike de duihua” 关于老年迪斯科的对话 [A dialogue on senior disco], *Renmin ribao*, June 5, 1988, 8.

novel kinesthetic possibilities that were different from the usual slow-paced activities. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that before the start of the reform era, most senior disco dancers spent a significant amount of their leisure time participating in various political movements. The only acceptable form of entertainment was restricted to a limited selection of revolutionary performing arts, such as the “loyalty dance” (*zhongzi wu*, 忠字舞), which consisted of formulaic movements performed to demonstrate respect to Chairman Mao.¹⁶⁵ As stage director Chen Xinyi recollected, many of the senior disco dancers had experienced psychological suppression during the Cultural Revolution, and had not dared to venture into any new types of performances amid the political campaigns.¹⁶⁶ Consequently, once China opened up and the political performance expectations were lifted, it was natural for those people, particularly the retired ones, to be attracted to and further find joy in liberating kinesthetic experiences where they could rediscover their bodies without the constraints of Maoist shackles.

As mentioned in the handbooks and Chen’s testimony, senior disco was often promoted and perceived as an ideal activity for retirees who not only enjoyed more leisure, but also needed to rediscover meaning and value in life. The rise of this trend should be examined against the backdrop of the wave of layoffs in China in the 1990s. As part of its economic reform policy, the Chinese government launched a nationwide dismantling of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which resulted in the displacement of tens of millions of workers, with many forced into early retirement

¹⁶⁵ Lu, “Guanyu laonian disike de duihua,” 8.

¹⁶⁶ The Chinese stage director Chen Xinyi once noted, “Just think about how many years they (senior disco dancers) have been oppressed . . . I experienced that suppression too . . . If you stepped across the boundary, the workers’ propaganda team would find you.” See Chen Xinyi, *Shengming dang’an Chen Xinyi daoyan shouji* 生命档案 陈薪伊导演手记 [Archives of the life Notes of the director Chen Xinyi] (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006), 264. For comments on the loyalty dance, see Lu, “Guanyu laonian disike de duihua,” 8.

in their 40s.¹⁶⁷ While this reform triggered collective protests among some workers, primarily due to concerns regarding salary and social security, other workers, with ample free time on their hands, chose to explore leisure activities to kill time. Some of the middle-aged laid-off workers began visiting dance halls on a daily basis, jokingly referring to these outings as “going to work” (*shangban*, 上班).¹⁶⁸ Quite a few elderly workers turned their attention to slower-paced forms of outdoor dancing, which included senior disco.¹⁶⁹ Tips for engaging in leisure activities after being laid off were also discussed in numerous publications around the same time. For example, in 1996, a book titled *A Guide for Modern Families* was published in Shanxi Province. The book addresses 232 questions on topics such as relationships, health, children’s education, and offers corresponding answers. Among the featured questions is “My wife has been laid off, and she’s feeling down. What can I do?” The answer provided lists three strategies for the husband to consider, one of which is to “encourage the wife to participate in social activities that interest her, such as singing opera, practicing senior disco, or cooking.”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, the phenomenon of senior disco in the late 20th century was closely linked to the massive layoffs in the 1990s. On the one

¹⁶⁷ According to the official account, the laid-off workers increased from 3 million in 1993 to 17.24 million in 1998. See Yongshun Cai, “The Resistance of Chinese Laid-off Workers in the Reform Period,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 170 (2002): 327.

¹⁶⁸ James Farrer, “Dancing Through the Market Transition: Disco and Dance Hall Sociability in Shanghai,” in *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, ed. Deborah Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 246.

¹⁶⁹ In 2002, writer Fan Yiping wrote an essay titled “The outdoor dancers,” which recorded the laid-off workers’ participation in outdoor dancing. Fan points out that these laid-off workers, together with the other retirees, were demonstrating that they never gave up on their passion and faith in life. See Fan Yiping, *Zhongguo dangdai yuanchuang wenxue juedi sanchi* 中国当代原创文学掘地三尺 [Contemporary Chinese original literature digging three feet underground] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2017), 200.

¹⁷⁰ Xia Zhifang and Qian Pinshi, *Xiandai jiating zixun quanshu* 现代家庭咨询全书 [A guide for modern families] (Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 739-41.

hand, the reform of SOEs resulted in a significant number of people having more free time, and possibly a greater desire, to engage in communal dancing activities. On the other hand, the rise in unemployment provided a valid reason for the state to further promote senior disco on a larger scale. In other words, the concept of “arranging a second life,” as used in the handbook *Disco for the Middle-aged and the Elderly*, applies not only to the elderly experiencing the natural aging process, but also to middle-aged individuals whose “first life” was abruptly disrupted by the dismantling of SOEs.

Addressing senior disco’s benefits to the dancers’ physical and mental well-being not only was a possible response to the nationwide retrenchment of workers, but also calls to mind several aspects of “spiritual civilization” promoted in the late 20th century. To begin with, it accorded with the principles of respecting seniors, providing eldercare, and showing concern for old people, which were proposed by the Chinese National Committee on Aging (*Zhongguo laoling wenti quanguo weiyuanhui*, 中国老龄问题全国委员会) in 1983 as an integral part of “spiritual civilization.” Such a proposal resulted from the Party’s awareness that the issue of demographic aging would greatly impact the nation, which already in the early 1980s boasted the world’s largest population.¹⁷¹ In addition, the ideals of honoring and caring for seniors were virtues deeply rooted

¹⁷¹ Ji Chenxi, “Dajia lai guanxin laonianren wenti” 大家来关心老年人问题 [Let’s consider the aging population issue], *Renmin ribao*, July 29, 1983, 3. Among the concerns for all elderly citizens, the concern for the health of old intellectuals was prominent. As Brownell has observed, older intellectuals’ health arose as an issue when a state survey revealed that their life expectancy was shorter than the national average. Such a result may be associated with several factors, including the sedentary nature of the intellectuals’ work and the political persecution they had experienced. Yet the “official given reason” was their lack of exercise. Accordingly, the State Sports Commission urged aging intellectuals to actively participate in physical activities. See Brownell, *Training the Body for China*, 188.

in Confucianism, where “filial piety” remained a core concept.¹⁷² Therefore, the advocacy of senior disco, which reflected the continuation of traditional Chinese values, once again exemplified an active inheritance of Chinese culture in the late 20th century.

More interestingly, as manifested in the aforementioned association between senior disco dancing and a harmonious society, senior disco was considered a practice not only beneficial for individuals, but also desirable for the nation—in other words, disco dancing became a moral obligation for seniors. For example, *Senior Disco Fitness Dance* encouraged senior disco dancers to “live up to the high expectations” of those who cared about them, to maintain a happy and healthy life, and to contribute to the construction of two civilizations.¹⁷³ *Disco Fitness Dance for the Middle-Aged and the Elderly* mentions how the editors wished “senior disco dancers to have a strong body that’s competent for the ‘four modernizations’ and the enjoyment of a happy, healthy and long life.”¹⁷⁴ In this sense, the advocacy of senior disco evolved into a type of Maoist social campaign that required the efforts of not only the central government, but also ordinary people of all ages, including seniors themselves. In other words, while it was the responsibility of a superior socialist system to create more perfect living conditions for seniors, the latter should also actively participate in practicing senior disco, which became part of their duty as modern Chinese citizens.

¹⁷² Wendy Wen Li, Darrin Hodgetts, Elsie Ho, and Otilie Stolte. “From Early Confucian Texts to Aged Care in China and Abroad Today: The Evolution of Filial Piety and Its Implications.” *Journal of US-China Public Administration* 7, no.7 (2010): 48–59.

¹⁷³ Yin Xiang, ed., *Laonian disike jianshenwu* 老年迪斯科健身舞 [Senior disco fitness dance] (Harbin: Heilongjiang kexue jishu chubanshe, 1988), 2.

¹⁷⁴ Du Sufang and Chen Qun, *Zhonglaonian disike jianshenwu* 中老年迪斯科健身舞 [Disco fitness dance for the middle-aged and the elderly] (Guangzhou: Guangzhou renmin chubanshe, 1988), 2. “Four modernizations” referred to the development of agriculture, industry, defense and science and technology, which was put forward by Zhou Enlai in 1965 and reaffirmed by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1980s. See Barry Naughton, “Deng Xiaoping: The Economist,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 135 (1993): 491–514.

What's more, as demonstrated in the full-score exam essay, the younger generation also played a key role in contributing to the promotion of the campaign. Through documenting, or even fabricating, the positive transformation of their parents or grandparents, these people were also reiterating the core values of the campaign. The recognition of these works as "models" further facilitated the dissemination of the essay and fostered reduplication among more students, thereby reinforcing the values of senior disco.

Viewing senior disco as a type of campaign that centered on social mobilization offers another perspective through which to comprehend the association between the practice of senior disco and the development of socialist "spiritual civilization," that is, through examining the collectivization of senior disco. Emerging during what Tom Wolfe has labeled as the "Me" Decade in America, disco was viewed as evidence of "individualistic self-obsession" replacing "meaningful collective values" in the Western context. As observed by Nile Rodgers, the principle of disco was always "the freakier, the better."¹⁷⁵ Similar narratives are also found in the disco guides published in the US, which emphasize how disco was a form of "self-expression" on Saturday nights; the guide aimed to help the readers "develop an individualized dance style and the self-confidence that will put . . . [dancers] in the spotlight."¹⁷⁶

By contrast, "collectivism," which was viewed as one of the critical characteristics of "spiritual civilization," was central to the practice of senior disco in Chinese society.¹⁷⁷ The

¹⁷⁵ William Rees, "'Le Freak, C'est Chic': Decadence and Disco," *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.2 (2020), 126–142; Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 190.

¹⁷⁶ Karen Lustgarten, *The Complete Guide to Disco Dancing* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), 13; Jack Villari, Kathleen Sims Villari, *The Official Guide to Disco Dance Steps* (NJ: Chartwell Books, 1978), "Preface."

¹⁷⁷ "Cujin shehui wenming de weida liliang" 促进社会文明的伟大力量 [Great power that contributed to the building of socialist civilization], *Renmin ribao*, December 23, 1982, 5.

practice of senior disco was less concerned with distinguishing oneself from the crowd and instead emphasized better coordination among dancers. Such coordination first manifested on the kinesthetic level. Whether it was articulated by the *People's Daily*, or observed in an elementary school student's essay, the common phrases used to positively describe the moves of senior dancers were always "synchronized and powerful" (*zhengqi youli*, 整齐有力) and "neat" (*zhengzheng qiqi*, 整整齐齐).¹⁷⁸ The emphasis on the conformity of moves highlighted how the presentation of the overall effect of the performance was prioritized over the exhibition of personal styles, which showcased the artistic expression and aesthetic standards deeply rooted in the collective cultural practices in Maoist China. The emphasis on collectivism was also reflected in the organization of disco dance teams, a majority of which were affiliated with work units (*danwei*, 单位) or residential units (*jiedao*, 街道). Such grassroots units were a legacy of the social simplification in the Mao era. They not only provided identity for individuals within society, but also functioned as the foundation for mass mobilization during the incessant Maoist political campaigns. Meanwhile, these units, the work units in particular, were instrumental in maintaining the collective welfare of its affiliates while aligning their activities with the Party's ideology.¹⁷⁹ And as shown in the case of senior disco, the organizational roles played by both types of units

¹⁷⁸ Sun Yongsheng, "Jinmen laoren chenlian huoyue" 金门老人晨练活跃 [The seniors in Jinmen were active in doing morning exercises], *Renmin ribao*, December 3, 1994, 3. Zhang Shihua, Hua Lei, "Malu pang de wuzhe" 马路旁的舞者 [Dancers along the street], *Renmin ribao*, March 27, 1993, 8. Peng Jun, ed., *Quanguo xiaoxuesheng youxiu zuowen wenku* 全国小学生优秀作文文库 [A collection of outstanding essays written by elementary school students] (Nanning: Guangxi minzu chubanshe, 1996), 107.

¹⁷⁹ David Bray, *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 122.

persisted into post-Mao society.¹⁸⁰ Through organizing disco dancing teams and classes, these units played a dominant role in responding to the senior disco handbooks' call for practicing physical activities and encouraging a healthy lifestyle among the senior citizens. Similar to their functions in Maoist China, these units transformed individual activities into a communal experience that not only fulfilled people's "spiritual" needs but also echoed the ideology of the communist regime in the early reform era. Through the mediation of such units, a sense of collective subjectivity was generated within the practice of senior disco. Such conformity was further perceived in the burgeoning senior disco competitions. Different from the World Disco Dancing Championships held in the UK in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which featured battles between individual dancers, the senior disco competitions in China primarily consisted of combats between teams that were affiliated with different units. For example, Yangquan city in Shanxi Province held a citywide senior disco competition in October 1990, and the teams that won the first three prizes were the "city department store," "Yangquan steel factory," and "the mineral district," all affiliated with work units.¹⁸¹ Thus, in contrast to disco in the Western context, senior disco highlighted collective efforts and achievements rather than individual glory.

In addition to the positive effect that senior disco generated within the unit, senior disco also became an officially recognized practice symbolizing social stability. On July 21, 1989, an article headed "Beijing has declared martial law for two months"—an action taken in response to the escalating hunger strike led by the students dissatisfied with the results of the economic and

¹⁸⁰ For an example of how work and residential units organized senior disco classes and teams, see Nanjing shi Xuanwu qu Xuanwu nianjian bianjizu 南京市玄武区《玄武年鉴》编辑组, ed., *Xuanwu nianjian 1987* 玄武年鉴 1987 [The 1987 yearbook of the Xuanwu District] (1987), 248.

¹⁸¹ Yangquan nianjian bianjibu 《阳泉年鉴》编辑部, ed., *Yangquan Nianjian 1991* 阳泉年鉴 1991 [The yearbook of Yangquan 1991], (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1991), 263.

political reform—appeared on the front page of the *People's Daily*. To illustrate the peaceful life enjoyed by Beijing residents and the mutual understanding between the army and the people, the article mentioned that senior citizens were disco dancing in leisurely fashion along the streets, with armed troops stationed at the crossroads.¹⁸² Such a report highlighted how senior disco represented the stability of Beijing in the aftermath of political turbulence. In other words, senior disco indicated the ideal and normative social order that aligned with the communist regime, in contrast to the upheaval initiated by the protestors who aimed at reforming the state.

Influenced by Maoist legacies in Chinese society, the promotion and organization of senior disco shaped the latter into a modern collective lifestyle, with its core being a reciprocal mass culture. The promotion of homogeneous steps through handbooks, the organization of classes and competitions, the addition of ideological implications to the practice of disco dancing, and the campaign-style mobilization all evoked certain aspects of Dwight Macdonald's conception of "mass culture," which refers to a homogenized culture that breaks down the "barrier of class, tradition and taste."¹⁸³ Nonetheless, just as Deborah Davis has criticized the intellectual tradition rooted in the Frankfurt School that reduces consumers of culture to "victims with no agency," Macdonald's theorization on how mass culture only exploits the masses' cultural needs for political reasons has its limitations when applied to the case of senior disco.¹⁸⁴ Admittedly, in comparison to the lush and subversive disco culture that originated in New York City, the practice of senior disco highlighted the sustained societal order. However, the orchestration of senior disco

¹⁸² Xu Jingyue, "Beijing jieyan liangge yue" 北京戒严两个月 [Beijing has declared martial law for two months], *Renmin ribao*, July 21, 1989, 1.

¹⁸³ Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes*, no. 1 (1953): 1–17.

¹⁸⁴ Deborah Davis, "Urban Consumer Culture," *The China Quarterly*, no. 183 (2005): 692–709.

should not be reduced to mere ideological manipulation from the state. Not unlike Huang's observation that retired female square dancing grannies in Chengdu in the 21st century are able to explore individual identity, senior disco dancers in the early reform era were not deprived of "human identity and quality" either.¹⁸⁵ As demonstrated in the testimony of these seniors, the dynamic and liberating moves of disco satisfied their cultural needs that had once been limited either by the conventions of Chinese tradition or by the political climate of the Mao era. Therefore, even if senior disco was imbued with ideological overtones as a practice exemplifying "spiritual civilization," it also enabled seniors to reclaim their agency and pursue their physical and mental well-being in a manner that was no longer at odds with the political framework. In other words, performing disco was fundamentally a means for seniors to reconnect with the vitality of their bodies, which were still mediated, but less restricted, by the political agenda of the CCP.

¹⁸⁵ Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," 14.

V. Conclusion: Remixed Modernity and Disco in China's Reform Era

In 2008, China celebrated the 30th anniversary of its reform and opening up policy with a series of events and ceremonies showcasing the country's modernization efforts over the previous three decades. Among the celebratory activities was the "30th Anniversary Golden Songs of Reform and Opening Up" awards ceremony, jointly hosted on October 24 by the National Musicians Association and the Publicity Office of the Shenzhen Municipal Committee of the Communist Party. One of the thirty "golden" songs selected was "Xintianyou," performed by Cheng Lin.¹⁸⁶ Around the same time, CCTV's International Channel produced an English-language documentary series titled "30 IN 30," which highlighted thirty of the most significant transformations China had undergone over three decades. While most episodes focused on China's economic and technological advancements, there was one titled "Elderly Chinese Discovered Disco."¹⁸⁷ Aired on November 29, the episode featured video footage of senior citizens practicing disco, along with interviews in which they shared their stories of how and why they started dancing.

The attention received by the song "Xintianyou" and the practice of senior disco indicated that both were considered evidence of the country's modernization in the early reform era. Closely associated with the influx of disco culture in China's early reform era, these two cultural phenomena could be described as showcasing a multifaceted "remixed modernity." To begin with, "remixed modernity" denotes the fundamental artistic features of "Xintianyou" and senior disco. "Xintianyou" demonstrated a modern repackaging of a traditional Northern Shaanxi folk tune with

¹⁸⁶ See Xinlang yule, "Gaige kaifang 30 nian jinqu shouxun wanhui jinqu mingdan" 改革开放 30 年金曲授勋晚会金曲名单 [List of award-winning songs at the Reform and Opening-up 30th Anniversary Golden Song Awards Ceremony], accessed April 26, 2023, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/y/2008-10-24/22452221003.shtml>.

¹⁸⁷ See "30/30: 1988 - Elderly Chinese Discovered Disco," accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiBfk0vsjDs>.

disco and rock elements. This fusion not only redefined popular music, but also liberated the folk genre from its previous political constraints. Similarly, senior disco involved the rechoreographing of disco moves to incorporate traditional Chinese cultural practices. Such a blending resulted in the creation of a kinesthetic experience that was comprehensible, imitable, and aesthetically acceptable for seniors. Therefore, both “Xintianyou” and senior disco exemplified a type of cultural creativity in the early reform era. Such creativity involved an openness to novel foreign culture and the willingness to experiment with cultural hybridization, which was also a characteristic that was intrinsic to disco culture itself.

Meanwhile, “remixed modernity” refers to the collaborative efforts that led to the creation of “Xintianyou” and senior disco. Admittedly, both “Xintianyou” and senior disco were products of joint wisdom: “Xintianyou” was co-produced by several musicians, and senior disco was co-choreographed by physical experts from various backgrounds. However, the “collaborative efforts” here aim to emphasize the partnership between the state and society in the creation of these two cases. As the “state-society” boundary in China is often blurred, the “state” here does not refer to a “free-standing entity,” but is viewed as a “state effect” that “orders, contains, and controls” individuals within society.¹⁸⁸ Such an effect is demonstrated through a series of practices, including the organization of “supervision and surveillance.”¹⁸⁹ While both “Xintianyou” and senior disco manifested as locally produced and organized cultural production, they were nonetheless remediated by the “state effect” that aligned them with the political agenda of post-Mao China. In the case of “Xintianyou,” such an effect was exemplified by the gala production

¹⁸⁸ Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics.” *The American Political Science Review* 85, no.1 (1991): 94.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

team members' efforts to modify the original song into a new piece that invoked familial affection, patriotism, and the vitality of folk culture. Here, the state effect manifested as an external force that was separated from the original work and exerted power over the latter after its completion. However, in the case of senior disco, the presence of the state was more diffused, with its effect being generated by various agents alongside the creation of senior disco, which further shaped the creation process.¹⁹⁰ Among the agents were the senior disco handbook editors, who adopted political glossaries to describe the positive social implications of practicing disco. With senior disco being fashioned as a desirable lifestyle symbolizing “spiritual civilization,” the cultural phenomenon of senior disco was constructed as involving not only “individuals and their activities,” but also “an inert structure” that preceded the individuals and provided a “framework” for their lives.¹⁹¹ Therefore, the creation of “Xintianyou” and senior disco were mediated by either an external or diffused “state effect,” both resulting in the generation of new political overtones in cultural production.

In addition, “remixed modernity” alludes to the existence of Mao-era socialist remnants in post-Mao society, which shaped the cultural phenomena of “Xintianyou” and senior disco. The gala’s adaptation of “Xintianyou” evoked the CCP’s practice of repackaging songs into nationalist pieces, a tradition that had permeated the Party’s political agenda since the 1930s. The use of Maoist rhetoric to evaluate disco culture, the collectivization of senior disco through work and residential units, and the campaign-style mass mobilization all underscored the persistence of

¹⁹⁰ Developing Timothy Michell’s conception of “state effect,” Gail Hershatter discusses the “diffuse state presence” while probing the boundary between state and society in rural areas during the Mao era. See Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁹¹ Mitchell, “The Limits of the State,” 85.

Maoist ideology, social structures, and practices in post-Mao Chinese society. These legacies demonstrate how the late 20th century was a period of both discontinuity and continuity with the past. The former paved the way for the influx of foreign culture like disco, which was further filtered through the latter, during which new formats and meanings were generated. This hybridity in post-Mao China not only highlights the momentum of historical patterns that transcend periodization, but is also fundamentally rooted in the CCP's attempt to reconcile reform and conservatism in the late 20th century, as it sought a path toward modernization while preserving its ideological framework and political legitimacy.

While disco culture gradually declined in China at the turn of the 21st century, it has made a comeback in Chinese popular culture since the 2010s. Today, the mention of disco no longer evokes exoticism but nostalgic sentiments. One of the most representative works that highlights the return of disco culture is “Wild Wolf Disco” (*Yelang disco*, 野狼 Disco), a song produced and sung by Chinese grassroots rapper Dong Baoshi (董宝石),¹⁹² Released in 2019, the song was created from a pre-mixed beat by Finnish musician Vilho Ihaksi and features lyrics in Northeastern Mandarin and Cantonese. The lyrics depict a man's late-night encounter with a beauty at a pub, with occasional references to disco-related fashions and iconic moves that were popular in Northeast China in the late 20th century. The nostalgic elements embedded in the song quickly resonated with audiences, and the song was streamed over 7 billion times online within five months of its release.¹⁹³

¹⁹² For the music video of “Yelang Disco,” see “Yelang disike” 野狼 disco [Wild wolf disco], accessed November 30, 2022, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1GJ411Q7Ck/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=13ec79d23d58793fe9ffac3ba72e23b6.

¹⁹³ For the data, see “Yelang disco quanwang bofang liang tupu 70 yi” 野狼 disco 全网播放量突破 70 亿 [The online views of “Wild Wolf Disco” have surpassed 7 billion], accessed November 30, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/370584904_100146645. Numerous comments posted below

Although the connotation of “disco” has shifted in the 21st century, some practices remain unchanged. The popularity of “Yelang Disco” caught the attention of the production team of the 2020 Spring Festival Gala, who brought the song to the national stage, with the original song repackaged into a performance titled “Celebrating the New Year Disco” (*Guonian disike*, 过年迪斯科).¹⁹⁴ The original music was rearranged with the addition of traditional Chinese instrumentation. The waggish and nostalgic lyrics were replaced with expressions celebrating Chinese cultural heritage, traditional virtues, and the country’s modernization efforts. The performance was accompanied by dancers doing disco moves while holding paper fans. The dancers’ attire featured both sparkling sportswear and cropped tops inspired by the signature early twentieth-century Chinese costume, the *qipao* (旗袍).

“Celebrating the New Year Disco,” a vibrant group dance performed on the national stage in 2020, brings to mind the “Let’s Dance” performance in the 1989 Spring Festival Gala. Looking back, “Let’s Dance” was not merely a dance performance celebrating the start of a new year, but a portrayal of a dazzling, fast-paced global dance floor that China itself had just entered. In this modern setting, both the official government and the general public were eager to find their voices and discover their signature moves as a way of self-reorientation. These voices and moves, like the dynamic interactions within a dance club, could either converge or clash, leading to increased uncertainties. Nevertheless, the irresistible allure of the dance club has made everyone determined to remain on the floor, at least for a few more decades, to explore their identities and styles while

the music video, which was uploaded to the website Bilibili, referred to the period portrayed in the song as “the good old days.” Their comments hinted at how the early reform era enjoyed a relatively liberal cultural policy and media environment, which contrasts with the cultural and political climate in China since the mid-2010s.

¹⁹⁴ “Guonian disike” 过年迪斯科 [Celebrating the New Year disco], accessed November 19, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAJ0A3S67ds&list=RDdAJ0A3S67ds&start_radio=1.

navigating the new challenges and possibilities that reverberate throughout the cosmopolitan dance club.

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