

Melodies Across Borders: Investigating the Relationship Between Music Preferences and Cultural Identity Among Multinational Youth

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Abstract: Purpose: This study investigates the relationship between music preferences and cultural identity among youth across different provinces in China. While globalization has diversified musical exposure, regional cultural characteristics may still play a significant role in shaping musical tastes and identity formation. By examining provincial variations, this research seeks to understand how music serves as a marker of cultural self-perception within a rapidly modernizing Chinese society. Methods: A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 400 participants aged 18 to 25, recruited from four provinces representing distinct cultural regions of China: Guangdong, Sichuan, Shandong, and Inner Mongolia. Participants completed the Music Preference Scale (MPS) and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses to explore differences in music preferences across provinces and the association with cultural identity strength. Results: Significant provincial differences in music preferences were observed. Participants from Inner Mongolia and Sichuan demonstrated stronger preferences for traditional and folk music, while those from Guangdong and Shandong showed higher affinities for contemporary genres such as pop, hip-hop, and electronic dance music. A positive correlation was identified between preference for traditional music and stronger cultural identity scores, whereas a preference for globalized music genres was associated with lower cultural identity scores. Conclusions: The findings highlight that regional cultural backgrounds within China continue to influence youth music preferences and cultural identification. Traditional music remains an important anchor for cultural identity in certain provinces, even amid increasing exposure to globalized music. These insights contribute to understanding the cultural dynamics of Chinese youth and inform efforts to sustain regional cultural heritage.

Keywords: Music Preferences, Cultural Identity, Chinese Youth, Globalization, Regional Cultural Differences

1 Introduction

Music plays a fundamental role in shaping and expressing cultural identity. As China experiences rapid modernization and globalization, musical preferences among its youth have diversified, reflecting both global influences and enduring regional traditions. Prior research has emphasized the significance of music as a tool for cultural expression and as a medium through which individuals negotiate their sense of belonging [1], [2]. Music provides not only entertainment but also a means of constructing, maintaining, and communicating social and cultural identities, particularly among young people undergoing complex processes of self-definition. However, much of the existing literature on music and cultural identity has focused on cross-national comparisons, examining differences between countries [3], [4], with limited attention to intra-national cultural variations, particularly within a country as geographically and culturally diverse as China. As Tomlinson [5] argues, globalization does not uniformly erase local cultures but interacts with them in complex ways, resulting in hybrid identities that blend traditional and global elements.

Provincial regions in China such as Guangdong, Sichuan, Shandong, and Inner Mongolia each possess distinct cultural histories, languages, and musical traditions. For example, Inner Mongolia is known for its rich traditions of throat singing and horsehead fiddle music, while Guangdong's cultural landscape has been shaped by Cantonese opera and, more recently, by significant exposure to international trade and global media. These differences may shape how young people engage with both traditional and contemporary musical genres. Understanding these variations is crucial, as music can both reinforce traditional cultural identities and facilitate the development of new, hybrid forms of identity in response to globalization [6], [7]. Youth in China are growing up at the intersection of strong historical traditions and rapidly intensifying global cultural flows. Research by Liu and Kalimyllin [8] suggests that even amid modernization, engagement with traditional cultural forms—such as dance and music—remains a vital mechanism for cultural preservation and identity affirmation among the younger generation. At the same time, the influence of globalized media, particularly through digital platforms such as TikTok, WeChat, and QQ Music, has exposed Chinese youth to a wide range of international music genres, including pop, hip-hop, and electronic dance music [9]. This dual exposure creates a unique context in which traditional and globalized cultural identities coexist and sometimes compete within the same individual.

Studies on identity formation among ethnic minority youth in China further highlight that cultural socialization through traditional practices contributes to a stronger sense of ethnic and national identity [10]. However, when traditional cultural practices are weakened or replaced by dominant global cultural influences, identity negotiation becomes more complex and, at times, more fragile [11]. In this context, examining the relationship between music preferences and cultural identity within China's internal diversity is both timely and necessary. This study aims to explore how musical preferences vary among Chinese youth from different provinces and how these preferences relate to the strength of their cultural identity. It specifically examines whether significant differences exist in music preferences across provinces and investigates the association between preferences for traditional versus globalized music genres and the strength of cultural identity among young people. By focusing on intra-national differences rather than solely cross-national comparisons, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how globalization and local traditions interact in shaping the identities of Chinese youth. The findings have implications for cultural preservation efforts, educational policy, and the broader discourse on globalization and youth identity in non-Western contexts.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional, quantitative survey design was employed to examine provincial differences in music preferences and their relationship with cultural identity among Chinese youth.

2.2 Participants

The study sample consisted of 400 participants, aged between 18 and 25 years ($M = 21.4$, $SD = 2.1$). Participants were recruited from four provinces in China: Guangdong ($n = 100$), Sichuan ($n = 100$), Shandong ($n = 100$), and Inner Mongolia ($n = 100$). Quota sampling ensured balanced gender representation and a mixture of urban and rural residents within each province.

2.3 Instrumentation and Measurement

The Demographic Questionnaire was utilized to collect participants' background information, including age, gender, province of origin, educational attainment, and frequency of exposure to foreign music. As for music preferences, it was measured using the Music Preference Scale (MPS), adapted from Upadhyay et al. (2016). The MPS is a 30-item instrument designed to assess participants' preferences across a range of musical genres, including traditional Chinese music, folk music, pop, hip-hop, rock, and electronic dance music (EDM). Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Dislike) to 5 (Strongly Like). Cultural identity was assessed using an adapted version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM). This instrument was modified to suit the Chinese cultural context, with a particular emphasis on dimensions such as cultural pride, sense of belonging, and engagement in cultural practices. The adapted MEIM demonstrated good internal consistency in this study, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.87.

2.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The survey was administered electronically through university mailing lists and social media platforms, including WeChat and QQ. Participants were required to provide informed consent prior to participation. Data collection was conducted over a two-month period. Data was analyzed using SPSS Version 28. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and music preferences across provinces. Subsequently, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to examine significant differences in music preferences among participants from different provinces. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships between music preference scores and cultural identity strength. Finally, multiple regression analysis was performed to evaluate the extent to which music preferences predicted cultural identity strength among Chinese youth.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Participant Demographics and Music Preferences

Table 1 presents the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of music preferences across the four provinces. Participants from Inner Mongolia (M = 4.3, SD = 0.5) and Sichuan (M = 4.1, SD = 0.6) reported a higher preference for traditional Chinese and folk music compared to those from Guangdong (M = 3.2, SD = 0.7) and Shandong (M = 3.4, SD = 0.6). Conversely, participants from Guangdong (M = 4.5, SD = 0.4) and Shandong (M = 4.2, SD = 0.5) expressed stronger preferences for globalized genres such as pop and hip-hop, compared to their counterparts in Inner Mongolia and Sichuan. These descriptive findings suggest a regional variation in musical tastes among Chinese youth, potentially reflecting differences in cultural exposure and socio-economic contexts.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Music Preferences by Province

Province	Traditional Music (M ± SD)	Globalized Music (M ± SD)
Inner Mongolia	4.3 ± 0.5	3.5 ± 0.6
Sichuan	4.1 ± 0.6	3.7 ± 0.5
Guangdong	3.2 ± 0.7	4.5 ± 0.4
Shandong	3.4 ± 0.6	4.2 ± 0.5

3.2 Music Preference Differences Among Provinces

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Table 2) revealed statistically significant differences in traditional music preferences across provinces, $F(3, 396) = 24.87, p < .001$. Post-hoc Tukey tests confirmed that participants from Inner Mongolia and Sichuan had significantly higher traditional music preferences than those from Guangdong and Shandong. Similarly, significant differences were observed for globalized music preferences, $F(3, 396) = 18.53, p < .001$, with participants from Guangdong and Shandong showing higher preferences than those from the other provinces. These findings align with existing research highlighting the influence of regional cultural backgrounds on musical tastes. Provinces such as Inner Mongolia and Sichuan, with rich traditions in folk and ethnic music, continue to prioritize traditional cultural expressions in youth identity formation (Liu, Chen, & Huang, 2024; Xu, 2018). Traditional music in these regions not only reflects local history and communal values but also serves as a crucial medium for intergenerational cultural transmission. Conversely, participants from Guangdong and Shandong, regions that have undergone rapid urbanization, economic modernization, and global cultural exposure, demonstrated stronger inclinations toward globalized music genres. Research on China's new generation indicates that the life trajectories of youth born during the reform and opening-up era have been profoundly shaped by urbanization, marketization, and globalization [10]. Moreover, the expansion of digital technologies and the internationalization of media have increased youth exposure to global cultural products [9]. Wang (2005) further asserts that metropolitan youth in China are increasingly influenced by brand-conscious consumer culture, with music preferences reflecting broader shifts toward cosmopolitan and hybrid cultural identities. Thus, the significant provincial differences observed in this study illustrate the complex interplay between traditional cultural preservation and the impact of globalization on the musical preferences and cultural identities of Chinese youth.

Table 2: One-way ANOVA Results for Music Preferences Across Provinces

Music Preference Type	F (df = 3, 396)	p-value
Traditional Music	24.87	< .001
Globalized Music	18.53	< .001

3.3 Relationship Between Music Preferences and Cultural Identity

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 3) showed a strong positive correlation between traditional music preference and cultural identity strength ($r = .52, p < .001$). In contrast, there was a significant negative correlation between preference for globalized music and cultural identity ($r = -.28, p < .01$), suggesting that a higher inclination toward globalized genres may be associated with a weaker sense of cultural identity. These findings support the idea that traditional cultural practices, such as engagement with indigenous music, function as important mechanisms for

reinforcing cultural identity among youth. Prior research among Yi ethnic minority adolescents in rural China similarly demonstrated that cultural socialization practices within schools helped foster strong ethnic identity development, even amid mainstream Han-dominant environments [10]. Music, like other cultural expressions, serves as a participatory medium through which youth negotiate and affirm their cultural belonging and personal identities [7]. In contrast, preference for globalized musical genres may reflect processes of identity hybridization or erosion, consistent with recent concerns about cultural homogenization and the growing influence of transnational cultural flows among Chinese youth [9], [11]. Thus, the observed correlations in this study emphasize the dual role of music as both a preserver of cultural heritage and a mediator of global cultural integration, particularly within the evolving sociocultural environment of contemporary China.

Table 3: Pearson Correlations Between Music Preferences and Cultural Identity Strength

Variable	1	2	3
1. Cultural Identity Strength	—		
2. Traditional Music Preference	.52 (p < .001)	—	
3. Globalized Music Preference	-.28 (p < .01)	—	—

3.4 Predicting Cultural Identity Strength from Music Preferences

A multiple regression analysis (Table 4) was conducted to predict cultural identity strength based on music preferences. The analysis revealed that preference for traditional music was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < .001$), while preference for globalized music was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < .01$). The overall model was statistically significant, $R^2 = 0.31$, $F(2, 397) = 89.14$, $p < .001$, indicating that music preferences accounted for 31% of the variance in cultural identity strength among Chinese youth. The results suggest that traditional music engagement is a strong determinant of cultural identity formation. Recent studies have shown that participation in traditional cultural activities, such as Chinese dance and folk arts education, significantly supports the preservation of cultural heritage and fosters stronger identity formation among the younger generation [8]. Additionally, Phinney et al. [12] emphasized that cultural practices rooted in heritage traditions contribute significantly to the development of ethnic identity among adolescents in multicultural societies. Conversely, the negative predictive value of preference for globalized music supports concerns regarding cultural homogenization, where dominant global cultural products may overshadow local traditions [11]. Youth exposure to transnational music genres can sometimes weaken attachments to national or ethnic identity markers, as noted by Kelly and Brown [7] in their cross-cultural studies on music and identity formation among urban youth. These findings demonstrate that music preferences are not merely aesthetic choices but are closely tied to deeper cultural and identity-related processes among Chinese youth navigating the tensions between tradition and globalization.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Cultural Identity Strength

Predictor	β	t	p-value
Traditional Music Preference	0.48	10.92	< .001
Globalized Music Preference	-0.22	-5.23	< .01

4 Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of regional cultural backgrounds in shaping the musical preferences and cultural identity of Chinese youth. Participants from Inner Mongolia and Sichuan demonstrated a stronger attachment to traditional and folk music, which correlated with a higher sense of cultural identity. In contrast, youth from Guangdong and Shandong exhibited a stronger preference for globalized genres such as pop and hip-hop, which was associated with a comparatively weaker cultural identity. The findings further revealed that music preferences significantly predict cultural identity strength, with traditional music preferences positively associated with stronger cultural identification, and globalized music preferences negatively associated with cultural identity. Notably, music preferences accounted for 31% of the variance in cultural identity strength among participants, underscoring the substantial influence of musical engagement on youth cultural self-perception. Despite the pervasive influence of global music, regional traditions continue to anchor cultural identity among young people in certain provinces. Traditional music serves not only as entertainment but also as a vital medium for sustaining cultural pride and heritage. These insights emphasize the need for culturally sensitive educational and policy initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting regional music traditions among the younger generation. Future research should explore longitudinal changes in these patterns and consider additional mediating factors such as media exposure, bilingualism, and urbanization that may further elucidate the relationship between music preferences and cultural identity development among Chinese youth.

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