

Semiotic Reconfiguration and Emotional Mobilization of Gufeng DJ Music in China's Online Left-Wing Subculture: A Case Study of Douyin

Hangchu Pu*

University of International Relations, Beijing, China

**Corresponding author: Hangchu Pu.*

Abstract

As short-video platforms have evolved into core venues for youth cultural expression and public issue deliberation, gufeng DJ music, originally positioned as pure entertainment and consumer musical product, has undergone semiotic re-encoding within online left-wing subcultural content, turning into an audiovisual signifier carrying social criticism, historical imagination and group identity connotations. Taking Douyin as the primary research field, this study adopts multimodal analysis and comment section discourse analysis to explore how gufeng DJ music shifts from ordinary background soundtracks into emotional triggers and subcultural identity markers. The persuasive and mobilizing power of such music does not stem solely from its musical text itself; instead, it is jointly constructed by the fragmented dissemination logic of short-video platforms, the polysemous interpretive space of gufeng imagery, the high emotional tension of electronic beats, collective audience decoding in comment zones, and secondary creation via user remixing. This communication mechanism lowers the participation threshold for young people to engage in politicized discourse, and consolidates emotional resonance and identity recognition within subcultural communities. Meanwhile, it risks over-emotionalizing complicated historical and social issues, reducing them to superficial symbolic labels and packaging them for entertainment consumption, which leads to semantic compression, information distortion and one-sided interpretive bias.

Keywords

online left-wing subculture, gufeng DJ music, Douyin, encoding/decoding, emotional communication

1. Introduction

Advancements in mobile internet technology and algorithmic distribution mechanisms have reshaped young people's ways of accessing public affairs and articulating cultural stances. Traditionally, social ideological trends spread mainly through newspapers, periodicals, online forums, long-read communities and knowledge-focused vertical platforms. The rise of short-video platforms, however, has rendered public discourse increasingly audiovisual, fragmented and emotion-driven. A general transition from intellectual elite-dominated discourse to popularized, platform-based circulation of social thought has long been observable within online public spheres [1]. Against this backdrop, online left-wing subculture is far more than a simple extension of orthodox left-wing academic discourse; it constitutes an emerging cultural-political phenomenon shaped by youth communities, social media and daily discursive practices. Within this paper,

online left-wing subculture specifically refers to a youth-born subcultural formation that operates primarily in online spaces, centers on topics including social equity, labor conditions, critiques of capital and historical narration, and expresses itself via online discourse, visuals, music, meme culture and comment section interactions. Existing scholarship confirms that Chinese online left-wing discourse bears multi-layered attributes: it involves genuine concern for social fairness while simultaneously featuring emotional mobilization, identity demarcation and discursive contestation within online public spheres [2]. Accordingly, this study refrains from framing online leftism as a rigorous political theoretical school, and instead analyzes it as a politicized youth subcultural phenomenon.

In recent years, Douyin and comparable short-video platforms have spawned a distinctive audiovisual expressive paradigm. A large number of clips adopt gufeng DJ music as background audio, paired with labor footage, archival historical materials, socially critical captions, sarcastic commentary and metaphorical visual storytelling, a stylized combination instantly recognizable to relevant subcultural groups. Gufeng DJ music carries no inherent political semantics. It initially emerged as a consumer music form blending classical Chinese gufeng melodies, traditional imagery, electronic beats, remix arrangements and repetitive catchy refrains. Yet through repeated deployment and collective communal interpretation, specific tracks, lyrical fragments, rhythmic motifs and visual collocations acquire new symbolic connotations, gradually evolving into semiotic resources for venting social sentiment and affirming subcultural belonging. The left-wing literary and artistic tradition has persistently prioritized popularization, accessibility and communication oriented toward ordinary working people [3]. Short-video platforms further reconstruct this populist orientation into expressive forms marked by strong rhythmic impact, low imitation barriers and rapid replicability. This paper thus proposes three core research questions: First, how is gufeng DJ music re-encoded to become an audiovisual sign loaded with political undertones within online left-wing subcultures? Second, how do music, visuals, captions and comment section interactions collectively facilitate emotional mobilization and identity consolidation on short-video platforms? Third, while broadening public participation, what latent risks of semantic compression, misinterpretation and entertainmentization do such communication patterns entail? By answering these questions, this research systematically unpacks the communication logics and audience reception mechanisms of politicized subcultures thriving on short-video platforms.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Online Left-Wing Subculture and Youth Political Expression

Existing studies on online leftism predominantly center on its intellectual origins, behavioral logics and discursive manifestations within online public spheres. Ma [4] situates Old Left, New Left, liberalism, nationalism, populism and other ideological strands within a unified intellectual genealogy of post-reform China. While this framework clarifies the ideological resources underpinning online left-wing subculture, its analytical focus rests on elite social thought and academic discourse, failing to account for the meme-laden, youth-oriented audiovisual expression unique to short-video ecosystems. Gui et al. [2] point out that online leftism is not a monolithic, internally consistent political stance, but a complex discursive phenomenon forged through concrete social issues, public expression and community interactions. This insight lays a critical foundation for the present research. Analyses of online left-wing subculture must cover not only its ideological content, but also its expressive carriers, dissemination channels and audience interactions embedded within platform architectures. Put differently, the prevalence of online left-wing subculture on Douyin demands scrutiny of both its thematic content and its mode of communication, namely the medium through which messages circulate and the collective interpretive practices of its audience.

2.2 Gufeng Music, Viral Short-Video Hits, and Emotional Communication

Gufeng music represents one of the most representative indigenous youth subcultures within Chinese-language online spaces. Prior research documents its early tight linkage with video games, fan creation, online communities and youth interest groups. Its developmental trajectory encompasses both inwardly enclosed subcultural participation and outward attempts to cross subcultural boundaries and integrate into mainstream commercial culture [5]. Research on identity construction within gufeng music communities further demonstrates that shared aesthetic tastes, consistent internal discourse and collective participatory practices maintain clear subcultural boundaries [6]. These findings furnish a theoretical basis for examining the

circulation of gufeng DJ music within niche subcultural groups. Compared with conventional gufeng music, gufeng DJ music emphasizes electronic percussion, remix rearrangement, melodic looping and highly distinctive refrain segments. Within short-video environments, background music can instantly capture viewer attention, condense emotional delivery and strengthen memory retention of video content [7]. Yang [7] notes that the widespread popularity of short-video background music is closely tied to platform recommendation algorithms, content presentation logic and mass user imitation behavior. A comparative computational analysis of Douyin and TikTok hit songs further verifies that platformized operational logics transform music into standardized cultural commodities optimized for fragmented short-video dissemination [8]. Therefore, the integration of gufeng DJ music into online left-wing subcultural circulation cannot be attributed to musical works alone; it is deeply intertwined with platform rules governing music screening, segmentation, reproduction and secondary sharing. Research on online viral soundtracks offers additional analytical reference. Tang & Wen [9] argue that viral music's spread relies not merely on catchy melodies, but also on its social applicability and capacity to provide emotional catharsis. Dong & Zeng [10] similarly stress that Douyin viral tracks break free from their original niche audiences via the combined force of platform mechanisms, user imitation and aesthetic acceptance. Gufeng DJ music follows an identical circulation logic within online left-wing subcultures: instantly recognizable musical fragments serve as emotional entry points, while comment section interpretation and user remixing continuously extend the semantic scope of these works.

2.3 Encoding/Decoding, the Ritual View of Communication, and Multimodal Semiosis

This study's core theoretical anchor is Hall [11]'s encoding/decoding model. Hall posits that media text meaning is not unilaterally dictated by producers, but continuously generated across three interlinked stages: encoding, circulation and audience decoding. This theoretical lens is highly suitable for unpacking the political reinterpretation of gufeng DJ music. The romantic storylines and classical aesthetic imagery embedded in original tracks do not inherently generate social critical meaning; new politicized connotations emerge only after creators pair the music with specific visuals and captions, and audiences produce negotiated readings rooted in shared cultural backgrounds within comment contexts.

The ritual view of communication further reminds us that communication transcends mere information transmission, it is a sustaining mechanism for communal cohesion. Carey [12] highlights communication's ritual function in maintaining shared collective beliefs and emotional bonds. On Douyin, comment sections filled with insider allusions, sarcastic wordplay, coded slang and repetitive mantras rarely deliver new factual information; instead, they signal implicit in-group consensus and confirm participants' belonging to a unified interpretive community. Multimodal semiotics theory additionally illustrates that visuals, music, written text and rhythmic elements jointly participate in the construction of textual meaning [13]. Accordingly, this paper treats gufeng DJ music as a component of integrated multimodal semiotic assemblages, rather than an isolated musical text.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, chiefly deploying multimodal analysis and comment section discourse analysis. Analysis objects are publicly accessible Douyin short videos that utilize gufeng DJ music as core background audio, with titles, captions, visuals or comment zones revolving around social criticism, class narratives, labor livelihoods, historical metaphors and related themes. Given the sensitivity and fluidity of relevant subcultural communities, this research avoids identifying individual users or collecting non-public private data; only publicly visible text, visual materials and interactive traces are analyzed to minimize ethical risks. Samples are selected via purposive sampling, covering a two-year time frame from January 2024 to December 2025, with an initial corpus of 30–50 public short videos retained for systematic analysis. Three screening criteria govern sample selection: First, the video must take gufeng DJ music or electronic remixes featuring distinct gufeng aesthetics as primary background audio, including excerpts from tracks such as *Ruo Shui San Qian* (Three Thousand Streams of Weak Water) and *Tangren Lianqu* (Ballad of Tang Romance). Second, its visuals, title, caption or hashtags must implicitly reference social equity, labor, capital critique, collective historical memory or comparable themes, alongside robust interactive metrics such as substantial view counts, likes and comment volumes. Third, high-frequency top comments must demonstrate tangible evidence of audience decoding, collective communal interpretation, meme-based interaction or user remixing intent. This sampling design does not aim to quantify the overall prevalence of

gufeng DJ music across Douyin, but to dissect the specific semantic generation mechanisms of such music within online left-wing subcultures. Table 1 outlines the multi-dimensional analytical framework adopted in this research. The framework conceptualizes music, visuals, captions, comment zones and platform operational logics as an interconnected holistic system, rather than evaluating communication effects solely based on lyrical or melodic content.

Table 1: Dimensions of Multimodal Analysis for Gufeng DJ Short Videos.

Analytical Dimension	Specific Analysis Content
Musical signs	Track selection, melodic looping, refrain extraction, electronic beats, overall emotional tonality
Visual signs	Laborer footage, historical archival clips, urban landscape shots, wealth disparity contrasts, collective crowd scenes
Verbal signs	Titles and captions, figurative metaphors, sarcastic expressions, slogan-style phrasing, historical literary allusions
Interactive signs	Comment section collective decoding, coded insider language, meme interactions, intertextual references, user secondary remix creation
Platform mechanisms	Algorithmic recommendation flows, template imitation culture, music ranking charts, reusable editing templates, cross-video recirculation

For analytical convenience, the complete communication chain is summarized as a recursive cycle covering creator encoding, platform circulation, audience decoding, comment section identity confirmation and secondary re-encoding via user remixing. Shannon & Weaver [14]’s mathematical theory of communication notes that information transmission is inevitably shaped by channel noise and medium constraints. Yet within social media ecosystems, semantic shifts are not limited to one-way information loss; meaning can also undergo compression, displacement, multiplication and secondary reproduction. This research therefore centers on continuous semantic reconstruction during platform circulation, rather than merely measuring the fidelity of derived interpretations to original musical texts.

4. Analysis

4.1 From Background Soundtrack to Politicized Signifier: The Semiotic Re-Encoding of Gufeng Dj Music

The formation of politicized social meaning around gufeng DJ music within online left-wing subcultures originates from the semiotic re-encoding of pre-existing musical texts. Take the track *Ruo Shui San Qian* as an example: its original lyrical narrative revolves around romantic longing, loyal waiting and classical-style sentimental imagery. In many short-video creations, however, this piece is overlaid with footage depicting labor hardship, social stratification and collective historical memory, redirecting its original romantic semantics toward the expression of mass collective sentiment. At this stage, the music ceases to function merely as decorative background audio, transforming into a semiotic device that evokes associative cognition, stirs collective emotion and invites shared interpretive participation. Such re-encoding does not rely on pre-existing overt political language within lyrics; it leverages the inherent semantic ambiguity and contextual malleability of gufeng aesthetics. Gufeng lyrics heavily depend on symbolic imagery and narrative gaps, enabling audiences to easily decouple lyrical segments from their original romantic contexts and embed them within new politicized interpretive frameworks. Chinese classical literary tradition has long employed natural imagery including fragrant herbs, elegant figures, mountains, rivers and parting scenes to convey implicit political sentiment. The symbolic metaphor system embodied in Qu Yuan’s *Li Sao*, in particular, has been established as a core paradigm for political allegory in traditional Chinese literature [15]. This deep-rooted cultural tradition provides a readily intelligible semiotic foundation for contemporary creators to channel politicized collective emotion through gufeng DJ music. On Douyin, re-encoding is consistently realized through multimodal collocation of music, visuals and captions. Creators typically extract the most emotionally resonant refrain segments of gufeng DJ tracks, pair them with labor documentary footage, night urban panoramas, historical archival materials or sharp wealth gap contrast visuals, and attach concise sarcastic captions. Viewers never interpret the music in isolation; they synthesize auditory rhythm, visual cues and written text into a unified holistic reading. Through this multimodal fusion process, gufeng DJ music evolves from a standalone aesthetic consumer product into a recognizable marker of subcultural group belonging.

4.2 Audiovisual Synergy and Emotional Mobilization: Unique Communicative Advantages of Gufeng Dj Music

Gufeng DJ music is uniquely suited for disseminating politicized subcultural content on short-video platforms due to its structurally intense emotional potential. Electronic drum beats and cyclical refrains trigger rapid emotional escalation, while gufeng melodic textures carry undertones of historic grandeur and solemn tragic beauty. When matched with socially critical visual content, viewers instantly perceive the music as a vehicle articulating unspoken personal grievances and collective frustration. Unlike lengthy theoretical argumentation, short videos do not demand comprehensive comprehension of complex social concepts; music and visuals first generate instantaneous emotional arousal, lowering the entry barrier for audiences to engage with weighty social issues. Gufeng DJ music also boasts strong compatibility with platform template replication mechanics. Short-video platforms incentivize mass reuse of identical audio tracks, editing templates and caption formats. Once a specific gufeng DJ track becomes stably associated with a fixed type of collective social sentiment, subsequent creators can draw upon its accumulated shared connotations without restating the full contextual backstory. This ready-made semantic attribute turns gufeng DJ music into an efficient, low-cost semiotic resource for online left-wing subcultural expression. Furthermore, classical gufeng imagery furnishes an indirect, implicit expressive channel for commenting on contemporary social issues. Gufeng DJ music occupies an intermediate expressive space: it is less blunt than direct political slogans, yet carries far stronger social relevance than purely entertainment-focused pop music. Balancing aesthetic appeal, emotional catharsis and social metaphor, it retains broad mass entertainment appeal on short-video platforms while conveying layered critical social meaning within closed subcultural communities.

4.3 Comment Section Decoding, Subcultural Identification and Circular Re-Encoding

If video creators complete the initial round of text encoding, comment zones operate as pivotal spaces for audience decoding and collective semantic production. Many gufeng DJ short videos fail to fully articulate their critical connotations within titles or visuals; complete semantic formation relies on subsequent audience dialogue in comment sections. Viewers deploy coded slang, sarcasm, emojis, historical allusions, lyrical continuation and insider shorthand to confirm shared interpretive consensus. Comment zones are therefore not auxiliary add-ons to video content, but shared co-production sites for subcultural meaning. This collective decoding process performs an explicit subcultural boundary-setting function. Audiences capable of recognizing embedded metaphors receive implicit affirmation that they belong to this community, while viewers without access to internal symbolic logic may only read the work as an ordinary gufeng emotional clip. Such divergent interpretations continuously reproduce the dividing line of subcultural groups. Online left-wing subculture sustains its cohesion not only through theoretical articles, but also through replicable, recognizable semiotic resources that solidify a persistent sense of communal identity. User remixing further reinforces this circular semiotic mechanism. When audiences reuse the same gufeng DJ audio to match new social events, historical footage or realistic contemporary scenes, they carry out a new round of re-encoding for the established symbolic sign. Each remix expands the semantic boundary attached to the original music. Certain tracks gradually break away from their original romantic musical context and become exclusive emotional code words for insiders. A closed communication cycle thus takes shape covering creators conducting initial encoding, platforms realizing content circulation, audiences completing decentralized decoding, comment sections consolidating group identity, and new participants producing remix works to launch repeated re-encoding.

4.4 Communication Risks: Semantic Compression, Entertainment-Oriented Framing, and One-Sided Interpretation

Although gufeng DJ music improves communication efficiency for subcultural expression, it brings three prominent structural risks. The first risk is semantic compression. Topics including social equity, labor rights and historical narration involve complicated logical relations, requiring factual evidence, contextual background and theoretical support for thorough discussion. Nevertheless, short-video platforms compress such profound social issues into dozens-of-second emotional audiovisual products. Audiences may achieve intense emotional resonance driven by powerful rhythmic music without mastering systematically relevant knowledge. As a result, emotional perception replaces rational factual cognition. A second risk is entertainment-oriented framing. Gufeng DJ music possesses strong aesthetic and entertaining attributes. When

applied to politicized expression, serious social contradictions risk being transformed into consumable, replicable meme content. On one hand, this transformation reduces participation barriers and encourages more young people to pay attention to marginalized social groups and structural unfairness. On the other hand, it may trivialize core social contradictions, reducing profound public issues to a channel for simple emotional venting. The final risk is one-sided interpretation and opinion polarization. Short-video algorithm recommendation systems tend to strengthen users' existing preference bias. Audiences may continuously receive homogeneous narrative logic and emotional tendency, gradually forming a single-dimensional understanding of multi-faceted social problems. This paper does not deny the legitimate concern for social equity and grassroots livelihoods embedded within online left-wing subculture. It emphasizes, however, that when complex social affairs spread mainly through musical symbols, insider-coded language and comment-section emotional resonance, the depth of substantive knowledge transmitted and audiences' capacity for factual verification will be severely limited.

5. Conclusion

Taking the dissemination of Gufeng DJ music on Douyin as the entry point, this paper investigates the semiotic reconstruction and emotional mobilization mechanism of such music within online left-wing youth subculture. Gufeng DJ music does not carry inherent political meaning. Instead, it gradually obtains functions of social criticism and group identity marking through multimodal audiovisual matching on short-video platforms, contextual framing by creators, collective audience decoding in comment zones, and continuous secondary remix creation by users. Its operating logic can be summarized as a recursive communication loop covering creator encoding, platform circulation, audience decoding, identity confirmation in comment sections, and re-encoding via user remixing. The core communication advantage of gufeng DJ music lies in its capacity to lower the threshold for youth participation in public issue discussion via strong rhythmic stimulation and concentrated emotional impact. Meanwhile, the polysemous interpretive space of traditional gufeng imagery provides an indirect metaphorical carrier for discussing sensitive contemporary social topics. For online left-wing subculture, this musical form amplifies emotional resonance, group recognition and content reproduction within the community, endowing abstract social contradictions with direct sensory impact.

At the same time, this communication mode bears obvious inherent limitations. Music-centered short-video expression tends to compress complex social issues into thin emotional symbols; collective consistent decoding within comment sections may solidify unilateral interpretive frameworks inside the subcultural group. The integration of gufeng DJ music and online left-wing subculture therefore reflects both young people's innovative expressive vitality under platform media ecology, and the defects of diluted substantive knowledge, semantic displacement and one-sided cognition that politicized youth subcultures inevitably face when relying on entertainment-oriented audiovisual carriers. Future research can combine offline interviews, questionnaire surveys and cross-platform comparative analysis to further explore the complicated interactive relations among content creators, ordinary audiences and platform algorithm mechanisms.

References

- [1] Fang, F., & Wang, G. (2010). Dangdai shehui sichao: Fazhan quxiang yu ganyu fangshi [Contemporary social thought: Development orientations and intervention approaches]. Changjiang Luntan, (3), 48–51.
- [2] Gui, Y., Huang, R., & Ding, Y. (2018). Wangluo zuoyi de sanchong mianxiang: Jiyou ge'an guancha he dashuju de tansuo xing yanjiu [Three faces of the online left: An exploratory study based on case observation and big data]. Shehui, 38(3), 203–239. <https://doi.org/10.15992/j.cnki.31-1123/c.2018.03.007>
- [3] Wang, X. (2024). Wenyi dazhonghua: Zuoyi wenyi de hexin linian [Popularization of literature and art: The core concept of left-wing literature and art]. Dongyue Luncong, 45(4), 30–43, 191. <https://doi.org/10.15981/j.cnki.dongyueluncong.2024.04.004>
- [4] Ma, L. (2012). Dangdai Zhongguo ba zhong shehui sichao [Eight social currents in contemporary China]. Social Sciences Academic Press (China).

- [5] Zeng, X. (2023). Quandi zimeng huo pobi shengzhang: Gufeng yinyue de yawenhua fazhan maodun [Self-enclosure or boundary-crossing growth: Contradictions in the subcultural development of gufeng music]. *Zhongguo Qingnian Yanjiu*, (5), 111–118, 102. <https://doi.org/10.19633/j.cnki.11-2579/d.2023.0065>
- [6] Yan, S., Huang, H., & Wu, Z. (2025). Gufeng yinyue yawenhua qunti shenfen rentong yanjiu [Group identity in the gufeng music subculture]. *Honghe Xueyuan Xuebao*, 23(4), 131–135. <https://doi.org/10.13963/j.cnki.hhxb.2025.04.028>
- [7] Yang, G. (2022, July 25). Rongmeiti shidai duanshipin beijing yinyue liuxing xianxiang tanxi: Yi Douyin wei li [The popularity of background music in short videos in the era of media convergence: The case of Douyin]. *Shenzhen Tequ Bao*. <https://m.dutenews.com/n/article/6933657>
- [8] Ta, N., Jiao, F., Lin, C., Chen, X., Li, K., & Shen, C. (2025). Platformization of digital cultural commodity production: A comparative computational analysis of hit songs on Douyin and TikTok. *Communication and Society*, 71, 65–92. [https://doi.org/10.30180/CS.202501_\(71\).0004](https://doi.org/10.30180/CS.202501_(71).0004)
- [9] Tang, T., & Wen, M. (2025). “Shangyin” de zaoyin: “Shenqu” de wenhua neishengli ji qi shejiao kegongxing [“Addictive” noise: The endogenous cultural force and social affordances of viral hits]. *Xiandai Chuanbo* (*Zhongguo Chuanmei Daxue Xuebao*), 47(4), 88–98. <https://doi.org/10.19997/j.cnki.xdcb.2025.04.017>
- [10] Dong, C., & Zeng, L. (2021). Douyin “shenqu” chuchuan de jichu, luoji yu shenmei fansi [The foundations, logic, and aesthetic reflection of Douyin viral hits]. *Gannan Shifan Daxue Xuebao*, 42(2), 136–140.
- [11] Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson.
- [12] Carey, J. W. (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Unwin Hyman.
- [13] Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [14] Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. University of Illinois Press.
- [15] Shang, Y. (2014). Li Sao de xiangyu fanshi yu wenhua neiyun [The symbolic-metaphorical paradigm and cultural implications of Li Sao]. *Wenxue Pinglun*, (2), 165–172.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author (s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).