

China Chick “Guochao” and the Micro-Level Display of Culture

Li-Min Lin*

School of Media and Communication, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai 200240, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: This research examines the complex role of Guochao, China Chick, in contemporary Chinese cultural production, moving beyond simple binary evaluations of its effectiveness. Employing the “Culture on Display” framework, this paper analyzes cultural economy performances at the micro level to explore how Guochao leverages consumer imagination and multiple interpretations to reconstruct “Invented Traditions.” This study reveals how deliberately reducing authoritative narration (“Authority Minus the Author”) creates spaces for interpretation that engage readers as active participants in creating meaning. The findings show that this process breaks down predetermined meanings and national narratives, transforming cultural production into both public exhibition and market product. We conclude that this transformation helps Guochao emerge as a powerful carrier of nationalist discourse, enhancing the understanding of contemporary cultural nationalism and consumer behavior.

Keywords: Guochao; China chick; Culture on display; Invented tradition; Fashion trend

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1. Introduction

Since its emergence in 2018, “Guochao”, or China Chic, has become a widely recognized term, though it lacks (or perhaps resists) a formal definition. As a cultural movement of phenomenon-level significance, Guochao captures the imaginations and identities of countless individuals, and its cultural and economic impact remains undeniable. While many discussions have explored its origins and driving mechanisms, no consensus has emerged. This paper therefore takes a different approach: rather than analyzing its “successes” and “achievements”, examining isolated case studies, or assessing the impact of designated “Guochao elements” in particular products, it treats China Chic products as “culture on display” within a consumerist context—similar to how eighteenth-century Scottish tartan transformed textile patterns into ethnic markers.

Through this lens, consumer behaviors are reframed as symbolic representations laden with nationalist meanings, functioning as cultural capital in global political-economic competition. This process turns cultural

production into both a spectacle and a commodity with market exchange value. Such a perspective facilitates an examination of the nuanced interactions within the cultural economy, illustrating how socio-historical materials transcend their original contexts and political implications, while opening further questions about the broader dynamics of cultural commodification in contemporary China.

2. Understanding Guochao: The intriguing balance between “National” and “Trend”

The term “Guochao” lacks a formal definition, though discussions typically analyze it by breaking down its two characters: “guo” (国 , nation) and “chao” (潮 , trend). The phrase gained popularity in 2018 through Alibaba’s Tmall marketing campaign, building on existing cultural enthusiasm. In 2019, Tsinghua University’s Cultural Creativity Development Research Institute’s Guochao Research Report defined it as “Chinese trends + Chinese-style trends”, while also interpreting it as “the trendification of the national” and “the nationalization of the trendy”^[1].

Guochao is commonly described as products incorporating elements of Chinese culture and history. Examples include brands like Li-Ning, Erke, and Florasis, products such as the horse-face skirt (mamianqun) and Forbidden City merchandise, and media like the animated film *Ne Zha*—each applying Chinese cultural motifs across various consumer goods. However, this definition is problematic. With Chinese civilization spanning thousands of years and encompassing countless cultural elements, and without clearly defined product categories, almost anything can claim the Guochao label. This vagueness enables opportunistic businesses to retroactively brand themselves as part of the movement. As a result, related terms like guofeng (国风 , national style), Hanfu (汉服 , traditional Han clothing), “Chinese cultural elements”, “classical aesthetics”, and even folk music are inconsistently included or excluded from the Guochao umbrella.

“Guochao” defies straightforward categorization as it represents a complex, multifaceted phenomenon rather than a singular concept. It extends beyond the scope of merely being a marketing strategy or cultural initiative. In the absence of a formalized definition, its genesis remains a subject of scholarly discourse. Its developmental trajectory can be roughly divided into three phases: pre-Guochao, its emergence, and its eventual consolidation. The lack of an official definition has also led to disputes over its origins: some demarcate 2018’s Tmall campaign as the starting point, while others trace it back to the Republican era—particularly its material culture (e.g., Shanghai’s cosmopolitanism, illustrated magazines, and modernist knickknacks) as embodiments of nostalgia—or even earlier to Ming-Qing literati pastimes or dynastic traditions^[2–5]. Yet the consumption of domestic goods has existed independently of Guochao influence throughout history. Before Tmall’s 2018 campaign, the term had already surfaced sporadically; it was only after Tsinghua University’s report and sustained market efforts that “Guochao” solidified into a proper noun. Once publicly legitimized, it evolved into a cultural fact, shifting focus from pure marketing to its intrinsic significance—a phase some now call the “New Guochao” era^[6–8].

Scholarly research on Guochao as a cultural phenomenon has moved beyond definitional debates to analyze its origins and development, falling into four main categories. Since its early manifestations were concentrated in streetwear and amplified through digital platforms, much research attributes Guochao to youth-driven subcultures—particularly Gen Z, the internet-native demographic—framing it as an expression of identity, neoliberal commodity fetishism, or influences from otaku culture^[9–11]. The second approach focuses on technological factors: multi-screen media environments, blended online-offline shopping experiences, user-generated content (UGC), data-driven marketing, and key opinion leader (KOL) influence. A third framework applies semiotic analysis, building on Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society*, arguing that consumption now

operates in the realm of symbols. These studies often narrow to study specific “Chinese elements”, evaluating their effectiveness through intertextuality in IP adaptations, nostalgic design, visual aesthetics (color, line), and perceived cultural appeal ^[12]. Part of this category addresses business strategy and brand management, though these analyses often rely on unexamined assumptions rather than empirical evidence. Technology has undoubtedly altered people’s perception of space and time, but its pervasive influence is insufficient as the sole explanation for Guochao’s emergence as a digitally fostered subculture. This phenomenon extends well beyond youth consumption patterns or fandom economies—prompting the author to question what initially triggered these preferences. If Guochao began as a genuine subculture, what factors propelled it into the mainstream? Methodologically, these studies offer few innovations, largely following 1990s Asian cultural studies approaches by treating Guochao as a “mega-text” subject to selective interpretation.

A fourth perspective views consumption as an expression of national identity, connecting to discussions about cultural confidence and heritage. The term’s connection to Chinese history gives “guo” and “chao” rich meanings: “guo” represents not only Chineseness but also international ambitions, while “chao” includes both youth trends and collective movements. Though Guochao reflects rising national pride, this connection works both ways; the spread of cultural products and public response cannot be simply traced to policy timelines. Likewise, how people respond to cultural symbols depends on personal understanding, with no universal standards for evaluation. The term has therefore become increasingly linked with official narratives of cultural confidence—a complex relationship that defies simple explanation. The complex power dynamics underlying this phenomenon require careful examination.

3. Cultural display at the micro-level: A compelling spectacle

Guochao, as a contemporary cross-cultural phenomenon, is unique in its resistance to simple explanation. Scholars have tried to analyze it through Chinese cultural heritage, ethnic affinity, or quantitative empiricism, yet these approaches fail to capture its essence—primarily because Guochao transcends state mechanisms. Rather, it emerges from the collective discourses of diverse transnational communities, resembling what Roland Barthes called “myth”: a second-order semiological system that transforms cultural constructs into seemingly self-evident truths ^[13].

Bella Dicks developed the concept of “culture on display”, showing how social and historical elements transform into visible symbols that draw people into what Anderson calls an “Imagined Community” ^[14–15]. Dicks traces how modern cultural display emerged in the 18th century. Before then, displays served mainly religious or commercial purposes, such as sacred icons or trade goods, while cultural exhibitions were limited to elite audiences. A crucial shift came in the 19th century when the rise of nation-states democratized cultural display. Nations began using exhibitions to distinguish themselves, creating a sense of belonging where historical artifacts became shared “heritage.” Cultural display thus became central to forming national identity. From royal projects of legitimacy to modern consumer culture, display has remained fundamentally linked to power and identity.

Fashion transcends individual choices to become a broader performance of “culture on display”—not just a moment in time and space, but a collective expression woven into everyday life ^[16]. This notion aligns with Hobsbawm and Ranger’s theory of invented traditions, where symbolic practices are fabricated or repurposed to reinforce collective identities ^[17]. The Scottish tartan exemplifies this perfectly: though originally a utilitarian garment, it was transformed through political and cultural interventions into a national emblem ^[18]. After being

banned and later revived by 19th-century elites, tartans were systematically codified and popularized through staged spectacles like the 1822 royal visit. Today, they persist as both a marketed heritage symbol and a fashion statement—whether on runways (like Chanel’s 2012 collection) or in global consumer culture. Far from being an organic tradition, the tartan’s endurance demonstrates how fashion operates as a dynamic medium for invented cultural narratives, where meaning is continually reinscribed through performance, consumption, and institutional reinforcement.

The tartan’s history shows a common pattern: nationalist groups first invent traditions, then use grand ceremonies to make them seem legitimate. Governments officially recognize these symbols and showcase them at events, while industries produce and sell them to consumers, who then help spread the government’s preferred narratives. From world fairs to film festivals, these cultural displays follow the same strategy used in the 1800s to create traditions, though now they serve modern economic and cultural competition.

4. Deconstructing Guochao: Microperformative practices and the integration of polysemic cultural interpretations

Unlike conventional “invented traditions” that rely on grand spectacles for legitimacy, Guochao operates through micro-level performances. It detaches itself from overt nationalism and embeds within consumption practices—primarily by establishing an “implied reader”^[19]. This concept builds on Roland Barthes’ assertion in *The Death of the Author*: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”

Wolfgang Iser developed the “implied reader” concept from Barthes’ foundation, arguing that a text’s existence depends on its interpretive gaps—spaces that invite engagement^[20]. The implied reader is “prestructured by the text’s design... a network of response-inviting structures that impel the reader to grasp the text.” Put simply, a text’s multiple potential meanings create an “objective structure of appeal.” By contrast, linear narratives with limited interpretive flexibility lack implied readers, preventing widespread adoption.

This framework illuminates Guochao’s success. Contemporary examples—Black Myth: Wukong, Genshin Impact, Pop Mart—have thrived through everyday consumption rather than mega-events like the Olympics. This challenges Joseph Nye’s “soft power” thesis: decades later, his recommendations (international aid, charm offensives, global events) remain fixed in an outdated model of top-down cultural projection^[21]. Instead, Guochao emerges from decentralized, collective agency—a diffuse yet powerful phenomenon rooted in daily rituals and micro-performances that bypass centralized direction.

At its core, Guochao reflects a consumer-driven dynamic where culture is continuously reproduced through practice^[22]. While producers embed “preferred meanings” into products, consumers actively reinterpret them based on their social experiences. Meaning emerges through co-creation—an interplay between daily life and consumption—rather than producer dictation.

For this co-creation to thrive, cultural commodities must offer interpretive space for imaginative engagement. Successful products are not vessels with fixed meanings but empty signifiers that stimulate diverse readings. They only become complete sign systems when integrated into everyday life. This aligns with Featherstone’s observation that postmodernity favors symbols freed from fixed references—a premise central to Guochao’s appeal^[23].

Guochao’s semiotic system balances producer and audience agency, transforming empty signifiers into nationalist expressions. While Hanfu or folk music serve as obvious cultural markers, Guochao’s strength lies in

incorporating unexpected works like *Genshin Impact* (with global aesthetics) or *Ghostblade* (inspired by Western fantasy). Despite their divergent designs, both are embraced as Guochao. Similarly, *Ghostblade*—celebrated as a “national comic”—is characterized through broad descriptors like “epic” or “dreamlike” that could equally apply to Western works, yet these influences do not exclude it from Guochao’s framework.

Ultimately, Guochao’s circulation depends on conceptualized consumption—a discursive process where products fuel collective imagination. Like Scottish tartan (now signifying “Scottishness” without historical references), Guochao functions as an open sign system. This openness allows consumers to project personal meanings onto a national framework while avoiding oppositional reading, as its ambiguous signifiers resist rigid ideological expectations ^[24].

In redefining cultural development, Guochao transcends traditional macro-spectacles and top-down “invented traditions.” Unlike approaches that emphasize national cohesion or authority, it demonstrates that China’s cultural industries have moved beyond forced exports. While Scottish tartan emerged from historical contingencies, Guochao actively reconfigures such traditions’ colonialist logic. Its success reveals that in a globalized, consumer-driven world, national image forms not through chronological value-building but through the consumptive imagination of “contemporary China”—a signifier enacted by audiences wielding their own interpretive frameworks.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of “Guochao” as a distinctive cultural-economic phenomenon in contemporary society. Through the lens of the “Culture on Display” framework, we have revealed how Guochao operates not through centralized authority but by creating interpretive spaces that engage consumers’ imaginations. Unlike traditional cultural symbols tied to nation-state development, Guochao represents a novel approach where diverse consumers actively participate in meaning-making while authoritative narration is deliberately minimized.

The analysis reveals that Guochao’s success stems from three interconnected mechanisms. First, it reimagines “Invented Traditions” by stripping cultural elements of predetermined meanings and political associations, transforming them into fluid symbolic representations. Second, it balances seemingly contradictory elements: nationalist sentiment with global commercial appeal, and cultural authenticity with market innovation. Third, it converts cultural elements into assets that function in global political-economic competition while maintaining domestic resonance.

The implications of this research extend beyond Guochao itself to broader questions about cultural commodification in the global marketplace. By demonstrating how cultural displays can function simultaneously as expressions of national identity and commercial products, the findings challenge conventional understandings of the relationship between culture, commerce, and nationalism. This research suggests that successful cultural movements in today’s interconnected world may increasingly rely on distributed rather than centralized authority, allowing multiple interpretations to coexist while maintaining coherent symbolism.

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