

# FORMATION, INDUSTRIES, AND IDENTITIES: OBSERVATIONS ON EXTREME METAL IN MAINLAND CHINA 2000-2013

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## Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of extreme metal in mainland China (EMMC) by investigating its formation, industries, and identities. First, the article briefly portrays the background of EMMC. Then, it argues that EMMC as a transplanted genre was formed around 2000. After that, the industry of EMMC is demonstrated by highlighting the indie labels, releases, and distributions. Finally, based on the textual analyses of the compilation album “*Resurrection of the Gods*”, a series of identical characteristics of EMMC are discussed. These preliminary conclusions potentially provide a basis for further researches of metal studies, popular music studies, and socio-cultural studies.

## Portraying the context of extreme metal in Mainland China

In his monograph, Kahn-Harris (2007) first differentiated extreme metal from the traditional idea of heavy metal as an independent research object, by focusing on its particular musical characteristics, scenic practices, and social transgressions. While extreme metal has been evolving in the West for over 30 years (began with Venom’s “*Welcome to Hell*” in 1981), this process is just more than ten years old in mainland China. Unsurprisingly, for a long time, extreme metal in mainland China (EMMC) has been marginal within global metal scene, and there was rare attention by academia thus far. However, along with the persistent development of the genre in the country and increasingly global tendencies of metal scholars (primarily exemplified by the documentary “*Global Metal*” by Dunn & McFadyen, 2007 and the publication “*Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World*” by Wallach, Berger & Greene, 2011), the phenomenon of EMMC is showing more significance as a case study in modern metal discourses.

Chronologically, EMMC began around 2000 as the main-body of the second wave of Chinese metal praxis, when the majority of the early generation of metal artists in the 1990s (such as *Tang Dynasty*, *Black Panther*, *Overload*, *Again*, and *Wazu*) turned into mainstream pop styles or disbanded. Geographically, EMMC is a nationwide but imbalanced phenomenon. Those more culturally and economically developed cities often become the core regions, particularly as Beijing and Shanghai. In terms of genre, EMMC should be seen as a lineal descendant of Chinese rock praxis, as well as a relatively peripheral component of the whole Chinese popular music industries.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the general environment of EMMC can be mainly understood in four aspects. First, the deepened development of the reform and opening up of the country gave rise to more frequent cultural exchanges between China and the West, with which increasingly non-mainstream and non-native musical genres obtained the chance to survive.

Secondly, there is an obvious contradiction between EMMC's anti-commercialism stance and its actually inevitably commercial involvement, where a local metal industry has been preliminarily established. Thirdly, given that the freedom of speech has yet to be thoroughly achieved in mainland China, the social transgression of EMMC is more aesthetic than political. Finally, EMMC had been experiencing a series of marginalization, involving ideological, aesthetic, commercial, and global, although a few changes had emerged since late-2000s. For example, *Voodoo Kungfu* as the first EMMC band ever performed in Wacken Open Air in 2008, while *Suffocated* performed in the New Year Concert on Guangdong TV in 2013 as the first appearance of EMMC on mainstream media. Given such context, the following chapters will be primarily illustrating some initial findings on three topics, including the formation, industries, and identities.

## Forming the Genre

### *Defining "Genre"*

Genre, as an important concept in musical vocabularies, has been used dominantly in popular music studies since 1980s (Moore, 2001: 443). Recently, its academic value was further underlined as a more satisfactory starting point for the theorization of the relationship between particular social groups and musical styles than subculture, scene, or tribe (Hesmondhalgh, 2005: 32). From an ethnomusicological perspective, Fabbri (1981: 52) defined musical genre as a set of musical events (real or possible), whose course is regulated by a definite arrangement of socially accepted rules, involving formal and technical, semiotic, behavior, social and ideological, and economic. In other words, genre should not be understood as something only in the music, but also in the minds and bodies of particular groups of people who share certain conventions (Holt, 2007: 2). It is also important to clarify that the differences and relationships between the two concepts of genre and style. They are both concerned with ways of erecting categorical distinctions and identifying similarity between different pieces (Moore, 2001: 432). However, a style is more relevant to musical techniques, traits, or other formal factors, while a genre involves more concerns besides the formal, such as subject matters and ideologies. Thus, style is not sufficient to define a genre (Fabbri & Chambers, 1982: 136).

Therefore, genre essentially refers to both textual (internal) and contextual (external) aspects of certain musical praxes. In this sense, a piece of music composed with typical metal styles cannot be seen as a genre of metal unless it is created, produced, performed, appreciated, and understood in a correspondingly culture of metal. Moreover, there could be a series of inherent connections and deviations between a genre and its subgenre or between the subgenres, either textually or contextually.

For example, two different subgenres black metal and Christian metal may share quite similar musical features, while the ideologies are thoroughly divergent. Conversely, black metal and death metal may embrace similar subject matters but in quite different styles. In case of China, extreme metal was a transplanted cultural phenomenon imported from the West, which indicates that the original text and context of the genre may not have been accepted and understood simultaneously. The formation of EMMC needs to be concerned with the holistic Chinese metal in a broader social background.

### ***Why around 2000?***

Chinese metal emerged in 1990 when Tang Dynasty introduced it to the public for the first time (Wong, 2011). However, in the following decade, the metal praxis could be seen as an intentional fad by a few mainstream labels and artists who tried to seek business opportunity by bringing metal into China from the West. In this process, the musical styles and textual characteristics were imitated without a clear understanding and embracement of the culture (yet to be a genre). In the late 1990s, Chinese metal evolved toward two different directions, mainstream pop/rock music and underground extreme metal. Eventually, EMMC became a formal genre around 2000.

First, two local fanzines “*Extreme Music*” and “*Painkiller*” were founded in 2000, as a crucial transmitting medium of metal culture (Weinstein, 2000: 174) and a significant factor in the formation of a certain extreme metal scene (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 86). “*Extreme Music*” exclusively focused on extreme metal worldwide, while “*Painkiller*” referred to more different kinds of heavy music, such as hard rock, hardcore, and even sometimes punk. They both contained historical introductions of metal, biographies of legendary bands, interviews with artists, reviews of the latest releases, and news in local scene. In doing so, they primarily contributed to the accumulation of the necessary knowledge of a genre. Besides, they positively engaged in global industries, collaborating with international labels, such as AFM Records, Nuclear Blast, Century Media, and Wacken Records. For example, “*Painkiller*” began to conduct an annual competition of local bands called “*Metal Battle*” since 2008, officially and exclusively authorized by Wacken Open Air. The winner would be awarded the chance to perform in Wacken Festival.

Secondly, according to the annual report from China Internet Network Information Center, the country had begun to be heavily influenced by the internet since 2000. In this trend, a website named “*GuitarChina.com*” was launched, which is now the most comprehensive and visited guitar website of China, as an important platform to promote guitar music cultures, including metal. For example, it inspired and expanded the consuming market of guitar and relevant equipments such as effects and amps. The affiliated “*Online Chinese Guitar Stores*” consisting of 37 guitar stores from different cities of China and the second-hand market forum made musical instruments more available to metal artists and ordinary fans, and the cost of engaging in metal praxis was largely reduced. Moreover, it was a resource for effectively learning guitar skills and musical knowledge. Particularly, a huge number of metal music scores or tabs shared and discussed would be beneficial to metal players (not only amateurs but also professionals) to improve their skills and musicianship.

Moreover, the first Midi Modern Festival was held in 2000, which is the earliest and greatest annually rock music festival. It initially derived from an illustration of the teaching results of Beijing Midi School of Music. During the last decade, it has been developed constantly in terms of scale and influence. More significantly, extreme metal has been accounting for a large proportion of the festival. A number of local bands have ever performed the final shows, such as Tomahawk, Yaska, Twisted Machine, The Miserable Faith, AK-47, Voodoo Kungfu, Suffocated, and Ritual Day, as well as many well-known overseas metal stars such as Soulfly, Shadows Fall, Finntroll, Loudness, and The Agonist. The considerable popularity and influence of the festival facilitated extreme metal’s dissemination within general audiences. Another festival titled 330 Metal held in 2001 was relatively small-scaled but exclusively featuring extre-

me metal. Considering the significance of live music in the industrial context (Page, 2007; Frith, 2007; Cloonan, 2011), these festivals indicated that the development of EMMC had reached a certain level, implying a number of professional artists, a stable group of fans, competent hardware facilities, and increasingly media attentions.

Finally, the first local metal label, Mort Production, was founded in 2001. In the same year, the label released the first episode of EMMC's compilation albums, titled "*Resurrection of the Gods 1*" (ROG 1), which consisted of twelve songs from twelve local bands, covering nearly all the main subgenres of metal. ROG 1 endowed EMMC a formal status in popular music recording industry. Moreover, it contributed to gather the dispersive metal practices from different cities into an integral Chinese scene. For example, the bands in this compilation came from Beijing, Tianjin, Kunming, Xi'an, and so forth. With eight episodes having been issued by 2013, ROG gradually became a symbol of honor and social capital, where only the best bands of the time would be involved. Potentially, it inspired new bands and artists to improve themselves and then upgrade the holistic level of EMMC. Meanwhile, it could be illustrative samples for examining EMMC in academic terms.

Therefore, it would be reasonable to argue that EMMC as a genre was formed around 2000 when: a whole genealogy of extreme metal with a set of aesthetic conventions were observed; a relatively complete metal industry was established; metal cultures were shared by artists and fans within a Chinese metal scene; EMMC began to engage in global metal praxis.

### **Establishing the industries**

In the context of popular music, Williamson and Cloonan (2007: 314) suggested that the concept "industry" should be replaced with "industries", indicating a range of industrial sectors around music, such as recording, distributing, live, streaming, and merchandizing. This chapter initially provides an image of the industries of EMMC by highlighting only three essential aspects, including indie labels, releases, and distributions. Furthermore, it attempts to reveal the qualitative implications behind the statistic data.

#### ***Indie labels***

"Indie" is usually an ambiguous concept with different connotations, such as a mode of distribution, a genre, an ethos, or a mode of critical assessment and judgment (Fonarow, 2006: 26). This article treats this term as a certain industrial mode outside the mainstream. The first indie metal label Mort emerged in 2001, followed by as total of 36 being founded between 2001 and 2013.

Temporally, as figure 1 shows, six labels were formed in 2006 as the peak time and one in 2004 and 2010. It is notable that there was at least one label founded in each year, which may exemplify that the EMMC was not just a fad but a continuous behavior. In addition, only one (Lie Records) has been already officially closed. In the spatial terms, as figure 2 demonstrates, the labels appeared in fifteen cities in mainland China, where Beijing accounted for nearly one third of the whole followed by Nanchang (8 per cent). Notably, all the cities shown in the statistic are provincial capitals which, in general sense, are relatively more developed in terms of both culture and economics. Such situation may induce a contradiction that while EMMC usually places itself oppositional against the commercialization, it primarily survives in the cities more commercialized. Besides, there were two labels, Psychedelic Lotus Records

and Stress Hormones Records, producing records in forms of vinyl. In the digital era, vinyl is usually relevant to a certain sense of connoisseur (McCourt, 2005). It may also indicate a certain depth of EMMC's development.

Figure 1: The numbers of labels founded in each year during 2001-2013

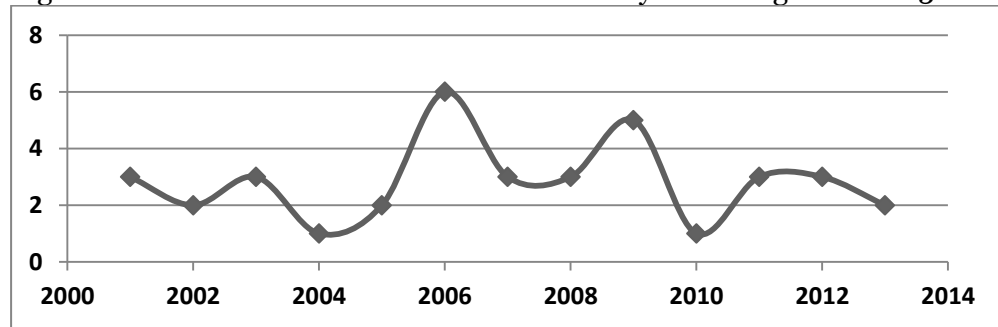
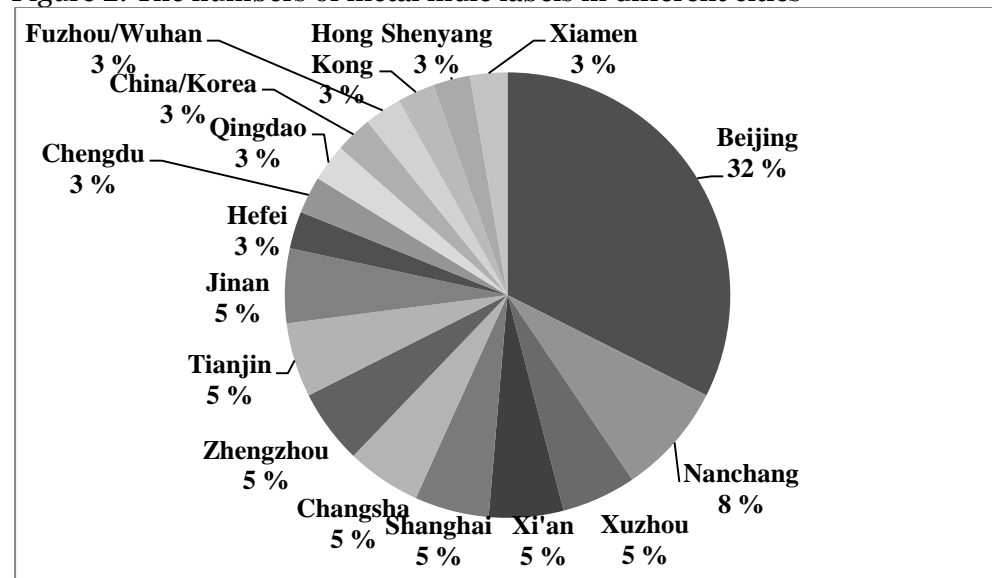


Figure 2: The numbers of metal indie labels in different cities



**Releasing**

Along with the foundations of metal labels, as total of about 700 releases had been produced and issued, mainly consisting of a majority of local bands and a few re-issues of overseas bands, covering a variety of forms such as Albums, EPs, collections, splits, and demos. According to figure 3, there were three releasing peaks in 2006, 2010, and 2013, respectively. The most dramatic increase could be observed between 2004 and 2006, where the later was a distinct watershed. Therefore, 2006 was the most important time point of recording industry of EMMC (considering 2006 was also the peak time of label's establishment).

Figure 3: The figures of the releases in each year during 2001-2013

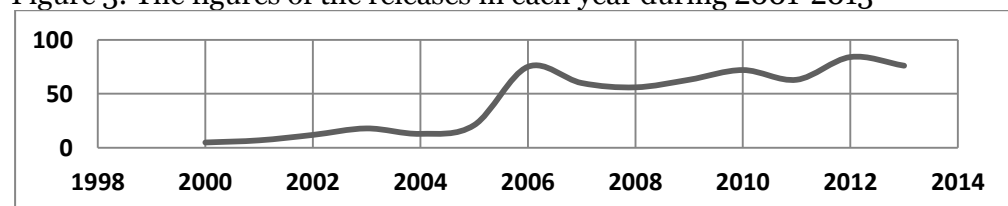
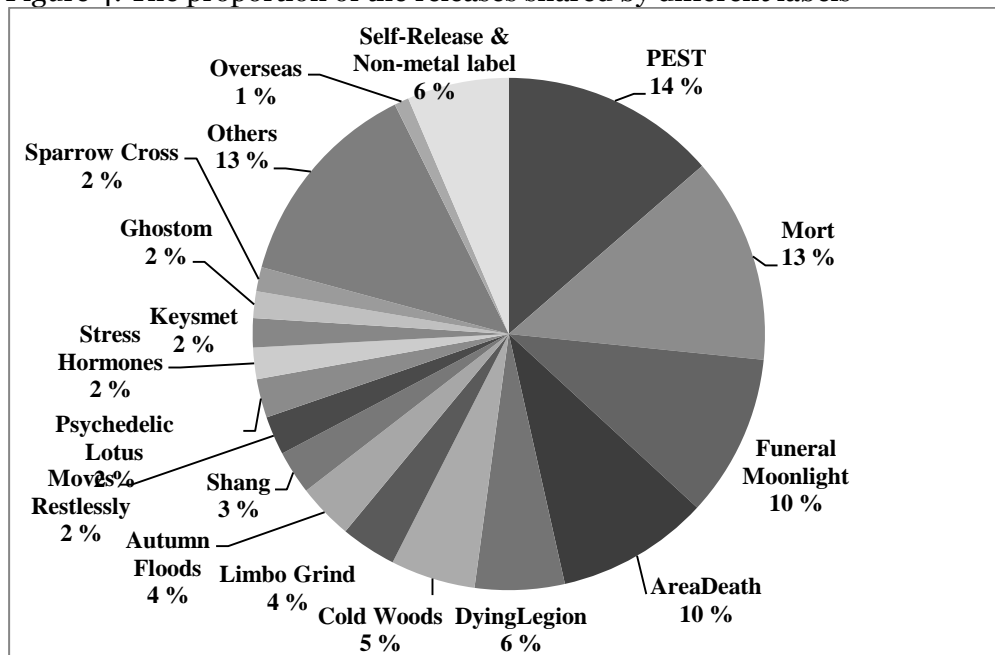


Figure 4: The proportion of the releases shared by different labels



However, an overt imbalance existed in this recording industry. According to figure 4, five labels including PEST, Mort, Funeral Moonlight, Area Death, and Dying Legion account for more than 50 per cent proportion. In contrast, the label such as Soul Cleanliness and Rotting Development had just only one release. Moreover, the labels usually possessed different attitudes and pursuits. For example, Mort as the biggest and most commercialized local label so far, usually gathered the best local bands of different subgenres. Particularly, the series of “*Resurrection of the Gods*” has brought continual accumulation of attention and reputation for the label. The central idea of Mort was/is making non-mainstream music in the mainstream way. In contrast, some labels presented a more underground and anti-commercialism stance, such as PEST which focused on black metal exclusively, including raw black metal, depressive black metal, and ambient black metal, regardless of whether the public would actually accept or not. However, PEST has been forced to explore overseas markets, since black metal is still marginal in China. It is notable that there were a few labels showing more interests on overseas bands. For example, in the sixty-three releases by Area Death Productions, only three of them were from local bands. Likewise, fifty-eight out of sixty-seven of Funeral Moonlight Production’s releases were from overseas bands. Meanwhile, there were also handful Chinese bands signing with overseas labels. For example, the depressive black metal band Be Persecuted was signed by No Clouds Records (Germen) in 2006. All of these show a positive participation of EMMC in the global metal praxis.

**Distribution**

The distribution of EMMC was generally underground, primarily by means of the internet, fanzines, and lives, yet never on mainstream radio or TV programs before 2013. Since 2000, with the boom of the internet, almost every band had used online social media to make promotion, such as Douban, Weico, QQ group. Moreover, the aforementioned fanzines “*Extreme Music*” and “*Painkiller*” always contained a particular section of introducing new local

bands and promoting the latest releases. Besides, the gigs were usually an effective promotional and distributional channel, where the fans were gathered and able to purchase at the venue just after the shows.

The main reason of such distributional marginalization may be that, as Richard (2013) observed, any officially distributed record within mainland China had to receive the imprimatur of the Culture Ministry, censored by a series of strict principles. Given both musical and ideological characteristics of the subgenres such as death metal or black metal, it may be difficult for most EMMC bands to obtain such imprimatur and then access into the mainstream distributional channel. For example, Murk, the manager of Dying Art Productions, recalled in an interview in 2013, that he had tried six publishers before the black metal band Martyrdom's debut album was eventually issued in 2002, because that the first five concerned that the work would not pass the national censorship.

An underground prosperity and a general upward tendency can be observed via the industrial data. They perhaps indicate a trend that EMMC is becoming increasingly popular but still far away from the mainstream in the future. On the one hand, the development of EMMC is likely inspired by the rapid cultural and economic growth of the country. On the other hand, EMMC's long-term marginal status is fundamentally determined by its particular identities. These predictions can be only tested by the statistics of the following years.

### **Exploring the identities**

Metal Studies (as well as Popular Music Studies) is naturally a multi-discipline centred on socio-cultural examinations (Weinstein, 2011: 243), where textual analyses have been relatively overlooked. Marshall (2011: 169) has called for a "materialist sociology of music" by underlining the significance of both how people engaging with the music as well as the music itself. Furthermore, in the field of popular music, the concept of "text" was expanded, involving graphic, musical, and video factors (Shuker, 2008: 93). With these considerations, this chapter attempts to explore the identities of EMMC from a textual perspective. The eight episodes of the compilation album "*Resurrection of the Gods*" are selected as samples, in which the 92 works covered a complete genealogy of extreme metal's subgenres, and the 72 local bands were strictly selected by the label. Besides, these albums were released throughout the whole period between 2001 and 2013. To a certain degree, the history, evolution, and artistic level of EMMC were typically reflected by ROG

### ***Album cover art***

Considering the cover art works of the eight episodes of ROG (which are available at <http://www.mort-prod.com/release/release.htm>), the central elements are featuring a sense of ancient China, such as the Buddhism (Episode 1, 2), temples (Episode 3, 6), warriors (Episode 4), Chinese paleography (Episode 7), and dragon (Episode 8), which may imply three overall tendencies. First, EMMC has been accompanied by an intentionally national consciousness rather than a passive imitation of foreign cultures and musical styles. In doing so, a set of traditional aesthetic conventions would be involved to produce a distinct ethos of EMMC. Secondly, it may connote that the glories of the nation have been lost and can be only celebrated by referring to the fantasies of the past. Thus, it may indicate EMMC's dissatisfaction and transgression against the contemporary society. Thirdly, by employing these common

Chinese elements, ROG endows the different works and artists an abstract unified identity, by which a united scene of EMMC (in both cultural and spatial sense) can be possibly consolidated.

**Themes**

The themes of music present particular ideologies, attitudes, preferences, or tastes of the artists, which may explicitly or implicitly reflect certain information of identity. Methodologically, they can be literally observed in titles and lyrics. For example, Weinstein (2000: 35-43) used the terms “Dionysian” and “Chaotic” to distinguish the themes of heavy metal, referring to the identities of a physical indulgence and a complex affirmation of power. By examining the themes frequently used and absent in death metal, Harrell (1994: 91) described the genre’s identity as an expression of industrialism’s emotional isolation and violence. Obviously, the themes can be classified into different categories with different criteria. By analyzing all the 92 works of ROG, three statistics are provided as below.

Figure 5: General relevance

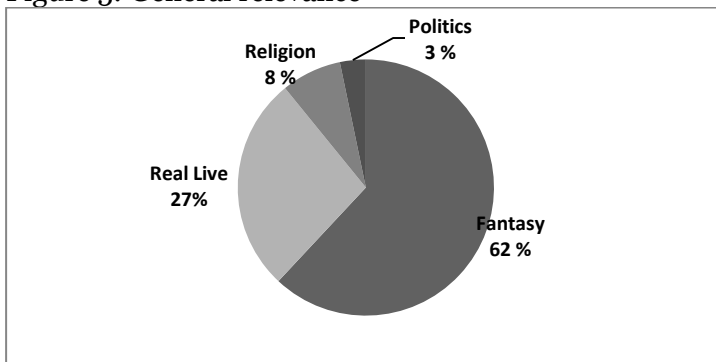


Figure 6: Related to mainstream values

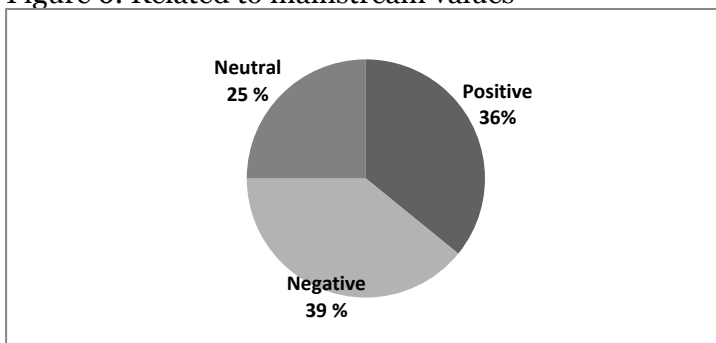
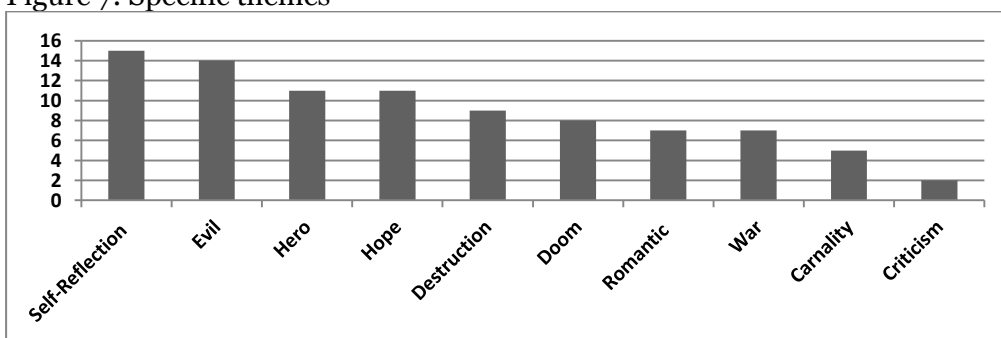


Figure 7: Specific themes





In terms of general relevance (figure 5), a majority of the themes refer to fantasy, while nearly one third refers to real life. In contrast, the religion is much peripheral and the politics is hardly mentioned. Considering the attitude toward mainstream values (figure 6), the positive and negative share a similar proportion, where one fourth shows no particular tendency. More specifically, these works can be roughly categorized into ten themes, as self-reflection, evil, hero, hope, destruction, doom, romantic, war, carnality, and criticism (figure 7). These results primarily suggest that EMMC has not only concentrated on the dark side of the world (as it is usually considered) but also positive aspects. Notably, masculinity is usually a prominent factor such as hero, destruction, war, or carnality. Besides, there is an overt tendency among EMMC artists of escaping away from their realities for whatever reasons. Furthermore, EMMC is not really political or critical compared to other genres such as punk and folk. Meanwhile, religion can be seen as a relatively irrelevant factor.

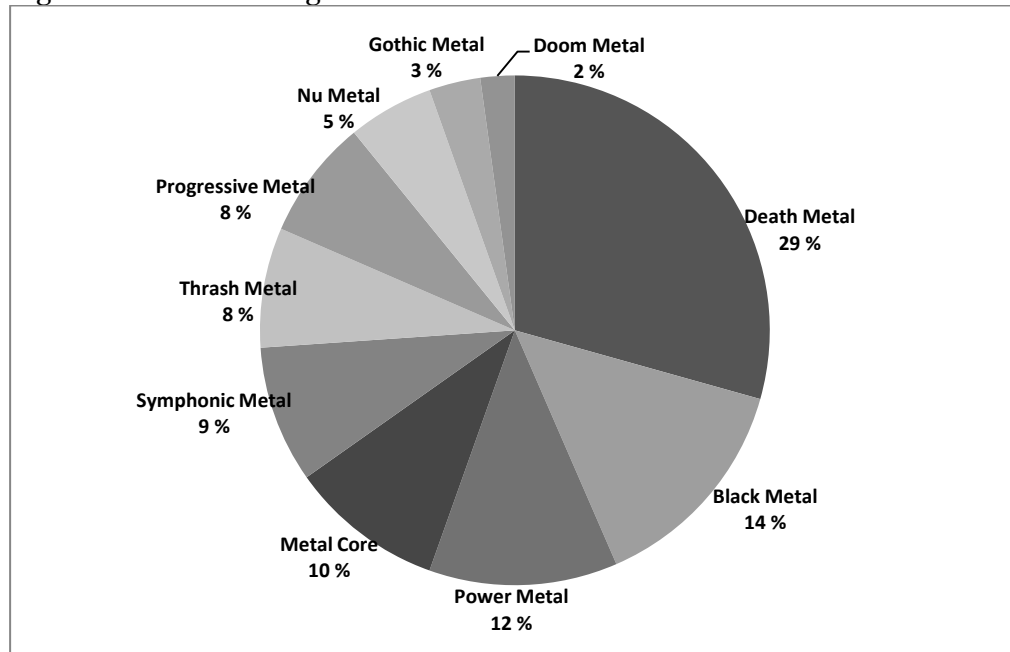
### ***Musical Factors***

Musical preference is usually significant to reflect the identities of certain groups of people. They can be partly revealed by examining the genre's musical features. Kahn-Harris (2007: 31-33) distinguished extreme metal from other genres by highlighting its particular musical features, such as the modes, guitars, vocals, rhythm and tempo, and songwriting. Most of these factors can be observed in the music of EMMC, which are, however, fundamentally disobedient against the country's traditional aesthetic criteria. As the most dominant school of thoughts, Confucianism has been heavily influencing on Chinese aesthetics, particularly the ideas of music (Cai, 1981; 1986; Jiang, 1984; Chen, 2003). One of the essential principles of Confucian aesthetics is musical moderation (Xiu, 1986: 88-90), which requires that the formal factors of music should be properly limited. For instance, the pitch should not be too high or low, the tempo is neither too fast nor slow, and the music is not too emotional to be out of the rational control (Cai, 1986: 12-14). In contrast, the aesthetic pursuit of EMMC is a sort of musical extremity rather than moderation. Thus, no matter what themes or subjects are employed, EMMC is naturally rebellious and radical. It may imply that such genre tends to be more embraced by the youth who try to establish their identities by opposing against the hegemonic one, the people who have difficulties to obtain their identities in everyday lives, or the artists who attempt to intentionally create a new identity of Chineseness.

Extreme metal as a genre consists of a series of subgenres with different musical styles or subject matters, such as thrash metal, death metal, black metal, doom metal, and many hybrid derivatives. By exploring the inner structure of the subgenres of ROG, further observations of identity can be made. As Figure.8 shown, death metal was the most commonly embraced followed by black metal, which may be because that these two subgenres perfectly reflected the aesthetics and ideologies of "extreme" by their distinct musical features, particularly the vocalizations. Moreover, professional musical background seems not necessarily required, since many artists actually learned the skills and knowledge by simply imitating their favorite artists without formal musical educations. One of the consequences is a sort of exclusiveness, because that these artists are often an expert on only one certain subgenre or style. Instead, more musicianship can be observed in symphonic metal, progressive metal, and gothic metal, since they present closer connections to classical music. The popularity of power metal perhaps comes from its catchy vocals, melodies, and

lyrics. Notably, metalcore became increasingly popular recently, attracting both metal and hardcore punk fans. Therefore, this identical diversity suggests that EMMC should not be simply associated with any single identity as many scholars did when examining heavy metal in the western context (Christenson & Roberts, 1998: 103; Phillipov, 2012: 56).

Figure 8: Different subgenres of ROG



In summary, by the textual analyses of ROG, four identical characteristics of EMMC can be concluded. First, the holistic praxis presents a general tendency of non-realism. Secondly, the politics and religion are not significantly relevant. Thirdly, there is an obvious contradictory attitude toward the tradition, both embracing and opposing. Fourthly, the diversity and complexity of Chinese social structures is reflected in the various subgenres. Notably, the current observations should be seen as illustrative more than representative due to the limitations of the examination. For example, the selected samples may inevitably reflect the subjective preference of its label (Mort) more than objectively reflective to EMMC. In addition, the conclusions obtained from textual analyses are usually influenced by different researchers' particular angles, parameters, or contextual concerns.

### **Preliminary conclusions and further research implications**

This article has focused on extreme metal in mainland China during 2000 to 2013, investigating its formation, industries, and identities. As a transplanted cultural phenomenon, extreme metal rooted in mainland China as genre around 2000. Then, EMMC had been developing steadily but in an underground status, and the metal industries were gradually established. Finally, based on the textual analyses of *“Resurrection of the Gods”*, the multiple identities of EMMC have been discussed.

Based on these preliminary findings, further research implications can be proposed. First, more general and fundamental regulations of metal can be possibly revealed in the background of global metal through conducting competitive studies between China and other countries. Secondly, the underground pros-

perity of EMMC indicates that more comprehensive surveys of Chinese metal industries may be increasingly significant in both theoretical (metal scholars) and practical (metal artists and businessmen) aspects, particularly considering the large-scale of music market in contemporary China. Thirdly, the industrial statistics in the article suggest that the research of EMMC could be primarily focused on a few core cities, and more in-depth fieldworks in these cities are required. Besides, a methodological consideration could be inspired, that how to make effective textual analysis of metal and how to properly connect the textual descriptions with cultural interpretations. Finally, insofar as this is the first academic article about EMMC, its analyses are relatively holistic and quantitative. It implies that the future studies should be turned to the specific details of EMMC, with more individual and qualitative analyses.

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## Discography

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- 2008 "Resurrection of the Gods V", Mort Production, Mort 025.
- 2009 "Resurrection of the Gods VI", Mort Production, Mort 035.
- 2011 "Resurrection of the Gods VII", Mort Production, Mort 058.
- 2013 "Resurrection of the Gods VIII", Mort Production, Mort 084.
- The official website of ROG, at <http://www.mort-prod.com/release/release.htm>