Red Sonic Trajectories - Popular Music and Youth in China

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One warm summer night in 1991, I was sitting in my apartment on the 11th floor of a gray, rather depressive building on the outskirts of Amsterdam, when a documentary on Chinese rock music came on the TV. I was struck by the provocative poses of Cui Jian, who blindfolded himself with a red scarf - stunned by the images of the crowds attending his performance, images that were juxtaposed with accounts of the student protests of June 1989; and puzzled, as I, a rather distant observer, always imagined China to be a totalitarian regime with little room for dissident voices. This puzzlement has resulted in the writing of this book on popular music in China. It can be read as a critical interrogation of two major assumptions that framed my viewing of that documentary, namely the totalitarianism of China and the rebelliousness of rock. This book aims to grasp my trajectory over the past decade, to analyze such overriding terms as "China", "popular music", and "youth culture" - the leading concepts grouped in the subtitle of this book. Urban China (not only Beijing), popular music (and not rock), and youth (without labeling it a subculture).

My perception of China as a totalitarian regime was ruptured shortly after my first arrival in 1992. I was confronted with an alienating schism when talking to youths. They didn't show a strong interest in the Cultural Revolution, nor did they express a strong involvement in the events of June 4th, 1989, to name two themes that fascinated me as a Western observer. Instead, they were more eager to find a better job, study, do business, and - if possible - go abroad. My conception of rock as a rebellious sound proved to be romantic, to say the least, when for example punk singer Peter from the group 69 explained to me how he traded in stocks and shares to make a living, or when Tang Dynasty's guitar player Kaiser Kuo argued in favor of the Party, since in his view, a certain amount of discipline is necessary to keep such a big country together.

To argue that the whole nation is brainwashed by its government and therefore lacks a sincere interest in politics, would be to assume that there is a naïve trust in the communicative power of the Party. Something more complex, and therefore also more exciting, is happening in China. Rock will prove to be an important domain for academic inquiry when we aim to grasp some of the complexities and anxieties of contemporary China. Rock's emergence in the mid-1980s shocked China: All of a sudden there was this long-haired guy with an electric guitar whose hoarse voice seemed to signify the anger, confusion, and pain of a whole generation. Cui Jian's hit single "Nothing To My Name" became the anthem of the student movement in the spring of 1989. Was the future of Chinese rock also crushed under the tanks that so violently ended the student protests? What did the 1990s bring?

Although they brought a steady growth of Chinese rock, it was not a spectacular rise. Nor
did the critical debate on Chinese culture that characterized both intellectual and artistic discourses of the 1980s, continue. Especially after Deng Xiaoping’s visits to southern China in 1992, the ideological vacuum that emerged in the wake of the 1989 crackdown seemed to dissolve as further economic reforms were put into full swing by Deng. An immediate and easy description of the 1990s is that of a decade with a boundless celebration of consumerism. However, the commercialization of Chinese culture triggered many complex processes that profoundly changed the everyday life of Chinese citizens, processes that certainly cannot be summarized by just one word: Consumerism. Chinese society has experienced another Cultural Revolution over the last decade, a revolution that is marked by “post” as its signifier: Post-revolutionary, post-socialist, and postmodern (Dirlik & Zhang 1997: 14). “Dizzying change and bewildering fragmentation not only undermine inherited narratives but call into question the very possibility of encapsulation within a coherent narrative of the past, the present and the future” (ibid.: 9). The postmodern functions as a site of ongoing struggles between the legacies of the past, the contradictions of the present, and the uncertainties of the future. It is not the intellectual domain, nor the political arena, but rather the cultural sphere that serves as the most important battleground for these struggles. A wide array of aesthetic forms - ranging from the movies of Zhang Yimou and, especially, Zhang Yuan, the novels by Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo, soap operas such as Eastern Sunrise, Western Rain (Dongbian richu xibian yu), and popular music such as Gangtai pop from Hong Kong (Xiang Gang), and Taiwan and rock from Beijing - can be interpreted in relation to “Chinese” postmodernism.1

Although market reforms are going hand in hand with gradual depoliticization in China (in the sense of a certain withdrawal of the state from the public sphere), this does not imply that politics is entirely absent from these public spaces. The market reforms and their cultural manifestations have not created, for instance, a public sphere in which people could privately debate societal change (Davis 1995: 7). As Foucault reminds us, power is everywhere (a seemingly hollow statement which, however, points to the impossibility of clearly separating the political from the non-political), and rather than localizing spaces that are presumably far removed from Chinese political realities, we might do better to rethink the complex relationship between politics, popular culture, and everyday life. This book deals with these problematics by singling out rock culture in an attempt to unravel the negotiations between past, present, present, present, present.

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1 Chinese intellectuals argue that one can speak of Chinese postmodernism (Wang 1997: 19-40). Such a claim regarding authenticity contradicts the discourse of postmodernism itself, which questions, among others, the idea of authenticity. According to Dirlik and Zhang (1997: 11), “postmodernism [functions] as a concept with which to grasp and make sense of a complex reality that does not lend itself to comprehension through categories marked by the spatial and temporal teleologies of modernity.” Rey Chow argues strongly against localizing theories, here cultural studies: “If one of the major tasks of cultural studies is that of bringing the entire notion of ‘culture’ into crisis rather than simply that of assembling different cultures for their mutual admiration, then a localist and nationalist strategy as such, which returns culture to the status of some origin, property or set of attributes - such as ‘Chinese,’ ‘French,’ ‘American’ - that everyone owns prior to language and discourse, would precisely put an end to the critical impetus of cultural studies” (Chow 1998: 9-10).
and future; between China, Greater China (a term that refers to mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and, arguably, the Chinese diaspora), and the West; and between production of the music, the rock musicians, and the reception of the music by its audiences.

Chinese rock can be considered one of the aesthetic forms that emerged during the 1980s, when it appeared along with other cultural products such as the TV documentary “River Elegy” and shared with them a sharp social critique. It continued to grow on the waves of commodification and commercialization in the 1990s. As a music genre, rock is framed by what I call the rock mythology. In this book I will analyze the discourses inside and outside China that together constitute this mythology and that produce rock as a distinct and supposedly rebellious music world. I will show how this mythology brings musicians, producers, audiences, academics, journalists, and politicians together in the universe of rock. In particular, the authenticating and localizing power of the rock mythology will be of crucial importance if we are to grasp the politics of Chinese rock. In doing so, I am less concerned with fixating the Chineseness of rock culture in China, than in analyzing how this Chineseness, along with other signifiers, is used as a marker of distinction.

But before embarking upon this project, I will first outline in this chapter the developments in China over the past two decades, and discuss the accompanying academic accounts of these developments. After positioning rock culture in both time and space, I will situate this study within the context of Modern China Studies and trace points of both convergence and divergence.

~ Texts ~

Trajectories

The Chinese media are still under the close surveillance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To grasp the intertwinement between the CCP and the Chinese media, we need to go back to World War II. In May 1942, Chairman Mao Zedong gave a speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. Yan’an was the communist guerrilla base where intellectuals and patriots gathered in the early 1940s. According to Saich (1994: 971), their aspiration to join the Party was caused by a desire to resist Japanese occupation, rather than by a strong commitment to communist ideology. These new members were not very well versed in Marxist-Leninism, which endangered the cohesion of the CCP. The threat of ideological erosion was unacceptable in a period of military crisis brought about by the war with Japan and the conflictual relationship with the Guomindang, the nationalists who later fled to Taiwan. Consequently, “To Mao and his supporters it was clear that if the CCP was to remain a coherent fighting unit a certain degree of ideological orthodoxy was necessary” (ibid.: 971). His talk in
Yan’an was one out of several that together constituted the ideological orthodoxy of the Party. After pointing out that literature and art in China ought to be geared toward the needs of its audiences - of which the most important are the workers, peasants and soldiers - Mao stated (in ibid.: 1128):

Since art is subordinate to class and Party in a society which has classes and parties, it must undoubtedly follow the political demands of those classes and parties, must follow the revolutionary period. (...) Literature and art are subordinate to politics, but in turn also wield a great influence over them. Revolutionary literature and art are a part of the whole revolutionary cause.

Both the artist and the media were to serve the revolutionary struggle. After “liberation” in 1949, their role became that of mouthpiece for the Party.

The opening up of China after Deng came to power in 1978 has had a profound impact on the mass media in China. Apart from being the mouthpiece for the Party, the media were supposed to meet the demands of the diverse audiences and to become economically independent. In the 1980s, the Chinese media witnessed an increasing openness, leading to a rapid diversification of media contents. Some media products were imported, such as American soap operas and Japanese cartoon series. In particular, the flow of *Gangtai* popular culture (from Hong Kong and Taiwan) - including which pop music - has changed the cultural landscape of China considerably, inspiring some authors to speak of an emerging common popular culture in Greater China (Gold 1993; Harding 1995). Other cultural forms were produced in China itself, such as the movies produced by the fifth generation of moviemakers Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, the avant-garde art of Fang Lijun, the novels by Wang Shuo, and the rock music of Cui Jian. The leading question in predominantly Chinese academic and artistic circles in the 1980s appeared to be how Chinese culture should reposition itself in a rapidly globalizing world. The media became an important arena (along with, among others, universities) for this “great cultural debate”.

One production that can be considered emblematic of the spirit of the 1980s, and is therefore frequently referred to by Western academics, is the TV series “River Elegy” (*Heshang*). This six-part series, broadcast in 1988, deals with the frustration over China’s failure to become a powerful, modern, trading nation. It is a dramatized documentary, written by a group of

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2 For an overview of this debate, see: Barmé & Jaivin (1992), Geist (1996), and Zhang (1997). The disjuncture with the West during the 1980s is striking: Whereas China was engaged in a lively and heated debate over its identity while opening up rapidly to the outside world, the West was struggling with economic recessions, strikes, unemployment, and wars. These wars were both imagined (the Cold War) and real (e.g., the Falklands Conflict). The 1980s were the years of Thatcher and Reagan, a decade with a spirit mirrored in the depressive sound of new wave music, and finally reached its dramatic apotheosis with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.
critical intellectuals, in which Chinese culture is blamed for being conservative and backward. It contains a sharp critique on Chinese traditional culture and, indirectly, on its present regime, and asks for a radical opening up to the outside - Western - world (Barmé 1995: 223). In reflecting on contemporary Chinese culture, references are made to “typical” Chinese symbols, such as the Yellow River, the dragon, and the Great Wall. For example, the Great Wall was said to symbolize China’s reluctance to open itself up to foreign cultures. The parallels with the May 4th movement from 1919, during which similar demands for change toward a modern, cosmopolitan nation and opening up to foreign cultures were made, are apparent. But, “What was different was that it confronted a mass television audience with a highly controversial political and cultural debate. In a sense it was a televised ‘struggle session’ against Chinese cultural icons and feudal Marxism” (Barmé & Jaivin 1992: 139). According to China Central Television (CCTV), the national broadcasting service of China, over 200 million people watched the series (ibid.: 140). The discussions spurred by the series were not restricted to China, but extended to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities. It was criticized by the Party and by conservative voices in Taiwan as being “culturally nihilistic” (ibid.: 141).

The controversial contents of “River Elegy” have frequently been read by academics as an important counter discourse, in juxtaposing China with the West, “the Western Other is used as a metaphor for a political liberation against ideological oppression within a totalitarian society” (Chen 1995: 8). But in its focus on China’s long past, its references to the supposed openness of the Tang Dynasty toward foreign cultures, and its extensive use of symbolism, its makers still present a rather monolithic, patriotic interpretation of China. As Lee correctly argues, “The narrative recovers and reinvents the same kind of patriotic sentiment on which the mentalities it claims to critique also relied” (1996: 25). The content is thus far from unproblematic, yet the series does allow us a glimpse of the changes in the media landscape of China in the 1980s, and can be considered emblematic of the great cultural debate of that period.

When compared to “River Elegy,” the fifth-generation cinema and avant-garde art, the emergence of rock music is significantly different. Although “River Elegy” reached a wide audience, it remained a singular event that was predominantly steered by intellectuals. Both the fifth-generation cinema and the avant-garde are part of a high culture that, not surprisingly, has been eagerly hijacked by the global cultural elite. The resemblance to Wang Shuo - the “hooligan (liumang) writer” whose books were bestsellers between 1987 and 1992 - seems more conspicuous. Wang Shuo’s novels “represented the spirit of the alienated, semi-criminal fringe of Beijing youth culture and Chinese urban life in general” (Barmé 1999: 79). Wang

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Shuo’s works reached a wide audience, especially since he was also active as a scriptwriter for the highly popular soap opera “Aspirations” (Kewang) and for the satirical comedy series “Stories of the Editor Room” (Bianjibude gushi) (for an extensive analysis of both Wang Shuo and these TV serials, see Barmé 1999). Cui Jian, probably even more so than Wang Shuo, reached millions of youths with his music, and over the years has established his own rock oeuvre. Apart from rock (yaogun yinyue), other genres that can be distinguished during the 1980s include disco (disike), Hong Kong and Taiwan pop (gangtai liuxing yinyue), northwest wind (xibei feng - folk songs combining both romanticism and realism, reflecting a desire for a shared and natural origin of Chinese culture), and prison songs (qiuge, folk songs from the northeast made popular by Chi Zhiqiang, former movie star and criminal turned singer) (Micutic, 1995). As I will show, Gangtai pop - from Hong Kong and Taiwan - is the most important and ideologically inscribed constitutive outside for Chinese rock.

June 4th 1989 marked the end of liberal cultural policies and a return to tighter ideological control (Barmé 1999: 99). By the start of the 1990s, most of the makers of “River Elegy” had fled abroad. If the series showed the relative cultural freedom of the 1980s, the consequences of the 1989 protests for the directors of “River Elegy” underlined how fragile that freedom was. The fascination of Western academics with the series corresponds to the fascination with Chinese rock. This focus on supposedly “alternative expressions” runs the danger of freezing certain texts in a subversive reading, thereby not only ignoring the inherent contradictions within those texts, but also ignoring and excluding equally interesting cultural products. In the years following 1989, the tightening of the cultural climate is not mirrored in the development of Chinese rock: Both 1990 and 1991 witnessed an increasing number of performances, and a rapid growth in the number of bands. The legendary rock concert “1990 Modern Music Concert Beijing” (1990 Beijing xiandai yinyue yanchanghui), at which six bands performed, was held in February of that year. It was scheduled to last two days, and all the available 18,000 tickets per day were sold out (Steen 1996: 137). After Cui Jian’s hit

Here I must add that the quantitative argument always strikes me as the least relevant with which to legitimize the study of popular culture.

For example, the pop music from the Taiwanese pop star Teresa Teng - or, in mainland pinyin romanization, Deng Lijun - has received far less attention from intellectuals on both the mainland and in the West, whereas her impact on mainland culture in the 1980s can hardly be overestimated. A popular phrase in the 1980s was that “Whereas old Deng [Xiaoping] rules during the day, little Deng [Lijun] rules at night.” In 1993, a tribute album was released, in which several Chinese rock bands cover her famous songs. According to the text on the jacket: “In a dozen years Deng Lijun has softened many musicians with her sweet, beautiful, bright voice. Around us was a group of brave young musicians, they got to know Deng Lijun before they knew Lennon and Bob Dylan, although at last they chose another kind of music.” Teresa Teng died a sudden death in a hotel in Thailand in 1995 at the age of 43.

The name was in fact “1990 Beijing Rock Concert,” but it had to be changed after complaints from the government. According to Steen (1996: 138), officials discussed the rock music problem because 300 chairs were demolished during the concert. Such outrageous behavior by the public worried the officials, but apparently not enough to ban performances: Six months later, Cui Jian started his concert tour.
BEGINNINGS

single “Nothing to My Name” in the 1980s, this performance can be seen as the second major public manifestation of Chinese rock. Steen (1996: 135-136) argues that the growth of Chinese rock after June 4\textsuperscript{th} 1989 can, and should, be interpreted as a direct response to the demonstrations. Chinese rock transformed from a subculture into a counterculture, according to Steen. There is little evidence for such a strong relationship between June 4\textsuperscript{th} and the development of Chinese rock culture. The all-women band Cobra is one of the bands Steen refers to when describing the post-1989 boom in Chinese rock. I asked keyboard player Yun Jin whether there was any relation with June 4\textsuperscript{th}:\textsuperscript{7}

“No, there is no relation with June 4\textsuperscript{th} at all. Some of us were friends, some were colleagues in the same orchestra. We started to listen to Western music before June 4\textsuperscript{th}, and Cui Jian was already there. We didn’t have many things to do, we were very free, and said, ‘Okay, let’s [form a band] for fun’.”

The overpoliticized reading of a Western academic who presents June 4\textsuperscript{th} as an important turning point is countered by a denial of any political connotation: Yun Jin stresses here the continuity, Cobra is presented as one of Cui Jian’s followers, and the band was formed just “for fun”. However, both readings are unbalanced: The growth of the Chinese rock culture after June 4\textsuperscript{th} can be considered both a continuation of complex processes that resulted in the emergence of this culture since 1986, and a lifestyle that has become more attractive since the failure of the student protests. The tolerance the Party showed toward the rock culture contradicts the perceived repressive post-1989 media policies of Jiang Zemin, and suggests that the relationship between rock and the Party is not necessarily hostile.

1992 might well be a more significant turning point for Chinese culture. That year, Deng Xiaoping traveled south to visit the special economic zones, places like Xiamen and Guangzhou where China was experimenting with a more open, market-oriented economy. Deng expressed his discontent about economic developments, and in doing so gave processes of commercialization a strong impetus. Not surprisingly, 1992 was also the year the Taiwanese record company Rock Records released albums, under the label Magic Stone, from the rock generation that followed in the wake of Cui Jian’s success. Tang Dynasty, Dou Wei (the former vocalist of Hei Bao), He Yong, and Zhang Chu were part of what can be called the second generation of Chinese rock.\textsuperscript{8} Meanwhile, a sixth generation of movie-makers, such as Zhang Yuan, moved away from the romantic and exoticizing cinematic style of their predecessors, and aimed for a more rough and direct way of presenting contemporary China. Zhang Yuan’s underground movie “Beijing Bastards” depicts the fringe of Beijing’s youth culture, including

\textsuperscript{7} Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are drawn from my interviews with musicians. I will in the last section of this chapter elaborate further on the methodologies used for this study. Appendix I contains an overview of the interviews.
its rock scene. Cui Jian, who later told me that he didn’t like the movie, was not only the co-producer but also played himself in the movie.

During the 1990s, government control over the cultural domains in China fluctuated, with 1998 the most recent turning point. After the 15th Party Congress (September 1997), the government once again supported the loosening up of the publishing and cultural spheres, thus allowing the release of, for example, musical products that could not be released earlier (Barmé 1999: 189). In the near future, China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) will most likely further accelerate the opening up of the cultural industry. However, relaxing control does not signify a retreat of the state, as I will show in this book, but entails a complex renegotiation of relationships between artists, cultural entrepreneurs (national, regional and global), and various official departments.

Cui Jian’s trajectory over the past two decades further illustrates these changes. Today (autumn 2000), he is still China’s best known rock star. He is, as will become clear in this book, an important reference point for both bands and audiences. However, I will confine myself to a brief overview of his musical past, since both his music and his personal history have been extensively covered elsewhere (Chong 1991; Lanning 1991; Jones 1992; Steen 1996; Xue 1993; Zhao 1992). Born in Beijing in 1961 to a Korean family, Cui Jian started his music career 20 years later as a classical trumpet player with the Beijing Philharmonic Orchestra (see Figure 1.1). His year of birth is significant: He was five at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and 15 when it ended, making him part of a generation that was located in a twilight zone: It did not belong to the revolutionary communist youth league, nor was it really part of the post-revolutionary generation. It might be this in-between position that fuels Cui Jian’s “critical” spirit. According to mainland academic He Li, Cui Jian used rock’n’roll to express two specific themes of the 1980s, namely, “a negation of the Cultural Revolution and a renaming of the self” (He 1996).

After releasing an unsuccessful pop album, Cui Jian started to experiment with rock music in order to address these two themes. Influenced by a wide range of styles, ranging from the Police to the Beatles and U2, Cui Jian quickly developed his own eclectic mix. His first rock album - Rock’n’Roll on the New Long March - was released in 1987. It is a revealing album title, as it borrowed its power from communist history, with the long march symbolizing the perseverance and strength of the CCP. Cui Jian revealed his sense of mission as he spoke of a new long march, and rock is, so it seems, used as the transportation mode for this march.

4 The discography contains an overview of the names of musicians and bands and the record companies they are/were under contract with.

5 Interestingly, Cui Jian’s ethnic background has never been an issue among either audiences or journalists in China. Only in Korea did audiences expect him to articulate his Korean descent, to Cui Jian’s disapproval.
It is no surprise that Cui Jian’s relationship with the authorities is ridden with conflicts. After transforming a revolutionary classic (“Southern Muddy Bay”) into a rock song, Cui Jian was forbidden to perform in 1987 (Jones 1992: 94). Releases were delayed due to problems with the censors. His most important song “Nothing to My Name,” one of the anthems of the students movement in 1989 that over time was further commodified into a karaoke version, combines traditional Chinese music with a rock sound. Its musical structure is described by Jones as one of tension and release (ibid.: 136). The singer muses in this song over a girl laughing at him, as the following fragments shows (in Jones 1992: 134):

I’ve asked tirelessly, when will you go with me?
But you just always laugh at my having nothing
I’ve given you my dreams, given you my freedom
But you always just laugh at my having nothing
Oh! When will you go with me?
Oh! When will you go with me?

But I have my doubts: Is it really a girl who laughs at Cui Jian - or is the girl synonymous with the Party, who laughs at a whole generation? Cui Jian’s lyrics are profoundly metaphorical in that the personal resembles the cultural. And given the close intertwinement of the cultural with the political, Cui Jian’s lyrics can easily be read as a political critique. His stance toward
both Chinese culture and politics closely resembles the great cultural debate of the 1980s, but he carried it on into the 1990s. His missionary zeal is at times patriotic. He claimed in a 1993 interview that Beijing-based rock was different from its Western counterpart. "He averred that northern Chinese could produce a robust, positive, and socially progressive type of music that was quite different from the negative and decadent rock of the West" (Barmé 1999: 272). Pop music from Taiwan and Hong Kong is downgraded by Cui Jian, he states (in ibid.: 361):

"Pop music as a strictly commercial product, that is for money only, I am not interested in and am indeed opposed to."

In another interview with Hao Fang (1997), Cui Jian remarks aptly that what makes Chinese rock Chinese are the issues that are dealt with in the songs. His judgement of issues he considers "Western" reflects his occasionally occidentalist gaze:

"Westerners take drugs as an instant response to the work stress and the high popularity of sexual happiness. However, China’s history of drugs was imposed upon it by the colonial countries."

At such moments, Cui Jian is anything but rebellious, and his opinions resonate with the nationalistic policies of the CCP during the 1990s.

But signs of rebellion seem to dominate, for example, on the flyer for his 1990 tour (Figure 1.2), which was cancelled after the wild audience in Chengdu frightened the local authorities too much. We see a creative reappropriation of a map that depicts a communist guerrilla. It offers us a fine glimpse of some recurring characteristics of Cui Jian's image.

For this flyer, Cui Jian borrowed from the imagery of the Communist Party. Whereas the Party "liberated" the country on October 1st 1949 from a feudalistic regime, the flyer suggests that the rock of Cui Jian will liberate China from its current authorities. We see red arrows pointing to areas already liberated by the force of rock, whereas the shaded parts are yet to be liberated by our hero with his electric guitar. We are confronted here with a subculture pur sang, so it seems. Signs belonging to the dominant culture are given a different meaning; they are now used to challenge dominant culture. Just as the punks transformed the meaning of a safety pin (Hebdige 1979), so Cui Jian transforms the meaning of the glorified communist past as embodied in a map of a communist warfare.

The videoclip of his song "Flown Away" presents another example of Cui Jian's style. It

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10 The borders are inaccurate; for example, Taiwan is located south of Fujian.
Figure 1.2: Flyer Cai Jian Tour
shows a communist dance performance where the aged audience, all dressed in the same grayish Mao outfits, sits motionless, with an empty gaze in their eyes. The dancers, all female, all dressed in blue with a red scarf and red head-kerchief, move quickly to the sound of Cui Jian’s song. The stage floor is half open, and smoke seeps through the cracks. Under the floor, Cui Jian and his band play the song. In this clip produced by Zhang Yuan, rock is literally presented as an underground sound. The saxophonist Liu Yuan wears a green Mao cap, adding to the rebellious aura the whole clip evokes. It takes little imagination to read this clip as a political protest against communism, and is therefore not surprising that it (and other clips of Cui Jian) was not allowed on public television.

Cui Jian did to some extent enter the spirit of the 1990s by setting up his own company, East-West (dongxi). He also became the producer for the band Zi Yue. That he did not lose his critical edge becomes clear on a compilation album titled *Born on the first of July*. Twelve bands from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Beijing were invited to reflect in their music on the return of Hong Kong to Beijing rule on July 1st 1997. Cui Jian is the only dissident voice on the album: The other bands are unanimous in celebrating the handover. In his rap song “Beyond that Day”, Cui Jian uses, as do other bands on the album, a familial home-coming narrative when he compares Hong Kong to a younger sister who is about to come home. The voice in the song, however, asks his mother:

Do you really understand the sister I have never met,
or do you really understand me?
If we all of a sudden fall in love with one another,
what are you going to do? (…)  
Mother,
the day my sister comes back, is a chance
to go beyond that traditional concept of family

Once again the metaphor he uses resembles the political: He wonders whether the mother (the Party) can control what happens when the lost sister (Hong Kong) returns to China and meets her brother (China’s new generation), who might well be seduced by the capitalist consumer culture of Hong Kong. It is also the only rap song on this compilation album. This sound strengthens his critical stance. Rap - which originated in US ghettos and by now has been appropriated by marginalized communities throughout the world, such as the Maori in New Zealand and the Moroccans in France - is often constructed by musicians, record companies, journalists, and academics alike as the countercultural sound of the 1990s. Cui

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11 Elsewhere (Chow & Kloet 2000) I analyze how the Chinese identity is articulated, and celebrated, in the songs on this compilation CD. There I argue that the Chinese identity is a complex amalgamation of nationalistic, religious, and ethnic sentiments, blended together into a rather sanctified narrative that borrows its power from the ideology of the family.

Given his politically inspired metaphoric aesthetics, Cui Jian also appeals to an international audience. Since 1989 he has regularly performed abroad. He suits this predominantly Western desire to see communist authorities challenged and fits well into the idea of rock as a rebellious sound. He both caters to and questions this bias:

“To many foreigners ‘China’ only means ideology or politics, they think that all Chinese youth are very suppressed. They pay no attention to the Chinese economy or culture. Sometimes we do so ourselves. (...) Making music is something very complicated, (...) you should shoulder the responsibility, you must say things about society.”

And he does say things about society. For example on democracy, Cui Jian says (in Daisaburo 1997: 38):

“A state is surprisingly narrow-minded, and when it feels threatened, it quickly suspects democracy. In its mind, democracy appears to mean another Party, another army. But for artists and the general public, democracy means nothing more than freedom.”

Cui Jian thus positions himself as a man with a mission: He aims to confront the young generation of China with the problems of their country, he wants them to be critical, and to him, being true to yourself is a prerequisite for remaining critical. To Cui Jian, his political stance also underlines his realness:

“Maybe you should lie, be patient and treat [government officials] like kids, maybe you can win. But that is not honest for the audience, it’s not right, so if you do that you lose your heart and you have no feeling to write your music. (...) So many people lie, they become successful because they know how to play the game.”

His insistence on speaking the truth authenticates his image and ties in very well, as I will show, with what rock is all about. However, although the chosen path to remaining “real” - that is, voicing his opinions on contemporary Chinese culture - corresponds with the spirit of the 1980s, it appears to be out of touch with the more leisurely, more playful *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s. Today, a Chinese youth is less interested in changing the country than in changing his or her own lifestyle. The urge to do business or to go abroad and return as a promising young urban professional, are ideals that are far removed from those enshrined in Cui Jian’s songs.
Cui Jian explained to me his views on the new generation, that born during or even after the Cultural Revolution:

"The younger generation, I should try hard to understand them. (...) They don't want to think about too many things, about the responsibility. (...) They don't care about anyone else, and I think in some way they are pretty independent, they don't need as much friendship as we do, they just want fun, to be cool, to enjoy a good fuck, earn money. Maybe it's not wrong, it's just..."

This is the voice of a bitter rebel who seems to have lost touch with a new generation. A columnist in China wondered: “Cui Jian cares about young people, will young people still care about Cui Jian?” (Deng 1997: 18). Today, it seems that the godfather of Chinese rock no longer rocks as much as he used to. Politics is no longer sexy; it's an ossified word belonging to the past. Exit Cui Jian, enter New China. But he continues, as in the song “Idiots”, where he raps angrily:

But what is enough, what is enough?  
We are so concentrated on making money that everything will be forgotten (...)  
Apart from the things in front of me, what else can I do?  
Apart from eating, drinking, shitting, and sleeping, what else can I think?  
Ha! If you ask me what the next generation will be like,  
I will give you a straight answer: Why should I care?

Maybe he shouldn’t. He reached his peak in the 1980s and early 1990s, and in his wake a vivid rock culture emerged. This rock culture still respects him as being China’s rock hero, his poster hangs on the wall of the punk bar Scream, and he appears as a guest trumpet player on a punk album released in 1999. Cui Jian, like all stars, is also controversial. He has been involved in various law suits and been criticized for the way he handles his band. According to a manager from a record company:

"His band members did not get the credits or the money, they were later simply abandoned by him. (...) Before June 4th I never heard Cui Jian say anything at all about his support for democracy. (...) He's not real, he's not sincere; his self-interest is so great that it's always himself he puts first.”

Nevertheless, he did pave the way for the rock culture in China. The bands that emerged in the early 1990s (some of which will be discussed in Chapter 3), after Cui Jian had achieved his fame, did not pursue his explicit, albeit metaphorical, political path. The music of Dou Wei and Zhang Chu is more personal and more ambiguous than that of Cui Jian. Punk rocker He Yong only succeeds in some songs to live, or better, act up to his image as Beijing’s most
The music of bands from the second generation ranges from the heavy metal of Hei Bao and Tang Dynasty, to the folk music of Zhang Chu and the dream-like soundscapes of Dou Wei. Although these second-generation bands, most of which were released under the Magic Stone label, are musically quite different from one another, the themes expressed in their lyrics resemble one another more closely. “Rock lyrics are set in a colloquial, urban idiom, and treat themes of alienation, oppression and the desire for emotional release” (Jones 1992: 101). However, it was not only Jones who complained about the perceived lack of thematic diversity: Journalists in China also complained.

Crises

The perceived lack of thematic diversity reflected a discontent with the present among artists and intellectuals in China that also fed a certain nostalgia for the 1980s. These sentiments, coupled with a tightened political climate around 1996, might explain why Chinese rock was considered to be in crisis in the mid-1990s. By then, it was believed that the great cultural debate had faded away and been replaced by complex processes of commercialization and individualization. The suicide of the poet Hai Zi in 1989 (cultural critics believed he could not endure the “dissipation of history” in contemporary China (Dai 1998: 1)) inspired song writer Gao Xiaosong to reflect on the 1980s in three songs. He writes:

“I cannot describe what that age looked like. I can only remember the anthology of poems in our bags, the poetry groups on campuses. (...) That was an age when white clothes were as beautiful as the snow, the world was full of intelligence and beauty, full of strength and warmth. Those who died are happy, but we have to live in this ridiculous world, desperately.”

Thus we are confronted with a tidy narrative that tells us that the 1980s were the years when the cultural and intellectual elite critically interrogated China and its culture and politics, while during the 1990s the spirit of money took control. Art went commercial and popular culture - an ambiguous label referring to almost any cultural form considered popular, ranging from soap operas and the Titanic, to pop and rock music - gained increasing power over China’s cultural landscape. Those in favor of a critical approach to things Chinese fall back on

12 On my question to He Yong whether he considers himself to be a good musician or a good actor, he answered that a good actor might come closest to what he is doing. His provocative poses, embodied in the punk rock classic “Rubbish Dump,” attracted much attention from the international media. However, since the release of his first CD in 1992, He Yong has failed to come up with any new music.

13 It is a rather common practice to construct closed narratives of a decade. For example, the 1960s are often equated with flower power in the West, just as the 1980s represent the punk and new wave years. The danger lies in the fact that other cultural trends are easily being overlooked or excluded. The dramatic ending of the 1980s in China brought about by the events of June 4th, coupled with the fall of the Berlin Wall, facilitate the construction of a periodized narrative in which the 1980s are considered essentially different from the 1990s.
a nostalgia to the 1980s. For example, Beijing University academic Dai Jinhua told me:

“The culture of the 1980s was more real, but it was also an elite culture. The 1990s are more commercialized. In the 1980s rock had a rebellious function; in the 1990s it has turned into a commercial good.”

The same longing is felt by some of those active in the rock culture. DJ Zhang Youdai explained to me why he doesn’t like the 1990s:

“The new generation does not have their own culture, or their own life, it’s consumerism. I think the 1980s were the golden years. People ask me why Chinese rock started in the 1980s. I think you should ask why in the 1990s rock died in China. (...) In the 1980s young people concentrated more on culture; right now people concentrate on the economy, on making money.”

Or as rock critic Zhao Ke (1999: 14) puts it:

“Even if we are touched by the most pure, the most original rock music, that kind of emotion is still outdated. This era does not belong to those who gather together to scream in one voice. What we need now is individuality, our individual voice. Whether as music, as spirit, or as ideal, rock fulfilled its historical mission in the 1980s.”

Rock is considered to be out of touch with the spirit of the 1990s. The rebellious spirit of rock was perceived to have been crushed by the forces of commercialism unleashed during the 1990s, with the Party acting as the invisible puppet-master behind the “gold” screen. Here we are confronted with three major narratives: First, that rock is a rebellious sound; second, that the Party controls society and ought to be challenged; and third, that commercialization has corrupted the rebellious sounds in China. These narratives are inscribed into a temporal schism: The 1980s signified the rise of rock as a rebellious sound against the Party, while the 1990s ushered in the commercialization and commodification of rock.

But it is insufficient to single out the commercial as the sole reason for the perceived crisis of rock. Mainland journalists complained that only heavy metal traveled well to China. Manager Dickson Dee from Sound Factory, an independent Hong Kong record label, criticized Chinese rock musicians for being brainwashed:

“After so many years of communist education they are actually kind of brainwashed already and do not know how to be against the government, they only abandon themselves.”
In a review of a compilation album dedicated to Zhang Ju, the guitar player for Tang Dynasty who died in a motorcycle accident and thereafter gained a status similar to that of Jim Morrison (to die young sells well in rock), the author writes (Yi 1997: 42):

“Zhang Ju belonged to the heyday of rock music and witnessed the splendid rock between 1992 and 1993. He died in time and didn’t have to witness the downfall of Chinese rock music. (...) Rock musicians are not what they once were. These songs are very bad: Pretentious sadness, mourning without real pain. (...) If Zhang Ju had a spirit, he would be sad, the music he devoted his life to has become like this, so coarse, so placid and so tired.”

This author is not the only one to lament the death of Chinese rock. In a 1997 article entitled “Where will Chinese rock go?”, author Song Xiao traces three crises. First, he blames the musicians for lacking dedication. Second, he considers the style too rigid; in his words, “Almost all rock singers have long hair, shake their heads and look painful and desperate, they twist their body and shout in their songs.” His third point is the most controversial one: He considers Chinese culture - with its emphasis on quietness, wisdom, and self-restraint - to be incompatible with the spirit of rock, which in his view is based on the release of personal emotions. He argues for a sinification of rock in order to make the sound more compatible. Such discourses of cultural essentialism sustain the notion of Chinese rock and will be discussed in further detail throughout this book. What interests me most here is the perceived crisis in Chinese rock in the mid-1990s. These less productive years, in terms of releases and performances, seem to support the idea that the processes of commercialization were indeed harmful to the spirit of rock. However, Chinese rock regained its productivity and popularity increasingly after 1997, the year that marks the birth of the New Sound Movement of Beijing (Steen 2000; Yan 1999). We apparently ought to search for more subtle interpretations.

Cuttings

The Beijing New Sound Movement (Beijing Xinsheng Yundong) has its own chronicler, Yan Jun, who in 1999 published an overview of the bands he considered emblematic of the movement. His beautifully designed book combines avant-garde art works with images and descriptions of rock bands. To group bands together as a movement signifies a desire to impose a temporality upon a supposed “development” of Chinese rock; in Chapter 3 I will explain why I refrain from doing so. What is important here is that his anthology of the New Sound Movement is dedicated to the China’s dakou (see below) generation. He explains

Yan Jun’s favorite sweater had “Michel Foucault - Madness and Civilization” printed on the front, just like a fashion brand-name, with on the back a print of a passage from the book. It shows not only his self-positioning as the intellectual chronicler of the rock culture, but also reveals his readiness to be identified with contemporary Western philosophy.
briefly why (Yan 1999: 8):

“"It is only after thousands of tons of dakou albums have fed the mouths of a new musical generation and when more daring youths took up their guitars courageously, that we felt the true air of spring."

Fu Chung, manager of New Bees record company, dedicated his first release to the sellers of dakou tapes at Zhong Tu Men - one of the spots in Beijing to buy them. What does it mean to be dakou? Among many other meanings, da stands for stride, break, smash, attack, and kou stands for opening, entrance, cut. Together, dakou stands for the cut CDs and tapes that are being sold in urban China, often along with pirated CDs, on a bustling black market. These CDs are dumped by the West, and expose Chinese youth to music cultures that are otherwise unknown or forbidden on the mainland. Yan Jun explained how these CDs get to China (personal correspondence, December 2000):

*Dakou* - sometimes called “saw-cut” - products originate from major American and Canadian record distributors and wholesalers. During regular stock clearance exercises, they gather up unsold stocks in their warehouses and cut them, normally with a saw, sometimes with a drill. Only very rarely do they use vehicles to crush them. The resultant plastic garbage is sold to recyclers for processing. They are also bought up and smuggled to China. Generally speaking, the activity is monopolized by Mafia-connected distributors. On arrival at the port, the cargo is handed over to sub-distributors, who have fixed locations in various small towns in Guangdong Province from which they sell the goods to buyers from different parts of the mainland."

After being cut by the record company, these CDs (see Figure 1.3) are shipped to China as surplus plastic, but then enter a Mafia-ruled domain of illegality in which they are smuggled onto the Chinese market.

*Dakou* CDs and tapes are cut to prevent them from being sold. However, since a CD player reads CDs from the center back to the margin, only the last part is lost. Not only have these CDs been tremendously nutritious for Chinese rock musicians, as they opened up a musical space that does not exist officially in China, they have also come to signify a whole urban generation. As rock critic Dundee explained (Dundee 1999a: 28):

“This plastic rubbish dumped by foreign record companies becomes a major source of pleasure for those discontented youths after they switch off their TV. When this plastic rubbish started flowing from the south to Beijing, it actually heralded a new rock era. All the new rock musicians in Beijing have grown up with *dakou* tapes.”
In another article critic Dundee points to the importance of the \textit{dakou} generation for the study of Chinese youth cultures (1999b: 27):

"In a not exactly official way, rock music, for the first time, was appropriated by youth (from \textit{dakou} tapes to the new bands now). If in the future sociologists or youth culture scholars study China's youth in the 1990s, they should not ignore this special phase."

It is remarkable that an urban generation chooses to name itself after an illegal product that is dumped by the West. A book on the \textit{dakou} generation is yet to appear. Not surprisingly, parallel to the current Internet fad in China, cyberspace is the place to be if we are to grasp the meanings of this term further. On one discussion site, there are various descriptions of the \textit{dakou} generation worth quoting at length. You Dali writes (2000):

"\textit{Dakou} cassette tape, \textit{dakou} CD, \textit{dakou} video, \textit{dakou} MD, \textit{dakou} vendors, \textit{dakou} consumers, \textit{dakou} musicians, \textit{dakou} music critics, \textit{dakou} magazines, \textit{dakou} photo books; this is a \textit{dakou} world, a new life where you don't even have to leave the country to realize your spiritual adventure. When Americans fiercely give themselves a cut,"

\footnote{I have to express my gratitude to Qin Liwen for pointing out this website to me. The site is part of the "elong" community, one of the most popular sites in China with different pages for different cities. The address from which these quotes are drawn is: www.guangzhou.elong.com/theme/themei48.html}
they also give the world a possibility of communism and unity. The Government doesn’t encourage 1.3 billion people to listen to rock and roll. A small bunch of them therefore secretly look for offerings to their ears, to their eyes, to their brains, and to their generation. If you can’t do it openly, do it secretly! On this useless plastic disc with a cut, some people are building their houses, some are driving their cars, while some are starving or shooting. It enables not only part of the population to become rich first, but also another part of the population to become poor first, and it also enables part of the population to become spiritually strong! Dakou products have ushered 1 million Chinese youths into a new wave, a new listening sensibility, a new awareness, a new mind and a new set of values. Whether the dakou generation is a jinkou [import] generation or a chukou [export] generation confuses quite a few social observers. Whatever it is, the strange thoughts, anecdotes and bad behavior of the dakou generation has already made most Chinese speechless.”

This is a parody of propaganda talk, such as the reference to Deng Xiaoping’s famous defense of his reform policy, in which he declared that one part of the population should be allowed to become rich first. There is a certain critical irony toward the US, which “gives itself a cut” and thereby supports a communist world. But at the same time there is a critique of the Chinese state which, according to this author, restricts the sound of rock. He reflects on the confusion over whether it comes from inside or outside, because under the current forces of globalization it is becoming increasingly hard to tell what is local and what is global. Also, the text evokes feelings of excitement and energy: The idea of being dakou seems empowering enough to build one’s life on. It is not just a cut in a CD, but a lifestyle that borders on the permissible, one which operates outside the political while criticizing the political. It is a lifestyle that is both global and local. It is an urban lifestyle at the turn of a century. An anonymous author wrote on the same website in 1998 about the dakou generation:

“We are a group of youth littering the margins of the city. We have nothing to do, but we like to play with our double-deck cassette player in our small flat. The noise it sends out receives angry shouts from the neighbors. We always ride on our grumbling old bikes, searching in small hutongs in the city for a dakou cassette tape. We run through the entire city, for a name no-one knows. In winter we stretch our cold hands rummaging through the items lying on the market ground. Our happiness is when we find treasure among the pile of tapes. It is a greeting and comfort to our heart. Autumn in the city is depressing and unbearable, as we are about to have our job and about to leave our familiar campus and city. We feel discontented and suppressed, but we can only nag like a child. We keep on saying something, but no-one pays attention. We like talking to ourselves. Brainlessness and unhappiness are our common traits. We are about to be buried and abandoned, as we are being dakou’ed by this strange era,
and we become *dakou qingnian* [youth]. Years later, we may forget the mark of *dakou*, but when we come across its trace in the street-side market stalls - ah, we will realize our youth is already *dakou*ed. This is our unforgettable era, our *dakou* era."

At the turn of the century, *dakou* has become a new label that groups urban youths together and replaces that other label that has received so much attention over the 1990s: The *liumang*.

*Liumang* is a word with strong criminal connotations, and few would be pleased to be labeled as such. As early as 1985, sinologist John Minford described the *liumang* generation as the fringe of China’s unofficial culture: “Rapist, whore, black-marketeer, unemployed youth, alienated intellectual, frustrated artist or poet - the spectrum has its dark satanic end, its long middle band of relentless gray, and, shining at the other end, a patch of visionary light. It is an embryonic alternative culture” (in Barmé 1999: 64). There are no grand ideologies anymore, it is unclear what is good and what is bad, confusion has taken control in the *liumang* era. Wang Shuo’s fiction is full of Beijing slang, his *liumang* characters operate on the margins, they are anything but heroic characters. Instead, his characters play around (*wan’r*), have sex, get drunk, and listen to music. Dutton takes the meaning of being a *liumang* even further and states that it refers to those who are without a place (Dutton 1998: 62). These are often people who float (*liu*) without a work unit, the *danwei*, such as the migrant worker. But Dutton also includes homosexuals under this label, as their sexuality does not provide them a place in contemporary Chinese society. Homosexuals may not be pleased to be categorized as such by a foreign observer.

In my interviews, hardly any rocker regarded himself as a *liumang*; its criminal connotations do not appeal to musicians. The term might fit the period around the turn of the decade, when China moved on from the 1980s toward the 1990s, and when the idea of being *liumang* was celebrated in the work of Wang Shuo. Now, at the start of a new century, it has lost its aura. If we are to use labels to group youth cultures together, this book can best be considered to focus on China’s *dakou* generation. This new label is unsuitable for such “oldies” as Cui Jian and Wang Shuo, as it refers to the generation born during or after the Cultural Revolution. As far as I am aware, my current attempt to adopt it represents its first hijacking by a Western academic.

What is strikingly different between the *liumang* and the *dakou* generation is not only the direct reference to music, but also - and especially - the inclusion of the illegal West in a “Chinese” concept. It opens up possibilities for a vibrant patriotism and for a creative rebellion vis-à-vis the Chinese state. The connotations of *dakou* are so diverse that it generates a discursive

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16 The work unit is, for example, the factory, school, or university one belongs to. It can be viewed as a communist attempt to replace the family and remains a very powerful locus of Party control.
field in which several narratives of this book come together. Dakou rocks, more so than liumang floats, and this is both a sonic and a cyberspatial rock. Both popular music and urban youth culture - remember the subtitle of this book - all get dakou'ed. Negotiating the West under current processes of globalization is also what dakou'ing is about. Because of a cut near the edge, a young generation reaches the center of a global music culture. The cut deforms the circle; something is missing, yet as a listener you get more, because you enter a domain of illegality. The dakou culture challenges established binaries such as local / global, as the CD is both specifically Western and specifically Chinese. The CD merges the margin with the center and inscribes popular music clearly into an "alternative" lifestyle. Suffice it to say, this book is not so much about the liumang generation as an exploration of the dakou era.

~ READINGS ~

Before discussing possible readings of the developments in Chinese popular culture described above (each description entails a reading which blurs the distinction I make between text and reading), let me reflect briefly on the problematics of my own position vis-à-vis the music itself. I consider Cui Jian to be one of the best rock musicians in China. To deny the rebellious potentials of rock strikes me as impossible when taking into account the impact of Cui Jian's song "Nothing to My Name," a song that hit China like a shock wave. Today, the collective memory of a whole generation is inscribed in this single song. It brings a past to the present. Cui Jian's poetic and critical lyrics, the unexpected twists in his sound, the creative mix of "Western" and "Chinese" sounds, his development over the years with significant creative leaps forward such as the inclusion of rap, as well as his charismatic personality and exciting live performances, all add to my positive judgement. He is to some extent the embodiment of a popularized version of the great cultural debate of the 1980s, and therefore triggers, for those who experienced these years, feelings of nostalgia.

When I lack inspiration to continue writing, I sometimes play a videoclip of Cui Jian in order to regain the feeling that rock music in China does matter, both musically and sociologically. I disagree with Barmé, who states - without substantiating his claim - that "the quality of [Cui Jian's] later work and the corpus of his music probably would have condemned..." Not only do I disagree with the statement that one cannot debate taste, but I also believe discussions over taste, explicit or not, are at the heart of social life (see also Bourdieu 1979; Frith 1996).

Boomkens (1994) links popular music to the idea of a shock experience, for which he draws extensively on the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin states that we have lost the ability to remember. Consciousness receives no memory traces whatever, its function is rather protection against stimuli. Sometimes, a crack will appear, a space for the experience of shocks. "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (Benjamin 1968: 255).
him to a short-lived career in a normal cultural market, but the unsteady politics of mainland repression lent him a long-term validity and the appeal reserved for a veteran campaigner" (1999: 131). However, just as I consider it a bit too sweeping to end up with such a cynical reading as Barmé's, I consider a romanticized fan-like reading of Chinese rock equally inappropriate. Although my involvement in the music might be a driving force, it is not my guiding force.

If we pursue the reading of the flyer depicted in Figure 1.2 a bit further, we are confronted with signs that are anything but univocal. To interpret the flyer as rebellious, semiotic guerrilla warfare (in line with traditional subcultural studies elaborated on in Chapter 3) might suit our desire, while we are safely seated in our academic chairs, to see dominant ideologies subverted. Such a romantic reading carries some truth, but much more is happening here. It is time to unhook the rebellious star. The flyer can also be read as an attempt to sinify rock. In a country where the rulers are at pains to constitute a socialism with Chinese characteristics, it comes as no surprise that its rock culture has set itself a similar goal. In its references to communist China, the flyer shows an important self-orientalizing move that signifies a desire to set Chinese rock apart from its Western counterpart, and resonates a belief in China's unique cultural characteristics (guoqing). And as such it resembles the policies of the CCP, which increasingly relies on nationalism, rather than communism, as its unifying ideology. During the 1990s, "the Chinese" replaced "the people." At the same time, the aesthetics of the flyer tie in well with the Western gaze on China, a gaze that shows a strong preference for either ancient China (that is, the traditional, primitive, mystical, exotic China) or communist China (with as its prime signifiers Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution). It is also a politicizing gaze, as it frequently reduces the realities of China to solely the political. Suffice it to observe here that this flyer is anything but univocal: It signifies complex negotiations of both time and space, negotiations that can be found not only in the rock culture but also in other cultural domains of contemporary China, be it the elite arts or popular culture.19

My description of the cultural trends of the past two decades has been brief, since they have been comprehensively described by others, particularly Barmé (1999). Apart from Barmé, whose collection of essays appeared under the title In The Red, another reading of contemporary China that is of crucial importance comes from Dutton. His book Streetlife China (1998) consists of a collection of articles written by Chinese scholars, linked together in an overall narrative provided by Dutton. What interests me is how Chinese popular culture has been

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19 The distinction between high and low culture is highly problematic but has unfortunately not lost its discursive power. To proclaim its end is one of the pervasive myths of cultural studies. For example, the canon that has grown around classical music is much more elaborate when compared to the canon of popular music - if there indeed is such a canon. Boomkens (2000: 12) argues that this badly affects the theorization of popular music. It can also be argued, I think, that the absence of a canon opens up a space to think through the power of music more creatively.
analyzed so far. Barmé's empirical strength is mitigated by his theoretical weakness. His book basically resonates around one main line of argument; that is, that during the 1990s Chinese culture, both the elite arts and popular culture, became increasingly commercialized, which reduced their subversiveness and maneuvered them more and more toward an intimate compliance with the CCP. To Barmé, the West is involved both as observer and as financier; for example, the art collector, whom he quite aptly labels a "collector of radical Chinoiserie chic who is in search of the authentic dissident Other" (xviii). In Barmé's narrative, money and subversion are as far removed from one another as Beethoven is from the Spice Girls. In his attempts to substantiate his argument, Barmé uses a wide array of adjectives to pigeonhole Chinese artists and dissidents. Some examples, apart from the earlier quoted judgement on Cui Jian's lack of musical skills, are:

"Chai Ling [one of the controversial student leaders of June 4th] for example, wrote a cloying essay column on her petit-bourgeois aspirations for a yuppie Hong Kong weekly."

"Looking beyond the superficial humor and limited political subversiveness of Wang [Shuo's] stories, as well as the more simplistic and obvious issues of youth alienation and emotional confusion..." (p. 97)

"Chen Kaige, an artist who gradually abandoned the artistic and cultural sincerity of his powerful early films for a more polished art-house exoticism..." (p. 194)

"... Zhang Yuan's work, with unswerving entrepreneurship, had hit on an issue [homosexuality] sure to appeal to the international art-house world and its attendant critics. (...) [The gay scene] was being depicted partly for its sensational value by a director who had an established record of overcoming his filmic deficiencies by pursuing the controversial." (p. 196)

The list is much longer: Videoclips are slick, mainland academics are patriotic po-moists, and so on. I share a lot of Barmé's concerns, and fully agree with him that one should be careful and critical, instead of only celebrating "critical voices", just as one should be alert to Western biases when it comes to the practice of China-watching. But he goes way too far in

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20 He cleverly silences such criticism in advance when he writes his disclaimer in the introduction: "...rather than pursuing an argument in one of the many dialects of hoch-pomo, I prefer to use platt-English. By so doing (...) it is inevitable that my work will be judged by some to be intellectually too flabby, a non-starter in the development of what Matt frytche so aptly terms 'neurobics for intellectual fitness freaks'" (xvi-xvii).

21 According to Barthes (quoted in Frith 1996: 294), "If we examine the current practice of music criticism (or of conversations on music: often the same thing), we see that the work (or its performance) is invariably translated into the poorest linguistic category: the adjective."
his accusation of artists and thereby falls prey to one overriding Western bias, namely, everything becomes 100% political and anyone who is not straightforwardly against the state is suspicious, to say the least. Of course, in his judgement some artists are satisfactory, such as the poet Bei Dao (ibid.: 12), and Barmé does acknowledge the subversive potential of, for example, rock music (ibid.: 129). However, his narrative is dominated by a highly unqualified and undertheorized cynicism.

Dutton shares my critique and takes a different stance. He states that “The problem with [Barmé’s] analysis (...) is its under-theorised approach to commodification. For Barmé, commodification is to rebellion what the full stop is to the sentence: It marks an end. Yet, commodification operates more like a syntactical structure, detailing the contoured forms available to rebellion and life rather than as a sign of its demise” (Dutton 1998: 6). Thus, Dutton opts to read consumption and commercialization as opening up a potential domain of contestation, rebellion, and subversion. In Dutton’s view, those who do not or cannot consume, such as transient workers (who are silenced and policed by the state), have developed their own language: “Their tactical language takes many forms; stealing, embezzling and ripping things off. (...) [T]hese have become the ‘mother tongue’ of an ever-increasing number of speakers who are talking with louder and louder voices” (ibid.: 284). Barmé’s and Dutton’s books are positioned at opposite points on the trajectory the pendulum of rebellion makes: Barmé tells us that what appears to be so rebellious is not rebellious at all, and Dutton tells us there is rebellion even at sites where one would not expect it, for example among the transient workers in China or in the consumption of Maoist imagery. Both readings fail to convince me. To consider Chinese artists the insincere accomplices of a communist regime, misses the point as much as celebrating the subversive potential of consumption. Where Barmé labels Cui Jian a rock prince (1999: 195), for Dutton rock singer Chen Jing is a rock’n’roll hero (1998: 277). A combination of both, such as Cui Jian being a heroic rock prince, seems impossible.

We are thus left with two well-informed and eloquently written accounts of contemporary Chinese culture that take inverse positions on similar themes. How to navigate between these two readings? “Read more,” could well be an answer. For example, the two books on Chinese rock music written by Jones (1992) and Steen (1996), respectively. In the following chapter I will discuss these texts in further detail. Suffice it to observe here that both texts interpret rock as a potentially subversive and emancipatory sound of an alienated and confused generation. As such, they overlap more with Dutton’s narrative than with Barmé’s.22 My reflection on these authors, whom I consider to be my main interlocutors in the field of Modern China Studies, leads me to the overall structure of this book.

22 As a general note, I run a danger that fuels all academic debates, namely that which Freud labels the narcissism of small differences (1930: 61), that is, although I agree on most points with these authors, I single out the differences so as to articulate my own position more strongly.
The rebellious aura of rock is produced by what I call the rock mythology. It is this mythology, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 2, that produces rock as a distinct music world. The mythology frames Cui Jian as a rebellious star who truly speaks out the fears, worries, and pains of his generation. Throughout this book I will analyze how this mythology functions as the glue that binds together musicians, producers, audiences, journalists, academics, and politicians. In unraveling the dynamics between these different groups, I have opted to structure this book along the lines of the traditional communication model, namely that which separates the musician from the producer and the audience. Having explained in detail the underlying assumptions of the rock mythology, which, as I will show, are most conspicuously present in the distinction that is made between pop and rock, I will explain in Chapter 2 how the mythology is a profoundly globalized narrative. In Chapter 3, I will introduce the different music scenes that are active in Beijing, such as heavy metal and hardcore punk, and analyze their position within the rock culture, the aesthetics that authenticate the scene and how they negotiate place, that is, how they try (or refuse) to make rock with Chinese characteristics.

The rock mythology is a force of inclusion and exclusion; in Chapter 4 I will analyze sounds that are marginalized: Female voices, bands from places outside Beijing, and Gangtai pop. Being aware that the meanings of popular music are not inscribed into the music itself but merely negotiated by its audiences, in Chapter 5 I will trace the uses of popular music. I will show how audiences move through music zones - pop, rock, and classical - and through the scenes as distinguished in Chapter 3. Some key aspects of the rock mythology, such as the importance attached to authenticity and the negotiation of place, prove equally important at the moment of reception, whereas the political turns out to be hard to locate within music preferences. The last two chapters discuss in detail the production of music in China. My analysis in Chapter 6 of the assumed processes of commercialization during the 1990s will show that these are very context-specific processes for which the label “commercialization” is far too sweeping. As such, Chapter 6 critically interrogates the perceived schism between the 1980s and the 1990s as outlined in this chapter, and criticizes the supposed incompatibility between rock and money. The state is most visible in the domains that regulate and control the reproduction of cultural forms, i.e., copyright protection and censorship. Both domains will be discussed in Chapter 7, after which I will conclude this book with a discussion of its more general implications for the study of popular cultures around the world.
BEGINNINGS

methods

"I talked about this with many colleagues, and guess what: We all lie in interviews. We
lie to protect ourselves, out of fear, of anger, as entertainment... in any case: We lie."

Pete Townshend (in Simonart 1997)

A strong faith in methodology often reflects both a strong (or rather, naïve) belief in a
factual reality that can be known and measured, and a mistrust in intellectual creativity. In my
attempt to grasp the dynamics that produce rock as a distinct music world, I employ an
eclectic range of methodologies. This study is informed by a wide array of empirical data. My
description of Cui Jian's oeuvre already sheds light on the methods employed. I will make
extensive use of the 170 MCs and CDs that I collected between 1992 and 2000, and include
the lyrics and compositions in my analysis. Given my limited musicological knowledge, the
balance is rather uneven as the focus is more on lyrical than on musical contents. Such
aesthetic reductionism produces a bias that unfortunately prevails in popular music studies.

I will at times embark upon a semiotic analysis of CD jackets, party flyers, and videoclips.
However, such analyses are troubled by a basic methodological fallacy of semiology: The
readings of the jackets and flyers are mine, and thus do not reveal the reception of audiences.
Only in rare cases have I been able to match my interpretation with that of audiences; in
general, neither jackets nor flyers were included in my audience study. In this study, semiology
has been a tool to sensitize myself, to guide the analysis into a certain direction, rather than a
tool to reach definite conclusions.

Articles that appeared in the mainland press shed light on Chinese discourses on popular
music. A distinction can be made between the official press - i.e., newspapers and magazines
directly linked to the CCP, such as the People's Daily (Renmin ribao) and the People's Music
(remin yinyue) - and the semi-official or popular press, which operates more independently
(Bax 1998). Stokes (forthcoming) makes a further distinction for the semi-official press between
pop magazines aimed predominantly at teenagers - such as Current Scene (Dangdai gequ),
Fan's World (Gemi dashijie), and Pop (Qing yinyue) - and the "critical" pop magazines, such
as Audio and Video World (Yinxian shijie), China Broadway (Zhonguo bailaohui), Music
Heaven (Yinyue tiantan), and Modern Sky Music Magazine (Modeng tiankong) (see also Steen
2000). The articles from the official press at times contain a propaganda-like critique on
popular music, labeling it as spiritual pollution from the West; the pop magazines contain
short features on the lives of pop stars, whereas the critical magazines are more focused on
the music itself, often expressing an aim to educate the readers in issues related to popular
music, with a special focus on rock. These latter pop magazines have been a valuable source
of information for this study. I have also used books, published on the mainland, on Chinese rock - such as the earlier mentioned one by Yan Jun on the New Sound Movement of Beijing - and on Western rock, such as a very extensive encyclopedia on “occidental popular music” (Yan 1999, Wang et al. 1999).

I carried out the fieldwork for this study during four periods: The winter of 1996/1997 (five weeks in Beijing); June to December 1997 (two weeks in Hong Kong and six months in Beijing); August 1999 (three weeks in Shanghai and Beijing); and April 2000 (five weeks in Beijing). During these periods, I attended as many live performances as possible. The most important information for this study came from interviews with record companies in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing, with rock and pop musicians from Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, and with Beijing youth. Appendix I provides an overview of all the interviews. In total, 94 were carried out: 18 with people working in the record industry, 35 with musicians, 9 with journalists and academics, and 32 with youths who were living in Beijing. All interviews were taped and transcribed. I chose not to use a standard questionnaire, but worked with an array of sensitizing concepts in the back of my mind, such as “Chineseness,” “politics,” and “gender.”

To gain some basic information on Chinese youth and media and music preferences, I carried out a survey among 650 respondents (see Chapter 5). Youths were introduced to me by Chinese friends; this group comprised 11 middle-school students, 18 university students, and three youths who had already started working. Sixteen were male and sixteen were female, and they ranged in age from 16 to 25. I also collected and analyzed the fan mail written by 80 rock fans to their favorite bands; this material was given to me by the record companies. The Internet proved to be an increasingly important source of information over the years this study took, not only to keep in touch with the latest trends (see, for example, my analysis of the dakou generation in this chapter), releases, concerts, and information cum gossip on the rock culture, but also as it is a forum for a transnational fan community.

Interviews with musicians usually took place over dinner, as this created an open, informal atmosphere that considerably improved both the quantity and the quality of the information provided. Some musicians were interviewed several times so as to trace their development over time (Qiu Ye from Zi Yue, Feng Jiangzhou from The Fly, and Zu Zhou from NO). An estimated 150 bands are currently active in Beijing, a figure that is most likely higher in reality, particularly if one counts student bands. With a few exceptions, the interviewed bands and singers are under contract to record companies. This study thus focuses on the more established part of the Beijing rock culture. It would be interesting to study how and why students form bands, as it would shed light on how music-making is often interwoven with other practices of everyday life, such as studying. However, this study focuses on the

23 For a valuable study on how music is one of the pathways for people to constitute everyday life, see: Finnegan 1989.
production of rock as a distinct music world. In my attempt to analyze this world, I chose to foreground the more established rock culture, as these are the bands that are released by record companies and known by youths.

Due to my limited knowledge of Chinese, interpreters were enlisted for the interviews and to translate both lyrics and articles.\(^{24}\) It goes without saying that this has affected the data, making, for example, a participatory observation in bars quite impossible. In any case, my Western appearance made me more of an outsider among the Chinese than a sociologist would like. On the other hand, musicians, record companies, and youths were always very helpful and open, and were quite eager to talk about their life and work. Their goodwill - and the rapport developed during the years of relating to them and their music - helped me to move into the rock culture quite easily. Articles on the rock culture I published in Dutch, English and Chinese journals and magazines added to my status and made bands and record companies more eager to help me. Unfortunately or not, I have not been able to talk with government officials from the Ministry of Culture about the CCP's policies vis-à-vis rock music, nor did I manage to get hold of a censor with whom to discuss the CCP's censorship policies in further detail; I would have needed very good relationships (guanxi) with officials to get so close to the political apparatus. Document research into regulations focusing on copyright protection and censorship has enabled me, however, to sketch out the policies of the CCP regarding cultural productions.

So much for the methods used to collect information and the limitations of this study. Throughout this book, ethnographic observations will guide me to theoretical interventions. In my view, the interpretation of field data implies a critical, theoretical interrogation of ethnographic reports. As such, no "truth" has emerged from the field data, like a ghost appearing from an empty bottle when a magic tune is played on a theoretical flute. Neither data nor theory are firmly grounded; at most, they are temporarily stable, fixed in time and space, waiting to be destabilized again. Instead, there is a constant dialogue between theory and data, the never-ending quest for interpretation in which I am driven by the theoretical concerns as outlined in this and the following chapters. This book will not reveal the truth about popular music in China, nor will it provide solid answers to fixed questions. The narrative to follow reflects a struggle over multiple interpretations, a search for meanings, a critical interrogation of what is considered to be the reality of Chinese rock, a reality produced by the discourses that have emerged around it, both inside and outside China.

\(^{24}\) Unless otherwise indicated, all lyrics have been translated by Chow Yiufai; articles have been translated by Chow Yiufai, Qin Liwen, and Wang Yiyou. Qin Liwen and Wang Yiyou were also my interpreters during the interviews.