Red Sonic Trajectories - Popular Music and Youth in China

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"The fact that we cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness."

Roland Barthes, Mythologies, 1957

More than ten years have passed since Cui Jian’s song “Nothing to My Name” marked the rise of a spectacular youth culture in China. The old Mao suits - signifying conformity to Party rule - were replaced by leather jackets, and communist revolutionary classics were transformed into punk. Music was turned into a site of political struggle. It is no coincidence that documentaries on the Beijing rock scene always include images of the June 4th 1989 crackdown (Lanning 1991, Sackman 1992, 1997). The provocative poses struck by the artists were warmly welcomed as the first signs of China’s journey along the path to democracy. The anger of a government official who in 1987, after hearing Cui Jian’s cover of the revolutionary classic “Southern Muddy Bay” (nanniwan), banned his performances and thus forced him to perform underground (Jones 1992: 94), strengthened the impression that rock symbolizes the struggle to free oneself from the communist burden, toward a free, democratic society. Cui Jian was considered the first of many rock singers who daringly challenged the dominant culture. His ban in 1987 was to be followed by many other incidents. In the spring of 1989, singer He Yong expressed his anger while performing on the streets of Beijing. He screamed (from “Garbage Dump”):

The world we are living in
Is like a garbage dump
People are just like worms
Fighting and grabbing
What they eat is conscience
What they shit are thoughts
Is there hope is there hope
Is there hope is there hope

His radical, sarcastic nihilism was politically subversive in a country where one is supposed to support the construction of a healthy, socialist society. That these lyrics escaped censorship in 1994 is still considered a miracle by the record company,¹ and it is no surprise that the accompanying videoclip, depicting He Yong caught in a cage and desperately trying to escape, was banned in China.

¹ According to Niu Jiawei, manager of the Beijing office of the record company Magic Stone.
The tanks that violently ended the student protests in 1989 did not crush the rock culture. On the contrary, the first part of the 1990s showed a rapid growth of Chinese rock - a growth that was accompanied by conflicts and repression. After bursting into tears while reporting on the June 4th massacre, China's Central Television reporter Wei Hua was fired and went on to become China's first female rock singer. A stadium tour by Cui Jian was cut short in 1991 after government officials were scared by the enthusiastic response of the audience. At the end of 1996, He Yong - who had made fun of the communist model worker, Li Suli - was banned from performing for three years. From these examples randomly selected from the subversive history of Chinese rock, the singers appear as true heroes, fighting for a free, democratic China, and disturbing Party bureaucrats with their electric guitars. It is hardly surprising that the official Chinese media condemn the local rock culture: It is considered “unacceptable to Chinese society” (Chen 1994: 14-18), a sign of unhealthy spiritual pollution from the West or, as a cultural form, incompatible with Chinese culture (Song 1997: 13). Deng Xiaoping had already warned that “capitalist living styles should not run wild in our country; it is unbearable to corrupt the younger generation with the declining culture from the West” (in: Chen 1994).

In October 1997, the Party launched a new set of regulations to strengthen their control over artistic performances, in order “to advance the construction of our socialist spiritual culture (...) and improve the excellent culture of our nation and enrich the people's spiritual life” (Renmin Ribao 1997: 5). The new regulations further limited the freedom of rock musicians.

It goes without saying that not only the musical contents but also the imagery and lifestyles of the rockers are considered by the Party as anything but an enrichment of the spiritual life of the common people. The dyed red hair of punk singer Gao Wei, the drug use of female star Luo Qi, and the mysterious death of Tang Dynasty's guitar player Zhang Ju are all miles away from the idealized lifestyle of the famous communist model soldier, Lei Feng. From the fringe of society, Chinese rock challenges, subverts, disturbs, and is maybe even changing contemporary Chinese culture. The dissonant voices stirred up the tranquil waters of Chinese politics in the 1990s. To quote China's controversial writer, Wang Shuo: “What didn't happen through June 4th will happen through Rock” (in Eckhardt 1994: 119).

This highly selective, romantic reading of Chinese rock corresponds with popular notions of rock as a countercultural movement. It suits our desire to see dominant ideologies subverted. It strengthens the stereotypical image (among other stereotypes) of China as a severely repressive society with a cruel political regime, and by doing so, indirectly celebrates liberal Western society. It is a product of what I call the rock mythology. By using the term “mythology” I do not wish to suggest the existence of a “reality” that lurks behind the mythology. I believe the rock mythology to be an important discourse that produces the rock culture as a music world. The aim of interrogating the mythology does not lie in revealing a “truth” about the rock culture as such, but rather in analyzing how the rock culture is constructed. I aim to develop
a different perspective on this cultural practice, a perspective which includes frequently overlooked discussions. It is the rock mythology, as I will argue, that functions as the glue that binds producers, musicians, and audiences together; it is the basis of the production of the rock culture.

**SCREAMING FIELDS OF SONIC REBELLION**

Chinese rock can easily be read as genuinely subversive and oppositional. "Since its release, the wide availability of this music of anger and frustration has continued to empower opposition to the regime. Yaogun yinyue's [Chinese rock's] role as an objectivation of anti-government feeling - as a resource for use in political opposition - has intensified" (Brace & Friedlander 1992: 197). Chinese rock is said to subvert Chinese politics, just as rock from communist countries is said to have resulted in the collapse of communism (Ryback 1990, Wicke 1992, Mitchell 1992). Václav Havel, the former Czech president, even claimed that the revolution began in the rock scene (Ramet 1994: 1). Apart from being a projection of the researcher's romantic desire to see ideologies subverted, the rock mythology as a global set of narratives with its specific contextualized articulations in China, is based on the following assumptions:

*It's subcultural...*

"Rock culture" is interpreted as a monolithic subculture. Theories of subcultures reflect a bias toward the deviant, countercultural, and masculine, a bias that is also prevalent in accounts of the Beijing rock culture. I will explain in Chapter 3 my move away from interpreting rock as a subculture toward a scenic approach. I consider Chinese rock a highly fragmented culture, with multiple relations with its wider cultural milieu, and with constantly shifting, permeable boundaries. It is a fragmented cultural practice, regarding both the styles and the degree of commitment of musicians and audiences.

*It's political...*

In journalistic and political discourses in the West, Chinese politics is often interpreted as ideologically uniform, as absolutely totalitarian. However, even if we summarize the complex Chinese political landscape bluntly, there are still factional struggles within the Party itself. One can at least distinguish the progressive factions, those who desire further modernization of the political system; the conservative factions, with a strong nostalgia for 'real' communism;
and the liberal factions, with a strong focus on economic growth (Nathan 1990, see also: Saich 2000). Party hegemony is by no means homogeneous and internally uncontested.

_It's controversial..._

Rock's controversiality seems to be “proven” by the numerous examples of its censorship by the Party. Yet, like Chinese politics, censorship is too easily considered total and consistent, whereas in practice it is constantly contested and negotiated by artists, producers, and publishers, as will be shown in Chapter 7.

_It's still political..._

By definition, rock is seen as incompatible with communism. However, there is no reason to believe that this is so. Rather than criticizing communism, rock often challenges broader societal norms. According to Pekacz (1994: 44), in Eastern Europe, where the state actually succeeded in domesticating rock, relations between the state and rock were more often symbiotic than hostile. There is no state funding in China for rock - as there was in East Germany (Rauhut 1998: 343) - nor do presidents express their appreciation of it (which Gorbachev did). But state officials are not per definition hostile toward rock. The Ministry of Culture sponsored an anti-piracy concert in October 2000 at which Cui Jian performed, rock band Hei Bao was allowed to perform in Tibet in 1995 (Liang 1995: 33), musicians frequently leave the country to perform, and even a rock music school is permitted to operate in Beijing.

_It's cultural..._

Chinese rock is sometimes interpreted and valued in relation to the dichotomy high culture vs. low culture. The book by Yan Jun on the New Sound of Beijing is indicative of this; in it, descriptions and pictures of rock bands are mixed with reproductions of the latest avant-garde art (Yan 1999). A German art catalogue on the Chinese avant-garde includes an article on Beijing rock, whereas _Gangtai_ pop is not mentioned at all (Liang & Stobbe 1993). Thus, partly because of its perceived strong links with other cultural practices, such as avant-garde art and modern literature, rock is often conceived as belonging to the “high arts” - which “liberate” and “enlighten” - as opposed to the low arts, such as pop, which “oppress”. It is a pertinent, yet highly questionable approach, based on Marxist theories of the Frankfurter Schüle (Adorno 1962). As I will show in Chapter 4, _Gangtai_ pop is too often reduced to an

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2 Between 1989 and 1992, the government Havel presided over, included many rock musicians (Ramet 1994: 55). During Havel’s visit to the United States, rock singer Lou Reed was invited to perform at the request of Havel (NRC Handelsblad, September 17, 1998). While it shows how in the West rock has moved from the fringes of society to its political center, it may be equally accurate to say that the perception of rock as being on the fringes of society in its early days in the West has always been a myth.
overtly commercial, non-creative expression, which ignores its musical and textual complexities, its diversity, the reception of audiences, and the contradictory dynamics of commodification.

It's authentic...

Closely related to the high-low distinction is the issue of authenticity. Artists are often considered to be individuals gifted with sufficient talents and perseverance to express their authentic emotions. From this perspective, rock, in contrast to pop, is generally regarded as an authentic expression of personal feelings, a musician’s testimony to his or her anger, sufferings, and struggles. However, as I will show throughout this book, rock is merely the joint product of different groups of people, including musicians, producers, and audiences.

It's non-commercial...

Commercialization, as explained in Chapter 1, is considered harmful to the truly authentic voice. Therefore, the sound of rock is authentic when it is produced independently; once it becomes a commodified sound under the guidance of, for example, EMI, it loses its subversiveness. As I will show in Chapter 6, there is little reason to pursue this line of thinking: The relationship between rock and the music industry (or, by the same token, between art and the market) is far more complex.

It remains political...

The tendency toward politicized readings of rock is even more apparent for China, as both Modern China Studies and media coverage show a strong bias for the political. Chinese society is frequently reduced to the political sphere. One should not focus solely on the tensions between the musicians and the state.3 “A stark dichotomy between virtuous artists and an oppressive state no longer goes very far in explaining the multiple stresses to which China’s artists must respond” (Kraus 1995:190). In this study, I hope to release all the political forces that the mythology tries to confine and which would liberate the notion of politics itself. The politics of rock goes beyond the strictly political, but stretches itself to other domains, such as a politics of pleasure.

Finally, the absence of studies on the reception and uses of the music by the audience

3 Tensions between music cultures and the state are not of course restricted to China. Illustrative is the agreement of the British parliament on The Criminal Justice Law in 1995 that aimed to ban (1) playing loudly music with repetitive beats and (2) gatherings of more than 10 persons at unsuited places (thereby aiming to impede techno parties). Consequently, a new genre emerged, “Chemical Beats” (named after the band The Chemical Brothers) (Carvalho 1997).
makes it easier to pursue a reading in line with the rock mythology. Audiences are too often seen as uniform, an assumption that I will challenge in Chapter 5. Texts are polysemic, and seemingly controversial lyrics might be “read” in a different way, just as Party propaganda can be, and is, read in a subversive way (Friedman 1994: 132; Hall 1980).

There is a need to interrogate the rock mythology, to go beyond unidirectional interpretations. I opt for a fluid, dynamic, and most probably contradictory analysis of this cultural practice, an analysis which constantly questions such dichotomies as East/West, local/global, communism/capitalism, high/low, rebellious/compliant, rock/pop, and art/commercialism. The challenge does not lie in a complete deconstruction and rationalization of rock as a commodity, as this would too easily guide us to a Marxist interpretation. Rather, the challenge is to illuminate the complex and contradictory processes at work in the production, creation, and reception of rock music, while at the same time grasping, and thus doing justice to, the feelings being expressed and shared with audiences.

-- INTERROGATING BOUNDARIES! --

The main threads of the rock mythology are inscribed into the dichotomy pop versus rock. Not surprisingly, this divide dominates both academic and journalistic discourses on Chinese rock, and proves to be a crucial marker of distinction for musicians, producers, and audiences. The divide is reproduced in the music press of mainland China, in which rock is considered to be “of particular social and cultural significance compared to pop music” (Stokes forthcoming). Here, the words of Sar, drummer for the band Thin Men, are indicative (in Kovskaya 1999):

“Rock music is totally different from pop... Rock comes from our souls, it is original music, composed and played from the same heart. Pop is the ultimate assembly-line product. (...) There is nothing genuine about it. It is not about expressing your truths but about manipulating consumers.”

Academics take a similar stance. According to Dutton, “Apart from the marginal and marginalised niche market of heavy metal and rock, it is the sickly sweet songs of Canto-pop that fill the airwaves” (1998: 239). His crude judgement not only reifies the rock mythology, but also represents a general and typical opinion of Chinese pop, which is considered to be overtly commercialized and to lack any creativity. In China, pop - especially that from Hong Kong and Taiwan - is often referred to as decadent, spiritual pollution. What does the music world of Chinese pop sound like? Here, I will elaborate briefly on the locality of both pop and
rock, on the style of pop, and on its production, themes that will be explored further in Chapter 4.

*Place* — Within Chinese pop, one can distinguish Cantopop (predominantly Hong Kong-produced Cantonese songs), Mandapop (predominantly Taiwan-based Mandarin songs), and pop from mainland China (*tongsu yinyue*). Generally speaking, Cantonese songs are more popular in southern parts of China, and Mandarin songs are more popular in northern China. Beijing can be considered the center of Chinese rock music, and Hong Kong and Taiwan are the centers of Chinese pop music for the Greater China region. This spatial dimension of the pop-rock divide generates specific and ideologically inscribed articulations of place. Pop music from the mainland is less popular than that from either Hong Kong or Taiwan, but still reaches a large audience on the mainland. Pop singers in China usually belong to a working unit (*danwei*), and are thus part of the formal structure of Chinese society. Both the production as well as the music style and the musicians are comparable with those from Hong Kong and Taiwan, although pop from the mainland is usually considered to be of lower quality, especially in Hong Kong and Taiwan, being rather old fashioned, in composition, lyrics, and image of the artists. It is worth noting that pop musicians from Hong Kong and Taiwan, apart from dealing with the local regulations, also have to deal with censorship and strict regulations on the mainland, as the rock singers from Beijing do.

*Style & Stardom* — The popularity of pop music can hardly be overestimated and by far surpasses that of Chinese rock in the Greater China region. In earlier descriptions of Chinese pop, the musicians, the music styles, the lyrical contents, and its production were considered to be essentially different from rock (Jones 1992). Strict typologies, however, ignore the fluidity and diversity of both music worlds, which in fact frequently overlap. The image of the artist is, for both pop and rock artists, a crucial promotion strategy. While the tough, leather-jacketed rock musicians prefer to signify a self-made subcultural identity, pop stars dress according to the latest fashion trends, that is, in a hip, sexy, and often extravagant manner. Figure 2.1 presents a picture of Taiwanese pop singer Coco Lee that can be considered emblematic of the pop aesthetics. We see an, arguably, sexy picture of Coco Lee in a tight black rubber dress with the skyscrapers of a metropolis in the background - signifying the cosmopolitan aesthetics.

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4 It is interesting to note that a popular terminology of pop stars is rooted in China’s feudalist past: The popular press often refers to the four most popular male Cantopop stars (Leon Lai, Jacky Cheung, Aaron Kwok, and Andy Lau) as the “four heavenly emperors” (Tianwang), to Faye Wong as “the princess” (Wangfei), and to Sammi Cheng as the “heavenly empress” (Tianhou). The older Cantopop stars are referred to as the “song Gods” (Gesheng).

5 “Greater China” is a problematic concept, as will be discussed further in Chapter 6. It remains disputed whether, for example, Singapore or other overseas Chinese communities ought to be included. A study of the global circulation of Cantopop would deepen our understanding of what constitutes “Greater China”. Cantopop is a crucial part of a global Chinese popular culture, and Cantopop stars frequently tour all over the world to perform for overseas Chinese.
of pop - along with a computerized image in the lower part of the picture, signifying the postmodernity of pop.\(^6\)

The stardom of pop singers is usually not restricted to music alone. For example, pop diva Faye Wong acted in *Chungking Express* by Hong Kong moviemaker Wong Kar-wai, and

\(^6\) It is interesting to note that in the year 2000, three of the most popular Taiwanese pop stars (Elva, Coco Lee, and Lee Hom) either had been born in the US or had grown up there. This might point to a growing symbolic importance of transnational Chinese identities for the articulation of a specific (in this case, Taiwanese) locality.

\(^7\) These two artists also provide an interesting example of the inconsistencies and blunt simplifications of categorization. They are contracted by Hong Kong record companies and are usually considered Cantopop stars. However, both were born in Beijing and only later moved to Hong Kong. Faye Wong still resides in both Hong Kong and Beijing. Furthermore, both singers sing in Cantonese as well as in Mandarin.
Cantopop star Leon Lai traveled in October 1998 to Brazil as an ambassador of UNICEF while being busy at the same time with the shooting of his new movie. Gangtai pop music is eclectic; over the years, new styles such as dance music and hip hop have been incorporated into it. Pop music is usually considered to be more melodic than rock music, and its lyrics are said to deal more prominently with love, whereas rock lyrics are believed to be more diverse and have a stronger focus on personal, social, and political struggles. A typical Chinese pop album consists of love ballads, often with one or two upbeat songs about life in general.

Production — Pop recordings are technically sophisticated. There is usually a strict division of labor in the production of the music: Someone composes the music, after which a lyricist writes the lyrics. The record company or producer sometimes identifies in advance what they expect from the song. The singer is often not involved in the actual writing of the music and/or the lyrics. But even these characterizations of the production of pop music tend to ignore the diversity. Faye Wong, for instance, often writes her own songs (and occasionally writes the lyrics), and some singers communicate directly with both the composer and the lyric writer. The singer Candy Lo writes and produces most of her songs and is marketed as such. In doing so, she moves toward the rock aesthetics. A case in point is a press release from Sony, in which the company explained that the tattoo on Candy's arm, which caused some debate in the local press, is real. But, as Sony pointed out, since she writes her own songs, and thus refuses to be packaged in the pop way, her tattoo is just another indicator of her self-made identity. Candy Lo is thus a pop star who articulates her authenticity in a way that comes close to the world of rock in which priority is given to the, indeed constructed, agency of the artist him- or herself.

Thus — To simply label the music as “easy listening” (Brace & Friedlander 1992: 117), dismisses the musical complexity, diversity, and creativity of Chinese pop. There are great differences between, for example, the avant-garde pop of the now disbanded Cantopop band Tatming (which might be considered the Chinese equivalent of the Pet Shop Boys) and the more “mainstream” Cantopop of Jacky Cheung. The highly commercialized and commodified cosmopolitan aesthetics of pop are full of pastiche, decadence, and play; the videoclips often depict surreal urban landscapes, and the karaoke culture that emerged around pop destabilizes boundaries between stardom and everyday life as well as between production and

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8 For example, to tie in with a forthcoming concert, the lyrics should be on the warm relationship with the fans, or if the image of the singer is on the sexy side, the lyrics could be more sensual or even explicitly seductive.

9 Jacky Cheung can be considered the pop star in the Greater China region. His image (that is: down to earth, funny, and friendly) is open for multiple identifications. He participated - along with cellist Yo-Yo Ma - in the performance of avant-garde Chinese composer Tan Dun's Symphony 1997 during the Hong Kong handover. When I attended the performance, I felt that a certain electricity suddenly filled the space with his appearance on stage, everyone started whispering. It was clear he was not just a singer, but rather the icon of Hong Kong.
consumption. Pop - especially that from Hong Kong and Taiwan (Gangtai pop) - can thus be considered an important cultural site for the articulation of postmodernity, as I will discuss further in Chapter 4.

The pop-rock divide is not a Chinese invention, but a globalized dichotomy that can also be traced in the West, especially around the 1960s. Frith distinguishes three music worlds: Art (or bourgeois), folk, and commercial (or pop) (Frith 1996: 42). In contrast to pop, “The assumption is that rock music is good music only when it is not mass culture, when it is an art form or a folk sound” (Frith 1982: 41). Rock verse is even said to be poetry (ibid.: 34). Rock is said to be sincere and authentic. The desperate screams from Kurt Cobain signify a truly tortured soul, ultimately verified by his suicide, whereas the sweet voice, face, and body of Mariah Carey carries a mass-produced product. Frith opts for a reverse of this narrative: “If, for example, the standard line of rock’n’roll history is that an authentic (that is, folk) sound is continually corrupted by commerce, it could equally well be argued that what the history actually reveals is a commercial musical form continually being recuperated in the name of art and subculture” (Frith 1996: 42). What interests me is not so much what a history “actually reveals,” but why and how such a dichotomy is sustained. Processes of commodification are not restricted to rock; on the contrary, all sorts of music are being commodified. Frith therefore concludes that “a comparative sociology reveals far less clear distinctions between music worlds than their discursive values imply” (ibid.: 43). In order to trace the power of the rock mythology, my study focuses on how these discursive values are constructed.

10 The concept “worlds” comes from Howard Becker (1982), who describes the art world in a tautological way as consisting “of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art. Members of art worlds co-ordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in frequently used artifacts” (p. 34).

11 The label rock is problematic in itself. Whereas in Europe it mainly refers to a specific genre that was popular in the 1950s, such as the music of Bill Haley and Elvis Presley, in the USA it has come to stand for all music that is considered non-commercial. The broad, and indeed vague, American interpretation of the label rock is the one that has been adopted in China (Frith 1986; Grossberg 1986).

12 In the rock culture, the gender issue is present in its absence. Although it is not the focus of this study, with the exception of the audience analysis in Chapter 5, it is important to note that the pop-rock divide is often considered to be a gendered one. It is tempting to go as far as Coates does (1997: 50) and opt for a purely structuralist reading: “Rock is metonymic with ‘authenticity’ while ‘pop’ is metonymic with ‘artifice’. Sliding even further down the metonymic slope, ‘authentic’ becomes ‘masculine’, pop is ‘feminine’. Rock, therefore, is ‘masculine’, pop is ‘feminine’, and the two are set up in binary relation to each other, with the masculine, of course, on top.” Things are not that simple; it makes more sense to think through the different articulations of gender within different music genres, as I will do in this study. The predominance of the four heavenly kings in Cantopop may raise questions about the “femininity” of pop. The problems female rockers have to overcome in order be taken seriously, however, does indicate that the link between rock and masculinity is not as far fetched or over-structuralistic as it might seem at first sight.
If we go back to China, in the two major publications on Chinese rock from Jones (1992) and Steen (1996), a typology from Pratt is used to frame the pop-rock dichotomy, based on the presumed function of the music for audiences (Pratt 1990: 9-14):

* The conservative, HEGEMONIC use, strengthening the existing status quo and supporting those in power.

* A NEGOTIATED use, in which the music functions as a safety valve. According to Pratt, “instead of taking action to change fundamentally the repressive existence of daily life, one is offered a substitute world of music, a ‘negotiated’ form of consciousness” (ibid.: 12).

* The EMANCIPATORY use, in which music functions as a tool to emancipate suppressed people.

This typology is highly problematic. It leads to unidirectional interpretations of the meanings of music. It has inspired both Jones and Steen to consider rock emancipatory as long as it is not yet commodified. As I have shown, this assertion is part of the rock mythology and ignores the complex processes at work. Whereas rock can be emancipatory, pop music is, if not part of the hegemonic structure, at most a safety valve for Chinese youth, according to Steen (1996: 14). Jones argues for a more positive reading for negotiated uses, by stressing the struggle in production, linked to larger struggles in society. But, “the outcome of these negotiations, because of their imbrication with the apparatus of [pop] music production and dissemination, are by definition never emancipatory” (1992: 42). Also for Jones, it is only rock that can be emancipatory. Thus, the typology of Pratt that has been so crucial in previous writings on Chinese rock music - a typology which resembles Hall’s typology for different forms of reception, i.e., preferred, negotiated, and oppositional (Hall 1980: 157-162) - classifies rather than clarifies. Their discourse is violent in that it downplays pop and popular taste, just as it imprisons the sound of rock in a cage of rebellion and subversion. They strengthen the dichotomy rock vs. pop, ignore the fluidity of musical meanings, and reinforce the rock mythology.

Apart from inspiring me to reflect further upon the production of generic differences, the pop-rock divide also leads me to another theoretical intervention that brings me back to the importance of place. In his study on the localization of Indian cricket, Appadurai makes a distinction between soft and hard cultural forms. According to Appadurai (1996: 90), “Hard cultural forms are those that come with a set of links between value, meaning, and embodied practice that are difficult to break and hard to transform. Soft cultural forms, by contrast, are those that permit relatively easy separation of embodied performance from meaning and value, and relatively successful transformation at each level.” Following Appadurai’s notions, pop in China can be labeled a soft cultural form, as it is difficult to come up with a coherent
set of narratives that together constitute the pop mythology. Pop’s meanings and values are not very well articulated. While running the danger of reifying a dichotomy I have just tried to debunk, I would say that rock can be considered a hard cultural form, with the rock mythology as its set of links between value, meaning, and embodied practice. It imposes a relatively rigid repertoire of styles upon those active in the rock culture; as such, rock “changes those who are socialized into it more readily than it is itself changed” (Appadurai 1996: 90).

Given the symbolic power of the profoundly globalized rock mythology, intuition tells us that rock, as a hard cultural form, ought to resist localization as its repertoire of styles is predefined. Appadurai expected the same with cricket, when he states that “cricket as a hard cultural form ought to resist indigenization” (ibid.: 90). The contrary seems to be happening: “Counterintuitively, [cricket] has become profoundly indigenized and decolonized” (ibid.: 90). As is the case with cricket in India, despite being such a hard cultural form, there is a strong urge to localize rock. In trying to explain this puzzle, Appadurai interprets the localization of cricket as an experiment with modernity in which the nation-state, the commercial sector, and the mass media play a pivotal role.13 I would like to take a slightly different track, not in the least because adopting Appadurai’s argument would lead me into an entirely different conceptual universe. In my view, because it is a hard cultural form, rock demands localization when it travels to places outside what is perceived to be its heimmat: The West. 14

Consequently, musicians in Beijing are at pains - and my analysis of Cui Jian’s concert flyer in Chapter 1 provides a fine example of this - to make rock with Chinese characteristics. We see in China both a negotiation and a negation of the West. This further complicates the working of the rock mythology, as we now stress - along with the leading terms outlined before, such as rebellion, authenticity, commercialization, politicization, and gender - the production of locality (cf. Appadurai 1996). Place is of crucial importance, in particular for Beijing rock: Not only is there the negotiation cum negation of the West through the sinification of rock, but the process also, often more conspicuously, entails an articulation of Beijing as

13 Whereas cricket entered India through its colonizers, rock has a far less clear-cut origin. However, both are to some extent related to modernity: In its most civilized form, cricket “took shape as the most powerful condensation of Victorian elite values” (Appadurai 1996: 91), while rock manifests itself merely as the flip side of the same Victorian, or bourgeois, values. Both entailed a manifestation cum negotiation of modernity. Rock in China is one way of being modern and its practitioners are at pains to turn this into a modernity with Chinese characteristics. I refrain from using modernity as a leading concept for this study as it, like identity, is such a sweeping concept that it would guide me away from the focus of the study: How the rock mythology as a hard cultural force produces rock as a distinct music world with Chinese characteristics.

14 It is crucial to realize the significance of the West-non-West dichotomy here. In the case of rock music in the Netherlands, bands that sing in Dutch are never asked to make their sound more Dutch; bands that succeed in crossing national boundaries are applauded, rather than accused of copying UK or US bands. In the West, rock demands much less localization.
the cultural center of China, with Taiwan and Hong Kong as its commercialized constitutive outides. This spatial dimension makes the pop-rock division of greater importance when compared with the West, since it involves regional ideological struggles.

Rock is labeled and criticized by the CCP as spiritual pollution from the West. It is thus considered a Western sound, just like Coca-Cola and hamburgers from Macdonald’s are considered quintessentially American. The claim that rock is a Western sound is shared by many, both in and outside China. A review of a documentary on Chinese rock music downplays its musical quality, a Dutch journalist states (Kamer 1997, translation mine):

“China is lagging behind in popular music and will never be able to make up for it. It is unclear whether Chinese youth actually wants such music.”

Both the Party view and this journalistic account, in which the West is considered the center of popular music, essentialize cultural differences. If we are to trace the origins of rock music, we will most likely end up in a dissipating history rather than finding one coherent source. It would be a futile quest to attempt to trace the “pure” origins of rock, because it - like the “Chinese” musical instrument guzheng - is an amalgamation of various cultural influences. “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (Foucault 1984: 79). But to conclude that it does not make sense to discuss imagined origins would again miss the point. On the contrary, it is precisely the perceived Western origin of rock and the “hard” force of the rock mythology that triggers a strong desire to localize the music in the Chinese context. We can speak here of the production of locality, as Appadurai does. Yet, this terminology suggests that the appropriation of a hard cultural form always implies an articulation of the local, as though it necessarily results in the sinification of rock. As my analysis will show, although this indeed is the case for many bands, other bands deliberately opt for a global, non-sinified sound and aesthetics to negotiate the hard force of rock. Thus, to speak of the production of locality is inadequate since this tends to ignore the articulation of the global. I therefore prefer to speak of a negotiation of place, a place that can be local, regional as well as global; a place, furthermore, that is as imagined as it is real.

Given the assumed origin of rock, it is no surprise that popular media in China often foreground Western sounds. A quick look at two of the main rock magazines in China - Music Heaven and Modern Sky Magazine - reveals not only the Chinese gaze on the West when it comes to rock music, but also the Chinese gaze on an assumed Western gaze. The West not only sets the criteria for what rock ought to be, given its status as being the heimmat of rock,
but it is also imagined to be the ultimate judge of Chinese rock. Rock musicians in China make music under the imagined scrutiny of their Western counterparts.
Music Heaven always puts a Western rock band on its cover, whereas Modern Sky Magazine runs a double cover, carrying a Chinese band or artist on the front, and a Western band on the back. Figure 2.2 presents the covers of both magazines. It is interesting that the headline on the Chinese cover of Modern Sky Magazine is “Go West”, whereas the cover of Music Heaven depicts the band The Cranberries.

Both magazines come with a free compilation tape or CD of both Chinese and Western bands, mostly with more tracks of the latter. All bands are featured in the magazine, thus allowing the reader a glimpse not only of upcoming bands in China, but also of the latest releases in the West. Reviews on Chinese albums often include references to Western bands. For example, the Beijing pop-punk band Underground Baby is compared to Black Flag and The Ramones, and is linked to the following generic labels: Underground punk (dixia pengke), punk pop (liuxing pengke), trash metal (bianchi jinshu), hardcore punk (yinghe pengke), and drum’n’bass (Yuen 1999: 20-21). The following review of the music scene in Guangzhou reveals the fear of copying the West (Zhang 2000: 16-17):

“Their local dialect, which is as soft as chewing gum, can easily make rock into copies of Beyond [a Hong Kong band]. That’s why most Hong Kong bands simply embrace their colonial spirit and [use English]. Similarly, Wang Lei [a Guangzhou rock singer] will never pronounce Nirvana perfectly. And almost every local band in Guangzhou puts Kurt Cobain as their teacher in oral English.... The English standard of Cavesluts [a Guangzhou band] may make me feel ashamed, but their demos will only be ridiculed by Billy Corgan.”

The reference to Cantonese as being as soft as chewing gum overlaps neatly with my description of Gangtai pop - in which Cantonese pop occupies a prominent place - as a soft cultural form. In this review, the fear of copying is situated in language: A Chinese band that sings in English is bound to “make me feel ashamed,” the clumsy accent will reveal that this is not real rock, and it will therefore be ridiculous in the eyes of the West, as embodied by The Smashing Pumpkins’ vocalist, Billy Corgan.

Thus, the danger of copying the West always lurks behind the electric guitar. Bands frequently accuse one another of copying, as my analysis in Chapter 3 will show. Whereas such accusations in the West usually mean that one band copies the sound of another band, in the case of rock in China, the East-West dimension becomes crucial: A band that copies is a band that copies a sound of the West. To copy implies a refusal to sinify a sound, a refusal which is often looked down upon. A special in Modern Sky Magazine reflects upon the reception of hip hop in China, echoing the words of the Dutch journalist quoted earlier (Zhang et al. 2000: 19):
"Compared to Western music, we will always be in a state of copying. When we have something new, we will throw away the old one. We have all sorts of music, but none is properly digested by us."

In its elaborate references to generic labels from Western popular music, and to all Western bands, the Chinese gaze reveals a desire to incorporate such sounds and classifications. Billed as the first Chinese encyclopedia of Western music, and with its title in both Chinese and English (A Guide to Occidental Popular Music) (1999), the authors explain in its foreword why it is important to grasp classifications that are used in the West (Wang & Zhang 1999: 5):

"When you listen to occidental music, you will inevitably come across various musical styles and genres. The diversity testifies to the active popular music scene in European countries and the United States, but it also confuses us. At first, you may only know of rock, jazz, blues, folk and heavy metal. You will soon find out that there are scores of sub-genres in jazz, blues and heavy metal. Their differences and characteristics can’t be grasped in a couple of days. However, an understanding of these genres will help you further understand the nature and rules of the music."

Consequently, such classifications are eagerly translated into Chinese, some in a direct, literal way (such as yaogun for rock (yao) and roll (gun)) and some as homophonic (like pengke for punk), whereas others remain untranslated, such as hip hop (only rarely is it translated as xibengyue). In an article on alternative music, the author distinguishes, in addition to punk: New wave (xin langchao), industrial (gongye), gothic rock (gete yaogun), death punk (xiwan pengke), death rock (xiwan yaogun), darkwave (heichao), ethereal (xianyue), and dark ambient (anhei fenwei) (Murk 2000: 16-17).

Western sounds travel well to China, but this happens to be mainly a one-way sonic flow. Although academics and journalists in the West might like the rebellious image of Chinese rock, the music itself is hardly ever taken seriously. The following is a telling account written by the Chinese female vocalist Long Hun, entitled ‘Go West!’, in which she elaborates on her

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15 The eagerness to take over all the classification schemes that are popular in the West is not mirrored by a desire among Beijing rock musicians to live abroad. Only few rock singers speak English, and hardly any of them express a desire to conquer the global market. In contrast, the young intellectual elites of China are very eager to study overseas. It is important to note that given the absence of a colonial history, coupled with a relatively small diasporic community, when compared to cities like Guangzhou and Hong Kong, Beijing has fewer direct ties with Western countries.

16 Whereas the English title speaks of "occidental music", in Chinese the characters for Europe (Ouzhou) and the US (Meiguo) are put together into Oumei.

17 Her comments are also very recognizable to me; time and again friends and colleagues are eager to tell me how the music is just a rather poor copy of sounds that are by now outdated in the West.
frustrations when introducing the Beijing rock she “is so proud of” to friends in London (Long 1999: 24). 17

“But their reaction is always: ‘Well, it’s OK’. To them, these punk bands are just another group of punk bands, Tang Dynasty is just another heavy metal band, and they just don’t have a clue to what’s so good about Zhang Chu and Cui Jian. It really annoys me. I can only say: ‘You don’t understand.’ Only some songs of Supermarket [an electronic band] still interest them, saying: ‘This is interesting, strange music.’ Also the tape of Chinese *guqin* [a ‘traditional’ Chinese string instrument], they play it over and over again. Strange, if it shows that there are indeed boundaries in music, why does foreign music manage to excite us and feel close to us?”

Her last outcry points to the crux of the globalization of popular music: Why are the Chinese so eager to listen to Western sounds, whereas the reverse seems to be less the case? And why have the Chinese developed an aesthetic sensibility toward popular “Western” sounds? Although rock might travel well to the West, in that its rebellious aura ties in neatly with the perceived totalitarianism of China, the sound itself is hardly ever considered compatible with its Western counterpart. What seems more appealing to Western eyes and ears are sounds and images that are strange and exotic (such as the reverse orientalism from the exotic, nostalgic imaginary of, among others, Zhang Yimou (see: Pickowitz 1995: 213)), rather than the familiar and the popular. When it comes to rock and pop, the West is the best and remains so, to the ears of Western listeners and of many Chinese rock fans. 18 The cultural sharing that takes place when the sound of rock globalizes is indeed most frequently on Western terms (cf. Kraus 1989: ix-x). The words of Western journalist Caroline Cooper are indicative (2000):

“What the West thinks of as Chinese rock - slapdash Spears rip-offs and the bleating of Hong Kong pop stars - is all wrong. Consider instead the work of Thin Men. Jumping between classical Chinese Mandarin and the Mongolian dialect of lead singer’s Dai Qin’s home region, and often featuring traditional Mongolian sounds alongside classic electric guitar and keyboard…”

To her, sounds that lack Chinese characteristics are “slapdash Spears rip-offs” - and these are the soft sounds of pop - whereas the hard sound of rock, once it is sinified (classical Chinese Mandarin! Mongolian dialect! Traditional Mongolian sounds!), is praiseworthy. On December 12, 2000, Cui Jian received The Prince Claus Award - a Dutch prize for non-Western artists amounting to 20,000 Euros. The speech by the fund’s chairman, A. van der

18 Kraus (1989) argues persuasively against the myth of music as an international language: “If music were indeed so international, Americans should be able to hear Chinese opera as easily as the people of Shanghai can now hear Beethoven. The cultural sharing that takes place is most frequently on Western terms…” (pp. ix-x). His words echo Long Hun’s experiences in London.
Staay, provides yet another indication of the Western gaze on Chinese rock. In it, he explained how Cui Jian incorporates (at www.princeclausfund.nl):

“... a natural respect for Chinese culture and society. Through his development of an authentic Chinese rock music, he distinguishes himself from a purely Western-inspired musical style.”

His remarks reify the West as being the center of rock; this perceived origin - which is firmly grounded in the hard force of the rock mythology - obliges Chinese bands to sinify the sound so as to avoid “copying”. The Chinese gaze on this Western gaze makes the fear of copying a pressing matter, as the idea of being watched and judged renders it all the harder to avoid copying.19

Following the “origin” narrative, both in China and in the West, Chinese rock is often said to symbolize China’s path toward “Westernization,” thereby indicating a profound cultural loss. Both Appadurai and Hannerz stress the idea that processes of globalization increase rather than decrease cultural heterogeneity (Hannerz 1987, Appadurai 1996). In this study, I am less concerned with when and how the rock mythology traveled to China, than with its subsequent reception and reframing. What interests me in the appropriation of rock in China is not whether, and if so, to what extent, it is a copy or a hybrid, but why and when the rhetoric of authenticity (i.e., not a copy but original, creative and real) versus imitation (i.e., a copy) is used. And this is where two major themes (on which I will elaborate in the chapters to follow) intersect: The negotiation of place - which often, but not necessarily, entails the sinification of rock - and the quest for authenticity. Both themes resonate with what the rock mythology is all about, in particular when it travels to a place outside the West.

Rock in China emerged in the 1980s when China was opened up to the outside world. It

19 Stokes (forthcoming) analyzes the fascination of Western academics for Chinese rock. He relates this fascination to a perceived death of rock in the West, where the sound has become an overtly commercialized one, lacking any authenticity (he quotes Grossberg, who observes that rock rarely challenges political and economic institutions, which Grossberg finds an “obvious but painful truth”). Following Iain Chambers, Stokes argues that “now that local roots, histories and traditions in the West have apparently been dispersed and destroyed, we search for ‘authenticity’ elsewhere.” The desire for an authentic rebellion is projected onto the other, onto China. His point is well taken, and reveals the orientalistic Western gaze on rock in China. The Western fascination for rock in China is undoubtedly linked to a desire to find a truly rebellious sound, a sound the West is perceived, by some, to have lost long ago. Yet, the announcement of the death of Western rock is by and large an academic, postmodern exercise with little resonance in popular discourse - be it Chinese or Western - in which, as I have shown, the West is constantly considered the center of rock music. Furthermore, to declare rock’s death reifies rather than challenges the rock mythology, as it suggests that the genre - with its connotation of rebellion and authenticity - was once alive. Finally, the discourse on authenticity has anything but lost its dominance in Western discourses on rock, as I will explain further in Chapter 3.
is part of the great cultural debate of that decade, during which Chinese culture was critically interrogated by intellectuals and artists. Rock continued to grow after June 4th 1989. Forces of commercialization, accelerated after Deng Xiaoping’s tour of the south in 1992, encouraged in particular regional record companies to invest in rock. After a short period of crisis in the mid-1990s, rock regained its position in the Chinese cultural landscape. The Chinese press labeled this reborn sound “The Beijing New Sound Movement,” which formed a part of the dakou generation, the post-Cultural Revolution urban youth.

However firm rock’s position has been in Chinese record stores, where rock tapes are usually grouped together, interpretations of its meaning and significance vary from author to author. However, their standpoints are located along the same axis: Either rock is considered rebellious, or the musicians are seen as clever marketing boys who know how to play with notions of that immense signifier “China”. Commercial forces are interpreted as being harmful to the spirit of rock. The rock mythology produces rock as a distinct music world; it forms a set of narratives that link producers with musicians, audiences, politicians, and analysts. The mythology is primarily articulated by juxtapositioning rock with pop. The ideologically inscribed divide between pop and rock involves a politics of place. Whereas the power of the rock mythology makes rock a hard cultural form, the world of pop is more soft, as it lacks a rigid or coherent set of narratives that together constitute the pop mythology. Precisely because rock is such a hard cultural form, a form that has in the popular imagination strong ties with the West, there is a strong urge to localize rock. This demand to localize the sound is fueled by a desire to be real, to be authentic, and to avoid copying the West. The politics of rock in China are therefore closely related to an authenticating politics of place, in which place is to be understood as local (Beijing), regional (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan), and global (in particular, Japan and the West). Such negotiations of place are embedded in current processes of globalization. The predominantly, but not exclusively, Western notion of China as an overtly politicized place does a lot to feed the rock mythology.

Having sketched the main themes that frame this book, it is time to move on. As I indicated, theory remains interwoven in the “empirical” chapters to follow. Although the debates outlined so far frame the whole book, some observations have led me to additional theoretical interventions. Also, the three main areas of research, i.e., producer, rock culture, and audience - areas that represent the traditional model of communication - will each include a theoretical introduction. Yet, the productive force of the rock mythology will be the thread running through the book. As I explained in this chapter, it is a force that is as local as it is global. It triggers a powerful set of mediated imaginations around the constructed music genre “rock,” imaginations that are as real as the computer I am writing this on.