Red Sonic Trajectories - Popular Music and Youth in China

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“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture, it’s a really stupid thing to want to do”

Elvis Costello (in Goodwin 1993: 1)

An empty life is so pretty
A strong body is so healthy
A short life is so hasty
Grab your time and burn your life
La la la la....

“Revolution” from 69

The night was freezing, public transport was not running, and only a few taxis ventured out onto the snow-covered streets. It was New Year’s Eve 1996 in Beijing and I planned to attend a rock festival with my friends. But they didn’t make it, so I decided to go alone.

Club X in Haidian district was packed with a mixed audience of foreign students and Chinese youths. Rock is literally an interface between China and the West. Around eight bands performed that night. Fei Fei played the keyboard for a band whose sound reminded me of Pink Floyd. Fei Fei is the owner of the rock bar Angels, a bar that was later closed down, like most rocks bars eventually are. The all-woman band Cobra, together with Catcher in the Rye, played a tribute to The Cure. Robert Smith must be pleased to know that his fame has reached Beijing, where vocalist Xiao Wei even mimics his punk hairstyle. Underground Baby - a popular live punk gig in 1996 - screamed that it’s all the same (dou yi yang). I doubt whether it indeed is all the same when you walk around Beijing with dyed purple hair, as they do. Punk was followed by Chinese folk music, and chaos and anarchy were replaced by ethnicity. The pogo - the anti-dance that symbolizes chaos and disorder, in which we all run over the dance floor, bumping into each other - came to an end. Later that night, at around 3 am, I saw a Chinese death metal band perform. The musicians’ faces were obscured by their long hair. There was the noise of long guitar solos, merging with the deep, hoarse screaming voice of the singer. The words were indistinguishable.

I was both puzzled and excited. I was in the midst of my research domain, and during the coming three and a half years I would be struggling to negotiate, to interpret these sounds, these poses. How was I to make sense of all this? When I left the venue at 5 am, the roads were covered with piles of snow. The wind was strong, and clouds of snow swirled violently against the walls of the gray apartment blocks. The streets were deserted; I couldn’t find a taxi to take me home, so I started walking. I felt entirely dislocated, moving from that outrageously
eclectic soundscape into an alien, surreal urban landscape. After a while, I no longer wanted to find a taxi: I just wanted to continue walking in that empty space, to dissolve into small pieces along with the white clouds of snow.

While walking, I wondered how to make sense of a music culture that is so fragmented. Why discuss both punk and folk, as though they were part of the same "subculture"? I realized that to conceptualize this as the rock culture pretty much misses the point. In my mind, a subculture broke into pieces that night. But more happened while I made my way through the snow. By then, the feeling that I was witnessing a truly political rebellion was also dissolving. The air in Club X had been filled with pleasure, rather than rebellion; pleasure in the form of music had infected me (or was it only the beer? No, it can't have been; well, it might not have been) and brought me to that desired plateau of non-being. Rather than finding myself, I had lost myself in the music, the snow clouds, the wind. I was literally moved, de-centered, pushed away from the stable identity I imagined I possessed. I realized it was this feeling, this experience, that I'm searching for in general. It is what has kept me going since, although I only rarely find it during concerts. Both the academic field and my own theoretical he-longings allow me little room to explore this emotional journey. In this chapter I will explore the fragmented field that I loosely label China's rock culture. After explaining why I have moved from a subcultural toward a generic approach, I will analyze the more important music scenes in Beijing.

The term subculture was coined in the 1940s and has since been used to describe and analyze all kinds of social groups (punks, football hooligans, homosexuals). The Birmingham Centre of Cultural Studies set the agenda in the 1970s with two major publications: Resistance Through Rituals (Hall et al. 1976) and Hebdige's Subculture, The Meaning of Style (1979). Whereas the former predominantly uses class as the key to discovering subcultural meanings, the latter uses style and race as their organizing principles (McRobbie 1991). Hebdige unravels different youth styles, which according to him are "pregnant with significance. (...) As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus" (p. 18). Oppositional styles, which deliberately transform the meaning of symbols of the dominant discourse, emerge to counter dominant culture. In later publications, Hebdige (1988) develops a more subtle approach, by adopting Foucault's ideas of power and surveillance. According to Foucault, "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. (...) We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (Foucault 1983: 216). Hebdige shows how different forms of surveillance emerged around the category "youth"
during the 20th century. He traced two dominant images of youth: Youth as fun, and youth as trouble. For Hebdige, the subcultural response is a new form of subjectivity. "Subculture forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is a hiding in the light" (Hebdige 1988:35).

In the last hundred years, discourses in China around the idea "youth" have increasingly come to resemble those in the West. In late imperial China, the term youth (qingnian) was "restricted to males aged sixteen to thirty; it excluded girls, who were expected to marry as soon as they reached sexual maturity" (Dikötter 1995: 146). In republican China (1911-1949), the term was universalized to both young men and women. "Youth" was turned "into a powerful symbol of regeneration, vitality and commitment to modernity" (Dikötter 1995:147). According to Dikötter (p. 149), "the problematization of ‘youth’ into a ‘social issue’ spurred the growth of a body of specialized knowledge, particularly in the new fields of social science, psychology and human biology." As in the West, this has resulted in a wide array of disciplinary practices and related normative pressures. Bodily inscribed differences between girls and boys produced gendered role models. The normative pressure is especially evident in the medical debates on (or, better, against) masturbation (Dikötter 1995:165).1 "In the adolescent, dress, diet, gestures, manners, emotions, speech, and thought were all to be disciplined for the building of ‘character’" (p. 176). Dikötter shows that apart from Western influences, these discursive repertoires were also rooted in a rich and diverse past in China itself. Traditional Chinese medicine, for example, strongly argues against masturbation, which is said to cause a severe loss of male energy (yang).

The Chinese Communist Party further institutionalized the category of youth by creating the Communist Youth League. Especially during the period 1949-1978, youth was a highly politicized unit (Gold 1991). In communist China, youth has always been regarded as the vanguard of social change (Geist 1996: 262). At the same time, "young people are described as unfinished persons not yet belonging to society and not yet having established correct world-views and knowledge about life" (Bakken 1994: 263). Thus, youth on the one hand is linked to hope, growth, and order (rather than to fun, as we have seen in the West), and on the other hand to something potentially deviant and dangerous. The last youth rebellion in China - the 1989 student protests - was followed by a decade of economic reforms. With the growing importance of leisure time and consumption culture, it is safe to assume that during the 1990s, the term “youth” was increasingly linked to ideas of fun and pleasure. Consequently, as in the West, different modes of surveillance are imposed on Chinese youths. I have explored these modes of surveillance in earlier publications (Kloet 1994, 1998). The expectations of parents

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1 This resulted in a new regime of table manners - the defiling hand should be kept on the table - and advises on the best sleeping positions, going as far as advising one to tie one's hands to the sides of the bed (Dikötter 1995: 172).
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(whose authority is anchored in Confucianist ideology), the very demanding educational system, Chinese social scientists who develop theories about youth, and the role models produced by the Party, are all involved in the construction of dominant images of what Chinese youth should be: The good son, the hard-working student, the model citizen, the obedient student. Rock singer Chang Kuan refers to this kind of constant surveillance (in Jones 1992: 104):

Right next to us are observing eyes
Every action, every move is caught in their staring eyes
When I’m yelling, when I’m dancing, when I’m smiling at a girl
Look behind me, there’s someone saying my lifestyle’s bad...

Thus, not only the Party but also, and mainly, other groups are involved in the construction of the category “youth”. By applying theories about subcultures, the response of the rock musicians can be interpreted as a denial of these prescribed forms of identity, rather than as the conscious construction of an oppositional identity.

What remains problematic in interpreting rock as a denial of prescribed forms of identity, is that the pleasure of the music itself tends to be ignored in favor of a neat sociological analysis. The argument is also based too much on a rigid hegemony model. Culture is conveniently categorized; the emphasis is solely on difference, on deviance. Apart from a bias toward the countercultural, there is a strong masculine bias in subcultural studies (Thornton 1997: 5; McRobbie 1991). Women are at best described as static objects. As I want to keep away from juxtaposing the rock culture with the state, just as I aim to avoid the masculine bias that characterizes subcultural theory, I refrain from labeling Chinese rock a subculture. I will simply speak of the rock culture. But how to present this culture in a comprehensive way?

So far, Chinese rock culture has been described chronologically (Jones 1992, Steen 1996, Huang 1997). The idea of a New Sound Movement that emerged after 1997 as put forward by Yan Jun, among others, imposes a temporality upon Chinese rock that suggests a neat and tidy development over time. In historicizing rock culture, one easily falls into a narrative of progress or regress, rather than of coexistence and contestation. Such a historicizing narrative is likely to reify and essentialize rock, and runs the danger of silencing the older, still active, bands and musicians, such as Tang Dynasty and Zhang Chu. I consider it more fruitful not to distinguish fixed periods, but to explore various fluid music scenes. These will provide me with a better anchor point from which to understand the boundaries within rock culture, and between rock and related cultural domains.

Musicians share my observation that the rock culture has become increasingly fragmented, for example Dai Qin from the band Thin Men (quoted in: Kovskaya 1999):
“The *yaogun quanzi* [circle of underground rock musicians] used to be a really supportive community based on the shared desire for unfettered self-expression through original music. Now the politics of trendiness and competition are disintegrating the ‘circle’. Now the ‘circle’ is breaking up into small cliques organized around style rather than substance. Now people worry too much about what the market ‘wants,’ and what’s ‘hip,’ and not enough about how to make the music that they themselves love.”

The scenic “split” is interpreted by him as a threat to the binding force of the rock mythology. His romantic reading of the past covers up all the fights and conflicts that have been part and parcel of the rock culture in China since its emergence. Style is considered to be shallow and empty, while the true rock spirit is about substance, about the expression of the self - in short, the rock mythology is once again reified. Dai’s elegy justifies my decision to analyze different music scenes, since such an analysis might guide us to the different workings and/or boundaries of the rock mythology. The advantage of speaking of scenes is that it does not overdetermine and homogenize the context, but classifies without separating a dominant culture from the music culture. It is, to put it bluntly, a concept with weaker political associations than the concept of subculture; instead, it directs the attention more toward the perceived specificities and aesthetics of the music (see also Straw 1997, Harris 1999). The concept scene also strikes me as less fixed; it is easier to imagine scenic movements (that is, music crossovers and audiences being attracted to different scenes at the same time) than subcultural movements. Boundaries of scenes are only momentarily fixed, and they frequently overlap. The act of writing makes it difficult, if not impossible, to capture this fluidity; the order as presented in this chapter is, indeed, scenic; that is (according to my electronic thesaurus): Picturesque and pretty. When drawing a picturesque image one runs the danger of covering up the ugliness beneath it, of hiding the contradictions with one smooth stroke of the brush. This makes it seem an artificial experience. However, what interests me is not a neat classification of the rock culture and the creation of yet another typology, but rather the processes, closely intertwined with the rock mythology, that produce different scenes.

Having explained my scenic move, the question is how to present the scenes. I will start off my description of a scene by pointing out its position within the rock culture. I will then trace its popularity and show how this scene is being discussed in China. Having positioned the scenes, I will move on to analyze their generic aesthetics - that is, the style that is perceived to distinguish one scene from another - and show how these aesthetics, or the perceptions of such, authenticates the scene. This part is grouped under the label authenticating styles. In the previous chapter, I showed how authenticity is of crucial importance in the rock mythology, and how it is inscribed into two dominant dichotomies: Rock versus pop, and non-commercial versus commercial. It is not my aim here to trace the Chinese specificities of the notion of authenticity (*zhengshi*); to do so would require a very different study.
Instead, my aim is to show how the rock mythology as a hard cultural force produces rock as a distinct music world with Chinese characteristics. Given the perceived origin of rock (the West), the danger of imitation (copying the West) presents rock musicians in China with a challenge. Whereas musicians in the West are literally born in the imagined center of rock, their counterparts in China have constantly to prove themselves to gain the right to make rock music. In the global imbalance of rock cultural flows, they are suspected of copying the West unless proven authentic. Compared to the Western claim to the origin and therefore the continual making of rock, Chinese rock musicians must bear the burden of authenticating proof. Here, an e-mail from the American, Beijing-based manager of Cui Jian, Matthew Clark, is indicative (9 May 2000):

“Most of what comes out of China is copied and very few Chinese musicians are able to rock with any degree of authenticity. Cui Jian is a strong proponent of this view and generally very disappointed with his rock compatriots - feeling most of them to be ‘fake’.”

Rock, as a hard cultural form from the West, demands localization so as to authenticate itself. Place thus intersects with authenticity, yet for the sake of clarity I have disentangled the two and discuss in the third section of my scenic analysis how bands negotiate place. Here, my concern is how place is an important signifier, and to trace two dominant images: Ancient China and communist China. I will show how other scenes opt for articulating the global rather than the local. I will also analyze how such articulations of place resonate with important political and commercial divisions within the imagined Greater China.

In restricting myself to these themes (i.e., positions, authenticating styles, and place) coupled
with my desire to grasp the fragmented nature of Chinese rock, my analysis will, instead of presenting an in-depth analysis of a few bands, be more of a long and winding journey through China’s rock culture. Since this book is not meant to be an encyclopedia of Chinese rock, bands will be included insofar as they shed a different light on the main themes of my argument. But as it is not my aim to imprison the sounds, poses, and voices of musicians in my argument, I will frequently make discursive side trips.

Underground

In the summer of 1996, three bands - NO, The Fly, and Zi Yue - gave a joint performance in Beijing. NO’s promotional flyer proudly refers to the severe criticisms they have received in the press. With hindsight, the performance might well be considered as marking the public birth of underground music, as the scene is also labeled this way in Beijing (dixia yinyue). Since then the bands have taken quite a different track, in particular Zi Yue, who is being criticized by other bands from the underground scene for a sound that has lost its subversive spirit. What links these three bands - as well as the more recent underground bands, such as Wooden Horse, Tongue, and Chen Dili - is their critical stance, in most cases combined with an experimental sound, toward Chinese society. In particular the experimental sound, ranging from the new wave (xin langchao) - which in China is also called the depression style (diliao yinyue) - of Wooden Horse to the noise of The Fly and the digital hardcore of their lead vocalist Feng Jiangzhou, means they operate on the margins of the rock culture. Sale figures do not often exceed the 30,000 mark, a figure considered low by Chinese standards. In general, these bands perform at small venues, for an in-crowd of rock groupies (those who prefer the more extreme sounds and hang out in the punk bars of Beijing) and foreign students.

Apart from being a musician, NO singer Zu Zhou (Figure 3.1), who was born in 1970, is a writer, poet, and painter, and has participated in several performance art activities. It is especially in the underground scene that links with other “art worlds” are obvious. The Fly’s Feng Jiangzhou is also an avant-garde painter. His CD was released in 1997 by a small Taiwanese label and only appeared on the mainland market in 1999 on the Modern Sky label. A mainland critic concluded after listening to the CD (Ai 1997: 42):

“Chinese avant-garde art is usually impotent art. Chinese rock is usually hollow. What kind of chemical reaction will happen if we put these two things together? (...) The Fly has set new standards for Chinese rock and made us realize how hypocritical and senseless the so-called avant-garde rock music was. (...) Grunge, punk and noise are really the best ways to express avant-garde art because they are extreme. The lyrics of
this album are controversial, they tried hard to use filthy words to improve their dirty, noisy and bad aesthetics.”

Being the avant-garde of the rock culture, the underground bands have close ties with the cultural avant-garde of China. This review was published before the CD was allowed on the mainland market. But despite government control, CDs find their way to music critics, who publish their reviews nationwide, thus indirectly promoting CDs that are supposed to have been banned by the government. Party hegemony, it seems, is far from absolute and
uncontested. The underground bands were among the first to break with the perceived crisis of rock in China. Their discontent with the rock culture is summed up by the words of Feng Jiangzhou:

“In China, from 1986 to 1996, for 10 years, Chinese rock remained quite the same, it is basically hard rock. So I believe that from 1997 there should be something new. But I can’t jump too far otherwise there would be a displacement. What I am trying to do is to create something that is just beyond the existing rock’n’roll, to create the avant-garde in China.”

The Fly has had two albums released, one in 1999 by Badhead (a sub-label of Modern Sky) and one in 2000 by Jingwen. NO plans to release its third album under the Badhead label, after which Zu Zhou aims to disband, having completed his musical trilogy. In 2000, Badhead became an independent label for underground bands, with Feng Jiangzhou functioning as the manager. Also Qiu Ye from Zi Yue has set up his own production company. Both are indicative of a general trend: Rock musicians are increasingly involved in the music business, be it as a producer or as manager of a small record label. To be a rock musician is not incompatible with the 1990s trend of going into business, despite the rock mythology’s opposition to commercialization. Feng Jiangzhou has also initiated a career in electronic music. Together with the Taiwanese band 3rd Nova, he has made an album the music style of which is known as digital hardcore. It presents an aggressive, upbeat, and angry soundscape, dominated by the repetitive beats. The album marks a radical departure from the idea of a rock band; the listener is drawn into a noisy, computerized, aggressive music world.

Authenticating styles — For Zu Zhou and Feng Jiangzhou, music functions as a site to negotiate feelings of anger and frustration, feelings young people are hardly allowed to express in Chinese culture. Both Confucian and Party ideologies stress the importance of conformity, and of obedience to parents, educators, and bosses. As Feng Jiangzhou said:

“I am actually very angry about a lot of things in China, like disrespect among people, the whole political system, but I do not have the courage to confront people directly, so when I write I can be very angry and aggressive.”

Underground musicians are vocal in their criticism of contemporary Chinese society. Chinese academic He Li quotes from rock critic Kong, who describes NO’s music as follows (He 1997: 88):

4 The same goes for their Western counterparts, like the German industrial band Einsstürzende Neubauten, which also participates in other cultural fields such as theater. Both NO and The Fly admit to having been strongly influenced by Einsstürzende Neubauten.
“Zu Zhou’s uniquely penetrating tenor, like a knife stained with blood and sperm, tears off everything... His purely despondent bass divulges the loneliness towards the future and the destruction of the will to live. Their simple and weird minor-scale progression embeds anxiety and emptiness. It is not only a musical language, but also a spiritual wandering guided by some old instinctive language. Their irregular and airy sound texture constructs some kind of imaginary space”

He Li states that “NO is like a group of sadists from hell” (He 1997: 88). NO’s singer Zu Zhou’s critique of contemporary Chinese society is more a radical denial of meaning: 

“I’m disgusted by Marxism; in my opinion, it has cheated me. (...) This is a senseless age, maybe the true age hasn’t come yet.”

He expresses his alienation and fatalism in his song “Let Me See the Doctor Once More” from NO’s first album Missing Master:

Let de rickshaw take me to the home of the surgeon
Let him fucking see the green smoke beneath my groin
Let me see you once more - doctor
I want to recover my
Left thigh, left rib, left hand, left lung, and my right-wing dad

This song is, in its reference to the singer’s lost right-wing dad, obviously political, but at the same time alienating and confusing: The listener wonders what is meant by the green smoke beneath his groin. NO’s music is profoundly disturbing: Electric guitars, along with a modified guzheng and string instruments made from cans and biscuit tins, produce a dissonant and threatening sound. Zu Zhou’s use of the guzheng is indicative. He refuses to use the instrument in a traditional way, as for example rock musicians Wang Yong and Cui Jian do:

“You know, I can play the instrument in a classical way, like they do. But what’s the point? It makes no sense!”

Instead, he puts a pair of scissors between the strings. The sound is transformed: Gone is the tranquillity the ancient instrument is reputed to exude, a tranquillity that to me signifies the myth of the peaceful, deep, traditional Chinese culture. What remains is a disturbing noise in which anger competes with confusion. Added to these sounds is Zu Zhou’s voice, which is indeed a penetrating tenor. His voice is at times a high pitched falsetto, and at others a Tom

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5 He Li also quotes critic Sun Mengpu, who describes the music of NO as: “A soul is bleeding in the butchery. A man, cursing the cultural garbage, cruelly exposes his anger, his tears and his despair. Rock and roll is music beyond limits. I see, in the darkness of fear, a pair of eyes, stunned, and a heart, floating in the air, dying.”
Waits-like grumbling one. Both the music and the vocals are anything but comforting. Dadaistic elements characterize Zu Zhou’s music and lyrics.

The dadaist aesthetics of Zu Zhou’s music shows similarities with the vulgar aesthetics of The Fly. In a Taiwanese review, the music from The Fly was compared to the guerrilla tactics of Chairman Mao: Instead of launching a frontal attack, the critic pointed out that The Fly was employing sideways movements to oppose dominant culture. Rather than writing about politics, as Zu Zhou often does, The Fly’s singer Feng Jiangzhou prefers to write about sex. Sex - another topic difficult to discuss in China - signifies the political. But his critique covers more than solely the political:

“What is considered beautiful by a lot of people is simply a very popular notion of beauty. I don’t think my lyrics are dirty at all; I want people to think again about what is beautiful and what is dirty. (...) The other reason I choose sex as the subject matter is as a reaction to the pop music of China. The government seems to at least condone if not encourage pop music, whereas it presents rock’n’roll with so many problems. I find pop music so superficial but it represents its own vulgar aesthetics. It would be very difficult for me to write very sophisticated lyrics as its critique. The only way to do so is to find another subject matter which could be as vulgar for the general people and sex seems to be very appropriate to counter Chinese pop music. (...) Everything [in China] is just so covered up. In the past there have been extremely erotic books, pornographic materials, but people hid them and presented themselves as gentlemen. We have a song entitled ‘Gentleman’. In China, everyone wants to be that gentleman, and I’d like them to tear off that mask. Because if you’re always wearing a mask, you don’t exist; people should be real.”

In his elucidation, some aspects of the rock mythology reappear in a sophisticated way. Feng Jiangzhou aims to subvert the ideology of pop by using provocative, vulgar lyrics. The implicit accusation that pop is both superficial and in line with the dominant ideology remains important for his positioning as a rock musician. Also the idea of tearing away the masks people wear, in order to reveal their true, authentic identity, is closely linked to the belief that his music - in being open about sex - is an example of authenticity. The promotion materials of The Fly point out that the recording is done in low fidelity. The underlying assumption is that technology is falsifying. Thus, not only the aesthetics of the lyrics and the music, but also the recording techniques, negotiate notions of authenticity. Like The Fly, NO stresses its preference for low-fi: Their demo tape was recorded on a Walkman.

The mirror The Fly offers the audience is as disturbing as that offered by NO. The sound merges grunge, characterized by its strong fluctuations in tempo, with noise. Feng Jiangzhou’s tormented and tormenting voice combines anger with a large dose of irony. The lyrics are
characterized by directness and absurdity, as shown by the following fragment from the song "Nirvana":

Since there is no light bulb in this village toilet  
Since there is no full moon tonight  
Since I can't fall asleep  
Since I want to play with myself (...)  
Under my ass shine rays of dawn  
I will bring with me the shit fragrance that fills the hut  
My nirvana, my nirvana

I interpret the dadaist aesthetics of Zu Zhou and the vulgar aesthetics of The Fly as tactics of symbolic inversion, which can be defined as an aesthetic "negation of the negative" (Babcock 1978: 19). This aesthetic negation confronts the audience with the lineaments of Chinese culture. It questions the normal in its focus on what is considered abnormal. It destabilizes the illusory symbolic order. "Such 'creative negations' remind us of the need to reinvest the clean with the filthy. (...) The modus inversus does more than simply mock our desire to live according to our usual orders and norms; it reinvests life with a vigor and a Spielraum attainable (it would seem) in no other way" (Babcock 1978: 19). In a text written as part of the promotion material for The Fly, mainland rock critic He Li points to the significance of these tactics of symbolic inversion:

"Flies are not lovely creatures. Their connotations in our language are negative: multiple-eyed, dirty, sickness-spreading, full of pus ... and we are expecting a more hygienic, more civilized, more elegant, more orderly time of money-making. We and the flies are enemies! In major cities of China, punk, I am afraid, only enjoys a very limited audience, because we are constantly concerned about hygiene, neat clothes, civilization, politeness. But it is also because of this that flies bring a special meaning to our life."

The dissonant sounds, the negation of daily life, and the focus on what usually remains unsaid, sets The Fly apart from other rock bands. The similarities with Zu Zhou are clear: Both apply tactics of symbolic inversion, and both share links with other art worlds. The band Zi Yue shares with them an articulate critique of contemporary Chinese society.

The music of Zi Yue (the name means It Says or The Master Speaks, a reference to the

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6 Also Western musicians claim technology to be falsifying, a notion that can be traced back to the Romantic critique of industrial capitalism in the 19th century. For a concise overview of this critique, see: Negus (1992: 27-37). The popularity of MTV's unplugged series in the 1990s can be seen in this light, and might be considered a reaction on the ultimate technologized aesthetics of electronic dance music.
Chinese philosopher Confucius) is produced by Cui Jian. Their CD jacket mixes specific Chinese symbols, such as a temple and a classic Chinese painting, with cosmopolitan images, such as high apartment blocks and oil barrels. A piece of jute connects these images with one another. The frayed ends of jute symbolize, according to vocalist Qiu Ye, the chaos of everyday life. To him, totalizing narratives such as religion and communism try to cut away these frayed ends and turn life into a tidy and straight event, something he considers unnatural. This is one of the reasons the bands’ name was later changed from Zi Yue to another old Chinese word, Yaoshi. Qiu Ye felt that the former was too arrogant, as though his music were telling the truth, whereas the latter leaves more space for multiple interpretations. However eloquent such a change of name might sound, it does cover up more down-to-earth reasons: After having had trouble with their record company Jingwen, Zi Yue changed its name also to be able to break the contract.

Qiu Ye claims to be very much inspired by Buddhist culture, and that he is striving for the perfection of Buddhism in his daily life. A closer look at Qiu Ye, his music, and his lyrics reveals that he is not losing himself in an uncritical celebration of the past. Qiu Ye is quoted on one of the band’s promotional flyers:

“Too many shadows of our ancestors are enshrouding our culture and our life. So-called morality serves only one class. It has only one aim: to enslave, to overthrow and to enslave again.... Looking at the so-called process of human history, whether it’s religion, politics, law or economy, they are all closed cans suppressing and constraining human instincts, like putting you into a vacuum and suffocating you. They call it unity.”

Like Feng Jiangzhou, Qiu Ye is already in his early thirties, and has been active in the rock culture for more than ten years. However, released his first CD only in 1997. Although he spent two weeks in prison in 1997 for fighting with an undercover policeman (Zu Zhou also went to prison in 1997, where he spent the summer), his lifestyle is not that of “sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll” - a cliché that suits only some musicians in the rock culture. His strong opinions on other bands combined with his drinking habits have gained Qiu Ye a quarrelsome reputation in the Beijing rock culture. But mutual criticisms and fights between bands and scenes are anything but rare.

Qiu Ye’s CD was praised as being the best Chinese album of 1997 by “China Broadway” (Zhongguo Bailaohu), one of China’s semi-official music magazines. Indicative of the praise are the words of rock critic Shang Guan (1998), who also refers to the crisis in Chinese rock of the mid-1990s:

7 Yao refers to Taoism (it points to the integration and mutual interdependence of what are often seen as opposite binaries), whereas shi stands for interpretation.
"Just when we are lamenting the decline of Chinese rock and roll, Zi Yue brings us this
delightful album. It is not only a pleasant surprise, but also a comfort - a comfort to all
the hearts which have cooled down for such a long time. (...) This album, which is a bit
psychedelic and full of punk spirit, enshrines the band members' (mainly its vocalist
Qiu Ye's) sharp insights into the world as well as deep and painful metaphors of reality."

Metaphors are crucial if one is to understand the music of Zi Yue, and the lyrics are very
dominant because of Qiu Ye's declaiming, rap-like singing style. In his song "My Dear Good
Child" Qiu Ye sings about the conflicts between a son and his father:

I have a lot of words in my heart
Actually I should have told my dad earlier
But every time before I open my mouth
Dad will give me a piece of candy
That's why I tell you: my child, I am contented, so should you be happy
Don't knit your eyebrows and pretend to be deep in thoughts
The nice things you eat, you drink, you wear are what your old man, me, has spent his whole life to get
Understand?
I try to bear it but it's unbearable
I have to tell you right away (...)
I say: the piece of candy you give me, Dad,
Is not sweet at all.

Qiu Ye impersonates both characters in the song. The music is full of twists and short
interludes, we hear Qiu Ye coughing and murmuring through which he manages to create a
sphere of intimacy with the listener, a sphere that authenticates the music. A classic generation
conflict unfolds in this song between the son and his father. But at the same time, the personal
intersects clearly with the political (or, to quote the feminist slogan, the personal is political).
The song reflects on the relationship between the Party (the father) and today's youth (the
son). Tired of all the stories about the sufferings of the past, before the liberation of China, and
severely disappointed by that candy called communism (or economic reforms, or anything
else handed down to youth), the youths want to scream at the Party, talk about their
disappointments, their dissatisfactions, their dreams. But they will be silenced by the stories

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* Qiu Ye lives with his wife in the center of Beijing in a small, old house, located at a courtyard with other families.
  His two-room house, which, like so many in the neighborhoods (hutong) of Beijing, is on the verge of being torn down
  (the character chai scrawled on many houses in Beijing indicates that they are to be demolished). The rooms seem to
  symbolize a schism between his personal life - symbolized by a girlish, tidy bedroom with neat pink bed sheets, a big
color TV - and his professional life, symbolized by a chaotic living room with music instruments, walls full of Taoist
phrases combined with words such as "rock'n'roll" and "Sex Pistols".
of the past or, eventually, as in 1989, by violence. But to read the father solely as the Party is too limited, according to Qiu Ye. In his view, the song can have different readings: The father also stands for patriarchy that needs to be challenged, just as it signifies the powerful working unit (danwei). Not only the music, but also the metaphoric aesthetics resemble those of Cui Jian, which explains why both are often compared with one another.

Place — Zi Yue’s music is labeled opera rock, a reference to the specific vocals of Qiu Ye, which strongly resemble those in Beijing opera. The music presents a mixture of “Western” rock with instruments that are considered to be traditional Chinese. Vocalist Qiu Ye criticizes those who, in his eyes, copy Western music, and does his best to stress the Chinese character of his music. Also Feng Jiangzhou from The Fly is fascinated by “characteristic” Chinese sounds, which he aims to combine with computer samples and sounds from electric drills:

“I am most interested in using Chinese instruments and revolutionary songs. (...) But I'd definitely refuse to make them sound beautiful; I'd try to make them sound uncomfortable. I like uncomfortable things.”

This conscious distortion of what are considered to be traditional Chinese musical expressions forms one important marker of difference used by underground bands such as NO and The Fly. The transformation of what are considered to be stereotypical Chinese sounds alters, rather than completely subverts, the connotations attached to them. These connotations are, in the case of the guzheng, mainly quietness and deepness, signifying China’s long history, and in the case of the communist songs, the heroic revolutionary past. Zi Yue is even more focused than The Fly or NO on making Chinese rock. For Wang Yue, lead vocalist for the punk band Hang on the Box, it is this inclusion of Chinese elements that she does not like:

“I don't like Zi Yue and NO! They have too many Chinese elements. I like more modern bands.”

To her, the Chinese elements stand for backwardness, for a pre-modernity, whereas the sound of rock, which she considers Western, signifies modernity. It shows how the negotiation of place is contested within the rock culture and functions as an important marker of difference between bands and, often, scenes.

Zu Zhou’s refusal to use traditional musical instruments in a classical way sets him apart from Zi Yue, where the traditional sound is used to construct an “authentic” Chineseness. However, in both cases, the use - or abuse - of traditional instruments also underlines that this is indeed Chinese rock. The negotiation cum negation of the past, either by a conventional or a “distorted” way of using traditional instruments, can be interpreted as an act of self-
orientalizing. Although the dissonant sounds of Zu Zhou's guzheng might not create the tranquil, peaceful, mysterious China that is created by rock musician Wang Yong, they are still intended to mark a difference from "the West". In the words of Feng Jiangzhou:

"Localization of Chinese rock implies that the music should express contemporary Chinese society, so in the music such local flavor is a kind of spontaneous flow of your ideas and emotions towards the conditions you are living in. You are Chinese, living in Chinese social situations."

He points to the importance of locality, of place, yet such localization often leads to an act of "othering" done by the "other" himself, thus constructing an essentialized Chinese identity. Like the flyer from Cui Jian's tour as analyzed in Chapter 1, the inclusion of sounds that are considered Chinese can be interpreted as an attempt to sinify rock. Zu Zhou's use of the guzheng sounds like a negation of ancient China, and Zi Yue sounds more like its reinvention - albeit in order to critically interrogate contemporary China rather than celebrate the past - whereas The Fly vulgarizes communist China.

Other symbols, on the other hand, are used to stress the international, cosmopolitan character of Chinese rock. Bands frequently refer to their sources of inspiration, such as The Beatles and U2. The use of English for band names (e.g., The Fly and NO) and album titles (such as Cui Jian's The Power of the Powerless) gives the CDs an international aura. Through these seemingly contradictory dynamics, place is being negotiated, a place that is both local and global, and, depending on the moment, one or the other will be articulated. The Western journalist and audience is happy to find traditional sounds in the music. Not only is the opera rock of Zi Yue a popular live gig for the expatriate community in Beijing, but they have also performed abroad, in Canada (1999) and Italy (2000).

Thus — After the releases of The Fly and Zi Yue in 1997, reviews speak of a rebirth of Chinese rock. Important markers of difference are their strong ties with other art worlds, the
subversive use by NO and The Fly of traditional Chinese instruments, and the articulate criticisms of Chinese culture. This critique is packaged in different aesthetics. I have distinguished NO’s dadaist and The Fly’s vulgar aesthetics, both of which can be considered tactics of inversion, and the metaphoric aesthetics of Zi Yue. These aesthetics are part of the underground’s discourse of authenticity. The direct lyrics, the low-fi recording techniques, the intimate style of Zi Yue, and the use of “Chinese” instruments all authenticate the underground sound. The articulation of place is connected to the construction of authenticity: The use of Chinese instruments makes this real rock from the mainland. In their lyrics, sounds, and imagery, the bands generate moments of opposition. The underground bands express anger and dissatisfaction with contemporary Chinese society, feelings they can hardly express in other ways. At the same time I question the construction of “Chineseness” in the music and imagery, the “othering” vis-à-vis the non-Chinese (that is, non-mainland) world. Qiu Ye’s wish to create a pure Chinese rock accommodates rather than challenges the dominant notion, namely the uniqueness of China - a notion currently very much in vogue in the Chinese political arena. These contradictions become even more apparent if we look at the heavy metal bands.

**Heavy Metal**

**Positions** — Heavy metal (zhong jinshu) seems to travel very well in China. Ding Wu (b. 1962) used to play with the rock band Hei Bao. Unable to express his love for heavy metal, he left the band and, in late 1988, formed the band Tang Dynasty together with Zhang Ju and two American-Chinese students, one of whom is Kaiser Kuo. Their debut album in 1992 was an instant success. The importance of Tang Dynasty for the Chinese rock culture can hardly be overestimated. They introduced China to heavy metal; during the winter of 1993, the piercing, high-pitched voice of Ding Wu could be heard in streets all over the country. They have toured throughout China and performed in big venues and stadiums. Other bands - such as Cold Blooded Animals, Overload, and Iron Kite - also attract a considerable audience. The following is a critic’s reflection on the popularity of heavy metal in China (Hu 1999: 21):

“The bombardment of heavy metal prevailing in foreign countries was enlarged by our ignorance and blindness. That resulted in the rebellious image both in terms of appearance and mentality and caused a general impression nation-wide that rock ‘n’ roll means being mad. Fortunately, the age is progressing on the whole...”

With the emergence of new scenes in the mid-1990s, heavy metal gradually gave way to other styles. The scene itself has also become increasingly fragmented; in addition to the more mainstream heavy metal rock of Tang Dynasty, the number of death metal (xiwan jinshu) bands in Beijing is rapidly growing, according to Shen Lihui from Modern Sky. Death metal is one of the most extreme subgenres of heavy metal: Its lyrics often focus on death, decay, and
MISE-EN-SCÈNE

destruction, the sound tends to eschew the melodic character of mainstream heavy metal, and in the West the death metal scene is surrounded by biased stories of fights between bands which, in some cases, resulted in murder (Harris 1999). It was only in 1999 that Tang Dynasty released their second album *Epic*, the style of which very much resembles their first one. The response of both the media and the audience to the album was lukewarm (Tao 2000: 3), and the band failed to regain the status it had gradually lost over the years. But they remain a popular live gig, and are still considered to be one of the few established names in Chinese rock.

**Authenticating styles —** At first sight, the aesthetics of heavy metal comes close to what the rock mythology is all about. The leather jackets, long hair, motorcycles, long, loud guitar solos, and screaming voices signify both rebellion and masculinity. A strong longing for the past is expressed in the band names, album titles, imagery, music, and lyrics. This celebration of the past and its related criticisms of the present, form the leading philosophy of Tang Dynasty. In their songs, they express their solitude in modern times, their despair, and their search for a better world. A music critic commented on the band (Dao 1997: 27) that:

“In their music, they express their true feelings towards life and their understanding of the world. (...) They express in their own way a longing for a strong and influential China: a return to Tang Dynasty.”

In line with the rock mythology, their criticisms of modern times are considered authentic, just as their historical claims authenticate the sound.

In the real world, the search for a different life has been far from unproblematic. The band has gone through hard times. After signing up with Magic Stone, they became successful overnight: Their CD is said to have sold over a million copies, and within a few months of its release, more than ten pirated versions were on the market. Unable to cope with their instant success, problematic years followed. Addiction to drugs lasted for years, and in May 1995 guitarist Zhang Ju died in a motorcycle accident. They split with Magic Stone, which, according to the band, had not supported them during their hard times. It was only in 1997 that the band started playing again, managed by Dickson Dee from Hong Kong. Such stories of hardship authenticate their music; they tie in well with the rock mythology, and the perceived perseverance of the band underlines that these are real, dedicated musicians.

Boys are impressed by the masculine poses of Tang Dynasty. The archaic language of their lyrics further strengthens the chivalric pose, a pose that corresponds to the tradition of Chinese swordsman novels (*wuxia xiaoshuo*). Added to the masculine poses and archaic lyrics are the powerful compositions, some almost military-like, with strong melodies and unexpected twists. Through these chivalric aesthetics, authenticity is negotiated, an authenticity that is constructed
around notions of being a real, tough man who dares to express loudly his discontent with modern society.

**Place** — The band’s name reveals the band’s longing for China at the height of its glory. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Chinese art and culture reached, according to popular notions, its highest point. In a comparison with the West, the record company states in the promotion material:

“The most important thing is that here you will hear the self-confidence of the Chinese, because they have done what you thought only Westerners could do.”

The symbolism in the music, the lyrics, and the videoclips that present a sort of orientalist dream sequence, full of references to the traditional past, express a pervasive sense of cultural loss. There is both irony and a recuperation of popular nationalism (cf. Lee 1996: 161-164). Jones quotes Lao Wu, who at the time was bass player for Tang Dynasty (in Jones 1994: 159):

“Rock is based on the blues, and we can never play the blues as well as an American. It’s just not in our blood. We can imitate it, but eventually we’ll have to go back to the music we grew up with, to traditional music, to folk music.”

The irony is that his dogmatic, essentialist approach resembles Western discourses, in which rock is frequently linked to folk music in order to differentiate it from commercial pop music. Tang Dynasty’s longing for the past is expressed in their song “A Dream Return to the Tang Dynasty” (Jones 1994: 160):

**Wind** - cannot blow away our grievances  
**Flowers** - cannot color over our longing for home

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10 *The negotiation of gender within heavy metal has been studied eloquently by Walser (1993). The androgynous poses in heavy metal (e.g., the make-up of Kiss and the long hair of Axl Rose) render the celebration of masculinity profoundly ambiguous. According to Walser (1993: 120), “the sexual politics of heavy metal are (...) a conflicted mixture of confirmation and contradiction of dominant myths about gender.” The chivalric aesthetics turn the musicians of Tang Dynasty into male heroes, thus confirming a dominant gender myth (which equates heroes with real men). At the same time, the band constructs a space where Chinese youth can play with gender. Boys experiment with hairstyles that until then had signified the feminine, and female groupies in the heavy metal scene play the same game by appropriating masculine signs, e.g., dressing up in tough leather clothes and wearing their hair short. Through its performance of masculinity, heavy metal shows that gender is above all a construction, one that is constantly forged (cf. Walser 1993: 136). There are no real men; we can at most act like one.*

11 *Together with Barmé (1992), Jones was the first to analyze the complicity of rock with CCP politics. He refers to an article in China Youth News (1991), which stated that the government should tolerate rock in order to oppose the dominance of Cantopop. “There is not just a little irony here: an oppositional subculture based on an Anglo-American musical form that originally sprang from a reputation of traditional Chinese culture is nationalistically invoked in the official press as a domestic alternative to foreign products” (Jones 1994: 161).*
Snow - cannot reflect the mountain stream
Moon - cannot fulfill the ancient dream
Following the patterns on my palm
Branded there by fate
Following fate I fall into a trance
In dream I return to the Tang Dynasty

American-born Kaiser Kuo, who left the band in 1989, replaced Zhang Ju on guitar. He stressed that they do not want to oppose politics. According to him:

“We are not rebellious at all, we are actually for the present administration. Because of the open door policy, we can exist. China is such a huge country that it needs a strong leadership.”

He agrees that, in a way, they are in fact patriots. Kaiser sees their music as a kind of safety valve, as a way for youths to release their emotions and energy, as a way to rediscover Chinese culture, to be proud of being Chinese. In his celebration of Chinese culture, he draws a comparison with Japan:

“[Japanese history] is going to be dwarfed by China. (...) Chinese culture is a mine, there is so much to do. There are people who go crazy for these Japanese samurai stories, but there is so little in it, there is such a well in China.”

The philosophy of the band strongly resembles the nationalist ideology as expressed by the Party. Kaiser voices popular notions on the supremacy of Chinese culture above Japanese culture, as does the record company in its promotional material. Kaiser’s return to Tang Dynasty was severely criticized by other rock musicians. Whereas Zhang Ju played the guitar in a Chinese way, Kaiser is said to play it in an American way, which is unsuitable for Chinese rock. Besides, he is said to be a bad guitar player anyway. This hostility toward foreign elements is illustrative of the attempt to make rock with “Chinese” characteristics. It is ironic that a band which excels in a celebration of Chinese culture should be faced with these criticisms.

In 1999, Kaiser Kuo left the band after having had personal conflicts with vocalist Ding Wu. According to the press, they got into a fight over NATO’s bombing of the Chinese embassy

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12 Jones (1994: 160) in his critique on Western society, quotes Lao Wu, who left the band after conflicts with vocalist Ding Wu: “I’ve been Westernized almost my whole life. I spent twenty years absorbing anything Western that I could get my hands on. I never knew anything about my own tradition. And now I really hate anything from the West. I resent its influence... modern Chinese culture has never lived up to the tradition because it’s been ruined by all the Western influence. We have to get back to our roots, (...) that’s what the mission of [Chinese rock] should be all about.”
in Belgrade. As an American-born Chinese, Kaiser Kuo was said to accept NATO's apologies to China, whereas Ding Wu - and most Chinese - saw it as a deliberate attack on their country. It is of course ironic that, despite his patriotic opinions, Kaiser Kuo had to leave the band over such an issue.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Thus} — More than underground bands, Tang Dynasty's music is an attempt to essentialize cultural differences. It not only accommodates but also celebrates the dominant notion - a notion supported by the Party - of the uniqueness (or unique excellence) of China. The act of "othering" can also be considered a commercial strategy. "The band is an avowedly commercial venture, and in this light, its nativism (...) is perhaps less an ideological stance than a marketing device" (Jones 1994:161).\textsuperscript{14} Tang Dynasty's affiliation with both political and economic realities is, however, not solely characterized by compliance. The critique on the present, the references to the past, the stories of the band's sufferings, and the chivalric aesthetics - strengthened by the heroic charisma of vocalist Ding Wu - authenticate the sound of Tang Dynasty. These elements also create a music world that both challenges and celebrates the reform policies and rapid modernization of China. Their music world forms a contradictory space: It both challenges and accommodates today's political realities. As such, it shows that rock culture can never be interpreted as solely oppositional or solely in compliance with dominant culture. By acclaiming the power of the past, Tang Dynasty both glorifies and challenges the present. The CCP seems to have been erased from the nationalistic present created by the band.

\textbf{Folk Rock}

\textit{Positions} — Folk music is often considered an important part of China's cultural heritage, and as such is studied by ethnomusicologists (see e.g., Schimmelpenninck 1998). The genre has made its way into the rock culture, but rather than being an expression of rural traditions, the sounds that carry the labels folk (\textit{mingge} or \textit{mingyao}), folk-rock (\textit{mingge yaogun}), or urban folk (\textit{chengshi mingge}) are first and foremost "individual” expressions of urban sentiments. Whereas other scene names are either a direct or a homophonic translation from the English, folk is the only scene whose name has a long and complicated history in China as well. Minorities use it to articulate their local identity, the Han Chinese use it to reify their long tradition, the CCP uses it to propagate communism, and now the rock culture has appropriated it.\textsuperscript{15} Two folk-rock singers I will discuss, Zhang Chu and Zheng Jun, were born in Xi'an and

\textsuperscript{13} However, the rumor within the rock culture was that the conflict was far less related to ideology than to conflicts within the personal sphere.

\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, their celebration of Chineseness, which is predominantly confined to their lyrics, does not cater well to the Western gaze, when Tang Dynasty performed (together with Cui Jian, Wang Yong, and Cobra) in Berlin in 1993, the audience started to leave, disappointed by what it considered to be an old-fashioned sound. The reception of Cui Jian, with his use of Chinese instruments, was much better (Steen, personal conversation, August 27, 2000).
only later moved to Beijing. In fact, the song that made Zhang Chu famous all over China ("Little Sister"), expresses his loneliness and his longing for both his sister and his hometown.\(^\text{16}\) The third singer in my analysis is Hu Mage, who comes from Inner Mongolia. Compared to the other two folk-rock singers, Hu Mage is far less popular in terms of sales figures. Both Zhang Chu and Hu Mage inspire me to reflect on the aesthetics of folk-rock, whereas Zheng Jun stimulates me to further discuss the negotiation of place. Given its apparently personal contents, folk-rock faces fewer political problems than most other scenes. It is nearly impossible to draw a clear line between folk-rock and pop-rock, particularly in the case of Zheng Jun. Other bands often label him, and look down on him as, a pop musician; the popularity of his music has made him a national star, and his record company Polygram (now Universal) positions it as pop-rock.

**Authenticating styles** — According to Frith (1996: 39), in Western folk music, there is ideally no separation between art and life. Folk music is not so much a reflection or comment on everyday life, as part and parcel of everyday life, an inseparable element of it. The folk singer is the regular guy, and he rejects glamorous stardom. As I will show, these aesthetics also distinguish Chinese folk-rock singers from other scenes. Instead, what is valued (or, better, constructed and displayed) is "the natural, the spontaneous, and the immediate" (Frith 1996: 40). Folk singers are troubadours, lyrical poets with a guitar. They are predominantly male; Ai Jing is one of the exceptions in China. They reflect on the loneliness of urban life, and sing about nostalgia for their hometown and their longing for true love. What sets them apart from pop music is not only their refusal to be glamorized, but also, and mostly, the importance attached to writing one's own songs and lyrics. The folk aesthetics produces a discourse of authenticity that is based on notions of closeness, simplicity, and intimacy. But, as I will show in my analysis, the paradox of folk is that while its troubadours are supposed to be ordinary boys, they are so extraordinary that you rarely find them in real life; you feel very close to them because the real boy next door is very far away.

Zhang Chu fits in very well with the regular guy aesthetics of folk-rock. Interviews with him usually stress his personal life. He is depicted as a poetic innocent boy (see: Hu 1997). And poetry, being regarded as the highest form of the literary arts, gives Zhang Chu an intellectual aura. At the end of the 1980s, he lived at Beijing Teachers University where he participated with Yi Sha in a poetry group (Hou 1996).\(^\text{17}\) Hou Ma writes about this period and

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\(^{15}\) So-called campus songs (xiaoyuan gequ) comprise a folk-rock subgenre popular among college students. The songs give voice to their angst about leaving home for an unknown future.

\(^{16}\) The importance of one's hometown can hardly be overestimated in China. Migrants in cities associate with other migrants from their hometown, and employers allocate jobs to workers from their own hometown; even emigration routes can be traced between a particular town and another country (the citizens of Wenzhou, for example, have strong ties with the Netherlands, given the emigration figures (Li 1999)).
how Zhang Chu composed his songs:

"Important was their rebellious attitude, directed against the hypocritical artistic atmosphere that dominated everything. This was really a time of emancipation, a time full of creation. (...) When Zhang Chu wrote music, he looked like a hallucinating wizard, humming endlessly as though controlled by a ghost."

This statement voices an idealized nostalgia for the 1980s, the decade of the great cultural debate. It also reifies the idea of the gifted artist who goes into a trance when writing his music, an idea that resonates well with the rock mythology. But in order to set Zhang Chu apart from other rock musicians, the author continues to describe Zhang Chu in terms that articulate the folk aesthetics (Hou 1996):

"Zhang Chu stays home all day. (...) He is more like a little animal or child, he is simple, curious and kindhearted. His eyes are bright and clear, his expressions are calm and he laughs without any restraint. (...) If you want to talk to him on an equal level, you must be as innocent as a child and wipe out all the impure things in your mind."

Such notions as simplicity, innocence, and purity position Zhang Chu as a true artist, and his rejection of stardom is crucial for folk-rock. But Zhang Chu is depicted here as an extraordinarily "regular guy," an extraordinariness that lies in his boyish attitude more than in anything else. In folk, the extraordinary is located in the ordinary. Folk is a celebration of innocence, of the immediate and sincere, and only those who act according to its "pure" aesthetics can enter the folk-rock scene.

Zhang Chu's boyish image is strengthened by his physical stature (he is small, like a young boy) and youngish face. Zhang Chu's voice is remarkable: It has a high pitched tone that borders on being sharp and off-key. It is a lonely and vulnerable voice, as though it were that of an adolescent. Zhang Chu is extreme in neither his looks - on the jacket of his first CD (Ashamed to be Lonely, 1994) he's lighting a cigarette in a shabby room; on the jacket of his 1997 CD (The Airplane-making Factory) he's dressed in jeans and T-shirt - nor his music. On the jacket of his first release, record company Magic Stone introduces Zhang Chu as follows:

He decides to look for more sincere and simple feelings. (...) He hopes people will find

37 Yi Sha later accused Zhang Chu in the popular media of becoming too intellectual (Hou 1996). Cui Jian had to apologize in public after spreading the rumor that Yi Sha had written lyrics for Zhang Chu (thereby accusing Zhang Chu of not being a true musician) (Zhu 1996). Yi Sha replied: "I have never set a single word to music for him," and added that Zhang Chu never liked his poems (Yi 1996). Gossip is certainly an understudied theme in popular music studies, and in cultural studies in general.
in his music some truer feelings, not just simple romance. He wants to be a narrator and stand with others; he does not want to be too aloof, to be too high or distant.

In line with the folk aesthetics that stress notions of simplicity and innocence, Zhang Chu is deliberately presented as the regular guy. But for this boy, there is little room for romance, which is the domain of pop music, since love is too simple, too unrealistic in the "broken real world", as is stated on the jacket of his second release. His folk-rock music resonates with the gloomy aspects of everyday life rather than with its joyful moments, and he is positioned as a friend by the record company, not someone to go out and play with (wan'rn), but to be with when we are alone in our room. He is often considered a poet by critics, more so than a musician maybe. The following lyric fragment from the title track of *The Airplane-making Factory* provides a fine example:

He flashes a red spade 3
A carriage, carrying summer, passes slowly by the empty factory door
The factory is running overtime, busy making an airplane
Planning to fly to the moon in the night
The sun is still shining everywhere, brightly; the sun is still waiting by the door and the windows, quietly (…)
The day the airplane incident takes place, I lose my poker game and I even trip over my chair
Suddenly I cry like a mute
Unsteadily, I run away, limping

His weak, fragile voice, drenched by a restless soundscape, combined with these ambiguous lyrics, makes this song difficult to grasp. These are not just the regular-guy aesthetics, since this boy is so carried away by his own musings that he is out of the listener’s reach. This explains why the critics are not always very supportive of Zhang Chu; his image as a poet has been turned against him (*Zhongguo Yinxiang* 1996: 31):

“I am deeply disappointed. Zhang Chu is getting further and further away from us. I think if he is too devoted to poetry he will get more distant from music. Zhang Chu is too obsessed with obscure (huise) thoughts.”

Zhang Chu has betrayed, in this critic’s view, the essence of the folk aesthetics: He is no longer the regular guy, and has moved away from us toward the obscurity of his poems. Hu Mage shares this critique. In the past, Zhang Chu was his idol, but now they have become friends.

“I don’t think my work is worse than Zhang Chu’s because I focus more on common
people, reality and the present situation.”

Here, Hu Mage acknowledges the link with Zhang Chu, but positions himself as being closer to the aesthetics of folk-rock in his focus on the common people and normality. Zhang Chu’s authenticity, which is related to the regular-guy aesthetics, is threatened by his gradual move toward obscure and inaccessible poetry.

In his lyrics, Zhang Chu refuses to reiterate the rock mythology; it is hard to find clear rebellious statements, his metaphors are complex and not easily translated into a cultural or political critique. In the ambiguity of his lyrics, Zhang Chu leaves open much interpretative space for the listener. Another critic observes that Zhang Chu’s voice is “lonely, weak, and unfashionable” (Vincent 1996: 20). The power of his music lies in, apart from the poetic lyrics, this strange voice. His high-pitched, nearly off-key voice is like a desolate cry from afar, as though he is asking for our help, but only after he has put himself out of reach.

Apart from being a musician, Hu Mage (b. 1973) works as a designer for an Internet company. He reflected on the changes in his life:

“It is very interesting. Fifteen years ago I was a peasant, and now I sit here and am involved in the most advanced technology. I want to write about these changes in my life.”

The migratory experience, combined with his rapid entry into modern society, inspires his music. The jacket design (Figure 3.2) for his 1999 record Hu Mage ties in well with the aesthetics of folk-rock.

The childish drawing on the white cover gives the album, in my eyes, an innocent aura, its whiteness signifying purity and simplicity. The lyrics are printed in the form of handwriting instead of being typeset, which constructs the singer as someone close to us, someone who has written down words for us. The inlay shows snapshots of Hu Mage, sometimes along with his band. Some have captions like “1991, graduated from Yiling secondary school” or “(..) stayed in Huazhong Teachers University, accompanying classmates in their studies.” Like the lyrics, these pictures construct Hu Mage as one of us, a nice guy who has fun with his classmates, who studies and tries to find his own way in life.

This is urban folk pur sang: There is only the guitar and Hu Mage’s voice, a voice that sometimes starts whistling the tune. When I listen to this record, I always imagine Hu Mage sitting somewhere in Beijing’s subway system, a group of people gathered round him while he plays his music. Like Zhang Chu’s, Hu Mage’s voice is not as “beautiful” and smooth as that of, for example, Zheng Jun. He often merely talks, rather than sings, in a whiny voice.
有人问我为什么

我不再露出笑容

我也失去了笑容

我不再露出笑容

我也失去了笑容

我不再露出笑容

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that constructs an image of the singer as a fun companion, someone to laugh with while strolling through the alleys of Beijing. Both the imagery and the music articulate a sense of intimacy that authenticates the music. A Beijing critic shares my observations in his album review (Zhahuang 1999: 17):

“Just like all sincere confessors, he all of a sudden becomes a real catcher of the heart, catching all the lonely hearts on a weekend night.... Even I am touched.”

In his song “Some Potatoes Go to the City,” Hu Mage starts laughing when he sings:

Next door lives a cultured person, strange, but not really with bad intentions  
He says I am hardworking, brave, sincere, simple and without any desire  
He shows me an exercise book, full of words  
He plays music to me, which I don’t like, too noisy  
He says that’s a compliment to us, he says he is one of us  
But he keeps his smile on the chair, under his buttocks  
He mentions something “hypocritical”, and says a few bad things about the city  
Most of them I don’t understand, so I say, timidly:  
“This, I think, is not good,  
this, I really think, is not good.”

After which he goes on singing ba ba ba ba ba along with the melody of the song. The grayness of Beijing dissolves in this soundscape, and is transformed into thousands of colorful pieces, little corners of that big city where this troubadour reflects on his relationship with his educated neighbor. Hu Mage stresses his simplicity by positioning himself vis-à-vis a “cultured person,” which ties in well with the regular-guy aesthetics of folk. When I listen to this song, I cheerfully sing along with him: “This, I think, is not good; this, I really think, is not good”. There is the pleasure of trying to be simple, to be innocent, to resist thinking, to refuse to read, and instead to search for the beautiful small moments in everyday life.

Place — The migratory experience is crucial in the work of both Zhang Chu and Hu Mage. Their music reflects a sense of loss, a longing for one’s hometown. Zhang Chu sings about his longing for his older sister, whereas the focus on the common people in Hu Mage’s work resonates a move away from modern city life. Such negotiations of place do not involve a specific articulation of Chineseness, but merely reflect the migrant’s homesickness. These sentiments further authenticate the music, as the sadness of these troubadours makes them more real. Other folk-rock singers (e.g., Zheng Jun) include references to the ancient, exotic China, references that also help to authenticate their sound.

I met Zheng Jun at in Hong Kong the end of June 1997, while he was promoting his new
album, *The Third Eye*. Zheng Jun has recently made the headlines in Hong Kong by criticizing Cantopop singers for not being real musicians. He considers himself different from them:

“I am a singer who writes a song in which I express my own feelings, my own opinions on society and on the life of young people. But for the Hong Kong superstars, they are just singers, maybe they sing well or badly, but other than that they are nothing. They have no ideas, not their own opinions, they are just vocalists.”

Like in other scenes, commercial pop is the constitutive outside for folk-rock. Zheng Jun says he writes his own songs in which he expresses his opinions, whereas pop singers just sing. His remark ties in well with the rock mythology. Not surprisingly, his comments were considered provocative by Hong Kong journalists. The spatial reification of the pop-rock divide is even more conspicuous when we realize that this controversy happened around July 1st 1997. He accused Hong Kong singers of being superficial just a few days before Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule, and thus the statement carries a double meaning. For many Hong Kongese, it undoubtedly underlined both the perceived cultural ignorance and the arrogance of their future rulers. It shows how music, at a specific juncture in time and space, can become a strongly politicized site.

Zheng Jun’s music contains many references to ancient China. He explains this by pointing to a perceived incompatibility between East and West:

“I think Western culture just tries to be comfortable, and Eastern culture is different: it cares about the spirit, cares about your own soul, about real life and life before birth and after death. (...) Eastern culture is for a few wise people.”

Zheng Jun positions the East versus the West, and reifies the clichés attached to this binary. He explained to me that he has learned to appreciate Western music, and attaches a notion of freedom of individual expression to it. But his freedom lies in a search for the spiritual, a search based not so much on Christianity (his mother’s religion), but on a celebration of Eastern mysticism. In his music he eagerly incorporates mythic elements, such as Tibetan folk songs or local opera. Zheng Jun’s hit song “Back to Lhasa” combines the voices of Tibetan women with the sound of his electric guitar. Despite its rather blunt structuralistic generalization, I will pursue a brief semiological reading here. If we follow predominantly Western stereotypes, ethnic and/or rural women, like Tibet, signify authenticity, naturalness, and purity. At the connotative level, both Tibet and women are considered closer to nature (than either the city or man) in Western culture and, I would like to argue, also in urban China. To combine the feminine with the exotic results in an even stronger articulation of authenticity, an articulation that ties in well with the rock mythology. Tibetan women articulate fantasies of origin and of nature (instead of culture). “These fantasies are played out through a generic realm of
associations, typically having to do with the animal, the savage, the countryside, the indigenous, the people and so forth, which stand in for that ‘original’ something that has been lost” (Chow 1995: 22). Rey Chow refers to this invention of an imagined past (which in the case of Zheng Jun is projected toward a distant place) as a primitive passion, “a fabrication of a pre that occurs in the time of the post” (Chow 1995: 22).

Zheng Jun, who comes from a higher class family in Xi’an, in which both Christian and “traditional” Chinese culture are core values, and was educated in a “communist” system, and then started studying foreign business, ended up writing the following lyrics (from his hit song “Return to Lhasa”):

That snow-capped mountain, that green grass, that beautiful Lama temple
That girl, forever
Lha....yaaayee....sa, feels like my home
Lha....yaaayee....sa, my beautiful snow lotus-flower
In the pure sky flies a pure heart
Don’t worry for tomorrow, don’t bother about today
Come come, let’s return to Lhasa
Return to the home we haven’t seen for a long, long time

The regular guy is longing for a girl, and for a purity he can only find in Tibet. These are not the lyrics of a rebel; the words signify a wandering soul in search of peaceful living. As with Sister Drum, the inclusion of ethnic elements can be considered a self-orientalizing move. Tibet is one of the prime signifiers of the mythic, spiritual East; a return to Lhasa not only expresses a longing for spirituality, and a desire for the primitive, but it also sets his music apart from that of other bands. It is a clever move in terms of marketing. But the reviews are not that favorable (A 1997: 35):

“He has many thoughts in his music. He wants Western R&B, rock, he wants Yunnan and Tibetan Folk music, he wants noise, he wants meditations, he wants guitar, he wants to combine, he wants the Indian sitar, he wants a Chinese guzheng, a Western flute, and a Chinese erhu... It is so chaotic, I can’t see anything!”

The inclusion of ethnic sounds does not guarantee positive reviews in the local press. I have already quoted how Sister Drum was criticized for the inauthentic copying of authentic

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18 It is not that surprising that especially the feminine travels well to the West, as women (more than men) articulate the exotic, authentic China. Examples can be found in both authorship - especially female (overseas) Chinese writers have appeared on the Western market (Jung Chang, Amy Tan, Lulu Wang) - and in contents, not only in the books of these authors, but also in Zhang Yimou’s movies (Red Shorgum, Ju Dou, and Raise the Red Lantern depict the female star Gong Li (Zhang’s ex-wife) in a predominantly rural setting from the past).
ethnic sounds, and Zheng Jun is accused of being too eclectic in his musical appropriations. To the ears of the critic, there is a limit to the creolizing possibilities of music.

Thus — The three folk-rock singers I have discussed all have their own articulations of the regular-guy aesthetics that is so crucial for folk. Folk-rock appears to be a suitable style for expressing the migratory experience, since not all singers are from Beijing. In his image, Zhang Chu fits the regular-guy aesthetics very well, but in his music he operates on the boundaries of the folk-rock domain. Not only does his high-pitched voice set him apart from other singers, but his poetic, ambiguous lyrics make him a remarkable figure in the Beijing rock circle. He is portrayed in the Chinese popular press as an extraordinary ordinary boy, which suggests that the folk aesthetics also operates as an exclusionary tactic. Hu Mage reflects in a straightforward, plain manner on everyday life in Beijing. His articulation of normality ties in well with the folk aesthetics. Zhang Chu and Hu Mage reflect upon the migratory experience and the importance of one’s hometown. Zheng Jun projects his desire for the simple and the primitive toward a distant place, and exotic sounds authenticate his personal musings on modern life. In his appropriation of exotic sounds, Zheng Jun is criticized for being too eclectic. Nonetheless, he is one of the best-selling rock musicians to date, although others accuse him of becoming a pop star. Zheng Jun, however, distances himself from pop. I have shown how he criticized Cantopop singers for not having their own thoughts. Folk-rock is a scene where male troubadours muse on living in a rapidly modernizing society. In their quest for authenticity, for purity, they fit in the rock mythology. But in their negation of being rebellious, they simultaneously push the limits of this mythology. This renders the scene ambiguous, and this ambiguity lies at the heart of the power of folk-rock, as it creates a relatively large interpretative space for audiences.

Pop Rock

Positions — The band Hei Bao (Black Panther) started off playing rather heavy sounds. After vocalist Dou Wei left the band, the music gradually smoothened and became pop-rock ballads (liuxing yaogun). Neither critics nor audiences were pleased with this development: A band which transgresses the boundaries set by the rock mythology is believed to have lost its soul. For Zang Tianshuo, the move from playing in a band to becoming a pop-rock singer has been more successful; he gained rather than lost audiences. Point Zero (Ling Dian) started off as a pop-rock band from Mongolia and as such was very popular on the mainland. According to critics, also Zheng Jun has moved toward pop-rock, as becomes clear from the following review (Tianpigu 1999: 17):

“The difference between rock and pop is very obvious. However hard the drums are played, and even strengthened with a supporting band, pop music remains pop music. Why do Zheng Jun and Ling Dian have to squeeze into this small alley of Chinese
rock? Maybe if they took off this rock jacket, more young girls would become their fans. I really like Zheng Jun - if only he’d stopped after his second album.”

His words reify the dichotomy pop versus rock, and clearly value the latter more: Pop is something for “young girls”. A hard sound does not guarantee the label rock; only sounds that are framed by the hard force of the rock mythology will be granted that label, I expect. My analysis of the pop-rock scene will focus primarily on how these bands perceive their position within the rock culture. I will show how pop-rock musicians rely on the rock mythology when it comes to being authentic, yet challenge other aspects of the mythology, in particular its focus on the countercultural.

Authenticating styles — When I told Qiu Ye I was going to a Zang Tianshuo concert, a cynical smile appeared on his face and he said: “That’s not rock, it’s pure pop!” Also for Gao Wei, the vocalist for pop-punk band Underground Baby, Zang Tianshuo has betrayed rock:

“Zang Tianshuo was not successful because someone said his music was provocative. Then he changed his style, and that’s not good for rock. It’s not rock at all, if you have difficulties and you change it, that’s not rock.”

Being used to the small rock venues that were hardly ever fully packed and usually attracted a lot of foreigners, the concert turned out to be quite an experience. A fully booked Workers Stadium hosted a Chinese audience that at a certain point, bewildered, sang along with the classic “Friend” by Zang Tianshuo. Young and old, men and women, all joined in singing his hit singles. In my interview with him, and in journalistic reports, Zang Tianshuo time and again stresses that it is his aim to reach “the common people” with his music. Reports in the media tell how he visits people who are dying of cancer to sing a song for them (Shang 1997: 14). Such catering to the perceived needs of “the common people” authenticates his music, in his closeness to the audience he becomes more real, more human, compared to a pop star.

Zang Tianzhuo explains his move from rock to pop as follows (in Fang 1997: 94):

“My ideas about human beings are changing from rock to pop. The reason is mainly because I have grasped the nature of music: although pain prevails, hope drifts above it, this is what I want to solve.”

He accuses rock singers of being too egocentric and pretentious; they don’t take the taste of the “common people” into account. He changed his focus from rock, which he equates with pain, to pop, which stands for hope. This is an interesting reinterpretation of the dichotomy, as he refuses to speak in terms of fake and real. He plays above all the nice guy; he tries to avoid blaming other bands and instead advises them to stop criticizing one another.
Nevertheless, to me he complained about punk rocker He Yong:

“If you look at his performance, his attitude is not good, the audience didn’t like it. Because of his act I had to postpone my performance for a long time. He exaggerates his sufferings under the government in order to attract foreign attention. (...) As to politics, I’d rather show my hope and expectation rather than encourage people to fight, because we cannot change it in this generation. “

Being openly rebellious is equated by him to catering to the West; a one-sided interpretation maybe, but it does acknowledge the Western gaze on China and its impact on the rock culture. His narrative, like his authenticating positioning toward the audience, is informed by the rock mythology in that he claims to be true to himself. In his refusal to rebel and to confront political or social problems, he at the same time negates the mythology.

Also the members of Point Zero are eager to point out that they write their own songs; like Zang Tianshuo, they differentiate themselves from other scenes by foregrounding the importance of meeting the demands of the audience. According to their bass player, Wang Xiaodong, they try hard to make easy listening melodic songs and he cannot understand why rock bands make “strange music”. Point Zero operates on the margins of the rock culture, yet ranks among the top when it comes to sales figures. Their aesthetics - “cool” poses, leather jackets - signifies a refusal to be packaged, and also authenticates the band. According to a Chinese review, the audience should not be fooled by the rock image as their music is more melodic. But according to the critic, the band moves from melodic toward pop, which makes it increasingly insincere (Yinshang Shijie 1997:34). In this critic’s reading, the sound remains framed - or rather, imprisoned - within the pop-rock dichotomy and reifies the related stereotypes. Like Zang Tianzhuo, Point Zero negates the rebellious:

“Our performances are all legal, we never meet any trouble. I don’t think the bands in China have difficulties with the government, but with money. (...) We are very proud to be Chinese, many foreigners ask us the wrong questions. Every country has its own system; foreigners can’t understand it and shouldn’t interfere.”

From the perspective of other scenes, the pop-rock bands are anything but rock. They have betrayed the spirit of rock and are looked down upon. Their popularity among the audience is envied but also interpreted as another proof that they are ‘only’ pop. According to Point Zero, the album sold nearly 300,000 copies within two weeks, ten times as many as a typical underground album.

Place — In his focus on the needs of “the common people,” coupled with a public positioning as being a devoted Buddhist believer, Zang Tianshuo combines the tradition with
a socialist spirit, both of which make him a Chinese singer. The positioning of Point Zero is more conspicuously connected to place: In the marketing, it is stressed that this is a band from Inner Mongolia, so as to set them apart from the Beijing bands. I will elaborate further on the importance of place for the marketing of Point Zero in Chapter 6. The members of neither Zang Tianshuo nor Point Zero are eager to point out their difference from Western rock bands; both bands are clear in that they aim to attract a big mainland audience.

Thus — The pop-rock scene is interesting in that it operates at the boundaries of the rock mythology. With their rock aesthetics (long hair, leather jackets), their insistence on making their own music, and their wish to share their optimistic ideas on love and hope with the audience, the pop-rock bands act in line with the mythology; they remain after all true to themselves. But in their refusal to take up a provocative pose or make controversial music - in terms of either sound or lyrics - they also negate the mythology. There is no attempt to be rebellious; at most, they try to look cool. The challenge they pose to rock - they accuse other scenes of being ignorant about the taste of the public - has a communist ring to it; they want to serve the people. By including the preferences of the listener, they move away from the idea of the rock artist who hovers above the crowds to enlighten them. Instead they acknowledge that the audience is part and parcel of the process of making music. The pop-rock scene shows how the mythology is anything but uncontested, yet the fierce criticisms they receive from other scenes simultaneously demonstrate the power of the mythology.

Hardcore Punk

Positions — Punk emerged during the long hot summer of 1976 in the area around King's Road in south-west London (Hebdige 1979: 25). Its beginning coincided with the end of that other, certainly more violent, Cultural Revolution, the one led by Mao in the ten years preceding that summer. While China was recovering and preparing itself to reopen its doors to the outside world, the Sex Pistols shocked the Western world in 1977 with their release God Save the Queen. The excessive look and extreme sound challenged all possible stylistic conventions. It was a white rebellion that borrowed eagerly from the youth cultures that had preceded it, such as glamrock and skinheads. Punk emerged at a specific juncture in British society; it was not just a (somehow celebratory) response to the increase in unemployment, but also a “dramatizing of what had come to be called ‘Britain’s decline’” (Hebdige 1979: 87, italics his). What happened when punk traveled all the way to China, some 20 years after that hot London summer?

Punk (pengke) - sometimes journalists or bands add the label hardcore (yinghe pengke) to differentiate it from pop-punk - proves to be a good source of inspiration for Chinese musicians. In August 1999, I spent three nights in Beijing and, as usual, did my best to see as many bands as possible (I managed to see nine punk bands, including the all-female Hang on the Box).
Although punk is the current rage, its circle is very small and active in only a few small bars scattered around the city. Every evening, the same faces show up, and most punk musicians play for different bands; it thus takes only a few musicians to form a scene.

The hardcore punk circle is marginal, in terms of both size and popularity, but is very visible given its extravagant styles. Some of the hardcore bands of the Chinese punk scene are Anarchy Jerks, Brain Failure, Reflector, and 69 - these four are collectively known as "Senseless Contingent" (wuliao jundui) under which they released a compilation CD in 1999 - and the all-female Hang on the Box. Their names signify anarchy and rebellion. Not surprisingly, Western reporters frequently write about Chinese punk, or film the bands, as this scene ties in best with the desired countercultural pose. And the bands perform accordingly. According to Peter from the band 69, China needs punk:

"Many people don’t understand punk. I think punk is necessary for Chinese society. Chinese people valued patience for about 5,000 years. Patience makes Chinese people like animals, like slaves. They need punk, they need punk to fight for what they want. If you don’t want to be a slave, you should be punk."

It does not seem an exaggeration to say that hardcore punk comes, from all the scenes I distinguish, closest to the ideal embodiment of the rock mythology.

Authenticating styles — In punk, the ideology of musical talent is subverted; in its do-it-yourself (DIY) philosophy, everyone can make music. Just as the pogo can be considered an anti-dance, a rejection of harmony and elegance, the related music can be considered anti-music, a refusal to accept any convention on popular music. Other authors have already eloquently analyzed Western punk (Grossberg 1986, Hebdige 1979, 1988, Laing 1985). Suffice it here to add one footnote to the history of punk: The seemingly anti-authoritarian

Figure 3.3: At a Punk Party in Beijing (photo by Wang Di)
stance of the Sex Pistols was carefully planned and marketed by Malcolm MacLarren and Vivienne Westwood. The authenticity of punk, negotiated through its excessive style and the DIY philosophy, was in the case of the Sex Pistols cautiously constructed. The DIY philosophy poses a fundamental challenge to this notion of skills and talent. But this challenge is not taken to its extreme in China (and quite certainly not in the West either): Like in other scenes, there is good and bad punk according to the musicians. Not everyone is allowed to do it him- or herself. The opinion of Peter indicates that the women of Hang on the Box do it the wrong way:

“ Their music sucks. It’s not music, it’s just screaming. Even their lyrics are dumb, really dumb...”

Compared to the underground band The Fly, who also stressed the importance of DIY, punk compositions are more basic: Punk songs are usually short with an upbeat rhythm and an aggressive singing style. Apart from the DIY philosophy, the focus on rhythm rather than melody presumably also renders punk more authentic. Rhythm is linked to the constructed and racist history of rock that goes back to the drums of Africa (which, through the blues, made their way into rock). The “primitive” sound of the African drum is real and sexy, just as Africa connotes sensuality and authenticity. But its authenticity differs from the one articulated by Zheng Jun through the voices of Tibetan women. Whereas Tibet signifies spirituality, however primitive it might be, Africa signifies sensuality. Of course, what is considered rhythmic and sensual is not so much defined by the music or the body, as by the conventions developed within a culture. Frith (1996: 127-141) points out that equating rhythm with the primitive, the bodily, and the sexual is merely a product of European high cultural ideology.

And via Europe, these notions traveled on to China. Consequently, the authenticity of punk can be captured in a one-liner: Just do it, and do it real, do it in the rhythm of the heart.

The flyer for a Halloween punk party depicts what looks like a white punker being terrified by a spider (Figure 3.4). The flyer’s design connotes rebellion and chaos, so this must have been an underground party. The text says, in clumsy English: “Will Hold Power, Just Saying ‘No’ to Leader.” Such a provocative statement is not repeated in Chinese, because that would be too risky; instead, the Chinese text simply announces a punk party. More than being a conscious political statement against the Party, both this text and the design of the flyer signify

19 According to Lawrence Grossberg (1986: 58), punk challenged the control of the major record companies, returned the single to the center of music production, rejected criteria of aesthetic and technological expertise, rejected the star system, and it consciously sought the minimal music conditions of rock.

20 But, as he explains, “the significance of rhythm for African music and culture lies not in its simplicity and ‘directness’ but in its flexibility and sophistication, not in its physical expressivity but in its communicative subtlety” (Frith 1996: 135).
FREE tickets FREE!

Halloween Dance Party

69 First St. - Free Admission

Just Saying 'No. Leader

10p.m. - 12a.m.

October 31

with costume or dead, you pay

Figure 3.4: Flyer for a 1987 Halloween party
in my view anarchy and rebellion, two core elements of the punk idiom. Peter’s band 69 also performed at the Halloween party. Their well-known songs turned on the audience. Their music is fun - fun to dance to, fun to sing along with. A fan dressed up like a Red Guard told me how he longs for a new rebellion, like the one in 1989. Peter’s voice was filled with anger, which he explained to me earlier:

“Every show I am angry. The music makes me think about many things, about all the bad things in society, the things that make me puke. (...) This society is controlled by the government.”

However tempting it is to give a politicized reading of Chinese punk, most bands resist such a reading. The “underground” punk-zines, whose aesthetics are very much in line with the flyer in Figure 3.3, explain punk in terms of a cultural struggle. The following was written by Hang on the Box vocalist Wang Yue (May 1999; the italicized sentence was already in English):

“The birth and growth of Chinese punk germinates the explosion of a cultural revolution, a counterculture, an anti-popular consciousness, and a great movement breaking entirely away from decayed and dated thoughts. The pioneering punkers in China will encourage the new generation of Chinese youth to run bravely towards a new century. They are making valuable contributions to China’s cultural development. Let us hope for the growth of China’s punk bands! At the same time, let us all shout: long live world peace! Long live anarchism! Long live the Chinese punk!”

The appropriation of communist terminology can be read both as a parody of the Party and as an attempt to sinify punk. The last, English sentence reads like a political slogan. But this is merely a symbolic play, not so much aimed at revolution and struggle, as at pleasure, the pleasure of shocking and provoking. At the same time, this text is an articulation of the rock mythology; it positions punk as truly countercultural. The pleasure of hardcore punk lies in its spectacular performance of difference, a difference that is both shocking and provocative. These punkers are anything but good sons and model students. Because such a negation of normality challenges dominant norms, we can speak of a politics of pleasure. This does not mean that pleasure is of less significance for other scenes; there is pleasure in the vulgarity of The Fly, just as there is pleasure in the intimacy of Zhang Chu. But in its negation of what is considered normal in Chinese culture, in its celebration of a difference that is taken to the extreme, the politics of pleasure is more spectacular and therefore more visible in punk.

Although the aesthetics of punk in China might resemble that of punk in the West, the ideological horizon of the former seems to be broader. The e-mail Peter sent me is indicative:
“Jingwen helped us release but the compilation is really bad cuz [sic] we have been ripped off. (...) I have good news, Levi will use 69 to promote their new products, we just signed the contract. (...) Pretty good, right? I think it’s the first Chinese mainland local band to have a deal with a big company like Levi.”

In line with the dominant idea that record companies are untrustworthy, Jingwen is considered to have ripped them off. He proudly announces their cooperation with the multinational jeans company, Levi. Also, Peter is earning a living by trading in stocks and shares, thus bridging the unbridgeable gap between punk and capitalism. Both examples show that, although punk might travel well to China, the musicians create quite some ideological space in which to maneuver.

Place — “Fuck” is the English word most eagerly adopted by the bands. For Qiu Ye from the band Zi Yue, this is a sign that punk only copies the West and lacks any link with Chinese culture:

“One extreme case of copying is punk. They only copy the hippies’ lifestyle, not the music spirit. In China there can’t be punk. Only in a wealthy country can punk appear because of the spiritual emptiness. What the Chinese play is fake punk. They just imitate the manners, like screaming ‘Fuck You Fuck Me’ without making clear whether they have the potency to fuck others.”

His remark not only reifies the West as the imagined center of rock, it also signifies tactics of exclusion, as the subtext reads “I make real Chinese rock, they just imitate.”

But punk fights back and creates its own authenticating discursive battles directed against the rock culture in general. The 69’s song “Comments on Rock and Roll” is a frontal attack on so-called posture rock:

What are you doing?  
Everything you say is so hypocritical  
Everything you do is so disgusting  
Fuck! That is posture rock! (...)  
Don’t fucking strike a pose  
Don’t fucking do that

21 It also shows how “Western” styles are mixed up: Both hippie and punk signify a specific lifestyle that is connected to a spiritual empty culture - whatever that may be. Communist propaganda, with its frequent campaigns against spiritual pollution from the West, has left its traces in the minds of Chinese youth, including Chinese rockers.

22 The line in italics was sung in English; the lyrics come from an underground punk-zine I will discuss further on in the text.
It’s all fucking bullshit
All you cheating stupid X
You cheating stupid X!

Peter voices clear political opinions. For him, being counter-political comes with the package of being punk. Whenever we started talking about sensitive issues, his girlfriend urged us to speak English, so that the neighbors would not be able to understand us. The name of the band is a reference to the sexual position, which, Peter adds mockingly, supports the one-child policy of the CCP (previously, the band was called The Dildos). But it is at the same time a reference to the Cultural Revolution, a period idealized by Peter:

“I think the Cultural Revolution is like an anarchy movement. I like anarchy, you know. Like anarchy in the UK, I don’t know why. (...) I think I’d be a Red Guard.”

And then accuse your parents?

“No, no, the Red Guards just wanted to destroy everything and then rebuild it.”

The anarchy of the Cultural Revolution, however violent it might have been, is considered to be in line with the punk spirit. Also, the revolutionary past not only provides a source of identification and nostalgia, but also supplies the punk scene with the symbols with which to articulate the Chineseness of their music. Such articulations are stronger when the place is located in the past (be it ancient China or communist China). In Peter’s words:

“69’s music is not new, it’s 1970s music, the British punk combined with the Cultural Revolution, it’s a mixture. I also use traditional Chinese music. (...) because I think punk is white music, just as reggae is black music.”

Since the Chinese are not white, some “yellow” elements have to be mixed into white punk. 69 adopts revolutionary classics and transform them into quick, short punk songs. The cover of an “underground” punk-zine depicts a scene where a communist shows the revolutionary road; the cover text runs (in English):

“In our great motherland a new era is emerging in which the broad masses are grasping punk thought. Once punk thought is grasped by the broad masses it becomes an inexhaustible source of strength and a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power.”

Li Peng - who shares his name with the Chinese leader - is guitar player for different bands and reporter for this punk-zine. He wrote about 69:
"The band, whether intentional or not, has integrated Chinese musical elements into punk music. (It's not like some bands who only use erhu or guzheng to display their Chineseness.) The elements they use are mostly from the 50s and 60s, which makes their style revolutionary and powerful!"

It remains unclear why the inclusion of ancient China is fake, whereas the articulation of revolutionary China is acceptable. The quote shows how the negotiation of place is consciously debated within the music scenes, and forms one of the dividing principles. Not only does the pop-rock dichotomy set Beijing apart from Hong Kong and Taiwan, but specific appropriations of the "Chinese" musical heritage mark a distinction, in this case, between punk and, for example, the folk-rock music from Zheng Jun as discussed earlier.

The Halloween party advertised on the flyer in Figure 3.4 shows how American parties travel well to Chinese youth. Punk, more so than other scenes, seems obsessively involved with the non-Chinese, in particular the West and Japan. In their magazine, reporters frequently stress how foreign TV crews have shot yet another documentary on punk, and that T-shirts of bands are being sold in Japan and the US. The eager incorporation of English words is equally indicative. In being so close to the rock mythology, punk can be considered a cultural form that is even harder than, for example, folk-rock. This explains the power of the punk aesthetics, which travels so well globally, yet also corresponds to the observation made in Chapter 2, namely, that especially hard cultural forms are eagerly being localized. Such localization goes hand in hand with a reification of the importance of the perceived origin of punk. Because it is considered Western, punk - as a hard cultural form - ought to be localized. These are two sides of the same coin, the coin called globalization, which has pushed the dynamics of sameness and difference to the forefront of global cultural practices.

Thus — Entering the punk zone feels like entering a zone where hedonism competes with boredom. It is a reality where beer is smuggled into the bars, and the hair (if there is any left) is dyed purple. Mohawks are combined with thick chains that serve as necklaces. Black mascara is eagerly applied around the eyes and to the body. Performances are a colorful attempt to turn life into a visual and sonic spectacle. Granted, it is an old-fashioned punk beat, but it's one that works well when performed live. The aesthetics of punk, which are rooted in the DIY philosophy, produce a shared understanding of authenticity. This authenticity is produced through the upbeat rhythm combined with the rejection of both technology and musical talent, and through the articulation and celebration of difference. But, as I have shown, there are limits: Some bands are considered by others not to be real punk, as they are not truly doing "it" well (a critique from a band in the scene), or they only get as far as copying the West (a critique from a band from a different scene). Punk is a scene where the pleasure of being different is put to the forefront of everyday life, a difference that lies less in content than
Chinese punk is freed from the ties of the British working class and from the dramatization of Britain’s decay, and has become an empty signifier of difference. Of course, in its nihilistic celebration of everyday life, punk challenges dominant cultural values, such as the importance of having a decent job, or feeling responsible for Chinese society. The joyful poses, the energetic music, and the flexible ideological horizon of the singers make Chinese punk a lighthearted place in which to act out insubordination, while at times surrendering to the mundane pleasures of alcohol and marihuana. It is not a rebellion, even though it is so eagerly staged as such; there is not even a crisis, and anarchy is merely a funky word that fits the vocabulary like a safety pin fits the ear. What remains is the intensive and pleasurable performance of difference.

Pop Punk

Positions — The pop-punk (liuxing pengke) bands, a label also used in the promotional materials and by the bands themselves, are far more popular than hardcore punk bands. The first album by Catcher in the Rye and the albums of Underground Baby, New Pants, and The Flowers are grouped under the label pop-punk. All record companies are trying to cash in on the pop-punk rage of the late 1990s: Underground Baby was released by Magic Stone (1998), New Pants by Modern Sky (1998 & 2000), Catcher in the Rye by Red Star (1998 & 2000), and The Flowers by New Bees (1999). The bands sell well, in particular to middle- and high-school students. Probably because of their popularity, the bands are often looked down upon, for example by Beijing rock critic Steve Vai (1999: 31):

“While the empty screams of punk force the acceptance by the crowds, it also gives itself a new label ‘punk pop’, as if they are afraid that no one knows what is popular now.”

For the hardcore punk bands, these bands betray the spirit of punk; they are not real. Peter from 69 criticizes Underground Baby:

“I like DIY, do-it-yourself, you know Underground Baby... why I say they are not punk, it’s because they depend on his father, his parents you know. Underbaby’s drummer and vocalist, they’re brothers, and their parents opened a restaurant, because of that money they can buy a motorcycle, they rent an expensive house. It’s fake!”

He also blames the New Pants for being pop; they are simply not cool. Peng Lei, vocalist for the New Pants, reversed the critique and told me that he considers hardcore punk out of date, and he doesn’t understand why punk is so popular in China. In any case, when it comes to sales figures and media attention, pop-punk is far more successful than hardcore.
Authenticating styles — As in hardcore punk, rhythm is an important authenticating style, as is the DIY philosophy, although the latter is less central. The spectacular performance of difference is replaced by a youngish, joyful pose that signifies spontaneity. In their performances, the youngish pop-punk musicians cheerfully jump about to the rhythm of their songs. These gestures of spontaneity render the scene authentic. It turns the musicians into real middle-school students. Their music is less aggressive than hardcore punk. The lyrics are often mischievous (which is intertwined with spontaneity), rather than provocatively direct. The youngish, mischievous aesthetics of pop-punk sets this scene apart from the others. The Dutch word pretpunk (fun-punk), which by the year 2000 had been turned into the label skate-punk, best captures its aesthetics.

Underground Baby is caught in an in-between position. In their lyrics, and in their opinions, they openly voice their criticism of Chinese society, in line with the rock mythology, whereas their mischievous poses signify a search for a more playful, less politically loaded style. When I talked with vocalist Gao Wei about the lack of performances in the period around the 15th Party Congress, he replied:

“Of course the government hopes we’ll shut our mouths. They think that rock incites the people, so rock is prohibited. I don’t want them to put such limitations on us. (...) For a long time the government has suppressed rock, but didn’t kill it. It left a small space where it is tolerated. (...) In fact, culture itself should not be a kind of weapon, but now it is.”

His last remark illustrates the predicament of Chinese rock: The government officials (along with journalists and academics) maneuver rock into a countercultural position, not necessarily with the approval of the musicians themselves.

Shortly after our interview, Gao Wei changed his name to Gao Xing, which means “happy”. Yet, the lyrics of their 1999 album Awake are more gloomy than the joyful poses of Underground Baby suggest. In “I Only Have Music,” Gao Wei sings

I can’t see the ocean, nor the sky
I can’t see the good and bad of this world
I don’t have imagination, nor happiness
I don’t experience real life at all
I only have music

Music is detached here from “real life”, as well as from imagination and happiness; music is portrayed as a lonely island on which to hide from society. Given the contents of their lyrics, Underground Baby remains pretty much in the “rebellious” spirit of the early Chinese
rock by, for example, Cui Jian. The following review reflects that position (A 1999: 54):

“It seems that Underground Baby is doing something different from the happy punk music by other bands such as New Pants. They haven’t given up the mission and spirit shown by China’s rockers during the past 10 years. The title track ‘Awake’ is the one that touches me most among the Chinese rock numbers I have listened to in the last year. Its melody is helplessly sad and the cries in the song are tragic. It makes my heart ache. (...) Loneliness and helplessness, emptiness and edginess dominate the album ‘Awake’. Such a mental state, common in but not restricted to puberty, exists in every society.”

Its reference to another band in the scene - The New Pants - shows how scenes are produced by journalists. At the same time, the scene is positioned in the wider context, namely the rock culture (and this album is considered to fit well into the history of Chinese rock), and, secondly, into youth culture in general (and this album is believed to reflect adolescents’ angst, but at the same time reflects a general concern that is not restricted to puberty). As such, this review not only sets punk apart from other scenes, but also produces rock as a distinct music world.

For Peng Lei of The New Pants, the lyrics of Underground Baby are rather old-fashioned, since “they always sing about the tastelessness and emptiness in life and about sex.” The CD’s jacket (Figure 3.5) depicts cartoon figures with a mischievous smile on their face. The jacket suits the pop-punk aesthetics well. Peng Lei was more articulate in his wish to move beyond the rock aesthetics:

“After 1995 people began to hate hard rock (...) We want to become more commercial, we will play at parties and festivals. We want to change the dominant ideas about rock, so that people start asking, is this pop?”

He does not want to talk about politics, nor to be critical. His desire to be commercial contradicts, and thus challenges, the rock mythology, but in his move to pop he also differentiates himself from Gangtai pop since:

“That is not real music; there are so-called rock bands because people are bored with pop. There must be
something in the lyrics that touches the audience, there must be something authentic and sincere in it."

We thus see a reification of the rock mythology in the insistence of being authentic, and once again - it indeed becomes a bit tedious - pop serves as the constitutive inauthentic outside. Bands are eager to note their difference not only from both pop and other scenes, but also from the bands that can be grouped under their own scene. Peng Lei’s earlier quoted opinion on Underground Baby is indicative, as is his view on The Flowers:

“I think members of The Flowers are too young; they can’t decide for themselves, the company decides for them. We’re older and independent.”
The rock mythology proves once again an empowering tool with which to articulate one’s authority.

In terms of sales figures, The Flowers is more successful than the New Pants, and has been received very well in Taiwan, something very few Beijing rock bands achieve. The band released its double CD in 1999, titled *On the Other Side of Happiness*. On the cover there is a very small line saying: “China’s first underage band”, a remarkable selling point. These are indeed young boys, of around 16. They are also called “China’s Hanson”, a reference that once more underlines the gaze on the West as being the imagined center of popular music. In their songs, they reflect upon their life at school, and sing “just want to hear that bell as soon as possible, just tell us school is over.” Although the lyrics can also be gloomy, the joyful spontaneous poses make it a cheerful album. The pleasure of pop-punk does not so much reside in the spectacular performance of difference as we have seen with hardcore punk, as in its spontaneity and naughtiness. The lyrics of their song “Fruits” are gloomy, but the cheerful upbeat rhythm makes it tempting to sing along with them:

Mom, don’t nag me no more  
Don’t worry for me, don’t feel sad  
There is such a beautiful landscape in front of me  
Who cares about the fruits  
Flowers blossom on the trees along the road  
Yielding big fresh apples  
Let my body move my arms  
To dig up the lost happiness  
Oh, I’m pissed, leave me alone,  
I have had enough of such a life  
I’m pissed, leave me alone  
I want to live happily.

Apart from the interesting juxtaposition between a seemingly gloomy text and a cheerful, catchy sound - which turns it into a playful gloominess - there is an interesting intertextual reference here. The line “I’m pissed, leave me alone” is in Chinese (or, rather, in Beijing slang), *fanzhe ne, bie li wo*. It was one of the lines that appeared in the summer of 1991 on the T-shirts in Beijing. These so-called cultural T-shirts (*wenhua shah*) - others carried such texts as “Life is a bore” (*zhen lei*) - were the creation of the Beijing artist Kong Yongqian, who was detained for questioning by the police that summer, but released after a few days (*Barmé 1999: 145*). His shirts were then officially banned. In his extensive analysis of the T-shirt rage in China in the early 1990s, *Barmé*
argues that the ban actually made the artist's name more famous, and soon the idea was taken over by clever entrepreneurs. T-shirts with positive slogans such as "Show a little love" (fengxian aixin) hit the market. "The shirts had become a healthy medium for the expression of mass sentiment and for social pacification" (Barmé 1999: 177). The subtext in Barmé's narrative, as in most of his work, is that seemingly subversive artistic works are being commodified and thereby pacified. I will interrogate this assumption further in Chapter 6. Suffice it to observe here that the song by The Flowers shows that a statement once forbidden by the Party has popped up again years later and in a different cultural domain. It underlines the power of popular culture.

Place — When I met Peng Lei he was wearing a leather jacket bearing a Ramones badge. A Beijing music critic recounted how the New Pants started making music (Wang 1999: 22):

"I don't even remember who bought this dakou cassette of the Ramones, the Jesus Christ of punk. But the moment they listened to it, they fell in love with it. (...) This is the most honest kind of rock, the core of rock spirit. It burns in these three new persons who want to have their humanity and freedom."

Peng Lei - who mockingly changed his name on their second CD (Disco Girl) to Millionaire Peng - thus openly acknowledges his main source of inspiration, a source that happens to be located in the West, and which comes closest, according to this critic, to "the core of rock spirit". However, compared to their hardcore counterparts, pop-punk bands strike me as less involved in an articulation of the local. The youngish, mischievous aesthetics of pop-punk are thoroughly dakou'ed; Peng Lei said that he can't care less about the Cultural Revolution, since it occurred before he was born. To him, those who refer so eagerly to revolutionary China, such as Zu Zhou and Cui Jian, are merely catering to the Western gaze. Consequently, there is not such a strong appropriation of communist imagery, nor are there references to ancient China. Instead, there is a longing to be part of a global pop-punk community, a longing reflected not only by the badge, but also by the desire of these bands to conquer Greater China with their international sound. The album Disco Girl by the New Pants is indicative: Three of the fourteen songs are in English. In "Modern Sky" (which is named after

23 Both the record company and some youths I asked are aware of the reference to T-shirts; what is unknown to them is that these shirts were officially banned. The line itself can be read at face value: that is, as the saying of a teenager who does not want to be disturbed. The line signifies a desire to resist surveillance, a refusal to act in line with the dominant images of "youth as hope - youth as fun - youth as trouble," as discussed earlier in this chapter. But there is more to it, due to the intertextual reference. The audience derived a lot of pleasure (or at least I did) from decoding the reference to the summer of 1991. When I heard them singing these lines I felt good, not only because of the intertextual reference itself, but also by my "ability" to pick up this reference. The pleasure lies in the active use of one's popular cultural capital, a capital so much ignored by academics (in a way also by Bourdieu himself, who seems more capable of elaborating on "high" cultural capital than grasping "popular" cultural capital; see Bourdieu 1979 and also: Frith 1996).
their record company) one line goes: “But we are future boys”. The longing for the global is coupled to a focus on either the present or the future, just as the longing of the hardcore punk bands to be local is coupled to a focus on the past.

Thus — Pop-punk presents one of the new routes Chinese rock has taken over the past years. The joyful poses of boys with a peaky hairstyle cater to the demands of a predominantly teenage audience. Not surprisingly, according to the hardcore punk bands, they have betrayed the spirit of punk, they are not real. Pop-punk merges the alternative - punk - with the mainstream, pop. In doing so, pop-punk challenges the rock mythology, by showing that the spirit of rock and the seduction of money are not that hostile to one another after all. The “pop” in pop-punk softens the style, which explains why there is neither an obsessive gaze on the West, as we have seen in hardcore punk, nor a strong urge to localize the sound. By adding a youngish, mischievous look to the rhythmic DIY aesthetics of punk, pop-punk cashes in cleverly on an authenticating style. The mischievous poses make them look like real middle-school students - which, in the case of The Flowers, they are - thus explaining their success among this group. The desire to be real, to be true to yourself, remains a crucial binding element in the pop-punk scene; bands are at pains to articulate their authenticity, often by accusing others of being unreal.

Fashionable Bands

Positions — The last scene I distinguish comprises only two bands and one DJ, each with a very different sound. Both bands - Sober and Supermarket - are under contract to the record company Modern Sky. DJ Michael is a techno DJ (taikenuo) who moved to Shenzhen after his studies in Shanghai, and only got to Beijing in 2000. Although he is not really part of the scene and has not yet released an album, he can be considered one of the forerunners in the development of dance music (tiaowu yinyue) in China. Sober’s lead vocalist Shen Lihui is also the founder and general manager of Modern Sky, chief editor of their music magazine, and operator of a rock venue he opened in Beijing in 1999. He thus plays a pivotal role in the rock culture of Beijing. When discussing these two bands and the upcoming DJ scene with Yan Jun, the chronicler of the New Sound Movement, he grouped them under the label fashionable bands (shimao yuedui), a label I take over here. The label has thus been invented by observers rather than being used by the bands themselves. Sober often refers to Britpop when positioning itself, while Supermarket speaks of electronic music (dianzi yinyue). Others, like music critic Tao Ran, refer to such bands as Supermarket as the future sound of Beijing; these bands have three main features: Melody, cross-over, and schizophrenia (Tao 2000: 24).

Both labels - fashionable bands and future sound - inscribe a temporal element into this scene, and indeed, like the pop-punk bands, many journalists and musicians consider this scene emblematic of the New Sound Movement. In an article on what makes this movement
different from the earlier generations, the (anonymous) author refers to a move away from idealism and heroism toward urban populism and realism. This move is reflected in a changing clothing style as well: From leather jackets and pants to casual wear, jeans, and brand-name sport shoes, and from long hair to short, sometimes dyed hair. Also the background of the musicians is considered different: Whereas the older musicians are believed to be very devoted and to lead a penurious life, the new bands live an easy, leisurely life in which music is just one of their interests (Yinxiang Shijie 1999: 25). Although I consider such attempts to write a chronology of rock merely as a discursive way to set scenes apart from others, the descriptions above allow us a glimpse of the perceived characteristics of the bands that belong to both the pop-punk and the fashionable bands scenes.

Sober is far more popular than Supermarket when it comes to sales figures: According to Shen Lihui, their album Very Good sold more than 150,000 copies on the mainland and was received well in Hong Kong. The fashionable sound of Beijing signifies, even more than the underground and pop-punk bands, a break with the earlier period of Chinese rock. The introductory words of Modern Sky on the Sober CD are indicative; in their sweeping terms, this band:

"... is no longer concerned with boring complaints and irresponsible screams. They ask questions and try to change. Let's start loving life and living, let's together begin a new era!"

Their blunt critique of the early sound of Beijing rock, coupled to the framing of these bands by journalists as belonging to the New Sound Movement, sets this scene apart from others. If we follow this statement, they suggest that they have moved beyond the rock mythology by refusing to be rebellious, a refusal we have also seen in the pop-punk scene with the New Pants. Bands such as Sober and the New Pants represent a rebellion against rebellion, and Shen Lihui's record company Modern Sky plays a pivotal role in this positioning, as will be discussed further in Chapter 6 (see also Steen 2000). But the aesthetic routes taken by the fashionable bands are strikingly different from pop-punk.

**Authenticating styles —** The music of Sober is a (post-)modern re-appropriation of The Beatles' sound, in ways reminiscent of the music of so-called Britpop bands such as Oasis and Blur. Before we look at Sober's music to see whether it is influenced by Britpop, we should be aware that many tracks were written in the early 1990s. As such, Sober might be considered Britpop **avant la lettre.** Sober aims to replace nihilism with pragmatism, and has labeled its style "anti-formalist" (Tao 2000). Such positioning betrays the educational background of Shen Lihui, an art-school graduate. The aesthetics of Sober are eclectic, and include elements of pastiche, irony, and cosmopolitanism. Eclectic, given the different music styles used; ironic, as they make it clear in their videoclip that they pose (for example, when they put on make-
up in the clip); and pastiche, given the references to The Beatles, which also gives them a cosmopolitan aura. The lyrics of the title song of their 1997 album are:

Your TV set breaks down and your eyes will be cured?
Your watch stops, does this mean that you are happy?
Does this mean that you are happy?
Very good!? Indeed very good!? Very good!?
To whom do I give Monday and Tuesday?
To whom do I give Wednesday and Thursday? (..)
All right! All right! All right! All right!

The refrain “All right! All right!” is sung in English, giving the song a cosmopolitan ring. The accompanying videoclip depicts the band in Beatles-style suits; we see four young Chinese in a British look with an ironic smile drawn on their faces. According to Shen Lihui, the song is influenced by The Beatles, but he considers it postmodern, both in melody and lyrics. Shen Lihui explained to me that to him doing business is as creative as making music. No wonder he sings in this song how his identity changes day by day. Gone is the die-hard rebel, with an angry voice filled with discontent. What we hear now is a radically different attitude toward modern life. The songs on the album are quite different from one another: Apart from the light-hearted, humorous songs, there are sad songs with a slow tempo, such as the last track “Walking into Sleep”. Whereas some critics applaud Sober’s move toward a new style, others accuse the band of straying too far from the spirit of rock (Tao 2000). It shows how Sober interrogates the rock mythology, both in its negation of rebelliousness and in its ironic and eclectic re-appropriation of styles and images. Such eclectic use of styles mixed with Sober’s claim to represent modern life, a claim I will discuss under place, also authenticates the music.

“Sometimes I feel that there is something amusing in the air,” is stated on the jacket of Supermarket’s album The Look. Their CD is more coherent than Sober’s, but it is not what I would call an amusing sound. This is synthesizer pop as we know it from Depeche Mode. 24 The album leads me to a virtual, computerized reality. In the linguistically shortest song of the album (“Explode”), Supermarket sings:

Right now I’m afraid time may explode
If I’m embarrassed, please don’t care.

Clear-cut meanings dissolve in their electronic soundscape. What sets Supermarket apart

24 For a review of the albums of Sober and Supermarket, and of NO, see: Kloet 2000; the possibility to group Feng Jiangzhou, Chen Dili (both of whom are now grouped as underground), and Supermarket together as an electronic scene indicates once again the inherent fluidity of the scenic approach.
from other bands is the electronic aesthetics. Neither the voice nor the lyrics are at the center of their compositions, as is often the case with other bands; instead there is the kaleidoscopic sound, linking syntho-pop with dance, drum’n’bass, and trip hop. This becomes especially clear from their second album (Weapon 5x), on which the electronic aesthetics are taken even further. The songs are titled “S1” to ‘S10,” thus resonating the electronic aesthetics. The jacket, too, resonates the electronic aesthetics. It bears images of all the complicated sound equipment, images that authenticate the sound: If the band has mastered technology to that extent, it must truly be driven by the spirit of rock. In my interview with band member Yu Shan, he did his best to negate any meaning:25

“My music is music without style, I just do what I want to do and make music, it's very simple. (...) I don’t have so many relationships with Chinese rock, I make music because I like it, I don’t care so much about trends. (...) I’m not a good guitar player, so I ended up in electronic music.”

His latter remark suggests that he started to make electronic music because he cannot play the guitar, a statement that reflects a negation of the rock mythology (where a gifted musician links his music choice to his talents rather than the lack of such). But, like Sober, he does not take this negation to the extreme, as is indicated by his answer to my question whether authenticity is important to him:

“It is the keyword of my music; my music depends completely on the notion of authenticity.”

The electronic aesthetics of both the music and the band’s image underlines the authenticity of Supermarket.

It would be beyond the scope of this study to include DJ-ing, but a brief detour will provide interesting similarities and differences. DJ Michael criticizes Chinese rock; in his view, too many bands lack musical skills and are stuck in a stereotypical heavy-metal idiom. At the same time, he questions such labels as rock and dance; he hopes both will disappear in the future, and that there will just be different kinds of sounds, “from electronic to punk-electronic and hardcore punk.” In his comments on other DJs, we see how dance, like rock, is a music world where scenic differences are crucial for the positioning of the self:

“Some DJs like Ben and Gary play trance and deep house. DJs like Wen Wen and Yan Pin play techno house, quite boring, just one kind of music. But Wen Wen also confuses

Which made the interview a difficult exercise, as I was rapidly running out of questions. This shows how my own position remains framed by the rock mythology.
me: he plays all kinds of music in one night, hip hop, drum’n’bass, techno house, deep house, I don’t like that. For me, I really hate trance, it’s too commercial.”

What is the difference between techno and deep house?

“Some say it’s the BPM [beats per minute], but I think it’s not only that. Of course, techno is quite fast; I think techno has a spirit inside, there is minimal techno with very good grooves.”

A new discursive world opens up with labels that include, and thus exclude, specific sounds and their DJs. Before we speak of a dance mythology, it is crucial to point to some recurring themes. As with rock, commercialization is considered harmful to the spirit of dance. As we saw with punk, DJ Michael stresses the liberating potential of the DIY possibilities, as today anyone with a computer can make music. Both his critique of commercialization and his DIY ideals resonate a desire to be authentic, a desire that ties in with the rock mythology. He points to the mission of dance:

“We should find ways to educate the people, the real crowd. Maybe we should use a commercial way to get sponsors, invite big names to teach Chinese DJs what a world-class DJ is. (...) The DJ should think: I’m a general, I’m a leader, I should make them crazy tonight.”

He perceives China to be lagging behind the West, where the “world-class DJs” come from. The people have to be educated, although he doesn’t point out why. It shows the importance of the perceived origins of dance, which brings us back to the negotiation of place.

Place — In its focus on educating the masses, an idea that has a communist ring to it, the celebration of Chineseness is replaced by a celebration of the West. The cosmopolitan aesthetics of Sober also reifies the importance of the global for the sound of rock. Shen Lihui has a desire to join the global world of music by adding a Chinese sound to it (in Platt 1998):

“Until now, the programming has been dominated by the US, but the next century is likely to bring a more multicultural mix where American youths will one day watch Chinese rock bands.”

26 An analysis of how disco parties in China, with their interruptions for a lottery and karaoke, challenge and subvert the dominant discourses in the West, where the DJ is supposed to be in control and to subtly lead the crowd to a sonic climax (as a famous song of UK band Faithless says “God is a DJ”), remains a topic for future research.
And given the current pace of changes in Beijing, the cosmopolitan choice strikes him as closest to reality:

“I don’t think it’s necessary to add elements like an erhu, (...) Beijing has become very internationalized. (...) I feel some foreigners are simply interested in something strange, something exotic. Music should be true to modern life”

His last statement shows how the cosmopolitan aesthetics authenticates the music. He constantly stresses the importance of accepting as many music styles as possible, and takes Japan as an example of an Asian country that successfully incorporates the West without losing its national characteristics. Like pop-punk, Sober’s focus on being modern articulates the global, which is located in the present rather than the past. Also indicative of this global move are the words of music critic Steve Vai (1999: 31):

“The emergence of electronic music has finally launched us into the same footsteps as the world. Different kinds of hip hop, house, rave, techno, groove... When our styles and characteristics are in line with the world, let’s hope our techniques will do the same.”

It comes as no surprise that for other musicians, a band like Supermarket has gone too far, since it is perceived as lacking specific Chinese cultural characteristics. Folk-rock singer Hu Mage, for example, also intends to produce an electronic album, but one with a different sound:

“You can’t tell whether Supermarket’s second album is Chinese or foreign music. I plan to make an electronic album, but you’ll still know it’s Chinese music.”

The fashionable bands opt for a sound that is perceived as being Western, and in doing so reify the idea of the West being the best when it comes to popular music. However, in their desire to join the center, they aim to place China on the global map of music.

Thus — Sober and Supermarket both present a semiotic rupture: The overload of meaning has dissipated into a fragmented and dispersed field of possible interpretations. Whereas the earlier rock from China seemed to be drenched in the rock mythology, this new breed has a lighter, more playful and fluid attitude. The eclectic and cosmopolitan aesthetics of Sober is both ironic and playful; the band’s image reflects a lighthearted play with musical styles and images. The electronic aesthetics of Supermarket is coupled to a construction of authenticity, as is the eclectic and cosmopolitan aesthetics of Sober. The emerging dance scene in China is refreshing in its introduction of new styles and accompanying labels, but remains framed within such core notions as authenticity and exclusivity, coupled to a desire to educate the
masses - an education considered necessary in order to reach the point where the West is perceived to be now; as such, the West serves more as a desired musical reference point than a place to differentiate oneself from. The celebration of Chineseness is replaced by an equally disturbing celebration of the West.

~ the center cannot hold ~

The journey through China's rock culture has been a long and scenic one. The Chinese rock culture is non-existent; what remains is a heterogeneous field of different sounds, different styles, and different poses. In this chapter I have tried to grasp some of these by grouping them into separate scenes. The perceived crisis of rock during the mid-1990s has been replaced by a steady growth of the rock culture since 1997. The scenic move opens up a sonic field where different musical paths can be explored, where a plurality prevails above uniformity. But the plural world of rock in China remains packaged by the rock mythology. Therefore, I consider it too early to celebrate the end, or the death, of rock in China. I have shown how scenes both challenge and reify the rock mythology. The power of the mythology remains unchallenged when it comes to authenticity. The importance of being authentic - a value rooted in the discourse of the high arts, where the unique artist gives expression to his or her pure personal emotions - links all the scenes.

The scenes have developed different aesthetics to articulate their authenticity. The underground bands employ dadaistic, vulgar, and metaphoric aesthetics coupled with low-fi recording techniques, heavy metal has its chivalric aesthetics, folk-rock has the regular-guy aesthetics, and hardcore punk combines DIY with an authenticating rhythm. Pop-punk adds a spontaneous, mischievous style to the punk aesthetics. The fashionable bands employ eclectic, cosmopolitan aesthetics and experiment with electronics, and thus authenticate their sound. Pop-rock borrows from the rock idiom so as to show that they are real musicians making their own music. All scenes thus claim to be real and are at pains to prove it in sound, lyrics, and image. This is a driving force - which at times is quite violent - behind tactics of inclusion and exclusion that characterize the world of Chinese rock. Bands often refer to an inauthentic other so as to prove their own realness; these others can be located nearby in the same scene, a bit further on, in a different scene, or down in the Chinese south: Gangtai pop. As the latter is the most conspicuous, pop can be considered rock's primary constitutive outside. Freud's concept of the narcissism of minor differences - a narcissism that drives many professional fields (such as academia) - is equally appropriate for rock music (Freud 1930: 61). The daily struggle to be real entails a desire to be different, and consequently leads to a politics of identity.

Rock serves as a sign of difference and, depending on the scene, it can be quite a spectacular
display of difference. The scenic authenticating styles often go hand in hand with a negotiation of place. Place is not only a politicized signifier, but above all it is turned into a style by rock musicians, a style that makes their music more or less Chinese. Especially the sounds that correspond so well with the rock mythology - heavy metal, hardcore punk, and the sounds of the underground bands - eagerly articulate their Chineseness. Being the hardest cultural forms of all the scenes, their urge to localize their sound, while at the same time including many references to the West, is stronger compared to the other scenes. The stronger a sound rocks, the harder it becomes and the more involved it gets in the negotiation of place. The local is often located in the past, be it ancient China or the communist China of the Cultural Revolution. Two scenes that are eager to dissociate themselves from the rock mythology and its aesthetics - i.e., the fashionable bands and pop-punk - reverse the roles and end up in a celebration of the West. In their desire to join the West, they focus on the present rather than the past. This desire resonates a nationalistic sentiment, as their aim is for China to join a global sonic world. Along with pop-rock, these scenes seem to be less involved in articulating the local. Interestingly, these are the scenes that currently are the most popular: Pop-punk is the rage among teenage youth, and pop-rock bands fill the stadiums of China. The production of locality might sell well to the West, but does not guarantee local popularity. To be global sells locally, and to be local sells globally.