Some voices are remarkably absent from the arguably fragmented world of rock in China. All the bands described in the previous chapter are located in Beijing; some of the singers moved from their hometown to the capital of rock to pursue their career in music. Releases from places outside Beijing are relatively rare; bands from, for instance, Shanghai are not taken seriously by the rock scenes in Beijing. Female voices are also rather scarce in Chinese rock; the aesthetics of rock cater primarily to male identifications, so it seems, leaving little room for women to make rock. However central Gangtai pop might be when it comes to sales figures and media outreach, it is peripheral in the more “serious” writings on music in Asia. It is downplayed not only by China’s rock musicians, but also by Chinese and Western journalists and academics. It is commonly assumed and asserted that a rock singer who has moved toward the world of pop has lost his or her soul. I like to label voices that are marginalized through the power of the rock mythology, subaltern sounds. Female voices, non-Beijing rock, and Gangtai pop are the sounds that are either silenced or downplayed by the colonizing power of the rock mythology. In this chapter, I will try to articulate these subaltern sounds in three relatively self-contained essays.

--- FEMALE VOICES ---

Rock is a gendered domain. Its aesthetics - such as the leather jackets, motorcycles, screaming voices, and aggressive poses -predominantly signify the masculine. A Freudian reading of the electric guitar as a phallic symbol may not be as far fetched as it may seem. “Heavy-metal guitarists unashamedly hold their guitars like a penis. Prince even has a substance being ‘ejaculated’ from his guitar! (...) It is not only the shape which is symbolic, but also the sheer volume and attack of the instrument which connotes phallic power” (Bayton 1997: 43). The cliché runs: sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll, but such a one-liner has to be specified, as this is straight sex from a male point of view. Particularly hard rock celebrates heterosexual masculinity; the term cock rock captures this male chauvinism rather well (Whiteley 1997: 67). The male bias (or, put differently, the spectacular performance of male power) can also be found in the Chinese rock culture, in which female voices are marginal. Of course, Chinese rock is not naturally male, nor does it simply reflect the gender roles of society at large. Instead, it is actively produced as a male world by musicians, marketers (from a male-dominated music industry), and audiences, and is hardly ever questioned on this point by either journalists or academics (see also: Cohen 1997). What happens when a Chinese girl picks up an electric guitar? Here, I am concerned with how female voices negotiate the masculine hegemony of rock. I will focus my discussion on two bands and one musician, namely Cobra, Hang on the
Box, and Luo Qi, all of whom have developed different tactics to position themselves in the rock culture: Cobra by articulating their musical expertise, Hang on the Box by inscribing gender into punk ideology, and Luo Qi by performing the bad girl.\textsuperscript{2} I thus distinguish three, partly overlapping tactics used by female rock stars to negotiate the phallic power of rock: The denial of gender, the dramatization of gender (and of sexuality), and the politicization of gender.

\textit{Denial of gender} — Cobra, one of the oldest rock bands in China, started in 1989 and has been performing regularly since then. The band members come from the Beijing Music Conservatory, went in search of more musical (and personal) freedom, and started experimenting with rock music. By now they are all in their thirties. So far they have released two CDs, one by the record company Red Star in 1996 and one by New Bees in 2000. The band members earn extra income by performing in hotels and bars, and from teaching music to students. The band has a fan club with its own website.\textsuperscript{3} In 1999, the saxophone player, Lin Xue, left the band to go into business, following the trend of the 1990s during which "doing business" were the magic words among Chinese youth. Cobra is an established name in the Beijing rock culture and is reasonably famous. The image of the band sells well internationally; their CD was first released in Germany rather than in China. As I have argued with Zheng Jun’s use of Tibetan female voices, women, particularly when combined with ethnicity, have become an orientalistic key signifier for China’s imagined primitive past. In specific cases, such as a Tibetan female choir, gender does signify authenticity. Interestingly, Chinese women at times also seem to be signifiers of change for Western audiences. Gender is in several cultural products that reach the West, the site where struggles over power take place. The novel \textit{Wild Swans} follows three generations of Chinese women, and a woman from the third generation - the writer Jung Chang herself - finds the road to freedom, that is, a ticket to the UK. In Zhang Yimou’s movies the women are heroines, fighting the power of patriarchy. Cobra fits such a reading rather well. They are in a way triple signifiers. First, the genre itself - rock music - signifies a movement to change and freedom. So does their gender - female, in line with the examples stated above. Chinese women, more so than men, are signifiers of change. Finally, although to a far lesser extent as the ethnic element is absent, their gender renders the music authentic.

The triple signification under a Western gaze as outlined above explains why foreign journalists frequently report on the band, and why Cobra has toured in both Europe and the US. It also explains why record company Red Star planned to record English songs. Their

\textsuperscript{2} These are not all the female voices in the Beijing rock culture; for reasons of space I leave out, among others, Wei Hua, Ai Jing (who borrows her power from the discourse of folk) and Zhang Qianqian (who has moved more toward the high arts, e.g., by performing as a vocal artist in a multimedia production of Wu Wenguang.

\textsuperscript{3} http://members.aol.com/yanjingshe/
music is clearly influenced by new wave, the songs are moody, and the sound of a synthesizer accompanies the sad voice of vocalist Wang Xiaofang. However, back in China, Cobra remains in a domain where the performance of masculinity is crucial. In my interview with ex-guitar player Kaiser from Tang Dynasty, with which Cobra has toured with a few times, he comments on their skills:

“I think that the girls.. I mean, they’re great, I like them a lot, they’re really good people. They don’t have their heart in what they are doing, I know they don’t. (...) If they weren’t an all-girl band, they’d have split up already, nobody would be interested. What’s novel about them is that they are all women. It’s a sad truth.”

There is an element of sexism in his statement that not only reproduces hard rock as a masculine scene, but also excludes a female band from the domain of rock by accusing them of being inauthentic: “They don’t have their heart in what they are doing.” Cobra is aware of such stereotyping and the related hostility, and has developed tactics to secure a place in the rock culture. Keyboard player Yu Jin explained to me how they respond to the macho rock attitude:

“At the beginning when we formed the band we didn’t know about this, we were part of the circle, we had a lot of friends. Everyone was nice to us. But later we found out they think we are funny and lovely. After some years, when we got better, we heard some male rock musicians who said we are just women... In these eight years we feel we have never been part of this rock circle, you know, we are always out because we are women.”

Cobra is caught in the image of the “funny and lovely” girls who happen to play some music. It is a disempowering image, and excludes them from the rock culture. The marketing of their record companies strengthens this image: Cobra is promoted as the first all-female rock band from China, thereby foregrounding their gender as the unique selling point - to their annoyance:

“Red Star is not so clever because they don’t have any ideas except that Cobra is the only female rock band, they can only write this sentence. Sometimes we feel this is really bad.”

While singling out gender as a selling point might be explainable in terms of marketing (although the rather disappointing sales figures for their first album seemed to doubt its effectiveness), it is interpreted by the band as a rather violent move, as it is read as a denial of their music. The band’s logo, which is used on the jacket of their second CD (released by
Figure 4.1: Jacket Cobra

New Bees), shows how gender is used in the marketing of the band: The “ob” in Cobra is transformed into the symbol for the female sex.

The power of the stereotypes as produced by both record company (“the all-female band”) and their male counterparts (“funny and lovely girls”) is hard to resist. But they do have their tactics to resist and survive. First, Cobra borrow their power as a real rock band from the rock mythology itself. Vocalist Xiao Nan explained in an interview (in Wong 1997: 4):

"The key essence of rock is truth. You must be able to express the truth from within yourself. This is where rock differs from other types of music. Take for instance, popular music, where they can package what’s already been packaged. They will try to do whatever they can to present the most perfect, most polished image, but rock isn’t like that. From its very beginnings, rock has striven for a kind of unaffectedness. This is rock music. This is truth."

Pop, being the constitutive outside of rock, is once again victimized for being inauthentic, whereas rock tells the truth. This is not a gendered truth, but a universal one. In their song “It’s No Age For Playing,” they give expression to their search for truth, a search that seems noble and truthful in itself:4

4 The music, however, is criticized for being old-fashioned. Illustrative is the review of their second album by a Beijing critic (Java 2000: 29): “Contrary to clothes, musical choices for women are very, very limited. In China, this problem is even more prominent. All female artists seem to have only one face: gentle, feminine. It’s the same in rock. I am not saying all women should get crazy. But I think their character is flat, and too old-fashioned.”

5 Translated by Peter Ho.
You stretched out your hands towards me and helped me getting up
It is like I have already forgotten that I have the strength
I begged you, “Let me go”, but you said, “it does not matter”
Since long I had understood that it would be like this
Why grudge, the way is rough
Living in confusion, remembering clearly
I know it is no age anymore for playing

Gender does not play a role in the lyrics; instead, there is an articulation of the rock mythology. Also in their videoclip, the focus is on musical skills rather than their gender identity. As Wong remarks, after analyzing how the camera zooms(5,10),(993,992) in on the musical instruments time and again, “Cobra’s positioning of themselves as non-feminine bodies, both in [this] video and in live performance, is a strategy to deflect attention away from their gender difference and to their abilities as musicians, good musicians” (Wong 1997: 9, italics hers). Cobra is not a case of girl power as we know it from the Spice Girls, nor do they reflect a negotiation of and play with femininity, as we know from Madonna. Instead, they pursue a strategy of denying the gender difference, and they articulate their equality with other bands by stressing that - in line with the rock mythology - they are real musicians who dare to speak the truth in their music.

Dramatization of gender — Luo Qi takes a different track altogether. She is much younger than the musicians of Cobra. Instead of being viewed as the innocent girl, Luo Qi is the bad girl. She embodies the cliché sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll in a way only few musicians do. She is notorious for sleeping around, but as Yu Jin from Cobra remarks correctly:

“It is just not fair, I know she is sleeping around, but a lot of men are doing the same and nobody says anything.”

For a male rocker, sexual performance is just another indicator of being tough and cool, whereas for a girl it’s a source of disapproval. The rock music of Luo Qi is authenticated by her own story. In 1992, aged 16, she arrived in Beijing, alone. After the divorce of her parents she was raised by her grandparents. She quit school at 13 to join a song and dance group. In the press, the story was that her mother had more or less abandoned her in pursuing a business career abroad (Zhang 1997). This past has distorted her life, as stated in a magazine (Yinyue Shenghuo 1997):

“Luo Qi said she became mature too early because her parents divorced when she was nine years old. She wants to be a good mother in the future.”

After arriving in Beijing in 1992 Wang Xiaojing, former manager of Cui Jian, discovered
Luo Qi and introduced her to the Compass, a band he already managed (in line with the narrative that Luo Qi was abandoned by her mother, Wang Xiaojing told me in an interview: “I know her much better than her mother knows her”). In her tight jeans and leather jacket, Luo Qi’s image suited the rock idiom. Two years after her arrival in Beijing, Luo Qi lost an eye in a fight outside a bar. Since then, she often wears sunglasses or covers her eye with a piece of black cloth, like a pirate. Luo Qi started using drugs and became a notorious drugs addict in Beijing - until the evening of July 14, 1997 when she asked a Nanjing cab driver to take her to the closest heroin dealer. In her words:

“I was very fucked up at that moment. I said ‘I am Luo Qi and am looking for heroin, let me go home, I feel so happy, if you can I want to go to the hospital’.”

Instead, the driver took her to the nearest police station, where she was taken into custody. She made it onto the front pages of the national newspapers. She was put into a “hospital” for three months, during which she “recovered” from her addiction.

The use of drugs will never be tolerated by the Chinese press, but drug use by a girl is even far more controversial. Tang Dynasty’s Ding Wu was also known for his addiction to drugs, and the rumor in the rock culture was that the death of their guitar player Zhang Ju was due to his drug use. But these stories were not situated in a narrative that went back as far as the childhood of either Ding Wu or Zhang Ju, they were simply rockers who used drugs. In Luo Qi’s case, more explanation was required, as it concerned a girl. Using drugs does not fit a girl. It is treated as a dramatization and negation of her gender identity, whereas for a male drug user, gender is not negated. The main reason given in the press clippings is gendered, since it is her mother who is blamed. And to recoup the mistakes committed by her mother, it was said that Luo Qi’s ambition was to become a good mother. To serve as a good example for innocent youths, she agreed to act in a TV series based on her life (Zhang 1997).

I interviewed Luo Qi just one week after she was released from hospital. Her sister joined her, clearly in order to keep an eye on her. During our talk, waiters came over to ask for her autograph, as the recent media display had made her even more famous. Feng Jiangzhou, singer of The Fly, told me that to him Luo Qi was merely pop, since she didn’t write her own songs. But Luo Qi positioned herself as different from the pop stars in Hong Kong when she talked about a visit to the city:

“When they [the Hong Kong audience] saw me live, they thought I was a very good singer, that I was very different. I rejected all the time the clothes they wanted me to

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In the 1991 World Values Survey, China ranks highest of all countries with 96% of respondents agreeing with the statement “taking the drug marijuana or hashish is never justified” (in the Netherlands, this figure was 66%) (Inglehart et al. 1998: V301).
wear. They told me not to smoke in front of the journalists, but I just did that. I was very free, sat on the streets and so.”

She positioned herself as free and, in line with the rock mythology, she refused to be packaged. This refusal sold well: Her CD sold around 600,000 copies. We came to speak of her drug use, after which her sister became very nervous whereas Luo Qi remained very easy-going. I asked her what exactly happened that night in Nanjing:

“Ah, so funny, so funny [laughing]. I have never seen so many policemen in my life. So many chances for me to get to know the communist party. I didn’t know much about the communist party, but now I don’t like them. They have no feelings, everything was very orderly. At 6.30 I had to get up, at 7.30 breakfast (...) It was like a jail.”

But it helped her stop using drugs, she said. So she was turned from a rock singer into a role model, into an example of how the Party helps those who use drugs:

“Before I went to the hospital most of the patients were forced into it, but after I went there many drugs users joined out of their own will, so I did promotion free of charge. (...) I think it’s so funny. Before I was a rock’n’roll singer and the government didn’t support me. But now I have become a model as an ex-heroin user and am on TV and so on. I have been interviewed by many government papers and they forget that I’m a rock singer.”

Her life story renders Luo Qi’s music authentic: It is the story of the bad girl who sleeps around, drinks, uses drugs, and gets into dangerous fights. It is a narrative used in the marketing of her music. The text on the jacket of her album that was released the year she was taken into hospital runs:

“This is Luo Qi who has experienced fame, pain, emptiness and illusions. We hope she can defeat the pain in her body and heart and walk on the stage to sing together with her fans the song ‘Come back’.”

The panoptic power that cast her as a bad girl was suffocating. In her words, it was too much to live under such conditions in China, she was unhappy:

“I just don’t like Chinese politics, it’s disgusting. And in China many people think I’m very strange, that I’m a bad girl because I drink too much, smoke too much and use drugs. Too many people think I’m a dangerous girl.”

The bad-girl image sells, but at the same time marginalizes her in real life. Consequently
she moved to Berlin in 1998, to record a new album. In an interview with German radio, she gave both political and personal reasons for her move (Bentoni 1999):

"My life wasn’t that bad, but the situation for rock musicians is difficult in China because of the government. But I also had personal problems since I’d started to use heroin. (...) Then I left for Germany to start a brand new life here.”

Luo Qi negotiates the masculine bias of rock not so much by denying gender, as was the case with Cobra, as by dramatizing it - by performing the bad girl. She did the things Chinese girls are not supposed to do, and thereby marginalized herself from both the rock culture (only boys may be naughty) and mainstream society. Her life story is well known all over China, and that made her want to escape the country. The dramatic performance of her gendered rock identity gave her fame, but at the same time made her run away to Berlin.

**Politicization of gender** — Hang on the Box appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*. When we add women to punk (the scene closest to the embodiment of the rock mythology, as I showed in the previous chapter), the attention of the West is guaranteed. And attention is what they want. They explicitly voice their ambition to become famous, and it is this openness that makes producer Feng Jiangzhou (the vocalist of The Fly) like them so much. Their singer and guitar player Wang Yue is quite a sight in Beijing with her short purple hair (see figure 4.2).

![Figure 4.2: Wang Yue](image)

She is a liumang in the eyes of her parents, a label she very much resents. She considers herself part of the post-1978 generation, the *dakou* generation. To her, the mission of the band is clear:

"Our band advocates women’s rights; we think the position of women should become equal to that of men. In our opinion, 21st-century women should be able to do what they want to do.”

A punky form of shock therapy is used to get the message across. Both the sound and the words are as direct as possible. The lyrics of the song “Asshole, I’m Not Your Baby,” which were published in the semi-official magazine *New Music New Life*, are written in English with deliberate grammatical mistakes, since they do not like lyrics in the first place (in: S&M 1999: 10):
Hang on the Box politicizes gender and inscribes it, often in its most explicit form (that is, sex) into punk ideology. This makes them different from the other hardcore punk bands, and is also a clever move in terms of marketing. In the punkzine mentioned earlier, Hang on the Box’s bass player Mi Lina writes about how boyfriends treat her:

“When he asks me why I don’t care about my life, why I have so many friends, why I don’t behave like a real ‘girl’, I am just like a picture he fails to understand. He only wants to put me on display in a suitable place in his home. He’s a stupid X! In the place where a mirror should be, he puts up a picture. From that moment on, we say goodbye!”

Like other women rockers, they feel they are not taken seriously by their male counterparts. Wang Yue complains that she always names other punk bands as her favorites in interviews, whereas they never do the same to her. She expressed the familiar complaint:

“Because we are women, we have to make much more effort to prove that we’re really good.”

Hang on the Box is the first band I know of whose lyrics are all in English. Whereas the male scenes try in one way or another to make rock with Chinese characteristics, the female bands strike me as less involved in the negotiation of place. Most likely, the negotiation of gender is more urgent. While opting for English lyrics is a clever move in terms of global marketing, it might also make it easier to escape censorship. Wang Yue rejects the articulation of Chineseness by referring to the perceived origins of rock:

“I think that Chinese rock should work itself out of its regional confines. Rock does not originate in China, it is Western music. It is not appropriate to incorporate Chinese national culture into the music. Good music should be international.”

Although her argument reflects an essentialistic interpretation of cultures, it is provocative in the sense that it counters the dominant trend in other rock scenes where priority is given to a sinification of rock.

7 Despite the fact that at a certain point Wang Yue exclaimed provocatively that “foreigners are very shit” (laowai tebie shi).
Thus — The masculine bias of rock music remains a topic frequently overlooked in popular music studies. In fact, it is a bias reflected in the field itself, as most scholars are male. The spectacular performance of male power from hard rock bands such as Tang Dynasty is rooted in the rock mythology. Men are more easily imagined as truly rebellious, and thereby have more power to perform in line with the rock mythology. Little room is left for women. Chinese female musicians therefore face a difficult task; they have to find not only their own music style, as do all bands, but also ways to negotiate the masculine bias of rock. The examples I have given show that they have developed different tactics: Cobra tries to foreground their musical capacities and deny their gender identity; the tactics developed by Luo Qi show a dramatization of gender by performing the bad girl in "real" life; and the punk band Hang on the Box has borrowed its power from the punk ideology, in which the band politicizes gender by explicitly rebelling against patriarchy. The predicament in which all female bands and singers are caught remains the same: They constantly have to negotiate the male power of rock, either by a denial, a dramatization, or a politicization of their gender identity. This negotiation pushes the music itself into the background. By positioning them as a separate scene, categorizing them as female voices, I - like their record companies and the journalists - reify this situation, and thereby act neatly in line with the masculine bias of the rock mythology.

The marginal position of women within rock does not render them necessarily more tolerant toward other subaltern sounds. Wang Yue, for example, voices clear opinions on rock from Shanghai:

“Fuck, fuck, fuck Shanghai! Shanghai is very shit! Shanghai is a very fashionable city. Because most people focus on money and enjoyment, there are fewer people who’re willing to make rock music.”

Money and enjoyment are conceived as being incompatible with the spirit of rock. Shanghai is perceived as a glamorous and fashionable city that is trying to regain the decadent flavor it had in the pre-Second World War and pre-Revolution years. As a colonized place, Shanghai was once the entry point for Western sounds. While Berlin had Marlene Dietrich, Shanghai had Bai Guang. Why, after half a century, did the sound of rock enter China through Beijing, rather than Shanghai, and take roots there? There is some truth in the stereotypical claim, so it seems, that the hypereconomy of Shanghai is hostile to sounds that do not sell that well, including rock. One also needs more money to lead a leisurely life in Shanghai, money a rock musician usually does not earn. These might be some of the reasons that help explain why the rock scene in Shanghai is much smaller than that in Beijing, but they fail to explain why the same goes for other, comparatively less prosperous cities such as Xi’an, Chengdu, and Kunming.
The words of Guangzhou rock singer Wang Lei are indicative of the resentment among southern bands:

"As long as you’re from Beijing, even your fart is good. But if you’re from any other place, you’re nothing. Especially in rock music. This is a big problem... I’m very angry."

No wonder this perceived attitude of Beijing triggers the desire to challenge the center. When writing about his stay in Lanzhou, Yan Jun - the chronicler of the New Sound Movement - writes that he was:

"...trying to help the local rock and roll force to subvert the feudalistic musical authority of the capital city." (Yan 1999: 86)

A manager of a Beijing record company once explained to me that the weather must be the main cause for Beijing being the center of rock: Because the north is colder, the character of the people is more harsh and straightforward. Rock, being a direct and harsh sound, is bound to emerge and prosper in the north. One singer even pointed out that the physique of people from the north, who are usually taller and bigger, explains why they bring forward such a powerful sound. Such climatological and biological arguments are as exotic as they are unconvincing. Here, I will not embark upon an analysis of the reasons why rock’s epicenter in China is located in the capital, as I fail to think beyond the self-referential argument that because all bands and rock industries are located in Beijing, bands will pop up more easily there, an argument that too easily reifies the idea of Beijing being the cultural center of China. Instead I wish to explore the cultural scene in Shanghai and the music from Wang Lei, the rock singer from Guangzhou, so as to give room to both their music and to their views on the center. I will show how the rock mythology remains the most powerful binding force of rock cultures outside Beijing, and how, given the dominance of Beijing, these subaltern rock cultures are at pains to distinguish themselves from the center. To do so, they employ two tactics that are located along the, by now, well-known axis of commercialism versus authenticity and the local versus the global. As I will show, they claim to be more authentic and more cosmopolitan than Beijing bands.

**The authentic south** — Beijing rockers downplay music from Hong Kong as being too commercial and too slick; many cultural analysts also hold such views. Shenzhen, a special economic zone close to Hong Kong, suffers from the same stereotyping. In a report on the rock scene of Shenzhen, the author writes (Punk Ian 2000: 12):

"I think we all have to accept the seemingly absurd fact that the more advanced the economy is, the more backward the rock and roll. The beautiful city of Shenzhen offers a good example. Indeed, the city is the migrant workers’ and workaholics’ heaven,
but a rock musician’s hell. Among few rock bands, Heathen is just like its lead vocalist Liao Kai’s pet dog: He loves it, but he has to pay a high price to raise it.”

Such a reification of the rock mythology, here coming from a journalist who is most likely located in Beijing, is often voiced by the musicians themselves, for example by Li Weiyun from the Shanghai-based band Seven:

“Shanghai has too much business, so money is a problem, you have to make money, there is a lot of competition. Beijing is China’s political city, the cultural life is very good in Beijing.”

But then he gives a twist to the narrative:

“I think Beijing rock is somehow not good. There are too many bands, but all of the same kind, they are all punk. Like Flowers. Shanghai bands are different, if one band plays grunge, then I don’t want to play grunge. (...) The bands in Beijing are very businesslike, Shanghai bands never think about money, they just enjoy themselves.”

Also other bands accuse Beijing of being too commercial. The narrative that considers commercialization harmful to the authentic spirit of rock, resonating the rock mythology, is employed by those on the margins to discredit the center of rock in China. Despite the fact that Shanghai is seen as an overtly commercialized place, bands manage to make rock, which renders their music more authentic than that of the musicians from Beijing, who have dollar signs in their eyes. The best rock grows in a barren place that is deprived of a cultural industry. Shanghai rockers reify the clichés about Shanghai, that it is a commercial place ruled by the twin brothers “work” and “consume,” where fashion prevails above character, and where prostitute bars cater to foreigners (see: Sun 1999: 18-19). What they are trying to say in this reification is that if a rocker can survive in such a location, he must be more than real. In a report on the Shanghai rock scene, Sun (1999) writes:

“Rock singers in Shanghai are not rich. Record companies are like hospitals: they’re afraid of dirty things, they don’t like rock and don’t think it can make money.”

The margin - like the center - eagerly reifies the clichés, as they empower them when framed within the rock mythology. Guangzhou-based rock musician Wang Lei is a case in point. In a report on the rock scene in Guangzhou, his position is described as follows (Zhang 2000:16):

“Wang Lei’s music is created amidst all the resistance, confusion, and interference surrounding [Guangzhou]. Not every city in China can produce a voice that is strong
enough to resist the suppression of the entire city. Guangzhou, however, has succeeded in squeezing out such a passionate and melancholic Sichuan guy. Wang Lei turns the dust, congestion, humidity, and solitude into one nightmare after the other, one scream after the other ... what is both disgusting and interesting about Guangzhou, is its chaos.

The music of Wang Lei accompanied me on my trip through China in 1995. I bought the tape in Wuhan, and all the songs on it are related to the theme of leaving home and heading toward an unknown future; as such, his music makes the ideal traveling companion. The opening (and title) track of his 1994 album *Journey Man* starts with the familiar sounds of a railway station. The high, lonely, and at times desperate voice of Wang Lei explains how he feels lost after leaving his father's home:

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I am the only one at the railway station
Full of sadness, I am completely lost
I want to cry, it is not easy
I want to laugh, but I am afraid I lack the courage
Where should I go now?
Where should I go?
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Since his first album was released by the Hong Kong-based record company Sound Factory, Wang Lei has released albums on a regular basis, something which is quite unusual in the rock cultures of China, where most bands release one, or at most two albums. Some of Wang Lei's albums are more acoustic, while others deploy a stronger rock sound. In his music he integrates elements of Sichuan opera (he was born in Sichuan Province in 1971). Despite being one of the few musicians with a rock oeuvre of his own, Wang Lei remains a marginal figure in the national rock scene since he is based in Guangzhou. A report from a fan from Wang Lei shows how his image remains framed within the rock mythology (Li 1995: 4):

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"Only after he got onto the stage did Wang Lei return to himself. He shouted without constraint and sang with a voice full of grief. His songs and voice astonished me: How could such excellent music exist in Guangzhou! (...) His image is not polished; he just belongs to himself and his badly injured heart. He is a simple man."
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His voice as well as the perceived pain and despair in his songs signify authenticity, and authenticity is something one does not expect in a city like Guangzhou. Which, again, makes the rock from the south a sort of hyperrock. In an interview in *Modern Sky Magazine* with Beijing pop-punk band Catcher in the Rye, reference is made to the self-positioning of southern punk bands, who also argue that they are more real (Wang 2000: 13):

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8 For once, the translation of the lyrics are mine.
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“In the south, some people who take on attacking Beijing rock as their mission, who call Beijing rock ‘swine’, well, they think they are the real punk bands.”

The musicians are aware of the marketing potential their outsider position provides them with. When I asked Wang Lei, after he had complained to me that he resented the cultural atmosphere of Guangzhou, whether he would prefer to move to Beijing, he confessed he would rather stay in Guangzhou, since he was a unique figure there.

“Perhaps the biggest advantage to me is that I live in Guangzhou. In Guangzhou no one makes music. Whether I’m good or not, as long as I know I’m making music, no one will influence me.”

The lack of an established rock culture gives him more space to manifest himself; in Beijing, he would have to fight more to get attention. But the reason for staying in Guangzhou he provides the Chinese media with is a more poetic one (Zhang 1995: 8):

“Because Guangzhou depresses me, makes me suffer and thus gives me the impulse to express various emotions and to create music.”

The author further strengthens his narrative by concluding that:

“The depression of the south is sublimated in his independent and pure chant. Wang Lei has always been a stranger to the entertainment circle of Guangzhou; he is solely devoted to his music, he disdains the popular sweet and slick style.”

Guangzhou, a city whose popular culture is to a large extent colonized by Hong Kong, is positioned as lacking any true culture, and pop is once again downplayed as sweet and slick, whereas the voice of Wang Lei is considered independent and pure.

The cosmopolitan south — When we move back to Shanghai, the gloominess of Wang Lei is replaced by a more playful attitude. Walking through the streets of Shanghai, it is tempting to cheerfully sing along with Madonna’s “Material Girl.” On the newly renovated Nanjing Road with its glamorous shopping malls, one is bound to conclude that we are indeed living in a material world, be it communist or not. The “alternative” circle of Shanghai is relatively small and rather mixed. Writer Mian Mian is also involved in organizing rock parties, together with her close friend Kasper, and jazz singer Coco often shows up at rock concerts. With his androgynous appearance and tongue piercing, Coco strikes me as a newly born, decadent, could-be-star of a new century. He tries to mix Chinese traditional music with jazz, and experiments at the same time with techno. To him, politics makes Beijing the center of rock. In his words:
"In China we have a saying that goes 'Wherever there is pressure, there will be fights'. So when politics imposes more control, things develop more quickly. In Shanghai they put more emphasis on business, and culture doesn't follow anymore. I think it's bad. (...) I think Shanghai is a bitch, feminine, like a wealthy girl from a wealthy family. She can be very happy one moment, and upset the next without giving any reason. It's very hard to deal with someone who is very changeable."

Also Coco points out that because the cultural climate is so harsh in Shanghai, it brings forward a smaller, yet more dedicated, alternative scene. The metaphor of Shanghai being a bitch (and then, I imagine, of Beijing as the husband trying to control her), is appealing. Given his gayish appearance, it come as no surprise that Coco feels an outsider in the rock circle:

"They think 'Hey, I'm a rock singer, you're a fucking jazz singer, I'm very alternative'. I mean, if you're really alternative, you can accept many things and then you can be alternative."

The Tribesman used to be the only venue in Shanghai for rock performances. It is located close to the Fudan university, which is rather far from the center. It was a hot summer night in August 1999 when I went there to attend a rock party. It was a dark and sleazy place, with bad sound equipment. Rock band Seven performed their depressive new wave songs, after which Crystal Butterfly took over. Their music is inspired by U2, according to their guitarist Pang Pang. In his view, the fact that their band operates in Shanghai is very important:

"You know, Shanghai is not really Shanghai. It's not so much a national thing, but a matter of cities. Just like you don't have American rock, you have rock from Seattle and New York. In China it's the same: We don't have Chinese rock, but rock from Beijing and rock from Shanghai."

_How are they different?

"In Beijing, people are more focused on this Chinese theme, Shanghai people don't like Beijing songs so much, they think it has such an attitude."

His view is interesting as it counters the idea of China's uniqueness and instead encourages one to look for local differences. Although he didn't use these words, he claims here that Shanghai produces cosmopolitan rock whereas Beijing makes Chinese rock.

"I just want to make good rock music. I feel that many foreigners like Chinese rock, not really because they like the music, but because they like Chinese rock. I don't want to make that kind of music, I want to make good rock music."
The refusal to sinify rock sets him apart from Beijing; this can be considered a tactic to resist the hegemony of Beijing: He is merely part of a world culture, rather than positioning himself as Chinese. Such negotiation of place, which here produces a cosmopolitan locality, sets Shanghai bands apart from the sinified rock of, for example, Cui Jian. For Qing Dao, singer for the band The Maniacs, the difference between Beijing and Shanghai is related to politics:

“In Beijing they include more political topics; in Shanghai we don’t want to include politics. Many Shanghai bands don’t like Beijing. I think one reason is that Shanghai music is less famous. Second, they just scream whahwhahwhah; it’s not really strong, it’s just macho.”

During the rock concert in The Tribesman, one girl had passed out drunk on the floor. I was amused when she turned out to be Kasper, the organizer of the party. I met her a few days later for an interview. Born in 1977, she is part of China’s dakou generation. She got into the alternative scene after listening to dakou CDs, watching Channel V, and exploring the Internet. She had just quit her “boring job” for a Shanghai record company and was trying to make a living on her own by organizing parties. Job-hopping is a rather popular practice among Chinese youth. Her music taste is eclectic: She likes Karen Mok, Aaron Kwok, and Anthony Wong (Cantopop stars), as well as Cui Jian, Portishead, and Underworld. She explained to me how she once tried to be punk:

“I used to be a singer in a female punk band, but they thought I was too commercial. I’m too much into fashion, and I don’t want to take a bus, I want to take a taxi. They didn’t like me because of that.”

She didn’t behave in line with the rock mythology and didn’t survive in the world of rock. Also Mian Mian - the female writer and organizer of local rock parties, ex-drug addict, and a woman notorious for sleeping around - has quite a few musicians against her. She is celebrated in foreign media (for example, Newsweek) as China’s most controversial female writer. Her little book Lalala contains her life story, along with many pictures showing her together with her friends. She is a writer, organizes parties, and seems eager to become an alternative celebrity like Courtney Love. Her book has not yet been translated into English. However, the following fragments offer us a glimpse of this alternative reality which, indeed, caters so well to what the West likes to see in China: Women, youth, sex, and rebellion. It’s the flip side of the mythic East, but remains part of the same coin - the part called “the oriental other”. Mian Mian writes (pp. 47-48):

It seems that fighting stimulates his desire for me. Every time after we fight, he makes love with me in a brand-new way. In our carnal contacts, I remain passive. I enjoying
being masochist, which gives me endless pleasure. Sometimes I’m ashamed of myself. I don’t know if there are others who make love like us. My helpless body. I don’t know whether my orgasm is physical or mental. Ever since Qi told me how she fainted during her orgasm, I’m no longer sure whether I ever have an orgasm. It’s a scary seduction. I want to possess a perfect body, a perfect me. But when do I have the power to be sure?

Thus — The tour through places other than Beijing has led us from Wang Lei in Guangzhou to rock bands, jazz singers, and controversial female writers in Shanghai. The voices of the margin are often at pains to perform their exclusivity, their difference. They are above all certainly not alike the center, which renders them even more marginal. Interestingly, the rock mythology is not so much subverted as used as a empowering narrative. First, those who can make rock in such culturally desolate places as Guangzhou and Shanghai must be even more authentic, more sincere, than their Beijing counterparts. Consequently, cultural stereotypes that are often heard in Beijing are reified rather than challenged. Second, most voice a critique about Beijing that is seen as arrogant, having an attitude, and being too political and too concerned with making rock with Chinese characteristics. Some prefer a more cosmopolitan rock style, and in doing so negate the importance of sinifying rock. The Shanghai rock bands, gay jazz singers, and controversial female writers hope to be less local than Beijing, so as to revive the cosmopolitanism of the old Shanghai. The poses are somehow more decadent, more fashionable maybe, but remain drenched in the rock mythology. If we are to interrogate the rock mythology, we’d better go further south, to Hong Kong and the seductive sounds of Cantopop.

"I adore simple pleasures, they are the last refuge of the complex."

Oscar Wilde (in Sontag 1964: 288)

When Cui Jian performed in Hong Kong in 1995, the 3,500-seat Elizabeth Stadium was only half-full. REM played just one night at the same venue for a predominantly white audience. In contrast, local pop icon Anita Mui played fourteen nights at the full, 12,500-seat Hong Kong Coliseum. These statistics inspired Witzleben (1999) - one of the few academics, Chinese or otherwise, to take Cantopop seriously - to embark upon an eloquent analysis of the pop music and stardom of Anita Mui. As noted earlier, it is more difficult to sketch the discourses

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9 All bands are at pains to point out their difference from Beijing rock, rather than from Gangtai pop, which shows how such organizing dichotomies are anything but fixed. The primary constitutive outside for a music scene depends on the context.
that produce pop as a music world, as there is no such thing as a pop mythology. Being a soft rather than a hard cultural form, pop is characterized by ambiguity. This leads Witzleben (1999) to argue that “the notion of rock aesthetics as liberation and authenticity (...) are quite irrelevant to the vast majority of listeners and performers in Hong Kong’s popular music community.”

Although the idea of liberation - in its conventional sense - might be rather absent from pop, the notion of authenticity, so I will argue, remains important for pop but is articulated in a very different way. In contrast to both the female voices and southern bands, rock from Beijing is insignificant for pop. Given pop’s dominant market position, pop singers are merely focused on positioning themselves vis-à-vis other pop stars. Consequently my analysis, rather than spelling out pop’s tactics of resisting the rock mythology, entails an ethnography of a soft cultural form. I will show, however, how pop’s aesthetics challenge some core notions of this mythology. This ethnography consists of a review of the criticisms pop often receives from rock singers, cultural analysts, and journalists, namely that: (1) pop is superficial, (2) pop stars lack creativity, and (3) pop is apolitical. The last claim, which is the easiest to debunk, will inspire me to reflect on how pop negotiates place. I will then sketch how the ambiguous aesthetics of pop interrogate dominant notions of authenticity.

Pop is superficial — Such a statement can also be given a twist: I like to argue that it is precisely the perceived superficiality that makes pop such a pervasive sound. Pop captures the feelings of urban life, in particular its fluidity and mobility. Today’s pop songs are known by everyone: Their melodies are imposed upon audiences in taxis, shops, and bars, but are often forgotten within a few years. Pop challenges the dominant norm that postulates that the best sounds (or, by the same token, true art) are immortal. Pop instead celebrates the temporal, the fluid, and the artificial. It might well be this power to spectacularize the present that makes pop such a pervasive sound. Pop’s immortality lies in its mortality, and its value lies in its artificiality or banality, as I will explain later. Pop thus challenges the dominant idea that the longer a sound lasts, the more worthwhile it must be. Pop captures the hyperreality of Hong Kong, that urban space (or, as some might say, jungle), with its 24-hour economy.

Whereas pop at first sounds like one monotonous soundscape and is often downplayed as such, I explained in Chapter 2 that, as with the Beijing rock culture, the world of pop is far more heterogeneous. This diversity enables one to single out the stars who seem to negate the

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Another English publication on Gangtai pop is Lee (1992); in Chinese, a book has been published on Hong Kong pop lyrics (Chan 1997) and on Hong Kong pop bands (Chu 2000). Another book on Hong Kong pop culture also devotes a chapter on pop music (Lok 1993). My current analysis presents a bias toward Cantopop and hardly deals with pop from Taiwan. The reason for this is rather practical: I have done research in Hong Kong through which I am more familiar with Cantopop. Whereas Cantopop is predominantly popular in southern China, Mandalopop, which is primarily produced in Taiwan (though most Cantopop stars now also record albums in Mandarin), reaches a wider audience on mainland China.
perceived superficiality of pop. A case in point is the analysis of Witzleben. He describes how Anita Mui remains in control of her own image, thereby subscribing in his analysis to the importance often attached to the idea of the authentic (rock) singer, a notion that fits well in the rock mythology. I rather propose to interpret pop as a challenge not only to the importance attached to the immortality of good music and art, but also to the very notion of the authentic artist. Whereas this notion can still be sustained in the world of rock, pop not only refuses to disguise the importance of packaging, control, and artificiality - as rock does in order to produce the authentic artist - but even celebrates it.\textsuperscript{11}

**Pop stars lack creativity** — Here I would like to argue that what is crucial is not so much whether or not pop stars are creative, but how pop as a music world makes it hard to sustain the idea of the authentic artist. Three reasons substantiate my claim.

First, the author of a pop song is ambiguous because it is hard, if not impossible, to define him or her, because the composer, lyricist, artist, record company, and producer are all intimately involved in the production of a song.

Second, the artist is more an all-round star than a musician is. Due to the different roles artists pick up - they often appear in movies, TV series, and commercials, and show up constantly in the tabloids and in TV quizzes - they are more media personalities than musicians. Pop stars are intertextual chameleons; they provide multiple possibilities for identifications and as such create a universe of their own (Witzleben (1999) makes a similar point). The world of Leon Lai, one of the four heavenly kings of Cantopop, is a complex one. It is at times a sexy one (when we see him dancing in a wet shirt in his videoclip), it can be a violent one (when we come across him in a movie), or a virtuous one (when he helps UNICEF to save the world in Brazil).

Third, karaoke actively engages the audience in the production of a song. The boundary between production and consumption is destabilized by the karaoke culture that has emerged around pop. Karaoke enables one to pick up a new identity for a moment, to slip into the role of a star and seduce the audience with your voice. To label it an escape from reality misses the point, since such an interpretation rests on a rigid dichotomy between reality and fantasy. Karaoke is a way to negotiate reality, to perform a different identity, to explore alternative articulations of everyday life; it opens up an imaginative space in which life once again seems pregnant with possibilities. Through karaoke, the audience slips into the skin of the artist; it transforms us all into a star - even if only for an evening, or just one song.

**Pop is apolitical** — The claim of both Jones (1992) and Steen (1996) that pop can never be

\textsuperscript{11} For a review of the albums of both Anita Mui and Candy Lo, see: Kloet 1999.
a political force, as outlined in Chapter 2, is easy to debunk. A brief sketch of the history of
Gangtai pop shows us how pop has been tied up with politics since its beginning. Pop emerged
in both Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1970s. The following introduction on a compilation
CD titled *Born on the First of July*, which was released to commemorate the handover of
Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule, refers to the perceived birth of pop in Taiwan:

“In the 1970s, Taiwan’s youth was crazy about Western pop music and cover versions
flooded the local music scene. In the winter of 1976, the young painter Li Shuangjie,
who had just returned to Taiwan, broke a bottle of Coca-Cola at a concert, right in
front of the audience. ‘Sing our own songs,’ he yelled. A contemporary folk song
movement was thus born.”

Pop can be considered part of this folk song movement. In Hong Kong, Sam Hui is
considered to be the first major Cantopop star; his emergence remains framed in an equally
nationalistic discourse. In the 1980s, Teresa Teng became the pop diva for the whole Greater
China region. Her popularity was anything but welcomed on mainland China, where she was
seen as a vulgar, pornographic, and decadent threat to the spiritual health of youngsters (Leng
1991, Witzleben 1999). Both the use of pop for the production of locality so as to resist the
perceived hegemony of the US, and the censorship it faced on mainland China, shows how
pop, like rock, at times becomes a site for political struggle. Lee (1992) analyzes how Cantopop
became a political tool from May 1989 to December 1990 in support of the democracy
movement in China. A more recent example can be drawn from Singapore, where Cantopop
is banned from the media as it is believed to threaten the status of the official language,
Mandarin.

The role Cantopop played during the handover of Hong Kong is yet another indication of
pop’s political potential. With the handover approaching, it seemed as if Hong Kong was
desperately trying to define its own identity. While on the verge of disappearing, during the
last spasms of colonialism, Hong Kong tried to capture its spirit in film, art, and music. In the
words of Abbas (1997: 4): “Now faced with the uncomfortable possibility of an alien identity
about to be imposed on it from China, Hong Kong is experiencing a kind of last-minute
collective search for a more definite identity.” One can speak of a postcoloniality that precedes
decolonization (ibid.: 6).

In the years before that rainy Tuesday in 1997 when China took back control, Hong Kong
performed its identity more forcefully than ever, and Cantopop became one of the arenas for
this performance. Its colonial past renders Hong Kong’s locality more ambiguous, and it is
this ambiguity that is reflected in the sound of pop, for example, in the song “Let’s Play Again
When the Next Century Comes” by Anthony Wong:
Still trying to distinguish the fading fragrance
I remember how the flowers flew with grace
We were so indulgent in the games we played
That we didn’t even notice the weather changed on a particular day
I remember how we played among the flowers
Our laughter was so happy
I remember how we took a deep breath
And dashed through one wonderful century
Now, I am afraid everything will be forgotten soon
Our remembrance becomes absurd, yet beautiful
Now, I am no longer playing with you
Shall we make a date?
Let’s play again when the next century comes.

This song, which was released in early 1997, was widely interpreted as a critical comment on the handover and said to reflect the angst that suffused the air of Hong Kong. As the singer explained during a concert in Berlin in the summer of 2000, Hong Kong faced a double *fin de siècle*: Not only the end of a century, but more so, the end of colonial rule and the prospect of being ruled by the CCP. This song provides not only yet another example with which to counter the assertion that pop lacks any political potential, but it also shows how pop, like rock, can be involved in a negotiation of place.

*Place*—Anthony Wong’s remarks on Beijing rock show how he expects them to be Chinese:

“I think Cui Jian really combines Western influences very well with Eastern elements; he is the best I think, he is basically rock but still has Chinese elements in it. (...) I think Cui Jian has written the most interesting words and is the most sophisticated; the others are typical rock’n’roll. You know, being angry, being anti-establishment, yeah. Of course for China this is a big step, but it means there is still a long way to go to become really cosmopolitan. China is still a suppressed state; that’s why people still have to sing about their anger.”

His idea that Chinese rock should have Chinese characteristics reflects a recurring theme: Rock as a hard cultural form ought to localize itself. What is interesting is how he casts China as an oppressive state that lags behind Hong Kong. Just as Beijing bands stress that Beijing is the capital of Chinese culture, Hong Kong musicians stress, resembling the voice of Shanghai bands, that they are the truly (post-)modern, cosmopolitan center. And the latter is valued more highly, as China is said to “still have a long way to go.”

12 According to the lyricist Chow Yiufai, he didn’t write the song with this particular intention, which proves how polysemic texts are: The intended meaning can be very different from the actual reading.
Having sketched the politics of pop, which at times involves a politics of place, I have sidetracked one crucial question: Why do we, Western academics, insist on pointing out the political abilities and disabilities of the sound of pop? The few articles that have appeared on pop are eager to point out the cases of censorship it faced (Witzleben 1999), or relate it to the democracy movement (Lee 1992). In an attempt to liberate pop from the strictly political - already in the 1840s referred to as the “new religion” by the German philosopher Feuerbach (“Die neue Religion ist die Politik” in Groot 2000: 94) - I would like to conclude by discussing the ambiguous aesthetics of pop. This aesthetics results, as my study on Anthony Wong will show, in performances of the inauthentic self that pose a fundamental challenge to the rock mythology.

The aesthetics of pop — Anthony Wong started his career as one half of the duo Tatming, which reached the top of the charts during the later part of the 1980s and was acclaimed by fans and critics alike. Both his music and his image are a case in point if we are to grasp the ambiguity, artificiality, and banality of Cantopop. Tatming’s synthesizer pop resembles the music of the Pet Shop Boys, but - as Anthony Wong quickly remarked in order to guarantee authenticity - both duos started out at the same time. This suggests that pop singers are as eager to claim the authenticity of their sound as their rock colleagues are. His desire to be more independent, which was realized later in the founding of the production company People Mountain People Sea, shows how pervasive the ideology of the rock mythology is. It also functions as a marker of difference, as he claims to be more in control than the big stars. He says:

“We want more autonomy. Actually, I think I have a lot of autonomy already, compared with others, but I still want more.”

Anthony Wong tried to distinguish himself from both Chinese rock and Cantopop by stating that:

“We don’t just sing about love, nor are we simply anti-establishment. We have put

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13 Here I must confess that Anthony Wong is a rather convenient choice, as he is considered to be part of the more avant-garde scene within Cantopop. His frequent collaboration with the Zuni Icosahedron theatre group points to his more “artistic” status. Consequently, it is easier to politicize his music, just as he opens up a lot of room for a postmodern reading in which attention is given to his play with identities and the intertextual references in his music. A study of the most banal, most popular of all artists, such as of the four heavenly kings, remains an important challenge for the future.

14 “People Mountain People Sea” is a Chinese idiom used to describe mass events where the people form, figuratively speaking, mountain and sea. It refers in this context to Hong Kong and to pop culture, but in the case of Anthony Wong it has also a critical aspect in that it refers to the disastrous effects such events can have, like the Cultural Revolution, and how the voices of minorities are too often silenced by the masses.
more humor in our music and the context of our music is more complex. We talk about sexuality, about weird subjects you can't find in Chinese music. We wrote a song about voyeurism; you don't find this kind of thing in Chinese music, not even in Cantopop.”

His characterization of other pop as focusing just on love reflects a desire to be different by downplaying the other. In his positioning Anthony Wong relies, like the Beijing rockers, very much on being original, on being authentic. But he negotiates such notions through an entirely different sound and image.

Inspired not only by such groups as Kraftwerk and by Chinese folk songs, but also by the elevator music or muzak from James Last, the music of Tatming presents an eclectic mix of styles. The repetitive banal sound goes hand in hand with serious lyrics, which have eagerly been analyzed by Hong Kong academics (Chan 1997; Chu 2000). During his solo career, which he began after the band split up in 1990, Anthony Wong followed the track he started on while in Tatming. Often, the music is artificial, with catchy melodies, but it has become even more electronic. It is precisely this artificiality or banality that defines the quality of the sound. Frith’s comments on the Pet Shop Boys seem equally appropriate to Anthony Wong, when he writes that their “musical appeal is rooted in [a] sense of mobile space, in the use of sounds which as both texture and hook surprise us by their very familiarity. But this sonic reassurance is overlaid with (or, perhaps, makes possible) an unusual pop sensibility: the Pet Shop Boys, unlike most rock groups, seem to be listening to their own numbers, to be picking up their own references and ambiguities. (...) They know that in this sort of music it is such surface noise that resonates most deeply in our lives” (Frith 1996: 6-8).

The sounds of James Last, resembling the music we hear in the shopping malls of Hong Kong, are applied with a camp sensibility; there is irony, but camp goes much further than that, as camp is irony with a dead serious undertone. And James Last is only one source of inspiration: Some songs are a reinterpretation of existing songs, some from the late diva of pop, Teresa Teng, others from popular Kung Fu series that are turned into an anthem for the street kids of Hong Kong, whereas yet others draw on the old decadent songs from Shanghai. Anthony Wong is not so much defamiliarizing the familiar sounds of Hong Kong from both the past and the present - as the avant-garde likes to have it - as merely playing with those sounds.

Ambiguity and playfulness are key characteristics of most of Anthony Wong’s songs. Pop does not use the direct shock tactics punk uses, nor is there the anger that characterizes much rock music. The topics are more mundane; like the sounds, pop lyrics often constitute a surface noise that resonates deeply with everyday life. For example in his song “Next Stop, Heaven,” of which one fragment runs:\n
\[15\] Translated by the lyricist Lin Xi.
And then
So much desire, so little time
Should I go shopping, sight-seeing or have a little ride
Sit next to me, and look into the eternity of this very fine day
Till I am gay enough to say
See you next time
Take a deep breath
And tell me you are fine
Think of me for a while
And see how life makes our love a crime
Time after time.

There is a playfulness in these lyrics, along with the reference to a forbidden love. It remains unclear, however, what the nature of that love is. It is not difficult to interpret the song as referring to a homosexual affair that is doomed to fail under the current Chinese sexual regime, but other interpretations are equally possible. Also in his image we can trace a play with gender as Figure 4.3 (the cover of his CD In Broad Daylight) shows.
Both the lyrics and the jacket reflect the ambiguous aesthetics of pop. This ambiguity provides space to play with gender and sexuality. The image on the jacket is clearly androgynous. Anthony Wong remains deliberately vague about his sexual identity, but incorporates clearly homosexual themes. Again, a reading from the Pet Shop Boys can also be applied to Anthony Wong, when Hawkins, from whom I have also borrowed the notion of banality, writes that “concepts of pleasure and power resulting from the ‘sexual undertow’ are never rendered fixed; everything is left open for negotiation, redefinition and reinterpretation” (Hawkins 1997: 125). Wong’s play with the sexual self resembles another general feature of pop, that of the play with identities.

In particular, live performances are an important site for such identity plays, which makes pop performances a spectacular display of the pop aesthetics. Performances by pop stars are above all visual and musical spectacles; the audience has to be entertained. Gone is the importance of “real” live music; there is no need to play endless riffs on a guitar until your clothes are soaked with sweat in order to authenticate yourself. What counts in the world of pop is pleasure; the better you entertain the audience, the better you are. And camp is a sensibility that captures such a play rather well, “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag 1964: 275). Anthony Wong changes his extravagant clothes several times during a performance in order to slip into a different image, just as he constantly changes his hair color. We see him in a shiny silver outfit, after which he changes in to a white suit of feathers (“Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers” (Sontag 1964: 283)), and then in to a suit the colors of which resemble the British flag. The video images that are projected on stage show an urban landscape through which live images of the performance are mixed, and performance artists from Zuni Icosahedron join him on stage and add to the spectacle.

In one song during his Berlin performance, Anthony Wong disappeared into a corner of the stage, and continued singing while an actor mimicked him. This act was a deliberate play with the artificiality of pop: It signified a love for the unnatural, confused the real with the fake, and was as such a self-reflective act. Which leads me back to the notion of authenticity. I have shown how some articulations of authenticity, such as claiming to be the original author of the musical concept and self-control over one’s image, resemble those we have seen in the rock culture. But coupled to this claim on authenticity there is at the same time in pop the play with authenticity. Pop turns authenticity, in a creative, self-reflective move, into a style. And style prevails in the pop world over content, just as aesthetics triumphs over morality (cf. Sontag 1964: 287).

The parody of an actor mimicking a song that is performed live can be interpreted as a parody on authenticity. This is why Grossberg argues that in pop, authenticity is turned into a
style, “[it] becomes a self-conscious parody of the ideology of authenticity, by making the artificiality of its construction less a matter of aesthetics and more a matter of image-marketing. The result is that style is celebrated over authenticity, or rather that authenticity is seen as just another style” (Grossberg 1993, quoted in Hawkins 1997: 130). The mimicking act was a performance of inauthenticity and, as Grossberg states, “the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge and admission of your inauthenticity” (ibid.).

The banality and artificiality of pop add to the discourse of inauthenticity that surrounds it; it is a plastic, commercial sound that can only emerge because pop is a soft, ambiguous cultural form. The strength of pop is its banality that resonates so deeply with our daily life; its self-referential, ambiguous, inauthentic aesthetics not only challenges the notion of the authentic artist and the idea that true art is everlasting, but also opens up a space to play with different, at times sexualized, identities. Pop's artificiality is a force that counters the authenticating drive of other art worlds like rock.

Thus — My analysis of Gangtai pop, with its focus on (or bias toward) Cantopop, shows that there is no ground to consider rock more rebellious, more authentic, more complex, or more emancipatory than pop. I have shown how pop, like rock, at times becomes a site for political struggle. I have also shown how pop, again like rock, is involved in a negotiation of place; it is at times used as a nationalistic force. Views of cultural superiority are expressed by musicians in Hong Kong, who consider the mainland a culturally backward region. Here they resemble pretty much the views expressed by their Beijing counterparts, who often claim that the capital is the center of Chinese culture. Being a soft cultural form, pop is merely characterized by ambiguity, artificiality, and banality. Pop challenges the uniqueness and immortality of art and its maker, and instead explores the fluid possibilities for identification that are offered by living a cosmopolitan life. Pop is fiddling around with the driving force of the rock mythology: Being true to yourself. Rock's holy quest for authenticity is replaced by a lighthearted play with images and poses; after all, “to be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up” (Wilde in Sontag 1964: 282).

There are the decadent poses that are reminiscent of 1920s Shanghai; there are the heroic songs that celebrate gang life; there are the songs that provocatively celebrate life under British colonial rule; and there are the songs that explore alternative sexual identifications. Pop is a performance of the inauthentic self; it is a spectacularization of the present. Pop's banality and artificiality render the music profoundly ambiguous, and it is this ambiguity that makes pop such a powerful yet soft musical form.
The subaltern sounds as explored in this chapter provide us with a more balanced perspective on popular music in China. We are confronted with the masculine bias of rock music; the female voices have developed tactics to overcome this bias: There is the denial, the dramatization, and the politicization of gender. However, all tactics rely heavily on the rock mythology, and as such the female voices do not offer a radically new interpretation of rock - and why should they? The same goes for the rock scenes in places outside Beijing. There, the rock mythology is not so much negated as used as an empowering narrative. Those who can make rock in such culturally desolate places as Guangzhou and Shanghai must be even more authentic, more sincere than their Beijing counterparts. Consequently, cultural stereotypes that are often heard in Beijing are reified rather than challenged. All bands are at pains to point out their difference from Beijing rock, rather than from Gangtai pop, which shows how such organizing dichotomies are anything but fixed. If we are to truly explore the boundaries of the rock mythology, a look at Gangtai pop proves most rewarding, as my analysis has shown. There, notions of authenticity are turned upside down, the campy ambiguous aesthetics of pop challenge the rock mythology by deliberately confusing the real with the fake, thus acknowledging the impossibility to capture the real, a claim so often made by rock musicians.

Non-Beijing rock, female rock, and in particular Gangtai pop open up discursive fields that scream to be explored further. Fields where so many tracks are still disguised by the clichés and stereotypes that imprison the sound of pop, the construction of gender, and the positioning of Beijing. These tracks have different names; in the case of pop, some are about camp, others about the fragmented performance of the self, whereas others are about the poetics of the banal. I dislike in general the concluding remark of so many studies that further research is needed: This not only sounds hollow to me, but it is a speech act that protects the future existence of the humanities. But for once I would like to conclude by saying that the subaltern sounds as explored in this chapter deserve more study, however difficult it might be to grasp them given the power of the rock mythology. The question Spivak posed in 1988, (“Can the subaltern speak?”) remains an important one in the study of popular culture in China, since their voices are still eloquently silenced and downplayed by artists, journalists, and academics. But there is little reason to foreground the importance of speaking if we are to recuperate the subaltern sounds. It is about time for an academic karaoke session. We'd better allow ourselves to be seduced by the groove of pop, give in to the fluid sexualities, and throw ourselves into a politics of pleasure that goes beyond the rock mythology.
I want to be high every day
And change by night and day
Like, Maria, reincarnated,
Pregnant by night and day
Look at the glamorous goddess
Forever branded on my skin
You look so beautiful
(illness contracted in daylight always breaks out in the dark)
I exist till now

("Ave Maria" from Anthony Wong)