Red Sonic Trajectories - Popular Music and Youth in China

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"If you’re a rocker who truly loves punk, then the underground is your paradise. If you’re a mainstreamer who worships all the pop idols, then this is your hell."

Yin Zheng, high-school student in a letter to Modern Sky record company

Having explored the popular music cultures in China, one of the questions that remains unanswered is what the audience thinks and feels about the music. First, though, what is the audience? The audience is a popular abstraction frequently used by the media industry when referring to those who watch TV, or listen to music, or do both at the same time. The audience is that group of trendily dressed youth with whom I sang the “Internationale,” the closing song of a Tang Dynasty concert. We shared that magic moment as though we were floating on a noisy cloud, safely detached from the boredom of everyday life. The audience is a bunch of purple-haired punkers buying cheap beer at the local store and smuggling it into the bars. The audience is the village boy from Sichuan province listening endlessly to the new Baojiajie 43 tape on his Walkman, and whose eyes fill with tears when he whispers along with their song “Goodnight Beijing”. The audience is the college student in Canada who is exploring his Chinese identity by listening to rock, and who shares his thoughts and feelings about the music on his website. The audience is me, when I lose my motivation to write, forget the topic of this research, and quickly put on the NO album. The high-pitched voice of Zu Zhou brings back memories of the past, a past that remains right in the midst of the present.

Based on this short overview, one might feel tempted to say that there is no “audience”: There are just people listening to music, some indulging in it intensively, others listening while ironing their clothes. If we continue to use the idea of an audience - as I will in this chapter - then this can at best be a diffuse concept, referring to a fragmented, heterogeneous troupe of people scattered across time and space. The audience is not only out there, to be studied and objectified, but also here, as we are all part of it.

The meanings of pop and rock are not encoded in the musical text itself, but are negotiated by audiences. The value of music, or of any other form of art, is socially constructed (Frith 1996). Nevertheless, popular music studies often focus solely on the musical text itself, as though it were a secret code to be deciphered by the hard working analyst. Also economic reasons help explain why there are relatively few music audience analyses, especially when compared with studies of TV audiences. Although sales figures are crucial for the functioning of the music industry, audience ratings are the major currency in the TV industry. It is tempting to treat a musical text as though it were solely the expression of the artist, e.g., as though the anger in Zu Zhou’s voice were just his anger, thereby ignoring the anger experienced by the
This chapter presents an attempt to explore how audiences negotiate music, and how sounds are incorporated into the everyday life of young people in China. But I will start off with a brief discussion of debates within the field of audience studies in order to frame the quantitative and qualitative “empirical” analysis that follows the theoretical introduction.

Waiting for the Audience

It seems rather futile to write yet another comprehensive introduction to audience studies. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) discuss three major paradigms. The first - the behavioral model of audience research - is mainly concerned with the effects of media on audiences. Gerbner’s “cultivation analysis,” on the impact of TV violence on the behavior of viewers, as well as the uses and gratifications approach, which studies a goal-oriented audience that uses the media to gratify specific needs, belong to this paradigm. The latter approach will help me show how audiences use music to manage their mood. But as a whole, the functionalistic, effect-oriented approach of the behavioral paradigm is of little use for this study.

The second paradigm, which is derived from cultural studies, comes closer to how I perceive audiences. In line with Stuart Hall, I consider media contents profoundly polysemic; reception represents a moment of struggle over meaning. According to Hall (1980), the range of possible interpretations of a certain text is limited by hegemonic structures in society, that is, certain readings of a text are preferred. A clear example is the positive news reports that appear on Chinese TV, which are meant to tell the viewers how well Chinese society is developing. But this preferred reading is often negotiated by the audience in a different way. Ling Ra, for example, explained to me in 1992 her mistrust of Chinese news programs:

“News programs don’t look like news. The news is a waste of time; it’s a kind of propaganda. It delivers the Party’s thoughts. But we don’t like it. We can’t see the things we want to see.”

Many young viewers share her ironic, critical attitude toward domestic news on TV. They resist the preferred reading of “Look how well China is developing”, and instead read “Look how the Party is trying to fool us!”. The audience actively negotiates media contents;

1 A study by Van Alphen (1992) of Francis Bacon’s work makes a similar point. Its cover text runs: “Most analyses of Bacon actually neutralize his work by discussing it as an existential expression, and as the horrifying communication of an isolated individual - which simply transfers the pain in the painting back to Bacon himself. This study is the first attempt to account for the pain of the viewer.”

consequently, different people and different groups can have different readings of the same song. My study will shed light on such multiple readings, while at the same tracing whether and, if so, how the rock mythology produces a preferred reading. Here I deliberately refrain from using the concept of hegemony. Whereas the behavioral model is burdened by its uncritical liberal approach, the cultural studies model is burdened by the overemphasis put on hegemony. To conceptualize power in terms of domination and resistance, misses the Foucauldian point that power is fragmented, diffuse, and in a constant state of flux.5

The third paradigm Abercrombie and Longhurst distinguish - the “spectacle/performance paradigm” - interprets media reception as a performative act that constitutes everyday life. It does not so much present a paradigmatic shift as refine the cultural studies approach. It focuses less on politics, in the strict sense of the word, and related issues of power and hegemony; instead, it foregrounds the importance of media in the everyday life of audiences. Performance can be considered “a kind of activity in which the person performing accentuates his or her behavior under the scrutiny of others” (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 40; see also Butler 1993). This is the case not only during a live rock performance, but also, and more importantly, during our everyday life, which is saturated with performative acts. The act of listening can be interpreted as a performance itself. The other does not have to be there physically to scrutinize: Its imagined (that is, real, but in our mind) existence suffices. “In a culture dominated by the mass media, performances are elongated in time and space and fragmented” (ibid.: 62). Being a member of an audience is no longer defined by time or space; instead, it constitutes everyday

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3 Gerbner’s “cultivation analysis” linked content analysis of media messages to survey methods for the study of the audience. The problem with this approach is that it assumes a rather passive audience and interprets communication as a one-way process in which the receiver is, as it were, injected with a specific message that has a direct effect on him or her. The uses and gratifications approach, which is rooted in studies in the US in the 1940s and further developed by Katz et al. in the 1970s, focuses on the uses made by the audience of media messages. The functionalistic rationale of this approach is, to say the least, problematic. The explanatory power of the approach is limited, as it does not account for why different people choose different media to satisfy similar needs. According to Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 9), three important points of critique of this paradigm are (1) its neglect of social groups within society (audiences are described as essentially individualistic or society-wide), (2) the ignorance about the complexity of meaning and textual structure of media texts, and (3) the overemphasis on the functionalistic aspects, either in terms of propaganda and effect or in terms of need satisfaction.

4 Studies that are grounded in this model focus, for example, on the “symbolic creativity” of audiences (Willis 1990), or the pleasure derived from media consumption (Ang 1985). Although it shares with the uses and gratifications approach the premise of the active audience, the cultural studies approach is quite different in its focus. “While uses and gratifications researchers generally operate within a liberal pluralist conception of society where individuals are seen as ideally free, that is, unhindered by external powers, in cultural studies, following Marxist/(post)structuralist assumptions, people are conceived as always already implicated in, and necessarily constrained by, the web of relationships and structures which constitute them as social subjects” (Ang 1996: 41). Interestingly enough, the cultural studies approach has also resulted in some studies that celebrate the possibilities of resisting dominant readings that are encoded in media texts; especially Fiske shows an unbridled belief in the activity of audiences and the polysemy of texts, after which he concludes that “There is no text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing” (in: Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 23).
life. "The essential feature of this audience experience is that, in contemporary society, everyone becomes an audience all the time" (ibid.: 68). This audience is a diffused audience acting in a never-ending performance that makes up everyday life. Such “aestheticization of everyday life encourages the widespread use of spectacle. It is the purpose, after all, of representation to draw the attention” (ibid.: 88). It is not my aim to turn Beijing into a spectacular city where all citizens are interpreted as diffused audiences who are involved full time in the aestheticization of their everyday life. The strength of these ideas, in my view, lies in the way in which they help to decentralize the political (in the strict sense of the word), and instead acknowledge the importance of media - including popular music - as the constitutive force of everyday life.

In this chapter I aim to interrogate the dynamics between music zones (pop, rock, and classical) and audiences that move in and out of these zones. My study can best be located within the two last-mentioned approaches; however, as I disagree with their rebuttal of quantitative methods, I will rely on both survey data and interviews and fan mail. The thread that runs through the book - the “hard force” of the rock mythology that intersects with the ideological distinction between pop and rock, and related notions of place and authenticity - will be reflected upon. After introducing the three music zones, I will analyze who is attracted to them in terms of gender, age, and education, and how their involvement differs. I will also discuss how notions of place and authenticity are negotiated differently by audiences, and whether they share specific values. To grasp the diversity of rock audiences, I will analyze how they move through the scenes distinguished in Chapter 3. Having sketched the zonal and scenic movements of audiences, I will try to locate the rebellious and political in youth cultures in China. This will prove to be a hard task, as with some exceptions the Chinese rebel has evaporated, just as everyday life has become strikingly depoliticized. Zonal movements can also be global, as I will show: The Internet is important for the production of a global cybercommunity built around rock music. I will finally interpret listening to music as a necessarily fragmented, performative act with infinite distinctive potentials.

5 Studies from this second paradigm are usually based on case studies (such as romance readers (Radway 1987) and Dallas fans (Ang 1985)), which ignore the fragmented nature of audiencehood. Audiences watch Dallas and the news, they listen to music and go to the cinema, and they often use different media simultaneously. The issue of the fragmented/diffuse audience, and the related topic of media intertextuality, deserves more attention than it has received so far. Also, it has proven to be difficult to translate the findings of the case studies back into society as a whole. The observation that Chinese youths read the news in an ironic way serves as a timely reminder that propaganda in China does not intrinsically brainwash the people, yet it does not get far in exploring the limits of "resistant" readings, let alone in challenging the construction of the Party as a monolithic force of domination. The focus on news and propaganda will also easily lead to overpoliticized readings of media audiences in China.
To gain some basic information on Beijing youth - i.e., about their values and aspirations - and their media use and music preferences, I decided to carry out a quantitative analysis. I approached the electronics concern, Philips, which agreed to cooperate in my survey among 650 youths in Beijing. This turned out to be a rewarding and fruitful collaborative exercise. Not only would it have been impossible to implement such an extended survey without their funding, but also the inclusion of more topics (Philips needed detailed information on the family background of respondents, and on their daily activities and their ownership of electronic appliances) made the survey more comprehensive. To acquire further information, I conducted 32 interviews with Beijing youths and analyzed 80 letters from fans to their favorite bands; the latter were provided by the three leading Chinese rock record companies, Magic Stone (Taiwan), Red Star (Hong Kong), and Modern Sky (Beijing).

The respondents were asked to indicate their appreciation of music genres ranging from Western classical music to Chinese rock on a progressive five-point scale. Figure 5.1 shows the popularity of the different genres among male and female respondents.

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4 The survey was carried out among youths aged between 15 and 25 years old by a Beijing-based agency, Diamond Consultancy, and was financed by Philips Sound & Vision. The sample is representative of the variables age, education, and sex. Figures from the real population were obtained from the China Population Statistics Yearbook 1995 (regarding age) and were calculated by the Beijing Bureau for Statistics for this survey (regarding education). Figures from the sample differ at most 5% from official figures. The survey was carried out in five different districts in Beijing; thus different neighborhoods are represented. The ten research assistants worked with a quota when selecting their respondents. Given the involvement of both local consultants and Philips, it was impossible to include political questions. The issue of class remains obscure given the turbulent recent history of China, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to develop reliable indicators; both the parent’s education and salary are inaccurate given the impact of the Cultural Revolution and of the wage distribution of the working units.
As expected, pop and rock music are most popular among Beijing youths. Female respondents tend to favor classical and pop music, whereas male respondents prefer rock. Compared with figures from the US, there is a striking difference. Whereas in the US rock music is more popular than pop, in China, and most likely in East Asia, the roles are reversed (Hakanen & Wells 1993: 60). However, such comparisons are problematic, as they ignore possible cross-cultural classificatory differences.

Can we distinguish specific music zones? Through a factor analysis we can see whether it is possible to blend certain genres. There then emerges a rather clear picture of three music zones, as Table 5.1 shows.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classical</th>
<th>Pop</th>
<th>Rock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese classical music</td>
<td>0.777</td>
<td>-0.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese opera</td>
<td>0.705</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese folk music</td>
<td>0.778</td>
<td>0.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western classical music</td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td>-0.193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangtai pop</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
<td>0.767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese pop</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>0.885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western pop &amp; rock</td>
<td>-0.098</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese rock</td>
<td>-0.081</td>
<td>0.374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz</td>
<td>0.283</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1: Factor Analysis of Music Genres

7 For reasons of privacy, the respondents were asked to use a pseudonym.

8 Rotated component matrix, extraction method: principal component analysis, rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. The principal component analysis (PCA) is an analysis of many variables. Its main aim is data reduction by lumping together variables that are closely correlated. It first measures correlations between each variable with each of all other variables, after which it searches for clusters of connected variables that are maximally independent from the other clusters. The variables within one cluster are merged into a metric component/variable. These clusters are shown in the table by the gray shading. In this case, the PCA has reduced the total variance of nine variables to three independent components. The first component (classical) explains 24.8% of the variance, the second (pop) explains 17.9%, and the third (rock) explains 17.8%. Thus, in total 60% of the variance of the nine variables can be explained with three components. The inaccessible terminology of quantitative research is worth a separate study, as it produces an aura of truth as though we were dealing with so-called “hard sciences”.

137
The analysis points to the coexistence of three music zones, namely classical music (in which predominantly Chinese and Western classical music is represented); pop music from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the mainland; and rock, in which Western pop and rock, and Chinese rock and jazz are represented. Thus, the distinction between pop and rock returns in taste differences among the respondents, but a third taste ought to be included as well, namely classical music. As Figure 5.1 shows, this music zone is least popular among Beijing youths. It can be argued that because of the given genre distinctions in the question, this does not show that Chinese audiences group the same artists under rock as I do. However, Appendix III presents the factor analysis based on the respondents' opinions of different singers. Again, the distinction between Chinese rock and Chinese pop appeared, to which a third component (Western pop music) was added. The survey thus seems to justify speaking of three genre-related audiences.

Whereas the Western music world has by now been transformed into a confusing forest of very specific genres, this is less the case in China. The classification of Chinese music in Hong Kong's HMV music store is simple - "male" and "female" - and the few Chinese rock bands and singers are to be found under "male." However, in Beijing, most music stores use three classifications: Rock, classical, and pop, thus reflecting the three music zones that appeared in the survey. It can be argued that due to the absence of generic labels, it is more difficult to talk about "Chinese" music. Whereas there hardly seems to be a language available to discuss Gangtai pop, for a discussion of rock at least the appropriation of Western terms is possible. In my interviews, rock fans indeed used a more specific language, with labels such as heavy metal and punk, whereas pop was usually characterized solely by its place of production: Hong Kong, Taiwan, or mainland China.

How far do these three music zones attract distinctive audiences? Do certain zones generate more involvement from the audience, and do audiences from a music zone share specific media tastes in general? If by involvement we mean the time they spend listening to music, the number of cassette tapes they own, and the importance they attach to music, there appear to be differences between the distinguished music audiences. There is a significant positive relation between number of cassette tapes - the main music carrier in China - and a preference for rock music (Pearson correlation = 0.195), whereas pop is slightly negatively correlated (-0.102). There is no significant relation between classical music and number of cassettes. If we look at media consumption, both a t-test (which compares the means of two groups) for the separate pop and rock audience, as presented in Table 5.2, and a correlation analysis

Unless otherwise indicated, the bivariate correlation figures presented in this chapter are all Pearson correlation coefficients.
show that the rock audience listens significantly longer to music, compared to the pop audience. The rock audience spends an average of 53 minutes listening to cassette tapes each day, whereas the pop audience does so for an average of only 34 minutes. The audience that shows no strong preference for either pop or rock (e.g., the pop audience) spends around 34 minutes a day listening to music.

These figures present a clear picture: From the three music zones distinguished earlier, the respondents positioned most often in the rock zone are significantly more involved in music, in the sense that they have more cassette tapes and spend more time listening to them. Correlation analysis also reveals a strong and significant positive relation between rock and music as a topic of conversation among friends (0.281), whereas such a relation does not exist for either the classical or pop zone. Thus, especially when positioned in the rock zone, one is more likely to talk about music. In his letter to Modern Sky, Li Huagang articulates the pleasure of talking about rock:

“I’m a rock and roll fan, and a lot of my friends are making rock music. We’re all very concerned about the development of Chinese rock! The biggest pleasure in my life is to chat with my friends about music, about rock. You can imagine how happy I am to see that Chinese rock is developing so strongly ... rock music is our greatest love! It releases us, it satisfies us ...”

The power of the rock mythology, which makes rock a hard cultural form, has produced a globalized rock idiom, with generic labels such as punk and heavy metal. This adds to the pleasure of talking about rock, of discussing the music itself. He also points to his use of the music: It releases him, the act of listening satisfies him emotionally, and since he writes about “us,” this is considered a communal act. Rock apparently creates a community.

Another measure of involvement in music is derived from measuring the relation between the three music zones and two statements, namely “Music is more important in my life than television” and “My music taste reflects my personality.” It turns out that there is a rather weak negative relation between classical music and the statement “Music reflects my personality” (-0.144), whereas there is a rather strong positive relation between rock and the statement “Music is more important in my life than TV” (0.204). There are no strong relations between pop and either statement.

Thus, those located in the rock zone are more involved in music compared to those located in either the classical or the pop music zone. As such, it may be fair to assume that rock as a genre is a more important marker of difference compared to other music genres; in positive terms, rock in China provides an important site to perform one's identity. But a more critical interpretation is equally valid. Hung Xin, who says she listens mainly to pop and classical
music, told me that rock as a genre demands more involvement from the audience:

“When you feel sad, or when you feel the need for something sweet, you can listen to pop. But you cannot have such an attitude for rock. When you listen to rock, you have to think about it, you have to sense what the singer wants to express, wants to convey to the audience - their anger, despair, hope, ambitions, these things.”

Given its assumed “deeper” contents (an assumption related to the rock mythology), rock requires more interpretative “work” from the listener. Being a hard cultural form, rock demands a specific reading, which in Hall’s terms can be considered the hegemonic or preferred reading.10

In my desire to move away from interpreting the rock mythology in terms of hegemony, I consider it important to stretch the spatial metaphor of a music zone a bit further. It doesn’t take much to imagine a music zone as a territory. The rock sound is a stronger force of territorialization, especially when compared to pop. It brings you home, for a moment.

“Now we are at home. But home does not preexist: It was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space. (...) Sonorous or vocal components are very important: a wall of sound, or at least a wall with some sonic bricks in it. A child hums to summon the strength for the schoolwork she has to hand in. A housewife sings to herself, or listens to the radio, as she marshals the anti-chaos forces of her work. Radios and television sets are like sound walls around every household and mark territories (the neighbor complains when it gets too loud). (...) The territory, and the functions performed within it, are products of territorialization. Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive...” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 311, 317; see also: Grossberg 1993; Boomkens 2000).

It is the, arguably, loud sound of rock, intersecting with the discourses that frame this sound (the rock mythology), that marks the territory. The sound is often more loud, more conspicuous, than pop - although here the danger lies in essentializing sounds and ignoring contextual factors, such as personal and cultural taste differences and the mode of listening. The listener can enter the territory, but only if he or she takes the musician seriously; in other words, only if he or she accepts the terms set by the musician and producer, terms that are embedded in the hard force of the rock mythology. Thus, the label “rock” produces a potential closure of interpretative possibilities, a closure not only encoded in the sound itself, but - more so - generated by the territorializing force of the rock mythology.

10 Indicative is that my survey showed a relation between the statement “For me, lyrics are important when I listen to a song” and rock (0.135), whereas this relation was less strong for the pop zone.
Does rock, then - being a rather important indicator of difference, or a stronger force of territorialization - relate strongly to specific media preferences? As can be expected, different music zones relate clearly to wider media preferences. This will be illustrated by measuring the relations between music zones (as outlined in Table 5.1) and preference for specific TV programs. As for the classical music zone, strong relations emerged with youth programs (0.233), educational programs (0.412), Chinese opera (0.582), and information and news programs (0.387). The pop zone relates well to movies (0.210), shows (0.328), and drama (0.209). Rock relates well to music programs (0.318) and, though less strongly, to sport programs (0.194), but relates negatively to educational programs (-0.196). This once again shows the importance of music for those located in the rock zone. There are hardly any differences between the different zones regarding time spent watching TV or listening to the radio. Only the classical music zone stands out, as it relates positively to reading both books and newspapers. Thus, when it comes to media preferences, especially the relations with the classical zone are strong; as such, a preference for classical music might be considered indicative of a more conspicuous media taste compared to either pop or rock.

Xiao Wei, a male student at Beijing University, can be considered emblematic of this classical zone. His favorite composers are Wagner, Listz, and Mahler. In line with his musical taste, he especially likes German philosophers, such as Schopenhauer, Kant, and Nietzsche. And when we came to talk about Samuel Beckett, he said he had read *Waiting for Godot*, a play that has been successful among Beijing youths, perhaps because its alienating emptiness relates well to the ideological vacuum Chinese youths are currently dealing with. His fascination for European culture is paralleled by a fascination for Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, and a high interest in Confucianism and classical Chinese literature. Thus, different media texts intersect, and I include classical literature as a media text here, because their meanings resonate and reinforce one another. Xiao Wei positions himself as living in a media zone through which he performs his identity as an "intellectual".

The classical music zone relates to the most conspicuous media tastes. So, whereas rock is a stronger signifier of difference compared to pop and classical, this does not mean that it is strongly correlated to specific media preferences. On the contrary, it might be argued that given the comparatively strong involvement in rock music, other media not directly related to music are less important for the performance of one’s identity.11

11 Liechty (1994:475) argues that it makes no sense to think of audiences in association with particular media, “since various mass media (...) as well as other commodities, mix together and resonate with each other in a sphere of mutually-referencing, mutually reinforcing ideas and images”. His point is well taken, but, as my analysis will show, it does make sense to think of music zones - and of the audiences that are, albeit temporarily, located in these zones - while being aware that these preferences are interrelated with other domains. The strength of these interdependencies fluctuates for different music zones.
To conclude, one can distinguish in general three media zones. The first, which includes classical music, reflects a preference for the more “serious” forms of media and arts, such as news programs, books, and newspapers. A second media zone, which includes Chinese pop, reflects a preference for entertainment programs and movies. A third media zone relates to rock music, and shows a comparatively stronger involvement in music and less involvement in other media. Rock music is an important tool for youth to position themselves; the territorializing force of the rock mythology generates a comparatively stronger involvement of audiences, whereas those who do not feel attracted by the rock idiom are more likely to choose other media to perform their identities. Having shown the territorializing power of the rock mythology, I want to discuss what identities are performed through rock. I will therefore first explore how music preferences are related to gender, and how notions of authenticity, intersecting with place, are negotiated by audiences.

**Gendering Zones**

Although they live in a country where genre distinctions are more vague than in the West, and where the pop-rock divide has such a short history, 57% of the respondents are willing to identify with either pop or rock. Table 5.2 presents the gender differences between the different groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Music preference</th>
<th>% (n=650)</th>
<th>male (%)</th>
<th>female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese pop</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese rock</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See no difference</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No preference</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2: Factor Analysis of Music Genres

Although pop is more popular than rock, 21% of the respondents indicate a preference for rock music. Given the marginal status of rock within the Chinese music industry, this is a rather high figure. The gender difference, as indicated in Figure 5.1, is striking: Rock remains predominantly a male music zone, whereas pop is mainly favored by females. These are statistically significant differences. This corresponds with figures from a US survey, where female listeners were overrepresented in the cluster “mainstream music,” and males were overrepresented in the clusters “music lovers”, “indifferents,” and “heavy rockers” (Hakanen & Wells 1993: 66). A regression analysis in which the three music zones are linked to the demographic factors age, education, income, and sex, again shows the importance of gender. Table 5.3 presents the results of this analysis.
Music zone | Predictor | Beta | R square |
---|---|---|---|
Rock | Sex | -0.143 | 0.020 |
Pop | Education | -0.136 | 0.033 |
| Sex | 0.119 | 0.033 |
Classical | Education | 0.153 | 0.036 |
| Sex | 0.131 | 0.036 |

Table 5.3: Regression Analysis between Music Zone and Age, Sex, Education, and Occupation

In the case of rock, only sex proves to be a predictor. As to pop, education as well as sex are related: Female respondents and those with a lower level of education are more likely to prefer pop music. In particular, girls with a higher level of education are located in the classic music zone. There is no relation between education and a preference for rock. Neither income nor age proves to be significant predictors of music taste. Thus, the classical media zone is more attractive to youths with a higher level of education, particularly girls, whereas the pop media zone appeals more to youths with a lower level of education and to girls. The rock media zone appeals mostly to boys.

If we look more carefully at different scenes within each music zone, the differences turn out to be gendered. For example, 49% of the men consider Cui Jian “good,” in contrast to 27% of the women; for Tang Dynasty, these percentages are 40% and 14%, and for Zheng Jun 27% and 23%, respectively. Table II in Appendix III presents such differences in popularity among the male and female audiences. The heroic masculinity as performed by Tang Dynasty appeals significantly more to boys than to girls; that is, boys can identify with the “leather jacket - motorcycle” poses, whereas such articulations of masculinity appeal less to girls. The same goes for the tough pose of Cui Jian. His rebellious attitude is significantly less appealing to the female audience. “Softer” and more innocent looking rock singers, such as folk-rock star Zheng Jun, are attractive to both boys and girls. The regular-guy aesthetics of folk produces a masculinity that is less loud; instead, the singer creates a sphere of closeness that appeals to...

A regression analysis shows which of the selected variables predict or explain another variable. In this case, I analyze which of the four demographic factors relate to music preference. The low R square values indicate that none of the variables is a very strong predictor.

Unless otherwise indicated, the three factors presented in Table 5.1 are used in the analysis to measure differences between different audiences. In some cases, the groups as distinguished in Table 5.2 are compared as an extra check. The disadvantage of using the factor variables is the relatively high amount of missing values; 469 out of 650 cases are included in the analysis. The missing value cases, somehow representing the non-audience, are valuable as they might reveal the ambiguities of music audiencehood, and might point to our misconceptions, stereotypes, and blind spots.
all audiences. The same goes for female pop singers like Faye Wong; her image - that of a modern urban girl who is in control of her life - appeals to both girls and boys. Girls will most likely identify with her girl-power image, whereas her independence makes her also attractive to boys. But when a pop singer becomes very soft and romantic (e.g., Leon Lai and Leslie Cheung) or too domestic (e.g., family man Jacky Cheung), the girls are attracted but boys start to dislike it; hence the significant differences in popularity. For boys, these singers are most likely too feminine, whereas this femininity appeals to girls; it is easy to imagine the male Cantopop stars as the ideal prince on a white horse. Thus, what we see is that music preference is related to specific gender performances. Zonal and scenic movements produce different performances of the gendered self. The choices affirm dominant gender roles, rather than challenge them.

**Authenticating Zones**

The divide between pop and rock gains importance when the involvement in one of the two genres increases. For Qin Ming, a 22-year-old female student who likes to listen to both pop and rock, the difference doesn't make much sense:

“I think the difference is just the melody, the rhythm, but inside it's all the same: They're expressing their personal feelings, mainly about love. Most pop songs are about love; rock is about disappointment, about loneliness. They express different parts of me.”

She thus rejects the reading of rock as being more authentic; instead, she believes that rock and pop express “personal feelings”, and she can relate to both. Those who indicated a preference for pop usually said that rock is too noisy, like Xue Mei, a 19-year-old woman:

“I don't like rock: I think it's disorderly. I like peaceful music, and I like to listen to music alone, not with others.”

Rock is disliked by pop fans, as it is considered too noisy. The screaming voices that are believed to signify true, authentic emotions by rock fans are interpreted differently by pop fans, for whom they signify a disturbing noise. Different genres also generate different notions of authenticity. The following contrast between statements is telling:

“Since the rise of rock, many musicians got money from Hong Kong or Taiwan, so they became famous and their living conditions improved a lot. They lost their passion, sensitivity and their attitude toward life. They lost their source of creativity.” (Hung Xin)

“Gangtai is the best because it is more commercialized.” (Zuo Dan)
Thus, whereas commercialization is believed to have a bad influence on rock, it is considered to add to the quality of pop. Audiences make these distinctions and manage to move between different music zones, and change the defining parameters accordingly. Zuo Dan, for example, also likes rock as “it reflects the real life of the common people”. Xie Wei (18) stresses his male identity by stating that he is a rock man. The pop-rock distinction appears in his letter to heavy metal band Overload:

“[My classmates] indulge themselves in their pure love for Hong Kong and Taiwan pop music. What pure love? It is only musical rubbish, catering to ignorant youth. Anyway, there’re some young people like me who’re trying hard to find the essence of music and to find the source of life.”

Inspired by the rock mythology and related discourses of authenticity, rock music is used as an identity marker, as a way to distinguish oneself from one’s classmates, and at the same time, to link up with other fans and the musicians. Thus, a sense of both particularity and communality is created. An “authentic” relationship - the shared sense of being - is articulated between artist and audience (Negus, 1992: 77). And along with their idol they fight against pop, as this fan expresses in a letter to Gao Qi, lead singer for Overload:

“Gao Qi, you’re so wild! Your scream has smashed the over-sweet sound of pop!”

The narrative that separates pop from rock intersects with the assertion that authentic music cannot be commercial. In the words of Zhang Min:

“In Hong Kong, people are more commercial, they might not be interested in rock music.”

The notion of authenticity proves to be a strong force of territorialization. It is not enough to know the language of rock; one ought to be real, according to Chen Li in a letter to Modern Sky:

14 I use the term “fan” rather loosely for audiences with a comparatively strong involvement. I do not wish to draw a sharp distinction between “fans” and those who are less involved. But I am aware of and hope to avoid the potential negative connotations attached to fandom. Fans caught up in the Beatlemania of the 1960s, or fans of the Spice Girls in the 1990s, are often depicted as screaming, crazy girls and boys who have lost their mind. I strongly agree with Jenson (1992: 123), who states that “Defending fandom as a deviant activity allows (individually) a reassuring, self-aggrandizing stance to be adopted. It also supports the celebration of particular values - the rational over the emotional, the educated over the uneducated, the subdued over the passionate, the elite over the popular, the mainstream over the margin, the status quo over the alternative.” However, I do not see the theoretical need to essentialize audiences in such fixed categories as fan and non-fan.
“In this society, a lot of people turn rock’n’roll into a kind of talking capital. Someone who’s humming Lingdian [a pop-rock band] - once he notices a girl is coming over - starts talking loudly with his friends about Kurt Cobain, about London, Suede. It’s ridiculous. But there’re so many of this kind of people in our daily life ...”

Apart from reifying the masculinity of rock by assuming that girls only like pop (and the example he uses is interesting, as Lingdian is a pop-rock band), the importance of acknowledging the shared notions of authenticity is articulated by this fan. Fluidity in music taste is not accepted by him, and knowledge of the global rock idiom is not a guarantee of acceptance. For Chen Li, to be considered a true rock fan one has to despise pop and be sincere when talking about rock. The quest for authenticity is a force of territorialization, and thus of exclusion.

**Localizing Zones**

Like the musicians, the rock fans position themselves vis-a-vis pop. High-school student Wei Yin is 17 and likes rock. He talked about his classmates who prefer pop:

“Rock singers don’t care about money and just play. Because of that, we distinguish them from Gangtai pop singers. We hate those pop fans. They’re like servants, slaves that kneel before their owners. In rock, we can hear some true feelings. Pop fans admire a singer only because he has a certain style. If he were to change his style, he’d be criticized, whereas rock fans are more tolerant and open.”

Rock is said to express true feelings; pop fans are looked down upon as they are mere slaves of the stars. And pop at the same time symbolizes Hong Kong and Taiwan:

“We have to admit that Chinese recording techniques are much better than those in Hong Kong or Taiwan. (...) Your emergence is the new starting point of Chinese and Asian culture. It is a great comfort to us that rock music saved us from the suffocating sea of pop music from Hong Kong and Taiwan.” (Zhou Zhou, 15-year-old male student, in a letter to Overload)

In this case, a global sound is used to articulate a sense of belonging. The audience uses the music to negotiate place, that is, mainland China.

Qin Ming, who likes both rock and pop, prefers pop from Taiwan to that from Hong Kong. I asked her why:
“Because of culture. Many of us agree that Hong Kong is a cultural desert: everything is very fast, their culture just flies by and won’t stay in our heart. (...) The culture in Taiwan is always marked by a kind of sadness; you know, they miss their homeland and can’t adopt to the fast changing world, so they dig deeper into people’s hearts.”

In line with the dominant political narrative, in which Taiwan is constructed as a place intrinsically belonging to mainland China, she interprets Taiwanese pop in terms of a longing for the mainland, whereas Cantopop from Hong Kong serves as the constitutive outside of the “cultural” Chinese world consisting of the mainland and Taiwan.

The negotiation of place becomes even more confusing in light of Olivia’s narrative. When I interviewed her, she told me that life in Beijing is too slow for her, that she doesn’t like the tempo of the city. She is highly critical about contemporary Chinese society: The education system is bad, the economic reforms are too slow, and the political system is outdated. To keep up with what’s happening in the world, she listens to the BBC and VOA. Most youth I spoke to are proud to live in Beijing, but Olivia feels different:

“I think it’s funny. Most people say that Hong Kong has no culture, but that Beijing does. Culture belongs more to the past. I think contemporary China has no culture (...) I think that Hong Kong is now better than Beijing.”

When we got around to rock music, she said she doesn’t like it at all. Her appreciation of Hong Kong is articulated in her music preferences:

“I think [mainland pop singers] just want to imitate those from Hong Kong and Taiwan; they don’t have their own style. And their imitation is not good, so people feel kind of disgusted. The melody is much worse than those from Hong Kong and Taiwan.”

Dissatisfaction with the current social and political realities is negotiated through Gangtai pop, rather than rock. But her strongest preference is for Western pop music - e.g., the Spice Girls (La Mei) and the Backstreet Boys - thus echoing her desire to study abroad, preferably in the US. Others are even more specific and distinguish Beijing from other big cities in China. Huang Shan, for example, told me:

15 Like most Chinese youth, Olivia uses an English name when she hangs around with foreigners, as they would never be able to remember the difficult, Chinese names. In my desire to create a Chinese world, I often asked my respondents to invent a Chinese rather than an English name. This shows the bias of the Western researcher, who is longing to explore an authentically exotic place, that fictional space where English names seem less appropriate.

16 When transcribing the interview with Olivia, I was confronted with my own bias: I could hardly imagine how she could be so critical about Chinese culture while disliking Chinese rock so fiercely. I therefore repeated my question regarding her feelings about rock several times, with a certain disbelief in my voice. This shows the power of the rock mythology, which constructs rock as a rebellious music world.
“Beijing is an ancient city with a long history, very different from Guangzhou or Shanghai. Maybe because Beijing is the capital it can produce such an angry kind of music.”

In his words, both the image of Beijing as signifying the richness of Chinese culture and its current role as the political and administrative center of China are considered beneficial for rock music. The articulation of place, signifying culture, returns in discussions about whether or not Chinese rock can be considered a mere imitation of its Western counterpart. Qin Ming was disappointed after she heard Western rock, and felt that Chinese rock is merely a bleak imitation:

“Before I listened to Western rock, I thought Chinese rock was very good. But by and by, as I listened to Western rock, I found that Chinese rock is so much alike that I can’t bear it.”

But most youths disagree with her: Although 31% of the respondents agreed with the statement that Chinese rock is a copy of Western rock, 69% disagreed. According to Zhang Ming, Chinese musicians imitate Western pop; she considers Faye Wong to be a copy of Enya. But in her view, Cui Jian and Tang Dynasty do not imitate: They make Chinese music. The attempt by musicians to localize rock, being a hard cultural form, proves successful at the moment of reception. Indicative are the opinions of Kasper on the underground sound, a sound which, as I argued in Chapter 3, belongs to the “harder” forms of rock, of NO:

“NO’s music has a lot of things. If you’re not Chinese, you can’t totally understand NO. I think NO’s music is totally Chinese.”

Audiences consider Chinese rock to be more Chinese that Chinese pop is. Rock thus gains cultural legitimacy; it is accepted as it reasserts notions of cultural difference. Traditional Chinese instruments and adaptations of minority music in Chinese rock were often referred to by the respondents as signifying the Chineseness of the music. Cui Jian, Tang Dynasty, and Zheng Jun are favorite examples of how Chinese rock is not a mere imitation. Lao Wu, for example, the former guitar player for Tang Dynasty, is famous in China for playing the electric guitar in a Chinese way.

Li Tian believes that Chinese musicians do a good job in adding a Chinese flavor to Western rock:

“At first, Chinese rock learned from the West, but it has gradually created its own style. Cui Jian’s music is very different from the West, especially his music style. Although he used Chinese traditional instruments, his music is very different from traditional music.”
Authenticity is not solely related to local and regional struggles over and for culture; it also concerns the issue that has puzzled China since the Opium War (1839-1842), namely, how to remain “Chinese” under increasingly powerful Western influences. The sinification of rock is demanded by audiences in order to safeguard the cherished illusion of an essentially distinctive Chinese identity.

To summarize, music preferences are connected to specific constructions of authenticity that intersect with a negotiation of place. Those who perceive Beijing as the cultural center indicate that rock, as the truly creative voice of a new generation, could only emerge in China, whereas those who are critical about contemporary life in Beijing stress the quality of Gangtai pop, instead of music from the mainland. Perceived differences between Taiwan and Hong Kong, and between Beijing and other major cities on mainland China, are also articulated through music preferences. Audiences’ demand that Chinese rock, more so than pop, should not be a bleak imitation of Western rock, reflects a concern for cultural difference. Genre-related music zones are used to articulate a sense of both longing and belonging: In the case of rock, a longing for authenticity, for honesty, as well as a longing to be, or to become, a real man, together with a belonging to a specific place, Beijing. The rock mythology intersects with these patterns of distinction; the masculinity of rock at times marginalizes the feminine, and the centering of Beijing disregards Hong Kong as a plastic city.

**Politicizing Zones**

In my interviews, respondents often disagreed with linking rock directly to the political situation in China. Zhi Yong compared Chinese rock with its Western counterparts:

> “I think Chinese rock has only a small political element, unlike Western rock. When I listen to U2, I notice there are a lot of political issues in its songs, but in China this is not the case. I think Chinese rock cares more about love, life, competition and things like that, not politics. Politics is still a forbidden zone in Chinese rock.”

When asked to explain this, Zhi Yong could not specify why it was a forbidden zone. Others, like Olivia, who are less attracted to rock, take a more cynical stance. Does rock say something about Chinese politics?

> “Of course not! (...) Like Cui Jian, maybe he is simply against Chinese politics in order to attract more attention.”

So in Olivia’s eyes, rock counters the political more as a pose than as an idealistic choice. For her - someone who dislikes entering the rock zone - the rock mythology seems false and inauthentic. Despite her own critical position toward Chinese society and politics, she cannot
identify with the rock idiom, as she feels it is more a pose and offers no ideas at all. Those located in the rock zone disagree with her. To Shu Ren, who likes rock, rebellion is what rock is all about:

“I think in the 1990s the rock bands are not rebellious, most of them at least. They are more and more like pop music. For example, they do promotion in different ways, and by and by they get further away from the nature of rock itself. I think the nature of rock is the sound of rebellion.”

In line with the rock mythology, rock is considered a rebellious form of music. With the demise of the political, rock has, in his view, gradually lost its basis in China. If we follow his assumption, namely that rock is a rebellious sound, then one might expect the rock audience to be more rebellious as well. Are different music genres related to certain opinions? The respondents were asked to select five important qualities, such as good manners or hard work, from a list of eleven. Most significantly, those located in the rock zone were not different from others on any of the values listed. Both the classical and the pop zone correlate significantly to tolerance as a value. Unselfishness was less often named by those located in the classical zone, whereas those positioned in the pop zone indicated that they care less about independence. The respondents were also asked for their opinion on a list of statements. Table 5.4 presents the differences of opinions among the different music zones, and indicates the relations. Appendix III presents the correlation coefficients of each statement for the music zones.

The rock zone relates to the statement “Sex before marriage is acceptable,” but the respondents located in this zone remain as hostile toward homosexuality as those from both the pop and the classical zone. In the interviews, everyone agreed that the attitude toward sex among Chinese youths has become more and more open over the last two decades. People have sex at an earlier age, and change partners more often before they marry. But homosexuality remains quite a taboo. In the words of Huang San:

“Homosexuality is different from traditional Chinese ideas, so I cannot accept such kind of relations.”

The rock zone also relates to the statement “I want to make a good career”, thus, those who like rock music are more likely to attach greater significance to making a good career. The figures also show that the rock audience has a tendency to attach greater significance to money.

17 The options were: Good manners, independence, hard work, feeling of responsibility, imagination, tolerance and respect for other people, thrift and saving money, determination and perseverance, religious faith, unselfishness, and obedience.
Especially the classical music zone has stronger relations: Those in it are more willing to help others than those in the rock zone are. The pop zone relates comparatively better with the statement “I usually have the same opinions as my parents.” Those located in the classical zone are more likely to be proud to be Chinese, and to attach great significance to having a happy family life. But all youths scored remarkably high on the statement “I’m proud to be Chinese” (their patriotic education has certainly had its intended impact). When I asked Liu Fangfang whether she was proud to be Chinese, she replied with the common clichés:

\[\text{Table 5.4: Opinions of the Audiences (% agreeing)}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Classical</th>
<th>Pop</th>
<th>Rock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conformity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get along well with my parents</td>
<td>94**</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I usually have the same opinions as my parents</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31**</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping others is very important in life</td>
<td>89**</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules are necessary</td>
<td>88**</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude &amp; Aspirations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to have a happy family life</td>
<td>97**</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money is the best indicator of one’s achievement</td>
<td>29**</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m proud to be Chinese</td>
<td>96**</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to make a good career</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I currently have a happy life</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender and Sexuality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex before marriage is acceptable</td>
<td>54*</td>
<td>48*</td>
<td>63**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love is more important than money</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuality is acceptable</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University education is more important for a boy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18 The percentage for each of the three zones is calculated by using the two groups pop and rock as presented in Table 5.2, whereas the classical group is selected by grouping those who indicated that they like (score 4 or 5) Chinese classical music. The opinions were measured on a four-point scale that has been turned into a dichotomy agree-disagree in order to calculate the percentages. Whereas the correlations can be considered a rather reliable indicator, the percentages are less so, but are included for reasons of comparison. When the Pearson correlation is significant at the 0.05 level, this is indicated by * and a light gray shading; when it is significant at the 0.01 level, this is indicated by ** and a darker gray shading.
“Yes, I’m very proud, because we have 5,000 years of history and are the descendants of the dragon.”

The main conclusion to be drawn from these data is that it is not the rock zone, but the classical music zone that stands out as being different when it comes to opinions; classical music relates to a more “conservative” and “social” attitude regarding, for example, family life and sexuality. Yet it can also signify, as explained earlier, a more intellectual positioning of the self. The rock mythology creates an audience that, if we look more carefully at its characteristics, seems to be less rebellious, subversive, and provocative than is suggested by not only the participants of this culture, but also by journalists and academics.

Incorporating Sounds

What about the assumed boundaries between different audiences? Earlier, I described Xiao Wei (the student who likes to listen to classical music) and positioned him in a media zone that articulates his identity as an intellectual. But he also enjoys listening to pop and rock. He thus moves in and out different music zones, rather than sticking to one zone. This movement is to a certain extent beyond one’s control, as music is everywhere. When you take a taxi in Beijing, you listen to pop, in the shopping malls you listen to popular classical music, and in discos you listen to techno. As such, people are necessarily surrounded by sounds they cannot always control. But audiences also move more consciously through different zones. The rock audience can become a pop audience within a few moments. Furthermore, the rock zone is a fragmented zone; different scenes, such as folk or heavy metal, generate different emotions and thoughts.

I would like to point to an underlying rationale why people opt for different zones at different moments. This is related to their mood management. Wang Hong, for example, is not very involved in music; she mainly prefers classical music. When asked about when she listens to music, she replied:

“I especially don’t like rock music; I just like books and classical music. I don’t listen to music often. When I’m very tired I like to listen to classical music, and when I’m happy I like pop music. When I get angry, I don’t want to listen to music.”

Some theories argue for a strong relationship between music use and mood management (Wells et al. 1998). The statement above seems to confirm that people move into different music zones when their mood changes. My survey included two statements directly related to emotional uses of music, namely “I listen to music to calm down” and “I listen to music to strengthen my mood”. Relations on the first statement are low. There is a negative relation
between the classical music zone and listening in order to strengthen one's mood (Pearson correlation = -0.181); this relation is reversed, but weaker, for rock (0.133). There is thus a tendency to "use" or "enter" the rock zone in order to strengthen one's mood, but this is not a very strong relation. I asked Qin Ming when she listens to classical music:

“When I’m angry or depressed, I play classical music and by and by I feel serene. When I’m feeling too lazy or too quiet, I listen to rock.”

Others, like Zhi Yong, however, indicate they use rock to cope with depressions:

“I find listening to rock an effective way to ease my depression. (...) Modern China is a competitive society, and this makes people more aggressive. Sometimes it makes me tired and I feel depressed.”

Zonal movements are related to mood management: If you want to strengthen your mood, you don’t listen to classical, but to pop or rock music.

What about the different scenes within the rock culture? I have already indicated how the gender difference disappears when we discuss folk music, whereas it appears to be stronger for heavy metal. To grasp these dynamics further, and to explore the fragmented nature of the rock culture, I will elaborate on the reception of four different scenes, namely underground, heavy metal, folk-rock (in line with the three scenes analyzed in Chapter 3), and Cui Jian. This exploration will lead me to reflections on how audiences negotiate scenic differences, how they interpret the nationalistic and exotic imagery employed by bands, how music can be considered a territorializing force, and how processes of the depoliticization of everyday life has affected the popularity of Cui Jian.

**Underground**

Because of the marginalized status of underground bands, such as The Fly and NO, their audience is much smaller. When I showed Olivia and her female friend Liu Jiayue the jacket of The Fly CD and played the music, I asked whether they felt it was good that such music is forbidden in China, which was the case at the time:

Olivia: “I think it’s good. Many people don’t feel good when they see this and listen to the music; it’s especially bad for the young. Young people are easy to mislead.”

Liu Jiayue: “I think it’s good to forbid it: I don’t think it’s good for us. I think the singer must have experienced something very bad in his life and now he wants to destroy everything ... he’s a lost man, I can’t understand him.”
The vulgar aesthetics of The Fly negates what is believed to be normal, and as such shocks the listener. Shi Peng is a rock fan who rejects The Fly. He believes that such music might be acceptable to university students as a sign of adulthood and difference, but he cannot accept such a pose. He wrote in his letter to Modern Sky:

"My classmates and I were disappointed. [The Fly's] lyrics are rather socially oriented. Those university students who listen to rock'n'roll have a preference for words with character; they want to be considered mature. But we don't want 'vulgarity', we want 'elegance'."

Others, however, criticize the music for being too refined, not vulgar enough. For example, Zhang Xudong writes in his letter:

"...but from the perspective of punk, this album is too refined, not brutal enough, not direct enough. From the perspective of experimenting, it is too standardized. Concerning lyrics, it demonstrates a strong flavor of social critique. Their lyrics are ironical and poisonous, but not confusing ..."

The music is judged on the basis of very specific genre-related standards: After relating it to punk, it is considered to be not according to the rules of punk. The ironical and critical contents of the lyrics are read in such a way (to use Hall's term, the preferred reading is conveyed to the audience), but the seemingly expected confusion was lacking. For others, Feng Jiangzhou from The Fly does act according to the punk aesthetics. Zhang Hongbin joined a performance and then wrote to Modern Sky in April 1999:

"......Every movement of Feng Jiangzou was so unusual, especially his weird costume which was absolutely rebellious. And the silver powder sprayed all over his body and his dirty hair constructed a most punk, most rebellious musician. We have finally tasted the decadent art so rare in China, as well as the kind of sound so readily labeled 'filthy' by the media. In The Fly's music, one will never find any sound of hypocrisy and trendiness ..."

The music is considered authentic - as it is never hypocritical - and pure punk, which here is equated with rebellious. At the same time, it is a decadent form of music; the negative connotations of decadence in a communist reading are erased. The vulgar aesthetics of The Fly is a strong force of territorialization; it shocks people, and those who like to be shocked are drawn into an underground world, as expressed by the following fans:

"......I believe they [The Fly] are the most real and the most honest human beings. They refuse to compromise with this filthy society. They just make their own music and go
their own way - their courage is admirable.... “ (Leng Ling from Shenzhen)

“.....I have just listened to The Fly. It feels like a release, like leaving an unlit village toilet ... Two things shock me: first, Feng Jiangzou's lyrics, and second his singing style ... Although I've been listening to Western rock and roll for more than a year, the linguistic barrier makes it difficult for us to relate to their anger. But now I've finally listened to real Chinese underground music. I'm so excited.......” (Cong Ling, a female secondary-school student from Beijing)

The Fly's criticism of modern Chinese society can be, and is being, read in a political way, more so than the heavy metal of Tang Dynasty or Overload, or the folk-rock of Zhang Chu. In his letter to the band, Wang Jinshen, a secondary-school student, draws an analogy with the Communist Party. He writes in a dakou style:

“I see hope, hope that the alternative will subvert the mainstream, hope that the underground will usurp the upper ground. It's time we learnt from the Communist Party, that is, to develop from an underground party into the ruling party, and finally to dictatorship. We should also leave the underground and bring forward an earthquake and let all the structures on the ground fucking collapse. Therefore, when finances allow, we must use every commercial trick: packaging, promoting, and marketing. This is not losing our dignity, but only a strategy to secure our basis. The day when The Fly sells a million copies, when Modern Sky is richer than Shanghai Audio-Visual, when an ordinary factory worker hums “Nirvana” [a song by The Fly], we will have reached our goal. We won't get depressed when we're old. Don't worry, we have a bright future. China's guoqing [national characteristics] are changing, they're becoming more and more open. Youth's ability to appreciate and accept is increasing. Those stupid fans who believe in marketing and sales will finally be captured ...”

By using communist tactics for the Great Long March of rock’n’roll, the underground can overtake the mainstream, a politicized mainstream, not only pop music, but “all the structures on the ground [will] fucking collapse.” Interestingly, both reviewers from Taiwan and Feng Jiangzou from The Fly make the same analogy. The music is compared by them to the guerrilla tactics of Chairman Mao (and can also be linked to Eco's idea of a semiotic guerrilla warfare). The univocality of these readings shows the territorializing force of the music (including the jacket design), which borrows its power from the rock mythology.

Thus, underground music can be considered an even stronger force of territorialization than other scenes within Chinese rock. It articulates a strong sense of difference, and the listener has to do a lot of symbolic work to interpret these sounds. Thus, a scene-related audience emerges. But even within such a scene, different distinctions can be made; as I have
shown, some reject The Fly for not being extreme enough, not truly punk, and search for even more underground sounds. The parameters that define a scene and create the shared sense of authenticity are constantly negotiated. Such strategies of distinction are infinite, each sub-scene fragments further into sub-sub-scenes, each with its specific constructions of authenticity. To conceptualize groups of people under such labels as pop and rock, or even heavy metal and underground, dismisses the infinite possibilities of distinction.\(^\text{19}\)

Individuals, all part of the diffuse audience, are constantly engaged in a symbolic struggle to distinguish oneself from the other; people hide for a moment in the seemingly safe grounds of a music territory, only to be deterritorialized by the forces of distinction within that territory. In the words of Grossberg (1993: 207): "rock is constantly producing lines of flight which can challenge not only specific territorializations, but also the very desirability of territoriality. (...) Rock operates with a necessary contradiction: territorializing and deterritorializing, lines of articulation and lines of flight." He fails to explain why he grants rock the exclusive rights to be territorialized by the jargon of Deleuze and Guattari. I rather think that audiences negotiate - that is, both draw and contest - the boundaries that separate music genres. The power of rock “lies in its ability not only to construct maps of everyday life, but also to deconstruct such maps as well. Rock can celebrate insecurity and instability even as it constructs secure spaces” (Grossberg 1993: 207).\(^\text{20}\) Even though rock, and in particular underground music, can be considered a stronger force of territorialization, pop also has the power to secure temporal spaces in everyday life. Due to the infinite strategies of distinction employed (or, better, performed) by audiences, the territory of rock becomes swampy at the moment of reception.

**Heavy Metal**

“Tang Dynasty, how are you? By and by I became fascinated [by your music], I can even listen to your tape more than a dozen times a day. I have come to know the meaning of heavy metal and understand that this is what I had longed for so long. (...) Last February, I resigned from my job, my mother couldn’t understand, I felt very annoyed.” (Li Junjun, male, in a letter to Tang Dynasty, July 1997)

This boy felt strengthened by the music, and dared to quit his job. It might be fair to say that the chivalric aesthetics of the heavy metal band Tang Dynasty helped him to resist the

\(^{19}\) One of the reasons I refrain from using Bourdieu for this reception study is that, in my view, he neglects these infinite strategies of distinction, and instead opts for rather fixed classificatory schemes.

\(^{20}\) Inspired by Lefebvre, Grossberg (1993: 204) interprets everyday life as “an historically produced plane of existence which is built upon principles of repetition, redundancy, recurrence (and ultimately, boredom). (...) It is, in a sense, a structure of discipline by which people’s daily practices are subjected to the demands of a comfortable predictability and routinization.”
dominant value of remaining loyal to your boss. Bai Fan wrote to Overload to explain how they had opened up a new world for him:

“I’m very excited, a new blood came into my body (...) I want to release myself and to hide myself. I am interested not only in your music style, but also in your appearance, long hair to your shoulders, very cool. I want to copy it, but my school doesn’t permit students to have long hair.”

Many boys write about their desire to become friends with the bands; they ask for telephone numbers and such items as posters. One fan refers to the singer of Overload as Gao laoshi (Teacher Gao), and writes passionately:

“I will wait for you in a far away place, breathe with you, share the faith with you and I want to fuse with you.”

The rock singer is treated as more than just a close friend; He or she is a hero, someone to worship. The masculinity of rock, intersecting with its perceived authenticity, appears clearly in the poem written by a 15-year-old boy, Zhang Yu, and dedicated to Overload:

“Overload, you are the light in my heart that never dims
You are the embodiment of my ancestors from a long time ago
You are the herald of power and courage
You give me the courage to be a man
You teach me the truth of this world”

The music is used by the fan to perform his gender identity and, in line with the rock mythology, the music is considered to tell “the truth of this world.” It is crucial here to realize that he is writing, just like the boy quoted earlier who states he is a rock man, to a heavy metal band. The chivalric aesthetics of heavy metal are more likely to appeal to boys (but I have to stress that “likely” is radically different from “necessarily,” as there are many female fans of heavy metal).

Tang Dynasty is well known in China: 86.3% of the sample knew of the band. Although it is not as popular as, for example Beyond, Faye Wong, or Jacky Cheung (the three most popular names from the survey), 27.3% of the respondents who knew the band consider its music “good,” a figure comparable to the popularity of Zheng Jun - a folk-rock singer - and Leon Lai, one of the four “emperors of Cantopop” (see Appendix III for an overview of the popularity of singers and bands). The nationalistic sentiments expressed by Tang Dynasty are interpreted in different ways by the audience. Zhi Yong supports the message of Tang Dynasty:
“I think it expresses the characteristics of Chinese nationalism. (...) During the Tang Dynasty, China was more attractive and flourishing, and we all want this country to be flourishing, influential, and attractive. (...) The music reflects the people’s hope for a more open country, one more open to modern civilization. When we dream of the past, we in fact look forward into the future. We want to reproduce the glory of China.”

But in his narrative, nationalism is not equated with rejecting foreign ideas, but with being open to different cultures. Other listeners, however, interpret the music as a critique of Western culture. Li Tian told me:

“They express a longing for the past, for the prosperous China of the past, and their dissatisfaction with today’s society, because Western culture invaded China.”

In its celebration of Chinese culture, the band somehow converges with Party politics. But audiences, depending on their own point of view, have different readings of the music. Xiao Wei, who likes the band a lot, laughed when I suggested that the band complies with dominant Chinese politics. He explained why such a reading misses the point:

“Tang Dynasty’s music is more philosophical and has a lot of traditional elements in its music; these are called xiayi [heroes] in China. Like Robin Hood. It is chivalrous, just like knights. I think they are very Western, the music style and the techniques they use. What is very important is that they do not express mainstream values. Xiayi is not mainstream in Chinese tradition, Confucius is. The music is also the expression of people who live a troubled life in modern society. They express many emotions in the music, for example, that everything passes by and that the future remains invisible, one cannot do anything for society. I don’t think the music is nationalistic.”

More listeners pointed out that the music is critical of contemporary Chinese society, and certainly does not support the Party. One can love the country without appreciating the government that rules it, one student told me. But, he continued, in China this is hardly allowed: If you don’t love your government, you’re betraying your country. The chivalric aesthetics of heavy metal cater to male identifications. The notion of authenticity is based on difference; the musicians are heroic rebels rather than “regular guys”. In the case of Tang Dynasty, a longing for an imaginary past is articulated that is projected into the future - a past and a future from which the role of the Party has been erased.

Folk Rock

“The day before yesterday, a very, very big event happened: Deng Xiaoping died. I feel very sad because I feel as if I have lost someone to depend on. Deng is a very
This girl shares her feelings of loss after the death of Deng Xiaoping. In her case, the rock star is treated as a close, personal friend with whom one discusses personal feelings. That she writes to a folk-rock singer shows how different genres produce different gendered audiences. As explained in Chapter 3, the folk aesthetics produces a discourse of authenticity that is based on notions of equality and normality. Not surprisingly, this female fan writes about her personal worries rather than her admiration for Zhang Chu. In her narrative, the personal is intertwined with the political, but remains far removed from the counterpolitical. Further on in her letter, she says how Zhang Chu’s songs helped her pass her exams (“When I took the examination, the melody echoed in my ears”) and how the lyrics made her think of “things I have never thought of”. The musician is transformed into a friend, the sounds are used to survive hard times, and the words inspire retrospection. It shows that audiences are actively involved in incorporating the music into their lives. Folk music is also appropriated as a way to create an imaginary world, to run away from the city to the rustic countryside. Fanny, a girl (again) from Shenzhen, wrote a letter to Hu Mage:

“... one voice and one guitar. And they manage to bring me from this modern city to the rustic countryside. What can I say? What should I say? Its content seems to correspond to the whiteness on its cover. Does whiteness have any content? I like white...I hope that Modern Sky will take us to the holy land of music and guide the kind of rock’n’roll fans like us to a more open temple of music.”

The religious overtones and the spatialization of a music culture (“the holy land of rock”) articulates a sense of belonging. In a country where religion is marginalized and communism has long lost its appeal, music is used, albeit temporarily, to constitute everyday life. The appropriation of the global musical idiom of rock is further strengthened by writing the words “city”, “countryside”, “white”, and “open” in English. Unlike the heavy metal singers, the folk singers are not heroes: They are friends with whom the audience shares feelings of nostalgia, a longing for an easy life, for the tranquillity of the countryside. The whiteness of his cover, analyzed in Chapter 3, signifies for this girl a sense of simplicity. The poetic aesthetics of folk are profoundly romantic; folk articulates a longing for an imaginary past when life was still natural, when modernization had not yet corrupted the soul. It shares with heavy metal a critique on modern society, yet creates a different alternative.
Zheng Jun has appropriated Tibetan music to his folk-rock songs. Such exoticism runs the danger of not being taken seriously. Qin Ming for example, questions the sincerity of the singer and the authenticity of his music:

“I don’t like him; he is pretentious I think. His song ‘Back to Lhasa’ is seriously criticized by Tibet; he doesn’t understand Tibet deeply.”

In Qin Ming’s view, Zheng Jun is exoticizing Tibet in order to become famous in China. Other listeners, however, do not feel disturbed by his use of Tibetan folk music, and instead stress how he succeeds in blurring the pop-rock boundary. In the words of Huang San, a 22-year-old male student:

“His music is as fluent as pop, but his lyrics still belong to rock music, so he links these two genres very well. (...) he is trying to create his own style, like in ‘Back to Lhasa’.”

The music is considered to merge the perceived, positive qualities of pop - fluent instead of noisy - with those of rock, personal instead of superficial lyrics. Pop songs with good lyrics as well as “fluent” rock songs, destabilize such constructed generic qualities. That is not the case here; instead, Zheng Jun is simultaneously positioned in both music zones. Audiences thus negotiate generic qualities and position singers in different zones at the same time.

**Cui Jian**

The godfather of Chinese rock - Cui Jian - is the most popular rock singer in China, as my survey shows (see Appendix III). Together with Jacky Cheung and Leon Lai, he is the most well-known musician included in the survey. Cui Jian was born shortly before the Cultural Revolution, and is often considered the voice of the generation of the 1980s. His predicament is that, no matter how hard he tries to escape from it, he is politicized by the Western media, the Party, and his audiences. But he feels out of touch with the new generation: He does not understand their aspirations, their desire for a good life, he told me. His new albums sells rather badly, and he has lost a large part of his audience. Whereas the underground bands translate the political into vulgar or dadaist aesthetics, Cui Jian’s metaphorical lyrics are more openly political. Most youths like him for his first two albums, which were released in 1989 and 1991, respectively. Some of his songs have become part of the collective memory of Chinese youth. According to 22-year-old Qin Ming, who had the best day of her life when we went together to a performance of Cui Jian, he is best capable of expressing political issues:

“Cui Jian is good at integrating politics into his music. It’s the real situation, people are very interested in politics because of Mao Zedong, because of the Communist Party. The words to ‘A piece of red cloth’ [one of his songs] assert that Chinese people have
been cheated, that they thought they were heading for a better life, a perfect society, yet later found that they had been wrong.”

Shik Shak is the leader of a student rock group at Beijing University. The decision to adopt such a weird pseudonym indicates his attempt to be different. During their weekly gatherings, they watch videoclips and discuss rock music. At times they have to fool the University authorities; for example, in order to be allowed to show a Guns and Roses video, they said the tape demonstrated how to play an electric guitar. The group has around 50 members. Cui Jian is one of Shik Shak’s favorite singers:

“I think all Chinese youth felt like me, that Cui Jian expressed the things from our heart. I think his music reflects the true feelings of the common people, compared with the so-called pure love in pop music. Now I think rock in China has lost this spirit, the spirit of the common people. Many people use rock as a way to say ‘Oh, I’m different; I play rock.’”

Qin Ming - the girl who identifies with the political issues Cui Jian dares to confront - shares his feelings and also speaks of the decline of Chinese rock during the 1990s:

“Singers like Wang Lei and Dou Wei don’t care about national affairs, nor about this world; they only care about themselves. Yet they don’t know why they’re so lonely, why they’re so bound by the world, so I don’t like the recent rock singers very much. Their sight is limited.”

Those who identify with the political agenda of Cui Jian, who consider his music an authentic expression of the concerns of “common people,” are critical of new bands as they are believed to be less sincere. But Qin Ming’s statement that people are very interested in politics is not convincing; it is more plausible to argue that during the 1990s, people - particularly youths - became bored with politics in China. It is quite striking that many rock fans dislike political content. Huang Shan inverts the narrative of Shik Shak:

“Cui Jian’s songs are too political. Tang Dynasty and Dou Wei just describe life, so I understand them much more. I listen to music to relax. If you add political factors, that’s not relaxing; it makes me feel tired. (...) Before the 1990s, the media talked about politics all the time, so we had to pay attention to it, but now we have more things to do. We can watch TV and care about sports and music, our life is richer than before. It is natural that we care less about politics now.”

Thus, there is a certain erasure of possible political interpretations of rock music, which explains why Cui Jian, as China’s most political rocker, lost so much of his audience during
the 1990s. Another reason he lost his audience is related to his changing music style. In the words of Zhi Yong:

“He used to be the rock pioneer in China, but now I don’t like him very much. I think his songs are becoming pure screaming; I find his new songs senseless.”

For the younger generation, like 19-year-old Mei Lin, he is simply too old:

“Cui Jian is very famous, but I haven’t listened too much to him; he’s part of the past, he’s too old.”

Finally, some criticize Cui Jian for becoming famous and losing the “true” rock spirit, as Yin Zheng explains in his letter to Modern Sky:

“Some may say: Well, we also have punk in the Chinese market, for instance, Cui Jian. But according to me, Cui Jian is no longer punk. He has already become an accessory to commercialization; he has betrayed the essence of punk.”

Apart from reiterating the idea that commercialization is polluting the true rock spirit, an idea that reifies the rock mythology, this statement shows how genre classifications are reinterpreted in the Chinese context. Punk has become a signifier for rebellion, rather than for a specific music style (the DIY style). Audiences negotiate the parameters that define a scene, and generic labels are given different meanings by different listeners. This further complicates the idea of thinking of genre-related audiences.

Cui Jian evokes images of the 1980s, and is the only rock singer who has reached an immense audience via his music. The political metaphors in his songs have inspired the young generation of the 1980s. What remains today are the nostalgic memories of those days. Cui Jian is above all a politicized rock star, a predicament that has brought him fame, both in and outside China, yet contains him. His music is a territorializing force not only for the audience, but also - and more so - for himself. The politicization limits the range of possible interpretations of his music, which is why he failed to keep his audience during the late 1990s. If we are to establish the political potential of rock in China, we can easily do so by quoting Cui Jian’s lyrics. The title of his recent album, *The Power of the Powerless*, is telling in this respect. But at a time when the political has become depoliticized by audiences - as it signifies boring slogans, old men, and futile aspirations more than anything else - we ought to rethink the political. Rather than reifying the importance of the Communist Party in China by tracing the direct political meanings of rock, I consider it important to take seriously the bored attitude Chinese youths have about politics. By acknowledging the depoliticization of contemporary *dakou’ed* Chinese youth cultures, we foreground the importance of everyday
life. But rather than writing about the disappearance of the political, it might be better to argue for a re-articulation of the political in China by pointing to its ambiguities, which become clear when we take a look at the politicoity of family ideology in a Chinese context.

The history of rock in the West is often perceived to be a history of inter-generational conflicts. Parents used to be worried about the sensuality of Elvis Presley, just as today they are concerned about the impact of Marilyn Manson. Do such conflicts also exist in China? Is listening to Cui Jian a sign of disobedience? What is quite remarkable is that only 28.9% of the survey’s respondents agreed with the statement “I usually have the same opinions as my parents” (among rockers, this figure was lower, i.e., 20%). Yet, nearly 90% agreed that they “got along well with their parents” (among rockers, this was 86%, slightly lower than average). So, whereas many youths dare to say that they disagree with their parents, they are less vocal when it comes to classifying this as living in disharmony with them. The often stressed “Confucian virtue” of harmony - which is valued above anything else (and certainly above the opinions of an individual - apparently still holds strong in China. Harmony prevails, and with the sufferings from the Cultural Revolution still vivid in their mind, parents seem to firmly uphold the importance of learning - at least, that is what their children are given to understand. The story of Qin Ming reappeared in most interviews, because many Chinese families are caught in different narrations of the same suffocating past:

“My mother suffered a lot during the Cultural Revolution because her father was accused of being an anti-revolutionary, just because he wrote an article in which he said that sparrows are good for agriculture. At the time, Mao was telling everyone to kill sparrows, so her father was labeled anti-revolutionary and she couldn’t go to university to study, even though she’d done very well at school. So she went to the countryside and worked with peasants for about ten years.”

Many students pointed out that the pressure put upon them by their parents to study hard and succeed in life is strongly affected by this violent period in modern China. The impact is strengthened by the one-child policy in China. All frustrations, anxieties, hopes, and failed opportunities are projected onto a single child, a burden often hard to carry for Chinese youth. But the hardships suffered by the parents, combined with the value attached to harmony, make it hard to rebel. As Zhi Yong remarked:

“When I have friction with my parents, I tell myself that they are my parents, that they support me, love me. It’s irresponsible of me to make them angry. Of course, it’s not always my fault, but I don’t think I should make them angry. They work so hard and
have experienced so many hardships, I don’t want them to feel uneasy.”

Memories of the Cultural Revolution, when youths rebelled against both parents and teachers in such a violent way, has made the word rebellion in a Chinese context more dubious compared to the situation in the West, which might have an impact on the acceptance of rock in China. In the West, the youth rebellion of the 1960s is frequently romanticized by its participants, some of whom now safely hold the most powerful positions in companies, governments, and universities (thus it is not so dangerous to be rebellious after all), as well as by younger generations, as its message of peace and love remains seductive, as does the fashion of those days.

There are, of course, also feelings of nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution. There are restaurants, decorated in the style of those days, where one can order the favorite dishes of the Great Helmsman. The following fragment from a text by filmmaker Jiang Wen is telling (and contradicts such narratives as Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans*) in its description of the Cultural Revolution:

“Back then, the sky was more blue, the clouds whiter, the sunlight was warmer. It seems as if it never rained - that there was no rainy season. No matter what was done then, the remembrance is still attractive, still beautiful.” (quoted in: Dai 1997: 153)

But it *does* matter what was done then. Chen Shirong is a girl from a small town in Sichuan who now studies in Chengdu. In her letter to the band Heaven, she writes about her loneliness and the burden she experiences from the family. Her letter is worth quoting at length, as she expresses very well the burden Chinese youths are often confronted with:

“Maybe you wouldn’t understand how sadness and angst started to show on the innocent face of a 12- or 13-year-old girl. I have always been a girl who wants more from life. Since childhood, I always have my own ideas. But in our place, it’s called being rebellious. So I’ve always suppressed my ideas, trying to be an understanding and obedient child. For my parents, for my brothers and sisters, I’m willing to sacrifice everything. I always believe that I am responsible for my family, my relatives, and my friends, for their happiness. Therefore, I study hard, hoping to become somebody and let those who know me be proud of me ... I wish I could have already taken over some of the burden from my parents. I wish I could have ventured into the world and not allowed them to support me through university. But still I accepted my father’s arrangement, because that’s his hope, his love ... Ideals, career, responsibility. They make me want to leave everything behind and escape into decadence. I’ve lost my confidence and courage. I’ve become weak and helpless. (...) I wish to be challenged by another soul so I won’t be numb anymore. I really need comfort. Those beside me
AUDIENCES IN WONDERLAND

do not understand me. I’m very tired. I need someone to lean on, to take away all my
burdens ... What I like most is listening to music quietly.”

It would be easy to retreat to the safe grounds of adulthood, and to label this quote as
stereotypical adolescents’ angst about life, to use a pathologizing term. Her words merely
represent the struggle to shape one’s own life in a society that demands obedience and control.
These are feelings shared by many Chinese - both old and young - as they discover that it is so
difficult to survive in such an increasingly competitive society that offers so few certainties.

The generational conflict in China seems less vocal, more subdued, than that in Western
societies. Yet, the expectations of parents, along with an extremely competitive education
system, as I will show later, put a heavy burden on the shoulders of the young generation.
Also the economic reforms have increased the pressure: The job market became more
competitive in the 1990s.

In the case of the girl quoted above, rock is used to cope with these burdens. She writes to
a band to express her worries and anxieties. As in reality she cannot rebel against the wishes
of her parents (“I’m responsible for their happiness”), rock provides an imaginary space where
she can rebel and express her sadness. People around her do not understand her, she feels,
yet rock supports her. Together with other fans, she forms an imagined community. “It is
imagined because the members (...) will never know most of their fellow members, meet
them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”
(Anderson 1991: 15). She signs the letter “little sister”. The rock culture is imagined as a
family, the audiences are brothers and sisters, they feel strengthened and supported by the
sounds produced by their elder brother. Supported in their dealings with their everyday life,
in which the expectations and demands of their parents are such a burden. But their own
father is not the only one; there is also the Party, that vague, abstract entity, that rules the
country like a father rules the family. The importance of the family ideology stretches beyond
the actual family, toward the political domain. To single out the actual family when writing
about a generational conflict thus ignores the ambiguity and the reach of family ideology.21
The desire to rebel against one’s parents can be interpreted in a more political way. The
personal is political, perhaps even more so in China, where the political borrows its power
from the sanctified ideology of the family.

According to Qing Ming, rock is used to distinguish oneself from the older generation:

“Old people will of course not like rock. It’s a kind of distinction for the young people.
They want to make their own style. But I know that some of my friends’ parents think

21 For example, the Chinese word for country (guojia) incorporates the word family (jia). When Hong Kong was
handed back to China, it was frequently described as a child going back to its motherland.
Cui Jian is acceptable, but like He Yong...never!"

Hung Xin believes that rock is used to mark a certain *rite de passage*, to deal with the period of becoming adult:

"We’re all young people and we have the same psychological experience. Young people are eager to become mature and to become what older people want them to be, but there’s still a long time to go. During that time you have to experience fear, anger, jealousy, you know, just something you want to express, to pour out. And Zheng Jun is doing that very well, without imitation, without disguise; he just cries out."

Rock is related to generational differences, not in terms of conflict, but as identity markers and emotional survival strategies. On the other hand, pop is believed to be incapable of articulating generational differences. As Qu Nian put it:

"Rock is suitable for young people; pop is liked by all people, my grandparents, my parents, and me."

Sometimes, however, it may annoy the family and disturb the precious harmony. In his letter to Overload, Li Zixu writes:

"This world is too hypocritical. Every time I see my depressed face in the mirror I feel helpless and at a loss. At moments like this I will listen to your songs and turn up the volume and drift away on your music. My family don’t want me to listen to such music, they want me to be quiet and study hard."

Rock is supposed to disturb the harmony and disrupt the bright future, and thus has to be silenced. But such readings are rare, and the boy merely describes his state of mind, rather than expressing anger toward his family. Thus, although rock music can be appropriated in a potentially rebellious way, in a society that demands obedience and harmony there are few opportunities to do so. Instead, it might help to articulate a sense of belonging to a specific (*dakou*) generation, with its own worries and pressures, but not as a way to express one’s anger toward the parents. It provides a place to hide, more than a place to fight.

*Politics Revisited*

If it is hard to locate the political, in the strict sense of the word, or the countercultural, in music preferences, what more can we say about politics and Chinese youth? Before concluding this chapter, I will explore the political dispositions of Chinese youth a bit further. In the World Value Survey, which was carried out in the early 1990s, China ranks second in the
world with 59% of respondents agreeing with the statement that politics is important in their life (the Netherlands scores only slightly less: 53%). But the survey shows generational differences: 68% of respondents aged 50 or above agreed, whereas among youths in the category 16-29 years old, the percentage was 48% (Inglehart et al. 1998: V8). In the same survey, China ranks highest in the world on the statement that maintaining order in the nation is most important, with 67% of the respondents agreeing. This percentage is only slightly higher for the older generation (74% compared to 63% for the young generation) (ibid.: V259). Not surprisingly, China ranks very low on the statement that it is important to give people more to say in government decisions (14%); here, the young generation considers this more important (20%) than the older generation does (8%) (ibid.: V259). These figures suggest a general support for both authorities and their market-oriented policies.

In the World Value Survey, China also ranks highest when it comes to trust in the education system (ibid.: V274), a finding that is anything but supported by my own findings, which suggests that either opinions changed considerably during the 1990s or, more likely, the reliability of the findings of the survey is questionable (the findings seem to be affected by a high level of social desirability; indicative is that China also ranks highest on confidence in its parliament!). The univocality of my respondents’ replies when it comes to the education system makes this ranking seem absurd. I usually asked them in my interviews what they consider to be most restrictive in Chinese society: Politics, the education system, or the family. Politics was usually regarded as being too detached from everyday life. The education system was mostly referred to as the biggest obstacle in life. It is far too competitive, the system of teaching is considered outdated, and “political education” is a bore for many students. The following quotes are indicative:

“Schools will teach you nothing; only the text book will teach you. The teachers are bound to teach you the lessons and give no further information. You have to pass the entrance examination, so you have to study all the boring things.” (Qin Ming)

“The education system restricts personalities, and only cares about examinations. I felt that my life in middle school was like life in hell, nothing funny, only those examinations. I think the education system is too cruel, it ruins personalities.” (Lui Jiayue)

“The education system decides on a person’s future only through some examinations, just like in ancient times. (...) In political education, we studied the five phases of human society; now we study so-called philosophy, which means we should develop correct ideas and values about this world.” (Liu Fangfang)

The irony in the words of Liu Fangfang, a middle-school student, is telling. Not everyone takes the propaganda seriously: She speaks of “so-called philosophy”. And when the teacher
fails to make clear what life's all about, some - like Din Qin - turn to rock music. She wrote in her letter to Heaven:

“I have a small question: please tell me what the value of life is. My teacher told us, for those who have no dream, life is a shame, and I think that maybe you can give me a dream. The teacher told us that we must have correct values and ideas about life and the world. Then, what is correct?”

Given the structure of the education system, it is no wonder that Zhang Yongping started writing a letter to Modern Sky during his writing class:

“I believe you [Modern Sky] will become even better. We are still young. The revolution is not yet completed, comrades, we must continue working hard!”

His last quote comes from Sun Yat-Sen, who was referring to the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty; it was later adopted by Mao Zedong and became one of his most famous one-liners during the communist revolution. The act of writing during class can be considered political, and even more so due to the parodic use of communist jargon. In fact, the education system, like the ideology of the family, is closely intertwined with politics, as Liu Xin argues correctly:

“I think politics is in education all the time. My parents have to make a living in society; they live within a certain political environment, so nothing can be separated from politics.”

Thus, the described depolitization of everyday life does not mean the disappearance of the political. Nothing can be completely separated from politics, and however creative audiences and students are in decoding messages, propaganda undoubtedly leaves its traces in the minds of the young, as does government propaganda elsewhere. Most striking in my interviews was that especially the teenagers uncritically repeated the voice of the Party. When asked for their feelings about June 4th 1989 (when they would have been around nine years old), some said:

“During that period, some anti-revolutionists incited our youths, who are weak in their thoughts and easily become excited.” (Qu Nian, a 17-year-old rock fan)

“At the beginning, the students only wanted to make the government’s bureaucracy better, but then they were used by some anti-revolutionists. Sometimes young students will overdo something, but soon they will do something to construct socialism.” (Wei Wei, a 16-year-old rock fan)
Although students in their twenties usually did not repeat the voice of the Party, they refused to get involved in the issue. It belongs to the past and signifies a time when politics was so pervasively integrated into daily life. Hung Xin is glad about the depolitization of everyday life:

"I think that during 1989, the political zeal of the people was quite high; since then, people just want to take care of their own things and feelings, it is a kind of shift. I think this is good, it’s more realistic. I don’t think a high political zeal is a good thing."

Given the impact of the Cultural Revolution, the period when Chinese youths shared a tremendous political zeal, it is not so surprising that today’s youths want to take a step back from the political. Some look back to that political period with a certain jealousy and wish they could have joined it. As explained earlier, these are the ones who are most likely to appreciate Cui Jian. Their hope is to bring back the political in the minds of Chinese youth. Shu Ren (a 24-year-old student of Chinese literature at Beijing University) is an example of this. He is very vocal about the current political regime, and his aim is to express his ideas to as many people as possible; he told me he wants to “enlighten” the people. In his view, the impact of June 4th on Chinese society has been great:

“As to the intellectuals, their attitude and methods have changed a lot. June 4th is like a cliff dividing two ages. If the movement hadn’t failed, I think the thoughts and changes brought about by the reforms of the 1980s would’ve had a good influence on China, but now it’s all been lost. June 4th is also a watershed in my life; before it I had no thoughts of my own, but since then I’ve begun to think independently.”

With such an attitude, it’s no wonder he feels quite lonely:

“Of course I feel disappointed and sad that Chinese youth is so much focused on money. I feel very lonely. Today I have few friends to talk with. But I have to analyze the condition rationally. People indeed care more about material life, which is good as we are still so poor and developing. Democracy and freedom are still far away from the common people in China.”

Unlike others, who can hardly imagine that June 4th could happen again, he believes it is quite possible that the Party will face such a challenge in the future:

“According to some information I have got, I can see the unemployment and the poor state of Chinese peasants and the difference between city and country life, we also have different people in China, the minorities... the government cannot solve these problems, so I think the possibility of another June 4th still exists.”
He concisely summarizes some major issues in contemporary China: The rural-urban divide and related issues of poverty, the suppression of minorities, and rising unemployment are all issues that rank high on the political agenda. I talked to him in 1997, and on my return to Beijing in 1999, I was pleasantly surprised to see that he had managed to publish a collection of essays entitled Fire and Ice (1989) and that in China it had been widely read. Barmé discusses this provocative book as one of the signs of a dawning of censorship in the late 1990s. “Advertised as (...) Peking University’s second ‘Wang Xiaobo,’ [Shu Ren] chose as his targets the autocratic habits of traditional Chinese culture and politics, fascism in twentieth-century Europe, and the suppression of free thought” (Barmé 1999: 352). In his book, Shu Ren writes (quoted in Barmé 1999: 352-353):

“Zhang Chengzhi [a Beijing-based Muslim novelist] is unequivocal when he proclaims: ‘Despite everything, I still champion the great age of the 1960s. I call on people to take the full measure of Mao Zedong, perhaps the last great man in Chinese history, and a solitary figure.’ Statements like this absolute horrify me. (...) I was born in 1973, so I never had the chance to experience the ‘great age’ of which Zhang Chengzhi speaks. But I do know one thing: poverty and ignorance, cruelty and violence, dictatorship and autocracy can never give birth to ‘purity’.”

Shu Ren is a rather rare example of someone with a high level of involvement in politics. As I have shown, the everyday life of Chinese youths became increasingly depoliticized in the 1990s. What counts is whether they can create sufficient space to lead their own life. But the political does not disappear; instead, it comes back in the form of, for example, the education system and family ideology. The personal is political; in that sense, all music zones, being part of the constitutive forces of everyday life, are intrinsically political.

Over the years, several sites focusing on Chinese rock have appeared on the Internet. Some present an overview of bands, including reviews of their albums and samples of their songs, while others give the latest news on the rock culture and sell albums on-line. There are chat rooms where fans from in and outside China discuss the latest releases and share opinions. Consequently, a globalized cyberscene has emerged around Chinese rock. When writing about Chinese rock audiences, these virtual scenes ought to be included. It is tempting to think of such cultures as being absolutely new and different from “conventional” cultures. The virtual character adds to the feeling that a cyberscene is something profoundly new. However, as Anderson has pointed out, the rise of imagined communities can be traced back to the rise of print capitalism. It makes more sense to think of cyberscenes as yet another proliferation of an imagined community, rather than as a revolutionary change.”
Chinese rock is appropriated by overseas Chinese to articulate their ethnic identity. In cyberspace, middle-school students from mainland China link up with Canadian students. National boundaries become blurred, and what counts is the shared articulation of Chineseness, rather than political rebellion. The main text of one website, constructed by Beijing students, runs:

Rock’n’roll is to some extent a spirit, but not an activity. It is always against something, such as tradition, society, etc. However, those are not the goals of them. It, in the end, will express its true feeling. Come on! Enjoy our Rock Spirit!

The rock mythology is as important for cyberscenes as it is for the rock culture in Beijing. Notions of rebellion and authenticity are once again being articulated. A transnational movement has emerged where an ethnic nationalism is being negotiated through rock. The following quote comes from the same site and shows how rock at times is politicized by audiences. It appeared at the start of the Kosovo war in support of the rock parties held in Belgrade:

“This concert will last for five days to let the world know that the citizens in Belgrade will not be horrified by bombs. They will fight against the NATO until the last moment. Now you see, rock’n’roll is not only amusement, but also a kind of power. Let us hand in hand support justice and denounce evil!”

In cyberspace, rock fans in China link up with youths in Yugoslavia in order to express their anti-NATO sentiments. But such articulations are rare; ethnic articulations are more prominent on the Net. For Peng from California, listening to Tang Dynasty is like visiting China:

“I find Tang Dynasty’s debut album more ornamental and psychedelic. It’s more like a cool rock’n’roll journey into China’s enormously artistic and warring past through the spiritual rainbow and energy of the original TD warriors. The current TD with two ‘new’ axemen is more balls-to-the wall bazooney hard-rock groovin’ that’ll have you bangin’ your head against the Great Wall of China. In short, it simply KICKS ASS!”

A sense of belonging is articulated here, a belonging to an ancient civilization with a perceived enormous artistic heritage. The cliché of the Great Wall is used, yet combined with a range of “cool” buzzwords. The new album is considered less Chinese, maybe because

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22 I am indebted to Kevin Robins for pointing this out to me.

Kaiser Kuo (an American-born Chinese) joined the band, but still very good. It is interesting that in particular Tang Dynasty seems to travel well globally, especially to overseas Chinese; its articulations of Chineseness provide a rich source of symbolic material. Other more presumably political forms of Chinese rock like Cui Jian seem to appeal mostly to non-Chinese audiences throughout the world. Here, the critical stance vis-à-vis the Party ties in well with the Western conception of China as a totalitarian regime.

Being located in the country of rock, namely the US, one feels the urge to defend Chinese rock against its American counterparts, like in this review:

"Some say the style in this album is old, what do u expect Tang Chao [Tang Dynasty] to play? Songs like Marilyn Manson, Korn, Rage Against the Machine? Is that what you call new music? And progressive rock is old music? Even Marilyn Manson’s song has the style of Pink Floyd."

To label these sentiments as profoundly nationalistic, presents only one side of the coin; the ethnic articulations negotiated through Chinese rock also empower marginalized Chinese minorities in, for example, Canada and the US.

A discussion about the release of a CD by the fashionable band Sober shows how cross-cultural comparison feeds judgments of Chinese rock:

[Nirvana:] “Sober is the copycat of Oasis, suck their ass man!”

[Wacko:] “Well, Oasis sucks! And Sober sucks even worse! Do they even dare to call themselves a rock band? And why do they actually need 5 people to make that kind of music? One man with a synth will do.”

[Limbomania:] “Sober is China’s Hanson. Their music is only appealing to girls under 14 years of age. Actually I think their music is more crap than Hanson’s. Avoid their album at any cost.”

The masculine language used is indicative of the rock idiom. “Nirvana” proclaims in another posting that only Cui Jian and Tang Dynasty have their own style; the rest simply copy Western rockers. But Cui Jian is, in his view, more a grandfather than a godfather of Chinese rock, as he “is a really old man, and his style is only suitable for those people involved in political issues.” The discussion about Sober illustrates the territorializing force of the rock mythology: Only “authentic” music (that is, not a copy) made on “real” instruments (that is, not on a synthesizer) is rock. According to the rock fans, if these criteria are not met, the music will more likely appeal to young girls.
Furthermore, not only global comparisons, but also debates over what characterizes Chinese rock appear on the Net. As expected, pop is again used as the constitutive outside of rock. Jack T replied to Yilin's question “What is ‘Chinese’ rock?” as follows:

“We use ‘Chinese rock’ to distinguish the talented artists who write their original stuff from the mass-produced brain-dead pop crap in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Mainland. We could assign different classifications and genres to them, but for one, some artists defy classification. (...) So I guess using the term ‘Chinese rock’ here mainly means you are into original music, not those karaoke-ready pop pieces-of-crap.”

To conclude, the Internet provides a global virtual stage used by both mainland and overseas Chinese to articulate their ethnic identity, as well as by rock fans to discuss the power of rock in terms that borrow their power from the rock mythology. Political issues are relatively absent from the Net, yet the quote on the Kosovo war shows how rock at times can become highly politicized. Discussions merely focus on issues that also emerged from the interviews, such as the pop-rock division and the shared notions of authenticity that cater to male identifications. The Internet is often presented as a liberating force, as a site where one can play with different identities. Bassett (1997), for example, describes how cyberspace undermines mainstream constructions of gender, how virtual sites are created that provide “spaces for disruption, for the possibility of gender-play, and for the emergence of new forms of multiple subjectivity” (p. 550). Such romanticized readings may be true for some cybercultures, but seem overtly out of place when we look at the cyberscene that emerged around Chinese rock. Here, the territorializing force of the rock mythology proves to be just as powerful as it is in the everyday realities described in this chapter. What makes cyberspace different is its transnational character; also the fluidity of the Internet provides easier ways out - one can simply surf further to the fan pages of Cantopop stars to be drawn into a different narrative. But the similarities with previous described modes of audiencehood are more striking than the differences.

~ Disclaiming the Audience ~

Listening to music is a performative act. Sounds are integrated into lives and used to perform one's identity. Together with other media, music can be considered the constitutive force of everyday life. The audience is engaged in a constant, non-verbal dialogue with musicians, and music is used as an important topic of conversation among friends, as a way to perform one's identity. In the words of Shank (1994, quoted in: Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 165), “spectators become fans, fans become musicians, musicians are always already fans, all constructing the non-objects of identification through their performances as subjects of enunciation - becoming and disseminating the subject-in-process of the signifying practice of rock’n’roll music.” But the classification “rock’n’roll” turns out to be problematic if we are
to grasp the processes of audiencehood. Instead of essentializing specific audiences, I have presented three music zones: classical, pop, and rock. These zones are meant as heuristic devices that help us to negotiate differences between music genres, and to situate these differences in a wider context. The zone that appears most conspicuous when it comes to media preferences, as well as regarding opinions about life, is the classical zone. There is a relation between a preference for classical music and in general adopting a more “conservative” and “social” attitude in life. Whereas pop is positioned as the constitutive outside of rock by musicians, producers, and audiences, the distinction between popular - be it pop or rock - and classical is far more significant.

The constitutive forces of rock such as the claim on authenticity (a claim that is constructed in different ways for different scenes within rock), the negotiation of place, and its catering to masculine identifications are forces of territorialization, and thus of exclusion. The rock mythology, intersecting with the arguably loud sound of rock, is a strong force of territorialization: Audiences located in the rock zone are significantly more involved in the music compared to those located in the pop and the classical zone. But the territory, and its related genre distinction, seems swampy at the moment of reception, due to the infinite possibilities of distinction. Even fans from a rather small scene (for example, underground music) negotiate the parameters that define the scene in different ways. When we at such specific levels of classification fail to grasp an univocal audience, it seems even more futile to suggest doing so for broad categories such as pop and rock. Instead of speaking of fixed, genre-related music audiences, it is more important to analyze both the zonal and scenic movements of audiences.

When I argue that one should think of music, along with other media, as the constitutive force of everyday life, I stress that music is used to gain a sense of control - albeit often imaginary and only temporarily - over life. It gives a sense of control over the political: Cui Jian can be “used” to perform a longing for political resistance, The Fly to parody the political, and a dislike of Cui Jian often signifies an erasure of the political. Music preferences thus signify specific performances of the political. Music is used to gain a sense of control over gender: A preference for heavy metal often indicates a strong identification with a heroic masculinity. Music preferences give a sense of control over place: At a regional level, a preference for rock often indicates the centering of mainland China, at times together with Taiwan, vis-à-vis Hong Kong. A preference for pop at times carries a critique of such constructions, and presents a longing for a modern, urban lifestyle. At a local level, Beijing is positioned as both the cultural and the political center of China, whereas Guangzhou and Shanghai are considered the commercial centers. According to fans of Chinese rock, rock needs a cultural and politicized soil in order to grow. At a global level, rock is used to articulate an ethnic identity. In particular cyberspace proves powerful here. Music is used to gain a
sense of control over one's mood; some listen to rock to release their energy, and others listen when they are depressed. Music is used to gain a sense of control over the past: A preference for Cui Jian often signifies a longing for the 1980s.

A romanticized construction of rebellion seems more difficult to uphold in China, in particular given the results of the youth rebellion of 30 years ago, the Cultural Revolution. It might therefore be more accurate to speak of control rather than rebellion. Rock creates a momentarily fixed imagined community, and provides a way for audiences to perform an alternative reality. But music is used to gain a sense of control over the uncontrollable. It provides ways to depoliticize a politicized life - a life in which both the education system (a system that generates a lot of pressure and dissatisfaction) and the family system (a system grounded in a model of harmony, with a demanding package of expectations to be met by the young generation) are politicized. Even an erasure of political interpretations is a political act in itself. I am therefore bound to conclude with a contradiction. Rock territorializes and deterritorializes at the same time, and it politicizes and depoliticizes everyday life. Audiences are on the one hand trapped in the rock mythology, and on the other hand they are constantly involved in specific re-articulations of the same mythology. Rock, although a stronger force of territorialization than pop or classical music, does not of course have the exclusive rights to do so; other genres, and other media, also have the power to constitute everyday life. These intertextual dimensions are merely taken for granted in this chapter. The territorializing force of rock, intersecting with the rock mythology, is necessarily contradicted by the infinite possibilities of distinction generated by specific music scenes. Rock simultaneously contains and liberates, and its power lies in this very ambiguity.