Red Sonic Trajectories - Popular Music and Youth in China
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Citation for published version (APA):
de Kloet, J. (2001). Red Sonic Trajectories - Popular Music and Youth in China

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I pass through this city of mass production,
through hundreds of neon lights at Jianguomen,
through automatic teller machines and stock market terminals,......
through the end of the twentieth century when we are about to be thrown into a
money blender......
I look at myself which is increasingly not myself,
but I cannot find myself.
I look at myself which is increasingly despising myself,
but I do not have the confidence to respect myself.
I look at my spirits, collapsing,
but I cannot balance myself.
I look at myself, together with the world, collapsing,
but I cannot save myself.

Baojiajie 43, “Collapse”

In this song, singer Wang Feng from the band Baojiajie 43 expresses a global concern that
assumes commercialization to be harmful to creativity: The artist collapses along with the
world when thrown into the money-blender called society. This assumption is often
accompanied by nostalgia for the good old days, when everything was pure, wonderful, and
authentic. All that is considered authentic melts into the thin air of commercialism. Fans
denounce the Irish band U2 for allowing its truly rebellious cry to be crushed by the forces of
commercialism. Lead vocal Bono responded to this by staging a parody on his supposed
stardom and richness in the ZOO-TV tour. He deliberately overacted his role as the rock star
in an outrageous leather outfit and dark sunglasses. His attempt to negotiate the perceived
schism between creativity and money was well received by both fans and critics; and this -
ironically - further increased his stardom.

The rock mythology allows little space for stardom and wealth, as these are considered by
both singers and audiences to be at odds with honesty and authenticity. Money corrupts the
ture rock spirit. No wonder singer Gao Wei from the punk band Underground Baby lied to me
about his financial status. His parents were unemployed, he said, he was living a poor life.
The subtext can be read as: “I’m truly suffering, I hardly manage to survive everyday life, but,
inspired by the spirit of rock’n’roll, I’ll persevere, whatever gets in my way.” This illusion held
only for a day, as someone told me about Gao Wei’s parents who own some restaurants and
have bought an apartment for their sons. The hardships Tang Dynasty faced in its early days
have become famous among their fans. A student explained to me how the band suffered
before it released their debut album in 1992:

“Old bands and rock musicians love rock music a lot, new bands just like the money. The new generation [of Chinese rock] is much lazier than the old singers. Like Ding Wu [lead singer for Tang Dynasty], who sold his blood to buy the instruments.”

The early rock bands of China represent the real rock spirit; their pure and authentic voices are not yet disturbed by the cruel forces of a market economy. These modern Chinese heroes have even sold their own blood to pursue their dream of making rock. The new bands only go for the money. The offers from record companies are too seductive and force rockers to compromise, to adjust to the wishes of producers. The critical voice is most likely to be silenced. Consequently, with the entry of domestic and foreign record companies to the Chinese market since the early 1990s, Chinese rock has declined; it has lost its critical edge, and the innovative sounds are being replaced by mainstream compositions.

This narrative, which believes commercialization to be hostile to creativity, is seductive. Didn’t the milk taste better in the past, when our parents bought it from a farm and there were no big food industries as there are today? Didn’t the same happen to the flavor of rock, which dissipated when the big music industries entered the scene? As I showed in Chapter 1, the critique on commercialization is packaged in China through the construction of periodized narratives that set the 1980s - the decade of the great cultural debate - apart from the 1990s, the decade when the spirit of money took control. Barmé writes disapprovingly that “Cui Jian found the market, whether in political or commercial guise, to be an indulgent if fickle master” (1999: 361). The general line in his work is that commodification signifies a full stop to subversion and rebellion. According to Steen, “the engagement towards the Long March of Rock’n’Roll evaporates, it becomes impossible to identify [rock] with provocative ideals” (1996: 237). Jones argues along the same lines, and states that “rock music’s gradual absorption into China’s burgeoning market economy has defused much of its politically oppositional potential” (1994: 149). Chinese rock musicians often express similar opinions. As Cui Jian told me:

“I think that companies make the star bands. It’s very commercial, all about money, and they [record company Magic Stone] did a pretty good job on that. So many bands, they used to have some heart, but after they signed they lost their heart and only go for the money.”

The rock mythology produces a narrative - in both China and the West - that interprets the record industry and related forces of commercialization as being hostile to the “true rock spirit.” I will argue in this chapter that this narrative is overtly romantic and unbalanced. I will show how the particularities of the Chinese record industry in combination with regional and
global capital flows have created a market with Chinese characteristics. The state continued to play a pivotal role throughout the 1990s. All music releases - including those of foreign record companies - are marketed by state-owned music publishers and distributors, an often overlooked fact that makes the Chinese market anything but open.¹

I do not wish to deny that Chinese media are undergoing processes of commercialization, but to challenge the prevailing interpretations of these processes. These interpretations - as reflected by the statements above from academics, audiences, and musicians - too easily equate commercialization with a loss of creativity, diversity, and cultural criticism. Instead, I will argue that one should interpret the relationship between the record industry and the rock culture as one of mutual dependence. The dynamics of commodification are related to the rock mythology and produce rock as a distinct music world. Regional record companies are considered to be the mainspring of the commercialization of China's record industry. According to Barmé, “contacts with the Hong Kong and Taiwan music industry went from strength to strength” (1999: 133); Huot (2000: 170) makes a similar point. However, whereas the “Greater China” narrative suggests that economic ties between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China strengthened during the 1990s, Chinese rock underwent a reverse trend: At the end of the 1990s, local companies gained importance at the expense of regional competitors. This local turn signifies, I will argue, a desire to become truly global. Whereas regional companies are at pains to localize rock, local companies aim to globalize the sound. Consequently, not only is such a concept as commercialization far too sweeping to grasp the particularities of the Chinese music industry, but it also foregrounds the financial at the expense of specific cultural considerations that frame the production of culture.

The size of China’s population invites an easy exaggeration of its market potential. Even if one reaches only a small part of the youth market in China, profits are bound to be huge.² A best-selling artist might well sell millions of albums on the mainland. No wonder, then, that while witnessing the blossoming of the Chinese rock culture in the early 1990s, record companies, mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan, became increasingly interested in the production of Chinese rock. However, reality turned out to be far less profitable, particularly

¹ This is not unique to China; however, the idea of an open market can at best be considered a political fiction, as any market faces government regulations of some kind.

² This image of the Chinese market is not restricted to post-1978 China. Already in 1842, when the Sino-British Treaty of Nanjing was signed to end the opium war and open up China, Sir Henry Pottinger, who drew up the treaty, assured the textile factories of Manchester that their capacity would be insufficient to make even one pair of stockings for each Chinese citizen in only one province. Thus the business opportunities were considered to be extremely promising (Osterhammel 1989: 171). I am grateful to Frans Paul van der Putten for this reference.
COMMERCIAL BETRAYAL

regarding the production of rock, and companies which entered the market in the early 1990s, were pulling out of it in the late 1990s. The rumor is that the Taiwan-based company Magic Stone has forbidden its manager Landy Chang from going to the mainland and signing other bands. The new policy of Magic Stone is to release Taiwanese alternative music, rather than music from the mainland. The Hong Kong company Red Star is reducing the number of contracted artists. Dickson Dee, manager of the Sound Factory, has lost hope and become involved in the production of avant-garde Tibetan folk music. Instead, local companies such as Jingwen, Modern Sky, and New Bees are gaining importance in the production of rock. The perceived crisis in Chinese rock - a crisis often related to its commercialization - is paralleled by a retreat of regional and an emergence of local record companies.

A substantive analysis of the Chinese music industry has not yet been carried out. Its complexity does not allow for clear-cut organizational models. The difficulty of gaining access to ministries and the unreliability of information provided by record companies and publishers (either because of the sensitivity of the materials dealt with, or because of a company’s desire to keep their problems secret) affect this analysis. Dickson Dee points to the complexity of the Chinese music industry:

“If you understood the production part, it’d be easier to talk, or if you knew about publishing, marketing and promotion. But in China, nobody understands that system. Musicians in China don’t know anything about how the industry works (...) they just play the music and want to make a name. People from outside [China] or some local Chinese would like to collaborate, but they don’t know how to help them, so in the end there’s nothing.”

Apart from literature on the media industry in China, my secondary sources consist of law texts and figures from the industry, either provided by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI - the representative of the major record companies), or obtained from the annual report of record companies, where such were available. More in-depth information was obtained from interviews with record companies, publishers, managers,

3 As time went on, Dickson Dee became more and more disappointed with both the rock culture and the music business in China. He turned to world music and in 1999 became involved in a large-scale Tibetan dance drama, “Qomolangma”. Its promotional brochure is interesting as it states: “Tibet is an inseparable part of China, the support of Tibet is an unshirkable duty and responsibility of each Chinese citizen. In the past 40 years since Tibet’s democratic reform, the central government and provincial governments have completed 62 projects supporting Tibet. “ The project is thus presented as celebrating the 40th “anniversary of Tibet’s democratic reform” and the 50th anniversary of the founding of the PR China. No wonder Dickson Dee had a cynical smile on his face when he showed me this brochure.

4When I asked the manager Louis Chan of Red Star for the company’s annual report, he replied: “An annual report? Are you kidding? It’s already quite impossible for me to keep the office running, let alone writing an annual report.”
producers, and journalists. The necessary incompleteness and inconsistencies of the information gathered can be interpreted as a reflection of the current chaotic state of the Chinese music industry. The sheer impossibility of developing an encompassing organizational-economic model for the Chinese record industry forces us to look for contextualized and fragmented interpretations.

**Cultural Flows**

The “Greater China” concept is often used to deal with the perceived growing interdependencies between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. It is not a new concept: Already in the 1930s it was used to refer to the 18 provinces primarily populated by the Han Chinese, including such frontier zones as Mongolia and Tibet (Harding 1995: 10). The most recent usage appeared in the late 1970s in Chinese-language sources, indicating the rapidly growing economic ties between Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. In English, the term emerged about five years later, in the mid to late 1980s (Harding 1995: 11). Nowadays, the term is frequently used, predominantly to describe the economic ties. It also refers to the importance attached to Chineseness when doing business; in these cases, the financial flows from overseas Chinese to China are highlighted. Hong Kong and Macao were in the period 1979-1995 responsible for 58.8% of the total foreign investment in China, and Taiwan for 8.7% (*The Economist*, March 8, 1997). Hong Kong’s cumulative investment in China doubled over a period of three years, to reach approximately $50 billion in 1993 (Shambaugh 1995: 3).

Apart from economic integration, the term also refers to political reunification and cultural interaction. The Hong Kong handover in 1997 is a clear example of the growing political reunification. The prospects for close political cooperation between China and Taiwan, let alone reunification, are less promising. Differences in legal systems and ideology seem too large to overcome. Instead, “there is more emphasis on building infrastructure, exchanging information and harmonizing regulatory policies, (...) [emphasizing] spontaneous commercial activity, rather than the negotiation of formal trading arrangements” (Harding 1995: 20).

At the cultural level, the spread of a common popular culture is an additional driving force for the formation and integration of a “Greater China” (Gold 1993). “Popular culture of Hong Kong and Taiwan has a growing audience on the mainland, and exchanges of artists, performers and writers between Taiwan, [Hong Kong] and the mainland are steadily increasing” (Harding 1995: 20). Gold (1993) stresses that this cultural flow - with the exception of cinema, Chinese rock, and “high” culture from the mainland - is predominantly unidirectional. *Gangtai* (Hong Kong - Taiwan) popular culture has penetrated the consciousness of mainland China’s youth, according to Gold.

However, this neat exposé, which unravels the political, economic, and cultural dimensions
of "Greater China," is problematic. These different domains cannot so easily be separated, and the perceived direction of economic, political, and cultural flows conceal the complexities involved. The image presented by Gold (1993) of mainland China being flooded by Gang tai popular culture resembles the cultural homogenization thesis in the globalization debate. Gang tai culture is described by Gold as "escapist", whereas Chinese observers often describe it as hedonistic. In response, Harding expects mainland popular culture to become more orthodox, embodying "collective values, patriotism and asceticism" (1995: 24). These perspectives overemphasize differences and contrasts between cultural practices, and ignore their inherent polysemic characteristics. As Barmé correctly argues, "the process of cultural osmosis that has existed since the late 1970s is complex and multifaceted, and Kong-Tai in many ways has provided the mainland with the means to bridge the gaps with both China's own past and its possible future" (1999: 5). Furthermore, the "Greater China" concept can easily become a signifier for an uncritical celebration of a transnational Chinese identity, as it has a strong nationalistic undertone that separates the "Chinese" from the "non-Chinese".5

In making a distinction for Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China between domestic, regional, and international repertoire, the IFPI is reproducing the image of a "Greater China". This distinction is not made for, for example, Japan or Europe, where it is only made between domestic and international music. Figure 6.1 presents the repertoire origin for China, Hong

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5 The Chinese translation of the concept, Da Zhonghua, has an even stronger nationalistic undertone, as its means "Great China".
Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Europe. Japan is included because it plays an important economic, political, and cultural role in Asia. The urban cultures of Hong Kong and Taiwan are strongly affected by Japan. Europe is included for easy comparison between the Asian market and the West (source: IFPI, 1997).

This figure justifies several conclusions. First, the penetration of international, but predominantly Western, music is much higher for Hong Kong and Taiwan than for mainland China. This is partly caused by the official limit on the import of foreign (i.e., Western) music to 250 titles a year (Laing 1998: 341). If the figure included illegally imported titles - dakou CDs - and the pirated copies, it would present a higher proportion of international music in China. But compared to Hong Kong and Taiwan, the mainland remains relatively closed to Western popular music. Hong Kong is the most open to international music, which is a result of its colonial past. Second, the regional flow of music is, as described by Gold (1993), uneven: Mainly music from Hong Kong and Taiwan enters the Chinese market, while the reverse is hardly the case.

Figure 6.1 also shows that the domestic music market is in all cases relatively well developed. Especially the Taiwanese music market consists of many local productions. In “Greater China”, international music is of less importance than local and regional music. Figures from 1991 onward are available only from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and reveal no remarkable changes over the years. The domestic repertoire grew in Hong Kong from 55.7% in 1991 to a peak of 67.4% in 1994, whereas it peaked in Taiwan in 1992 with 75.0%. Other Asian markets with a remarkably high market share for domestic music are Thailand (80%), Pakistan (79%), India (95%), and Indonesia (80%). The figures for Europe differ tremendously from country to country: Whereas 85% of the Russian music market consists of domestic products, the figure for the Dutch music market is 23%. Austria and Switzerland rank lowest with 9.9% and 7.4%, respectively.

The figures represent the proportion of the total legitimate market value accounted for by each repertoire type.

Artists from Hong Kong are often contracted by the Taiwanese branches of the record companies to release a Mandarin album for both Taiwan and the mainland. These releases will most likely be labeled as domestic. I expect the same to happen with releases that are in fact cover versions of Japanese or Western songs, a practice that is very widespread in the Chinese music industry. When Commercial Radio in Hong Kong changed its policy in the early 1990s and refused to play cover versions, this had an impact on the industry: producers were urged to produce original compositions rather than cover versions. They changed their policy again in early 1999; being satisfied with the number of locally produced songs, they now allow cover versions.

Language barriers strongly affect musical flows. As to the international repertoire, Hong Kong can be expected to be more receptive to English music. Regional flows of music are more likely to occur between Taiwan and the northern (Mandarin speaking) part of China and Hong Kong and the southern (Cantonese speaking) part of China. Because of the shared language, Taiwan is more receptive to Chinese rock music.
The different articulations of Chineseness as produced in these cultural flows between China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are financed by global - or, rather, mainly Western - capital: 70% of the global music industry is in the hands of five record companies (Laing 1998: 339), i.e., EMI (with such artists as Faye Wang), BMG (Andy Lau), Universal (Jacky Cheung and Zheng Jun), Warner (Sammi and Aaron Kwok), and Sony (Leon Lai). Their important regional competitor in the “Greater China” region is Rock Records from Taiwan, which has contracted such artists as Karen Mok. Global capital thus plays a predominant role in the production of local and regional music cultures. The global record companies are deeply involved in the production of the idea of a “Greater China.” Sometimes, driven by market considerations, global media conglomerates play on specific local sentiments and are thus part and parcel of the production of straightforward nationalistic narratives. For example, Channel V (part of Murdoch’s Star TV) has the following slogan:

“A composite portrait of mankind today: 7% Black, 36% Caucasian, 57% Asian, the face of the earth is Asian. Channel V - Star TV Music.”

A “Western” company is consciously marginalizing the West and covering up global power imbalances under a disturbing blanket of cultural essentialism. The deification of Asian culture is employed here as a marketing tool, but one needs little imagination to think of other, more dangerous, cases of such strategies of cultural essentialism and hierarchization.

Global record companies recognize the need to localize their products in order to gain a considerable market share. It shows that rather than excluding one another, the global, the regional, and the local are deeply embedded in one another. Global record companies have penetrated such well-developed markets as Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but are far less part of the - less developed - mainland market. In the mid-1990s, the transnationals had a market share of 90% in Hong Kong and only 14% in China (Laing 1998: 339). Apart from Universal and Rock Records (the latter under the Magic Stone label), none of the transnational companies has contracted a Chinese rock band. The obvious explanation for this is that China does not yet allow independent record companies to enter the market; only joint ventures are allowed to operate in China. But it can also be argued that the Chinese market is currently not that attractive to the transnational companies. How big is the music market of “Greater China” in financial terms?

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9 According to Laing (1993: 22), “the Christian Church was Europe’s first transnational institution and its liturgy gave music an international dimension as early as the Middle Ages.”

10 I am indebted to Sudeep Dasgupta for pointing out this argument.
Financial Flows

The US and Japan are the world biggest music markets. Table 6.1 presents an overview of various countries, including their ranking on the 1998 world music sales list (source: IFPI 2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>US$m Retail Value</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>14,251</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>6,437</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>2,909</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2,832</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1,983</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1: 1999 World Music Sales Ranking

The retail value of “Greater China” - that is, the total retail value of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong put together - amounted to 500 million US dollars in 1999, a market comparable to the Dutch one.\(^\text{11}\) China’s market amounts to only 18% of the Dutch and 0.7% of the US market. For the time being, although the mainland music market might be huge in terms of potential customers, it is less so in terms of its retail value. However, the Chinese market gradually declined during the 1990s.

\(^{11}\) Copyright income from, for example, karaoke or radio airplay is not included in these figures. Also not included in these figures are the piracy market, and the informal recording and circulation of music. Sales figures thus present a distorted view of musical activity in “Greater China” (see also: Negus 1992: 12-13).
The Hong Kong market reached its peak in 1995 and then declined, whereas the Taiwanese market underwent gradual growth until 1997. It is assumed that the Asian crisis - which began in 1997 and quickly spread from Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia to, among other countries, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Hamlin 2000: 1-16) - has had comparatively less impact on mainland China (Saywell 1999). However, the figures in Table 6.2 show a steady decrease of the music market in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, suggesting that in the case of the music industry, the crisis has impacted badly on Greater China as a whole. Celine Cheung, manager of the publishing unit of Rock Records Hong Kong, explained to me how Cantopop sales figures decreased in Hong Kong during the 1990s:

“There is a great difference between now and the past. When I entered this industry in 1988, I worked with the company of Anita Mui. A good album would sell 200,000 copies. Now a top one like Leon Lai sells only 50,000 to 80,000. Most artists sell around 2,000 to 3,000.”

Both the 1999 sales figures and the development of the Chinese market during the 1990s present a rather gloomy financial picture. The narrative goes that over the 1990s the spirit of money took control in China, yet it proves to be a fairly fragile spirit when it comes to the record industry.

Table 6.2: Retail Value (US$m) since 1995 (IFPI 1999, 2000)\textsuperscript{12}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>(178)</td>
<td>(188)</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>(183)</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater China</td>
<td>(697)</td>
<td>(834)</td>
<td>729</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>12,100</td>
<td>12,298</td>
<td>11,906</td>
<td>13,193</td>
<td>14,251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>607</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>522</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{12} For China, the 1996/1997 figures and for Hong Kong the 1995/1996 are not comparable, which is why these figures are put between brackets.

\textsuperscript{13} But especially the figures of the Chinese market over time are problematic. The figure in China dropped from 388.7 in 1992 to 241.0 in 1994 (based on official - that is, unreliable - government figures) and from 178.4 to 279.6 from 1995 to 1997 (based on industry estimates). Hong Kong increased from 96.5 in 1991 to 183.2 in 1995, after which it decreased to 167.3 in 1996 and to 148.6 in 1997. Taiwan increased from 223.9 in 1991 to 427.8 in 1997 (all figures in millions of US dollars).
If one looks at the music carrier, it becomes more clear why the retail value on mainland China remained low for all those years. The music market in China is mainly based on the sale of cassettes, whereas more developed markets predominantly sell CDs. Table 6.3 presents the differences for China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe. It also shows the piracy level and per capita sales.14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Hong Kong</th>
<th>Taiwan</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music Cassette (MC)</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>158.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD (million)</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>846.1</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piracy Level (%)</td>
<td>&gt;50</td>
<td>&gt;50</td>
<td>10-25</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Sales (US$)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Sales (albums)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.3: MC/CD Sales (million), Piracy, Per Capita Sales in 1998 (source: IFPI 1999)

Eight out of every hundred Chinese customers buy one album a year, a very low figure compared to the other markets. If one were to single out Beijing youths, the figure would be drastically different. The average number of cassettes and CDs owned by the survey’s respondents is indicative: 26 and 3.3, respectively. In terms of the retail value of domestic piracy copies, China ranks first in the world (620 million US dollars, and an estimated piracy level of 90%), followed by Russia (200 million US dollars, and 75%) and Brazil (180 million US dollars, and 50%) (IFPI 2000b).15

These figures support the argument that apart from the institutional drawbacks that prevent the big five record companies from entering the market, the market itself is less appealing to transnationals. According to Negus (1997: 2), “since the end of the 1980s, the music industry has been continually reorganizing to deal with the world on a more regional basis.” Thus, rather than only licensing music to Asia, during the 1980s transnational record companies decided to set up local offices and become the owner of a record company that gave direct access to the local market (Laing 1998: 339). But this process of the globalization of the music

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14 These figures are produced by the IFPI, the most important global lobby organization for the protection of copyrights, which is financed by the record industry. High figures on piracy undoubtedly support their lobbying activities, which might affect the figures as presented in this table. Figures sometimes fluctuate considerably, which makes one question their reliability, e.g. China’s per capita sales went down from 0.1 US$ in 1997 to 0.08 US$ in 1998.

15 According to Louis Chan from Red Star, the VCD boom in China is another issue linked to piracy. VCD producers buy a song for little money and thus avoid the high costs of contracting artists and recording the master tape. The issue of piracy will be further discussed in Chapter 7.
industry is uneven and reflects an exclusion of certain markets. “So-called ‘global markets’ tend to be those which have strictly enforced copyright legislation and highly priced CDs rather than cheaply priced cassettes (so Japan is an important global market, whereas India is not). Hence (...) the ‘global’ is imagined in terms of a series of very particular criteria” (Negus 1997: 2). The exclusion of China from the global music market shows that while it is easy to imagine the Chinese market as being both huge and open to the West, the reality is more complex: Local particularities - such as the legal system and the dominant role of the government - in combination with the market-led considerations of transnational companies, prevent the mainland music market from having access to the global music industry.

In short, to interpret the Chinese music market as rapidly growing and opening up is inaccurate; in fact, it is rather marginal and uncertain. This is an important fact to keep in mind when writing about the production of Chinese rock music. In contrast to the narrative of a rapidly expanding market, the Chinese music market showed a steady decline of the music market in terms of retail value during the 1990s. The Asian crisis has had a considerable impact on the music business in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan since 1997, when the retail value started to drop considerably. Processes of commercialization in Chinese media during the 1990s are not yet reflected in the financial figures of its music market. The music industry of Hong Kong and especially that of Taiwan are relatively more important, both in financial terms and in terms of their exports to the mainland. The bias of Western studies toward Chinese rock at the expense of pop produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan is not justified by the figures. I do not wish to imply that the academic agenda should be set by sales figures, but I believe it important to contest easy simplifications of “the rapid commercialization of the Chinese music industry,” by pointing out that both sales figures and - especially - its finances force us to be more careful.

The number of releases of Chinese rock grew from just a few in the early 1990s, to 30 - 40 releases a year in 1999. However, the number of releases remains rather small, especially when one takes into account that around one-third are compilation tapes. This high percentage can be explained by the fact that many bands have only a few songs, and record companies spread their financial risk by including more bands on a tape in the hope that this will attract a wider audience. Compared to the music market in the Netherlands, the number of new releases is low. In 1992, more than 10,000 titles of popular music were released in the Netherlands, 24% of which were debut albums (Christianen 1995: 60-61). Thus, in terms of the number of new releases per year, the rock market is relatively small.

The five most important record companies that release Chinese rock are Magic Stone
COMMERCIAL BETRAYAL

(Taiwan), Red Star (Hong Kong), Jingwen (Beijing), Modern Sky (Beijing), and New Bees (Beijing). Of these, only Magic Stone belongs to a large company, namely Rock Records. Red Star can at best be labeled a small independent record company (an “Indie”), whereas Jingwen, Modern Sky, and New Bees are relatively young local companies. Magic Stone is a case of portfolio management, a common practice in the record industry. By dividing the company into discrete units, surveillance of its performance is ensured (Negus 1998: 360). At the same time it gives the artist the illusion of dealing with a small label. Specialization, based on either region or music genre, is turned into a corporate strategy, meant to conquer the world with music products that are well adjusted to local tastes, while at the same time ensuring the possibility of closely supervising business performance. Through portfolio management, “the music industry plays a major part in shaping the conditions and divisions within which claims about creativity are asserted, maintained and contested” (Negus 1998: 362).

By focusing on a genre that is considered different from other music genres - in this case, alternative Chinese music - Rock Records has facilitated the production of Chinese rock as a music world that is considered essentially different from pop or traditional music. As such, the record industry is closely intertwined with the production of a music culture, rather than necessarily destroying or neutralizing it. In an analysis of so-called black music, Garofalo argues along similar lines; in his words, “the [music] industry takes account of societal divisions in developing its product categories” (1994: 279). It is because of the intermediary role of both producers and bar owners (who provide spaces in which to perform) that a Beijing rock culture could emerge. I do not wish to argue that it is the industry that produces the rock culture; the idea that media industries turn music into standardized commodities has been put forward, and has been heavily criticized by Adorno. To him, commercially produced music is another corrupting force in society that silences and stupefies the masses. Nor has the rock culture produced an industry (cf. Negus 1998). Rather, the relationship between rock culture and music industry has to be interpreted in a more dynamic and productive way; that is, they are interdependent and closely intertwined. In adopting both the symbolism and sounds of rock music, Beijing rockers set themselves apart from other music worlds, such as pop and folk. By establishing a label that specifically deals with alternative Chinese music, Rock Records has further generated the invention of rock as a specific music world, which in

16 The comparison is unfair in the sense that the Dutch figures include all genres of popular music, for example, folk music and country & western. Since 1992 the number of new releases on the Dutch market has decreased. After the booming replacement market (1986-1992), during which customers bought CDs to replace their LPs and cassettes, customers have become more critical. 15% of Dutch music sales in 1998 consist of rock/alternative albums.

17 As Polygram’s 1995 annual report states: “Some managers would look at our melee of pop labels and shout ‘merge, cut, prune’. What possible use can we have for so many different labels, all competing with each other? Between them, Polygram’s labels share roughly 17% of the world’s music market. By keeping each of the labels’ identities intact, they can access the world and respond more quickly to changes in taste, and artists are not submerged by that ‘big company’ feeling.”
turn has inspired other youths to start playing rock music. These dynamics of commodification resonate well with the rock mythology.

To provide an understanding of the particularities of the Chinese record industry - in which the Chinese state continues to play a pivotal role, since it owns all the music publishing and distribution companies - I will elaborate briefly on the industry in the West. An important distinction in the music business is that between publisher and producer. The former contracts the authors of songs (that is, composers and lyric writers) and sells their songs to a record company, which contracts a singer to sing the songs. A distinction can thus be made between copyright royalties for the composers and writers - which are handled by the publishers and often collected by specific organizations (such as BUMA/STEMRA in the Netherlands and CASH in Hong Kong) - and artist royalties, which are handled by the record company. Although some independent publishers still exist, usually a company like Universal has a publishing unit and a production unit. The production unit records the master tape, takes care of the production of the units (cassette, CD, or LP), markets the product, and arranges distribution to retailers. In the case of a band that writes its own songs, it is contracted by the publisher for the author rights and by the record company for the mechanical rights, and receives royalties from both business units. The mechanical royalties range from 10% of the trade price (which is usually around 75% of the retail price) for a beginning artist, to 25% for a well-established artist. It can, and does, happen that, for example, a Universal publisher sells a song to another company, such as Sony.

The role of publishers in China, however, is entirely different and can best be compared with the role of a book publisher. In China, the publisher decides to release a music product, often arranges the duplication of the master tape, and is responsible for its distribution throughout the country. A record publisher in China thus performs the roles that are performed by record companies in the West. What, then, are the roles left for the record companies? A record company contracts the artist and records the master tape. It takes care of the design and is responsible, sometimes together with the publisher, for the marketing. In China, there is no copyright collection society; copyright revenues usually do not exist, and artists receive a fixed sum, although they may get royalties if sales exceed a certain limit. Usually, a record

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18 According to Dolfsma (1999: 12), “the theoretical study of pop music is heavily burdened by earlier writings”, including Adorno’s. He argues against spending too much effort to counter Adorno’s armchair generalizations, as this has already been done in a convincing way. It is indeed remarkable how often Frith refers to Adorno in his 1996. Apart from reiterating outdated debates, popular music studies is sometimes burdened by an excessive use of references to “great thinkers”, as though academics were aiming to counterbalance the perceived “low-brow” character of the object of study. A good example of this is Nehring 1997.

19 I would like to thank Olav Vlaar from the Dutch Federation for Producers and Importers of Audio-Visuals (NVPI) for his expose of the Dutch record industry. Unless otherwise indicated, my information on the Western record industry is drawn from my interview with him in March 1999.
company sells the master tape to the publisher for an amount that guarantees a fixed number of releases. If more units are sold, the publisher pays an additional amount to the record company. Foreign record companies are not allowed to set up an independent office in China; only joint ventures are legal. Publishers are, by definition, state-owned enterprises, which is crucial as this strongly affects the "openness" of the Chinese music market. According to Gene Lau of ZOOM music, a Hong Kong company that has an office in Beijing:

"For the international record companies, if they cannot handle the distribution directly, they are not really interested. Many foreign companies now have an office in China, but they are working on a very small budget and trying to learn how to manage a company in China. Their main purpose is to sell their foreign products to China."

Instead of seriously entering the market, foreign record companies choose to license their products to a local publisher. All sound carriers in China are released by one of the 250-300 publishing houses. These publishing houses are affiliated to either the National Broadcasting, Film & TV Bureau (guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju) or to the Ministry of Culture (Wenhuabu). The publishing houses are relatively independent entities, that is, they are state-owned companies that aim to gain a firm position on the music market. Their primary goal is to be, or to become, a profitable enterprise. According to Gene Lau, the competence of publishing houses depends largely on their relationship (guanxi) with the ministries they belong to: If that relationship is good, their products are more likely to be approved. A record company looks for competent publishers in order to reduce the risk that their product will not be accepted. In the case of a “foreign” product (those from Hong Kong and Taiwan are still considered such), the State Administration of Copyright is responsible for registering the work and granting official permission for the work to be released in China. This is arranged by the local publisher. The official approval of one of the ministries is necessary to release a foreign product. According to Song Zufen, who works for CMSP, one of China’s major publishing houses:

"The difference is that if we work with a domestic record company, we just reach an agreement and they send the master tape. But a foreign record company has to get official permission, they have to get the right from the copyright bureau, then we go to the broadcast and TV bureau to get the permission."

There are different ways to set up a local business; however, in all cases the companies depend on local music publishing houses to release their products. Another crucial party in music production - besides the producer and the publisher - is the distributor of the tapes. Often the publishing house is also a distributor, but this is not necessarily the case (Jingwen,
for example, is both a producer and a distributor, but not a publisher). Sometimes, a record company contracts directly with a distributor, who in turn looks for a publisher. Gene Lau from ZOOM music points to the power of the distributor when he tried to release Gray Wolf, a band he had contracted:

"Because Gray Wolf is a new band, it was quite difficult to find a distributor, so I'm not the one who chose the distributor. I tried, but the best one rejected me, so I chose the minor one."

The impossibility of starting your own company and the dependence on state-owned publishers and distributors are important drawbacks to the Chinese music market. The difficulty of making money is another problem. Different parties are involved in the process, i.e., the record company, the publisher / distributor (state owned), and the retailer. Figure 2 presents the share of revenues for each party, based on information given to me during the interviews. These figures are not fixed, but fluctuate and depend on the agreements between the publisher and record company; they are merely meant as an indication.22

Figure 6.2: Share of Revenue of MC (10 RMB)23

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenue Share</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Record Company</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher / Distributor</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21 Four examples of setting up a business are: Red Star has set up a local company in Beijing that is owned and managed by the related Hong Kong company Kinn's Music. They choose to set up a local office in order to be more free to release their products (they release around five albums a year). They were able to do so because the manager is married to a woman from Beijing. Jingwen, Modern Sky, and New Bees are all local companies; Jingwen is both producer and distributor but does not have publishing rights. Magic Stone has an office in Beijing, but this is an illegal office according to local manager Niu Jiawei. However, as Rock Records is applying to become a joint venture, they are allowed to operate in China. ZOOM Music is a Hong Kong-based company that operates in a joint venture in Beijing with a local company named CVIK Culture Co.

22 The retail price of Western music cassettes is usually higher (around 15 RMB), because the record companies ask a higher share to cover the royalties involved. The price of CDs fluctuates around an average of 65 RMB. Whereas the price of a music cassette is approximately 15% of what it is in the Netherlands, a CD costs around 40% of the retail price in the Netherlands.

23 8 RMB = approximately 1 US$. 
The publisher pays for the production costs of the cassette, which account for 30% of the retail price (3 RMB a tape). How much does the record company earn? The costs for contracting the artist, recording the master tape, and marketing differ among record companies and artists. Costs for marketing are sometimes shared between record company and publisher. Magic Stone invests 500,000 to 600,000 RMB in an album, whereas Red Star invests 300,000 to 400,000 RMB, although they invested around 650,000 RMB in their first album, which was by Zheng Jun. To break even on an investment of 400,000 RMB, at least 60,000 cassettes have to be sold. Sales figures are difficult to obtain and are usually very unreliable. For example, it is almost impossible to trace the number of copies sold of the first album by Tang Dynasty, one of the bestsellers of Chinese rock. According to its guitar player Kaiser Kuo, it sold more than a million. According to the publisher it sold between 400,000 and 600,000 albums. According to Niu Jiawei from the record company Magic Stone, they sold 300,000 albums, whereas Steen speaks of 700,000 legal albums and 1.3 million piracy copies (Steen, 1996: 174; he bases this figure on an interview with Magic Stone).

According to their own figures, Red Star sold 500,000 Zheng Jun albums, which would have brought in 750,000 RMB (15% of the revenue of 5 million RMB). But after subtracting the investment of 650,000 RMB, they earned only 100,000 RMB on this album, a low amount, particularly for a Hong Kong company. The publisher would have earned 1.5 million RMB on that tape (30% of 5 million RMB; the other 30% would have covered the cost of producing the tapes), a much larger amount of money. These are rough figures: Neither the sales outside China nor the sale of CDs or copyright incomes from Hong Kong or Taiwan have been included. Most releases sell around 100,000 cassette tapes, an number insufficient for the record company concerned to really make a profit. Compared to artists in the West, these figures are not exceptionally high. For example, in 2000, the worlds’ best selling album was by the boys band ‘N Sync (9.8 million CDs), with the controversial rap singer Eminem ranking second (7.8 million CDs) (Mingpao Daily, January 2, 2001). In comparison, a regional star like Hong Kong pop singer Jacky Chueng sold only 2.5 million albums in 1996 (Polygram 1996).

Despite legal reforms and processes of commercialization and internationalization, the Chinese record industry remains predominantly a regional industry operating in a market that is anything but open. Government-owned publishing houses prevent record companies from entering the market directly. Although legal regulations improved during the 1990s, a phenomenon on which I will elaborate in the following chapter, piracy continues to be perceived by both industry and musicians as an important constraint on the Chinese record industry. Added to these problems is the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s. According to Hong Kong manager Celine Cheung, the crisis has forced producers like Magic Stone to

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24 EMI distinguishes world-wide the following revenue mix for 1997: mechanical 60%, performance (including airplay) 22%, synchronization (feature films, advertisements, etc.) 10%, and other 8% (EMI, 1997).
gradually retreat from the mainland market, and to concentrate on more reliable markets, such as that in Taiwan. It has also affected the financial performance of Red Star; there are rumors that they lost large sums of money on the Hong Kong real estate market.

My sketch of the Chinese record industry shows that it is too simple to summarize developments in the 1990s under the concept of commercialization. Although record companies became interested in Chinese rock and started to contract bands, to label this as the commercialization of rock runs the danger of ignoring the particularities of the Chinese market. Edward Ko, manager of Rock Records Shanghai, concisely summarized the crucial obstacles:

“The problem is that the CCP controls all the publishing houses; they don’t allow record companies to publish their own records, because they think it is dangerous. Now they are ready to enter the WTO, they must at least open their cultural market. (...) If that happens, the whole structure will change. Promotion, publishing, everything will change. The market will become a normal one and piracy will be reduced. At the moment, the publishing houses are doing a bad job.”

With China’s entrance to the WTO, its cultural industry is more likely to change for the better for record companies. But till that day it seems justified, despite its essentializing undertone, to adopt the jargon of the Party and speak of commercialization with Chinese characteristics.

When record companies first entered the Chinese rock market in the early 1990s, the financial picture was far from promising, and the market declined during the 1990s in terms of retail value. What motivated producers in the early 1990s to enter the market, and what made them stay for all these years? An obvious reason is, of course, that companies hope for better times. In the words of Leslie Chan from Red Star:

“Maybe in three years the market will be open, and if we hadn’t started two years ago, we wouldn’t have a chance to survive. If we can produce one classic album a year that people will still buy ten years later, we just hope... (...) Nobody wants to give up the Chinese market, you know, because it’s so huge, but to survive will be a long march, it isn’t easy.”

Gene Lau from ZOOM music used to be in charge of BMG’s China trade department. His interpretation of the market is interesting, as it shows how what some may see as a limitation
can also be considered advantageous:

"I feel that in China there are no rules of the game, so you still start your own company, even if you don’t have so much money. But in Hong Kong and Taiwan, it’s all controlled by big record companies; independent companies can’t do the same kind of things. (...) In China there are still many chances to do independent business."

Thus, the absence of the major record companies provides space for small companies to enter the market. None of my interviewees stated that they had entered the Chinese market and contracted rock artists for political reasons. Apart from their desire to fill the vacuum left by the absence of the big companies, discontent with the pop music they grew up with was often quoted as a consideration:

"I don’t like Hong Kong music, although I am a Cantopop lyric writer." (Gene Lau, ZOOM Music)

"The more time I spend in China, the more I realize that Cantopop has a big problem; it has no spirit, the music is not music. (...) It’s like drinking water, it has no taste at all. (..) But for the music in China, especially the Beijing artists, they really come up with something." (Leslie Chan, Red Star)

"Our long-term goal is to export music to Hong Kong and Taiwan, rather than having Cantopop pushing into the mainland, which is really sad. Everybody sings the same kind of music, about love and relationships, 95% is the same. Chinese music may have something different, the contents, the lyrics are more sophisticated, something that is from the heart.” (Louis Chan, Red Star)

It is interesting that those who mainly deal with pop music pointed out in the interviews that they are committed to other music genres:

"My favorite is of course rock, I like the songs from your heart, I don’t like the commercial thing. (...) Pop music depends on market needs, so there is no difference between songs." (Eric Kwok, Polygram)

This shows how genre-specific assessments of the Asian music market are fuelled by the rock mythology, and its related claim to authenticity. The “favorite is of course rock” was said in an apologetic way, as though his involvement in the promotion of pop should be excused. For both Red Star and ZOOM music, the perceived authenticity of Chinese rock music and their discontent with “commercial” Cantopop, comprise an important reason to enter the market. Added to the perceived authenticity of the music is the image of Beijing as the cultural
center of “Greater China”. Beijing is an important signifier; it (along with, e.g., the Great Wall) symbolizes the dominant cliché of 5,000 years of Chinese history and tradition. As such, the appeal of Beijing rock to regional record producers can be interpreted as an imagined cultural pilgrimage. The Hong Kong and Taiwan producers return to their imagined cultural roots and thus merge with 5,000 years of history. Rock singers play on this image of Beijing as being the cultural center of China; for example, in the words of Zheng Jun:

“I love Beijing because it is a city of culture, you can always feel the culture. In Hong Kong, all you feel is money, just the commercial thing, everybody is living in a supermarket. (...) In Beijing it's different, we think more about music.”

Both the perceived authenticity of rock music and the notion that Beijing is the cultural center, support Negus' argument that “what are often taken to be straightforward business decisions are actually based on a number of culturally specific beliefs and assumptions” (Negus, 1998: 367). But these beliefs and assumptions are not necessarily shared by all the parties involved. Musicians are often highly critical about record companies, and smoothly retreat to the grounds of cultural essentialism in order to make their point:

“I don't know how a record company should be, but to me, the Taiwanese like to cheat people. The Taiwanese are good at making fake things.” (Gao Wei from Underground Baby, signed by Taiwan-based company Magic Stone)

“Red Star gives me very small royalties; it's very unfair, but they are Hong Kong people, you know...” (Zhang Qianqian, female singer contracted by Red Star)

“I don’t believe in Taiwanese people, I just don’t like them. Hong Kong is not the same. I know some singers who were contracted by Magic Stone, they have big problems.” (Wang Feng, lead vocal of Baojiajie 43, a band contracted by Jingwen)

These opinions show that the commercial and cultural links established by Hong Kong and Taiwan record companies with the Beijing rock scene do not imply the emergence of a common culture. Cooperation between the regional record companies with the Beijing musicians spark off cultural struggles between companies and artists, struggles in which “national characteristics” are articulated in order to explain perceived differences and strengthen

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25 According to Dai, this particularly applies to the 1980s. She writes: "In the narrative space of the 1980s, the north seems to be the figurative reminder of Chinese history, while the south (...) seems to have become the signifier of the future." She speaks of a reversal in the 1990s. On the waves of commercialization, the south occupied an increasingly strong place in artistic imagery (Dai 1997: 156-157). Rather than speaking of a reversal, it seems more justified to argue that the focus of artistic imagination has somehow shifted from the north to the south. This, however, has not downplayed the importance of Beijing as a signifier for China's long history.
one’s own position. In turn, producers often react in a similar manner. Rock Records manager Celine Cheung from Hong Kong complained about how lazy Chinese rock singers are, and that they constantly had to visit Beijing to inquire about the progress of Dou Wei. Others consider them simply brainwashed by communist propaganda. To repeat a quote used in Chapter 1 from Hong Kong manager Dickson Dee:

"After so many years of communist education [the musicians] are actually kind of brainwashed already and they do not know how to be against the government."

The production of rock can thus be interpreted as a struggle over and for culture. Boundaries - that is, markers of cultural difference - are both drawn and contested. The commitment of producers to Chinese rock can be traced to a complex and contradictory set of factors. It is a cultural pilgrimage, yet for producers the final destination of this pilgrimage - Beijing - simultaneously signifies repression and unpredictability. Thus, commercial aspirations are strongly fueled by specific social and cultural considerations. In the words of Louis Chan from Red Star:

"We cannot divide a music product into an artistic side and a commercial side; that’s the reality."

He correctly points to the impossibility of clearly separating the creative process of music-making from the commercial side; as such, his statement underlines my critique on the earlier described assertion that Chinese rock has been crushed under the forces of commercialization. Record producers are part and parcel of the production of a music culture. It might be more fair to argue that due to the restrictions put on the commercialization of rock music, Chinese rock has failed to establish a firm position in the Chinese cultural landscape. As a result, regional record companies - Magic Stone from Taiwan and Red Star from Hong Kong - gradually pulled out of the Chinese rock market, leaving open a space that was filled by local companies like Jingwen (with releases from Cui Jian, Zi Yue, Tang Dynasty, Baojiajie 43, Ling Dian, and the Compass), Modern Sky (Sober, New Pants, Supermarket, Hu Mage, The Fly, and NO), and New Bees (The Flowers and Cobra). The production of rock is characterized by a decrease rather than an increase of economic ties between China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

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26 The company statement of Jingwen is interesting, especially if one bears in mind that this company has released both Cui Jian and Zi Yue, two of the more critical voices of the Beijing rock culture: "Since its establishment, the company takes the principle of "developing the primary creative music of the mainland, and giving great impetus to the mainland's culture cause" as its ultimate aim." It can be argued that the nationalistic stance is reflected in choices for rock that are considered to be very Chinese by both the musicians and the audiences, namely that of Zi Yue, Cui Jian, and Tang Dynasty. But the celebratory tone of the company statement seems to be at odds with the, at times, critical voices of these bands.
This local turn in the production of rock is in the popular mainland press considered to have resulted in the emergence of the New Sound Movement. In particular Modern Sky plays a pivotal role, with at least ten new titles a year in what is perceived to be the rebirth of Chinese rock, a rebirth that followed the crisis discussed in Chapter 1. As well as being a record company, Modern Sky publishes its own monthly music magazine - *Modern Sky Magazine* - which contains (like other magazines, such as *Music Heaven*) a compilation CD introducing both Chinese and Western bands with an accompanying booklet explaining the tracks. It also has its own rock venue, Bar 17 in Sanlitun (a street of bars located in the diplomatic area of Beijing).

The close link between Modern Sky and the perceived rebirth of Chinese rock underlines once again the intertwinement of music-making and the record industry in the production of the rock culture. New Bees is another local independent company that operates in a style similar to that of Modern Sky. In the near future, more small local labels will emerge in Beijing, many of which will be linked to Internet companies. Shen Lihui, manager of Modern Sky, has set a trend in the music business of China. Although both Jingwen and Modern Sky are a local company, they are strikingly different. Jingwen resembles very much an old-style work unit or danwei: It is located in a gray apartment block, directed by older men, and - given its status as a music distributor - has close ties with the official structures. Modern Sky works more independently: It is run by young people and is housed in a chaotic office where the most recent computers (i-Macs, of course) are used. Shen Lihui is profiting from what he calls "a relaxed attitude towards music publishing on the part of political authorities" (in Steen 2000: 46), a relaxation most certainly linked to the dawning of government control after the 15th party congress in September 1997. Modern Sky has been labeled by Guo and Su (in Steen 2000: 47) a "typical postmodern PRC paradox" because it uses different tactics to circumvent regulations.27

Modern Sky signifies a break with the old system; it shows how new, young entrepreneurs have created a space that operates more independently from the state, a space filled by young entertainment and Internet companies.28 But however promising its start might seem, the

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27 Steen (2000) quotes Guo and Su, who explain the publishing of their magazine as follows: "Small magazines have used the quasi-legal vehicle of advertising licenses to outflank China's conservative cultural czars." It remains unclear exactly what quasi-legal means here.

28 Unfortunately, both Jingwen and Modern Sky were deliberately vague when I inquired about their specific legal status, and no one else active in the culture industry could tell me more. Consequently, I cannot explain precisely how both companies are tied to the official structures. Shen Lihui did point out, however, that because their company is involved in the publishing of the music, they have more control and lose less money compared to record companies which rely on the official publishing houses. Again, he remained vague about precisely what this involvement entailed.
financial picture drawn earlier in this chapter has not changed. There are rumors in the rock culture that Modern Sky’s financial problems are getting worse. In the summer of 2000, Badhead - the sub-label that was used for underground bands - became an independent label, with The Fly’s vocalist Feng Jiangzhou as its manager. Badhead has suffered from a lack of money right from the start. Various foreign companies have showed interest in buying Modern Sky, with Sony named as the most likely candidate (Virant 1999: 12). Thus, to label Modern Sky a local company might prove inaccurate over time. The local turn marks a specific moment in China’s modern history, and it remains to be seen whether local or regional companies are strong enough to compete with the big foreign record companies that will most likely be given more space to operate after China joins the WTO in 2001.

Again, cultural factors are named by the managers of the local companies to explain why the regional ones didn’t really get a foothold in the Chinese rock market. In the words of Fu Chung from New Bees:

“\text{The problem is that the managers were not Beijignese, so they had little knowledge on how to operate in the mainland market, and operated as they do in Hong Kong and Taiwan.}”

In particular Modern Sky is clear in positioning its products vis-à-vis the earlier rock bands. Shen Lihui constantly stresses that he wants more diversity. Steen (2000: 55) quotes Shen Lihui from the website of his band, Sober:

“One irresponsible shouter is leading a group of headless shouters; this is today’s situation of Chinese rock music. At present, the irresponsible shouter has already turned into an chattering old woman. Today, without understanding anything, he is still recovering from the complaints of his childhood. In fact, apart from affirming Freudian science, this doesn’t say anything to us. This world has already started to change, and the things he is talking about don’t have anything to do with us. (...) I think, he or they should go into a museum and get some sleep!”

Clearly Shen Lihui is talking here about Cui Jian and his generation. Cui Jian responds to this by labeling the new generation as “charlatans without culture” (Yan 1999: 31). With the depoliticization of everyday life, Cui Jian is framed as a voice from the past; the bands from Modern Sky have taken over his role. The early generation is downplayed as comprising screaming, long-haired individuals. The new generation is said to reflect contemporary urban life: They are more playful and less rebellious. New Bees boss Fu Chung gives similar

\footnote{Here, the distinction between rock culture and record industry becomes extraordinarily blurred; these quotes could also have been used to discuss the positioning of the fashionable bands.}
descriptions of the new generation and refers to his company’s band The Flowers as one of its examples. Such characterizations of the New Sound advocated by Modern Sky cover up the fragmented state of Beijing’s rock culture. I showed in Chapter 3 how some scenes, such as the underground bands, are anything but apolitical. But in employing such a chronological framework, Modern Sky positions itself as the new brand name for rock. It is a clever move in terms of marketing, as it presents the unique selling points of their products. Shen Lihui provides more markers with which to distinguish today’s from the previous generation (in Steen 2000: 56):

“New Music’s function is to link up. In the past, the temperament of [bands like] ‘Tang Dynasty’ was very local. The new bands are much more international. We are preparing to spread much more Chinese new wave music to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Europe. Not to make contact and not to exchange is impossible. The Indians also had culture, but they failed to make contact. Therefore, their influence weakened day by day.”

Fu Chung from New Bees voiced a similar ambition:

“I think that if we can produce music that can meet the standard of international music, many overseas Chinese will be proud of it. (...) [Taiwan and Hong Kong rock musicians] lack an idea or spirit in their music.”

Which brings us back to the negotiation of place. The local turn signifies a desire to become global, which corresponds to my earlier observation that just as the local travels well globally, the global travels well locally. Again, such positioning too easily produces a neat chronological order which denies the plurality of Beijing rock; for example, the band NO (which is released by Modern Sky) has frequently been criticized for its sinified aesthetics. What interests me here, though, is how regional companies motivate their activities in terms that reflect a cultural pilgrimage, whereas a local company aims to conquer the world by adopting to the perceived global (that is, Western) standards of rock. Fu Cheng’s remarks on the attempts to make rock with Chinese characteristics are indicative:

“I feel it makes no sense. When I listen to a Dutch band, I don’t question what its Dutch characteristics are. What matters is whether the music moves you. Since rock comes originally from the West it is obvious that musicians play Western instruments. If they insist on integrating Chinese elements, the music becomes unnatural and is not successful. Music is all about authenticity and sincerity.”

30 Because The Flowers sold well in Taiwan (50,000 copies in one month), where it was released under the Magic Stone label, New Bees managed to earn a lot more money than they did in China.
CHAPTER 6
COMMERCIAL BETRAYAL

What links the motivations of regional and local record companies is that both express a desire for a strong Chinese culture, a desire that is packaged in the sound of rock.

**Marketing Mythologies**

Government restrictions - such as limited air time on radio and TV, and strict regulations for large-scale concerts - make it difficult for record companies to market rock music. Important media that can promote albums are music magazines and posters displayed in music stores. Also the jacket design and the videoclips can be considered promotional materials. Especially the limited air time is a major drawback. Radio and TV broadcasting is considered by the music industry as the most important way to promote songs and albums. It is not my aim here to discuss the impact of these restrictions on the development of the rock culture; it suffices to include it here as an additional factor affecting the “commercialization” of rock in China. In the following chapter, I will discuss censorship in greater detail. Here, I aim to elaborate on how record companies market rock, and trace the importance of the rock mythology. I will show how rock music is set apart from other music genres through specific marketing strategies that closely relate to the rock mythology. Similar to my analysis of the music scenes in Chapter 3, I will discuss three interrelated aspects, namely the marketing aesthetics, the construction of authenticity, and the negotiation of place. I will first show how regional companies like Magic Stone and Red Star frame rock, after which I will discuss how the local turn signifies a shift in the marketing of rock.

Magic Stone was the first company to invest a considerable amount of money in the promotion of rock. Its sophisticated videoclips, professional jacket designs, and careful packaging of the artist have profoundly professionalized the imaging of rock. When I pursue a semiotic reading of the jackets of Magic Stone (and, as I indicated in Chapter 1, such a reading has its limitations as these are my own readings, rather than that of audiences), I consider its aesthetics predominantly masculine - not necessarily because the singers and bands are all male, but merely because of the imagery. He Yong is depicted half-naked with his head burning, and this adds to the masculine image of rock. The jacket of China Fire 2 depicts a pile of TVs, all tuned to the same image - that of a burning fire. The flames represent, in my view, the rebellious spirit of rock. Guitar rocker Zhou Ren’s jacket again presents a half-naked singer, this time a singer who is trying to escape from a can of baked beans. One possible and overtly politicized reading is that while the suffocating red sauce of communism might be imprisoning the blank, faceless masses, the rock star is trying to fight his way out of the tasteless misery (see Figure 6.3).

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31 According to Olav Vlaar from the NVPI, the Dutch representative of the IFPI.
Inside, the jacket consists of a pastiche of images. It shows the musicians with a raised middle finger (to appease the censors, the word “fuck” on a T-shirt has been changed to “fuct”), and one picture presents the band joyfully jumping up and down on a rubbish dump. Images of “traditional China”, such as a paper cutting and an old flute, are put alongside images of communist China - such as a CCP badge - as well as images signifying the transition to modernity, such as a game computer, a Zippo lighter, a coffee machine, and a key ring depicting a scantily-dressed woman. These images are scattered around on the jacket, dominated by pictures of the band playing their instruments or taking a break. There is a surplus of meaning, a symbolic overflow that signifies chaos and disorder. The seriousness drawn on the faces when they are actually making music stands in sharp contrast to the joyful poses on the rubbish dump. Making music is, after all, a serious business.
These aesthetics of chaos and disorder construct a rebellious image. The seriousness drawn on their faces while playing the instruments signifies, in my eyes, the authentic artistic musician. In their spare time, they party, have fun, and subvert dominant society, but in their music they are depicted as musicians who are struggling with both themselves and society. These notions of authenticity and rebelliousness intersect with the rock mythology; the jacket produces rock as a distinct music world. There is sex, of course, straight sex (the half-naked woman), there are drugs (a lighter, a pipe, beer), and there is rock’n’roll. But there is more, there has to be more, since this is Chinese rock’n’roll. To negotiate place, to set this CD apart from, for example, Nirvana, images of both traditional and revolutionary China are included. The jacket represents both the struggle of Chinese youth to make sense of contemporary times, and the conscious packaging of the rock mythology, since it is this mythologization that has globally proven to be such a marketing success.32

The aesthetics of rock allows little space for softness. Whereas pop singers from Hong Kong and Taiwan are often photographed in soft-focus, for example while staring dreamily at the sea, rock singers look more serious and tough. Neither can one find the gayish pop aesthetics, like male singers depicted in tight wet T-shirts. Although the production of rock, being a hard cultural form, has a stronger involvement in the negotiation of place, pop is at times involved in similar attempts. The following e-mails sent by the composer of an Anita Mui song to lyricist Chow Yiufai are indicative (March 1999):

“This is the original Gary Tong - Joey Tang version. Very Tai-Chi style. But the melody is more Western and too ‘free’/jam.”

“This is the new modified version I have done. The melody is more Eastern and ‘formulated,’ rather than too free.”

Here, the world of pop is clearly involved in a localization of sound. We see a strong reification of cultural stereotypes: The West is considered free and jam-like, whereas the East is more formulated, rather than too free. These quotes underline the importance of specific cultural considerations in the production of music, be it pop or rock.33 But in general, as I have also shown in previous chapters, rock is more conspicuously involved in the negotiation of place.

32 Caglar (1997: 5-6) gives an example of the importance of authenticity in the marketing of Turkish hip-hop in Germany. Like Chinese rock, Turkish hip-hop is positioned vis-à-vis pop (pop songs are considered commercialized love songs), and “within the context of valorized discourses of marginality and diaspora the image of being the ‘authentic’ voice of the subversive minority might work as a successful marketing strategy.”

33 Perceived regional cultural differences are equally crucial. According to Celine Cheung from Rock Records Hong Kong, the Taiwanese are more concerned about the music whereas Hong Kongese focus on stardom. Thus, what is important for Hong Kong is “a good packaging of the album and the artist, in Taiwan the focus is more on music itself.” Here she reifies the stereotypes of Hong Kong being a commercial place and Taiwan being a cultural place.
Record company Red Star relies heavily on communist aesthetics; the cover of Heaven, for example, depicts a large crowd wearing Mao Suits and dark glasses standing in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace. Also the name of the record company itself is a clear reference to the communist revolution. It can be argued that in its imagery, Red Star critically reflects upon the past, a past that still lives in the present because its main producer still carries the same brand name, that is: CCP. But these signs are consciously produced by a record company, and as such merely serve as signifiers that set rock apart from other music worlds. They can be considered a parody of communism, a parody that is not so much rooted in political idealism, as in the conviction that it sells well. Communist paraphernalia sold well, especially during the celebrations of Mao Zedong’s 100th birthday in the early 1990s.

For Red Star, as for Magic Stone, a rough, male image is part and parcel of the rock identity, as manager Leslie Chan told me:

“In China, if you want to make a rock act, you must give it something rough; don’t make it too beautiful, don’t polish it too much. So for Zheng Jun we made him look not as rough as Cui Jian, we made him look handsome, but not like Leon Lai with make up. We concentrate a lot on the music side. (...) His music is not that rock, more pop-rock, so I selected the picture where he had tightened up all his hair and had a clean face.”

He speaks of making a rock act, a statement that shows how consciously a rock image is constructed. The way he negotiates the positioning of a singer he considers to fall somewhere between rock and pop is telling. Because Zheng Jun is not positioned as a ‘tough’ and real rocker, his long hair has to be disguised, but neither is he as ‘made up’ as a pop star. He has to look natural, as a handsome boy whose profession is making music. By depicting him on the jacket with a guitar, Red Star foregrounds the fact that he makes his own music, and has his own thoughts. After leaving Red Star, Zheng Jun signed up with Polygram (now Universal). In their promotion of Zheng Jun, they too stressed his authenticity:

“Zheng Jun is one of the most impressive and most authentic and energetic pop-rock singers on mainland China.”

Polygram’s marketing plan for Zheng Jun’s second album (The Third Eye) is interesting, as it shows how record companies package an artist. The plan states:

**Image:** dalliance, talented, stylish but simple.
**Artist status:** taking gradual steps toward international recognition.
**Album concept:** his own story and life attitude. Lyrics are sad and soulful but sometimes with black humor.
**Music style:** UK pop rock with Indian and Chinese traditional music instruments.
Like Red Star, they opt for a simple, clean styling with a focus on the personal characteristic of the music. The music style is defined with reference to a UK music genre; Western music remains the primary reference point. And Zheng Jun? He acts accordingly, as I showed in Chapter 3. The artist is positioned on the margin of the rock culture; in line with the rock mythology, the authenticity of Zheng Jun is carefully designed.

Red Star’s company statement articulates the narrative of authenticity, reproduces the pop-rock dichotomy, and thus indirectly strengthens the construction of Beijing as the artistic center of Chinese culture:

Red Star production’s philosophy revolves around the concept of ‘originality’, disputing the notion of ‘canned music’ - which refers to the overly produced music of the Cantopop industry: commercial packaging of teen idols, separation of songwriter and performer, overly produced, slick, meaningless pop music that doesn’t call for an ounce of creativity! Unfortunately, this ‘canned music’ is overwhelming the music industry in the Asia region today.

Their quest for un-canned music is reflected in the company’s logo, which depicts a can on a prohibition sign: Forbidden for canned music. Most companies highlight the fact that these are real musicians who write and compose their own music. This is well reflected in Magic Stone’s description of their artist Wang Yong:

Graduated from the China Conservatory in Beijing, Wang Yong is a gifted musician who plays two extremely different instruments, the Guzheng (a Chinese flat-bed string instrument) and MIDI music in perfect harmony. (...) Come discover a new China where no one has ever been.

There are numerous examples of promotional materials that stress the musical capacities of the artists.

Chineseness is articulated in order to market rock beyond the confines of mainland China, but it is a contested subject. Not everyone working in the music industry believes it important to stress the fact that the music is produced in China. The marketing manager of Magic Stone in Hong Kong told me how he consciously downplayed the fact that the music came from the mainland:

“To the Hong Kong audience, China stands for backwardness, out of touch with trends, so we had to position it on the market as the new hope of rock; we deliberately did not stress that it came from China. (...) It’s a brand-new kind of rock’n’roll but it just happened to be from mainland China. We placed the music in the context of world music.”
Also manager Dickson Dee believes that Tang Dynasty should not focus so much on the “Chinese characteristics” of its music:

“Chinese bands should not stress all the time that they are a Chinese band. You know that heavy metal and hard rock are a Western musical form, so just play it and play it well.”

The opinion of the Hong Kong manager of Magic Stone, however, is not reflected in their promotional materials. There, the fact that this is rock music from China is clearly articulated. The label’s subtitle is China Fire (Zhongguo Huor). The leading slogan is a clear reflection of how the rock mythology is intertwined with marketing:

“The worst times, the best music” (zui huaide shidai, zui haode yinyue)

Here, the perception of China as a totalitarian, repressive society is subtly put forward and linked to the emergence of a rock culture in Beijing. The slogan suggests that good rock can only emerge from a repressive, bad society. As such, it stresses the perceived political differences between Taiwan and China, political differences that are considered useful as a marketing strategy for this Taiwanese record company. Along with classical Chinese music, rock music travels the best as it continues to capture the global imagination. Music stores in Hong Kong and Taiwan sell Chinese rock, whereas they hardly sell any pop from the mainland. Western journalists and academics are fascinated by rock rather than pop. Whereas traditional music travels well globally because it articulates ancient China, rock does so because it articulates both ancient and communist China. As such, specific perceptions of mainland China affect the outreach of certain music genres, perceptions that in turn are a crucial symbolic source for the marketing of, in this case, rock on a regional or global scale.

Sometimes, a marginal place is articulated, constructing an image of even more original and exotic music. Magic Stone clearly points out the influence of Tibetan music on the music of Wang Yong, and the importance of religion in his music. JVC Hong Kong has licensed the Mongolian pop-rock band Ling Dian from Jingwen for the market outside China. It states in the promotional material:

“Inner Mongolia, a part of PRC, is a harsh, sparsely populated land. The winters are

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34 Dickson Dee holds a rather cynical (or perhaps realistic) attitude toward the band. He explained why he would prefer to position them mainly as good musicians: “Since they don’t have anything to say, I want to image them as plain guys making rock.”

35 The packaging of religion, as reflected in the CD title “Samsara”, does not correspond with the lifestyle of Wang Yong, who told me he does not believe in Buddhism.
The militaristic metaphor strengthens the importance the record company attaches to the geographical origin of the band: It is positioned as being on the verge of conquering the whole of Asia. Commercial motives result in an articulation of place; the metaphor of war suggests that this is not a peaceful process, but that place is to be interpreted as something to fight for. The myth is that music is without frontiers, that it unifies people around the globe. But sounds do not travel freely; they are confined by geographic boundaries, and as such are part and parcel of power games. The desire to break through geographical boundaries with rock music, driven by commercial motives, can also be interpreted as a cultural-political struggle. Mongolia, as the political and cultural margin of China, strikes back, after being imperialized by Western and Gangtai sounds - and this, ironically, is according to JVC, a transnational Japanese company. Again, the global reproduces the local as a commercial strategy.

The company further points out the musical skills of the members (thus articulating that these are true musicians), JVC's perception of the impact of June 4th that drove rock to the underground (thus articulating the rebellious character of this culture), and the hardships the band suffered when moving to Beijing (thus articulating that they all have the true rock spirit, i.e., strength and perseverance). Ling Dian provides a fine example of the importance of the rock mythology in marketing narratives. The authenticity of the music, which is rooted in the soil of Inner Mongolia, coupled with the sincerity and perseverance of the band members, has produced a rebellious sound in which pop and rock are blended. And the music sold well: Ling Dian is one of the best selling acts on mainland China. But the conquering of Asia is turning out to be less easy: So far the band has not been very successful outside China.36

The marketing strategies discussed so far are from regional record companies. I have shown the importance of rebellion in the imagery of Magic Stone, the significance of communist symbols in the marketing of Red Star, and the exoticizing strategies of JVC. The local turn proves refreshing in that it has introduced a more avant-gardistic, more "(post-) modern" imagery. Jingwen's aesthetics remains framed tightly within the rock mythology, as do the

36JVC Hong Kong manager Steve Mui blames the Hong Kong audience for this: "The music education is not good, they only know pop music, they can't distinguish other kinds of music, that is why the band does not sell well." Needless to say, the Hong Kong audience is, especially when compared to the mainland audience, much more exposed to Western music and thus to different genres.
Figure 6.4: Jacket of Sober

jackets from the regional record companies; the jackets of Cui Jian, Tang Dynasty, and Zi Yue all tie in well with the rock idiom. But the aesthetics of both New Bees and Modern Sky signify an interesting semiotic rupture. In line with the earlier quoted desire to be truly modern, the aesthetics of the new companies can, and are, considered to be more up to date. This becomes more clear if we take a look at the jacket of Sober.

We see a band with their own logo, as though it were a brand name (in English!) that has to be sold (which it is after all); the members are dressed neatly and vocalist Shen Lihui is gazing anxiously into the camera. Gone are the rebellious poses and naked torsos. The band presents a more cosmopolitan image. Vocalist Shen Lihui explained to me that in their imagery,
Sober tries to be postmodern; they opt for a pastiche of images, full of references to both the West and living a modern life. The pose of the band on this jacket is, as Shen Lihui told me, a reference to The Beatles. References to either ancient or communist China are relatively absent, although the band is depicted in front of the Chinese flag on the inlay of this jacket. “Modern” images predominate on the inlay: There are pictures of the Beijing subway, a computer, a television, and Adam asking Eve whether she feels good. As in their videoclip (described in Chapter 3), the jacket is more playful, more cosmopolitan than those of either Magic Stone or Red Star.

What Sober’s jacket signifies is a recurring attempt to localize Chinese rock, yet what is new is the strong desire to globalize it at the same time. The complete package - which includes their own magazine with CD, the Internet pages, a rock venue, and a diverse selection of CDs - sets Modern Sky apart from other labels. In its diversity it is impossible to speak of one marketing style. Instead, the marketing has produced different scenes; some tie in well with the rock mythology, others are further removed from it. Also New Bees is involved in the production of scenes; in its marketing of The Flowers, it time and again stressed that this is a teenage band, thus adding to the spontaneous, mischievous aesthetics of pop-punk; whereas, as I discussed in Chapter 4, the cover of Cobra’s last album integrates the symbol for the female sex into the band’s logo, thus positioning them as a female band. The new local companies market rock in a more targeted way, and in general their up-to-date aesthetics resonates a strong desire to make Chinese rock with international characteristics.

The assertion that commercialization is harmful to the true rock spirit is articulated in China through the construction of a periodized narrative that sets the 1980s apart from the 1990s. Rock is believed to reflect the authentic spirit of the 1980s; its rebelliousness has been crushed under the market forces of the 1990s. However appealing this narrative is, it proves to be unbalanced. In this chapter I have shown that the record industry is crucial for the production of rock as a distinct music world, and as such, the relationship between them has to be interpreted in a more dynamic way.

My study of the record industry shows that the complex processes of commercialization during the 1990s have led neither to the disappearance of the state nor to a financial boom. In the 1990s, the record industry witnessed a commercialization with Chinese characteristics. Because of state regulations against independent foreign companies, limitations on the import of foreign releases, relatively low revenues, and poorly enforced copyright regulations, China is largely excluded from a global music market that is dominated by a few transnational record companies, whereas Hong Kong and Taiwan are not. Instead, regional record companies
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from Hong Kong and Taiwan have entered the music business in China.

The rock industry in China is rather small in terms of the number of new releases each year, the number of albums sold, and - especially - the revenues it generates (which is due not only to the low price of China’s predominant music carrier, the cassette, but also to the limited share of revenues that is left for the record company). The power, both in terms of money and as regards control over the selection and distribution of releases, of state-owned music publishers frustrates the development of the Chinese music industry considerably. The role of music publishers sets the Chinese market apart from other such markets around the globe, and proves the point that it is still too early to speak of an “open market”. Regional record companies have commercial motives for entering the market, but these are embedded in specific cultural considerations. The investment in rock from Beijing by producers from Hong Kong and Taiwan is related to a strong discontent with the pop music these producers grew up with. It can furthermore be interpreted as an imagined cultural pilgrimage.

But the commercial and cultural links established by Hong Kong and Taiwanese record companies with the Beijing rock scene do not imply the emergence of a common culture. The assumed emergence of a “Greater China” covers up cultural struggles between companies and artists, struggles in which “national characteristics” are articulated in order to explain perceived differences and strengthen one’s own position. The production of rock can thus be interpreted as a struggle over and for culture. Regional companies seem to lose the struggle to local producers, and the production of rock is characterized by a decrease rather than an increase of economic ties between China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. “Greater China” proves to be both more fragmented and less great than often assumed. The local turn signifies a move away from a focus on making rock with Chinese characteristics, toward making rock that meets global - that is, Western - standards. It reflects a desire to become truly cosmopolitan, which is coupled to a desire to have Chinese rock enter the global music market.

The rock mythology is an important symbolic source for the marketing of rock. Its predominantly male aesthetics signifies rebelliousness and authenticity. In the articulation of authenticity, the negotiation of place plays an important role; not only are both traditional and revolutionary China constructed time and again in the marketing imagery, but also rock is frequently juxtaposed vis-à-vis pop from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Sometimes, it is a global record company that produces the local as a commercial strategy. The marketing of rock clearly shows how culture and production are intensely intertwined; the dynamics of commodification, corresponding to the rock mythology, produce rock as a distinct music world. This becomes even more conspicuous when we look at the different marketing aesthetics employed for different scenes. The actors in this world - that is, both the producers and the musicians - eagerly retreat to the safe ground of the rock mythology that provides them with
a sense of place, and constructs an imagined, unified identity. There is indeed sex, there are indeed drugs, and above all, there is rock’n’roll - that hard cultural form that is so eagerly being localized.

The globalized imagery of rock and its related notions of authenticity and musical talent blend with articulations of Chineseness. The state - mocked at in the imagery, often perceived as the primary antagonist of the rock culture - is part and parcel of its production, both in practical terms and in providing a rich source of symbolic material. Although not as strong as traditional Chinese music, rock, more than pop, captures both the regional and the global imagination, in which ancient and communist China are articulated. The world of Chinese rock, with its jarring guitar solos and screaming voices, is quite a safe and pleasant world. It’s just a pity that it turns out to be so difficult to make a living in it.