Red Sonic Trajectories - Popular Music and Youth in China

de Kloet, B.J.

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The rock culture in China does not exist, as such. Rock is not dead; as a genre, it is falling apart into scenes that are supposedly different, temporarily stable, and - at the same time - held together by the same beliefs in rock. Rock is not dead, given the sustaining power of the rock mythology. It is this mythology that produces the crucial, spatially and ideologically inscribed divide between rock from Beijing and pop from predominantly Taiwan and Hong Kong. Whether it is folk, underground music, or pop-punk, rock musicians seem to agree on one thing: They are not making pop. In contrast to what is often perceived by musicians, record companies, journalists, and academics as the commercial fake sound of pop, rock musicians express their “true feelings” in their music. Pop is rock’s most conspicuous constitutive outside.

Authenticity is of crucial importance in the rock mythology, especially when this mythology travels to places outside the West. Whereas musicians in the West are literally born in the imagined center of rock, their counterparts in China constantly have to prove themselves in order to gain the right to make rock music. Compared to the Western claim to the origin, and therefore to the continual making, of rock, Chinese rock musicians must bear the burden of providing authenticating proof in order to avoid being labeled a mere copycat. The production of a scenic authenticity involves an exploration of different aesthetic tracks. I have analyzed the dadaistic, vulgar, and metaphorical aesthetics coupled to the low-fi recording techniques of underground bands, the chivalric aesthetics of heavy metal, the regular-guy aesthetics of folk-rock, the rhythmic DIY aesthetics of hardcore punk to which pop-punk adds a spontaneous mischievous pose, and, finally, the eclectic, electronic, and cosmopolitan aesthetics of the fashionable bands.

We are thus left with two key, mutually conflative, dichotomies that underlie the politics of rock in China: the West versus the non-West, and rock versus pop. Different scenes employ different tactics to negotiate these dichotomies and to arrive at a shared construction of authenticity, a process that often involves a negotiation of place. By adding “Chinese flavors” to the sound, it becomes more real (that is, non-West, non-pop) as it is rooted in Chinese soil - or, better, the soil of the capital, Beijing. Rock can be considered a hard cultural form. It is “hard” because the rock mythology produces a rather tight and stable (or to put it more negatively, rigid) package of images, sounds, styles, and expectations. The perceived origin of rock - the West - in conjunction with the hard force of the rock mythology, inspires a strong

Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass (1871)
desire and demand to authenticate and localize rock in China. Hence the repeated articulations of ancient and of communist China in the Chinese rock aesthetics.

These articulations are in particular significant for those scenes that tie in more with the typical rock idiom, such as the rebellious sound of Cui Jian, the heavy metal of Tang Dynasty, the hardcore punk of 69, and the underground sound of NO. The “harder” the sound, the stronger the urge to localize it. Bands that are positioned in scenes operating on the boundaries of the rock mythology - such as pop-rock, folk-rock, pop-punk, and the fashionable bands (the recurring hyphen already indicating the hybridity of these scenes) - are less involved in attempts to localize their sound. Sometimes, they even choose to articulate their global aspirations. For instance, the fashionable bands, which are emblematic of the New Sound Movement of Beijing, clearly voice their wish to be as global as possible. Consequently, and despite their current popularity among Chinese youths, they receive less attention from the Western press since they appear and sound less Chinese. Whereas the soft sells locally, it is the hard that makes it to the West. In a related way, the global travels well locally, and the local travels well globally.

Academics’ interpretations of the rock culture range from the cynical - like that of Barmé, who perceives the co-option of rock by both the record industry and the Party as the end of its assumed rebellious and subversive spirit - to the celebratory and romantic, like Dutton, Jones, and Steen, for whom rock singers embody the spirit of a rebellious youth culture, where individualism prevails over the collective and confusion reigns over ideological certainties. In the latter perspective, the totalizing narratives of the past have dissipated and left behind an ideological vacuum through which a new generation crawls with its electric guitars. Such a romantic reading of rock goes hand in hand with a critique on the processes of commercialization. Apart from Dutton, all authors interpret commercialization as being harmful to the “true” spirit of rock. This narrative - which is equally strong in Chinese academic, journalistic, and cultural discourses - constantly reifies the rock mythology by repeating the same assumption or belief: Rock ought to be rebellious and authentic, and these two aspects will never make a good match with the spirit of money.

All authors treat rock as reflecting the Zeitgeist of Chinese urban youth culture. It is an appealing idea to interpret rock as a mirror of society. However, in this book, I have tried to walk through the mirror, as Alice did in Wonderland, and look for the paradoxes, taking a paradox as a “seemingly absurd though perhaps actually well-founded statement” (OED 1984). Throughout this exploration, we have come across many seemingly absurd statements. If we are to grasp the meanings of rock and the dynamics of Chinese society, we ought to take these paradoxes seriously, rather than cover them up under a comforting blanket of fixed theoretical preoccupations that force us to say rock is either this or that, and not both. In the previous chapters, I laid bare the paradoxes (but without labeling them as such) that underlie the music
industry, the making of music, the listening to music, and the governance of music, and showed how readings that appear to be contradictory are in fact complementary.

In my concluding observations, I will show that rock is a dynamic, sonic field with the rock mythology as a powerful deparadoxicalizing force. This force produces rigid binaries and informs univocal readings. To foreground the deparadoxicalizing force of the rock mythology is to acknowledge its productive, creative, and generic power on the one hand, and its confining, suppressive, and violent power on the other. A more subtle, fluid, and scenic approach proves more fruitful than a subcultural reading, as it avoids juxtapositioning the state vis-à-vis a supposedly rebellious rock culture, thus again reifying rock and the state. By positioning rock as a cultural form hardened by the deparadoxicalizing force of its mythology, it becomes necessary to include all domains related to rock: its constitutive outsides, the audiences, the producers, and the state. Given its implications for the study not only of rock, but of popular culture in general, I consider it worth taking the risk of introducing such a terribly long and unpronounceable word as “deparadoxicalizing,” which might inspire some to pigeonhole me as yet another devoted follower of an inaccessible, jargonized postmodern world. To grasp these broader implications, I will sketch some recurring paradoxes in the workings of and writings on rock music in China.

The cut in the edge of dakou CDs signifies an entrance to the center of a global music culture. The vivid youth culture that emerged from this fertile sonic soil in urban China just before the turn of this century, operates on the fringes of Chinese society. The emergence of a dakou generation coincided with the perceived birth of Beijing’s New Sound Movement. The image of a cut CD generates metaphors that help us understand the dynamics of contemporary rock and youth cultures in China. The dakou CD has opened up a Western music world that otherwise would have remained closed. The music itself might not be political, but the fact that these CDs are illegal makes the act of buying a politicized one. The dakou lifestyle is a depoliticized one with distinctive political dimensions. Cut CDs are considered specifically Chinese (you can’t buy them in the West), and yet they are dumped by the West, and these are sounds from the West, sounds that are predominantly excluded from the official market.

In China, the dakou CD provides a fertile soil for rock to grow in. The dakou CD is, like the dakou generation and the rock culture, as local as it is global. When the West enters China, there are possibilities of subversion. The global powers get a cut, they are re-appropriated, localized to an extent that upsets both the Chinese state and the West. There is a profound cut in the global, a cut that localizes the global, and even renders it illegal. The local and the global are complementary rather than contradictory.
Readings of rock in China often either stress that it is a copy of Western music, or point out its specific Chinese characteristics. The paradox here is that popular cultures in China, and elsewhere, are as local as they are global. To perceive this as a contradiction misses the point as much as singling out either one of them. However, due to the deparadoxicalizing force of the rock mythology, the Western focus is often on the Chineseness of Chinese rock, whereas at times in China, its Chineseness is foregrounded, and at other times, its globality is foregrounded. Popular cultures are, I believe, profoundly *dakou*: They are both global and local, constantly involved as they are in articulating the differences from and sameness with the "origins" of, in this case, rock. Given the historically dominant West to East cultural flows, cultural "origins" are, more often than not, perceived to be located in the West.

Although communist ideology evaporated during the years of reform, the CCP is increasingly relying on nationalist sentiments as a unifying ideology. This often invokes a celebration of both ancient China and communist China. In its eagerness to localize the sound of rock, so as to avoid copying the West, Beijing musicians employ related articulations of Chineseness. At times their references are overtly subversive: Some bands transform the peaceful sound of "traditional" instruments in order to challenge the underlying myth of China's rich cultural past, while others simply express their pride in Chinese culture. All, however, reify the idea of China's uniqueness and, in doing so, come close to the dominant ideologies of the CCP. But simultaneously - and it is crucial to erase the notion of time here, since I am no longer talking about moments of compliance and moments of rebellion, as both happen at the same spatial and temporal juncture - these dominant ideologies are subverted.

Cui Jian reifies the uniqueness of China, but couples this to a political or cultural critique. In the heavy metal of Tang Dynasty, China's past is celebrated, resonating with the nationalist policies of the CCP, while the role of the Party is completely erased, articulating a critique of the modern times. The Fly deliberately vulgarizes the communist past, both reifying the uniqueness of China's modern past and criticizing it. The rock mythology produces rock as a rebellious sound: Those who embrace the mythology (Steen, Jones) opt for the subversive reading, whereas those who say Chinese rock has betrayed the mythology (Barmé) - a critique that again reifies the mythology - opt for the compliant reading. Both, however, are deparadoxicalized readings, as they fail to acknowledge that rock is both rebellious and compliant. It is time to unhook the rebellious rock star, and unravel the complementary - rather than the contradictory - politics of rock.

The politics of popular culture reflect this paradox time and again. Readings that stress the "subversive" side of, for example, Madonna's gender performances, are as inadequate as those that point out the ways in which she reasserts dominant gender roles. Madonna does
both. Only if we position such paradoxes at the heart of our analysis, can we grasp the politics of popular culture and its complex dynamics in society at large.

Inclusive <<< Beijing Rock >>> Exclusive

The politics of rock function, as all politics do, as a force of both inclusion and exclusion. One needs an outside to constitute an inside; hence the importance of studying the sounds that are excluded by the rock mythology. This has resulted in a discussion of what I have called the subaltern sounds. In its masculinity, rock marginalizes the feminine. In its reification of Beijing as the cultural center of China, rock marginalizes voices from places outside the capital. By constantly criticizing and ridiculing Gangtai pop, rock excludes sounds that are not packaged by the rock mythology. The female voices employ their own tactics to negotiate the masculinity of rock, some by a denial of gender and some by a dramatization of it, whereas others inscribe gender into punk ideology. The sounds from places outside Beijing voice a critique on the center, which they consider arrogant and corrupted by the spirit of money. In Shanghai and Guangzhou, bands claim to have subverted the commercial positioning of their city, and to therefore have become even more authentic, more real than rock from the center.

If we are to interrogate the rock mythology, a journey through Gangtai pop is most promising. The often heard critique that pop can never be rebellious or politically subversive proves easy to debunk; there are numerous examples of the political use of pop. Of course, the focus on the political in the strict sense of the word is itself questionable; the ambiguity of pop, along with its banality and artificiality, creates a musical space that dramatizes the present. Pop both relies on and plays with notions of authenticity. In its extravagant display of inauthenticity, pop challenges the idea of the authentic musician (or the unique artist) who composes his or her immortal songs (or makes his or her unique art). It is pop's ambiguity and fluidity, indeed this softness, that makes it such a difficult sound to grasp.

Territorialized <<< Audiences >>> Deteritorialized

Three music zones can be distinguished - the classical, the pop, and the rock zone - through which audiences move in and out. In particular, audiences located in the rock zone are strongly involved in the music; rock, as a hard cultural force, demands more involvement from the audience. The rock mythology is a strong territorializing force, but the territory becomes swampy at the moment of reception. Audiences are both passive and active. Even audiences that can be located in a specific scene within the rock zone have their own tactics of distinction. Due to what I call the infinite possibilities of distinction, rock both territorializes and deterritorializes audiences. This paradox is given scant attention as the rock mythology leads us to perceive the rock audience as a coherent group.
My analysis has revealed some characteristics that indicate the territorializing power of
the rock mythology: Apart from showing a stronger sense of musical involvement, the rock
audience is predominantly male, and a preference for rock goes hand in hand with centering
Beijing as the cultural capital of the imagined Greater China. On the other hand, due to the
mentioned infinite possibilities of distinction, audiences resist being contained in fixed music
genres; the “active” zonal and scenic movements coincide with the “passive” involvement
that is produced by the territorializing power of, for example, the rock mythology. Audiences
are drawn into a music zone, and yet remain mobile: They move to different zones, and
within a zone they move through the scenes.

Audience studies are often burdened by unidimensional readings: They either celebrate
the power of the people in using popular culture to resist the dominant culture (e.g., the
writings of Fiske), or underline the stupefying powers of popular culture on the audience (e.g.,
the writings of Steiner). Both perspectives are presented as contradictory, whereas my study
of the rock audience in Beijing shows that a complementary reading that acknowledges the
force of deparadoxicalization provides a more spacious framework to understand the
experiential complexities of media consumption.

\textbf{Productive \textless\textless Industry \textgreater\textgreater Destructive}

The critique on commercialization is inscribed into a temporal schism: The 1980s are
perceived to be the years of the great cultural debate, both in and outside China, whereas the
1990s are the decade in which the spirit of money took control - a spirit considered harmful
to rock, which, some say, explains why it has lost its rebellious character. Such a reading
articulates and keeps on constructing the rock mythology, as money (a symbol of modern
slavery and civil obedience) is believed to be destructive to the rebelliousness of rock. As
such, the mythology informs a univocal reading and conceals the paradox that rock needs
money as much as it is endangered by it.

Processes of commercialization in China are anything but univocal: For instance, the state
remains a key player in the music industry and in the commercial sector as a whole, while
amidst all the worries over commercialism, the music market, both in China and in “Greater
China,” declined during the 1990s. Furthermore, regional cultural and economic flows are
uneven; particularly Gangtai pop travels well to China, whereas only rock travels back, and
does so on a far smaller scale. However, this has not, as is often claimed, led to the emergence
of a common popular culture in the region; instead, perceived cultural differences are articulated
by musicians, record companies, and audiences. The investments made by companies from
Hong Kong and Taiwan can be interpreted as a commercial and imagined cultural pilgrimage
that failed due to the harsh economic climate. The subsequent local turn signifies the emergence
of Beijing companies that are now the key producers of rock music. It coincides with the rise
of the *dakou* generation and the New Sound Movement. This again shows how processes of production, music-making, and music consumption are closely intertwined, rather than hostile toward one another.

Commercialization - despite its Chinese characteristics - is also nurturing Chinese rock culture. Only after the entry of record companies from Taiwan and Hong Kong could mainland rock establish a firm position in the record stores all over China, and only after the emergence of local companies could rock regain its position in the market in the late 1990s. In other words, commercial processes might have affected Chinese rock, as is often suggested, but they are also productive for its development.

The deparadoxicalizing force of the rock mythology generates readings in which commercialization is considered harmful, while its productive force is ignored; to put it bluntly, commercialization is a necessary prerequisite for any popular cultural form to emerge in a contemporary society. Only when we view the productive and destructive force as complementary, are we able to come to terms with the processes of the commercialization of popular culture.

The paradoxical dynamics of rock become rather tedious as they seem to suffuse all domains related to rock - and in general, popular - culture. Even regulations that result in the containment of representations (copyright protection and censorship) lead to a paradox. First, piracy. On the one hand, piracy is said to be damaging to rock; musicians, producers, publishers, and government ministers alike agree that they lose a lot of money due to pirated copies. To label copyright protection an imperialistic force, or to view the revenue collecting intermediaries solely as ceremonial institutions, is of limited value in the case of China, given the univocality of all parties involved when it comes to denouncing piracy. However eager China is to impose strict copyright regulations, an eagerness related to its wish to enter the world economy, it remains a campaign-like exercise rather than successful law enforcement. Consequently, piracy rates continued to climb during the 1990s.

On the other hand, it must be noted that both piracy and the cut CDs produce a domain of illegality that is nutritious for both Chinese rock and urban youth cultures, of which the *dakou* generation is but one example. The question whether and, if so, how culture ought to be copied or copyrighted, and who benefits at the expense of whom, is a timely one and the answer can never be straightforwardly given. The deparadoxicalizing force of the rock mythology gives rise to readings that consider piracy harmful or imperialistic; piracy's power to produce and contain culture is seldom discussed.
A complex package of regulations govern the production of rock, its mediation on TV, and live performances. The rock mythology directs attention to the restrictive nature of censorship. Not only does it reaffirm the perceived totalitarian character of the CCP, but it also ties in well with the framing of rock as a rebellious sound. To point out the creative negotiations artists and industry employ in order to circumvent, subvert, or ignore the rules, again runs the danger of feeding the idea of the creative artist fighting his or her way through a harsh political landscape for the freedom of his or her thoughts and sounds. Both censorship regulations and the related negotiations are a display and a construction of the rock mythology. But what one loses sight of is how censorship produces rock, precisely because it resonates so neatly with the mythology.

By censoring rock, the CCP actively produces it as a specific music world. Censorship produces speech; it necessarily has to say what cannot be said, which in itself is a speech act. By pointing out that art may or may not be pornographic, the censors themselves draw attention to sexuality, thus inspiring rock bands to include on jackets, or exclude from jackets, images that are deemed to be “pornographic.” Censorship defines what can and what cannot be said and is, albeit less conspicuously, equally present in the West (the ban on Nazi rock is the most simplistic example, and the almost impossibility of speaking in favor of incest points to the more complicated workings of censorship). It forms both the necessary condition for and the limitation of agency; it both contains and produces culture. If we are to trace the politics of censorship, we must stop seeing the two sides as contradictory, and see them as complementary. By liberating censorship from its prevailing politicized reading, we come closer to its necessary omnipresence.

NO IDEOLOGY, PLEASE: WE’RE CHINESE

The rock mythology as a deparadoxicalizing force directs people’s gaze: It encourages them to follow ready-made narratives and to experience a flattened world. Assuming the eyes of Alice in the land of mythology, we are confronted with a wide range of paradoxes that together constitute the world of rock; paradoxes that are too often turned into opposing binaries. If we view these paradoxes seriously, as I argue, we are bound to acknowledge the generic and productive power of the rock mythology, while at the same time refusing to be contained in fixed readings of rock culture. My insistence on listing the range of binaries does not lie in a need to present a piece of neat and tidy discourse that produces rock as a music genre. On the contrary, throughout this book I have analyzed the complex sonic, political, commercial, and cultural processes that produce the world of rock in China. But time and again, we are confronted - in both popular and academic discourse, in both the West and China - with these binaries. The discourse on rock, and, I repeat, on popular culture, is very much framed by the
paradoxes that are turned into opposing binaries.

The harder a sound rocks, the more difficult it is to escape from a univocal reading in which one has to choose. In particular “hard” scenes, such as hardcore punk and underground music, are loud (literally and metaphorically) in denouncing commercialization, and eager to perform a rebellious image - one that is readily picked up by journalists and academics alike. Indeed, these scenes provide ample evidence of the creative, generic power of the rock mythology. It is, I have to admit, these scenes, along with the hoarse sound of Cui Jian, that make me feel at home in Beijing. They point to the most typical sonic power of rock. Yet, in their univocal attitude to such issues as authenticity, rebellion, and commercialization, they allow little space for the paradoxes; consequently, they show us how the hard force of the rock mythology both produces and confines culture.

When we return to the crucial dichotomy rock versus pop, we are confronted with both the generic productivity and the silencing capacity of the rock mythology. How should we grasp the sonic varieties of the soft sounds of pop? Why are we so silent when it comes to discussing the generic subtleties of pop, and the different modalities of karaoke culture? Both the univocality of the harder scenes within rock and the silencing power of the rock mythology as a whole need to be critically interrogated.

As a first step, it will help, I think, to try to live with the paradoxes - to try to grasp their subtleties, their fluidity, their ambiguity - rather than to lose ourselves in a one-sided reading of popular music, in which we either downplay pop or accuse rock of betraying its spirit. If we trace both sides of the paradoxes and take them as complementary rather than contradictory, then the organizing binaries produced by the rock mythology will dissolve - at least theoretically speaking. While acknowledging the creative power of the same mythology, rock (and pop) can be seen as rebellious and in compliance; the commercialization of rock (and of pop) is both damaging and productive; for rock (and pop), censorship is both productive and restrictive.

What, however, remains if our eyes and ears acknowledge the productive power of the rock mythology, while simultaneously resisting its deparadoxicalizing force? The answer is as important as it is simple: We avoid getting trapped in cultural hierarchies. Rather than taking sides in the fights over authenticity and place (examples in this book show how bands accuse one another of being inauthentic, commercialized, orientalizing, Westernized, and so forth), we can trace how such fights are the result of the organizing binaries that constitute the rock mythology. We can see how, as I have tried to show in this book, such binaries are taken as contradictions and are appropriated by bands and scenes (and by others that are part of the music world of rock, such as audiences, journalists, and academics) so as to articulate differences, and how such binaries are the organizing principles of the rock mythology that produce and stabilize the scenic world of rock.
It is tempting to go one step further and declare the death of rock. This has already been done in the West by academics such as Grossberg, just as it has been done before with, for example, modern art and the novel. I try not to share such an academic desire to reconstruct social reality. My book is an attempt to deconstruct rather than reconstruct the world of rock. Its constructing binaries, the paradoxes outlined above, are powerful organizing principles of this world. By tracing the complex mechanisms of these paradoxes in domains of popular culture, we avoid falling into a moralistic trap, as the aim is to liberate not the people, as is often the case in cultural studies, but the paradoxes.

This is not just a methodological or linguistic move, but a theoretical act that pays due respect to the forces constituting everyday life. By asking ourselves time and again who says what from which perspective, and what mythology is at work here, what productive and creative forces are propelled by this mythology, and what are the paradoxes that are flattened out by the mythology, we negotiate an idealism that tends to take sides, gliding toward a more subtle, more fluid, and ultimately more dynamic way to narrate “reality”. This study presents an attempt to liberate the paradoxes of reality. Not to change reality as such, which is why I speak of negotiating ideology, but to interrogate its imaginations, to articulate the stories that are too often silenced, sidetracked, and ignored. Stories which, along with other stories that are anything but silenced, sidetracked, and ignored, constitute the cultures of, in this case, popular music (and thus not necessarily rock) in China.

There is no need to deny the power of rock as a generic label, as long as this does not result in the silencing or ridiculing of pop, just as there is no reason to celebrate the high arts at the expense of popular culture, the hard cultural form at the expense of the soft. What happens when we take the binaries outlined above - binaries that are so pervasively present in discourses that frame popular cultures - as paradoxes rather than contradictions, is that we create a space for a dialogue as we subvert cultural hierarchies. Beethoven and the Spice Girls, rock from the West and rock from China, rock and pop, literature and pulp, the sixth-generation Chinese cinema and Hollywood, serious drama and soap operas, the high and the low, the divine and the banal, the hard and the soft: All coexist, very often, with heavily guarded boundaries, so real and authentic. What needs to be resolved are not so much the boundaries, as the implicated hierarchies. I have shown in this book how the tensions between such domains generate infinite struggles over the positioning of the self. Everyday life consists of a never-ending game of inclusion and exclusion, in which paradoxes are flattened out so as to make the game run smoothly. In the case of rock, the rules of the game are set by its mythology. Driven by the passion to be authentic, by a desire to be in place, boundaries appear - boundaries between rock and pop, between us and them, between here and there.