

# Geography of Chinese rock and roll: cultural, political and economic forces intertwined

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## Abstract

This chapter mines the literature to bring out the richness and heterogeneity of Chinese rock. The first part charts the geography of music as the intersection of situated material space and networked topology. Chinese rock thus assembles disparate elements from the two wests: the capitalist-west and, the western China of the silk roads. The second part addresses the live rock scenes that has mushroomed in cities, some as forces of dissenters, some as state-sanctioned role models, or, as a hybrid form of both.

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<au>June Wang and Li Chen

<a>INTRODUCTION

In his paper ‘Pop Culture China’ published more than a decade ago, Chua Beng Huat (2001: 6) called for analytic attention to the ‘processes within this cultural economy at each location [that are] unavoidably inscribed with local political, cultural and economic conditions . . . [The] neglected terrain . . . should be undertaken not with an imagined, or even a search for, cultural unity but with a desire to mine the richness of different cultural experiences.’ This chapter takes this as the point of departure, mining the literature to bring out the richness and heterogeneity of Chinese rock. In this chapter, we focus on the relational geographies of its production, circulation, dissemination and consumption, and the cultural, political and economic forces intertwined in this process.

Studies on rock and roll usually explore it through the lens of subculture. Since the 1920s, studies on subculture have witnessed a series of shifts from the Chicago School (Cohen, 1955), to the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), and the collection of post-subculture theses. The Chicago School, represented by Albert Cohen’s studies on male gangs, coins the term ‘subculture’, while CCCS studies focus on youth culture, which has been deployed as an imaginary solution to structural problems, and therefore is interpreted as a type of class-based but context-specific culture. Following that, post-subcultural studies question the assumed agonistic position of subculture against mainstream hegemony. Instead, Bourdieu’s taste and distinction making theory was deployed to examine the consumption behaviour of social groups (Thornton, 1995), which serves identity construction in a more fluid, neo-tribal, locally situated, but depoliticized pattern. The ongoing debates in subcultural studies reflect the complexity of subculture itself, and its alteration in the intertwined processes of commercialization, professionalization, generational schism, genre-based scene fragmentation and state regulation (Anderson, 2009; Fraser, 2012; Fraser and Ettlinger, 2008; Halfacree and Kitchin, 1996; Kong, 2014).

Different from scholars on musicology or cultural studies, cultural geographers pay more attention to its spatiality for place and identity in globalization,

and economic geographers care more about distribution of production sites as a creative economy in the global demand and supply chain. The concept of scene is introduced to identify space of musical praxis that entails performance space and infrastructural production space, such as recording studios and live music venues (Connell and Gibson, 2014; Straw, 1991). In this increasingly globalizing world, scholars claim that musical scenes are geographically fluid, loose and transitory, networked by an alliance of performers, audiences and others. The attention to fluid networks and mobility of musical knowledge, musicians and new technologies brings to the fore a relational reading of mobility and fixity, in particular, the Deleuzian conception of de-territorialization and re-territorialization (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The mobility of music, in its production, distribution and reception, is thus featured with the tension between the flat and territorial reading of globalization. First, the situated material preconditions are stressed as one of the driving forces. Scholars on Asia caution that

<quotation>Cultural inflections and political and economic distinctions such as these within Asia enable us to claim that the materiality in which pop music is always embedded gives rise to cosmopolitan flows, political temporalities, and aesthetic industries that are not translatable as arbitrary signifiers of a unified regionalism or universal globality. (Chun and Rossiter, 2004: 6)</quotation>

Second, instead of reducing the mobility of music as one imaginary construction – always from the advanced to the less developed regions – scholars urge approaches that allow multiple imaginary terrains that contest, support or ignore one another.

This chapter attempts to chart the geography of music as the intersection of situated material space and networked topology, the encounters of which are enacted by, and in return reshape, political, economic and cultural forces. In the historical development of Chinese rock and roll, two forces have been repeatedly brought to the fore: the force of ideological contestation and the force of capital accumulation. While the two forces have been investigated extensively in studies of subculture in general, what has been more crucial for Chinese rock studies is to situate China in its broader historical and geographical context. Historically, Chinese rock and roll was initially an unintended side-effect of marketization of the music industry, which then evolved through the contingent state interventions to sustain political stability. Geographically, the ideological expectation of being an independent force has been imposed on

Chinese rock and roll, which makes it almost an obliged duty of Chinese rockers to resist ‘western’ things, including both capital and ideas. Under this circumstance, rockers muddled through the two ‘wests’ – the west of European (and American) countries, where the liberal voice of rock and roll emerged out of consumerism-driven capitalism, and the west of silk roads, where a strong and cosmopolitan China was imagined historically by harnessing the masculine culture of its ethnic minorities.

In the following section, we will first review the historical evolution of Chinese rock and roll along two major threads: ideological contestation and marketization. We will then move to urban space for live performance of rock and roll and its changing spatial politics, focusing on the shift from liquid usage of space through private parties and live festivals, and the fixed usage of space through live house. Still, the two major threads of political surveillance and marketization are also discernible in the two types of spatial usage of rock and roll, leading to more fragmented and contingent live music scenes.

#### <a>AN OVERVIEW OF ROCK AND ROLL IN TRANSIENT CHINA

<quotation>. . . The 50s had the vigorous feel,  
as all the nation smelted steel,  
the 60s sang ‘going to the country’,  
the 70s model operas were revolutionary,  
the 80s was breakdance but that’s not all,  
there was a fever for rock and roll . . . (Jones, 1992: 9)</quotation>

Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 ‘southern tour’ seems to mark a watershed moment in China’s development of popular music (Jones, 1992: 3). During the socialist era, music had been completely constituted within the nationalized institutions, produced by professionals working in work units, assigned to particular singers chosen by cultural institutes, performed on designated stages with prefixed customs, and disseminated to the general public through state-owned mass media, from television, radio to cassette and disk produced by several state-owned companies. The open door to marketization and the relaxation of control on music led to the development of two major genres of music: *tongsu* (popularized) music and rock music (Jones, 1992: 3).

Emerging from this context, Chinese rock has always been placed on the opposite side to *tongsu* music with two implications. First, *tongsu* music is ‘yellow music’ that focuses on heterodox sexual pleasures and bourgeois values. In contrast, Chinese rock is serious and political. Second, *tongsu* music is a commercial product

of assembly lines in the entertainment industry, produced for mass consumption, whereas rock music is composed and performed by the same person/band, therefore viewed as a domain for autonomy and honest expression. In sum, rock music generally refers to the genre excluded by and deliberately distinguishing itself from *tongsu* music. This leads to a common feature of Chinese rock, which frequently builds up an identity in antagonism with the imagined enemy of *tongsu* music. As such, most studies take the two features of ideological autonomy and anti-commercial practice as interdependent, if not interchangeable. In subsequent, an altering fragmentation of the genre occurred, or what Barmé (2000) labels the ‘greying of Chinese culture’, partly because of the growing power of foreign and local enterprises to cultivate and pursue market niches (De Kloet, 2010; Efird, 2001), and partly because of state-directed assimilation of this potentially subversive forms of culture. The two forces, nevertheless, rarely function separately, as the state’s experimentation with liberating the economy and sustaining political stability are never mutually exclusive.

#### <a>MARKETIZATION OF ROCK AND ROLL

##### <b>Geography of Production and Dissemination

Since the 1980s onwards, the relational geographies of music production, circulation, dissemination and consumption have gone through a series of changes: from initial monopoly of state-owned record companies in the 1980s, to periphery (*Gangtai*, Hong Kong and Taiwan) surrounding the central (mainland China) in the 1990s, to the surge of domestic labels and studios in mainland China, and the present ever-spreading digital and live rock scenes (Qu, 2016).

At the early stage of transition to a market economy, the mass media offered little space for personal expression. Private consumption of cassettes functioned as a utopia for the youth, especially university students. State-owned record companies like China International Radio and Television Publishing House played a dominant role. Within no time, the burgeoning Chinese rock and roll soon found itself embedded in the process of globalization, with the dual influx of transnational capital and foreign images of middle-class lifestyles.

##### <c>Periphery surrounding the central

In the early 1990s, rock musicians relied on contracts with offshore Hong Kong and Taiwan record companies, which often dictated production values and marketing. In China, coastal cities were chosen to be pilot economic special zones to make use of

their proximity to nodal spaces like Hong Kong and Taiwan, thus frequently witnessing more instant marketization of the former planned economy. The same applies to the musical industry. In the first half of the 1990s, Hong Kong and Taiwanese record companies such as Magic Rock (Taiwan) and Red Star (Hong Kong) dominated production and distribution. The flow of rock music products remained significantly unidirectional, from *Gangtai* to the ‘commercial south’, or was often “‘imported” back to China through the Hong Kong-based Star TV cable network and overseas-produced tapes’ (Huang 2001, p. 6). As summarized by Gold (1993: 923): ‘the mainland is supplying the market, while Hong Kong and Taiwan are supplying the commodities, expertise, networks and capital.’ This is what Chua (2001) called ‘periphery as the central’ in the production and consumption of Chinese pop culture.

### **<c>Rise of domestic record companies and the New Sound Movement**

The booming music industry dissipated in the late 1990s, reducing big record companies to a few small studios or labels. Hong Kong and Taiwan record companies closed their branches in the mainland. In 1997, mainland China’s first independent record company ‘Modern Sky’ was founded, and signed contracts with bands including ‘New Pants (Xin kuzi)’, ‘Sober (qingxing)’, ‘The Fly (Cangyin)’ and ‘Catcher in the Rye (Maitian bushou)’. For Modern Sky’s founder Shen Lihui this marked the beginning of ‘Beijing’s New Sound Movement’ (*Beijing Xinsheng Yundong*) or ‘98 Rock’s New Wave’ (*98 Yaogun Xin Lanchao*) (Steen, 2000).

In their manifestation of the New Sound Movement, Shen and others openly rejects propagating rock as a liberalizing force. Instead, the ‘new generation of musicians who are financially independent because of either their job qualification or a well-off family background’ regard rock music only as a means for having fun (*yule fangshi*) (Hong, 1999: 28), and just ‘do it’ within a newly negotiated economic, cultural and socio-political space. The emerging Chinese petit-bourgeoisie with deep pockets then attempted to copy lifestyles of their counterparts in the capitalist west, hoping to distinguish themselves from the homogenous working class by consumption with taste. In China, rock and roll served such market demands for distinctive consumption. Stokes’s (2004) discourse analyses of major music magazines suggests a deliberate construction of ‘rock as privileged genre’ by music critiques, and therefore coloured Chinese rock as ‘unpopular’ and distinctive in taste. In this way, Stokes questioned the subversiveness of rock fans, instead suggesting that the uses of rock by consumer citizens were a ‘considered’ act of social distinction.

Consumerism-driven societal change is then evident in the development of rock and roll in the late 1990s. Jing Wang (1996: 116) lamented: ‘At the dramatic consummation of their enlightenment cause at the Tian’anmen Square in June 1989 . . . who could have predicted in 1989 that it was not communist authoritarianism but capitalist consumer culture that would mark the sudden downward turn of their fortune (yesterday’s cutting edge).’ The erosive power of economic coercion inevitably results (Huang 2001).

### **<c>Towards a democratic time?**

Entering the new millennium, the advancement of technology on digital music immensely changed the ecology of music production and consumption. Modern Sky peaked in the late 1990s, only to plunge in 2002. Globally, ‘the accessibility and diffusion of low-cost recording equipment throughout the world has encouraged independent and autonomous forms of local production’ (Théberge, 2004). With computer and digital technology, music production can be carried out in studios, as well as in cafes, street corner, parks or bedrooms. Music production is therefore theoretically beyond control of big studios and big cities, and consequently beyond control of record companies. Online forums become new hotbeds for rock and roll communities for networking, dissemination and circulation at much lower cost. Such a production pattern evidently enables artists to control more aspects of the production process. For Warner (2003), ‘this has resulted in the breakdown of the amateur/professional status in the production process.’ It seems valid to argue that ‘such technological developments suggest the potential for democratisation and may act to decouple relationships between cities, recording studios, and technology, it will inevitably reconstitute them in new and exciting ways’ (Gibson, 2005). In this democratic atmosphere of music production, assembly-line manufacture has deteriorated, and what has re-emerged is live houses for live performance and digital music scenes (discussed in the next section). With technological assistance that makes music production accessible to everyone, individual musicians and bands, individual studios, and small labels mushroomed across China (Qu, 2016; Jian, 2018).

### **<a>IDEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION: CONSTRUCTING CHINESE ROCK THROUGH THE TWO WESTS**

Situated as a type of liberal voice under the authoritarian governance of China, Chinese rock was taken as a rebelling force by both first generation rockers and scholars. With his rough vocal delivery and untamed live performance, Cui Jian

rocked the entire country with his song 'I have Nothing' in 1987. This attack on the illusion of socialist China's 'happy working class' instantly captured young people's hearts. As Huang (2001) stated, 'Cui expresses the things that young people, want, but never dare, to say.' Noting that the genre of rock and roll emerged at a time when the mass media was highly controlled by the propaganda system, its relative autonomy captured the attention of the masses, who were then able to try something different by purchasing private cassettes. Chinese rock in its early stages was subculture if compared to the mainstream state-propaganda musical pieces, but was also mass culture in terms of its instantly growing popularity among the public.

The Chinese term *yishi* (consciousness) is emphasized by rockers to denote sensibility and deliberation in expressing their feelings and assert their 'authorial intent in terms of creative, social, and political aims of singers' (Jones, 1992: 22). As such, Jones argues that rock music in China is not a genre defined by its musical style, but a function of ideology. For De Kloet, the rock mythology is forged through 'a set of narratives which produce rock as a distinct world that is, first and foremost, authentic, but also sub-cultural, masculine, rebellious and (counter) political' (2010: 26). First generation rockers have rejected being passively manipulated. Instead they prioritized honest expression, improvised performances and conformed to the ethos of rock 'n' roll as 'style is ideology objectified' (Brace, 1991).

### **<b>'The Real West and the Less Real Rest'**

The label of a liberal voice imposed a number of moral principles on Chinese rock and roll. One of the first moral issues Chinese rockers have to handle is the localization of a western-born music genre, without which the liberal voice is frequently critiqued as copycat behaviour. Under this circumstance, Chinese rockers 'attempted to scale the heights of cultural authenticity, casting rock identity as functionally Chinese' (Huang 2001, p. 7) and therefore anti-westernization. Two reasons have been introduced by scholars. One is to align oneself with authenticity that is allegedly valued by liberal voice, therefore defining oneself as legitimate Chinese worthy of mass support. The other is to 'attack the capitalist West – but at the same time, attack the state, which promotes economic prosperity and material progress while leaving little room for religion and spiritual freedom' (Baranovitch, 2001).

Such a departure point, however, assumes a west-to-east diffusion of music and its influence upon local forms. In other words, by focusing on the politics beneath



mimicry, one actually takes the process as a unidimensional phenomenon or imposition of the 'global' upon the local. Nevertheless, cultural authenticity of Chinese rock, in terms of whether rockers simply copied their western counterparts, was commonly reckoned as one constitutive element of Chinese rock. Under the scrutinizing eyes of the West, De Kloet (2010) argues that Chinese rockers struggle between a dichotomy of the 'Real West' and 'Less Real Rest'. The impression of authentic Chinese rock resting in the cultural north (with Beijing as the epicentre), is a social construction by rockers and music critiques, as well as scholars on Chinese Rock.

### **<b>Western China: Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia**

The first generation of Chinese rock, while endeavouring to establish its own Chinese characteristics, synthesized disparate elements from two sources: western rock and roll and 'northwestern folk influence' (*xibeifeng*), referring to China's Yellow River basin and the silk roads. Required by the moral principle of authenticity, the deliberate intention of countering the capitalist west pushed Chinese rock and roll to the other west. The imagining of 'Chineseness' is thus supported by a wide variety of vernacular folk musical elements, frequently resorting to the other west – the western part of China including the Yellow River basin (*xibeifeng*), Tibetan plateau ('Return to Lhasa' by Zheng Jun), Inner Mongolia (Teng Ge'er) and Xinjiang (Dao Lang). If the capitalist west always haunted Chinese rockers with cultural colonization, the western China appeared to be safe resources to construct Chineseness, given its image of a 'virile Chinese nationalism which selectively incorporates Western elements' (Huang, 2001). Scholarly questions are then directed to the Han-minority relations and the construction of nationalism.

Studies on the construction of 'Chineseness' investigate how that imagined identity has been forged as one that has unified various ethnic minority cultures, or 'the big harmonious family of 56 ethnic groups' as usually depicted by the CCTV Spring Festival Gala. This brings out the social construction of nationalism, during which the state and the Han population are usually envisaged as dominant. Paradoxically, appropriating minority culture to construe Chineseness has been practised as early as the cultural revolutionary period. As Clark (1987: 101) stated, 'one of the most effective ways to make films with "Chinese" style was to go to the most "foreign" cultural areas in the nation . . . minorities' areas offered instant national style.' The territorial extension of rock and roll towards western China

appears to overlap with the territorial extension of urbanization of formerly less developed areas, and more importantly, the Han-style urbanization that marginalizes minorities on their own land. In the words of Mongolian musician Teng ge'er,

<quotation>I can't sing anymore the kind of songs that deceive oneself as well as others, like 'The Beautiful Grassland is My Home'. My elders and my fellow people will not forgive . . . In my native land, Ordos grassland, the herding people live year after year in drought and poverty. The lushness of the grassland belongs only to the past. (quoted in (Zheng, 1993: 2)</quotation>

For Finley, Han mando-pop artist Dao Lang's appropriation of Dolan culture and Uyghur cultural heritage perhaps constitutes an ideal vision of an all-inclusive regional identity. In his musical representation, Dao Lang's Xinjiang territory is one inherent part of China, which can be understood in the 'notion of occupying virgin land' by Han people, who subsequently claim a role of 'guardian of the borderland' and furthermore an actor with a 'civilizing mission'. Such Han-style urbanization, as argued by Yeh's (2013) study of Tibet, is pursued through subject-making and redefining the relationship between land and population. Finley (2015) therefore announced that 'Wolf in Sheepskin', one of the most popular songs by Dao Lang, implied the real relations between Uyghur and Han population and behind that, the party-state. Finley might over-interpret Dao Lang and his songs. Still, the metaphor of wolf cannot help remind us of another immensely popular novel, *Wolf Totem* (Rong, 2004). For Agnew (2012) and Callahan (2015), the analogue to a wolf that tries to survive in the tough environment portrays 'a Han Chinese enterprise in a Social Darwinian world'. It recycles geopolitical nostrums of the German school, such as *lebensraum*, organismic statehood and racial categorization, all of which are framed in nationalist terms.

Huang (2001) agrees with Finley's (2015) caution against 'a simplistic valourization of Western representations of rock rebellion' and correspondingly a static reading of the Chinese party-state as a political force that always takes Chinese rock as threatening such that it must be repressed at various historical moments. Nevertheless, the agency of rockers is also recognized in his reading of the appropriation of cultures in the western part of China. According to Huang, the silk roads historically symbolize a selective incorporation of western elements through communication, trade and wars, indicating a cosmopolitan culture that is open to

different kinds of civilizations. As such, Tang Dynasty, another influential rock band, named themselves after this cosmopolitan culture that was allegedly prevalent during that time. For Baranovitch (2003), minority cultures have elements that are analogue to western rock and roll, which are usually lacking in Han culture, such as ‘masculinity and personal and sexual freedom’. Therefore, ‘the Han attitude toward non-Han cultures has mixed derogation, even detestation and fear, with desire and fascination’ (Baranovitch, 2001: 374). The appreciation of minorities as an ‘other’ that is both exotic but also brave and free of didacticism lured Han rockers like Zheng Jun to ‘Return to Lhasa’, and Dao Lang to claim Xinjiang as his hometown.

Stressing agency of China’s minorities, Baranovitch (2001) rejects the reading of an absolute hegemony by the state and Han nationalism. Instead, Baranovitch argues that ethnicity is a process of negotiation that involves multiples forces. Moreover, the line between the state, Han and minorities has been blurred, resulting in a relatively porous sphere that is open to various narratives. On the one hand, the power of agency in minorities has been evident in asserting their own identities, such as discontent expressed in Teng Ge’er’s songs, although such subversive voices are always carefully managed by rockers themselves to avoid political surveillance. On the other hand, the state is sometimes open to, and even plays a proactive role in, incorporating minority identities for the image of the Chinese nation.

As shown above, if music travels, it does not travel as an entity, nor does it move in one direction only. The process is much more complicated than mimicry or anti-hegemonic actions, but rather is selectively enabled and mobilized by multiple dynamic forces. This is an ever-ongoing process of reconfiguration of narratives, identities and territories. It is far more than ‘instances of aesthetic borrowing and creation, but is embedded in and in return reshapes the broader construction of political, economic, and cultural landscapes’ (Chun et al., 2004: 8).

## <a>ROCK AND ROLL AS SPATIAL PRACTICES IN/OF CITIES

### <b>Rock as Spatial Practice: Liquid, Rooted, and the Network

Before the new millennium, the clear consciousness of self-subjectivity (Johnston and Bajrange, 2014; Pratt, 2009) enabled Chinese rockers deliberately to emphasize their underground status. In spatial terms, this led to a liquid pattern of space usage. In other words, there was no fixed venue for rockers’ live performances, rather they were always on the move and frequently made use of non-conventional spaces during non-conventional hours. Nevertheless, this kind of space usage must be distinguished

from that of rave culture in the west. Whereas Western rave culture also appropriates non-conventional places to forge a cutting-edge milieu, Chinese rock lacked such freedom. Instead, it had to wrestle with political and economic forces for pocket space. Two types of functions are used for live performance: private parties and festivals.

Rock musicians performed in private ‘parties’, which took place at a rotating cast of venues like bars, restaurants, hotels and college cafeterias (Jones, 1992; Campbell, 2011). In Campbell’s overview, these places included the Peking Duke restaurant for Kiaser Kuo (Tang Dynasty), the Sun Park for Radio DJ Zhang Youdai and an office canteen called Susanna for Li Chi, who later opened the Mao Live house. Nevertheless, the booming of private ‘parties’ did not last long. In the mid-1990s, the tightening-up of ideological control moved rockers to foreign-owned or foreign-run venues, the ‘extra-territoriality’ of which insulated these private parties from political surveillance (Jones, 1992: 22).

Another popular venue for Chinese rock acts has been rock festivals, which go back several decades. In February 1990, the Modern Music Festival kick-started a series of festivals featuring various rock bands. Likewise, Cui Jian’s ‘The New Long March of Rock’ toured Beijing, Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Xi’an and Chengdu in 1990, and Nanjing and Kunming in 1992. One year later, Black Panther’s ‘Puncture Action’ tour covered 30 Chinese cities. An even more intense music festival hype has swept China in 2007. Across the country, the number of large-scale festivals surged from 10 in 2007 to 40 in 2010 (Groenewegen-Lau, 2014).

The third way of spatial practice is live house. As we previously argued (Wang and Chen 2017), live house might be the first attempt by Chinese rockers to stand out and occupy space in the city. Since that, they changed from liquid usage of space to a fixed one. The model of live house is borrowed from Japan, where several ‘cramped, smoky, nondescript concrete boxes’ (Mcgue, 2009) function as an anti-MTV platform for unknown rock bands. In China, live houses assume multiple and occasionally contradictory hedonic and political functions. They commonly engage in commercial operations, leading to a surface product of consumption space that functions, like a veil, to insulate live houses from political surveillance (interviews 2013 & 2014). In live houses, rockers can challenge mainstream social and political norms, foster communication between producers and audiences, and assert an alternative order within the established regime of aesthetics. Crucially for cities under authoritarian governance, live houses add underground musicians to the

city landscape, function as material bases for ‘guerrilla warfare’ (Frith, cited by Marcus, 1981), offer the material nodal points for construction and expansion of the web of empowerment (Grossberg, 1984).

#### <a>LIVE ROCK SCENE AS A SMALL COMMONS IN THE CITY

##### <b>Web of Empowerment and the Small Commons

The power of affective and embodied performance is the new approach to study live rock scenes. In fact, concern on affective power can be traced back to Grossberg’s (1984; 1991) concepts ‘mattering maps’ and ‘affective alliances’ that recognized affect as a new frontier for politics (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). In these strands, what concerns us are the embodied and performative practices of rock as spatial practices of unauthorized speakers in their spontaneous actions to become visible, to stimulate alternatives, to seek and nurture peers, and eventually to form a community. By affective alliance, Grossberg highlights the strategy of constructing a network of empowerment to link scenes and events in the practice of rock and roll, such that ‘through [it], the audience is empowered by and empowers the musical apparatus’ (Grossberg, 1984: 228). The key is engaging the public, rather than making a distinctive sub-stream of culture or drawing a boundary between the professional and the armature rockers.

At the micro-level of performative scenes, the sheer proximity between producers and patrons in live houses indicates an equal status of both sides, inviting communication and making both sides contributors to a rock milieu. In cities, live houses stimulate what Small (2011) calls musicking practices, through which producers and audience members sense each other and imagine alternatives (Liu, 2014), and the space itself becomes ‘formative of the sounding and resounding of music’ (Leyshon et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2007: 424). Curators of live houses reiterate the terms ‘consciousness’, ‘Rock and Roll ethos’ and ‘utopia’ (interview 2014). Promoting independent production of music, curators of live houses stress their responsibility to nurture the local culture of producing and appreciating rock and roll by serving local and yet-to-be-established bands. As such, their goal was ‘to provide a platform for those young guys with ethos . . . to reject the domination of industrialized music . . . and to nurture a growing audience that likes authentic music and rock music’ (interview 2014).

At the city level, live house become a material base to form a new solidarity among musicians, patrons and the general public. Musical schools or individual tutors

in musical education operate as intermediaries. In the city of Shenzhen, many musicians establish wide networks with students through their daily work as tutors. On the other hand, their own connections with live houses and music pubs provide them access to cheap space. As such, the first festival entitled ‘Band-ing, None to Others’ (*da band daguotian*) in 2007 was conveyed by Yue Yun, owner of a small music instrument shop, through collaborations with live houses and pubs that have hosted University Music Festivals since 2000. In Beijing, the annual MIDI Music Festival started with a humble in-house event in the Beijing Midi School of Music. The GrassU festival further extends the independent music network to the general public. Sticking to its slogan (‘Free, Fresh, Friends’), GrassU removed almost all barriers to a free gathering of ordinary folks. First, they set no criterion to performers other than to have an appreciation of independent music. Second, all major Chinese social media outlets, from online forums such as Douban and Tieba to instant communication apps including QQ, Weibo and WeChat, have been fully employed to invite voluntary performers, work out logistics, publicize news and organize focus group discussions. Third, the venue may be any unoccupied lawn they can find in public parks, assisted with apps on mobile phones for instant communication. In this way, they can organize small- or large-scale gatherings in Bijiashan Park and Lianhuashan Park, where a giant portrait of Deng Xiaoping is situated. These strategies help the event to survive and thrive in fractures of the heavily scrutinized public space, and, more importantly, leads to the emergence of an alternative while extensively stretched public sphere in China.

### **<b>The Small Commons**

Spatially, engaging the aesthetic regime in spatial politics allows us to focus on the delimitation and partition of spaces envisioned by consensus (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014), specifically the ‘social fixity that indicates proper allocations of social groups and places’ and ‘material order of space’ (Dikeç, 2012: 670). This thus leads to the issue of alternative orders enacted by practitioners who use space in different ways as indicated, as disciplined by official orders. In other words, spatial politics of live rock scenes concerns new types of spaces in the city by making creative and adaptive use of the resources of the other (De Certeau, 1984), and more importantly its aggregated effect of cultural-material order of musical space at the macro level (Dikeç, 2012).

At the city-level, live houses are commonly located in central areas. The existence of live houses disrespects and challenges the ‘social mix’ defined by

capitalist logic: privileged locations, from city centres to special zones, are for production service industrial sectors, such as high finance and consumption hubs. In contrast, live houses argue for the right to operate in the city and appropriate city space for Chinese rockers. Live houses manifest the changing attitude of rockers in their spatial strategies and shift from deliberately shaping themselves as underground venues to seeking an equal share of the city landscape and a spatial base for encounters.

Through live houses, Chinese rock has shifted from its transient and fluid appropriation of city space to a fixed, rooted one. When the western rave culture or EDM move from their non-conditional locations in the suburbs to licensed clubs in the city, this move is generally a signal of absorption into the mainstream (Anderson, 2009). In Shenzhen, the spatial fixity of live houses functions as a nodal point for new social relationships, based upon which a web of temporary spaces of autonomy is woven through transient, fluid appropriation of public spaces, such as the small events 'Band-ing, None to Others' and GrassU. Although this web of empowerment rarely leads to political resistance or social movements, it does circulate the idea of building small common areas in everyday life. The web of fixed nodes and events not only allows the 'appearance of unauthorized speakers' (Ranciere, 2004: 19), but also serves to circulate an alternative version of 'what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak' (2004: 13).

### **<b>Intertwined Noise and Consumerism?**

Just like Chinese contemporary art had to resort to the market for its survival in its early stages, it was also practical for rock festivals to operate in the market, given that the mass media is controlled by the state. Live rock scenes in China provide a platform for independent production in cities dominated by entertaining-oriented consumption.

Geographically, quite several places hosting rock festivals are in ethnic-minority areas, whereas some others are in the commercial south before 2007. After the official ban on rock music that was strictly enforced since 1993, rockers often performed in the hinterlands. It is not coincidental that rock festivals were held in western China, including the Lijiang Snow Mountain Festival in southeast China in 2002 and 2007, and the three-day Helan Mountain festival in 2004 between Gansu Province and Inner Mongolia in northwest China. According to Lolo (Baranovitch, 2003: 102), 'Minorities are much more receptive to rock music because all the dance

rhythms that are used in rock are already found in their own indigenous music . . . [That's why] Kunming is a paradise for rockers' (Lolo, interview with author, 4 June 1996).

Jonathan Campbell (2011) might be one with a profoundly optimistic vision of Chinese rock festivals, for he views them as a 'rocker's paradise', where folks shouted together 'Whenever There's Oppression, There's Resistance'. Some rockers and musician critiques, like Yan Jun (2002), would appreciate his remarks. Despite many political constraints and commercial considerations, festival organizers, audiences, and bands tend to be grateful for the performance opportunities and the relatively few instances of censorship (cf. azchael, 2010). Miserable Faith's bass player Zhang Jing recalled that outside Beijing, his band has been allowed to perform subversive songs like 'Whenever There's Oppression, There's Resistance', 'Duplicator' and 'Step Down' (Zhang Jing, pers. comm., December 2011).

Nevertheless, rock festivals in the commercial south are more deeply embedded in its consumerism culture, encroached by the ceaseless mobility of transnational and local capitals. Cities of the commercial south turned out to be more tolerant to this alternative genre of music, as 'the emperor is far away'. As early as the 1990s, rock festival organizers found cities in the commercial south relatively 'open and relaxed' (Campbell, 2011: 122), in comparison to other cities where the procedure of issuing permission for a festival was complicated and time-consuming. In Shenzhen, the Nirvana Pub hosted the Southern New Music in 1994; the Sun Square hosted the Cui Jian Live Music Party in 1995 and then the Alternative Music Festival the following year; in 1997, Shenzhen University hosted the Rock & Roll Festival 97, Xiangmihu Holiday Resort hosted Rock Festivals, and Sunshine JJ'S KTV hosted the Future Mix Party; and in 1998, Q-Discotheque at Kingkey Oriental Regent Hotel hosted two festivals of This Q Party and Happy Chinese New Rock Party (Ni, 2014). Performers included many established bands from the cultural north, such as Cui Jian, Zhang Chu, Tang Dynasty, Xu Wei, Pu Shu and Cobra. These parties and festivals increased the exposure of Chinese rock to overseas audiences, especially Hong Kong. This directly facilitated the Chinese Rock Power Festival in Hong Kong in 1994, which triggered heated discussion and is still remembered by a wide audience in greater China and Asia.

In the commercial south, rock festivals were highly associated with public holidays and subsequently named in a very ambiguous way as if they were celebration



events. Moreover, many functions took place in premier shopping malls, resorts or nightclubs, despite most performers being hardcore bands like Cui Jian, Zuixiao Zuzou and Second Hand Rose. If rock festivals at that time still had subversive voices under their veil of celebratory functions, the annual Strawberry Festival organized by the market-savvy Modern Sky has depoliticized rock and roll completely since 2007. According to She Lihui, CEO of Modern Sky, ‘cool’ is the very core of music festivals:

<quotation>The background of European and American music festivals lies in the hippie era. To them, music is a kind of release and resistance against urbanization. Chinese festivals are different. They lack that kind of history. While organizing we realized that it rather results from the pleasure generation. . . I think currently Chinese youngsters know how to entertain themselves, and respond with a sense of humor. In the 1980s music festivals definitely had a sense of rebellion, but today there are no clear-cut divisions, we all experience this first hand. So let’s have fun, youths nowadays vent like this . . . We are mainstream and self-ridiculing. (Wang, 2010)</quotation>

Profit-driven consideration filled the Strawberry Festival not only with popular Korean boy bands, but also with numerous placed-in products, from soft drinks to automobiles. No wonder the festival quickly became the most commercially viable festival brand, squeezed MIDI school out of the collaboration with city governments. Now, the Strawberry Festival takes place annually in big cities of Shanghai, Beijing, Xi’an and Zhenjiang. City governments, which are now proactive in hosting all kinds of eye-catching events, pursue more than monetary profit from festival tickets and tourism (Xiao, 2015). Functioning as an instrument for city branding, rock festivals now take on much more duties as both the initial capital for growth, and as the media for the state to ‘absorb, distort and even mould the popular music of the times to co-opt the people and public culture’ (Fung, 2007).

#### <a>ROCK AS STATE-ORCHESTRATED CITY-EVENTS

The national campaign of cultural shift of cities since the new millennium might be one major reason that changed the attitude of many city governments. Reform of cultural system so to boost the cultural enterprises and cultural economy has been listed as one of the strategic directions for all local government in the Tenth Five-year Plan. As argued by Wang Jing (2001), the central propaganda system went through three stages of envisioning ‘culture as propaganda’, ‘culture as leisure’ and ‘culture as

capital'. In this process, there are multiple actors who participate to different degrees and negotiate for respective vested interests. Situated in this context, live rock scenes in China are heterogeneous and dynamic.

Under the nationwide campaign towards a cultural turn, cities that once held rock at arm's length as politically threatening have started to realize its value for a new cultural economy and city branding. In the early 1990s, rock festival organizers, including individuals and companies, relied on building up private connections with the then conservative governments to get permission to hold festivals. Now, governments' attitudes have drastically changed, with many offering preferential policies to entice festivals. Gronewegen-Lau (2014) argued that festivals soon shifted to a middle ground, one negotiated by bands, music companies and city governments in their pursuit of cultural and creative capital so as to brand city images and maximize revenues.

The surging popularity of festivals has made the initiative a yearly routine event of the city, ensured by contracts signed between city governments and festival organizers, which are usually private enterprises like MIDI school and Modern Sky. First, such a collaboration goes hand in hand with the privatization of units in the propaganda system. In Zhenjiang, the major actor of Zhenjiang Culture and Broadcast Ltd is the enterprise after the Zhenjiang Broadcasting Bureau was privatized. In Shenzhen, the collaboration is among MIDI school, Shenzhen Longgang District Government and the Hong Kong developer Kaisa Group. In Chengdu, the Zebra festival is handled through a joint work between Zebra Media, a private enterprise, and Chengdu Media, a privatized company under Chengdu cultural department and propaganda bureau. As I have argued elsewhere (Wang and Lau, 2008; Wang, 2012; Wang, 2017), such a privatization of cultural institutions (*shiye danwei*) releases former state-owned institutions from regulations, while maintaining their connections with the government. Therefore, this semi-privatized propaganda machine is able to surf on the market and also claims easy access to state-owned resources such as information and funding.

Under the umbrella of cultural city making, city governments shift from capitalizing on festivals to offering financial support to festivals. In the early 1990s, the Beijing government gave a green light to Cut Jian's rock tour because he promised to donate 1 million yuan from his concert. The same thing happened in 2004 when Beijing Government issued 'Performance Permits in Beijing' to MIDI festival at the

state-owned Sculpture Park in Shijingshan district, which was the first cultural event organized by private enterprises to secure an official permit in China. In the late 2000s, city governments outsourced festival organization with special funds from the local budget plan. For instance, the contract between the Chengdu city government and Zebra Media stated explicitly that Zebra Media is responsible for the performances and stage production, and Chengdu Media is responsible for half of the budget (Qi, 2009), as well as the groundwork (including local promotion, security and clearing permits, a whole range of preparatory work). In this light, festivals are outputs of strategic coupling of multiple actors, including state and non-state actors. This development allowed Gronewegen-Lau (2014) to reject a binary reading of state and society that has dominated cultural policies in China since the 1980s.

### **<b>City-branding: The Soft Power of Music**

In 2007 the Beijing Government funded MIDI musical school and MIDI festival to brand the city as a cultural hub of Asia. Since 2009, many cities followed suit. Taking MIDI festival as an example, it has been jointly organized by MIDI school and city governments, such as those of Zhenjiang (Jiangsu), Shanghai, Rizhao (Shandong), Huaxi (Guizhou), Shenzhen, Taihu (Jiangsu) and Lichuan (Hubei). Aside from cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen, most other cities are small ones at the lower tier of the global city hierarchy.

Since the open-door policy was introduced, appropriation of the commercial value of music through the marketization of music production has prepared the ground for massive consumption of music and shaped the norms of music as a commodity. Rock festivals as a type of mega-event are then envisaged as capital in its secondary circuit, through which the city becomes a growth machine. That said, rock festivals do not just bring an immediate influx of money with tourists, but also boost the city image, its overall competitiveness and subsequently its land value. For instance, the Zebra Festival in Chengdu emerged because the local propaganda department of the Communist Party wanted to market the image of resilience after the Sichuan earthquake of 12 May 2008. Several live rock scenes in various cities have been endorsed and supported by government policies on multiple dimensions and curated by cultural elites, which frequently function as models to showcase and celebrate the new cultural economy. In Shenzhen's Musical Project (Wang and Chen, 2017), the municipal government models flagship live house and music festivals to show how to 'build the city through culture' (*wenhua lishi*) and to 'enrich public

culture for the people' (*wenhua huimin*). While the first slogan serves the imagined new economy of music, the second slogan appeals for contributions to cultural events through citizen participation. Nevertheless, the thread of ideological censorship weaves its way through programmes under both directions at all levels. Cultural elites, state-owned enterprises and government form a new ruling regime, which co-opts selected live houses, rockers and festivals but marginalizes the others. The Musical Project in Shenzhen converts the city into propaganda sites where state-sanctioned aesthetics are delivered to and experienced by subject-citizens. The practice is advocated by the *China Daily* (Weng and Zhou, 2014), which highly praised the concept that translates socialist concerns into everyday practices and promoted as a model for the whole country.

## <a>CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we reviewed the historical development of Chinese rock and roll through the two entangled threads of economic strategy and political ideology. The first part charts the geography of music as the intersection of situated material space and networked topology, the encounters of which are enacted by, and in return reshape, political, economic and cultural forces. The construction of Chinese rock as a liberal voice in authoritarian China has put it into a continuous struggle with three missions: counter political surveillance, counter capitalist-driven consumerism and counter westernization. Chinese rock thus assembles disparate elements from the two wests: the music style of rock and roll as subversive force in the capitalist west, and 'northwestern folk influence' (*xibeifeng*) of the western China that imagines a cosmopolitan culture of the silk roads.

The second part addresses the live rock scenes (live house and festivals) that has mushroomed in cities, some as forces of dissenters that attempt to construct small commons in cities encroached by neoliberalism, some as state-sanctioned role models to propagate alternative music as new economy and as new city images, or more frequently, as a hybrid form of both. What has triggered a resurgence in scholarly attention to Chinese rock and roll is the changing relationships among underground musicians, record companies, music agents and the state. On one hand, live houses and rock festivals have mushroomed in a wide range of cities, through which dissensus emerges and alternative urbanism is practised. On the other hand, state-orchestrated music scenes are also trying to construe social laws of music practices by collaborating with musical elites. Entering the new millennium, the

mutually inscribed consensus and dissensus through musical practice deserves more scholarly attention.

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