

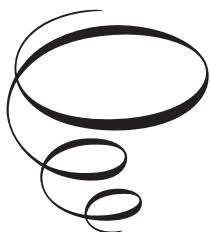
The Power of Culture:

Encounters between China and the United States

Edited by

Priscilla Roberts

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LOST IN TRANSLATION?
TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN ROCK MUSIC
OF THE SIXTIES AND ITS MISREADING
IN 1980S CHINA

TENG JIMENG

This chapter is drawn from a long-term personal project on the impact of the American Sixties on China's intellectual community since 1979. In addition to researching this subject, I often speak about the Sixties on public radio and television networks, and also teach a near-permanent graduate-level course on the Sixties at Beijing Foreign Studies University. But why then the Sixties, that “most evocative of American historical labels”?¹ Because that “fatal attraction” of the American 1960s was the grand narrative of the civil rights, student, and antiwar movements, and their composite program of political and cultural liberation: participatory democracy, personalized politics, racial integration and equality, and respect for Third World cultures. For me, however, the period is important not just for these political movements in and of themselves, but also for the musical innovations it brought. What was central was their integration into politics, making the one movement inconceivable without the other. It is therefore essential to emphasize not only their contemporaneity but also their mutual dependence and fusion.

This chapter will basically consider how the combination of musical lyrics and politics that occurred in the social movements of the 1960s was an important source of cultural transformation. Its analysis focuses on the changing relations between politics and music, from the reborn interest in folk music in the first half of the 1960s to the cataclysms of the counterculture, which mingled black and white musical traditions and

¹ Burner, *Making Peace with the Sixties*, 1.

articulated a new generational consciousness. My reading of the 1960s stresses the movement roots of rock music, such as black music and 1960s folk rock.

Before scrutinizing closely some of the forces shaping the Sixties music scene, one must establish a brief theoretical foundation, on which to base this chapter's central argument. In their excellent book on the American Sixties, *Music and Social Movements*, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison insightfully illustrated the central social process they termed "mobilization of tradition":

In social movements, musical and other kinds of cultural traditions are made and remade, and after the movements fade away as political forces, the music remains as a memory and as a potential way to inspire new waves of mobilization.²

In the history of the United States, perhaps no movement has been more characterized by this mobilization of tradition than the civil rights movement and the youth-oriented movements—broadly grouped under the rubric "the counterculture"—that occurred during the 1960s.

The African-American Experience

The early civil rights movement reflected the rural, religious traditions of the American South. The mode of dress and speech and, most importantly, the music that was so central to that movement's identity formation—and with which it has come to be identified—were drawn from the deep waters of African-American tradition. While the rest of the South was strongly conservative, the music of the black community contained a transcendental or emancipatory potential that could be mobilized in the struggle for integration.

Music was essential to the African-American religious experience, and the church was the central institution of southern African-American life. Music was also central to the more secular sides of southern black life. The development of race records and radio in the early postwar era was a response to the general rise in living standards, some of which trickled down to African-Americans, at least in the form of rising expectations. Except for New Orleans, jazz was not the music of southern blacks; rather it was blues in a new, more mass mediated and modern form dubbed rhythm-and-blues. R&B added electrification and, like jazz, piano, saxophone, heavy bass, and drum beat to the blues guitar, which remained

² Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 1-2.

the central instrumental link to tradition. The other link was, of course, the singer and the song.

The first stirrings of the civil rights movement came with the 1954 bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Montgomery, Alabama. Music was there from the beginning, since the church was the main meeting place where relatively large numbers of blacks could congregate freely. The church and its ministers, most notably Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph Abernathy, were the leading figures in the better known Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted for more than a year. With the church taking such a central role, it should not be surprising that religious music was present from the outset. The first music of the movement were traditional spirituals and gospel songs used, as customary, in their normal way at church functions. This familiar music identified the members of the congregation and welcomed outsiders as part of the same community, even in light of the new, secular circumstances. As in church services, the song leader played an important role in this process of recreating group identity and solidarity. The song leader used voice to bring the group together, to call attention to common purpose, and to establish the opening of the meeting in the same way that a chairperson would do in another setting. Throughout the civil rights movement, finding a song leader was as important to local organizing as filling any other leadership function.

As the movement developed, so too did music and its functions. Music continued to serve as a means of identification, but added other communicative functions as the boycott took its toll and patience waned. Music served as a source and sign of strength, solidarity, and commitment. It helped build bridges between class and status groups, between blacks and white supporters, and between rural and urban and northern and southern blacks. It also bridged the gap between leaders and followers, helping to reinforce the notion that all belonged to the same community.

As support for the movement widened, not least because of the coverage given by the mass media, other types of songs and singers became influential. The attempt in 1962 to integrate the University of Mississippi at Oxford gave rise to the Bob Dylan song "Oxford Town." A year later Dylan wrote the classic, true-life folk ballad, "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," about the murder of an African-American maid by her white employer. These songs, along with others by Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, and Len Chandler, marked the convergence of the civil rights movement and the folk revival stirring among white American youth.

Music thus made it easier to bridge the gap between these cultures. The ballad tradition also had roots in the rural South, while the topical song which reached back to the Wobblies and the popular front helped cross the

multidimensional cultural divide. Folk singers helped bring the longstanding American tradition of protest song into the civil rights movement.³ Long-time activist-singers such as Pete Seeger and institutions like the Highlander School were both important in this process.

The evolution of the song “We Shall Overcome,” which more than any other expressed the Sixties project, provides an instructive example of the mobilization of tradition in social movements, showing how traditions can link social movements, providing a river of embodied ideas and images between generations of activists. That song, which began as a spiritual, was picked up by the labor movement and then, through contacts between labor movement activists and civil rights activists, transformed into the anthem of the civil rights movement. Since then it has found new “uses” in many other movements around the world.

Politics and Music of the 1960s

During the early to mid-1960s, the collective identity of what was then termed the Movement was articulated not merely through organizations or even mass demonstrations, although there were plenty of both, but perhaps even more significantly through popular music. In the words of Richard Flacks: “In the early sixties music and protest were more deeply intertwined than at any other time since the days of the Wobblies.”⁴ Movement ideas, images, and feelings were disseminated in and through popular music. Simultaneously, the movements of the times influenced developments, in both form and content, in popular music.

By providing resources for collective identity formation, innovative developments in popular culture can be traced back directly to the influence of social movements. In particular, the increasing multiculturalism that now characterizes the American historical consciousness and popular values and behaviors, can be traced back to the 1960s, when politically charged music helped project a new vision of American society. The more general search for new personal identities and the urge to connect the present with the past—that is, for mobilizing traditions—that are so pervasive in today’s world can likewise be traced back to the early 1960s. This section seeks to identify some of the factors, both contextual and

³ Many scholars and music critics have contributed to writing protest song history. Two outstanding scholars in the field are Jerome Rodnitzky and John Greenway. My work relies heavily on their mega-narratives of protest song history in the United States.

⁴ Flacks, *Making History*, 182.

textual, that led to the creative recombination of culture and politics that occurred in the United States in the 1960s.

Youth

What were some of the key social processes affecting the mediation between popular culture and social movements in this period? Why was popular music able to become so pregnant with ideas and innovations? One obvious sociological factor was the size, as well as the economic and creative power, of the prime audience for both sides of the mediating process: youth. With the possible exception of the civil rights movement in its early stages, both the prime constituting public of the Movement and the creators, users, and consumers of popular culture were under thirty. Throughout the 1960s the proportion of the American population under thirty was expanding both numerically and in influence. The social movements of the 1960s were both a cause and an effect of this. The movements were fueled by young people and were forces transforming an age group into a self-conscious generation. Commercial forces and interests were also at work, but for a time they were followers rather than leaders. Within the youth movement the many racial, regional, gender, and class divisions were transcended, part of its utopian dimension and exemplary action. Music was essential to its expression. It was in this music that the utopian images of a multicultural society gained coherence and form. And it is in this music that this multiculturalism lives on. During the 1960s youth not only gained self-consciousness, it became the model and set the standards for the rest of society in many spheres of culture. Like so many cultural development, the rise of rock owed much to technological change. With television replacing radio as the primary medium for comedy and drama, radio was forced to seek out new formats and new audiences, at precisely the time when rock was born. To survive, radio stations all over the country embraced rock music. Todd Gitlin argues convincingly that AM radio was one of the most important forces in creating within a generation the sense that it was a generation.⁵

These changes in the social and material process of popular music must be understood in relation to social changes that were taking place in American society, especially those that were brought to a head by the escalating war in Vietnam. By 1965, opposition to American intervention in Southeast Asia had become the single most important issue defining the social movement sector in the United States, which until then had focused

⁵ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 38.

largely on issues of racial equality and civil rights. The anti-Vietnam War movement proved more divisive than the civil rights movement, thereby altering the forms of interaction between politics and culture that had been so intimate during the early 1960s.

All the movements of the 1960s contained within themselves a critique of militarism and of the role of the military in American life. At one level, the 1960s movements represented a massive protest against the military-industrial complex and the dominant position of the military in American political, economic, and cultural life. The predominance of military values and military priorities meant that other significant social goals—racial equality, elimination of poverty, social welfare—could not be adequately addressed. It also meant that aggressive and violent behavior had become defining characteristics of American culture. For all its simple-mindedness, the hippie slogan “Make Love Not War” articulated at least part of the meaning of the movements of the 1960s.

The great cultural transformations these social movements actually achieved and for which they helped to prepare the way, were the integration of black culture, if not blacks themselves, into American society, and the general elevation of youth as cultural exemplar. If (white) rock-and-roll was a transformed and translated (black) rhythm-and-blues, then the new (white) urban folk music was, at least in part, a transformed and translated (black) country music. Its authenticity derived much from black southern roots. At the same time, the youth culture that cohered in and through the social movements of the 1960s became the standard bearer for society at large. It was to young people that one turned for guidance, assurance, and legitimation. They knew and defined “where it’s at,” especially in music.

Music in the Movement

Social movements develop in specific historical periods, as well as in national political cultures. These contexts form a distinct environment that affects the formation of a social movement, and is in turn affected by that movement’s formation. Popular music, in its specific national and international form, is a distinctive part of the environment affecting the formation of new social movements. Not only are movement activists raised in a milieu permeated by popular culture; as activists they also draw upon and use many of its forms and contents—its symbols and its stars—to further movement ends. Movements, through their activists and their activities, are both consumers and producers, takers and shapers, of

popular culture. They perform these functions, however, in ways defined by national contexts.

Several accounts by activists, from Todd Gitlin, onetime president of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the main proponent of a New Left in the early 1960s, to Bernice Johnson Reagon of the singing group *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, confirmed the importance of popular culture in helping solidify collective identity and the sense of individual belonging in the social movements of that time. As Gitlin remembers one moment in the early 1960s, the “years of hope” that preceded the “days of rage” at the end of the decade:

Dylan *sung for us*: we didn’t have to know he had hung out in Minneapolis’ dropout non-student radical scene in order to intuit that he had been doing some hard traveling through a familiar landscape. We followed his career as if he were singing our song; we got in the habit of asking where he was taking us next.⁶

The mixing of music and movement was therefore already clearly established, with popular sources and traditional tunes transformed and put to new uses. The songs provided a sense of identification as well as being rallying cries to resist authority. The American student movement, which began with a direct connection to the civil rights movement, was contemporaneous with a revival of interest in folk music, paralleling the development of soul or roots music and the civil rights movement, as described above. The music and the movement grew together, at the same time as many of those instrumental in the folk revival—Bob Dylan⁷, Peter, Paul and Mary, Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, Judy Collins and numerous others—found a ready audience on the front lines of mass demonstrations. Just as “freedom songs” had in the civil rights movement, folk songs and singers formed part of the process of collective identity formation of the student movement, to the point where it is difficult to think of one without the other.

⁶ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 197-198.

⁷ In his *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s*, Mike Marqusee offers an excellent assessment of Dylan’s works of the 1960s, especially during the folk revival and folk rock movement period. I am much indebted to Marqusee’s analysis.

Music Transformation

The political folk music of the early 1960s played a key role in the development of rock music. Indeed, rock music represented a further mobilization, in this case of the black secular blues music tradition. The mobilization of blues and its transformation into rock complemented, but also built upon, the mobilization of the black spiritual music tradition that characterized the civil rights movement and the mobilization of the topical folk song tradition that was so central to the “folk revival.” Singers such as Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, who would be the most successful in introducing rock music into the popular culture, brought all three traditions into the rock mixture, together with the oppositional politics shared by the “counterculture” as a whole.

It was primarily in the period of transition from the civil rights movement to broader political opposition to the war in Vietnam, that is, in the years from 1961 to 1965, that popular music could serve as the site, perhaps the most important site, of a remarkable process of experimentation and innovation, which would lead to major transformations in American and eventually in global culture.

In the 1960s, well-known songwriters and musicians and some of their songs represented the spirit of the decade in the popular consciousness. Songs contributed to making a new political consciousness, and were often performed at political demonstrations and collective festivals. They became vehicles for collective identity formation and shared consciousness-raising. Some songs pointed the finger and were overtly political. Meanwhile, singers—like songs—were central to the 1960s social movements. Intense collaboration within the songwriting community in “trading songs” became widely prevalent in the early Sixties. Further, the singer had often been a songwriter, performer, and producer, and also an activist, all rolled into one.

China and Its Map of Misreading

This chapter seeks to relate the theoretical and historical material presented above to recent developments elsewhere. It focuses, therefore, on the interaction of popular music and social movements in one particular national context, China. Besides being the country where I live, China is also a country in which many of the tensions and dilemmas of post-1960s political music were first played out most clearly and visibly. The Chinese political rock music movement, a network of musicians and activists who

have flourished since the mid-1980s, was fairly unique in its strength, longevity, and long term impact on China's overall popular culture.

The Chinese music movement was, in my view, a movement of mediation between the 1960s in America and the 1980s and 1990s in China. On the one hand, it appropriated the American experience into a different national culture and idiom, not simply by translating the American experience into Chinese culture, but also by translating the political messages of the United States of the 1960s into the social movements and political struggles of China in the 1980s. As the Chinese experience nicely illustrates, the birth of politicized rock music has represented an important mediating influence on the social movements of the 1980s, especially those related to student radicalism or the general reevaluation of Chinese culture. As a source of inspiration, it continues to have an impact on Chinese society. The results of the movement are equally visible: a wide-ranging folk music and folk rock movement has become an important component of Chinese popular culture, while the active propagation of participatory ideals in music-making has led to an explosion of young, talented pop musicians, many of whom are also well received in Southeast Asian as well as mainland markets.

On the other hand, the localization resulting from the introduction of the new globally oriented rock music has spawned a reaction, a search for roots and tradition. Hence, the process of globalization has always been characterized by a process leading Chinese rock musicians to defy the totality of the Western rock music. This has generated the conflicts that, fortunately, provided the dynamics and mechanism in China's music movement, prompting a conscious, concerted endeavor by the participants in quest of "a map of misreading."⁸ This, in return, enabled them to imbue the original texts with new meanings. In other words, by following the "map of misreading," Chinese audiences and musicians alike began to "concretize"⁹ the text and context of US popular music by drawing on their own "existing stock of experience."¹⁰ Again, this resulted in a movement whereby Chinese traditions were mobilized, with the texts of American song lyrics usually treated as things in themselves, decontextualized and disembodied, in order to fit them into the Chinese historical context. This appropriation led to what Jacques Derrida terms a genuine "act of creativity."¹¹ In this case it brought a new wave of Chinese rock music, beginning in the 1980s and gaining strength in the 1990s and

⁸ Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*.

⁹ Iser, *The Implied Reader*.

¹⁰ Iser, *The Act of Reading*.

¹¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.

the first decade of the twenty-first century, through which Chinese music entered the ambiguous realm of world music.

What Was the Chinese Music Movement?

There were many elements to the Chinese music movement, and by now, in retrospect, a variety of possible interpretations exist as to just what was happening. At the simplest level, there was a translation of American folk-rock music into a Chinese idiom. Rather than singing in English, or singing direct translations of American pop hits, around the early 1980s some young Chinese musicians began to transfer the meaning of American rock music into a Chinese context. By comparison with the earlier national appropriation process that occurred in most East Asian countries and regions—including Japan, Thailand, South Korea, and Taiwan, to name only a few—in China this translation work was characterized by a rather stronger political element and much more organizational activity. Many defined the making of Chinese rock music in political, namely, “anti-traditional,” and especially non-commercial terms. A broader range of musical genres and traditions were applied to the task of appropriation than was the case in other countries. For most of the 1980s this movement was an important cultural force in China. In its journals, concerts, records, meeting places, and record companies, it carved out a public space that was, in many respects, more significant than those of other “new social movements.” As critic Zheng Xiaoti argued at the time:

Of all attempts to create alternatives to the mainstream socialist culture, the Rock Music Movement is probably the most surprising and most successful. A politicized, socially critical musical culture has grown up in a few short years outside the framework provided by established culture. In an increasingly polarized culture, the Rock Music Movement is so far relatively alone in having the characteristics of a sort of alternative mass popular movement and at the same time giving concrete examples of how radicals can make real inroads in mass culture.¹²

The music movement was contemporaneous with the rise of a full-scale intellectual movement aiming at a radical reassessment of overall Chinese culture, including the movement known as the “cultural fever.” Both the student movement and the rock music movement were part of a

¹² Zheng Xiaoti, a former manager of China’s state-run audio and video company during the 1990s, made these remarks during an interview with a local music journal that ran a major interview on Cui Jian.

process of specialization of social movement energies that set in after the tumultuous years of China's Cultural Revolution during the 1960s. The use of music at demonstrations, festivals, and large collective manifestations during the good times of the early days of "reform and opening up," was reminiscent of America's Sixties experience, and especially of the music of the civil rights movement. The music was therefore inclusionary rather than exclusionary, meant for everyone; the themes were universal, but sometimes rather particularistic, emphasizing one set of issues or social problems over others. As such, these movements prefigure the present-day social and sexual identity movements.

In China, there was an extraordinary emphasis on music in the movement activity of the 1980s. As we will see, this was to be a source of strength for the music movement. The music tried to include all progressive causes. Lacking any unifying program broader than "anti-commercialism," the music movement could not survive its own problematic commercial successes, which eventually led to the breakdown of the barrier between the alternative movement space and the mainstream popular music industry. This resulted in a larger share of the music industry for alternative companies and groups, and a wider set of opportunities for less commercial music.

The Chinese Context

In the early 1980s Chinese popular music was in a state of stagnation, resembling the situation in the United States in the late 1950s, when the initial excitement of rock-and-roll had begun to wane and popular music showed signs of commercial and artistic stasis, thus creating an opportunity for a politically charged folk music to win market share and influence people. With official endorsement, mainland China was swept by a craze for the sappy music of Hong Kong and Taiwan, known as "Gang-tai Gequ" (literally Hong Kong/Taiwan music), which dominated the early 1980s Chinese popular music scene.¹³ Both artistically and commercially, therefore, in China popular music lagged behind that in many other East Asian countries. In China, the pop industry was simply cast aside, leaving something of a vacuum. There was no indigenous Chinese pop music that could claim to represent and put into focus the collective identity of Chinese youth. By contrast with the situation in many

¹³ Andrew Jones, associate professor of Chinese at the University of California at Berkeley, has written extensively on the rise and fall of popular music in China in the 1930s and during the early years of China's reform and opening up era. I have learned much from his insights and draw heavily upon them.

East Asian countries, in China the state-run music industry demonstrated a lack of vision and awareness, which created a space for the rise of self-organized alternative structures. This space was quickly filled by a sudden flow of youth subculture and progressive movements that experimented with new forms of political and musical expression. Meanwhile, a new collective identity, with common values, symbols, and ways of interacting, was developing among the large group of students who from 1978 onward began to return to colleges and universities, which had been effectively shut down during the fanatic years of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). What grew out of this was Chinese underground music that from the very start had a political definition: it was oppositional, or at least, non-conformist, independent, and suspicious of commercial values and resistant to attempts at cooptation.

The movement began as one ingredient in the making of a counterculture, Chinese style. It began single-handedly with the story of the rise of one young man, Cui Jian, a former trumpet player affiliated with a state-run orchestra, together with a band called Ado—a Swahili word meaning “friend”—with which Cui Jian has been associated ever since the mid-1980s. Ado was formed in 1986, and its original members were several local musicians and two foreign students studying in Beijing. It was widely recognized as China's first rock band, with Cui Jian as its founding father. Like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan in the early 1960s, they first performed in bars and on university campuses. What eventually emerged as a Chinese progressive music movement was thus, first and foremost, an effort to produce a more meaningful kind of popular music.

The sources of this movement would be many and varied. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the main influence was the folk and folk-rock music of the American counterculture: the music of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Pete Seeger, the psychedelic rock of Jimi Hendrix, the rock blues of Janis Joplin, and the British variants thereof, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In China, these kinds of music fed into an alternative culture that was genuinely subversive and oppositional, reputedly subverting Chinese politics, just as rock from Communist countries purportedly resulted in the collapse of Communism.¹⁴ Vaclav Havel, former president of Czechoslovakia, even claimed that his country's revolution began in the rock scene. Nowhere else in East Asia was the diffusion of American rock music produced in the Sixties given such a political coloration as in China, and nowhere else was a self-consciously progressive music organized as effectively as in China.

¹⁴ Jones, *Like a Knife*.

This Sixties-inspired political rock music movement helped bring about a renewed interest in folk music that is now an important force in “global culture.” But in China there was a quite unique political component to this appropriation process. There was a mobilization of tradition and traditional musical forms, within the context of an avowedly political movement. The movement provided opportunities for musical experimentation and the rediscovery of traditional forms of Chinese folk music. Even though the political songs of the 1980s now seem anachronistic, Chinese rock music continues to develop. While the music movement largely failed in its efforts to contribute to major political change, it played an important role in the making of a new sensibility and consciousness.

The Sources of the Movement

Rock music made its debut in the early 1980s, almost two years after China decided, once again, to open itself to the international community at almost every level. By 1989, a decade had passed since China had embarked on a massive campaign to modernize itself. Economic reforms had been wildly successful—so much so that by 1989 the economy was overheating. There had been perestroika (economic restructuring) but no glasnost or real political reform. China was (and still is) run from “behind the silk screen” by an old guard looking back to the generation of Mao. By then, everyone was unhappy. Ordinary citizens were seeing their standards of living cut in half by double-digit inflation, while corruption was running rampant. Intellectuals were clamoring for freedom of the press and the release of political dissenters. Meanwhile, within the party liberal reformers had temporarily gained the upper hand, leaving the conservatives apparently powerless to stop the flood of new wealth and new ideas. Change was in the air. Mind-blowing books were available on the black market and in campus bookstores. College students spent their time reading J.D. Salinger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and C. Wright Mills, and listening to rock music, while discussing how to change China at “democracy salons” that were flourishing on campuses nationwide.

Throughout the 1980s, Western culture, including works of literature, history, and philosophy, was introduced to China. This was seen as an exercise in the transmission of knowledge, comparable to that in science, and was not expected to have any ideological impact. Simultaneously, the first wave of what the Chinese government then termed “foreign experts,” most from such English-speaking countries as the United States and

Britain, began to arrive on almost every college campus around the country. Interestingly, most of “the first wavers” belonged to what Steve Armstrong, an adjunct professor of American history from California whom I have had difficulties in locating, termed “the Sixties survivors.” Not surprisingly, they brought in with them not just literary and historical works from or about that decade, stressing the positive gains of the social movements of the 1960s, but also, most importantly, music tapes and records by major singers from that era. The first group of songs included “We Shall Overcome” and “Blowin’ in the Wind,” and the albums, naturally enough, were those of Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and Art Garfunkel, to name just a few. Lyrics were first used for language teaching purposes, and also, at least by Armstrong, treated as artifacts reflecting a period of what Charles Reich labeled “a time of passion” and Todd Gitlin “years of hope.” The songs, whose repertoire subsequently expanded to include those of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and many others, found a ready audience among those college youths who were hungering for the role of rebels eager to cleanse China of its assorted imperfections. The same pattern occurred across the entire country. Beijing became the center where the wind of change was blowing.

In 1986, Cui Jian abandoned his iron rice bowl job as a trumpet player with the Beijing Song and Dance Troupe, and soon released his first album. Its signature song, “Nothing to My Name,” later became the anthem of a generation. Other musicians from around the city, twenty in all, soon came to join him. They spent the years before 1989 trading and listening to tapes of rock music they had copied from foreign students studying and living in Beijing. Around 1986, they had been turned on by—who else?—Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Door, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, Sting, and Bruce Springsteen. After that they listened to whatever tapes and CDs they could get their hands on, which usually made the rounds within 24 hours. Listening was a dizzying process, a conversion to a new faith. Each tape brought new revelations, new musical worlds, new languages that they could pick up, use, and adapt to their own purposes. At first they just copied, playing along with the tapes and learning the techniques. Later, they began to write their own songs, looking for and finding their own voices. In this way, Cui Jian experimented with rock and roll music before composing many of his hit songs on his first folk rock album, *The New Long March Rock*, including his signature song “Nothing to My Name,” a song that would be listened to and analyzed with some of the same intense literary attention that Bob Dylan’s early texts had attracted.

Political Influence

Like A Knife

By the mid-1980s, it was evident that Cui Jian and other singing groups, such as 1989, Black Panther, and Cobra (China's first all-women rock band), shared the same outlook. Their songs were replete with symbolism, surrealism, and literary allusions. They expressed alienation and youthful discontent, strong hostility to the existing cultural and political hegemony, explicit paranoia over official authority, deep antagonism to conventional morality, and affinity with a variety of so-called "Western bourgeois liberal ideas."

Introducing a March 1989 performance of the song "Xiang Yi Ba Dao Zi," meaning "Like A Knife," Cui Jian spoke provocatively, proclaiming: "If Western rock is the flood, then Chinese rock is a knife. We dedicate this knife to you." The song says:

The guitar in my hand is like a knife.
I want to cut your face till all that's left is your mouth.
I don't care who you are, my dear,
I want to trade you my blood for your tears.
I don't care if you are an old man or girl,
I want to cut at your hypocrisy till I get some truth.

In 1989, at the height of the "cultural fever," Chinese intellectuals challenged the Frankfurt School's critique of popular culture as a manipulative form of social control imposed from above, and presented rock singers as agents of change: "Chinese college students have been stressing the individual, the self, and rebelling against all sorts of authority...but this idealism and the sense of the individual is contrary to the reality of present society....The people who are most influential among young people are singers such as Cui Jian."¹⁵

In 1989, therefore, student dissatisfaction with the status quo catapulted Chinese rock to power as an icon of ideological and inter-generational conflict. In a February 1989 interview for *China Daily*, then China's only English-language newspaper, Cui Jian said: "Rock and roll is

¹⁵ Cui Jian made these remarks in his famous 1989 *China Daily* interview. It was a rare chance for rock fans in China to learn that he would open up at all. He may have chosen an English-language publication deliberately, even though or possibly because the message might not reach many of his fans, given how few English speakers there were in China at that time.

a special kind of music. It is anti-tradition, anti-culture. It's the ideology of modern man..." Cui Jian's words that rock was an ideology, not a set musical form, recontextualized the German sociologist Theodor Adorno's reading of pop culture as producing consumables which condition people to insist on the very ideology that enslaves them.¹⁶ Cui Jian's reading of rock history reveals, moreover, an alternative Chinese representation of the social, collective function of rock and roll, one that diverges from the theories of subculture propounded by the Birmingham School of cultural studies. Dick Hebdige represents rock rebellion against established norms as symbolic semiotic guerrilla warfare at the level of music and fashion.¹⁷ According to Michael Brake, subcultural groups limit themselves to asserting an expressive identity against cultural hegemony, but rarely constitute an articulated opposition, so that cooptation inevitably results.¹⁸ Chinese rockers, however, self-consciously created a cultural opposition to *Yayi*, the oppression of individual expression, liberty, and creativity by an authoritarian, conformist, even feudal tradition. Their anti-traditionalist individualism advocated nominally Western values, at the very least, a cosmopolitan and *Kaifang* (liberalized open) internationalism, as opposed to *fengbi* (landlocked, closed) traditional culture.

Visions of China

Thirty years after China's opening and reform, the Chinese rock scene is in transition and transformation. While playing rock music is not illegal in China, rock is still not permitted on state-run television or most other state-run media, and public rock concerts are still regularly banned or cancelled. With the government waging a war of attrition on such music, mixed with selective economic reforms, rock lost some of its galvanic power. The rewards of the market have led a number of rockers toward a kind of commodity nativism far removed from 1980s political activism. Within this milieu, there exists a phenomenon that music critics have termed the compradorization of the Chinese avant garde, where, thanks to the absence of public domestic performance venues, rock musicians have been forced to rely almost exclusively on offshore Hong Kong and Taiwan record companies, a dependence that often dictates accepting apolitical production values.

¹⁶ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*.

¹⁷ Hebdige, *Subculture*.

¹⁸ Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures*; and Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture*.

One such band imported back into mainland China and sanctioned, most interestingly, by the government, is called Tang Dynasty. This heavy metal band is named after the ruling dynasty of the Li family, in power from 618 AD-907 AD. In many ways, Tang Dynasty represents the future of Chinese rock music. The band members are determined, professional, overtly apolitical, and bent on commercial success. They refused to be painted into the corner of subcultural rebellion. And finally, despite the fact that they are working in a distinctly Western form, they are ferociously nationalistic. In an interview with Andrew Jones of *Spin* magazine, Ding Wu, Tang Dynasty's lead guitarist, expressed an essentialist notion that Chinese and Western cultures are irreconcilably different, saying: "Rock is based on the blues, and we can never play the blues as well as an American. It's just not in our blood. We can imitate it, but eventually we'll have to go back to the music we grew up with, to traditional Chinese music."

This raises a question of authenticity: Is it possible to create authentic Chinese rock music? The effort to create "rock and roll with Chinese characteristics," emulating the catch phrase of the day, "constructing socialism with Chinese characteristics," has indeed provoked earnest intellectual debate among Chinese rockers. If Deng Xiaoping, architect of China's modernization program, could speak of "constructing socialism with Chinese characteristics," Tang Dynasty wishes to know how to make rock music that is unmistakably Chinese. Tang Dynasty's first album opens with a song titled "A Dream Return to the Tang Dynasty." This is art rock at its pompous best: complex harmonies, breathtaking guitar work, and Led Zeppelinesque mysticism wedded to ornate, flowery lyrics. In place of the art rockers' Shakespearean pretensions, Tang Dynasty draws on classical Chinese culture. The lyrics of "A Dream Return to the Tang Dynasty" are written in the Chinese equivalent of Middle English. At one point in the song, Ding Wu chants a few lines from a poem by Du Fu, one of the greatest poets in Chinese history.

The music is a richly imaginative sound tapestry, assimilating Peking opera and Uigur folk tunes with Western heavy metal timbres, yet with uniquely Chinese melodic and harmonic orientation. The focus remains on the melodies of the lead guitar and bass, and the percussion does not perform in lockstep but actually paces a dramatic framework for the piece. The entire album represents a fusion of heavy metal, intricate art rock, Arabic folk forms from Xinjiang's far western deserts, and well-crafted pop melodies. Released in 1992 by Taiwan-based Magic Stone Records, the album propelled the band well beyond the narrow subterranean world represented by Cui Jian, and also far beyond being pigeonholed as rebels

by party officials and Western journalists eager to view Chinese rock only in politicized shades of red versus white. As Zhang Ju of Tang Dynasty repeatedly stressed, they are not politicians but musicians, whose goal is to be the best rock band in China.

Ideologically, therefore, the knife that Cui Jian dedicated to Chinese audiences, cutting away at hypocrisy, has become a letter courting a different time, and dreams of refuge from grievances, longing, and fate. The blade is no longer directed toward the residues of a feudal culture, but toward Western cooptation, a point articulated by Liu Yijun, the heavy metal guitarist:

I've been westernized almost my whole life...I never knew anything about my own tradition. And now I really hate anything from the West. I resent its influence...modern Chinese culture has never lived up to tradition because it has been ruined by Western influence. We have to go back to our roots...that is what the mission of this cultural phenomenon should be all about.¹⁹

This is certainly a new definition of rock and roll authenticity. It stems in part from real anger over betrayal by Western ideals of freedom for which, ever since the 1919 May Fourth Movement, Chinese have died. Post-1992 market-oriented socialism has seized upon this anger. As Maoist ideology becomes irrelevant, the government has turned to assertive Chinese nationalism.

As for other current rock bands, a plethora of punk-funk and folk rock bands have sprung up, including, to name just a few, the Catcher in the Rye (campus band), the Flyz, Scream (heavy metal, the Chinese equivalent of Guns'n'Roses), and Carsick Cars, PK 14, and many others. The most respected are The Tongue and Second Hand Rose, who together have made an effort to articulate a post-Socialist sense and sensibility, in such songs as "This Is Me" and "Rock is Useless." Yet, as the playwright Paul Rudnick argued in 1992, true rebellion entails risk and offers little hope of personal remuneration.²⁰ This accurately describes the position of many of China's rock musicians, whose frustration is aimed less at party elders than at the older generation of rock musicians, headed by Cui Jian. Again, Zhang Ju expressed this best, stating: "If we are going to overthrow something, it will be Cui Jian's monopoly on the word 'Superstar'."

¹⁹ Liu Yijun, born in 1962 and affectionately known as "Laowu," is a Chinese heavy metal guitarist and a member of the rock /metal band Tang Dynasty. He made these remarks in 1995, during an interview for *Zitat*.

²⁰ Rudnick, "Everybody's a Rebel," 52-58.

One pertinent question remains: What direction will Chinese rock pursue? Will it mirror changes in Western popular music trends, or will it chart its own course, a trajectory suggested by the promise of Tang Dynasty's debut album. Can a distinct and authentic Chinese rock exist, free of or at least transcending its Western origins? What differences will the new generation of Chinese rock musicians articulate? Just exactly where—twenty-five years after the portents of *A Dream Return to the Tang Dynasty*—is Chinese rock heading?

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