Since the mid-1980s the Chinese rock singer Cui Jian has stirred up the arguably tranquil waters of Chinese popular music. In his wake, a rock culture emerged in China, especially Beijing. Whereas earlier generations of Chinese rock were characterized by rather clearly rebellious poses, poses that resonate the spirit of the Great Cultural Debate that characterized Chinese culture over the 1980s, the more recent music scenes employ a wider range of visual tactics. Threading through various generations and scenes within Beijing rock culture, however, has been a quest for authenticity. In this article I will present an overview of the authenticating aspirations of Beijing rock culture. I will start off by sketching a brief history of Chinese rock, and argue that, compared to the Western claim to the origin—and therefore to the continual making—of rock, Chinese rock musicians must bear the burden of providing authenticating proof in order to avoid being labeled mere copycats.

Apart from the West versus Rest distinction, a second dichotomy that propels the politics of rock in China is Beijing rock versus pop from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Rock is constructed as the authentic voice of a new generation, whereas pop is interpreted as an overtly commercialized sound produced by the music industry. These dichotomies underlie the five authenticating tactics that I distinguish: representing what I call the rebellious, the ancient China, the communist China, the scenic, and, finally, the new China. This article will provide ample visual evidence of these authenticating tactics, and analyze critically the politics behind these tactics. I will in particular interrogate the insistence on articulations of time and place that prevail in (discourses on) Chinese rock culture and argue for a cultural studies approach that resists rather than reifies either time or place.

AUTHENTIC LONGINGS

The perceived birth of Chinese rock can be traced back to the mid-1980s, when the hoarse voice of Beijing rock star Cui Jian stirred up the arguably tranquil waters of Chinese popular culture. In his wake, a vivid rock culture has emerged in Beijing that conquered not only mainland China but also, although to a far lesser extent, its overseas family members, Taiwan and Hong Kong. By now, the label rock
(yaogun yinyue) seems too broad to capture the diversity of music styles currently en vogue on the mainland, such as hardcore punk, folk rock, and deep house. However, when one walks into a record store in Beijing, the label regains some of its significance, as one will find the rock tapes grouped together, set apart from what is categorized in popular discourse as pop music (liuxing yinyue).

Beijing rockers are constantly negotiating a set of complex relationships: not only is Beijing rock culture itself profoundly fragmented into different music scenes, Beijing rockers also feel the double urge to mark a difference from the West, to avoid being (labeled) mere copycats, and from their Southern pop colleagues from Hong Kong and Taiwan, to avoid being criticized as commercial. The key term to grasp and analyze these negotiations is authenticity. Rock musicians in Beijing employ different tactics to construct and guarantee their authenticity. Rather than investigating for a clear-cut definition of authenticity, this article presents a search for the different visual authenticating tactics used in the Beijing rock culture. In this article, I first argue that Beijing rock’s quest for authenticity is inscribed into two mutually conflative dichotomies: the Real West versus the Less Real Rest and the Cultural North (Beijing) versus the Commercial South (Hong Kong and Taiwan). Both dichotomies propel the five authenticating visual tactics—representing what I call the rebellious, the ancient China, the communist China, the scenic, and the new China.

My study of the authenticating tactics draws upon a collection of approximately 200 Chinese rock albums released between 1985 and 2002, and a small collection of concert flyers, rock magazines, and pop albums. I conclude that the authenticating tactics of Beijing rock at times reflect fierce nationalistic longings, resembling the official ideological policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); they also reinforce perceived regional cultural differences, and finally can be considered a result of the (internalized) orientalizing gaze of the West upon China. Consequently, a romanticized reading of Beijing rock as rebellious and heroic [Dutton 1998], of rockers as warriors for freedom and democracy, is incomplete, if not inaccurate. So is a reverse interpretation in terms of accomplices of the nation-state [Barme 1999]. My reading hence oscillates on the proposed continuum from accomplice to rebel; this reading in the end inspires me not only to foreground but, more so, to question the importance of a context-specific interpretation of popular culture, in particular when it comes to the Kantian dimensions of time and place.

AUTHENTIC HISTORIES

Before I outline and interrogate the importance of what I call the rock mythology for Chinese rock culture, it is important to sketch some historical lines along which Chinese rock culture proliferated. Cui Jian’s rise to fame in the mid-1980s followed the Open Door policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Cui Jian’s stardom, and the subsequent growth of Chinese rock culture, resonated closely with broader cultural developments that took place in China over the 1980s. In order to map out these developments, Arjun Appadurai’s distinction of five different scapes through which contemporary culture globalizes proves useful: he distinguishes mediascapes (flows of popular culture), finanscapes (flows of money),
technoscapes (flows of technology), ethnoscapes (flows of people) and ideoscapes (flows of ideology) [Appadurai 1996: 27–48].

First, the mediascape. Popular music—ranging from The Beatles to John Denver and from The Carpenters to Michael Jackson and Madonna—was among the forms of popular culture that have entered China since 1978, along with, for example, Telenovelas from Brazil, pop music from Taiwan, and cartoons from Japan. The flow of rock to China was greatly enhanced by foreign students—an aspect of the ethnoscape—who brought their tapes with Western (alternative) music to the Chinese colleges. Also, the visits of rock musicians to the West at a later stage, during which they eagerly bought tapes and visited live performances, facilitated the development of Chinese rock culture profoundly. New modern electronic appliances—constitutive elements of the technoscape—such as radios, cassette players, and television sets provided the necessary infrastructure that enabled the growing importance of popular music in China. Foreign investors such as Polygram, JVC, and Rock Records from Taiwan—being part of the financescape—further facilitated the growth of Chinese rock. Cui Jian, studying trumpet at the Beijing conservatory, eagerly incorporated the new, rebellious “Western” sounds of rock. With the sound came a new ideology, being part of the ideoscape, as embedded in the rock mythology, which promises (bodily) freedom, masculinity, rebellion, and protest. The ideology of rock resonates closely with the perceived Zeitgeist of the 1980s, during which a “cultural fever” raged over urban China, questioning the confinements of Chinese culture. Later in this article, I will question such periodization of the past, for now, however, it proves useful in order to contextualize the rise of rock culture in Beijing. Emblematic for the Great Cultural Debate is the TV epos River Elegy in which stereotypical signifiers of Chineseness, such as the Dragon, the Great Wall, and the Yellow River, were heavily criticized as symptoms, rather than symbols, of a culture that is inward looking, inert and backward [for an overview of this debate, see the wonderful anthology of Barme and Jaivin 1992, also Geist 1996, Wang 1996, and Zha 1996; for a critical inside perspective, see Zhang, 1997 and Dai 2002].

When Cui Jian came to fame in 1986 with his song “I Have Nothing” (yīwù suǒ yǒu)—a song about a failed love affair, but widely read as a metaphor for the growing estrangement of Chinese youth from the political climate of China—he gave a popular sonic voice to this great cultural debate. His song became, quite unintendedly, one of the anthems of the student demonstrations in 1989. His subsequent songs, in particular “A Piece of Red Cloth” (yì kuài hóng bù), expressed critical dissent towards the Chinese Communist Party, and its assumed abuse of power [Brace 1991, Brace and Friedlander 1992, Jones 1992, Weller 1994]. Not surprisingly, Cui Jian was banned from performing in 1987 for a year after a Beijing performance on 14 January enraged one Party official [Steen 1996: 97], just as the frenzied audience in his 1991 tour prompted the authorities to cut his tour short in Chengdu [see Jones 1992 and Steen 1996 for an analysis of Cui Jian’s oeuvre]. Not only his lyrics, but also his musical arrangements are representative of Cui Jian’s pioneering role for Chinese rock. In his works, he combines the sounds of the electric guitar with that of what are considered classical Chinese instruments, such as the guzheng, suona (a reed instrument), and dizi (a transverse flute made of bamboo). Whereas this combination of presumably Western with
presumably Chinese sounds can be and have been interpreted as signifying the conflict between the freedoms of the West vis-à-vis the conservatism of Chinese traditions [see for example Steen 1996: 126], in this article, I will take a slightly different track by explaining how, under the scrutinizing Western gaze, this inclusion of Chinese elements can and should also be interpreted as an authenticating tactic.

With the crackdown on the student protests on 4 June, 1989, the cultural fever that raged over China in the 1980s is believed to have quickly faded out, after which Chinese popular culture had to reground itself [Zha 1996: 109]. Nonetheless, Beijing rock culture continued to grow, and the works of bands following on Cui Jian, such as Tang Dynasty, Black Panther and singers like He Yong and Zhang Chu, continued to be deeply embedded in the rock mythology. Over the course of the 1990s, Chinese rock culture changed profoundly, particularly after Party control loosened significantly in the latter half of the 1990s, making possible the release of more controversial works from bands like Zi Yue, NO, and The Fly. Parallel to the loosening of political control at the end of the 1990s, local record companies gained importance at the expense of regional and global companies, pushing the development of the rock culture even further (see de Kloet [2002] for an analysis of the Chinese rock music industry in the late 1990s). Consequently, Chinese rock culture became more diverse, more fragmented, in short, more scenic, producing a wider array of authenticating tactics used by the bands to distinguish themselves from pop musicians from Hong Kong and Taiwan, from other Chinese bands, and from the West.

AUTHENTIC GEOGRAPHIES

To return to that most ambivalent of all scapes as distinguished by Appadurai, the ideoscape, rock’s ideology is embedded in and framed by what I call the rock mythology.2 This mythology consists of a set of narratives that produce rock as a distinct music world that is first and foremost authentic, and also subcultural, masculine, rebellious, and (counter-)political. Not surprisingly, the perceived totalitarian character of the Chinese regime excites the imagination to relive the rock mythology and its associated pop-rock dichotomy in this part of the world. Again not surprisingly, this dichotomy has been dominating academic and journalistic, Chinese and non-Chinese, discourses on Chinese rock, proving to be a crucial marker of distinction for musicians, producers, and audiences [Jones 1992, 1994; Steen 1996]. Both the West and Gangtai pop3 can be considered the constitutive outsides of Beijing rock, both feed its authenticating politics which I try to unravel in this article [Figure 1].

The first distinction that is crucial for rock musicians in Beijing is the Real West versus the Less Real Rest. Being located outside the perceived center of rock music, the West, rock musicians in Beijing constantly run the danger of being (labeled) mere copycats of their Western colleagues. To authenticate their sound, sinification is a frequently used tactic, as I will show later. A special feature in Modern Sky Magazine on hip hop in China is indicative of the general angst: “Compared to Western music, we will always be in a state of copying. When we
have something new, we will throw away the old one. We have all sorts of music, but none is properly digested by us” [Zhang 2000: 19]. Given the assumed origin of rock, it is not unusual that popular media in China often foreground Western sounds. A quick look at two of the main rock magazines in China—Music Heaven and Modern Sky Magazine—reveals the importance of the perceived Heimat of rock music. The West sets the criteria for what rock ought to be, and it is under this imagined scrutiny of their Western counterparts that rock musicians in China make their music.

Music Heaven, for instance, always puts a Western rock band on its cover, whereas Modern Sky Magazine runs a double cover, carrying a Chinese band or artist on the front, and a Western band on the back. Figure 2 presents the covers of both magazines. Indicative of the importance of the West are both the headline on the Chinese cover of Modern Sky Magazine: “Go West,” and the picture of the band, the Cranberries, as depicted on the cover of Music Heaven.

Both magazines come with a free compilation tape or CD of both Chinese and Western bands, mostly with more tracks of the latter. All bands are featured in the magazine, allowing the reader a glimpse not only of upcoming bands in China, but also of the latest releases in the West. Reviews of Chinese albums often include references to Western bands. For example, the Beijing pop-punk band Underground Baby is compared to Black Flag and The Ramones, and is linked to the following generic labels: Underground punk (dixia pengke), punk pop (liuxing pengke), trash metal (bianchi jinshu), hardcore punk (yinghe pengke), and drum’n’bass [Yuen 1999: 20–21]. Consequently, as will be shown in this article, different visual tactics are used in order to guarantee authenticity by marking a difference from the West. Interestingly, these tactics have changed over time. Whereas the earlier generation eagerly employed images of either ancient or communist China, more recent music scenes employ tactics that represent the contemporary, and the (post-)modern.

The second distinction that underlies the authenticating tactics is the distinction between Gangtai pop from the Commercial South—the love songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan—and rock from the Cultural North. The pop-rock distinction is anything but typically Chinese; in the West the voice and image of Kurt Cobain is also framed differently (that is, more authentic, more true to the inner self) than

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Figure 1  Politics of Chinese rock.
that of Britney Spears. What is different in the Chinese context, however, is the geographical dimension inscribed into this globalized dichotomy: it once again reifies the North—Beijing—as being the cultural center of Greater China and the South—Hong Kong and Taiwan—as its commercialized constitutive outsides.

There are numerous examples that may question such a strict spatialization of the pop-rock divide in the Chinese context. For instance, the rock (or, some would say, pop-rock) band Beyond from Hong Kong was immensely popular during the late 1980s and 1990s. At the turn of the century, the Hong Kong rap group LMF (Lazy Mutha Fucka) hit the charts with provocative, politicized lyrics [Ma 2002]. Hong Kong pop star Candy Lo includes rock aesthetics in her image (a real tattoo), videoclips (with close-ups of her playing an electric guitar), and way of working (she produces and writes her own music, unlike the “typical” pop acts). The teen idol Nicholas Tse smashes guitars onstage and generally assumes a “bad boy” stance, which was even further strengthened when he was put into jail for cheating the police after speeding with his yellow Ferrari. In Taiwan, a rock scene has proliferated in Taipei, with Wu Bai as its godfather. These examples, which might serve to trouble the pop-rock spatialization, have, however, done the contrary. They testify to the mythical strength of the Beijing rock culture when both popular and academic discourse pay scant attention to these alternative southern rock voices; nor is there much debate on the destabilization of the pop-rock divide. Instead, Beijing is time and again reified as the epicenter of Chinese rock music. Emblematic of this imagination is the Hong Kong movie *Beijing Rocks* from Mabel Cheung, from 2002, in which a pop singer in Hong Kong
becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the perceived artificiality of pop and so undertakes a pilgrimage to Beijing in a quest to (re)gain the authenticating spirit of “true” rock music.

However weakly the pop-rock distinction may be grounded, most Chinese rock musicians will agree with Sar, the drummer of the Beijing rock band Thin Men: “Rock music is totally different from pop... Rock comes from our souls, it is original music, composed and played from the same heart. Pop is the ultimate assembly-line product. (...) There is nothing genuine about it. It is not about expressing your truths but about manipulating consumers” [in Kovskaya 1999].

The visualization of the pop-rock dichotomy is reflective of the connotations of the generic labels. The rock jackets that I will present later are more rough and “real” to the eye when compared to pop jackets that are smooth, often visibly artificial, with the faces and clothes more often than not altered by Photoshop. Figure 3 presents two typical examples of pop aesthetics, one from Hong Kong-born pop star Coco Lee, who moved to the U.S. at the age of ten and later became particularly popular in Taiwan with her Mandarin albums, like DiDaDi and Sunny Day: Feeling Good. The image comes from a postcard that is included with one of her albums. The second image presents a jacket image of an Anita Mui CD.

The image of Coco Lee can be considered emblematic of the pop aesthetics. We see a sexy picture of Coco Lee in a tight black rubber dress with the skyscrapers of a metropolis in the background—signifying the cosmopolitan aesthetics of pop—along with a computerized image in the lower part of the picture, signifying the postmodernity, or better perhaps, the high modernity of pop. The jacket of Anita Mui—from her album Larger than Life—presents the singer as a dandy. We see a play with gender in the work of Anita Mui, which granted her the title of the Asian Madonna, and like her American counterpart, the image draws attention to

![Figure 3 Postcard Coco Lee and jacket Anita Mui.](image)
its own posing, to its very artificiality, signifying a departure from the authenti-
cating drive as inscribed in the rock mythology (for a detailed analysis of Anita
Mui, see Witzleben [1999]).

Apart from the Hong Kong pop icons mentioned above, Taiwan also seems to
provide a fertile soil for the cosmopolitan sounds of Chinese pop. The pop diva
A-Mei (Chang Hui-Mei) has won fans on both sides of the Taiwan strait. Her
spectacular live performances can be considered emblematic of the pop aesthetics;
gone is the need to play endless riffs on your guitar until your clothes are soaked
with sweat to guarantee your authenticity. Instead, what counts in the universe of
pop is spectacle and performance, the quest to be real is replaced by a light-
hearted play with identities, in which the singer changes outfit several times, in
which playback is acceptable as long as the show remains entertaining.

AUTHENTIC TACTICS

Beijing rock’s quest for authenticity—producing markers of distinction from both
the Real West and the Commercial South—is played out through different visual
tactics, among which I will distinguish the following five: (1) Signs of rebellion
produce rock musicians as real rebels; signs of either (2) ancient or (3) communist
China make it into real Chinese rock, (4) different rock scenes and their specific
aesthetics lend authenticity to the sound; and finally, signs of (5) contemporary
modern urban China make rock a representation of today’s life in China.

THE REBELLIOUS

A good example of the rebellious image rock releases often employ comes from He
Yong. This punk-rock singer in 1991 triggered off my interest in Chinese rock. I was
amazed by his outrage and anger, his punk hairstyle, and the way he screamed
out that he felt like living on a garbage dump. Given my perception at that time of
China as a totalitarian regime, with the images of the June 4 protests still vivid in
my mind, I hadn’t expected anything like that. Instead, I associated China with the
tranquil sounds of the guzheng. My subsequent study of Beijing rock culture could
be interpreted as an interrogation of this Western gaze that views China as both an
exotic, ancient place (signified by the tranquil sounds of the guzheng), and a highly
politicized space (signified by the June 4 events of rebellion and repression). Figure
4 shows the jacket of He Yong’s first (and only) CD, released by the Taiwanese

There are different elements that construct rebellion: first and foremost, the fire.
Like the fearless phoenix, He Yong bathes in fire; his naked torso makes him look
like a wild rebel who borrows power from the unruly flames surrounding him. On
the inlay we see him standing in doubt against a tree, his head on fire—as if his
raging thoughts have literally made his mind burn. On the title track “Garbage
Dump” (lajichang), we hear He Yong scream desperately that: “The world we are
living in is like a garbage dump, people are just like worms, fighting and grabbing,
what they eat is conscience, what they shit are thoughts, is there hope is there
hope.” The images, the lyrics as well as the rhythmic punk sound make the opening song a clearly rebellious one. It produces a true rock singer, who—in line with the rock mythology—rebels against the established order.

The same rebellious tactics are shown in Figure 5, the jacket of Zhou Ren. Again we see a rock singer with a naked torso, this time fighting his way out of a can of baked beans. One possible and, arguably, overtly politicized reading is that while the suffocating red sauce of communism might be imprisoning the blank, faceless masses, the rock star is trying to fight his way out of the tasteless misery. Politicized or not, the image is one of breaking out, of freeing, of rebellion. It is also interesting to note that what both jackets signify is not only rebellion, but a particularly masculine rebellion, a masculinity as reflected by naked torsos and angry looks. Rock is above all constructed as a male rebellion against authorities, leaving little room for women.

ANCIENT CHINA

Another frequently employed tactic to authenticate the sound of Chinese rock, to rescue it from being an imitation of the West, is the invocation of ancient China. This tactic can be traced among all generations of Chinese rock, from Cui Jian to the more recent work of Thin Men. One example of such sinifying tactics comes from the band Tang Dynasty, whose first album, *A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty*, was released by Magic Stone in 1992. A strong longing for the past is expressed in the band’s name, album titles, imagery, music, and lyrics. This celebration of the past and its related discontents of the present, form the leading characteristic of Tang Dynasty. In their songs, they express their solitude in modern times, their despair, and their search for a better world. A music critic commented on the band that: “In their music, they express their true feelings towards life and their understanding of the world. (…) They express in their own way a longing for a strong and influential China: a return to Tang Dynasty” [Dao 1997: 27].
In line with the rock mythology, their discontents of modern times and their nostalgia for dynastic China serve not only to construct a general rebellious spirit, but also to borrow the power of Chinese history and tradition to set them apart. The jackets of the first and second CD of the band, as shown in Figure 6, represent the band as warriors for an old China, the flags with archaic characters, against a background of an old Chinese painting, all signifying the celebration of ancient China.

Like the jackets, the band’s name reveals a longing for China at the perceived height of its glory. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), Chinese art and culture reached, according to popular notions, its zenith. The record company states in the promotion material: “The most important thing is that here you will hear the self-confidence of the Chinese, because they have done what you thought only Westerners could do.” The symbolism in the music, the lyrics, and the videoclips that present a sort of Orientalist dream sequence full of references to the traditional past, express a pervasive sense of cultural loss. There is both irony and a recuperation of popular nationalism [cf. Lee 1996: 161–64]. Lao Wu, who at the time was bass player for Tang Dynasty, once remarked [in Jones 1994: 159]: “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 music, to folk music.” The irony is that his dogmatic, essentialist approach resembles Western discourses, in which rock is frequently linked to folk music in order to differentiate it from commercial pop music.

A second example can be drawn from the band NO, whose lead vocalist Zu Zhou’s falsetto voice is considered one of the most underground voices of Beijing rock culture. Figure 7 presents the jacket of NO’s first album *Missing Master*.

We see a picture of Zu Zhou’s face inserted on a Chinese painting in a classic style, with Zu Zhou being tied like a dog to a woman. Like Tang Dynasty’s, the NO jacket invokes ancient China to authenticate its music, ensuring that this is Chinese rock. However, unlike Tang Dynasty’s, Zu Zhou’s music represents anything but a longing for the past. On the contrary, the lyrics of NO are often absurd and dadaist, with references to sex and with strong political implications. Zu Zhou expresses his alienation and fatalism in his song “Let Me See the Doctor Once More,” from *Missing Master*:

Let de rickshaw take me to the home of the surgeon
Let him fucking see the green smoke beneath my groin
Let me see you once more—doctor
I want to recover my
Left thigh, left rib, left hand, left lung, and my right-wing dad.

This song, in its reference to the singer’s lost right-wing dad, is obviously political, but at the same time alienating and confusing. The listener wonders what is meant by the green smoke beneath his groin. NO’s music is profoundly disturbing. Electric guitars, along with a modified *guzheng* and string instruments made from cans and biscuit tins, produce a dissonant and threatening sound. Here, the
The invocation of ancient China does not seem to reflect a longing for the past, hardly a celebration of Chinese culture.

The recuperation of ancient China authenticates the sound of Chinese rock and, more problematically, may also give it a nationalistic edge. However, as I have shown, different bands employ the imagery of ancient China in different ways: whereas for Tang Dynasty, ancient China represents the fantasy of a powerful China, Zu Zhou interrogates the past, which chains him like a dog. He distorts the traditional sounds, subverting a past to lay bare the perversions of the present.

COMMUNIST CHINA

Apart from the recuperation of ancient China, modern Chinese history also provides a fruitful semiotic source to sinify rock, and is again a tactic that is employed fruitfully since the perceived birth of Chinese rock in the mid-1980s. The symbolism employed by the rock star Cui Jian provides a case in point. For example, on the flyer for his 1990 tour [Figure 8], which was canceled after the wild audience in
Chengdu frightened the local authorities too much. We see a creative reappropriation of a map that depicts a communist guerrilla strategic plan. For this flyer, Cui Jian borrowed from the imagery of the Communist Party. Whereas the Party “liberated” the country on 1 October 1949 from a feudalistic regime, the flyer may suggest that the rock of Cui Jian will liberate China from its current authorities. We see red arrows pointing to areas already liberated by the force of rock, whereas the shaded parts are yet to be liberated by our hero with his electric guitar. Signs belonging to the dominant culture are given a different meaning; just as the punks transformed the meaning of the swastika from Nazism to anarchy, so Cui Jian transforms the meaning of the glorified communist past as embodied in a map of communist warfare.

The videoclip of his song “Flown Away” presents another example of Cui Jian’s authenticating tactic. It shows a communist dance performance where the aged
audience, all dressed in the same grayish Mao outfits, sits motionless, with an empty gaze in their eyes. The dancers, all female, all dressed in blue with a red scarf and red kerchief, move quickly to the sound of Cui Jian’s song. The stage floor is half open, and smoke seeps through the cracks. Under the floor, Cui Jian and his band play the song. In this clip, produced by acclaimed movie director Zhang Yuan (Beijing Bastards, East Palace, West Palace), rock is literally presented as an underground sound. The saxophonist Liu Yuan wears a green Mao cap, adding to the rebellious aura the whole clip evokes. Again, we are confronted with a conflation of the authenticating tactic of rebellion and of the representation of communist China, making it Chinese rock, produced by true rebels.

Another example of the inclusion of the communist past into rock aesthetics comes from the hardcore punk scene of Beijing. The band 69 is one of the four bands featured on the Senseless Contingent CD. The name of the band is a reference to the sexual position, which, as vocalist Peter adds mockingly, supports the one-child policy of the CCP (previously, the band was called The Dildos). But it is at the same time a reference to the Cultural Revolution, a period idealized by Peter:

“I think the Cultural Revolution is like an anarchy movement. I like anarchy, you know. Like anarchy in the UK, I don’t know why. (... ) I think I’d be a Red Guard.”

And then accuse your parents?

“No, no, the Red Guards just wanted to destroy everything and then rebuild it.”

The anarchy of the Cultural Revolution, however violent it might have been, is considered to be in line with the punk spirit. The revolutionary past not only provides a source of identification and nostalgia, but also supplies the punk scene with the symbols with which to articulate the Chineseness of their music. In Peter’s words: “69’s music is not new, it’s 1970s music, the British punk combined with the Cultural Revolution, it’s a mixture. I also use traditional Chinese music (... ) because I think punk is white music, just as reggae is black music.” Since the Chinese are not white, some “yellow” elements have to be mixed into white punk. Thus, 69 adopts revolutionary classics and transforms them into quick, short punk songs. The cover of an underground punk-zine depicts a scene where a communist points to the revolutionary path [Figure 9]. The cover text runs: “In our great motherland a new era is emerging in which the broad masses are grasping punk thought. Once punk thought is grasped by the broad masses it becomes an inexhaustible source of strength and a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power.” We see a clear and arguably mocking appropriation of communist jargon, again underlining the Chineseness, the rebelliousness, and thus the authenticity of Beijing punk.

THE SCENIC

The generic label “rock” offers an important marker for distinction, but its inherent ambiguity necessitates more stringent musical identifications so as to guarantee authenticity. Over the years, Beijing rock has developed into different
music scenes, ranging from hard rock and punk to folk rock and electronic music. In particular since the late 1990s, different aesthetics are used as further markers of distinction and for a shared sense of authenticity. I will give here a few examples, drawing from the folk rock scene and hardcore punk scene, so as to show how different visual tactics are employed in their quest for authenticity.

First, the folk rock scene. Folk rock is generally depicted as part and parcel of everyday life. The folk singer is the regular guy, and he rejects glamorous stardom. What is valued (or, better, constructed and displayed) in folk rock is “the natural, the spontaneous, and the immediate” [Frith 1996: 40]. Folk singers are troubadours,
lyrical poets with a guitar. They reflect on the loneliness of urban life, and sing about nostalgia for their hometown and their longing for true love. What sets them apart from Gangtai pop music is not only their refusal to be glamorized, but also the importance attached to writing one’s own songs and lyrics. The folk aesthetics produces a discourse of authenticity that is based on such notions of closeness, simplicity and intimacy. One example of the folk rock scene aesthetics comes from Hu Mage. The jacket [Figure 10] for his 1999 record Hu Mage has the above image.

The childlike, if not childish, drawing on the otherwise pure white cover gives the album an aura of innocence, purity, and simplicity. The lyrics are printed in the form of handwriting instead of being typeset, again constructing the singer as someone close to us, someone who has written down his own words in his own hand. The inlay contains daily life-like snapshots of Hu Mage, sometimes along with his band. Some have captions like “1991, graduated from Yiling secondary school” or “(…) stayed in Huazhong Teachers University, accompanying classmates in their studies.” Like the handwritten lyrics, these pictures construct Hu Mage as one of us, a nice guy who has fun with his classmates, who studies and tries to find his own way in life.

This is urban folk pur sang: There is only the guitar and Hu Mage’s voice, a voice that sometimes starts whistling the tune. When I listen to this record, I always imagine Hu Mage sitting somewhere in Beijing’s subway system, a group of people gathered round him while he plays his music. Hu Mage’s voice is not as “beautiful” and smooth as that of, for example, a pop singer like Jacky Cheung. He often merely talks, rather than sings, in a whiney voice that constructs an
image of the singer as a fun companion, someone to laugh with while strolling through the alleys of Beijing. Both the imagery and the music articulate a sense of intimacy that authenticates the music. A Beijing critic shares my observations in his album review. “Just like all sincere confessors, he all of a sudden becomes a real catcher of the heart, catching all the lonely hearts on a weekend night... Even I am touched” [Zhahuang 1999: 17].

When we move on to the hardcore punk scene of Beijing, we are confronted with some very different aesthetics, but equally powerful in the construction of authenticity. The building blocks here are its anarchic style, its focus on rhythm, and its Do It Yourself (DIY) philosophy. The DIY philosophy, which privileges “home-made,” low-fi sounds, poses a fundamental challenge to the notion of musical skills and talent. Punk songs are usually short with an upbeat rhythm and an aggressive singing style. The focus on rhythm rather than melody presumably also renders punk more authentic. Consequently, the authenticity of punk can be captured in a one-liner: *just do it*, and do it real, do it in the rhythm of the heart.

The flyer for a Halloween punk party depicts what looks like a white punker being terrified by a spider [Figure 11]. The flyer’s DIY design connotes rebellion and chaos, so this must have been an underground party. The text says, in clumsy English: “Will Hold Power, Just Saying ‘No’ to Leader.” Such a provocative statement is not repeated in Chinese, because that would be too risky; instead, the Chinese text simply announces a punk party. Similar aesthetics can be traced on the jacket of the CD of “Senseless Contingent,” a compilation that includes the four punk bands 69, Anarchy Jerks, Reflector, and Brain Failure, depicted in Figure 12. Again images of anarchy dominate. More than being a conscious political statement against the Party, the design of both this jacket and the flyer signify in my view anarchy and rebellion, which are two core elements of the punk idiom that authenticate the scene, the latter of which already indicates that the tactics that I distinguish do (at times) conflate, a point to which I will return later.

NEW CHINA

With the further opening up of China and the related loosening of control on cultural production since the 15th Party congress in 1998, Chinese rock culture has changed considerably, culminating in the emergence of what was dubbed The New Sound Movement [Yan 1999]. Not only is there more freedom to publish sensitive albums (from, for example, NO, The Fly, Zi Yue, and the hardcore punk bands), but the visual aesthetics of Chinese rock has also changed. References to the new, postmodern China have become more apparent, whereas the importance of performing rebellion seem to have faded away a bit. The record label under which many bands of the New Sound Movement were contracted played a pivotal role for Beijing rock culture at the turn of the century. One example is the “Britpop band” Sober, whose lead vocalist Shen Lihui was also the founder and manager of Modern Sky. Sober claims to represent contemporary life, a claim that can be traced in the eclectic aesthetics of their CD jacket [Figure 13].

We see a band with their own logo, as though it were a brand name (in English as well) that has to be sold (as it is, after all); the members are dressed neatly and
the vocalist Shen Lihui is gazing anxiously into the camera. Gone are the rebellious poses and naked torsos that frequently appeared on the earlier CD jackets of Chinese rockers like He Yong. The new recruits of Chinese rock prefer to be cosmopolitan. The vocalist Shen Lihui explained to me that in their imagery, Sober tries to be postmodern; they opt for a pastiche of images, full of references to both the West—the image of the band, he said, represents a conscious reference to the Beatles—and living a modern life. Images of “Modern” China predominate on the inlay. There are pictures of the Beijing subway, a computer, a television set, and Adam asking Eve whether she feels good [Figure 14].
In the case of Sober, the articulation cum celebration of Chineseness as traced in the earlier generation of Chinese rock, is replaced by an articulation of a new China, an eagerness to transform into the cosmopolitan, to join the world. Their visual tactics also underline their musical aspiration. Shen Lihui has a desire to join the global world of music by adding a Chinese sound to it [in Platt 1998]: “Until now, the programming has been dominated by the US, but the next century is likely to bring a more multicultural mix where American youths will one day watch Chinese rock bands.” And given the current pace of changes in Beijing, the cosmopolitan yearning strikes him as closest to reality: “I don’t think it’s necessary to add elements like an erhu, (...) Beijing has become very internationalised. (...) I feel some foreigners are simply interested in something strange, something exotic. Music should be true to modern life.” His last statement shows how the cosmopolitan aesthetics authenticate the music. Sober’s focus on being modern articulates the here-and-now, it represents, or claims to represent, the realities of contemporary urban China which is positioned in the midst of a global popular culture.

CONFLATING TACTICS

More often than not, different authenticating tactics conflate. The more the tactics conflate, the more the sound rocks. For example, the hardcore punk scene is not
Figure 13  Jacket “Very Good?!” by Sober.

Figure 14  Inlay jacket for Sober.
only eager to display its rebelliousness, but is also involved in a strong articulation of its scenic boundaries—with musicians time and again assuring that they are making real hardcore punk that is very different from the pop-punk of, for example, The Flowers. The hardcore punk scene authenticates itself equally readily by references, both textual and visual, to Communist China. In its “extreme” use of authenticating tactics, hardcore punk is a sound that comes closest to the perfect embodiment of the rock mythology.

Another example of the conflating authenticating tactics comes from the activist rock band Thin Men, whose energetic, rocking live performances have received wide critical acclaim and are compared with those of Rage Against the Machine [Kovskaya 1999]. The band eagerly distances itself from Gangtai pop, and safeguards its authenticity by clear critical and rebellious lyrics and stage performances and by references to both ancient and modern China—as visualized in their CD jacket which is released by Scream records in 2002 [Figure 15]. The traffic lights represent a modern city, whereas the band is depicted with the forbidden city in the background.

The aesthetics are representative of the power of the rock mythology and produce a band that is positioned differently from Western rock as well as Gangtai pop. It is also possible to invert the narrative that focuses on how a music world is being produced. The quest for authenticity elicits, in particular for the sounds that rock the hardest, the invocation of authenticating tactics that can well be interpreted as semiotic closures, containing the sound and image of rock.

CONCLUSION: AUTHENTIC POLITICS

In Chinese rock culture, authenticity is played out over the two key thematic as well as geographic dichotomies: the Real West versus the Less Real Rest, and Cultural Northern Rock versus Commercial Southern Pop. To construct and
display its authenticity, rock employs different visual tactics: (1) articulations of rebellion; (2) articulations of ancient China and of (3) communist China; (4) different scenes employ different aesthetic tracks; and, finally, (5) the more recent bands eagerly include images of new China. Through these authenticating tactics, musicians mark a difference from either commercial pop or the dominant West or both—thus producing Chinese rock as a real, distinct music world. While running the danger of presenting an overtly schematic picture, different tactics can be linked to either one of the key dichotomies that propel the politics of rock in China. In order to come to terms with the Real West as its constitutive outside, Beijing rock musicians invoke images of ancient, communist, or new China. In order to come to terms with the Commercial South with its Gangtai pop as its constitutive outside, Beijing rock musicians invoke images of rebellion and articulate specific scenic differences. Interestingly, too, Beijing rockers “imitate” Western rock aesthetics (rebellion and specific music scenes) in order to differentiate themselves from their Southern colleagues. However, they will not “imitate” the pop aesthetics so as to mark a difference from the West.

Quite apart from the relevant observation that such generic geographical authenticating tactics tend to reiterate and reify cultural stereotypes (or, in other words, essentialize differences between places: that of China being intrinsically different from the West—that of Beijing being intrinsically different from Hong Kong and Taiwan)—it is important to elaborate further on the politics behind such visualizations. There is the perceived Western gaze upon China that demands sinification of rock to avoid it from being (labeled) a copycat, an imitation of the “original” rock, produced at the origin and center of rock, the West. This perceived gaze, framed by a wider and older power structure of China and the West, is internalized by rock critics and musicians alike, while being strengthened by the nationalistic policies of the Chinese Communist Party, policies that permeate all domains of China, not only politics and popular culture, but also, for example, the arts and academia [Sleeboom 2001].

When moving from the geographical towards the temporal dimension, I have shown that recent developments in Chinese rock show a shift towards the (post-)modern, in which a longing for or celebration of the past is replaced by an insistence on the present, on the here-and-now. In particular, the record company Modern Sky has been at the forefront of this semiotic turn in Chinese rock culture [de Kloet forthcoming]. The difference from Gangtai pop remains in place yet the aesthetics seem to move closer towards one another, since the New Sound Movement, like pop, includes articulations of the contemporary, of the now, as signified by images of urbanity and cosmopolitanism, representing an urban lifestyle that is in constant flux.

The dimensions of time and place are essential to understanding the visual authenticating politics of rock in Beijing. Place, because the locality of production, Beijing, necessitates articulations of Chineseness. Time, first, because these articulations are located in the distant past, the recent past, or the contemporary, if not the future; second, because these articulations have changed over the past 15 years. But both dimensions are more often than not taken for granted in studies on Chinese rock. In most studies, we can trace a frequent reification of both time and place, in which Chinese rock is interpreted as a specific sign of its time, coming
from a specific place or locality. By interpreting music as the mirror of its time, we run the danger of creating a temporal discourse that reifies, rather than questions, modern historical trajectories. For example, by interpreting Cui Jian as the sound of the 1980s, we do not only silence him and discursively make his further creative endeavors impossible, but we also create a simplistic periodization in decades. Dai [2002: 78] makes a similar point for Chinese film, stating that “the clear succession of generations in Chinese culture, or in Chinese film at least, is a profound sorrow rather than one of the glories of contemporary culture.” By heralding the New Sound Movement as a break from the past, we become implicated in narrating China as being on the road to hypermodernity. In insisting on the importance of the specific cultural context in any study of a popular culture, and in resisting against any fixation of meaning, cultural studies run the profound danger of becoming implicated in a specific narration of a past that silences other possible pasts, of neatly periodizing an assumed development of a cultural form that contains, rather than liberates, that form.

For the same token, cultural studies run the danger of producing yet another reification of culture, when insisting on analyzing the particularities of Chinese rock. If, as Rey Chow puts it,

one of the major tasks of cultural studies is that of bringing the entire notion of “culture” into crisis rather than simply that of assembling different cultures for their mutual admiration, then a localist and nationalist strategy as such, which returns culture to the status of some origin, property, or set of attributes—such as “Chinese,” “French,” “American”—that everyone owns prior to language and discourse, would precisely put an end to the critical impetus of cultural studies. [Chow 1998: 9–10]

Consequently, we ought to interrogate, rather than investigate, the Chinese in Chinese rock culture. If we are to engage in a cultural study that takes the problematics of possible reifications of time and place into account, we must resist periodizing a past as if it represents a neat chronology. Beijing rock music is neither a simplistic mirror of its times, nor does it represent a geographical ontology called Beijing. It does represent a struggle over culture, a struggle for semiotic power, as Fiske already put forward nearly two decades ago [Fiske 1987], and its multiple claims over time and place.

This struggle asks for different questions and different methods; it makes me return to an old plea for comparative research, not to illuminate cultural differences and specificities but to point at the struggles between different places, at different times. It may open up research trajectories that enable us to narrate different pasts, to indeed throw any cultural adjective, be it a geographical (West or Non-West, Beijing or Taiwan), temporal (first generation or second generation), or generic (rock or pop) adjective, into a profound crisis. My plea is thus for comparative studies of popular cultures that aim to liberate such cultures from any essentializing geographical, temporal or generic longing, not to arrive at a monolithic plateau of a globalized common popular culture, but to put the global cultural interdependencies and power imbalances in the limelight. Beijing rock musicians are not really the heralds of a new time, neither are they only making music from a different place; instead they are involved in a continuous war of
positions, a war that implies a struggle over time and place, in which both run the
danger of being reified. If we engage in such comparative studies of popular culture,
and question the inherent power imbalances by, for example, criticizing the Western
claim on the making of Real Rock, it may well be that we open up a way for Chinese
rock to be heard by the West—not because of its assumed rebellious stance (which
ties in too neatly with Western conceptions of China as a totalitarian regime), but
because of its sounds and images. Fifteen years after the rise of the “Western” sound
of rock in China, it is about time that Beijing starts rocking the West, at least “Western”
academia, and their constant reifications of time and place, and hopefully, if I may
close in a utopian way, finally erasing the adjective “Western.”

NOTES

1. This article is based on field research between 1996 and 2001, and unless otherwise in-
dicated, the quotes from musicians are based on this field research. I am indebted to
Prof. Chan Kwok Bun for his encouragement and the anonymous referee for his inspir-
ning and valuable comments. I thank Chow Yiu-fai for his critical reading and Qin Liwen
for her support in Beijing during (and, indeed, after) the fieldwork.
2. For an elaborate discussion of this mythology, see De Kloet 2000.
3. The term Gangtai blends together the Gang from Xiāng Gang (Hong Kong), and Tai from
Taiwan.
4. Candy’s tattoo caused debate in the popular press of Hong Kong, after which her record
company Sony issued a press release explaining that the tattoo is real, but, as Sony
pointed out, since she writes her own songs and refuses to be packaged in the pop
way, her tattoo is just another indicator of her self-made identity. Here, Sony borrows
from rock mythology to justify the tattoo.
5. The face of the pop singer is also considered more important, and nearly always part of
the jacket, whereas rock jackets do not necessarily depict an image of the band.
6. The fact that her song “Bad Girl” was banned in China and that her 1994 tour was cut
short in Guangzhou after she insisted on performing the song does show that the move
away from the authenticating quest does not necessarily erase the political potential of
pop music; on the contrary, it points to the fallacy of the claim to rebellion as inscribed
in the rock mythology. On December 30, 2003, Anita Mui passed away at the age of 41.
7. The borders are inaccurate; for example, Taiwan is located south of Fujian.

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