

Popular Music and Youth in Urban China: The *Dakou* Generation

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ABSTRACT The import of illegal, cut CDs from the West (*dakou* CDs) in the mid-1990s marked the revitalization of Chinese rock culture. This article analyses the rise of *dakou* culture in the context of the interrelated processes of globalization and marketization of Chinese culture. Contrary to accounts that proclaim the crisis or death of Chinese rock, this article describes the re-emergence of rock since the mid-1990s. It presents an overview on three different scenes, part of the *dakou* culture among Chinese youth. The fashionable bands are inspired by a cosmopolitan aspiration, the underground bands signify the return of the political and the urban folk singers express a nostalgic longing. All three scenes attest to the current diversity of popular music cultures in China, and are interpreted as sonic tactics employed by Chinese youth to carve out their own space amidst an increasingly commercialized and globalized society.

The scene was rather familiar to me: the punk boys sitting outside the bar “Nameless highland” (*Wuming gaodi*) in Beijing, drinking Nanjing beer from the shop nearby to save money. It was a warm summer evening, 19 June 2004. Today’s concert included four bands, all contracted by the local “indie” label Modern Sky.¹ Apart from the Chinese audience, a few foreigners – students, researchers, journalists and, though less so, expats – watched the performance. The scene reminded me of my earlier research trips, when the audience also consisted generally of a mixture of young, hip and predominantly male Beijing youths and curious foreigners.² The vocalist of the band Half Man Half Fish (*Renyu*), a band that labels its style as “new industrial metal” (*xin gongye jinshu*), raised his arm, screamed, in English, “I am a Nazi!” and then, to confirm his outcry, pointed at himself. This shock tactic may work in a Western context, but seemed rather out of place in Beijing. Both the statement as well as

1. “Indie” is put between parentheses given the involvement of the state in China’s record industry: although the most prolific music producers in Beijing – Modern Sky, Scream Records and New Bees – operate relatively independent from the state, *all* music publishers and distributors are state-owned companies. The local labels have recently reduced the earlier prominence of regional and global record companies in the production of Chinese rock, thereby contradicting the trend of the globalization of Chinese economy. See Jeroen de Kloet, “Commercial fantasies: China’s music industry,” in S.H. Donald, M. Keane and Y. Hong (eds.), *Media Futures in China, Consumption, Content and Crisis* (London & Surrey: Routledge/Curzon Press, 2002), pp. 93–104; and Andreas Steen, “Sound, protest and business – Modern Sky Co. and the new ideology of Chinese rock,” *Berliner China Hefte*, Vol. 19 (2000), pp. 40–64.

2. My research on Chinese rock culture started in 1992, when I analysed the reception of Cui Jian among Xiamen youth. Since then I have been following Beijing rock closely. This article is based on research in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong over seven months in 1997, one month in 1999 and two months in 2000 – all part of my dissertation project on Chinese popular music and urban youth culture – and a return visit of three months in 2004.

the presence of foreigners underlines the conspicuous involvement of the West in Chinese rock music, not only at a practical but also, and more so, at a symbolic level.

Over the past decades, disjunctive flows of capital, people, technologies, media and ideologies have been subject to profound changes that have deeply intensified processes of globalization.³ My return trip puzzled me not so much because so many things were still the same but because so many things had changed since 1995. It is the changes during the 1990s that I want to reflect on in this article. These are mirrored in identity labels that have been used to describe youth cultures in China. Whereas in the early 1990s one could still speak of a *liumang* (“hooligan” or “rascal”) generation, around the turn of the century this had changed into the *dakou* generation, named after the cut CDs that were sold illegally on the streets of, among other cities, Beijing. In the first part of the article, I will introduce Chinese rock culture of the early 1990s and its link with *liumang* culture, including brief descriptions of its audiences, releases and performances. The second part discusses the change towards the *dakou* generation at the end of the 1990s.

This change, signalling a rebirth of Chinese rock, contradicts journalistic as well as academic accounts that proclaimed the death of Chinese rock in the mid-1990s. I will argue that *dakou* culture not only illustrates the continuous importance of popular music in Chinese youth culture, but it also signals an increasing involvement with the West, which does not rule out the possibility of voicing out discontent. The *dakou* generation’s involvement with the West parallels the increasing marketization of Chinese culture, a process in which the state is deeply implicated.⁴ Youth are particularly at the forefront of what Davis calls the consumer revolution of urban China.⁵ In the third and final part of my article, I aim to unravel the tactics employed by rock musicians to negotiate globalization and marketization in China – two processes that are closely intertwined. My analysis includes bands of three different scenes that belong to the *dakou* culture: the “fashionable bands” (*shimao yuedui*) Sober (*Qingxing*) and Supermarket (*Chaoji shichang*) express a cosmopolitan aspiration; the underground sound (*dixia yinyue*) of NO and Tongue (*Shetou*) signifies the return of the political; and the urban folk (*chengshi ming*) of Hu Mage and Xiao He are examples of a nostalgic longing.

The three terms that guide the third part of my analysis – cosmopolitanism, politics and nostalgia – are interpreted as *sonic tactics* that are used by musicians and their audiences to navigate through contemporary China in which a state-supported urban consumerism is deeply embedded

3. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large – Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

4. Dorothy J. Solinger, “State and society in urban China in the wake of the 16th Party Congress,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 176 (2003), p. 943.

5. Deborah S. Davis (ed.), *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

in an increasingly globalized capitalist economy.⁶ I will show that rock music remains relevant in China, but when compared to the early 1990s, it is dealing with a different society, amidst different forces, in which the marketization and globalization are in full swing. Chinese rock culture serves not only as a prism to grasp these changes, it is also one of its constitutive forces, as it provides a way to be a young Chinese in this globalizing time. The term sonic tactic is invoked to highlight the opportunities offered by popular music for young people to deal with their everyday life.

Before Dakou

In the wake of Cui Jian – still heralded as the godfather of Chinese rock – a generation of Chinese rock emerged in the early 1990s that attracted a relatively large audience in mainland China. Under the Taiwanese record label Magic Stone, He Yong, Zhang Chu, Dou Wei, Tang Dynasty and Hei Bao became among the most popular rockers and bands of these years.⁷ Authenticity is, like in the West, a key element for Chinese rock culture. Two spatial dichotomies propel the quest for authenticity of Beijing rock: the West versus China, and Beijing versus Hong Kong and Taiwan. Being located outside the perceived centre of rock music – the West – rock musicians in Beijing constantly face the danger of being (labelled) a mere copycat of their Western colleagues. Chinese elements are frequently added to both music and image, in particular elements referring to ancient or to Communist China, to authenticate Chinese rock. Bands and singers like Cui Jian and Tang Dynasty have been very keen to make rock with Chinese characteristics. Examples are Cui Jian's references to the Cultural Revolution and his inclusion of "traditional" Chinese instruments and Tang Dynasty's glorification of ancient China. Localization through Sinification is employed to avoid the charge of copying.

The second distinction involves *Gangtai* pop from Hong Kong and Taiwan and rock from Beijing. The pop-rock distinction is anything but typical Chinese; in the West the voice and image of Kurt Cobain is framed differently (that is, more authentic, more true to the inner self) from that of Britney Spears. What is different in the Chinese context, however, is the geographical dimension of this globalized dichotomy: it once again reifies the north – Beijing – as being the cultural centre

6. Wang Hui, *China's New Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jing Wang, "Culture as leisure and culture as capital," *Positions*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2001), pp. 69–101; John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, "Social change and political reform in China: meeting the challenge of success," *The China Quarterly*, No. 176 (2003), pp. 926–942.

7. For an analysis of the earlier generation of Chinese rock culture, see Andrew F. Jones, *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* (Cornell: Cornell University, 1992); Andreas Steen, *Der Lange Marsch Des Rock'n'Roll - Pop Und Rockmusik in Der Volksrepublik China* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 1996) and Nimrod Baranovich, *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender and Politics, 1978–1997* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

of Greater China and the south – Hong Kong and Taiwan – as its commercialized Other.⁸ Shanghai is perceived by Beijing rockers as equally desolate in terms of music culture, a judgement that conveniently ignores the importance of Shanghai for the dance and hip hop scenes of China.

Baranovich reads the popularity of Chinese rock in the early 1990s as a continuation of the assumedly more critical and rebellious spirit of the 1980s. According to him, “the rock fad began in the euphoric and carnivalistic spring of 1989, during which it rose to the surface and achieved popularity in the most general public sphere. The intensification of the fad during the early 1990s was a continuation of the process that had started just before and during the movement, but it was also a backlash, a popular expression of anger, defiance, and perhaps a kind of compensation for the failure of the movement.”⁹ His equation of rock with anger, defiance and frustration reifies a rather univocal, stereotypical reading of it as a rebellious and subcultural sound. Also, by interpreting Chinese rock as a fad, Baranovich not only assumes its temporality, he also exaggerates its popularity in the early 1990s. His reading of the early 1990s as a residue of the spirit of the 1980s is valid, but runs the danger of implicitly privileging the 1980s and its alleged cultural spirit.

The works of Wang Shuo, the hooligan (*liumang*) writer whose books were bestsellers between 1987 and 1992, paralleled the popularity of rock, and “represented the spirit of the alienated, semi-criminal fringe of Beijing youth culture and Chinese urban life in general.”¹⁰ The *liumang* was celebrated in the work of Wang Shuo as a person who lives at the margin of urban society, plays around (*wan’r*), has sex, gets drunk and listens to rock music. However, under the forces of commercialization that swept over China after Deng Xiaoping’s visit to the southern special economic zones in the summer of 1992 – after which a “socialist market economy ... quickly mushroomed”¹¹ – both Wang Shuo’s and rock music’s appeal declined steadily, and with them the *liumang* generation faded away as well. Being marginal was no longer considered a desirable option. “Plunging into the ocean” (*xiahai*), a popular metaphor for engaging in private business, and “linking up with the tracks of the world” (*yu shijie jiegui*) became more popular lifestyle choices.¹²

8. For a detailed discussion of these authenticating dynamics, see Jeroen de Kloet, “Authenticating geographies and temporalities: representations of Chinese rock in China,” *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 2/3 (2005), pp. 229–256.

9. Baranovich, *China’s New Voices*, p. 36.

10. Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 79.

11. In Wang Jing and Tani Barlow (eds.), *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 217.

12. Li Zhang, “Spatiality and urban citizenship in late socialist China,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2002), p. 312; Zhang Zhen, “Mediating time: the ‘rice bowl of youth’ in fin de siècle urban China,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2000), p. 93.

The mid 1990s were subsequently characterized by a crisis in Chinese rock culture, as critic Zhao Ke puts it:¹³

Even if we are touched by the most pure, the most original rock music, that kind of emotion is still outdated. This era does not belong to those who gather together to scream in one voice. What we need now is individuality, our individual voice. Whether as music, as spirit, or as ideal, rock fulfilled its historical mission in the 1980s.

Rock was considered to be out of touch with the spirit of the 1990s. Its rebellious spirit was perceived to be endangered by the forces of commercialism unleashed at this time, with the Party acting as the invisible puppet-master behind the “gold” screen. As Dai Jinhua phrases it, in the 1990s “the commercial displaces the political.”¹⁴ The crisis made people long not so much for the early 1990s, but more for the 1980s, when the culture fever (*wenhua re*) swept over China.¹⁵

The perceived crisis of Chinese rock in the mid-1990s is shown by the words of DJ Zhang Youdai, who told me:

The new generation does not have their own culture, or their own life; it’s consumerism. I think the 1980s were the golden years. People ask me why Chinese rock started in the 1980s. I think you should ask why in the 1990s rock died in China. ... In the 1980s young people concentrated more on culture; right now people concentrate on the economy, on making money.”

Baranovich interprets the decline of rock along similar lines. To him, it “reflects the fact that young people and others lost much of their past idealism and their will to change things.”¹⁶ Instead, according to Baranovich, “commercial” pop from Hong Kong and Taiwan gained popularity in the Mainland, and became the urban sound of the 1990s. He enters the slippery grounds of cultural essentialism by suggesting it may well be the significant cultural, political and social differences between the West and China that prevent rock from becoming a mainstream sound. However, changes over the second half of the 1990s, when Chinese rock witnessed a revival that continues till today, prove that to label rock in China as a fad is inadequate.¹⁷

13. Zhao Ke, “Shijimo yaogun – yaogun xintai yijing guoshile ma?” (“Rock by the end of the century – is the rock mentality outdated?”), *Zhongguo bailaohui* (*Chinese Broadway*), No. 14 (1999), pp. 2–3.

14. In Wang and Barlow, *Cinema and Desire*, p. 216.

15. Geremie R. Barmé and Linda Jaivin (eds.), *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York: Times Books, 1992); Wang and Barlow (eds.), *Cinema and Desire*; Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

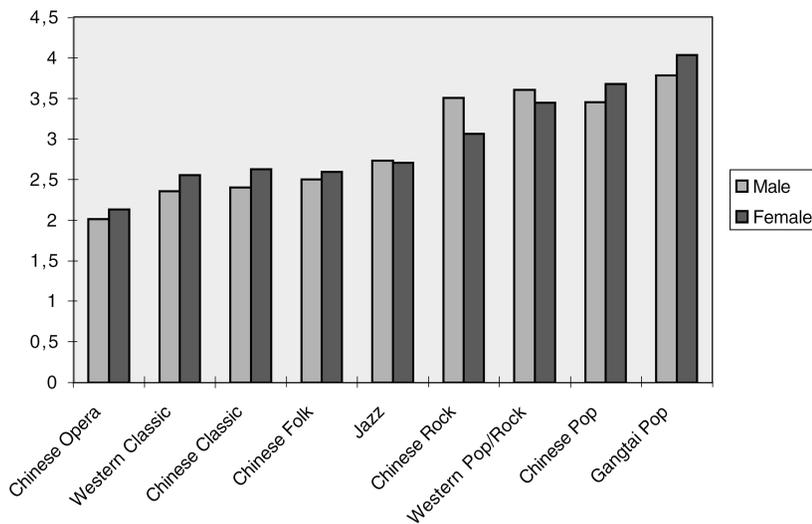
16. Baranovich, *China’s New Voices*, p. 44.

17. Baranovich (*ibid.* p. 48) also notes the danger of sweeping statements when he writes that “the impact of rock, nevertheless, should not be underestimated. It still constitutes a viable subculture in China, especially in Beijing, and although marginal, still exerts, even if only indirectly, some degree of influence on the wider culture.”

Audiences, Releases and Performances

A brief look at the audiences, the number of releases and the performances already points towards the continuous popularity of rock. In a representative 1997 survey among 650 Beijing youths, the respondents were asked to indicate their appreciation of music genres ranging from Western classical music to Chinese rock on a progressive five-point scale.¹⁸ Figure 1 shows the popularity of the different genres among male and female respondents. Pop and rock music are most popular among Beijing youths; the statistics show that rock – be it from the West or from China – remains a popular sound for Beijing youth. The popularity of Chinese rock is as high as Chinese pop, for boys it is even higher. When compared to the appeal of *Gangtai* pop from Hong Kong and Taiwan, rock is less popular, but, in particular for boys, the difference is not that big.¹⁹ Reflecting the composition of rock culture itself, in which female voices are scarce, the music preference of audiences is clearly gendered: boys are more into rock, girls are more into pop. The intensity of involvement with the music is, however, strikingly different, and points at the importance of rock music. The rock audience is more involved in

Figure 1: **Popularity of Music Genres**



18. The survey was carried out under my initiation and supervision among youths aged between 15 and 25 years old by a Beijing-based agency, Diamond Consultancy, and was financed by Philips Sound & Vision. The sample is representative of the variables age, education and sex. Figures from the real population were obtained from the China Population Statistics Yearbook 1995 (regarding age) and were calculated by the Beijing Bureau for Statistics for this survey (regarding education). Figures from the sample differ at most 5% from official figures. The survey was carried out in five different districts in Beijing; thus different neighbourhoods are represented.

19. When compared to studies on rock culture, studies on *Gangtai* pop are unfortunately relatively scarce.

music when compared to the pop audience: they spend 53 minutes a day listening to music, compared to 34 minutes for the pop audience.

The number of releases of Chinese rock grew from just a few in the early 1990s to approximately 40 at the end of that decade, and the increasing number of small record labels means that the figure continues to grow. Sale figures are notoriously unreliable: Tang Dynasty's first album is said to have sold anywhere between 300,000 and 700,000 copies, excluding the pirated versions that are estimated at over one million copies.²⁰ Chinese sale figures declined from US\$127m in 1997 to US\$94m in 1999, but grew annually by 21 per cent after 2000 to US\$198m in 2003.²¹ However, given the increase in rock titles the number of each album sold has decreased. According to estimates from record producers, popular rock albums sell around 100,000 copies whereas more alternative titles reach 30,000 copies. Sale figures of *Gangtai* pop declined over the 1990s but still exceed those of rock: for example, a Jacky Cheung album sold over 2.5 million copies in 1996.²² Actual sale figures in the cases of both rock and pop are much higher given the prevalence of piracy and more currently illegal downloads. The piracy level in China is more than 50 per cent and includes also the more alternative voices of rock culture.

The promotion of rock in China is severely hampered by the restrictions imposed upon traditional mass media, for which the genre is considered too alternative. Rock performances also suffer from government restrictions. Shows at small venues attract a stable yet relatively small fan audience, but large shows are notoriously difficult (though not impossible) to organize. Nevertheless, since 2000 an annual rock festival has been organized by the MIDI music school in Beijing. This festival, already labelled China's Woodstock, attracts national and international audiences. It was postponed in 2004 for security reasons; according to some sources, its success forced it to move to a larger park,²³ but others suggested political reasons played a role.

Finally, the number of bands and of local independent record companies has also increased since the mid-1990s.²⁴ Although media coverage is relatively rare, and in particular large-scale performances are scarce, there are no signs of decline. The audience figures are another indication of the continuous popularity of rock.

20. It is also indicative that the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) excludes Chinese sale figures from its regional and world sales overviews since the figures are based on local estimates and considered unreliable, see IFPI, *The Recording Industry World Sales 2003* (London: IFPI, 2004).

21. IFPI, 2004 – *The Recording Industry in Numbers* (London: IFPI, 2004).

22. Polygram, *Polygram Annual Report 1996* (Hong Kong: Polygram, 1996).

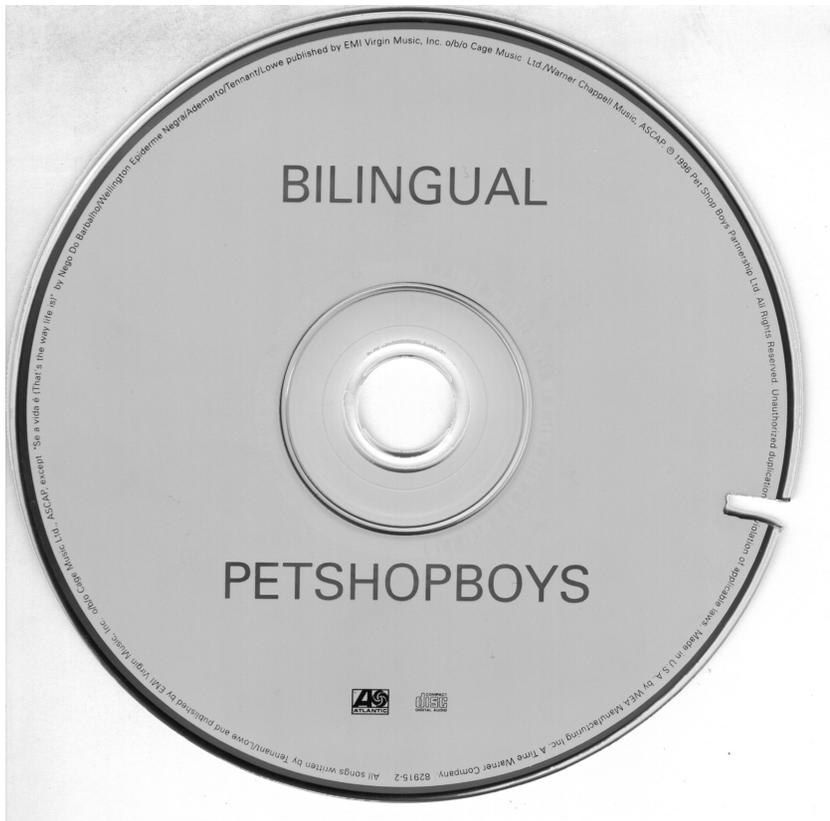
23. See China Daily, *Festival Goers Sing the Blues*, at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-10/20/content_384075.htm, retrieved 12 January 2005.

24. By now, "China boasts more than 10,000 rock bands. In Beijing, over 2,000 rock bands collectively have at least 10,000 players," according to the, probably positively biased, estimation of Huang Liaoyang, organiser of a rock festival at Helan mountain in Ningxia in August 2004 (in Miao Hong, "Helan mountain – to rock at a music festival," *China Daily*, 6 August 2004, p. 14). An excellent database of Chinese rock culture (in Japanese) can be found at www.yaogun.com.

The Dakou Generation

To mourn the death of rock and its assumed rebellious *liumang* generation consequently risks missing the birth of new scenes of rock and a more multifaceted *dakou* generation. Although rock may not reach the same level of popularity as it did in the early 1990s, the rise of the *dakou* generation in the second half of the 1990s does mark a new generation of Chinese rock music. China's most prolific rock critic Yan Jun published in 1999 an overview of the bands he considered emblematic of what he called the Beijing New Sound movement.²⁵ His book is dedicated to the *dakou* generation of China. At more-or-less the same time, Fu Chung, manager of the small Beijing record label New Bees, dedicated his first release of pop-punk band The Flowers to the sellers of *dakou* tapes at Zhongtumen – one of the spots in Beijing to buy them. Among many other meanings, *da* stands for strike, break, smash, attack, and *kou* stands for opening, entrance, cut. Together, *dakou* stands for the cut CDs and tapes that are being sold in urban China, often along with pirated CDs, on a bustling black market (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: **A Dakou CD**



25. Yan Jun. *Beijing xinsheng (New Sound of Beijing)* (Hunan: Wenyi Publishing, 1999).

Dakou CDs are dumped by the West, meant to be recycled, but instead are smuggled into China. They are cut to prevent them from being sold. However, since a CD player reads CDs from the centre to the margin, only the last part is lost. *Dakou* CDs enabled musicians and audiences in China to listen to music that was either censored or deemed too marginal by China's music distributors. Examples of titles range from the new wave of Joy Division to the industrial sound of the German band Einstürzende Neubauten and the digital hardcore of Atari Teenage Riot. *Dakou* CDs are, however, not necessarily alternative: Celine Dion and the operas of Wagner have also appeared on the market. But the more alternative titles were picked up by rock musicians and audiences, and consequently became tremendously nutritious for Chinese rock culture, as they opened up a musical space that did not exist officially in China. Inspired by the phenomenon itself, both musicians and audiences picked up the concept of *dakou* and turned it into a signifier for a whole urban generation. As rock critic Dundee explained²⁶:

This plastic rubbish dumped by foreign record companies becomes a major source of pleasure for those discontented youths after they switch off their TV. When this plastic rubbish started flowing from the south to Beijing, it actually heralded a new rock era. All the new rock musicians in Beijing have grown up with *dakou* tapes.

It is remarkable that an urban generation chooses to name itself after an illegal product that is dumped by the West. On one internet discussion site, You Dali presents a description of the *dakou* generation that is worth quoting at length. He writes²⁷:

Dakou cassette tape, dakou CD, dakou video, dakou MD, dakou vendors, dakou consumers, dakou musicians, dakou music critics, dakou magazines, dakou photo books; this is a dakou world, a new life where you don't even have to leave the country to realize your spiritual adventure. When Americans fiercely give themselves a cut, they also give the world a possibility of communism and unity. The Government doesn't encourage 1.3 billion people to listen to rock and roll. A small bunch of them therefore secretly look for offerings to their ears, to their eyes, to their brains, and to their generation. If you can't do it openly, do it secretly! ... It enables not only part of the population to become rich first, but also another part of the population to become poor first, and it also enables part of the population to become spiritually strong! Dakou products have ushered 1 million Chinese youths into a new wave, a new listening sensibility, a new awareness, a new mind and a new set of values. Whether the dakou generation is a *jinkou* [import] generation or a *chukou* [export] generation confuses quite a few social observers.

This is a parody of propaganda talk, such as the reference to Deng Xiaoping's famous defence of his reform policy, in which he declared that one part of the population should be allowed to become rich first. There is a certain critical irony towards the United States, which "gives itself a cut" and thereby supports a communist world. But at the same

26. Dundee, "Beijing yaogun: smells like teenspirit" ("Beijing rock: smells like teenspirit"), *Yinyue tiantang (Music Heaven)*, Vol. 31 (1999), p. 28.

27. At www.guangzhou.elong.com/theme/themei48.html, retrieved on 12 July 2000.

time there is a critique of the Chinese state, which, according to this author, restricts the sound of rock. Also, the text evokes feelings of excitement and energy: the idea of being *dakou* seems empowering enough to build one's life on. It is not just a cut in a CD, but an identity that borders on the permissible. It is an identity that is both global and local.

It is also an identity that has moved past the criminal connotations of its predecessor, the *liumang*. Compared to the *liumang* generation, the *dakou* generation is more explicitly geared towards Western musical products: it acknowledges the importance of Western popular music in everyday life. Because of a cut near the edge, a young generation reached the centre of a global music culture. The *dakou* CDs point at the complicated relationship between the West and China, they are a testimony of the importance of the West when it comes to popular music. The cut at the edge, however, can be read as a contradictory sign of localization; contradictory because the cut is made by the West to ensure the CD's destruction, yet appropriated by Chinese youth in a way unforeseen by the manufacturers.

By now, websites such as www.dakou.org and www.dakou.net contain music reviews and message boards both popularizing and commodifying the *dakou* concept, just like the music magazine entitled *Koudai* (a word play of *dakou*) that presents the latest music of the West. The sites are commercial online stores where audiences can buy the latest release of Celine Dion or Kylie Minogue. Rather than following Hebdige's idea that the commodification of a subculture, as illustrated by these sites, results in its disempowerment,²⁸ it is my contention that the concept of *dakou* culture gathers, ironically through commodification, its subversive power, both against the dominant culture and against its state-supported forces of marketization.

The emergence of the *dakou* generation is very much facilitated by a few local (Beijing) record companies and their managers, most notably Shen Lihui from Modern Sky but also Fu Chung from New Bees, Yan Jun, rock critic and owner of the Subjam label, and Lu Bo from Scream Records. They have been profiting since 1997 from what Shen Lihui calls "a relaxed attitude towards music publishing on the part of political authorities,"²⁹ a relaxation linked to the dawning of government control after the 15th Party Congress in September 1997. These young entrepreneurs happily "plunged into the ocean" of doing business while simultaneously "linking up with the tracks of the world," thereby facilitating the growth of *dakou* culture.³⁰

According to Yan Jun, the *dakou* generation "represents a generation that refuses to be suppressed, that seeks unseeingly, that connects to the underground, that creates marginal culture and lifestyle, that grows

28. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

29. Steen, "Sound, protest and business," p. 46.

30. Further study is required to analyse the role of these gatekeepers in including and excluding specific voices in Chinese rock culture, and thereby in defining the field of rock, an analysis in line with Bourdieu's theories on cultural production.

stubbornly, that resists and struggles.”³¹ His reading presents one side of being *dakou*, it celebrates the rebellious. As my analysis will show, *dakou* culture is more diverse and more ambiguous. In what follows I reveal the variety of *dakou* culture by presenting three different scenes: the fashionable bands, the underground bands and the urban folk singers. These scenes not only account for the current generic diversity of Chinese rock culture, but their sounds, lyrics and images should also be interpreted as tactics through which Beijing youth negotiate “the blessings and the blows of two decades of ever-deepening marketization.”³²

Cosmopolitan Aspirations: Sober and Supermarket

The record company Modern Sky is clear in positioning its products in relation to the earlier rock bands. Shen Lihui, who is not only the managing director of Modern Sky but also the vocalist of Sober, constantly stresses that he wants more diversity. Steen quotes Shen Lihui from the website of Sober³³:

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

Clearly Shen Lihui is talking about Cui Jian and his generation. Cui Jian responds to this by labelling the new generation “charlatans without culture.”³⁴ The early generation is downplayed as comprising screaming, long-haired individuals. The new (*dakou*) generation on the other hand is said to reflect contemporary urban life: don't take it so seriously, have fun; who cares to rebel if you can revel.

Sober often uses the generic label Britpop to describe its sound. The music of Sober is a postmodern re-appropriation of The Beatles' sound, in ways reminiscent of the music of Britpop bands such as Oasis and Blur. The references to The Beatles are indicative of the cosmopolitan aspirations of Sober. The lyrics of the title song of their 1997 album *Very Good!? (Haojile!?)* are:

Your TV set breaks down and your eyes will be cured?
Your watch stops, does this mean that you are happy?

31. Yan Jun, “Yongyuan nianqing, yongyuan relei ningkang – 2002 midi yinyuejie jishi” (“Forever young, forever crying – notes on midi 2002 music festival”), in Chen Guanzhong, Liao Waitong and Yan Jun, *Boximiya Zhongguo (Bohemian China)* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 176.

32. Solinger, “State and society in urban China,” p. 943. Zhang Zhen focuses predominantly on the blows when she writes that “In a society mobilized to plunge into the ocean or to link with the tracks of the world, fear of drowning and the perils of speed have made anxiety a central figure of public discourse.” In Zhang, “Mediating time,” p. 94.

33. *Ibid.* p. 55.

34. Yan, *New Sound of Beijing*, p. 31.

Does this mean that you are happy?
 Very good!? Indeed very good!? Very good!?
 To whom do I give Monday and Tuesday?
 To whom do I give Wednesday and Thursday? (..)
 All right! All right! All right! All right!

The refrain “All right! All right!” is sung in English, giving the song a cosmopolitan ring. The accompanying video depicts the band in Beatles-style suits; four young Chinese in a British look with an ironic smile drawn on their faces. According to Shen Lihui, the song is influenced by The Beatles, but he considers it postmodern, both in melody and lyrics.

Both Sober and Supermarket are grouped by Yan Jun under the label fashionable bands (*shimao yuedui*).³⁵ The ambient sounds of Supermarket are also referred to as electronic music (*dianzi yinyue*). Supermarket’s 1998 debut album *The Look (Moyang)* leads the listener to a virtual, computerized reality. In the linguistically shortest song of the album, “Explode” (*Baozha*), Supermarket sings:

Right now I’m afraid time may explode
 If I’m embarrassed, please don’t care.

Clear-cut meanings dissolve in their electronic soundscape. Supermarket employs a kaleidoscopic sound, linking syntho-pop with dance, drum’n’bass, and trip hop. This becomes especially clear from their second album *Weapon 5 (Wuqi)*, on which the electronic aesthetics are taken even further, as signified by the song titles that run from “S1” to “S10.”

Chinese characteristics are conspicuously absent in both the music and the image of Supermarket. The group’s cosmopolitan position resonates closely with the aesthetics of Sober. However contradictory it at first sight may seem, the cosmopolitanism of these *dakou* bands has a clear nationalistic edge. Shen Lihui has a desire to join the global world of music by precisely adding a Chinese sound to it: “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.”³⁶ And given the current pace of changes in Beijing, the cosmopolitan aspiration strikes him as closest to reality, as he explained to me: “I don’t think it’s necessary to add elements like an *erhu*, ... Beijing has become very internationalized. ... I feel some foreigners are simply interested in something strange, something exotic. Music should be true to modern life.”

The cosmopolitan aspiration of Sober’s Shen Lihui, with its refusal of Sinification, show that under the current forces of globalization more authenticating repertoires have become available. Sober’s focus on being modern signifies the longing of the *dakou* generation to become part of a global youth culture, not on the basis of cultural differences but on the

35. *Ibid.*

36. In Kevin Platt, “China’s cutting-edge artists join global village,” at www.csmonitor.com/durable/1998/06/26/fp54s1-csm.htm, 1998, retrieved 14 January 2000.

basis of similarity, of a shared musical culture. At the same time, Shen Lihui's business activities illustrate that this longing goes hand in hand with the practice of "plunging into the ocean" by setting up a private enterprise.

The Return of the Political: NO and Tongue

The split between the 1980s and the 1990s is often conceived as a shift from the cultural and political towards the commercial and individual. Cui Jian's oeuvre resembles the spirit of the 1980s; in his lyrics and performance the personal and the political are closely intertwined. His lyrics are profoundly metaphorical and often contain a strong political critique.³⁷ The political voice reappears in the *dakou* generation, but has become more sarcastic and direct, when compared to Cui Jian. To interpret the *dakou* movement as one that lacks a political edge is thus inadequate. The bands NO and Tongue challenge in an underground sound (*dixia yinyue*) and in ironic lyrics the words of Shen Lihui quoted earlier, in which he distances himself from the "irresponsible screams and boring complaints" of the earlier rock musicians. Strangely enough, both bands are contracted by Shen Lihui's label Modern Sky, and can be considered emblematic for the return of the political voice in Chinese rock.

Zu Zhou's NO has been active since 1994, but released its first CD entitled *Missing Master (Zoushi de zhuren)* in 1997. By 2004 it had released three CDs. Zu Zhou, born in 1970 in Nanjing, is not only a musician but also a performance artist and writer. His music (for which he uses self-made instruments) and his lyrics are profoundly experimental. His voice oscillates between the very low – resembling, if you like, the voice of Tom Waits – and a high falsetto. As one Chinese critic remarks, "Zu Zhou's uniquely penetrating tenor, like a knife stained with blood and sperm, tears off everything ... His purely despondent bass divulges the loneliness towards the future and the destruction of the will to live."³⁸ In the song "Representatives" (*Daibiao*) from his third album *Zuoxiao Zu Zhou at Di'anmen (Zuoxiao Zu Zhou zai Di'anmen)*, he compares Chinese leader Jiang Zemin to both Yeltsin and Clinton³⁹:

They asked me when Jiang Zemin would act like Yeltsin
 "Ask him. I'll give you comrade Jiang Zemin's contact
 I have nothing to do with his business, I have to mind my own"
 Just like that, I took them as his enemy
 I have mastered the world skilfully
 Unlike you

37. See Jones, *Like a Knife*.

38. He Li. "Yaogun gu'er" ("Rock'n'roll orphans"), *Jinri xianfeng (Today's Avant-Garde)*, Vol. 5 (1997), p. 77.

39. See also <http://www.zuoxiaozuzhou.com/> for an overview of Zu Zhou's lyrics. On the jacket, the lyrics are printed in both Chinese and English. In the Chinese version, the name of Jiang Zemin is left out. The fact, however, that these lyrics do pass censorship is indicative of the relaxation of control over cultural products in China.

The lyrics poke fun at Jiang Zemin. Zu Zhou's lyrics are characterized by a Dadaistic absurdity and, to use his own description, a profound sarcasm that defamiliarizes the familiar. Zu Zhou's music and lyrics can be considered a critical intervention in Chinese popular culture. They signify a dark and falsetto voice of resistance, a voice that, given the publicity Zu Zhou receives in numerous music magazines, is certainly not being silenced.

In one of his songs, Zu Zhou refers directly to Tongue and their Xinjiang background. Tongue's members are from Ürümchi.⁴⁰ Their first album *Chicken Coming out of the Egg* (*Xiaoji chuke*) was released by Modern Sky in 1999 and a subsequent live album was published under Yan Jun's label Subjam. Tongue's music is, like Zu Zhou's, full of noise, the tormented voice of leading vocalist Wu Tun strengthening the dark atmosphere the music evokes.⁴¹ Yan Jun writes on the difficulties Tongue's releases face when passing the censorship authorities.⁴² He refers in particular to the song "They are coming" (*Tamen laile*), of which the full lyrics run:

The primitive men are coming
 The slave masters are coming
 The feudal lords are coming
 The democrats are coming
 Imperialism is coming
 Capitalism is coming
 Socialism is coming
 Communism is coming
 They are coming

The upbeat sound turns the song in an underground version of a protest march, almost overruling the gloomy, whiny voice of Wu Tun. At the end of the song – when the last sentence *tamen laile* is repeated all the time – a high pitched screaming voice joins in, after which the song suddenly changes into the tune of the lullaby "Brother John." The switch from a march to a lullaby signifies, in my view, a moment of parody, it pokes fun at all the "isms" that are included in the lyrics of the song, a sonic manifestation of Lyotard's claim that an end of the Grand Narratives such as socialism and communism characterizes contemporary postmodern culture.⁴³

40. Baranovich (*China's New Voices*, pp. 54–107) elaborates on the link between ethnicity and rock, suggesting that rock serves as an empowering tool for China's ethnic minorities. The presence of non-Beijingers within the Beijing rock culture indeed indicates that rock is a cultural domain that enables musicians to move from the margin towards the centre, but this margin does not necessarily have to be defined in terms of ethnicity, it can also be simply in terms of geography.

41. For a wonderful and subtle analysis of Tongue's work, see Jeroen Groenewegen, "Tongue – making sense of the underground rock community, Beijing 1997–2004," MA thesis, Leiden University, 2005, available at www.keepmakiningsense.com.

42. Yan Jun, *Didixia: Xin yinyue chanxingji (Underground: A Trip Through New Music)* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2002), p. 183.

43. Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Both Tongue and NO are examples of the reappearance of the political in Chinese rock. Their politics are more noisy, more sarcastic and more absurdist when compared to their predecessors, including the poetic, metaphorical lyrics and melodic sound of Cui Jian. They do testify that the displacement of the political by the commercial during the 1990s has not been as absolute as some authors claim. Even more ironically, the two do not necessarily exclude one another; on the contrary, it has been because of the relaxation of government control that small, local record companies could emerge, and eventually contract bands like Tongue and NO. The reappearance of the political in Chinese rock is consequently embedded in a state supported marketization of Chinese culture.

Nostalgic Longings: Hu Mage and Xiao He

The sounds that carry the labels folk (*minge* or *minyao*), folk-rock (*minge yaogun*) or urban folk (*chengshi minge*) are first and foremost “individual” expressions of urban sentiments. Whereas other genres within Chinese rock are either a direct or a homophonic translation from the English, the term *minge* has a long and complicated history in China. Minorities use it to articulate their local identity, the Han Chinese use it to reify their long tradition, the CCP uses it to propagate communism, and within the rock culture it is used to voice out feelings of urban nostalgia.

Hu Mage is a singer originally from Inner Mongolia, whereas Xiao He moved in 1995 from Hebei to Beijing. The migratory experience is particularly evident in the folk scene with most singers positioning themselves as troubadours from the provinces. Hu Mage’s 1998 album *Everyone Has a Little Wooden Stool, Won’t Take Mine to the 21st Century* (*Renren dou you ge xiao bandeng, wo de bu dairu ershiyi shiji*) has a white jacket that depicts a childish drawing. The whiteness and the drawing, as well as the hand-written lyrics in the inlay, signify (the longing for) simplicity and purity. In his song “Some potatoes go to the city” (*Bufen tudou jincheng*), Hu Mage starts laughing when he sings:

Next door lives a cultured person, strange, but not really with bad intentions
 He says I am hardworking, brave, sincere, simple and without any desire
 He shows me an exercise book, full of words
 He plays music to me, which I don’t like, too noisy

He is like a modern troubadour: the music is plain and simple, only the sound of his guitar accompanies his raw and unpolished voice. He stresses his simplicity by positioning himself in comparison to a “cultured person.” His music can be read as a nostalgic longing to retreat from contemporary urban society, towards a place beyond conspicuous consumption, a place that is imagined as one full of serenity and honesty.⁴⁴

44. Indicative of the mobility of cultural identities in China is Hu Mage’s move towards electronic music in his second album – an album that was generally not well received. He currently operates a popular website that contains, among others, music and film reviews, message boards and chat sites (www.rmage.com).

Xiao He's CD carries an equally long and prosaic title as Hu Mage's: *A High-flying Bird Won't Land on the Back of a Slow-moving Cow* (*Feidegao de niao bu luo zai paobukuai de niu de beishan*). It was released by, again, Modern Sky in 2003. The CD resembles the aesthetics of Hu Mage: this time the jacket is in earth colours, signifying naturalness, and also includes hand-written lyrics. On the jacket's inlay, Yin Lichuan writes on Xiao He's live performance: "I believe Xiao He can survive in any environment, waiting for every opportunity to have fun and share it with others. Now he is performing in a bar amidst all sorts of people, but he behaves as if he's herding sheep on a little hill slope when he was young, so relaxed, so involved, and so happy."

The last remark again underlines the nostalgic purity of folk, a purity that is often located in the rural, rather than the urban, and in youth, rather than in the adult world. The temporal element in folk's nostalgia remains ambivalent. Drawing on Rey Chow, Helen Hok-sze Leung argues that "nostalgia is not simply a yearning for the past as though it were a definite, knowable object. Rather, nostalgia involves a 'sensitivity to the movements of temporality.' Understood in these terms, a nostalgic subject is someone who sits on the fence of time."⁴⁵ The folk singer sits on the fence, his back turned against a time of conspicuous consumption, longing for the innocence of youth and the imagined purity and simplicity of an idyllic life. This longing returns in the lyrics of Xiao He's song "The river of wolves" (*Lang zhi he*), the music of which includes elements of traditional Chinese folk:

The snow that will never melt and remain clean
 The river that will never freeze and remain transparent
 Wind, please caress her body gently
 Make her speak slowly
 Through the surface of the river
 Through the tree leaves
 Through the valleys
 As a gift to the forever past
 As a gift to the forever future

Both singers evoke – in terms of lyrics, vocals, sound and image – a nostalgic longing for a life beyond the marketization and globalization of urban Chinese society and can consequently be read as a critique on contemporary China. However, ambivalently enough, both singers, in their own life, moved from the geographical margins of China towards its political and cultural centre. This pull to the modern capital comes with a nostalgic longing for a margin that is located in an ambivalent idyllic past.

Conclusion

The musical practices that can be grouped under the label "rock culture" encompass a wide array of genres, each with their own sonic

45. Helen Hok-sze Leung, "Queerscapes in contemporary Hong Kong cinema," *Positions*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2001), p. 430.

tactics to negotiate the larger context in which they are situated. The *dakou* culture that emerged in the second half of the 1990s, with Beijing as its epicentre, has refuted the voices that declared the end of Chinese rock. The fashionable bands, in their urge to place China in the world, offer a nationalistic embrace of the cosmopolitan present, as well as a commercial break from an assumedly more rebellious past. The political bands under study present the *dakou* generation with an entirely different set of aesthetics that establish a noisy, ironic and sarcastic critique on contemporary China and the state-supported forces of marketization, which, in turn, have encouraged the establishment of small local record companies and facilitated the return of the political voice in Chinese rock. The nostalgia of urban folk singers delivers less a direct critique than a desire to withdraw oneself from these forces. The modern troubadours move from the provinces towards the cultural centre to articulate their longing for a margin that is perceived to be located in an ambivalent time and place, a more idyllic and ideal China.

All of these rock scenes express a sense of national longing and belonging, though in the case of the fashionable bands this longing paradoxically is articulated through a transnational desire to place Chinese rock on the world map of music. If early rockers and the *liumang* generation have appropriated a Western musical genre to deal with the opening up of a nation towards reform and the world, the later rock scenes and the *dakou* generation are customizing the same genre to negotiate a diversity of longing and belonging in a nation increasingly configured by marketization and globalization. Driven by the same logic, the *dakou* culture itself is threatened to become obsolete, in the words of Yan Jun in 2004: “The *dakou* generation is vanishing. China is changing, the youth is ageing, the market is spreading. Wild thoughts, pledges, poetry and even the suicidal urge have been pushed to the bottom of the box by accumulated wealth. Memory, like first love, is melting in the currents of information.”⁴⁶ The availability of music through the World Wide Web has rendered *dakou* CDs almost redundant: new songs are just a mouse-click away from Chinese musicians. The West is no longer out there, instead, it increasingly becomes part and parcel of Chinese rock culture and contemporary urban Chinese culture at large, in which China and its Others are being synchronized day after day.⁴⁷

The scenes under study show how popular music is used by Chinese youth to carve out their own space in contemporary China, making use of the possibilities that state-supported, globally embedded processes of marketization offer. The makers and users of such music simultaneously

46. Yan Jun, *Ranshao de shengyin (Burning Noise)* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2004), p. 174.

47. Synchronization with the West is particular apparent in China’s Hip Hop culture. In Yin Tsang, only one out of its four members (MC Webber) is “indigenous” Chinese, whereas MC Sketch Krime works with four MCs from France, Britain, Japan and the US. Both Yin Tsang and Sketch Krime released their first album in 2004 under Scream Records.

express and process their daily life experience: a cosmopolitan, national aspiration, a political, ironic critique, and a nostalgic, idyllic longing. Contemporary rock culture in China provides ample evidence that the assumed change from the cultural and political in the 1980s towards the commercial and individual in the 1990s is anything but clear-cut or univocal.