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# Rock and Roll and its Cultural Legacy in Post-Socialist China

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

**Rock and Roll and its Cultural Legacy in Post-Socialist China**

An Honors Thesis  
Presented by  
**Cameron Ruscitti**

To  
The Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College  
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*I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to:*

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*and, of course, my family and friends*

## Introduction

*It has been said many times over that the current generation doesn't need rock. But no generation before needed rock either - until, that is, they got it, and it became their very life force. To this day, there is no shortage of people that believe they need rock, and it is those people that believe they need rock, and it is those people that will create the yaogun<sup>1</sup> that will move things forward.<sup>2</sup>*

- Jonathan Campbell

As a musical and sociocultural phenomenon, rock and roll is not terribly new to the People's Republic of China. Since its inception in the 1980s, the rock culture movement has shifted away from its more politically dissident roots and, as the quote above would indicate, has established itself as a small but permanent fixture within urban youth culture. Despite facing opposition from a mainstream culture often described as "overwhelming"<sup>3</sup>, it has nonetheless managed to survive and, today, continues to attract a fiercely loyal audience. While it does not enjoy nearly the same level of exposure as pop music, over the past twenty or so years, it has begun to move away from the fringes of society, and has made legitimate progress in gaining an increasingly organized following, from the founding of Beijing's Midi School of Music in 1993 to Modern Sky's first annual Strawberry Music Festival in 2008.

Though many Chinese unfamiliar with this culture still identify it as a form of 'angry' music<sup>4</sup> typified by shoddy hairstyles, ragged jeans, and a *liumang* (hooligan) lifestyle, in recent years, its fan base has begun to diversify. With the rapid growth of the Chinese economy and the

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<sup>1</sup> Short for *yaogun yinyue* (摇滚音乐), "shaking and rolling music," the Chinese term for rock and roll

<sup>2</sup> Campbell, Jonathan. *Red Rock: The Long, Strange March of Chinese Rock & Roll*. Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books, 2011. 254. Print.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Huang, Hao. "Yaogun Yinyue: Rethinking Mainland Chinese Rock 'n' Roll." *Popular Music* 20.1 (2001): 4. Music Index Online. Web.

subsequent rise in the national standard of living, gradually, the face of Chinese rock has begun to change from that of the shabby traveling guitar player to that of the middle-class college student specializing in math and economics or the college graduate with a comfortable salary.<sup>5</sup> This transition not only reflects the history and development of Chinese rock and roll as a cultural trend, it also reflects the progression of China's transformation into a postsocialist national consciousness.

The reason I have chosen to write on this topic is to introduce the concept of postsocialism into the discussion of contemporary rock and roll trends, and to analyze the history of rock and roll's development in China through a postsocialist lens. Though over the past decade or so, there have been a few publications that shed some insight into important events in the development of the culture or that discuss the current state of Chinese rock, but none take the concept of postsocialism into account in their analyses. Andrew Jones' *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music*, published in 1992, was arguably the first Western scholar had taken any interest in the subject, or at least the first to produce such a substantial body of work on it. Though in this regard, it is still a valuable resource, it is nonetheless dated; the past twenty years have seen a number of changes to China's economic, social, and cultural landscape, and many of the figures featured prominently in the book, such as Cui Jian, no longer command the same amount of influence in the modern rock scene. Jonathan Campbell's *Red Rock: The Long, Strange March of Chinese Rock & Roll*, released in 2011, offers a more updated look, and while it includes an impressive list of names and places, his approach is too narrative; he does not appropriately consider China within a larger context,

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<sup>5</sup> Bagenal, Flora. "Beijing Calling." *New Statesman* 22 Nov 2007: 39. Web.

instead remarking only that “thousands of years of history [are] slowly disappearing in the nation-wide march to an uber-modernity of no particular kind.”<sup>6</sup>

In any discussion regarding either contemporary Chinese issues of post-Mao Chinese historical developments, the concept of “postsocialism” plays a vital role, as it offers a perspective that is largely unaffected by the constraints of Western academic discourse. For this reason, with regards to Chinese rock and roll, while it is important to approach rock and roll as a phenomenon in and of itself, I nevertheless believe it is essential to consider the movement as within the framework of postsocialist through. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that, as a byproduct of the post-socialist landscape that currently frames contemporary Chinese society, rock and roll has been appropriated by contemporary Chinese as a means whereby they can dismantle geocultural barriers and strike a balance between Chinese identity and globalized culture.

In chapter one, I would like to discuss in greater detail the historical foundations of the rock and roll movement. Upon the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, China entered what is now dubbed the “New Era” (新时期), and while Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in 1978 did achieve some economic successes, it is important to consider the lesser-known social and economic repercussions that came to inform social culture in the next decade. I will also discuss how the phenomenon and its primary themes related to contemporaneous artistic phenomenon, in particular the pop art movement of the 1990s. By examining the relationship it had to physical art, I will demonstrate that rock and roll was not an isolated development, and that, as an art form, its message and its popularity were legitimate. To put some of these themes into context

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<sup>6</sup> Campbell, Jonathan. *Red Rock: The Long, Strange March of Chinese Rock & Roll*. Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books, 2011. 16-17. Print.

and understand them in greater detail, I will present three case studies on three separate musical acts: Cui Jian, as he was one of the first Chinese rock musicians to gain notoriety inside and outside of China; Tang Dynasty, one of China's first successful rock bands; and P.K. 14, a newer group that has achieved success here in the United States. By doing so, I will help bring the discussion regarding rock and roll into contemporary postsocialist society and demonstrate how the legacy of rock and roll has evolved into what it is today.

### **Postsocialism**

Before going any further, it is important first to define and understand the significance of the term “postsocialism” in the context of contemporary China. In 2006, Xudong Zhang, professor of East Asian studies and comparative literature scholar at NYU, published *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, arguably the most thorough work yet produced on the topic of postsocialism. Initially, he describes postsocialism as a discussion of “modes of production, forms of ownership, moral-political identity, socio-psychological experience, intellectual discourse, and everyday culture all at once.”<sup>7</sup> This definition attests not only to the versatility of the term itself, but to the impressive interconnectedness of the various facets of China both as a society of individuals and as a larger political, economic, and cultural entity.

Moreover, it is also important to consider the relationship that postsocialism has with postmodernism, as the two terms, though not interchangeable, do share a rather intimate relationship with one another. In the social sciences, theories of postmodernism and postmodern aesthetics were originally framed within the context of Marxist views of globalization; like certain postsocialist intellectuals, such as Hui Wang, whose work I will discuss below, Marxist

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<sup>7</sup> Zhang, Xudong. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008. 3. Print.

anthropologists such as David Harvey have proposed a more teleological perspective on the progression of global history in which the dissolution of the current capitalistic mode of development is inevitable.<sup>8</sup> While postmodernism underscores the pressures of “global historical conditioning”<sup>9</sup> that have brought about the transformation of China’s internal identity and the alteration of the relationship between the many components of Chinese society and the socialist state, postsocialism is more concerned with the national-historical lineage, and highlights this phenomenon within the greater global shift from modernity to postmodernity.<sup>10</sup> It is also essential to recognize that, while a number of nation-states could be characterized as postsocialist, because of the uniqueness of the Chinese postsocialist model, the postsocialism I am discussing here should be understood as a China-specific paradigm.

The use of the term “postsocialism” does not indicate any finite evolution or enhancement, or suggest a more superior, or inferior, form of socioeconomic or sociopolitical development. Rather, it is a means of attempting to address and define a “bewildering overlap of modes of production, social systems, and symbolic orders, all of which lay claim to a fledgling world of life.”<sup>11</sup> Within academic discourse, it carries a more neutral connotation that forces critics to approach issues from an unbiased standpoint. Zhang very concisely expounds upon this concept in further detail later, writing:

The implications of postsocialism as a concept point to an intellectual liberation from the teleological

historical determinism which, in the name of a rivalry between socialism and capitalism, tends to imprison

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1991. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang, Xudong. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008. 9. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

the mind in a rigid and dogmatic notion of modernity defined by an earlier historical age (of imperialism, colonialism, the postcolonial nation-state, and socialist industrialization).<sup>12</sup>

Postsocialism, he argues, presents a more ambivalent alternative to scholars who may be inclined to apply much more weighted terms. While some may not hesitate to label China as a “communist” society for the sake of convenience, such a term has such strong ties to the past that it is difficult, if not impossible, to apply it in a modern context without accidentally implanting and disseminating its fixed historical significance. To do so would be largely inappropriate considering the relative uniqueness of contemporary China.

Much of Zhang’s discussion appears in *China’s New Order*, a 2006 release by Tsinghua University professor Hui Wang, who addresses the topic from a slightly different perspective than Zhang. In particular, he addresses the issue of binaries. Currently, within intellectual discourse of both contemporary affairs and recent history, analysis still takes place within the confines of certain ideological binaries, such as reform/conservatism, the West/China, capitalism/socialism, and market/planning.<sup>13</sup> Ideological binaries such as these confine the discussion to a fixed set of ideas that, as Zhang mentioned, history has endowed with certain intrinsic meanings. Moreover, it can be argued the use of binaries demonstrates the underlying hegemonic value system that forms the foundation of such arguments; participants within this discourse prefer to utilize such dualistic terminology in order to allocate not only meaning but weight and dominance to certain ideologies. Through such binaries, critics are able to reduce arguments to relativist terms and, ultimately, present them opposite one another, thereby predisposing the argument to become a battle of good/bad and precluding the possibility of a third alternative.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>13</sup> Wang, Hui. *China’s New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 146. Print.

But what of socialism? In such a discussion, naturally, the question begs to be asked: what is the role, if any, of socialism in postsocialism, and what exactly is the relationship between socialist China and postsocialist China? While the term itself superficially appears to convey that China has somehow moved beyond socialism and into a new era, this certainly is not the case; rather, scholar Xudong Zhang argues that, despite the changing face of modern Chinese society, “it is clear that the Chinese economy, society, and culture as they are examined in this context will survive or fail with socialism as a postsocialism.”<sup>14</sup> Socialism, regardless of how one may define it in the context of China, has become such an integral of the national economic, political, cultural, and social identity that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to pursue a direction that would stifle or exclude its influence.

Because of the oftentimes ambiguous nature of the term “socialism” and the institutions that it can describe, it is important to define clearly the significance of socialism in a Chinese context. In addressing this issue, Wang offers two conceptions of socialism, stating, “one is the ‘socialism’ of the old state ideology, characterized by a system of state monopoly, the other is the movement for social security that developed out of that system of state monopoly and the expansion of the market system.”<sup>15</sup> I will argue that, while the latter may appear to be the more prominent with regards to issues concerning contemporary domestic reform, the former, though perhaps not as overtly potent as it has been in years past, is nonetheless still extant, providing an ideological foundation upon which the government is given jurisdiction not only over political

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<sup>14</sup> Zhang, Xudong. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008. 3. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Wang, Hui. *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 47. Print.

affairs, but also over affairs concerning culture, morality, and social issues. Later, Zhang offers insight, remarking:

Chinese socialism, which is the historical and, to some extent, cultural form of Chinese modernity, does not disappear into the new universal defined by global capitalism. Rather, it becomes embedded in the latter as a semiautonomy conditioned by its complex negotiations with world capitalism understood as its natural environment, but not as its sociocultural and moral institution.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary Chinese socialism, then, is defined by two characteristics: as an economic policy, it is able to cooperate with as well as navigate through a global capitalist system; as a sociocultural and moral institution, it provides the nation with the aforementioned ideological base, and moreover serves as a means whereby China is able to reaffirm its autonomy in the international community.

In his commentary on Chinese socialism, he touches upon modernism, another point that cannot be excluded from the discussion. In the same vein, Wang is particularly critical of contemporary modernization theory, which he describes as being “often understood as the process of becoming capitalist.”<sup>17</sup> This is certainly not the case for China, which historically has adopted an “anti-modernist” perspective with regards to the question of modernization. “Modernism,” he argues, is rooted in imperialism and crisis; as such, Chinese intellectuals have based their approach to modernization on criticism and doubt of the Western model. Socialism provided them with the opportunity to pursue modernization in a more cautious and just manner while simultaneously providing an ideological base upon which China could bolster nationalism

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<sup>16</sup> Zhang, Xudong. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008. 13. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Wang, Hui. *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 148. Print.

and sovereignty. Just as Zhang equates Chinese socialism to Chinese modernity, Hui Wang argues that the Chinese socialist movement is notable in that it not only accomplished modernization, it itself has become the main characteristic of Chinese modernity. Modernization in China does not exist solely in terms of economic development, technological achievements, and the assembly of political structures; rather, it also presents a distinct teleological worldview that simultaneously deconstructs the values of capitalist modernization and constructs a new set of Chinese socialist modernization values. In this regard, Chinese socialism both as a means of and as a definition of Chinese modernization reflects directly the concepts of pan-historicism and historical determination embedded in the ideology of postsocialism.

## The Roots of Chinese Rock and Roll

Having introduced the role that the notion of “postsocialism” plays in the discussion of Chinese social, as well as national, history and culture, I would like to explain in greater detail the roots of Chinese rock and roll and how its origins reflect the arguments refracted by a postsocialist historical lens. As is the case with the history of any sociocultural phenomenon, a reevaluation of the rock and roll tradition in China is essential due to the evolving narrative regarding the development of China as a social, political, and cultural entity. In particular, I will focus on the contributions of a few key figures and how their personal backgrounds influenced their decision to embrace rock and roll as a musical genre and as a social phenomenon. In addition, I will discuss how the early stages of the history of rock and roll connected to another prominent cultural development at the time, the *xungen*, or Root-Seeking, movement. By observing its transformation throughout the 1980s and understanding its relevance in a larger historical context, it is evident that rock and roll as an event very much embodies the concepts contained within a postsocialist historical narrative.

Since Deng Xiaoping’s reforms began in the 1980s, the number of cultural imports that have entered China as a result of increased economic exchange with the West is nothing short of astounding. The streets of nearly every major Chinese city are dotted with billboards advertising a wide variety of foreign commodities, from smart phones, digital cameras, and luxury cars, to events featuring foreign DJs and pop stars and high-end restaurants specializing in various Western cuisines. The reason I mention these developments is to underscore the seemingly unchanging role that rock and roll, historically, has played in contemporary Chinese society. Despite the flair of many of the aforementioned items, rock and roll is, ironically enough, fairly

innocuous in comparison. Roaming around the bar districts in Beijing, one will invariably encounter several venues hosting rock performances, but to this day rock and roll remains a largely underground affair.

This trend very much reflects the genesis of rock and roll as something of a grassroots musical movement. Rock and roll did not enter China as a Western commodity, surrounded by powerful marketing agencies or a social media presence. Rather, it fermented underneath the surface of the outskirts of Chinese society, away from the neon lights and concrete of the cities. Most acknowledge that the earliest foundations of rock music in China can be traced back to *xibei feng*, or Northwest Wind, a musical genre that originated in Northern Shaanxi province in the early 1980s.<sup>18</sup> Musically, it was quite distinct, and represented a drastic departure from other musical genres prominent on the mainland at the time. In particular, it represented a hybridization of Western and Chinese musical traditions. It blended the fast tempos, heavy bass lines, and rough vocals characteristic of Western punk rock and heavy metal with traditional Chinese instrumentation, such as a *suona*, a reed instrument that features prominently in Chinese folk music.<sup>19</sup>

The result was an effective appropriation of a popular Western music form into something that was uniquely Chinese rather than a mere copy of a Western popular trend. This feature of Chinese rock music is essential to consider in the context of the discussion of a “postsocialist” China. Throughout its modern history, China had experienced a tumultuous relationship with the West, to say the very least. At times, China occupied the role of the commodity; during the

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<sup>18</sup> Baranovitch, Nimrod. *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978-1997*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. 19. Print.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

nineteenth century, as European imperialist powers carved up Chinese territory, Chinese goods such as tea, silk, and porcelain became popular items in Western society. At other times, it was a student; during the New Culture Movement, for example, many Chinese intellectuals advocated abandoning the various facets of traditional China and supplanting them with Western learning and values. The common feature that connected these eras of crisis was the persistent struggle with a national cultural identity, and the interference of the West into the realization of this concept. Northwest Wind, however, represented a stark contrast from these previous historical developments. Rather than generate shameless imitations of Western rock acts and, in essence, fall victim to another intrusion by the West, Chinese artists instead chose to incorporate the Western rock and roll tradition into a part of its own culture. Not only did they manage to retain their own cultural identity in the face of a Western cultural phenomenon, they actually adapted the West into China. In doing so, they flipped the conventional East/West binary that had typically defined the Chinese/Western relationship.

It is also important to consider the relationship that Northwest Wind music had with pop music at the time, which, because of its more tame and saccharine sound, was more acceptable to the greater public.<sup>20</sup> It stood apart from contemporaneous popular music that tended to be much more tame and saccharine and, overall, more acceptable to the greater public. The majority of successful pop music at the time was, in fact, not produced in the mainland, but rather was imported from Hong Kong or even Taiwan.<sup>21</sup> It was not until the emergence of the Northwest Wind genre that the mainland was able to embrace a music style that was both modern and indigenous.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

The implications of this cultural development outside the context of music are significant in that they represent a shift in the Chinese historical-cultural narrative. Following the Communists' rise to power in 1949, the production of culture had been dominated by political radicalism, and individual creativity was stifled in the name of revolution ideological zeal. For that reason, Northwest Wind music was not only the first popular music style to evolve on the mainland since the advent of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, it was arguably the first successful attempt at individual creativity in several decades. It reflected not only a progression of music culture, but of culture overall, and marked a revival of creativity on the mainland.

Moreover, it represented an attempt by the mainland to reassert cultural hegemony within the greater Chinese cultural sphere. Mao Zedong's ascension to power in 1949 marked the beginning of a long period of political radicalization that carried with it a significant number of sociocultural ramifications. In an attempt to establish absolute ideological purity among the Chinese people, the Chinese Communist Party stifled intellectual freedom not only in the political arena, but also within the arts; regarding artistic expression, Mao explicitly stated that "There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics."<sup>22</sup> Such political fervor effectively prevented the emergence of any prominent popular cultural developments in the years leading up to Mao's death. As a result, the majority of Chinese popular music production came from Hong Kong or Taiwan in the form of *gangtai*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "Mao Tse Tung: Quotations from Mao Tse Tung." *marxists.org*. N.p.. Web.

<sup>23</sup> 港台, an abbreviation of 香港 (Hong Kong) and 台湾 (Taiwan). The term referred to imported Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop music.

The emergence of Northwest Wind music, however, prompted a shift in this cultural power dynamic. One factor that contributed to this phenomenon was geography. The geographic origins of Northwest Wind music in Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu provinces<sup>24</sup> represent what many historically regard as the cradle of Chinese civilization.<sup>25</sup> This characteristic, along with the genre's incorporation of traditional instrumentation and mimicry of rural folk singing, endowed the genre with a potent sense of cultural pride and grounded the music in the heart of Chinese society. In doing so, it lent credence to the notion that Northwest Wind represented a manifestation of an authentic ancestral culture, and that this culture was most assuredly rooted in the mainland.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, musically, its harsher, more unrefined vocal style and driving bass rhythms presented a more powerful and masculine image that juxtaposed strongly with the comparatively tame and saccharine features of *gangtai*.

In effect, this cultural refocus from Hong Kong and Taiwan back to the mainland represents the upending, or at least partial upending, of the historical-cultural binaries of China/Hong Kong and China/Taiwan. The introduction and development of Northwest Wind on the mainland marked the beginning stages of the reemergence of mainland Chinese cultural dominance within the pan-Chinese cultural realm. Rather than reversing these binaries, as in the scenario described above of East/West, in this context, the binaries are eliminated through combination. Despite the substantial political, social, and cultural gaps that still separate mainland China from Hong Kong and Taiwan, since the 1980s, the People's Republic of China

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<sup>24</sup> Garofalo, Reebee. *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992. 118. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Baranovitch, Nimrod. *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978-1997*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. 20. Print.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

has managed to establish itself as the primary representative of the idea of “China” within the international community. Of course, the issue of Taiwanese sovereignty is still a contentious one, and over the past several years, Hong Kong has experienced unrest as discontent with their affiliation with the People’s Republic grows among an increasingly concerned Hong Kong electorate. Nonetheless, these issues only further underscore the fact that the the line between China and Hong Kong/Taiwan has begun to blur, and that, invariably, the resolution of such issues ultimately points to the People’s Republic. Again, the upsetting of such typical binaries is an essential feature of the discussion of Chinese postsocialism, as is the question regarding the role of cultural history and authenticity in contemporary geopolitics.

### **Relationship with Contemporaneous Pop Art**

Another question that is important to consider within any discussion of Chinese rock and roll is the thematic connection it may have had to other contemporaneous art forms. Following Mao’s death in 1976, the national shift from political to economic reform had a significant impact on the development of various art forms throughout the country. Though the government still maintained its tight grip over the release of film and printed material, many writers nevertheless were afforded the opportunity to reflect introspectively on their experiences over the past several decades. One such movement that emerged as a direct result of this sudden transition in national consciousness was the *xungen*, or root-seeking, movement in the late 1980s. As the name would imply, it was composed of a number of writers and film-makers who struggled to rediscover and redefine Chinese identity in the wake of the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. In doing so, participants in the movement began to turn their attention inward to local and folk, seeking to define themselves through their own environment rather than some

larger imposed set of principles. In essence, Northwest Wind, as an embodiment and evolution of certain types of Chinese folk music, represented the musical manifestation of the root-seeking movement.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, in addition to their common heritage within Chinese folk culture, some have even remarked that, musically, Northwest Wind songs often resemble the soundtracks to film adaptations of works by xungen writers.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to turning to local folk culture, many rock and roll musicians utilized techniques that also featured prominently contemporaneous popular art. In his *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*, Chinese art critic Wu Hung provides a critical analysis of the development of Chinese art over the past several decades. Throughout the work, he pays particular attention to how new Chinese artists have depicted the city of Beijing, as well as famous symbols such as Tiananmen Square and Chairman Mao, and what these depictions represent with regards to political or social commentary. In this regard, the art he discusses shares much in common with the prominent lyrical themes within Chinese rock and roll; although the artistic styles themselves and the approach with which the artists create their works may differ, the themes that their works embody are nonetheless unified around the overarching idea of postsocialist sociocultural development.

Of course, it is essential to understand the differences that exist within these depictions, as not all representations are presented in a similar fashion, nor do they serve precisely similar functions. The counter image and its offshoot, political pop, play with familiar political icons and, in doing so, simultaneously deconstruct old meanings and construct new ones.

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<sup>27</sup> Baranovitch, Nimrod. *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978-1997*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. 23. Print.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, Andrew. *Like a Knife*. Ithaca: Cornell University, 1992. 55. Print.

Objectification, another artistic style that Wu Hung describes, does not rely as heavily upon the utilization of symbols as it does the alteration of perspective. The last that he mentions, emptying, differs greatly, as it does not result in a new product, but rather questions the notion that there should be any new product at all. Through observing these representations and piecing together the various concepts embedded within, we are then able to construct a more cohesive picture that reflects these artists' outlook of a postsocialist present and future. Just as in music, these concepts may not be apparent at first; it is only through careful inspection that their significance can be unpacked and appreciated as an elaborate political or social critique.

One of the most prominent ideas that Wu Hung discusses in his analysis is that of the counter image, and how its utilization has evolved over the past several decades. In the context of Beijing, counter images are especially effective, as Beijing, as the political capital of China for centuries, is ripe with monuments and icons to serve as the primary target of this artistic practice. The counter image embodies the very idea of rebellion, as it removes an icon from its original, established context and exploits it to produce what is often times a negative or even opposing point of view. Hung writes that, "...to these artists iconoclasm becomes meaningful only when it offers possibilities to develop new types of representation - that is, when the original image can be fragmented and its elements reused for new purposes."<sup>29</sup> One of the essential aspects of the counter image, then, is that it assists the artist in the construction of new meaning out of the broken pieces of the old; an image is only useful insofar as it provides an opportunity to do so.

At the same time, counter images also serve to deconstruct the original meaning; later, Hung, discussing popular artist Wang Guangyi's portraits of Mao Zedong, states "What [Wang

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<sup>29</sup> Hung, Wu. *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 184. Print.

Guangyi] intended to achieve was therefore to get rid of the ideology associated with the portrait, thereby reinstalling its status as a sheer image.”<sup>30</sup> The counter image, then, serves a dualistic function, as it not only deconstructs the original meaning assigned and attached to the image, it also constructs a new meaning out of these scattered pieces. This dualistic function became much more potent with the introduction of Political Pop in the early 1990s. As Hung describes it, “the iconoclastic tendencies of the 1980s turned into sarcasm, and the disillusioned artists found a major vehicle in appropriating ‘ready-made’ political images. Political Pop thus represented a deepening stage of deconstructing a previous visual culture.”<sup>31</sup> The politicization and sarcasm of the movement added a certain bite to the final product that thrust Beijing back into the political arena, although under a much more critical light.

This idea, that memory is tied to intricately to symbols or “icons” within art, is one that simply cannot be ignored in the context of this discussion, as one of the most notable features of this art is its acknowledgement and manipulation of these icons. Grasping the true significance of the role these icons play will also enable us to heighten our understanding of how this art relates to postsocialism both present and future. As indicated by the nomenclature itself, socialism is an irrevocable part of postsocialism; that is to say, the past is an inevitable part of the present and the future. One of the primary channels whereby the past has survived is via these icons, and although many may, at first, accept icons without a second thought, it is essential to understand that icons themselves only have meaning insofar as we allow them to. It is through these icons that people feel personal connections to people to whom they are completely alien in reality. Moreover, as I touched upon previously, icons have a tendency, particularly in the context of a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 200.

cultural nation-state, to represent cultural memories. As such, to re-appropriate these icons, a key feature of these art works, is to challenge and subvert a set of conventional beliefs; it is this clash of convictions that often times marks periods of cultural and social transition. In addition, this image recycling underscores that society has already moved past these icons, and they they are no longer relevant in their original context. At the same time, these symbols, have, for better or for worse, become an irrevocable part of one's identity and ultimately represent how others perceive us. These two conflicting ideas embody perfectly the concept of postsocialism, and attest to the relationship that iconography has with it as a larger social, cultural, and political identity in China.

So what relevance does this discussion have to Chinese rock and roll? It is essential to recognize that the idea of a counter image or, more specifically, the re-appropriation of a particular icon, is not restricted to paintings or photography, but exists in music as well. One prominent musical example comes from Cui Jian, who in 1987 performed a rock and roll cover of "Nanniwan", a 1943 patriotic song describing the prosperity that the Communists have brought to local villagers in Northern China:

*Basket of flowers are fragrant, listen while I sing,*

*Come to Nanniwan, a great place, great scene;*

*Crops, cows, and sheep are everywhere.*

*The old Nanniwan was an uninhabited place of barren hills;*

*But today's Nanniwan is different.*

*It no longer has that old look.*

*It has become the Jiangnan of northern Shaanxi.*

Like the aforementioned portraits of Chairman Mao, patriotic compositions such as “Nanniwan” were iconic representations of Chinese communism that intended to portray the Party, its ideology, and its revolution in a glorious light. Cui Jian’s performance was significant in that it re-appropriated the song by removing it from its original historical context. This act is essential if one considers the time period during which he began to perform his arrangement. Although at the time the original version of the song was composed, the Communists had not yet assumed complete control over the mainland, its popularity came as a result of the political zeal that characterized Chinese social and political culture under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Even before the Cultural Revolution began, the fundamental concept driving the reconstruction of the Chinese state was that the construction of a new national consciousness through ideological solidarity, above all else, was crucial to the development of a new China. Upon the ascension of Deng Xiaoping to power in 1978, the status quo began to change. Rather than emphasizing the political aspects of revolution, Deng chose instead to promote economic reform, effectively dampening the political fervor that had gripped the country for several decades during Mao’s leadership.

Throughout the 1980s, then, the excessive patriotism that was characteristic of Maoist China seemed largely anachronistic. Cui Jian played on this idea; his performance, in many regards, mocked the tradition of Maoist political revolution. Moreover, that he set the lyrics to a rock and roll musical accompaniment illustrated a further dismantling of fundamental Maoist thought. As rock and roll was, originally, a Western musical genre, using it as a backdrop for a Communist anthem only served to further undermine the legacy of the Revolution in Deng’s China. Thus, through an alteration of context, Cui Jian successfully deconstructed the song as an

icon of Maoist revolutionism and reconstruct it as an indicator of the altered sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape.

One of the primary focuses of Hung's article is how Mao and Tiananmen, two images with which the city has come to be intimately associated, are represented, and how these representations reflect an overall shift in how Beijing as an entity was perceived. One of the primary techniques that he introduces is the objectification of Mao and Tiananmen, although this approach differs from the aforementioned utilization of counter imagery, in that it does not manipulate the objects themselves but rather presents them from a different perspective. This alteration in perspective is not accidental or random, but rather serves a number of purposes. Hung, discussing the photographer Liu Wei, states, "It has been suggested that documentary photographs both objectify and 'subjectify' reality. In Liu Wei's case, his images objectify the monuments because they strip their aura and return them to the ordinary."<sup>32</sup> It is interesting, then, to note that, despite the fact that it is the perspective rather than the object that has been changed, this quality produces an effect similar to Wang Guangyi's work; by presenting the subject in a different manner, they are reduced to their primal, disassociated forms. Discussing the work of artist Yin Xiuzhen, Hung describes another function of this objectification, stating, "...because Yin Xiuzhen's project focuses on spaces that are intimate to her, it necessarily debases Tiananmen's identity as a collective monument."<sup>33</sup> Yin Xiuzhen chooses to approach Tiananmen from an individualist rather than a collectivist perspective; Tiananmen becomes a personalized memory.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 190

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 194

Perhaps the best example of such a process in the development of Chinese rock and roll was Tang Dynasty, who are widely considered to be the first Chinese metal group.<sup>34</sup> Though Tang Dynasty was never politically charged to the same extent as Cui Jian, their reverence for Imperial Chinese history and their perception of it as a source of inspiration was, in itself, a form of protest; there is no better way to shun the present than to embrace the past. Utilizing history as a means of individual escape effectively individualizes national history; national memories than become personal ones and serve as an instrument through which one becomes can turn inward and reject his or her greater surroundings.

Regarding memories, Hung moves on to discuss the concept of emptying, especially in the context of Mao and Tiananmen. He then extrapolates upon this idea, stating, “A counter monument rebels against a traditional monument and this rebellion results in a new monumental form. An anti-monument, on the other hand, negates the very notion of a monument as an embodiment of history and memory.”<sup>35</sup> Whereas the aforementioned objectification can alter memories, emptying seeks to eliminate them entirely, thus effectively eliminating the inherent potential of the object in question for now and forever.

Considering all these factors, it is clear that via these artistic representations, we are able to discern a powerful connection to many of the concepts that comprise postsocialism. The manipulation of popular icons, such as Mao Zedong, flips convention on its head and forces the observer not only to question his or her own beliefs but also to speculate the true significance of these symbols in a modern context. At the same time, by adjusting his or her gaze, the observer is

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<sup>34</sup> Wallach, Jeremy, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene. *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 69. Print.

<sup>35</sup> Hung, Wu. *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 184. Print.

able to see past the superficial auras that have been constructed by fixed angles over time and return them to the same level as the common onlooker. While many of these techniques serve to address how these icons are fixed within a collective cultural memory, through artistic emptying, they are detached from memory completely and lose their function and, more importantly, their influence, to a generation that is still wary of where it might be headed in the future. It is only by dissecting and toying with these icons of the past that the future begins to take shape, although the shape that eventually resolves might not be that which was originally envisioned; such is the nature of a postsocialist society, which, although connected to the past, is still wary of the role that the past may play in the construction of the future.

## Cui Jian

In any discussion regarding the history and development of rock and roll in mainland China, it is nearly impossible to avoid mention of Cui Jian, one of the movement's most prominent and enduring figures. Born on August 2, 1961 to a musical family in Beijing, Cui Jian developed a fondness for music from an early age, as both his parents were successful entertainers; his father was a trumpet player and his mother was a member of a Korean dance troupe. This exposure to music during his upbringing proved vital to his development as a musician during his teenage years. At fourteen, he followed in his father's footsteps and began to play the trumpet and at twenty, he joined the Beijing Philharmonic Orchestra as a trumpet player. It was around this time that he first picked up the guitar, and the music of American icons such as John Denver, Bob Dylan, and Simon and Garfunkel sparked an interest in rock and roll and inspired him to start playing.

Internationally, he has become one of the most well-known contemporary mainland Chinese music artists, and has embarked on dozens of tours throughout East and Southeast Asia as well as Europe and the United States. Arguably more important, however, is the role that he assumed at the height of his fame as a de facto representative of Chinese cultural affairs on the global stage. Although his popularity has waned somewhat in recent years, as a cultural icon, he wielded considerable influence during the late 80s and throughout the 90s, especially among the younger urban population.

As one of the few Chinese rock and roll artists to receive any substantial recognition in the West, he has appeared periodically in a number of Western newspapers and academic journals, where he has earned, rightfully, a reputation as something of a folk hero among Chinese

rock and roll audiences. More often than not, columnists will attempt to draw comparisons between him and a number of musicians who have achieved similar popularity with audiences here in the West. Typically, Springsteen<sup>363738</sup> is the most common comparison, as his musical style, lyrical themes, and appeal to the “common man” feature prominently in Cui Jian’s music as well.

In the context of this discussion, however, such a comparison may be inappropriate. While likening him to figures that have become so prominent in the development of our own music culture may help us to appreciate his position as an icon within China, doing so, in turn, removes him from his true historical context and positions him in relation to a parallel or similar Western phenomenon. This process ultimately leads to the partial adoption of Cui Jian into the Western cultural memory, despite the fact that he is not a substantial part of it, if at all. I do not emphasize this point with the intention of constructing an impenetrable cultural or historical barrier between the United States and China; indeed, as I mentioned above, there are certain shared characteristics between Cui Jian and a number of Western music acts, and Cui Jian himself has listed a number of Western groups as his primary influences. Rather, equating one to the other or insisting upon drawing a comparison between the two is inaccurate, as their relevance as cultural icons is amplified by the social historical conditions that surround them. Implanting Cui Jian into the same cultural space occupied by Springsteen yields two primary

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<sup>36</sup> Matusitz, Jonathan. "Semiotics of Music: Analysis of Cui Jian’s “Nothing to My Name,” the Anthem for the Chinese Youths in the Post-Cultural Revolution Era." *Journal of Popular Culture* 43.1 (2010): 156. Music Index Online. Web.

<sup>37</sup> Eimer, David. "Cui Jian: The man who rocks China." *The Independent*, November 14, 2005. Web.

<sup>38</sup> Katz, Larry. "China's Boss; Rocker Cui Jian brings his voice of protest to MIT." *Boston Herald*, August 13, 1999. Web.

consequences: it diminishes the actual impact of Cui Jian as a standalone figure within mainland China, and it distorts the themes of his music to fit a superimposed set of circumstances.

Though his career has spanned decades and, even today, he continues to be a presence in the rock and roll scene, he is still defined by his most famous work, 一无所有, or “Nothing to My Name” in English. Released in 1986, it achieved enormous success, eventually becoming something of an anthem for disaffected youth as well as supporters of the fledgling rock and roll movement<sup>39</sup> as well as a battle song for those who sought to rally against the established order for any type of substantial political change.<sup>40</sup>

*“Nothing To My Name”*

*I've asked you endlessly  
When will you go with me?  
But you always just laugh at me  
(with) nothing to my name  
I want to give you my dreams  
(and I) also have my freedom (to give you)  
But you always just laugh at me  
(with) nothing to my name*

*Oh! When will you go with me?*

*The ground beneath my feet is moving  
The water beside me is flowing  
But you always just laugh at me  
(with) nothing to my name  
Why is your laughter never enough?  
Why will I always search  
Could it be that before you I'll forever*

*Have nothing to my name?*

*Oh! When will you go with me?*

*(I'm) telling you I've waited for a long time  
(So I'm) telling you my final request  
I want to grab you by the hands  
And then you'll go with me  
This time your hands are trembling  
This time your tears are flowing  
Can it be that you are telling me  
You love me with nothing to my name?*

<sup>39</sup> Eimer, David. "Cui Jian: The man who rocks China." *The Independent*, November 14, 2005. Web.

<sup>40</sup> Matusitz, Jonathan. "Semiotics of Music: Analysis of Cui Jian's "Nothing to My Name," the Anthem for the Chinese Youths in the Post-Cultural Revolution Era." *Journal of Popular Culture* 43.1 (2010): 173. Music Index Online. Web.

On the surface, the song from the perspective of a man apparently pleading with a woman who has long since been rejecting him. Though he expresses his desire to give her hope and freedom, and though he remarks that the world beneath them is changing, her only response is that of scorn and ridicule for having nothing to his name. It is important to note the natural imagery that Cui Jian invokes in the lyrics; not only do they allude to the natural landscapes prominent within Classical Chinese poetry, they convey a strong sense of motion meant to provoke a stronger emotional response from the listener.<sup>41</sup> The lyrics' political undertones, however, are less than subtle, as it is evident that woman in the song is a reference to the state and to Communist Party control. One of the most immediately recognizable themes within the lyrics is that of individualism, a concept that hitherto had been stifled both in traditional China as well as after the Revolution<sup>42</sup>. At the same time, however, because of the lack of a specified pronoun in the original Chinese phrase 一无所有, not only can it be translated as "nothing to my name," it can also be translated as either "I have nothing" or "we have nothing." This fact is significant in that it enables unity behind a common idea. When considering the tumult that had prompted the students protests in 1989, this trait becomes even more vital as it provided the students with an already widely-disseminated message behind which they could stand.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 172.

## Tang Dynasty

As I mentioned earlier, the 1990s oversaw a number of significant changes in China's social and economic climate. In addition to the initial series of market reforms championed by Deng Xiaoping in the late seventies, continuing market liberalization ensured that such changes, for better or for worse, would resonate well into the nineties and beyond. More importantly, however, the 1989 Tiananmen Protests, and the government crackdown that followed, in some respects marked a pivotal moment in the development of the rock and roll tradition in China. Although previously, artists such as Cui Jian did not necessarily shy from testing the boundaries of free speech through politically charged commentaries, the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 effectively quelled dissident voices, musical or otherwise, not only in Beijing but throughout the country.

It was during the 1990s that Tang Dynasty, whom many regard as China's first heavy metal group<sup>43</sup>, first achieved a notable degree of success. Aside from Cui Jian, Tang Dynasty is one of Chinese rock music's most important groups, and though their lineup has changed since they first formed over two decades ago, even today they maintain a loyal fan base of both old as well as new listeners. Founded in 1988, the group was composed of two Chinese musicians, Ding Wu and Zhang Ju, and two Americans, Kaiser Kuo and Andrew Szabo. Their first album, *Dream Return to Tang Dynasty*, achieved monumental success, selling over two million copies worldwide.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Wallach, Jeremy, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene. *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 69. Print.

<sup>44</sup> Chen, Nan. "Tang Dynasty continues to rock." *China Daily* 26 March 2010, n. pag. Web.

As cultural icons, Tang Dynasty were significant in that they contributed to the dismantling of a number of still-pervasive orientalist stereotypes regarding Chinese people and Chinese culture. At the time of their initial foray into the music scene, few outside of China were aware of rock and roll's expanding appeal within the Chinese market. Tang Dynasty's emergence and subsequent success overseas upended the notion that the Chinese were merely "blue ants"<sup>45</sup> incapable of such individuality; on the contrary, it proved that China was just as capable of playing and embracing such a wild genre of music as anyone else, and that it was ignorant to think otherwise.<sup>46</sup> Also, Kaiser Kuo, one of the founding members of the group, became so notable for his popularity with women that he effectively challenged the misconceived notion that Chinese men were somehow feminine or lacked sexual appeal.

Whereas Cui Jian embodied the more progressive and driving aspects of the postsocialist sociocultural mindset, Tang Dynasty exhibited a deeper historical awareness and incorporated this as an integral characteristic of their outlook on modernity as well as their music. It is not difficult to recognize and appreciate the historical influences that inform the band's style; like Cui Jian, their music incorporates a number of uniquely Chinese instruments, and their lyrics, rich with metaphors and historical allusions, draw heavily from Classical Chinese poetry, as demonstrated in this excerpt from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*:

*Surge over surge, the Long River passes east away,*

*White blooming waves sweep all heroes on*

*As right and wrong, triumph and defeat all turn unreal*

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<sup>45</sup> In 1957, French journalist Robert Guillain published a waspish account of his visit to China in which he likened the Chinese to "blue ants" because of their garments.

<sup>46</sup> Wallach, Jeremy, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene. *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 70. Print.

*But ever the green hills stay to blush in the west-waning day.*

*The woodcutters and fisherman, white-headed, the've seen enough*

*Spring air and autumn moon*

*To make good company over the wine jars,*

*Where many a famed event provides their merriment.*

Even the name “Tang Dynasty” itself invokes a period that many historians and scholars regard as a golden age of Chinese culture during which art, music and literature flourished and Chinese civilization was among the most advanced in the world.<sup>47</sup> Having grown up listening to stories of Chinese history from his grandparents<sup>48</sup>, Kaiser Kuo did not wish to shy away from what he felt was a source of pride from his cultural heritage. Such a mindset marked a significant departure from the prevalent social attitude at the time; after schools in the mainland reopened in 1969, discussion about China’s Imperial history was only used to criticize the backwardness of the traditional order and justify the Revolution. That Tang Dynasty would embrace the past as a part of identity rather than reject it or manipulate it as a means to support any particular political ideology demonstrates a more historically informed worldview. This historical reverence was, in itself, a form of protest, though much more subtle than the more scathing work of artists such as Cui Jian. By eschewing contemporary society in favor of the past, Tang Dynasty signified their dissatisfaction with the current state of Chinese society.

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<sup>47</sup> Benn, Charles. *China's Golden Age: Everyday Life in the Tang Dynasty*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002. ix. Print.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Tang Dynasty is, in many ways, the quintessential postsocialist Chinese rock group. By combining Chinese historical allusions and a deep appreciation for Chinese history with a modern musical genre, the music can be said to have a timeless quality to it. Though these historical influences invariably tie Tang Dynasty to the past, at the same time, they are some of the most prominent pioneers of a new cultural phenomenon in China. Moreover, the connection that they have with this cultural heritage in the face of the state's conflicting political ideology is an undeniably progressive trait. That they are able to straddle between history and modernity in a way that amplifies and diminishes aspects of both is reflective of a postsocialist approach to social and national culture; as I mentioned in my introduction, the recognition of the past and the role that it plays in the construction of the present is a core characteristic of a postsocialist worldview.

## P.K. 14

The reason I decided to include P.K. 14 as a case study is because they occupy a separate space within the realm of Chinese rock and roll; some have described this uniqueness as being analogous to that of the Talking Heads of Television in 1970s New York.<sup>49</sup> Founded in 1997 by Yang Haisong, they have since become one of the most well-known bands both within China as well as internationally; they have performed a number of shows in the United States, and have even sold out concerts in New York and Washington D.C.<sup>50</sup> Considering their popularity, their origins in Nanjing rather than Beijing are fairly unique; it is a fairly common complaint among many southern Chinese groups that many rock audiences are biased towards any product that comes out of Beijing, despite the prevalence of rock and roll in southern cities such as Nanjing.<sup>51</sup>

The origins of the band are unglamorous in comparison to Cui Jian or Tang Dynasty in that they formed in a considerably different era. Though the separation between Cui Jian and P.K. 14 is only about a decade, the changes within China's socioeconomic landscape that occurred during the 1990s laid the foundation for an entirely new generation of rock musicians with a separate set of, or rather, relative lack of, strong ideals. In particular, P.K. 14 is noted for their indifference towards any focused sense of rock and roll aesthetic<sup>52</sup>, and their complex musical style, containing elements of post-punk, post-hardcore, noise rock, and experimental rock, seems to defy explicit categorization. Indeed, Yang himself has outright rejected the notion of affixing

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<sup>49</sup> "P.K. 14." *maybemars.org*. Maybe Mars. Web.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> de Kloet, Jeroen, and Jeroen de Kloet. *China With a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010. 120. Print.

<sup>52</sup> "P.K. 14." *maybemars.org*. Maybe Mars. Web.

any sort of label to the music that they play<sup>53</sup>, instead suggesting that the best way to describe their music would be “simple rock and roll churned through a Chinese dictionary.”<sup>54</sup> The irrelevance of labels itself is representative of contemporary China as a whole; indeed, the uniqueness of China’s current political and economic order challenges many of the terms upon which many Western critics have become so reliant, rendering them inaccurate as general descriptors.

After just over ten years, Yang Haisong remains the only founding member still in the band. Despite the change in membership, however, the character of the band has gone largely unchanged. The full-length name of the band, Public Kingdom for Teens, indicates a potent populist bent that, indeed, is truly representative of the fundamental beliefs of the band and its style.<sup>55</sup> When asked about some of the finer details of the origination of the band, Yang simply stated that he and his friends began playing music because they were young and bored rather than because of any larger aspiration or political drive.<sup>56</sup> This attitude echoes the sentiments of many young Chinese who have begun to settle into a middle-class lifestyle; bored detachment has, to an extent, taken the place of political frustration as a primary motivator for artistic expression. He has also stated that, though they were not able to access to any physical copies of Western albums when they were younger, the internet provided them with a means of accessing Western music.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "10 Questions with Yang Haisong - PK14 is a Spicy Dish." *Beijing Daze*. 29 Nov 2012: n. page. Web.

<sup>54</sup> Sakellaris, Areti. "P.K. 14 Interview: SXSW 2010." *Spinner*. 09 Mar 2010: n. page. Web.

<sup>55</sup> Day, Lara. "Asia's Best Bands." *Time*. 21 Jan 2008: n. page. Web.

<sup>56</sup> Sakellaris, Areti. "P.K. 14 Interview: SXSW 2010." *Spinner*. 09 Mar 2010: n. page. Web.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

While it is generally accepted that indie rock is distinguished through its opposition to mainstream labels and larger musical corporations, because it can refer to a wide variety of divergent musical styles outside of rock music, it is difficult to describe in strictly musical terms<sup>58</sup>. Though not overtly political, P.K. 14's DIY ethics and independent spirit are necessarily and inherently anti-establishment.<sup>59</sup> In a sense, this quality places them along the lines of many contemporary indie rock bands in the United States. Like Tang Dynasty, the creative process that informs their musical production encourages a type of introspection that invariably challenges the notion of mainstream culture as a primary source of inspiration. Whereas Tang Dynasty invokes images of a glorious past and invites the listener, when appropriate, to appreciate the connection he or she has with this cultural history, P.K. 14 has built its image and its music around the idea that individuality should not be the result of any forced effort; bands, like people, do not require any type of label in order to be acceptable.

Perhaps this connection to American indie rock is one of the reasons that they have achieved such a considerable degree of success in the United States. One of the most remarkable aspects of this success is that unlike a number of newer rock bands seeking to establish a larger international appeal, they do not sing in English. That they are able to penetrate this linguistic boundary and attract such a following overseas is certainly an impressive feat, and attests to the increasingly globalized nature of contemporary popular music. In this situation, though, it marks something of a breakthrough for Chinese music. While Cui Jian and Tang Dynasty did achieve recognition abroad, much of their appeal, as I stated earlier, came from their status as icons that

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<sup>58</sup> Novara, Vincent J., and Stephen Henry. "A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock (1980-2005)." *Notes* 65.4: 816. JSTOR. Web.

<sup>59</sup> Day, Lara. "Asia's Best Bands." *Time*. 21 Jan 2008: n. page. Web.

challenged traditional perspectives on China. In this particular instance, however, P.K. 14's success comes not from any type of political or social message, but rather simply through their music. As Yang has described it, no matter what language differences there are, "a good time is a good time."<sup>60</sup> Of course, this prosperity has prompted some music writers to raise the question of whether or not we have really entered a new Golden Age of Chinese music; fittingly, when presented with this question, Yang merely replied that he did not care, not should any musician.<sup>61</sup> Such an attitude speaks to the individualism that defines the band, and further to the ethos of independence that has begun to shape youth culture within mainland China.

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<sup>60</sup> Sakellaris, Areti. "P.K. 14 Interview: SXSW 2010." *Spinner*. 09 Mar 2010: n. page. Web.

<sup>61</sup> "10 Questions with Yang Haisong - PK14 is a Spicy Dish." *Beijing Daze*. 29 Nov 2012: n. page. Web.

## Conclusion

This past summer, I had the opportunity to spend two months in Beijing, historically one of rock and roll's most important cities, conducting research regarding the current status of the rock music scene. While there, I interned at Modern Sky Entertainment, China's largest indie record label and one of the country's most prominent contemporary entertainment companies. Founded in 1997, Modern Sky currently operates a number of labels across a variety of genres, and in addition to music also covers video production, graphic design, and magazine publication. Needless to say, it has become one of the most significant contributors to the promulgation of rock music and rock and roll culture within China. Not only have they provided Chinese rock bands with the opportunity to succeed in the Chinese market, they have also enabled them to disseminate their music on an international stage; Modern Sky operates a small office in New York City, and several bands currently signed with them have toured outside of China.

While Chinese rock bands may not attract the same audiences as American or European indie bands, they nonetheless have established fan bases overseas that attest to their rising status within the international music scene. The increased presence of Chinese rock and roll bands in the West not only marks a substantial development in the Chinese music industry in and of itself, it can also be regarded as an indicator of shifting global sociocultural trends. This phenomenon, in a sense, represents a reversal of the hitherto dominant cultural power dynamic between the West and China. For much of China's modern history, it has had to grapple with the effects of orientalist interactions with Western culture; as I mentioned earlier, the notion that China and everything Chinese is feminine or weak has been a prevalent factor in informing the Western mindset for over a century. China's adaptation of rock and roll, in front of a Western audience no

less, underscores two important developments within this dynamic. Fundamentally, rock and roll, both through its music as well as through its aesthetic, among other things represents disorder and rebellion in the face of greater organization or authority.<sup>62</sup> By embracing it and exporting it beyond the boundaries of mainland China, Chinese rock musicians thus deconstruct this longstanding image of China as being subservient and docile. In addition, Chinese musicians' appropriation of an historically Western musical genre represents a strong sense of cultural agency. Rather than continue to consume imported Western culture, the popularity of rock and roll both domestic as well as international attests to a mastery over cultural production.

During my time in Beijing, one of the most striking things that I noticed talking to a number of coworkers, musicians, and music fans was the perceived direction, or directions, that rock and roll both as a genre and as an embodiment of ideals seemed to be taking. In particular, there were two primary camps into which people can be separated depending on their point of view. The first I encountered from a coworker, Jackie Zhang, who was then serving as the manager for the rock band Retros. After arriving, I was eager to speak with people in the industry, particularly younger people who I felt might be able to offer an interesting perspective on the matter, having not grown up in the same set of circumstances that compelled these rock bands to convene in the first place. Naturally, I asked what his thoughts were on some of the older bands, Tang Dynasty in particular. To my surprise, he shook his head and shot me a look of mild irritation.

“They’re old,” he declared, not even bothering to look up from his lunch. “Have you heard them live? They sound terrible.”

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<sup>62</sup> Martin, Bernice. "The Sacralization of Disorder: Symbolism in Rock Music." *Sociological Analysis* 40.2 (1979): 89. JSTOR. Web.

When I asked about their role in the development of rock music as a genre, he nodded, but added, again, that as performers, their talents have waned, and that they have already begun to become irrelevant to many younger Chinese. Over the course of two months, we went out to lunch nearly every day, during which he did not hesitate to share with me his opinions regarding the bands he did and did not like, the status of the popular music market, and his bands' plans for touring outside of China. As an insider within the industry and as the primary manager of a fairly popular band, he demonstrated a considerable knowledge of the finer aspects of the business side of music. Rather than approach rock and roll from a purely poetic point of view, he was less idealistic and assumed a more pragmatic stance with regards to promoting rock culture within China. To figures like Jackie, who are a part of the formalized music industry, rock and roll, though still retaining a degree of significance within the Chinese sociocultural sphere, is nonetheless a part of a growing industry. It is an art form, but as entertainment, it should be appealing and accessible. This perspective, in a sense, reflects the general course of development of greater Chinese society; though political reform remains a sensitive subject, increased general economic prosperity, particularly within cities, has prompted many to reject or simply turn a blind eye to political matters and instead embrace the newfound luxuries that accompany a middle-class lifestyle.

At the same time, though, while to this audience, it does not carry the same political appeal as it may have twenty or so years ago, rock and roll still serves a vital function as an outlet for disaffected youth. While many middle-class Chinese enjoy a number of benefits they were not able to back when rock and roll first began, economic development, no matter how great, cannot remove the emotional troubles that can afflict one on a regular basis. In this regard,

rock and roll has transformed, though not completely, from a political vehicle into a personal one. At the same time, rock and roll, at the end of the day, is about creative expression. With the rise of expendable income and leisure time, many younger Chinese have taken to music as a means of enjoyment.

On the other hand, there are still a number of musicians who adhere to the same set of principles espoused by the forerunners of the rock and roll movement, or at the very least share a similar type of progressive attitude with regards to sociopolitical change. One night, while I was out with a few friends at a bar that featured live music, I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Meng You, a guitarist who played regularly at one of the more popular locales in the area. He was not a Beijinger; having grown in Qiqihar, a city in Heilongjiang province, he moved to Beijing after graduating from college to pursue his music career. I sat down with Mengyou the week before I left and interviewed him regarding his personal history as well as his views on contemporary Chinese rock and roll and what it means as a cultural phenomenon. Though he, like Jackie, grew up in a fairly well-to-do household, he held a different set of beliefs regarding rock music and its place in Chinese society. Rock and roll, he proclaimed, is not merely music; it is a type of 精神, which roughly translates as “spirit” or “consciousness.” He further extrapolated that, though the newfound prosperity of the domestic rock and roll market is certainly beneficial to a number of aspiring musicians, more important than its potential as a business is its ability to inspire. When asked about democracy and whether or not politics plays any substantial role within the sphere of rock and roll, he responded without hesitation that there is an irrevocable connection between the two. Like rock and roll, he explained, democracy is, in many regards, a

grassroots system that requires a heightened awareness of the individual and the role of the individual within society.

Throughout my thesis, I have made a number of connections between the different layers of rock and roll as a sociocultural phenomenon and the numerous facets of a postsocialist worldview and sociopolitical landscape. The reason I ended with this personal experience rather than a more abstract literary analysis is that it is a perfect embodiment of the current state of rock and roll in mainland China. No longer is rock music a purely underground phenomenon marked by political satire and frustrated urban youth. Though some, such as Meng You, continue to advocate a more progressive platform with regards to politics and society, others, such as Jackie, regard it as a more personal form of expression and understand and appreciate the potential for market expansion. It is this combination of ambiguity and diversity that currently defines rock and roll as a development of a postsocialist sociocultural landscape within China. Regardless of its political leanings, in the years to come, the rock and roll scene will no doubt continue to develop to reflect the rapid cultural change that is occurring underneath the heavy hand of government control.

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