REPHRASING MAINSTREAM AND ALTERNATIVES: AN IDEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE BIRTH OF CHINESE INDIE MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis project focuses on the birth and dissemination of Chinese indie music. Who produces indie? What is the ideology behind it? How can they realize their idealistic goals? Who participates in the indie community? What are the relationships among mainstream popular music, rock music and indie music? In this thesis, I study the production, circulation, and reception of Chinese indie music, with special attention paid to class, aesthetics, and the influence of the internet and globalization. Borrowing Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding/decoding, I propose that Chinese indie music production encodes ideologies into music. Pierre Bourdieu has noted that an individual’s preference, namely, tastes, corresponds to the individual’s profession, his/her highest educational degree, and his/her father’s profession. Whether indie audiences are able to decode the ideology correctly and how they decode it can be analyzed through Bourdieu’s taste and distinction theory, especially because Chinese indie music fans tend to come from a community of very distinctive, 20-to-30-year-old petite-bourgeois city dwellers. Overall, the thesis aims to illustrate how indie exists in between the incompatible poles of mainstream Chinese popular music and Chinese rock music, rephrasing mainstream and alternatives by mixing them in itself.
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INTRODUCTION

A cool breeze seemed to end the August heat in Beijing. As my friends and I walked into the former plant of the Beijing Jeep Corporation, situated nearby the Third Ring Road, and close to the International Trade Center, we saw some workers gathered at a round table in front of an old bungalow, eating *yangrouchuan*¹, and drinking beer and *erguotou*, a strong Beijing white spirit. The cook, also the owner of the restaurant at this bungalow, glanced at us for a second, then continued his task at the kerosene stove. “One dish of twice-cooked pork,” someone inside the bungalow shouted at the cook’s back. The loud voice led us to look through the glass door of the bungalow and see some plant workers, their sleeves rolled up to their shoulders, scattered around the old and shabby square tables. Not too many *wenyi qingnian*, literally, young men and women of arts and literature who we assumed would show up, were on the scene here. We asked the cook if Mako Live House (Mako) was there. The cook nodded and directed us to go straight on the lane until we saw some film studios on the left. Mako was at the very end of the east courtyard.

The *wenyi qingnian* we expected to see became more common as we passed the two theaters of the Mako Arts Display Center. They were mostly in T-shirts, jeans and canvas shoes. Some of the women wore long cotton skirts and flats. The “back-to-school-days” style was conspicuous. Judging from these people’s appearances, I knew we were in the right place, and I had just arrived in the indie music community in Beijing, China.

Chinese indie music that was introduced to listeners shortly after the turn of the 21st century

¹ *Yangrouchuan* looks like Shish Kebab. It is an Arab snack very popular in the north and northwest of China, where there is a sizable Muslim population. Many vendors are seen making them on street corners in northern cities. Lean mutton is first cut into slices, these slices are then stuck one after another on iron skewers, which are then arranged closely on a trough-like burner and grilled over a charcoal fire. When the mutton oozes juice, salt, chili and aniseed powders are sprinkled on and the yangrouchuan are ready to eat.
is the subject of this thesis project. Chinese popular music was started during the Qing dynasty when *xuetang yuege* (school songs)\(^2\) were widely sung not only by school students but also by the national public. It developed quickly after the New Culture Movement in 1919 (*Xin wenhua yundong*).\(^3\) As time goes by, the symbolic meaning of “popular” has varied from “yellow/pornographic, to popularized and popular music.”\(^4\) Now Chinese popular music encompasses three major types: mainstream popular music, Chinese rock music, and Chinese indie music.

With the influence of economic and technological development, popular music making is no longer the exclusive property of entertainment tycoons, neither is it a propaganda tool for politicians. As boundless as it is, the internet provides musicians and producers a feasible path making their desired works available to larger audiences. For example, free MP3s could be an excellent promotional tool for new artists. In the meantime, netizens\(^5\) engage spontaneously in online activities, hence making the musical circulation a two-way selection process in today’s Chinese popular music. Online music reviews written by individual listeners now can impact

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\(^2\) Jin Zhaojun notes that “after The Hundred Days’ Reform (*wuxu zhengbian*) in 1898, the feudal Qing power was forced to reform that it abolished the imperial examination and built public schools. Intellectuals? at that time advocated the nation to learn from the West, to pay special attention to the nation’s education. In that situation, music education was deeply appreciated. *Xuetang yuege* came out of such attention to music education.” A typical example of *xuetang yuege* is *Songbie* (Farewell) which was originally composed by John Pond Ordway with the name, “Dreaming of Home and Mother.” Jin Zhaojun, *Guangtian huari xia de liuxing—qinli zhongguo liuxing yinyue*[Being popular under the sun—hands-on experience of Chinese popular music] (*Renmin yinyue chubanshe*, 2002), 22, [http://read.chaoxing.com/ebook/detail.jhtml?id=11324160](http://read.chaoxing.com/ebook/detail.jhtml?id=11324160).


\(^5\) Netizen relates to the Chinese word 網民 *wangmin*, an internet user.
other listeners’ tastes and preferences. These changes lead Chinese indie music fans to discover artists from amateur, grassroots, and underground realms; they also cause professional artists to show respect for amateurism. Chinese indie music invites listeners to participate in music scenes. It asks fans to find their own understanding of being “indie.” In listening to Chinese indie music, the previous passive listening experience of mainstream popular music has been changed to a more active and shared one. While Chinese indie music voices independence, hardly any of its listeners become radical and trouble the Chinese authorities.

As it is ambivalent yet highly participatory, Chinese indie music is interesting to me because I am curious about what it tends to bring to Chinese listeners and why it attracts so many youth to take part in it. Andrew F. Jones situates Chinese rock music in contemporary Chinese popular music by discussing the ideologies of each popular music genre. This scholarship has prodded me to ask: Who produces indie? What is the ideology behind it? How can they realize their idealistic goals? Who participates in the indie community? What are the relationships among mainstream popular music, rock music and indie music? In answering these questions, I hope to define Chinese indie music in terms of how it is produced in both factual and cultural senses. But this thesis is not limited to defining Chinese indie music. I not only explore this music from the panoptical ideological perspective, but also look to ethnographic data to discover how indie is reproduced by audiences with individual understandings, and how it is applied to other aspects of life.

The thesis deals with ideology; hence in this introduction I want to clarify what I mean by ideology and its relationship with popular music, especially Chinese popular music. According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, those who rule the society rule how people in the society perceive things, and the rulers of the society are those who control the means of material
production. This idea assumes that a dominant ideology hides behind the veil of being productive. Scholars have elaborated from this to analyze popular music.

Developing from the Marxist idea of ruling class and ruling ideas, the Frankfurt school-associated scholar Theodor Adorno argues that popular music is standardized. And compared with serious music, popular music is “low-brow, simple and naïve.” This critic devalues popular music from the standpoint of both production and quality, referring to it as superficial, ahistorical, and “pseudo-individualistic.” For Max Horkheimer and Adorno, mass production has denied individual creativity as every cultural product is made pre-scripted, pre-selected, and pre-filtered so that it appears identical and meets identical needs. Their arguments depreciate the artistic value of popular music, seeing it as a mere tool for capitalistic dehumanization.

The Chinese popular music industry after 1998 has been reported by Jin Zhaojun as being very exciting yet full of junk in the article “In High Spirits at a Garbage Time (laji shidai de

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7 Popular music can also include the particular made-in-China songs that follow a very different production procedure and are recognized as “tongsu (popularized)” music. Here “popular music” refers to the Western definition, the capitalist original popular music.


9 Adorno observes that “standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individualization keeps these customers in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or ‘pre-digested.’” Adorno, “On Popular Music,” http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/On_popular_music_1.shtml.

He states that “new hit songs come out weekly, musicians head from various places of the nation to Beijing, and producers buy demos from songwriters, make respective musical videos, and buy media broadcasting rights—these activities show the high spirit of the popular music industry in China.” However, he argues that: “I think 99% of popular music is garbage… perhaps these music pieces did try hard to imitate the 1% masterpiece. However, I doubt if those in the 1% of good music left are imitating each other.” This comment is akin to Adorno and Horkheimer’s observations on Western popular music: to critics, Chinese popular music now appears to be formulaic. Jin observes that the music making has been dedicated to only one goal—profit-making. The mass media worries about the quality of Chinese popular music. Borrowing the pessimistic criticism from the Frankfurt School, some scholars have criticized Chinese popular music as “dirty popular songs that poison Chinese youth’s mental health.”

There is a reason for such criticism: as a commodity for sale, Chinese popular music cannot

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escape from being standardized: the hit songs on the charts sound familiar, and singers are becoming “superstars” on the assembly line. These popular songs are becoming examples of the so called “koushui ge (saliva song)” that are very easy to follow, but no one believes they have artistic value. Yet some of the commercialized popular songs actually become tools for socialist propaganda.  

Situated in China, a country with a different social system and beliefs, whether the music will drive listeners to capitalism or socialism depends on how the song is played, what the song is about, when it is played, where it is played, and who listens to it. Thus the Frankfurt School’s ideas fail to explain the complications of Chinese popular music, for they overlook the process of circulation and the audience’s influences and they also over-emphasize mass production and the hegemonic power behind it.

“Popular” in China means the song attracts a large audience, and the popularity of the song can be determined by either how much it sells or the degree of governmental enhancement. In this sense, any piece of popular music (tongsu and liuxing music), rock music, or indie music can be regarded as Chinese popular music in a broad sense. As Andrew F. Jones notes, in China “genre is a function of ideology, not musical style.”  

In Chinese popular music, genres “construct and convey cultural and political ideology.” Ideology is referenced by the Chinese term yishi (literally, sensibility). It was explained in Chinese novels that people had the yishi (desire) to seek their roots, in politics as the government was promoting democratic yishi (consciousness) in face with a new age, and in cultural trends in that people had nostalgic yishi

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16 However, this may not act like it sounds. Dr. Jeremy Wallach notes that “yet many accounts suggest they are of limited effectiveness, since the overtly propagandistic songs don’t sell and the ones that do are so subtle the message might in fact be blunted beyond recognition.”

17 Jones, 20.

18 Ibid., 21.
Therefore, with the distinctive yishi that a music piece conveys, Chinese popular music can be studied in different ways: as popular music (liuxing and tongsu music) that sings for/about the people, as “rock music which is politically bold but musically conformist, and as indie music that is musically diverse but politically apathetic.”

In studying how ideology functions, Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding theory is helpful. Hall introduces an ideological struggle: “a terrain of ‘incorporation’ and ‘resistance’: one of the sites where hegemony is to be won or lost.”

By “incorporation”, Hall means that the program was encoded with “frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure” to be a “meaningful discourse,” the discourse then was decoded by the audiences and turned to a renewed meaning structure which was influential, and could be applied and expanded. Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding accepts that audiences react to the code and influence reproduction. His theory retains the hegemonic power of capitalism and reports three different states between audience and the dominant ideology: 1) “dominant-hegemonic position”, the complete acceptance of the encoded meaning; 2) “negotiated position”, where acceptance and objection both existed; and 3) “decoding the message in global contrary way”, absolute opposition.

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19 Ibid., 21.

20 This is also noted by Dr. Jeremy Wallach.


24 Hall, 174-176.
Hall anchors the role of dominant ideology in a capitalist cultural discourse. In my study, the situation is complicated since the nation describes its political system as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Literally from this statement, the dominant ideology seems to be striving to balance between socialism and capitalism while using both of them to stimulate national prosperity. The different encoding/decoding goals in the three music types reflect different responses towards the dominant ideology in China. In order to know how the dominant ideology impacts Chinese popular music, I propose that we study popular music, rock music and indie music individually and analyze how each of them interacts with the dominant ideology. By doing this, we will be able to understand why indie music stands out from different music types as one prevailing genre in the current popular music industry in China.

In this thesis my observations are based on five things: ideologies, nostalgia, digital form, intelligence, and aesthetics. I study the production, circulation, and reception of Chinese indie music, with special attention to class, aesthetics, and the influence of the internet and globalization.

Comparing indie with other music genres, I argue that the ideology behind indie involves the escape from both conformity and consumerism. What realizes such musical autonomy is the enhancement of digital platforms—internet, mp3 and other devices. However, the audience members’ decoding highly depends on their cultural competence. Pierre Bourdieu has noted that an individual’s tastes correspond to that individual’s profession, his highest educational degree, and his father’s profession. Whether indie audiences are able to decode the ideology “correctly” and how they decode it can be analyzed through Bourdieu’s taste and distinction theory, especially because Chinese indie music fans tend to come from a community of very distinctive, 20-30-year-old petit-bourgeois city dwellers.
The study of indie music, particularly Chinese indie music, is a rather new subject in academia. Because of the complexity of the subject and the inadequacy of both English and Chinese scholarship, I am mixing theories to analyze the topic. For example, I add Bourdieu’s sociological approach to Hall’s ideological framework. Also, there are times I quote my interviewee’s viewpoints when I think their comments best explicate the situation. In addition, I draw on findings from authors who produced pioneering work in indie culture and indie music studies, as well as authors who researched Chinese popular music, especially Chinese underground rock music.

Chinese indie music is highly influenced by British indie antecedents. Works by Wendy Fonarow and David Hesmondhalgh introducing British indie music from sociological and political economic perspectives exemplify how we could begin to explore the genre. Fonarow defines indie by distribution, genre, ethos, style and aesthetics, however, she stresses that indie (ness) is located ultimately in its discourse, and she used a participatory framework to analyze how ideologies encoded in discourse impact the structure of indie music performance.\(^\text{25}\) Hesmondhalgh focuses on case studies of Creation and One Little Indian, two important British independent labels. On one hand, he provides readers with the history of British indie music as it moved from being independent to merging into major labels, and, on the other hand, he reveals the political understatement that more than struggling between “sell-out”\(^\text{26}\) and “burn-out”\(^\text{27}\),


\(^{27}\) Burn-out means the independent label could maintain “their institutional alterity until the human and financial resources run dry.” Hesmondhalgh, “Indie,” 36.
indie ends “the post-punk vision of transforming the social relations of musical production via the medium of the small record company.”

Indie-pop is a sub-genre of indie music and seems to be of interest to a majority of Chinese indie fans. One source that refers to this sub-genre is Brent Luvaas’s “Dislocating Sounds: The Deterritorialization of Indonesian Indie Pop”: Using Indonesian indie-pop bands like Mocca and The Upstairs as examples, Luvaas veers from traditional analysis of local hybridity and localization as a resistance to globalization and instead argues that indie-pop and its expressive forms actively reconstitute the local as a locality that is reluctantly associated with traditions and territorial traces yet incorporated with aesthetics of the global marketplace, projecting itself onto the global stage. Chinese indie-pop music seems to have adopted a similar strategy.

Indie music making, if not turning into commercial label ventures, may be considered as a kind of amateur practice. Ruth Finnegan provides research on the amateur musicians in the English city of Milton Keynes. She observes how the independent music scenes there change across time under the influences of technologies. In addition, Finnegan gives multi-faceted observations that detail musical practice into overlapping pathways.

English-language scholarship on contemporary Chinese popular music was pioneered by Andrew F. Jones. Jones introduces readers to the Chinese ideologies (yishi) under which Chinese popular music divides into different genres: rock and pop. With a particular concentration on Cui Jian, Jones observes that Chinese rock music is developing in a contradictory way: the rock

28 Ibid., 57.


subculture is becoming more polarized while rock music is taking over popular music. In her dissertation, Cynthia P. Wong focused on the early Chinese heavy metal band, Tang Dynasty, and female rock band, Cobra. She examines how a generation of urban youth negotiates issues of identity and self-presentation through rock music between late 1980s to early 1990s. Drawing from socioeconomic observation on Chinese modernity, Wong studies how early Chinese rock music, as the new expressive form of the time, pushes the boundaries for “disenfranchised People’s Republic of China (PRC) youths to voice their feelings and comment on their own alienation.”

The pioneer rockers’ anticipation of rock music’s ruling Chinese popular music did not come true. However, both Jeroen de Kloet and Maranatha Ivanova studied the dakou generation of Chinese rock music fans who in the mid-1990s consumed imported, illegal, cut albums from the West, and witnessed the rebirth of Chinese rock music.

Drawing from the above scholarship, I have made my own framework for understanding Chinese indie music:

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31 Jones, Knife, 147-148.


Encoding

Initial Process of Decoding

Mainstream Chinese Popular Music  Chinese Rock Music

Codes: collectivism of the mainstream and the resistant rock

Encoding

Chinese indie Music

Decoding: a discourse of genre formulation
§ How indie music is produced showing how the codes of collectivism from mainstream and the resistance against oppression are achieved in a less aggressive way.

§ How indie music is expressed in the indie musicians’ works showing codes of remaining self-control and building an imagined community whose members naturally agreed with the ethos.

Codes: Self-control, collective freedom, and indie aesthetics

Encoding

Decoding: a discourse of a new generation of cultural consumers
§ An analysis of the indie birthplaces including douban (an internet community for Chinese youth of literature and arts), Beijing livehouse, and musical festivals will present how the reinvented codes are passed onto the audiences.

§ An analysis of the prevailing indie pop aesthetics then shows how some codes lost in decoding by the influence of class and cultural capital variation among audiences.
Based on this framework, the thesis is divided into five chapters. It will start from the ideologies, to investigate the question of who rules the voice of Chinese popular music. Chapter One, “Liuxing and Tongsu music— the Controlled Entertainment,” concentrates on the songs picked by the annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala (CCTV Chunjie lianhuan wanhui, CCTV 春節聯歡晚會) during 1998-2008. I choose this TV show to investigate the ruling ideology of Chinese popular music mainly because it is a national tradition to watch the show annually on Chinese Lunar New Year’s Eve. As CCTV Spring Festival Gala caters to nationwide audiences, regardless of age, gender, race and class, regardless if they are familiar with popular music, the hit songs that the PRC government allows to be performed gives the immediate impression of what is officially appreciated by the year. This specific framework can serve as a better source than charts to understand the kinds of popular songs and how they are used to interpret mainstream ideologies. By studying the texts of each year’s popular songs and recurring folk songs, I hope to present the original ideologies that came from historical philosophy (Confucius and feudal moralities), socialist reform (borrowing the idea by Jones), and my observations on current economic development in mainland China.

Chapter Two, “Gun or Rose—The Rock Pioneers’ Dilemma,” continues the discussion of ideology. Rock was introduced to mainland China in 1984. Because it is an imported form,

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35 CCTV is the abbreviation of China’s Central Television Station, the Beijing located major state broadcaster and one of China’s official broadcasting outlets. CCTV reports directly to the Propaganda Department of the CPC (zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuan bu).

36 By officially appreciated I mean that every Chinese popular song has to go through censorship by the The State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT), songs that are selected for CCTV (the nation’s central television) are determined to be politically right and positive to the Chinese youth. Unlike some underground rock songs that are banned, these songs then are allowed to be popularized nationwide.
rockers are questioning their identities and the spirit of rock. By studying the pioneer Chinese rockers’ songs, I am interpreting how some socialist codes were being resisted by the rockers. In this chapter, I am also presenting how ancient (Confucius or feudalist) and capitalistic ideologies are unintentionally encoded into early Chinese rock music. Besides that, the flourishing of rock in China has established the value of musical virtuosity for later Chinese musicians.

Chapter Three, “‘Yao Bu Yao Gun’—The Underground Rockers’ Dilemma,” focuses on the later-on strugglers, the rockers who go underground and the rockers who were active in Beijing circle between 1995 and 2004. While pioneer rockers were showcased as artistically enlightened in Chinese popular music industry, rock was soon marginalized. The name of this chapter, “yao bu yao gun” (which can be pronounced in either “yao4 bu2 yao4 gun3 [要不要滾], to get out or not” or “yao2 bu4 yao2 gun3 [搖不搖滾], to rock or not”) reveals the rocker’s dilemma, as I hope to explain in this chapter: Whether to stay in the rock circle? Whether to stay away from the principles? Whether to be commercialized? By answering these questions, this chapter will present codes that have been decoded and reproduced for the next genre of music—Chinese indie music.

Chapter Four, “‘Let’s Graze Our Band in the City’—An Indie Way of Music Making,” moves to an introduction to Chinese indie music. Chinese indie music seeks an ideological escape from being lost and commercialized yet it in return turns to be a unique creature in the urban setting. This chapter discusses how indie music is produced through the musicians and producers’ perspectives. I have included some points from my in-depth interview with a label producer discussing how he understands and markets indie music in mainland China. How the indie label producers sell their music definitely shows how the codes of capitalism and punk-derived DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethos are being negotiated in the indie genre discourse. However, the major
focus of this chapter will be on the indie musicians, their expectations for the genre, and how they convey their expectations through their attractive pieces. I will analyze works by mainstream indie singers, indie rockers and indie folk singers to show how the new codes passed onto the indie community are invented.

Chapter Five, “Douban, Mako Live House and taN Record Store—Discovering the Indie Dissemination in Mainland China,” looks to how digital technology and human intelligence work together to form an indie community. Here I am analyzing 1) how technology realizes indie music circulation, focusing on the relationship between indie music and user-controlled content websites like Douban; 2) whether the indie style in dressing, performance and writing reflects an agreed-upon aesthetics; 3) are the live performances that happen at livehouse and musical festivals telling the other side of the story that codes inherited from rockers are well received by the audiences?

In conclusion, Chinese indie music is a young, dynamic, and distinctive musical form that revives Chinese popular music after the millennium. To put indie in a cultural context, the thesis follows a chronological order to detect ideologies encoded in Chinese popular music from different times. These ideologies solidify the birth of indie music in China. By studying the encoding and decoding process, this thesis aims at illustrating how indie is put in between the mutually incompatible mainstream popular music and Chinese rock music, rephrasing mainstream and alternatives by mixing them in itself.
CHAPTER ONE: LIUXING AND TONGSU MUSIC—THE CONTROLLED ENTERTAINMENT

In the article “Cultural Attributes of Chinese Popular Song Lyrics,” Hu Jiangfeng generalizes four attributes to define popular music: the “Tongsu attribute (of people’s life), the Yuyue attribute (of pleasure), the Shangpin attribute (of commodity), and the Liuxing attribute (of popularity).”37 For Hu, mainstream Chinese popular music should be related to people’s lives, create pleasant experiences, be a commodity, and it must be widespread. He also separates Chinese popular music according to cultural differences, classifying it with four cultural attributes: “Qunzhong gequ [songs for the people],” “Yishu gequ [songs of artistic taste],” “Minge [folk songs],” and “Liuxing gequ [popular songs].”38

“Songs for the people” in their lyrics and musical styles represent the dominant culture.39 This type of song creates a communal public image, sings about national integrity and prosperity, hopes for social stability, and establishes moral standards. “Songs of artistic taste” are of a gaoya (highbrow) type. It is interesting yet reasonable that Hu puts the milestone rock song “I Have Nothing” by Cui Jian in this cultural category because he relates the elites to those well-educated intellectuals who have critical minds and artistic tastes and who play with words and entrust their dreams in a gaoya type of song. For Hu, gaoya songs represent elite culture in China. However, we should be aware that this elite class is not equal to the Western aristocratic elite class; it stresses more on intellectually advantaged. The third category, “folk songs” or “popularized songs,” represents the folk culture, traditional, original, and widespread creativity of a specific


38 Ibid.

39 One thing to note here is that China follows communist ideology and it believes the nation’s dominant culture is its people’s culture.
group of people. For example, the song “qianfu de ai (Love of Boat Trackers)” describes the love and life of a man in a particular folk occupation. The last cultural type, “popular songs,” represents mass culture. It is melodic in sound, artistic in its lyrics, and covers diverse topics.

Hu’s classification illustrates one way to understand a song in mainstream Chinese popular music, i.e., every song denotes a cultural type. Hall states that, “the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a communicative event.”\(^{40}\) When a popular song is performed on a TV program, both the song and the program have been incorporated into the ruling ideology. When we study mainstream popular music, we are therefore studying how a song expresses the ideology in one cultural form. For example, “I Have Nothing” expresses the elite’s reaction towards the dominant ideology of that time, how members of elite culture respond to the dominant culture.

China is believed to be ruled by its people and the working class. Article 1 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China declares that “The People’s Republic of China is a socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants.”\(^ {41}\) Article 2 asserts that “all power in the People’s Republic of China belongs to the people;”\(^ {42}\) restating the emphasis on people’s overwhelming power. The line that “the basis of the socialist economic system of the People’s Republic of China is socialist public ownership of the means of production;”\(^ {43}\) in Article 6 seems to justify the economic impetus for the popularity of collectivism in China. Ironically, however, after the Reform and

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\(^{40}\) Hall, 167.


\(^{42}\) Constitution of PRC, Article 2.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., Article 6.
Opening in 1979, the subsequent Hong Kong Handover in 1997 and the impact and acceptance of globalization, it is doubtful whether socialism is still prevalent in Chinese society.

Consumerism has been marked by the booming of advertising. In politics, some argue that collectivism has turned into top-down one Party nationalism, since “the Communist Party posits itself as the vanguard of the Chinese nation—not the proletariat—and as the privileged agent to carry forward the Chinese nation’s long-deferred dream of wealth, power, and international respect.”

Based on these discussions, it is hard to specify the true dominant ideology in China. Yet we can infer that collectivism, consumerism, and nationalism play very important roles in dominant Chinese culture.

In this study, I find that mainstream popular music completely accepts these key facets of dominant ideology and that it becomes the ruling class’s entertainment. In the following section, I analyze how this acceptance is realized. In the particular case of the annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala (CCTV Chunjie lianhuan wanhui), a TV show designed for the national celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year, I locate mainstream popular music in the orthodox settings, so we can have a clear view of how popular music functions within the system. By within the system, I am emphasizing in this chapter how popular music regardless of its origin is controlled

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45 By “orthodox,” I mean Chunwan is a political outlet. It allows very limited creativity and business interferences. The primary goal of this show is to create a national image of the year for a general audience. It is not profit-driven; hence it does not cater to capitalism. Yet it attracts businesses to advertise, and the competition for advertising space is very intense; therefore it is hard to deny this show lacks a consumerist impetus. Compared with analyzing how popular music survives and thrives in the Chinese market, I prefer to study what is chosen to appear and how these selections are performed on the political stage.
in expressing a meaning.

The Controlled Entertainment

In a market-oriented economy, singers compete for public exposure, utilizing the strategy of capitalist individuality by creating a unique self-image and iconic songs. Besides promoting themselves in print, on various online charts, and on radio shows, some singers receive national attention by performing on the annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala (chunwan). The show invites other pop singers to attract larger audiences. Using popular songs and other performances, the show advocates ideals presented in the Constitution: people’s country, people’s land, and people’s rights. It entertains people, the “ruling class” of the nation. In return, it educates the people being entertained to hold on to Chinese nationalism.

Between 1998 and 2008, chunwan has produced various hit songs. By “hit songs,” I mean that the song was already popular and ranked high in Baidu MP3 Chart\(^\text{46}\) and FM 97.4 Chinese Pop Chart (zhonggebang),\(^\text{47}\) or that the song received immediate success after the chunwan debut. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on the lyrics and fictional images selective hit songs have conveyed.

The songs I have selected (the performers for each song will be introduced later) are:


\(^{46}\) Baidu MP3 is China’s biggest music search engine, despite a lawsuit between the website and the major labels, the website allows visitors to download more than 4 million examples of popular music for free. For information about the lawsuit, see http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/techpolicy/2005-10-02-baidu-mp3_x.htm. It is practical to find what is popular on Baidu MP3 List: http://list.mp3.baidu. Baidu MP3 List com/.

\(^{47}\) FM97.4 Chinese Pop Chart (Zhonguo Gequ Paihangbang) is a Beijing Music Radio Station show that started in 1993. It was also the earliest popular music chart. The show introduces 40 popular songs and 10 new songs to audiences weekly, regardless of the performing language and the song’s origin (like where it comes from, is it an American pop song). The show reaches 0.4 billion audience members, and strongly influences the popular music industry. Zhongguo Gequ Paihang Bang, http://fm974.rbc.cn/zgb/jmjs/200904/t20090423_506716.htm.
“Happy Life”, a folk song sung by Chinese Hmong soprano Song Zuying, describes a traditional Chinese Lunar New Year celebration. It opens with people beating drums, striking a gong, and dancing happily. The song lyrics then present a close-up view of people’s smiling faces shining in the sun. Instead of presenting a quiet family gathering, “Happy Life” portrays a crowded street. To assure listeners that everyone is happy at this moment and should be happy in the future, the song lyrics describe a red lantern, beautiful songs, bright moonlight and optimistic feelings to create the image of a satisfied person. The message seems to be that a happy person will see a red lantern, will hear lovely songs, will watch the bright moon (probably a full moon, which is a symbol of family unity in Chinese culture), and will be very positive towards the future. The drum and gong, as folk instruments, symbolizing the nation’s proletarian class, immediately connect this song to collective happiness. With the folk dance melody, listeners can associate scenes of either yangko dance or the dragon dance (which is the prevailing dance performance) with the oppressed class (again the proletarian) in the old days. The song creates the image that everyone is happy, which reflects the idea of collectivism: to share happiness together. Since 1998, this folk song has been sung at various occasions, occasions as formal as
national events and as nongovernmental as personal weddings. The dominant ideology of shared happiness is encoded in the song and completely accepted by audiences for such large and frequent adoption of it.

In 1998, “Entering a New Era” was first sung by Li Guangxi, Li Guyi and Zhang Ye. The song is considered *hongse gequ* (a revolutionary song). In 1999, it was performed again in *chunwan*, by Zhang Ye as lead singer backed up by a chorus. “Entering a New Era” describes the nation entering a new stage of modernization and globalization. Without mentioning the “CPC or Party” or using the word “party,” the lyrics actually refer to many important policies and remarkable achievements made by the Communist Party of China (CPC). The song ends with a promise of building a brilliant future, assuring listeners of the ruling party’s resolution. In this affirmation of the CPC’s successful leadership, the song conveys the message that the nation’s future is still in the people’s, not the capitalists’, hands. In this way, dominant Chinese nationalism is encoded in the song.

“Gathering Together in 1998” is an outstanding popular song performed in *chunwan*. The song is appreciated mostly because it was sung by two EMI superstars: Na Ying from China’s mainland and Faye Wong⁴⁸ from Hong Kong. The performance represents the reunion of Hong Kong and the mainland in 1997 as well as anticipating the reunion of Macau and the mainland that was scheduled for the next year. The performers’ EMI label reflected that the 1998 Chinese society welcomed foreign investment. Indeed, foreign-owned companies and Sino-foreign joint ventures had already emerged, naturally leading to various kinds of conflicts with dominant ideology. The singers’ careers are commercialized, while the lyrics they sing are used to explain

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⁴⁸ Faye Wong or Wang Fei was originally from Beijing. However, she moved to Hong Kong in 1987 and became a superstar in the early 1990s by singing Cantonese popular songs. At the 1998 *chunwan*, Faye was regarded by the mainland Chinese audiences as a Hong Kong-based superstar.
the fact that the dominant power is still the socialist government. For instance, lines like “the warm look of you is welcoming me; I am bringing you yesterday’s good memories,” describing a son’s gaze, indicate that his mother is greeting her son who is returning home after several years’ being away. The pleasant reunion scene in this song displays the long-standing close relation between the motherland and the special administrative districts.

“Healthy Song” was sung by Fan Xiaoxuan, a Taiwan teen-pop star at the time and Xie Xiaodong, the mainland Chinese pop singer in the 1998 chunwan. The song was first released on Fan’s 1997 album shaoxi lizheng zhanhao (Attention! Stand at Ease). Unlike the album’s serious name, which is a drill command, the songs on her album are all urban nursery rhymes. Fan’s songs achieved mainstream success immediately after the album came out. Chunwan invited Fan to play a fairy who sang and danced at the show, accompanied by Xie, who played an old grandpa following her body movements, and singing about the benefits of physical training. The original lyrics were rewritten, changing the urban nursery rhyme to a slogan about how everyone will benefit from building body strength. One funny line is “After you keep doing physical exercises, you will look 23 next year even though you are currently 32.” When singing this line, Xie took off his fake grey hair and tore off the white moustache and returned to his natural young male look.49 The song, so easy to follow and dance with, reinforced the 1995 National Fitness Program established by the mainland China State Council.

The 1999 chunwan hit songs seem to shift the focus from the plural “dajia (we, everyone)” to the single unit “home.” “Return Home Often” suggests that middle-aged couples should take their child to visit their old parents frequently, while “To Be Honest with You” sings in sympathy with the soldiers who hide their feelings of homesickness and keep to their duty of guarding the nation. The two songs marked the new dominant ideological strategy: the individual has been

49 See 02:10- 02:15 of the video: http://space.tv.cctv.com/video/VIDE1239846372512892
cared for, yet that individual should think about his or her nation more than s/he thinks about himself or herself. This is taught in the song “To Be Honest with You.” The song tells a touching story of a soldier that dreams about his mother aging alone quickly, yet the soldier is so loyal to his country that he will not leave the military to visit his mother. The song praises the soldier because he protects thousands of mothers in this nation by doing his duty. Paradoxically, in 1999 chunwan, the show praised someone who fails to visit parents, but it also advised kids not to leave their old parents alone. This dilemma points to the debate over loyalty to one’s nation and filial piety to one’s family, both of which show individual concerns for the other. The true care for an individual is yet to be shown in Chinese popular music.

This situation is quickly overthrown by the hit songs performed in 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2007 chunwan. Previous songs were about the proletariat, for the revolution, the nation, and moral standards, but the new songs were about romantic love. These songs are thematically closest to Western popular music. “Rainbow” and “You are My Rose” use metaphors to describe the singer’s love for a girl. “At Least I Still Have You” and “Love’s 36 Plans” express love from the female’s perspective. “The World Outside” is a nostalgic 1980s love song. “I Have You in My Life” is a famous xiaoyuan minyao (campus folk) love song. “Marry Me Today” is a popular song that describes a wedding day. Because the song is performed on chunwan, a nationwide broadcast, the symbolic meaning changed from private listening experience and consequent empathy for an individual’s feelings to the public exhibition of an individual’s feelings about love. The audience members therefore return to the dominant ideology of the collective “we.”

“Rainbow” was sung by mainland China pop duet Yu Quan, who signed with the popular Taiwan label Rock Records, while “I Have You in My Life” was sung by Shuimu Nianhua, a famous Tsinghua University boy band. These two groups represented the development of
yuanchuang yinyue (original music) in China. Both groups composed their own quality original songs. Singers in the band are regarded as well-educated intellectuals with competent artistic tastes. “You are My Rose” is selected from various other poor-taste, koushui (easy-to-follow) songs by Pang Long. Despite its popularity on the internet and among the general public, the song is highly criticized by Chinese intellectuals as being vulgar. A vulgar song has a very simple structure, often verse-chorus-verse-chorus. It is very easy to learn and sing, some fast learners can even sing it after listening to it once. The lyrics are in plain language and written for less-educated people with boldly explicit words of love. As a matter of fact, “You are My Rose” has been specifically associated with migrant workers. These people head from rural areas to big cities in the hope of becoming wealthy. Most of them received middle school (9th Grade) education at most. They work at the lowest level in the labor services industry: waiting table, cooking at the backside of an ordinary restaurant, and doing construction work for example. They are therefore less respected in Chinese society. Migrant workers download the song and play it loudly in public spaces like shabby barbershops, farmer’s markets, and construction sites where they spend a lot of time. The song was also set by the migrant workers as a ring tone, one that often played loudly in public when cellphones rang. Ironically, despite the fact that the song is perceived as lower class, the singer, Pang Long, is actually a college professor who belongs to the well-educated elite class. In this sense, it is hard to despise “You are My Rose.” However, “Rainbow” and “You are My Rose” did show the battle between capitalism and socialism, raising the question of where the rest of the proletarians will go after some of them have gotten rich? While intellectuals are educated by capitalism to appreciate one musical form over the other, chunwan tries to elide this difference by presenting both sides on the show. Because chunwan has very strict censorship, the co-presence of both kinds of songs indicates official
agreement with the values they represent.

Who performed on *chunwan* also creates topics for audiences. “At Least I Still Have You” and “Love’s 36 Plans” were sung respectively by Cantopop singer Sandy Lam (Lam Yik Lin) in Mandarin Chinese and by Taiwan Mandopop singer Jolin Tsai. The two female superstars reflect the situation of mainstream popular music after the millennium: singers are constructing positive images of Chinese females. Lam’s song, with lyrics delicate enough to capture every detail of a woman’s thoughts, is intended for Chinese women in love. Tsai is like a Chinese Britney Spears, living as the queen for teen pop. The two singers represent calm, elegant and mature women, and cheery, lovely and smart teenage girls, respectively.

“The World Outside” and “Marry Me Today” are male and female duets, the first performed by Karen Mok and Qi Qin, and the latter by David Tao and Jolin Tsai. Both songs belong to *gangtai* (Hong Kong and Taiwan) pop. “The World Outside” is a cover of the 1987 original by Qi Qin. The performances of these *gangtai* songs display the musical genre’s twenty years of prosperity on China’s mainland.

As early as its beginning in the 1980s, *chunwan* aimed to provide a diversified image of the nation to its audiences. In popular song performances, the inclusion of singers from various places and origins, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and ethnic minorities for example, promotes the ideology that we belong together. The show presents a sense of Chinese nationalism that stresses the fact that, no matter how different we are, we have the same desires. This sense of nationalism is directly associated with socialist collectivism. Yet the popular songs frequently go “wild”: Gangtai pop sounds more modern than *minge*, traditional folk songs, and intellectuals prefer *minyao*, folk/alternative songs, over *koushui* songs. These class preferences are inevitably accepted in the songs. *Chunwan* organizes the show based on audience members’ ages. *Gangtai*
and other liuxing songs are always put together in a section named “liuxing feng (wind of popular culture).” These songs are performed in the second half of the show because youth who can stay up late will wait till the honored old and proletarians enjoy their favorite pieces.

However, popular music also references popular culture of the time period and is influenced by traditional folk music. Taiwanese superstar Jay Chou made his chunwan debut in 2004 with the Chinese style R&B song “Dragon Fist.” The song describes an artistic conception when practicing longquan, one of the Chinese martial arts. The song’s lyrics draw a map of China by mentioning “Great Wall,” “Mongolian Highlands,” “Huanghe (the Yellow River),” and “Taishan.” The song repeats the key word “dragon,” creating a powerful image of China across time. The Great Wall is an example of cultural heritage that symbolizes China’s long history. The Mongolian Highlands indicate the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), which is famous for its rules and the territorial expansion of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan. The Yellow River symbolizes the root of the Chinese han people, while Taishan Mountain is where the Chinese han emperors prayed for the well-being of the nation after coronation. Chou wore traditional Chinese clothing when he performed on chunwan. The song was well-received by national audiences, regardless of age. As a popular song, “Dragon Fist” helps build the national image.

“Chandman Erdene (or My Three Precious Things),” an adapted Mongolian folk song, dominated the 2006 Chinese popular music charts for several months after its premiere. The song is performed by a Mongolian family, the small daughter asks a question and either her mother or her father answers it. The questions the girl asks are about nature, for example she asks, “where will the sun be when the moon comes out?” The song, which is sung in both Mandarin and Mongolian, presents a happy family, which exemplifies the CPC’s stress on a harmonious society.

Besides Chinese style popular songs and ethnic-minority-sung popular songs, chunwan also
introduces inspirational songs to the audiences. “Invisible Wings” became such a popular inspirational song that the president of Peking University sang the song at the university’s New Year ceremony. With lines like, “I am alone, I am lost, but I am strong,” and “I am hurt, but I will not cry,” the song urges listeners to be tough. The importance of being tough has a long history which can be traced back to the I-Ching: “The movement of heaven is full of power thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring.” Unlike what is said that capitalist popular songs delude consumers into thinking life will be easy and free of hardship, some songs of this kind promote the idea of suffering together and frame the belief that we will all overcome problems with the “invisible wings” we all share.

Lastly, Jay Chou combines pop singing with operatic singing in the song “Faraway” by inviting bel canto singer Fei Yuqing to sing with him. On the 2008 chunwan, Fei performed this song alone. In this song, listeners hear a combined melody made by Chinese folk instruments and electrified instruments. The song also combines the styles of serious music and popular music, and of past and present.

In conclusion, in the context of chunwan, the 17 songs discussed in this chapter present the look of mainstream Chinese popular music. Mainstream popular music is supposed to be the ruling class’s entertainment. And the ruling class, stated in law and believed by the nation, is those proletarians. In order to enhance this ideology, popular music in the mainstream is controlled. It covers all aspects of people’s lives: love, family, friends, and the nation. By alternating between communal and private emotions, listeners still consider themselves members of the ruling class when consuming capitalist songs. Though sometimes it symbolizes class or ethnic distinction in its musical lyrics, styles and melodies, the purpose of the song is to create a

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positive, harmonious outlook.

This controlled enjoyment has directed us to two questions: first, can individuals be satisfied when their personal feelings are guided by the system to be sacrificed for communal benefits? Apparently, despite the fact that the government-approved popular music tries so hard to cover all aspects of people’s lives, some young listeners, eager to find the true self, do not buy it.

Collectivism brings discipline, yet it takes with it troubles of being too conformed. In popular music, conformity numbs listeners; also bores them. This explains why rock and indie attracted Chinese youth soon after their birth. Both rock and indie seem free and rebellious. Yet the nature of freedom-seeking points to the second question, does conformity or collectivism continue in musical forms other than mainstream popular music? In indie music, we found the answer is yes. A collective memory of the past and collective interest in certain aesthetics has been practiced in Chinese indie music. And indie has changed the original look of the mainstream.
CHAPTER TWO: “GUN OR ROSE”—THE ROCK PIONEERS’ DILEMMA

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Chinese media follow the “Four Cardinal Principles” which are “adherence to the socialist road, adherence to the dictatorship of the proletariat, adherence to the leadership of the Communist Party, adherence to Marxism-Leninism and Maoist Thought.” Following this rule, private feelings are less important than the public embrace of stability, patriotism and normalcy. Jones writes that the censorship in popular music making has become so naturalized by cultural hegemonic power that musicians conduct self-censorship.\(^{51}\) In such a cultural environment, rock music as “a discourse of split and reconstruction that first cuts the American youth off from the capitalistic mainstream then unites them in the rock utopia,”\(^{52}\) seems to be the last music that Chinese popular music would welcome. However, pioneer Chinese rockers marched to the beat of their own drum to import it and expand it across the nation.

There are different divisions for the timeline of Chinese rock history. Yan Jun notes four rock active periods from 1986 to now:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Myth of the Hero} (1986-1990): rock was a concept, symbolizing freedom and spirituality.
\textit{Aristocratic Elite} (1993-1997): 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation of rockers emerged, these rockers were supported by the Taiwanese record company Magic Stone.
\textit{Underground Spirit} (1997-2004): the 3rd generation of rockers refused to follow their predecessors whom they believed had sold rock out to the mainstream.
\textit{Today’s Period} (2004- now): rockers embark on a journey to the West.\(^{53}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{51}\) Jones, 39.

\(^{52}\) Liu Shi and Wang Qian, \textit{Burning In Heat: Rock and Its Culture [xinhuo xuanyang—yaogun yu tade wenhua shijie]} (China, Tianjin: Baihua Wenyi Chubanshe [Baihua Arts and Literature Press], 2001), 190.

\(^{53}\) Based on Yan’s division, the responsible chief editor of the national music magazine \textit{People’s music (Renmin Yinyue)} sets 1990-1992 as \textit{Rock Concerts Period}. Yan Jun, “History of
The three-periods division of Chinese rock history is seen mostly in Chinese mass media reviews, they are: the Golden Time (1986-1995) which is marked by rock elites and rock concerts, the Declining Age (1995-2000) when rock is hidden underground, and the Revival (2000-2004) which is marked by the popularity of rock music festivals.\(^5^4\)

I have made an ideology-oriented division of Chinese rock music history. I divide it into two periods, i.e., the *Gun or Rose* Period (1986-1995) and the *In or Out* Period (post 1995). During the two periods, rock has shifted from being public to less visible in Chinese popular music circulation. Ideally in my proposed division, each period is dominated by a typical rocker’s dilemma that reflects the dominant ideology of the moment.

For the first period, the dominant ideology of the time is centered on “Bring in”\(^5^5\), an economic strategy to enhance the Opening and Reform by initiating importing from the overseas. The “Bring in” ideology is encoded in how the rock elites expand this Western music across the nation. To decide how and what to convey through rock music is a process of encoding the “Bring in” ideology in production. The first-period rock music pieces display the dilemma of choosing between gun and rose: gun for politics and rose for romance. The dilemma reflects the widespread recognition that “authenticity” was of paramount importance in rock music, thus it is

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Rock in China, 2. Timeline,”


necessary for rockers to be convincing in both one’s political convictions and one’s romantic ardor. The *Gun or Rose* dilemma somehow answers the question “What is the use of rock?” Representative musicians of the time are Cui Jian, Tang Dynasty, Dou Wei, He Yong and Zhang Chu. However, as the government and record companies intervene, doubts spread from the circle to the Chinese audiences: is rock music becoming the avant-garde decoration of Chinese popular music? Can rock musicians target politics and give romance an insightful meaning?

The doubts also mark the ideological turning point of rock music in China. After 1995, when overseas Chinese investors retreated from mainland China and the government continued to refuse to legitimate rock music in the popular music industry, post-1995 rockers even had difficulties feeding themselves. Despite poor living conditions, these rockers engaged in a revolutionary dream: rock was the weapon, the guarantee, and the faith for them to seek the ultimate happiness. For this period, rock rose to be an ideal, sacred, but difficult artistic approach to illuminate one’s freedom. Interestingly, the number of rockers at the time increased, while no single piece is valued as equally classic as the works of the first period (1986-1995). Rumor lasts for years that “rock is dead in China.” The life struggles and unfair lack of public recognition have led to a dilemma— to remain in or leave from the circle— for most post-1995 rockers. Such a dilemma is caused by the subtle change of the dominant ideology, that “Bring in” is accompanied with “Go global.”

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56 The Chinese government has added control to the cultural industry as early as in 1987 when the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization Campaign started. They had certainly begun censorship campaigns before then.

the developing dominant ideology, they are the true fighters against capitalistic corruption which is strengthened by globalization and cultural hegemony\textsuperscript{58} enhanced by the CCP governance.

This chapter deals with early Chinese rock music. Rock occurred when the pioneering intellectuals yearned to find the soul of popular music. The rock pioneers, who created and joined bands during the late 1980s, are “honored for their musical achievements and regarded as heroes whose rebellion is remarkable in the nation’s history.”\textsuperscript{59} They made rock music a distinctive, aggressive, and meaningful genre. In music making, rockers stress virtuosity, creativity, and originality. In performance, they desire freedom and passion. In lyrics, they report fear and negative experience.

For these rockers, rock music is first an enchanting imported form. The rock spirit of the time is found in the Westerner’s songs where the topics of love and politics are directly addressed. It is interpreted as “rebellion, enlightenment, and freedom.”\textsuperscript{60} Some Chinese rockers pick the topic of politics; others use romance rhetorically to spread the rock spirit. Such individual artistic approach is encoded with the state-sanctioned narrative of the time—to import the valuable foreign sources to help strengthen the power of the nation. However, Chinese rocker did not completely follow the rules such that they go against the mainstream, they become furious in words, repugnant in appearance, and dissident in action. Like a rose that has a thorn, like a gun

\textsuperscript{58} Jones writes that the cultural hegemony concept introduced by Antonio Gramsci is realized by means of censorship conducted by the CCP officials. Jones, 	extit{Like a Knife}, 37-38.


\textsuperscript{60} Li Wan comments that Chinese rock is very similar to the Enlightenment, the elite cultural movement in 18\textsuperscript{th} century Europe. The beginning of rock in China is the beginning of anti-oppression, of freedom to use one’s own intelligence, and of anti-state sanction. Li Wan, “Rockers no longer meet each other after 20 years [guole 20 nian, wuren lai xianghui],” [http://data.book.163.com/book/section/000BHFDZ/000BHFDZ6.html](http://data.book.163.com/book/section/000BHFDZ/000BHFDZ6.html).
that is yet to shoot, Chinese rock music is beautifully aggressive.

The marginalization of rock begins when early Chinese rockers refuse the mainstream collective consciousness and unite fans in the rock circle. To rock is to fight to awaken the listener’s self-consciousness. Rockers guide the listeners to find themselves in the present in the rock music and lead them to a life in the so-called “circle [quan].” The circle in China is a kind of frame that confines people into a particular group, within which the culture is unified. It is a form of community that gathers together people with similar interests, careers, or life experience. For example, professional actors and actresses belong to the entertainment circle [Yule quan].

The original rock circle, according to Cynthia Wong, appeared in Beijing and consisted of trained artists, teachers, and writers who gained access to rock music from their Westerner friends.61

From time to time, the Chinese rockers have been questioned: What is the use of this music? What are these expressive forms for? What is authentic in rock music? Attempting to answer these questions, this chapter will analyze the texts of rock songs to illustrate with what ideology Chinese rock music is encoded.

The Rock Elites

Rock music started around 1984 in Beijing. The pioneer rockers are treated by the society as “rock elites.”62 To view pioneer rockers as “elites” may cause doubts if we examine their class background. According to Guo Facai, most of the rock elites were born in an ordinary family and


only some of them had relevant exposure to art. They cannot count as coming from “the elite class of China who are from affluent families and protected by the CCP government.” However, these rockers stood at the intellectual forefront to welcome foreign language songs and make Westerner friends. After acquiring the basics of playing rock music, they led their Chinese followers in spreading rock across the nation.

The discussion on what is in the rock music has been covered by both Chinese music critics and rock musicians. Their individual appreciations are presented in the following paragraphs. The authors and rock musicians I quote are either pioneer rockers or the first few rock critics in China. Their thoughts in general reveal the reasons why rock music was imported to China.

Economically, Chinese rock is thought to be “advanced consumption in culture.” Chinese music critic Jin Zhaojun writes that “only if the economic backwardness is solved will the Chinese notice what rock music is trying to convey.” However, Chinese rock music was born in the mid1980s when urbanization was not completely realized in mainland China and the economic gap between China and the western countries was still wide. Jin treats the unexpected birth of Chinese rock as “the growing awareness of artistic taste in the Chinese elite class.” In Jin’s theory, the appreciation of rock, as an imported art, reflects the subculture of urban youth.

These young people are economically and intellectually sensitive to capitalism so as to have the


66 Ibid., 208-209.
sympathetic cultural awareness to Western rock. Behind this understanding of rock music is the state-sanctioned narrative which steers rock to be the byproduct of the adoption of new economic strategies—“Let some people get rich first (yunxu shaoshu ren xian fu qi lai)”\textsuperscript{67} and “Bring in (yin jinlai, to bring the investment in)”\textsuperscript{68}—hence a few elites play rock and they invite more foreign rockers to strengthen the local scene.

Culturally, the soul of rock music is discovered in a rejection to be capitalism oppressed, and a refusal to be disciplined. Yan Jun, a Chinese rock music critic, explains the Chinese rock craze thusly: “rock music is not a form of worship that Chinese people have been doing for a long time (like the 1960s worship of Mao for instance), it is their need to realize the value of the individual (as opposed to the collective) within Chinese society.”\textsuperscript{69} Rock is an enlightening response to the Chinese popular culture of the time. It seems to be a capitalistic strike to the long-run cultural hegemony while it is originally a fight against the unrevealing dirt of capitalism.

Some radical rockers find love and violence in rock. As Guo Facai states, “love in rock symbolizes an individual’s dignity while violence symbolizes an individual’s disagreement with

\textsuperscript{67}“Let some people get rich first” was stated by Deng Xiaoping when he introduced Opening and Reform to Chinese. Deng worried the equalitarianism at that time impeded economic growth for it failed to stimulate people’s enthusiasm for production. He observed that productivity varied in different areas. It was helpful to let some areas develop their advantages and let people in these areas get rich first. So they could lead the rest of the nation to follow the pragmatic path. “Yunxu yibufen ren, yi bufen diqu xianfu qilai [Let some people, some areas get rich first],” Zhonguo gongchandang xinwenwang [CPC News Net], accessed October 18, 2011, http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/82819/143371/8818525.html.


\textsuperscript{69}Yan Jun, Under Underground, 3.
a society’s unfairness.” He explains that the angry youth (fenqing) in China use agitated expressions to rock is because they see the inequalities of the society. The fenqing rockers want to arouse the public and advocate for social reform by performing the angry, energetic Western music.

For the Chinese rocker Cui Jian, rock music is unlike the popular music that entertains listeners by numbing them. It instead urges listeners to reflect and to resist anything that makes them lost to themselves. At the same time, rock is the simplest way to bring pleasant life experiences. The pleasure lies in taking social responsibility to criticize social problems; it lies in trusting oneself rather than worship others; it also lies in a kind of freedom created by the fact that rock never pushes listeners to accept it. In reference to the last pleasure, Cui asserts, rock is not made popular, it becomes popular naturally.

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70 Guo Facai, “Rock is love and violence [yaogun jiushi ai yu baoli],” in Shackles and Dashing, 236.

71 Fenqing, or the Chinese angry young man, is a post Opening and Reform cultural product. The fenqing emphasize heavily Chinese nationalism, is pro-communist.

72 This is an answer Guo Facai provides to an interview question asking why early Chinese rockers like Tang Dynasty and Black Panthers add the fenqing emotion into their music. I am quoting his analysis of anger and violence in Chinese rock, but I am not concluding that every Chinese rocker is fenqing or vice versa. See the analysis in Guo Facai, Shackles and Dashing, 236.


74 In China, a lot of things— artists, musicians, and music pieces for example— become popular after its critics “go viral.” This is called “chao,” to advertise excessively not by showing its substantial content but by the cultural analyses, by the irrelevant reviews, and by the gossips about a person. Cui Jian replied in an interview with Xue Ji that western rock reached mass audiences by its music not by the media’s written word.

75 Cui Jian explains the reason why he thinks rock music is prevailing naturally in that: in rock music, a persistent formality is set aside. Music critics cannot interfere with rock music
In sum, as audiences of western rock music, pioneer Chinese rock followers accept it as more enlightening than Chinese popular music. They believe that instead of forcing the listeners to a unified way of thinking, rock asks listeners to find what they have lost and why they have suffered such loss. Western rock music is found to be outlaw for it feels an impetus to rebel against the ruling class.\textsuperscript{76} It targets the politics and exhorts one to love freely, so that listeners are taken to an opposite side of existing routines. The existing routine is exemplified in the life of a person who is subordinate to the capitalistic economy, objectified by modernization, and disciplined by cultural hegemony. Rock music makes such a life that is naturalized by capitalism no longer acceptable. As Cui Jian puts it, in “the religious collective of western rock music, western rockers have built a rock utopia where life is less restricted by money, law and vanity.”\textsuperscript{77} As free, rebellious, and enlightening as it is, rock music attracts Chinese rockers to import it.

**Importing Rock**

The process of importing rock can be read as a process of localizing western rock to mainland China and a process wherein Chinese rock spirit is generated. The special political environment has made the understanding of Chinese rock music complex in that it needs to be considered in relation to the state-sanctioned narratives as well as to the nation’s relation with the West.

\textsuperscript{76} This viewpoint is only an understanding of rock music from the Chinese side. By stating this opinion, I do not contend that western rock music is cut off from western popular music and serves as authentic and original the way modernist classical music did for Theodor Adorno. Nor do I agree that western rock music is autonomous, and free of capitalistic control. The reason why Chinese narrow the goal of rock down to class struggle, and, to some extent, down to a subcultural expressive form is due to the particular history and political system which shapes the way Chinese are thinking.

\textsuperscript{77} Xue Ji, 2-3.
As to rock music’s relation to the state-sanctioned narratives, I am quoting Rey Chow to reintroduce the state’s “dominant” culture. Rey Chow argues that the Chinese communist leadership since 1949 uses a history that fundamentally settled upon class struggle as the nation state’s official culture. The history teaches that the cultural privilege of becoming the “Who speaks” has been handed from “the feudalistic landlords to the capitalists then the running dogs, eventually to the proletarian (who is represented by the CCP).”\textsuperscript{78} The last successful class struggle is remixed by the state with entwining nationalism and patriotism, and performed in a revered, dedicated, disciplined and nostalgic way\textsuperscript{79} that leads listeners to always remember the CCP’s contribution.

Being as innovative and aggressive as it can, rock music remains in the realm of popular music consumption but it is not the negative distraction that Theodor Adorno would argue it is. Chinese rock music is meaningful. Chow analogizes it with Vaclav Havel’s description about rock music in Czechoslovakia before 1989, quoting him thusly: “in an authoritarian regime, the official culture is omnipresent; rock music offers outlets of political expression.”\textsuperscript{80}

The outlet of political expressions is seen in the works of Cui Jian, the acknowledged rock father of China. But it is not the overwhelming theme Cui Jian tries to promote. In his debut album \textit{Rock ‘n’ Roll on the New Long March} [\textit{Xinchangzheng lushang de yaogun}], Cui Jian explains his intention to naming it the “New Long March” as: “rock provides listeners a direction, so my music is to ask listeners to start to retrieve their lost minds.”\textsuperscript{81} Cui reports that he is highly


\textsuperscript{79} Chow, “Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized,” 466.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 467.

\textsuperscript{81} Guo, 107-19.
influenced by the Police and Sting, yet he puts the influence of western rock culture after the individual artists’ creativity. So in his album, Cui gives Chinese listeners rock music with Chinese characteristics.

The organization of the 1989 mainland China version and that of several different overseas labels’ versions of the *New Long March* (in overseas versions its name is *I Have Nothing*) are different. Since the original 1989 mainland version is rare, I am using the 1989 CD version by Taiwanese “kedeng” label to give the analysis. Yet in this Taiwanese version the song “Rock ‘n’ Roll on the New Long March [*Xinchangzheng lushang de yaogun*]” is excluded.

In the *kedeng* album, Cui begins with a Chinese country rock song, adapting the northwestern folk musical elements into the music, the lyrics claim that all the promises made across time during the nation’s economic development have not yet been realized in the reappearing frustrated line “I have nothing.” By this very first piece, the album immediately opens the listeners’ eyes to find if their life qualifies for such nothing-to-do and nothing-to-lose status. In the next, Cui moves to the second song “Fake Monk [*jiaxingseng*]” to present a conflict that a monk lives an ascetic life but breaks the Buddhism codes by welcoming love from a woman: “If you love me/kiss me on my lips.” This bold and straightforward line projects Cui Jian to the oppositional side of the standard and reserved music pieces of the time. And this is viewed as very western (capitalistic) by the official culture.

The song follows “Fake Monk” is “Start All Over Again [*cong tou zai lai*].” Unlike the first two songs, the melodies of which are very folk-inspired, this piece sounds similar to 1980s cantopop with an archly dance beat as well as similar to 1980s Police; however, its lyrics are written in a fierce contrast: “I pretend I carry no head on my shoulder… /I don’t want to leave/ and I don’t want to exist/ I don’t want to live in the reality/ [*wo zhuangzuo zhe jianshang yi*]
meiyou zhang naodai... wo buyuan likai/ wo buyuan cunzai/ wo buyuan huode guofen shishi zaizai].” The way such thoughts are presented with a lighthearted rhythm and melody provides listeners with a sarcastic inference. But it just functions as a transition to the more aggressive ones.

After three songs of a suspending opening, Cui stops waiting and clarifies that he will give “No More Disguises” and the truth is that “I don’t have money/ My opinions are ignored/ My (Your) freedom belongs to heaven and land/ My (Your) courage belongs to me (you)[wo meiyou qian/ ...yuelai yue meizhuyi/ wode (nide) ziyou shuyu tianyudi/ wode(nide) yongqi shuyu woziji (ni ziji)].” It seems that Cui attributes this nihility nullity/nihilism and feeling of loss to the fact that “the world changes too quickly (so it is beyond my understanding) [zhe shijie bianhua kuai]” in the fifth rap/rock song “Not That I Don’t Understand [Bushi wo bu mingbai].”

The sixth song “Flower House Girl [huafang guniang]” is the only song has almost no indication of politics, but its lines touch many passionate Chinese listeners and is valued as a renowned, poetic, and romantic Chinese rock piece. The beginning line introduces how Chinese lovers appreciate each other: “You say that I’m the toughest man in the world/ and I say you are most virtuous woman in the world [nishuo wo shishang zui jianqiang/ woshuo ni shishang zui shanliang].” “Tough” and “virtuous” are two traditional words using to praise men and women respectively. To incorporate such Chinese characteristic descriptions in an imported musical form, Cui successfully presents to listeners how traditions either in the form of musicality or in the text of lyrics can be blended into rock music.

But Cui does not stay at blending traditions into rock, his last two songs in the album “Let Me Have a Good Sleep [Rangwo shuige haojiao]” and “Leave [Chuzou]” become angrier and

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82 Cui Jian switches “You” and “I” in different verses of this song. The first verse that opens the lamentation, ends with the “You” lines. The third verse ends with the “I” lines.
reach for rebellious reactions to the dominant culture. In the former, Cui personifies the Lugou Bridge [lugou qiao] and sings from the bridge’s angle that it is tired of being portrayed as the best relic to teach the people about patriotism and nationalism.\(^3\) The latter, “Leave,” with lines like “I close my eyes so I don’t see the past/ I open my eyes I can see myself only/ I don’t have anything else to say/ I don’t have anything else to do/ I tighten my fist and I walk forward/ I open my mouth and I shout / I hate this /I love this [wo bishang yan meiyou guoqu/ wo zhengkai yan zhiyou wo ziji/ wo mei biede shuo/ wo mei biede zuo/ wo zuanzhe shou zhiguan xiangqian zou/ wo zhangzhe kou zhiguan dasheng hou/ wo hen zhege/ wo ai zhege],” announce clearly and resolutely the rocker’s desire: with no hesitation, rockers need to shout out their thoughts.

Besides the text in each song, the overall song arrangement gives hints of the contextual meaning that combines the separate meanings of each song. A different song arrangement in Rock ‘n’ Roll on the New Long March therefore may lead to a different emotional stage for the listeners. So I also want to examine the 1999 Jingwen second edition of Rock ‘n’ Roll on the New Long March which circulated in mainland China. The album adds the song “Rock ‘n’ Roll on the New Long March.” The song order in this album has created more radical meaning than that in the Taiwanese version. The album starts with “Rock ‘n’ Roll on the New Long March” that used the CCP long march as a metaphor to advocate for listeners to “find themselves [zhao ziji].”\(^4\) In order to strengthen the theme of the need for soul-searching, the second song is “No More Disguise” and following it is “Let Me Have a Good Sleep.” Both songs are straightforwardly aggressive and from just the title listeners can infer the complaint and anger. The fourth song and

\(^3\) In the mainland China’s history, Lugou Bridge is the place that marked the beginning of the war between mainland China and Japan in 1937.

\(^4\) This is quoted from the song lyrics: “Lower my head/ March forward/ to find myself [maizhe tou/ xiangqian zou/ xunzhao wo ziji]…how to speak/ how to do/ how to be the real self [zenyang shuo/ zenyang zuo/ cai zhenzheng shi ziji].”
fifth of the album seem to offer a break from discussing politics, “Flower House Girl” and “Fake Monk.” Love is the central topic in both songs, but in love listeners can identify more personal sympathies with the rocker. Then the album moves to “Start All Over Again,” “Leave,” “I Have Nothing,” and lastly “Not That I Don’t Understand.” The first two provide solutions to the problem while the latter two provide reasons for the unpleasant condition. Overall, the album follows the logic of raising political awareness, drawing emotional reactions, and finding solutions.

Besides political expressions, Cui Jian’s music almost immediately set standards on how to rock in China. As seen in the above analysis, rock music offers musicians an opportunity to innovate, to go beyond popular music text formula, especially the controlled content. Musically, Cui Jian let the Chinese folk instrument cooperate with western electric instruments. He tries rap, but it is different in style, and is like the “Doggerel [shulaibao]” as he joked and described how he manages to do rap in “Not That I Don’t Understand.” Cui’s lyrics read simple and plain but poetic and romantic. This way of writing influences rockers who follow, as early Chinese rock music pieces generally show eloquence and lyricism.

Due the fact that rock, both Cui and after him, is dismissed from the mainstream, a discussion of the dichotomy of tradition and modern, the folk and the commercial, the communist China and the capitalist West, is continued by western scholars. Academic understanding of this separation falls to two sides: one supporting the binary opposition between the culture CCP leads and the culture rock music leads. Andrew Jones provides the undeniable conclusion that: “as oppositional as it is, rock is polarized to the other end of tongsu [mainstream

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popular] music.”\textsuperscript{86} The other (non-dichotomized) understanding is based on the fact that subversive rock expressions are used by the so called “mainstream.” In this sense, rock is not marginalized. Also rock music is borrowing from the mainstream. Such interactions display the Chinese long standing habits of “absorbing alternative modes within its mainstream.”\textsuperscript{87} As Marie Huot states, “rock music cannot be simply and unilaterally read as a counter-discourse, as an underground mode for dissident voices. There exists now what is termed ‘alternative \textit{[ling lei]},’ but it is, as anywhere, one among many selections that young people can play.”\textsuperscript{88}

While both scholars have made reasonable arguments, I am trying in this section to provide a local understanding of Chinese rock music of Cui Jian’s time. I want to link the Cui time rock music making with the timely dominant ideology. In this way, rock music initiated by Cui actually is encoded with the “Bring-in” ideology, thus in the music production, the base is traditional Chinese music, conventional Chinese thoughts, the CCP cultural dominance, while the variants are the western sources being added (“brought in”) to the music pieces. The question becomes: how can Chinese rockers create a new form of popular music by importing rock?

This question can be examined in the music of subsequent rockers after Cui Jian. Each of them has produced an individualized localization of rock music. Together with Cui Jian, they unintentionally formed the Chinese rock circle. Following Cui’s success, the rocker’s prestige is shared mostly by Tang Dynasty, Dou Wei, He Yong and Zhang Chu. Among the four, Tang Dynasty represents the Chineseness in the rock music,\textsuperscript{89} Dou Wei and Black Panthers (before

\textsuperscript{86} Jones, 147.


\textsuperscript{88} Huot, “Rock Music from Mao to Nirvana,” 156.

\textsuperscript{89} Guo Facai states that the guitarist Laowu is not the most virtuosic player (if we judge by
Dou Wei left it) are very much centered in musicality, creativity, and aesthetics in rock; He Yong is one of the first few punk artists in China and his music goes to ideological extremes; Zhang Chu is regarded as the Chinese troubadour, or minyao shiren, whose music is a glass of rock, folk and poetic flow of words. In the next paragraph, I am going to analyze what is found in each rocker’s music and how it can be ideologically understood.

Ideologically, Tang Dynasty is the best equivalent to the ideology of “building socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Cynthia Wong terms Tang Dynasty as a “heavy metal band with Chinese characteristics.” In explaining the Chinese characteristics in Tang Dynasty, she states that:

These (the Chinese) characteristics were drawn from a historical Chinese conception of the ideal man espoused by ancient thinkers. This conception called for a man to possess a balance of cultural refinement (wen) and martial ability (wu), as in the axioms “Wen and wu form the complete set of talents”… Their aggressive sound, onstage behavior, and martial themes in their lyrics exhibited strong wu masculinity; the style of their poetry and the allusions to classical writings exhibited the wen side of their collective personalities.  

“Offering the authentic Chineseness in rock” is a praise given by Guo Facai to Tang Dynasty. Ding Wu gives his understanding of western rock as “it is about a hero who is a guitarist. It is about a group that represents the heroism, that group is the band.” Indeed, heavy metal as a genre stresses the guitarists’ virtuosity while in performance shows the hardcore, masculinity side of rock. When such a form of expression is imported to China, the idea of heroism is to be

instrumental technique and style), yet he is the most unique guitarist who can perform the Chineseness [dongfang qidu] in “A Return to Tang Dynasty.” “This is where other foreign guitarists cannot achieve.” Guo Facai, “Tang Dynasty: the band’s structure and Ding Wu’s loneliness [Tangchao yuedui: tangchao de jiegou he gudu de dingwu],” 125.


conveyed through it. Every listener keeps an eye on the name—“Tang Dynasty.” Interestingly, Ding Wu admitted in his interview with Xue Ji that, “When Kaiser Kuo [early American member of Tang Dynasty who left China for the US in 1989 and rejoined years later] suggested the name to us, we just thought it was a good one, but we did not intend to use it to conceptualize our music.”92 But soon after their successful debut, they began to pay attention to the history of the Tang Dynasty. Ding Wu explains how they play with history and heavy metal in the following sentences:

We added the historical and ethnic elements in our music. This has made our music sound very Chinese. The ethnically diversified culture of Tang dynasty controls the mood of our music. But as for the musical technique, we still adopt the western ones. We are still a band led by the guitarist. And we are using electric guitar to play chords. Our music making, in general, shows how the Tang dynasty, as the undeniably affluent and tolerant society in ancient Chinese history, welcomes all cultural forms.93

Tang Dynasty also introduced to the listeners the power of rock music videos.

Besides groundbreaking videos, the lyrics written by Tang Dynasty are also a showcase of postmodern pastiche. For instance, in “A Return to Tang Dynasty,” the verses jump from modern vernacular speech to the ancient manner of speech that Tang poems (tangshi) use:

Chrysanthemum, sword and Chinese white spirit/
As people brew coffee in the crowded courtyard, the coffee takes them with it/
[Juhua, gujian he jiu/ Bei kafei paoru xuanxiao de tingyuan]
...
The bright moon is in the wine we drink tonight/
[jinxiao beizhong yingzhe mingyue]
We are enjoying the natural’s endowment/

92 Ibid., 15.
93 Ibid., 15.
[wuhua tianbao]
We are at a place with distinguished and talented people/
[renjie diling]

The first part is depicted in a modern tongue with delicate words,\(^{94}\) while from “the bright moon” it changes to the ancient poem style, the last two lines in this example are actually a quotation from “Preface to a farewell feast atop the Prince of Teng's Pavilion in Autumn,” a classic Chinese Tang poetry written by the Tang poet Wang Bo.

The special selected words in “A Return to Tang Dynasty” each give audiences a symbolic inference of ancient Chinese aesthetics. “Chrysanthemum” can be associated with Jin dynasty poet Tao Yuanming (365-427), who uses chrysanthemum to “compare a noble man living a sober life and not seeking for fame and wealth.”\(^{95}\) “Sword” leads to the Wu that Cynthia Wong analyzes. It is an indicator of Chinese chivalry. While “jiu” could be translated to “Wine,” but I maintain the longer words of “Chinese white spirit” for this type of wine is the actual drink in ancient China. Standing along with juhua and gujian, jiu immediately gives Chinese listeners an impression of Chinese white spirit. And Chinese white spirit symbolizes the same traditional chivalry image. As the three words are juxtaposed in the first line, the listeners are quickly drawn to ancient China. A bold and unconstrained mood is created by the symbolic images. However, with coffee jumps on the next line, listeners are abruptly pulled back to the modern world where the import of rock has taken place. The lyrical pastiche is witnessed from there. Later after the first two lines, the song keeps rotating from the past to the present, combining the ancient images with the present images, and joining the ancient poems with a description of the modern world.

\(^{94}\) By delicate words I mean the adjective the band chose to modify the noun, also the nouns are chosen particularly to give an epic and poetic feeling. I will discuss this word choice later.

The name says it is a “return to Tang dynasty” but in reading it, it is like the Tang dynasty is making its random return between lines. The band does not cease to create symbolic images in the song. Soon in the chorus, they introduce repeatedly the bright moon, which is a famous image in tang poems, and most famously, Li Bai, known as the God of poetry, loves to mention jiu and the bright moon in his poems.

In “A Return to Tang Dynasty,” listeners and MTV viewers are definitely given the nostalgic feelings for the old, powerful history of ancient Tang, and are recalling their appreciation towards Chinese traditional values of the moral and masculine ancient knight.\textsuperscript{96} Out of their willingness, however, to perform Chineseness leads the band to be a group of “nationalist rockers.” With the help of the unseen hand of dominant ideology, the band’s works serve the country. Then “Internationale” by Tang Dynasty was used in 1993 to familiarize high-school students with the universal anthem. In Tang Dynasty’s case, we see the dominant ideology emphasize that to import is to utilize better resources to build the nation. As Huot puts it, “the traditional, ‘western’ music is everybody’s thesaurus.”\textsuperscript{97} But in China, it is everybody’s thesaurus, while it is the dominant ideology that controls everybody.

From Tang Dynasty and Cui Jian, the dilemma that early Chinese rockers faced begins to materialize in front of us. Because western rock has considerable content discussing politics, and the dominant ideology pushes rockers to be politically helpful for the nation, rockers are immediately connected with politics, regardless of whether their focus is on it or not. On the other hand, besides politics there is another thing—love/art—mostly centered on in early

\textsuperscript{96} Cynthia P. Wong, “‘Lost Lambs’: Rock, Gender, Authenticity, and a Generational Response to Modernity in the People’s Republic of China” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005), 160-161.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 157.
Chinese rockers’ works. The dilemma is that a rocker cannot choose both, there is only one answer their works can give to the audiences: gun or rose. Can Chinese rockers get rid of politics and focus solely on love/art? Dou Wei tried when He Yong rocked politically and Zhang Chu shot to fame in the rock circle as a *waixiangren* (an immigrant to Beijing) singing about poor love and poor life.

Dou Wei’s 1994 song “The Higher Being [*gaoji dongwu*],” which has a strong beat and is almost non-melodic, is viewed as an avant-garde piece of the time. The song marks his departure from the band Black Panther for which he co-wrote the pop/soft metal song “Utterly Ashamed [*wudi zirong*] with Li Tong in 1991.” One remarkable feature of Dou Wei is that he never stops trying new forms of music. While he focuses on creativity and tries to avoid being commercialized, his pieces encode a question that is posted by the dominant ideology: which style should rockers import? In “Utterly Ashamed,” it is heavy metal that backs the entire song, the lyrics are written in phrases and the melody is easy to follow. For example, it says, “In the crowds/ There are you and me/ We meet, we become friends, we try to know each other very well.” In “The Higher Being,” it is a handful of words that construct the lyrics, and Dou Wei is not singing but rather mostly narrating the pejoratives used to criticize a person. The single word is accompanied by the rock beat and random alien-like sound. After nearly two minutes’ narration, he sings “Where is the happiness,” and this is the only sentence and only singing in this song. Lacking singing, “The Higher Being” distances listeners from the rocker in that it invites them to listen carefully to the lyrics but does not invite them to participate in the music, either to dance or to sing along. As his rock peer, He Yong, once concluded, Dou Wei is “the divine in the morbid consumer society.”

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98 GUO FACAI, 131.
music that rejects the Chinese popular music formula as well as the impact of western ones.

Unlike Dou Wei, who indulged in musicality, He Yong is highly associated with politics. The traditional elements in his music seem to be a thesaurus to tackle politics. By comparing the music and performance of “Garbage Dump [lajichang]” and “The Bell and Drum Towers [zhonggulou],” Nimrod Baranovitch finds that “He Yong’s relationship with tradition is full of contradiction and ambivalence.”

Once in a while, He Yong switches from being very western as a hardcore punk to being very traditional as a Beijing citizen feeling nostalgia about the good old days. Baranovitch states that:

In *Garbage Dump*, He Yong uses the psychedelic sounds of an electric guitar, aggressive drumbeats, no melody, an irregular tempo, wild screams, and a redundant, annoying bass line to articulate modernism, Westernization, and the violent negation of history and tradition, whereas “The Bell and Drum Towers” embraces tradition through the use of traditional Chinese instruments, such as the *sanxian* (three-string lute), the *dizi* (bamboo flute), and traditional percussion instruments.

During a 1994 Hong Kong rock concert, He Yong displayed the “mainland chauvinism toward Hong Kong and Taiwan,” as well as “the northern chauvinism toward the south in China.”

This chauvinism comes from the political ideologies that “Taiwan can only produce insignificant ‘little tunes’ while Hong Kong as once a capitalist colony has ‘meaningless’ culture that its music is only guided by money and lacks cultural taste.”

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100 Baranovitch, “Popular Music and State Politics,” 266.

101 Ibid., 265.

102 Ibid.
only found in his [He Yong’s] comments on Hong Kong popular singers, but also in his quick
switches from the western, modernist performance of “Garbage Dump” to the traditional,
restrained performance of “The Bell and Drum Towers.”

The pioneer folk/rock singer is Zhang Chu. His songs are valued for their poetic lyrics.
Narrativity is an essential element in Chinese folk song that Zhang Chu has incorporated into his
musical making. He regards his early pieces as “growing pains that being identified by the
listeners of his time.” Indeed, his songs turn out to be the report of the life of the grassroots
class. The grassroots class in China refers to those who have no stable income and live either in
the suburban areas of big cities or in rural areas. Most of them are less educated and are viewed
by the official culture as having less cultural and artistic sensibility. In “Loneliness is to be
blamed [gudu de ren shi kechide],” Zhang presents a lovely scene by singing: “This is a season
for love/ The taste of love is filled in the air/ Loneliness is to be blamed/ This is a season for
love/ We should smile to each other, hug each other, and this is the point.” In “Older Sister
[jiejie],” he performs a blue monologue by a poor guy as he sings: “The snow is still not here for
this winter/ I stand on the road without blinking my eyes/ My heart beat softly/ You should praise
me/ That I am obedient today/ My clothes are a little loose/ You say that I look adorable.”

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103 Ibid. 266-267.

104 Guo, 141.

105 Mainland China follows the Marxist Theory of Base and Superstructure to develop the
society’s culture and ethics. For these people have to meet the necessary needs first, so they
generally are not able to develop culture and ethics. For understanding of Base and
Superstructure, see Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,”
in Media and Cultural Studies: keywords ed. by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner

106 The original line contains a dialect “ga” which has different meanings depending on
different location. For example, in Beijing, it is used to tease a kid being very protective over
his/her property: “You are ga.” Also it could be used to describe a weird adult. In Dongbei
know/ I’m standing like a fool in the crowd/ You know my dad/ When he drinks he is a bastard/
But before he dies/ His heart is no longer broken/ And he does not beat us anymore /…/Oh, sister!
I wanna go home/ Take my hand and you shall not be afraid.” The other works of Zhang Chu
runs in the similar vein. In general, his music remains traditional, folk in the rock world.

From the above examples, we can see how rock elites Cui Jian, Tang Dynasty, Dou Wei, He
Yong and Zhang Chu develop the new musical form in their individual approaches. Ideologically,
their localizations of rock display possible selections the nation would encounter when it carries
out the “Bring in” strategy. This is exemplified in that rockers may import the style, import the
ideology of political outcry, or remain traditional by stressing more folk, grassroots content. The
dilemma for these rockers is that the intention and the outcome are contradicting each other.
When they do not intend to be political, their works become political thesauruses. When they do,
their works are immediately banned. The problem of Chinese rock is that it is never legitimated,
but it is highly influential. After Cui’s period, rock quickly moved underground.

However, the pioneer rock music establishes for amateurs the standards of music making. It
is admired as authentic for pursuing both musicality and political outlet. This requirement has
been carried on for not only underground music but also indie music. Pioneer Chinese rockers
formed the circle such that only insiders got to know the life of a rocker and how the music was
made. This exclusive way of appreciation is found in indie music, too.

Province, it is pronounced “ger” then the meaning of it turns to be funny. It is hard to decide
which exact meaning it carries, so I’m translating it as “adorable” which presumably is what an
older sister would say to her younger brother.
CHAPTER THREE: “YAO BU YAO GUN”\(^{107}\)—THE UNDERGROUND ROCKERS’ DILEMMA

Dude, you play rock music, what is the use of rock?  
(Secondhand Rose, “Trick,” 2003)

I begin to rock: I’ll grow my hair long then shave it bald;  
I begin to rock: I will borrow some money to buy a guitar;  
I begin to rock: I will drink some beer then find some thoughts…  

Oh, poor me, I speak with an accent.  
(Hu Mage, “Some Potatoes Go to the City,” 1999)

For Chinese rock music brews indie music into being; in understanding how the dominant ideology shapes the rock music in China, we will understand how indie music subsequently flourished in China. This chapter presents how rockers battle between professionalism and amateurism, commercialization and musical autonomy.

While more people join the circle in the middle 1990s, rock music grows less obvious in public. The underground rockers refuse to follow the same path of early rockers to develop rock music. On the one hand, works of these rockers along with that of the emerging indie musicians\(^{108}\) are constrained by both the government and the mainstream record companies. The

\(^{107}\) “Yao bu yao gun” (pronounced in both “yao4 bu2 yao4 gun3” and “yao2 bu4 yao2 gun3”) is quoted from Chinese rock band Zhengwu Yangguang’s song “I begin to rock.” In Chinese, rock is translated by combining the word Yao, which means to turn, to shake, to rock, and Gun, which means to roll, it also can be used as a derogatory term which means “get out,” in this verse, the singer uses “Yao Bu Yao Gun,” which if “yao” is pronounced in fourth tone, to imply the question “do I have to get out?” I put it as the title of this chapter because this phrase has interpreted the rocker’s dilemma better than a direct translation of “to rock or not.” By this phrase, I hope to imply the inquiries: Whether to stay in the rock circle? Whether to stay away from the principles? Whether to be commercialized?

\(^{108}\) The first Chinese indie label Modernsky [modeng tiankong] was founded in 1997. The emerging indie musicians are those who release albums with Modernsky around 2000 and some others who participated in the first two rock music festivals during 1998-2003.
music circulation is limited within the rock circle and among the rock fans. On the other hand, the restriction provides the underground rockers a chance to skip the censorship and make aggressive music with harsh words and radical opinions. Meanwhile, in their music there emerges a growing interest in reaching overseas.

Associated with the elite class, Chinese rock was aristocratic during its early years. This is displayed in the fact that pioneer rockers were confined to the rock circle. However, as the rock population enlarged after 1995, remaining in the circle neither secured rockers legitimation by the public nor did it authenticate their music. By this time, rock had become severely marginalized from the mainstream. To understand this marginalization, three things need to be examined: 1) the development of the rock circle; 2) why it is hard to legitimize rock in mainland China and how rock can survive without being legitimized; and 3) the authenticity debate over Chinese rock. Also, by discussing these three factors, we will find how the dominant political/economic ideology of “Bring in” and “Go global” is encoded in underground rock music making. It is such ideology that makes Chinese rock radical, but it is also such ideology that deploys its power from being radical and turns into something commercially attractive for the overseas market.

The rock circle was formed and centered in Beijing when pioneer rockers played rock music in parties held at an aristocratic place like “Maxim’s, a French Belle Époque-style restaurant, or East Lake, a diplomatic foreign restaurant with a downstairs party room, or the Great Wall Sheraton Hotel Bar, where the audiences are a mix of foreigners and the Chinese social elite (children of wealthy Party officials and businessmen).”

According to Cynthia Wong, the early members of the Beijing rock circle display in general a self-honored image of a “hooligan [pizi

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or liumang].” 110 They consistently show “a shared dissatisfaction with the sanctioned forms of cultural production and a cynicism toward the rhetoric and lifestyle promoted within the official culture.” 111 By “creating works that poked fun at officials, exposing the corruption and thematizing the meaninglessness of their own lives,” 112 these hooligan rockers engaged in, in the official culture’s sense, devastative activities such as drinking, swearing, drug use and casual sex to attack the official culture.

However, even if they are “hooligans,” early members of the circle look aristocratic for they are mostly foreigners and “cultural workers.” 113 The music brought by the westerners is the technical source and inspiration for the early rockers in the circle. However, since not everyone can afford the luxury places and not everyone is capable of befriending foreigners, this circle is not as inclusive as it could be. This has made rock, though performed nationwide, limited to a small group of elites who are capable of both understanding and creating rock pieces.

Soon after 1988, Chinese rockers began to hold their own rock parties. The rock circle then welcomed more Chinese to get involved. Yet Yan Jun notes that “when rock parties cater to Chinese audiences, it becomes a ‘masquerade,’ which makes rock a fashionable activity to which only people having relevant artistic and cultural taste will go.” 114 According to Yan, such developments in the rock circle again have established an aristocratic scene that contradict a presumed rocker’s original intention: to speak for the poor, thus they welcome less people from

110 Wong, 59.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Yan Jun, Under Underground, 5.
the grassroots class.\textsuperscript{115} 

The aristocratic image of the rock circle, however, does not last long. When slashed cassettes and CDs (\textit{dakoudai}) reached mainland China, it helped rockers to shed the elite title. It is most visible in that more and more outside drifters (\textit{waixiang ren}) sojourn to Beijing and become routine visitors on the rock scene. According to Maranatha Ivanova, \textit{dakoudai} enabled the generation of rockers to “negotiate their own relationship to emerging practices and institutions of capitalism and market reform.”\textsuperscript{116} By seeking autonomy by leaving parents and distancing oneself from the government’s protection, by establishing music authenticity in \textit{dakoudai}, and by resisting to the dominant “money-is-the-future” ideology, these rockers find themselves living in an imagined community with like-minded others.\textsuperscript{117}

I compare such transformation from avant-garde art to lower-class revolution in the following two songs: “Trick [\textit{jiliang}]” by Secondhand Rose [2003], and “I Begin to Rock” by Zhengwu Yangguang[2004]. An excerpt of lyrics of “Trick” is quoted below:

(Narrator: Hello! Comrades, please be quiet! The performance is about to begin. )
Dude/ You play rock music/ what is the use of rock, huh?
I have to learn new things to show off ha/
So you can continue to like (my performance)/
You know art is born dumb/
It has to find a way to talk/
Tell me if rock tire you out/
Or if it destroy your personality/
You see love looks blind/
It has to find a place to talk/
Seems like you have learned new things to show off/
Otherwise how can you be so popular/

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid..

\textsuperscript{116} Maranatha Ivanova, “Dakou'r Yi Dai—The "Slashed Generation" —Western Waste as a Shifting Sign o' the (Transnational) Times” in \textit{Limning the Jianghu: Spaces of appearance and the performative politics of the Chinese cultural underground} (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2004), 263.

\textsuperscript{117} Ivanova, 206.
But you have become dumb/
Talk endlessly about crap/
So I can’t be an affectionate whore/
And I can’t pretend to be a righteous actor/
Suddenly all my dreams become boring/
I have nothing to say in front of you
(Secondhand Rose, “Trick,” 2003)

In the beginning of the song, the indifferent narrator’s voice, seeming to come from a loudspeaker, brings listeners back to a Mao-time rural gathering setting. The narrator’s line implies that this song is an onstage play. Then as the identifiable melody of Northeastern China errenzhuan\(^{118}\) joins the song, listeners are immediately led by the vocals of Liang Long to a dialogue between two people. One of them is a rocker; the other represents public audiences. In the band’s live performance, Liang Long almost always dresses himself as a woman, adding more visual effects for this song.\(^{119}\) The song begins with a question on what is the use of rock and it is through irony that the singer replies that to rock is to “show off.” This opening introduces how general audiences are misled by the mass media in China to view rock as an overtly expressive form that its use is to show off. Then as soon as the singer moves to the analysis of art. He points out what is limited in the rock performance: there are things rockers need to talk about and there is love rockers need to express. After discussing art in rock, the singer moves to conclude that only through showing off can a rocker be popular. Yet the dilemma is that if a rocker can only show off, his performance is still restrained like a “dumb person” talking about “crap.” The song ends with a sad conclusion that his dream becomes boring and he himself is speechless. The singer switches roles between a rocker and an audience so as to create

\(^{118}\) Errenzhuan, known as a folk dance-sing duet, is a funny Northeastern China folk performance. It consists of a male and a female performer; both dance and sing as they carry on their dialogue of the performance.

\(^{119}\) See image 1.
multiple layers of meaning in this song.

What “Trick” presents is a dilemma that rockers in the circle have encountered: the dream of showing the art and the fear of being conceived as meaningless commercial rock. This dilemma lies in the misconception of “showing off” by the rocker and the audiences outside the rock circle. For rockers, to rock is to show the art and the individual feelings. Meanwhile, guided by the dominant ideology of “Bring in” and “Go global,” the outsider audiences conceive of rock as a showpiece of western and avant-garde expressive forms. For these audiences, rock is just an imported form, more or less a new genre, sometimes annoying and always too noisy. The rocker’s passionate performances are then connected with the nation’s desire to sympathize with the other half of the world. Hence, rock is perceived differently from within the circle than it is from without.

In the meantime, Secondhand Rose creates a transgender image that attacks the rigidity found in the official culture. Liang Long, the vocalist, explains his deviant taste as, “We are aiming for the ‘Most,’ the most garish and vulgar\footnote{Vulgar refers to the nature of errenzhuan, which is designated for rural audiences in northeastern provinces. The performance uses dirty jokes to entertain the less-educated people.} should be the best. We love to go to extremes,

\footnote{Accessed from “Secondhand Rose, Modernsky Music Festival,” \url{http://site.douban.com/widget/photos/472576/photo/666237627/}.}
this choice to be aggressive leaves audiences greatly impacted."\(^{122}\) Indeed, the listeners enjoy the band’s combination of Chinese rural elements with comparably “elite” western rock elements. But whether such a form can be legitimated is a question I will address later in the discussion of rock authenticity in mainland China.

Compared with the artistic acclaim Secondhand Rose has received, in 2003 a Chinese rock band Zhengwu Yangguang (Sunshine at Noon) was introduced to the public by the song “I Begin to Rock \([Wo\ kaishi\ yaogun\ le]\),” in which the lower-class generation rockers and their life in the circle are vividly presented:

I don’t have money/ I don’t have any privileges/ for my dad has no title and he is not able to make money by bribe/ But I am not a shamed
I study hard/ but nothing I’ve studied is useful/ you know I studied math for 10 years/ but my job is to feed the pigs
You tell me to live is to live in dumbness/ you tell me to do your work/ or I’ll be fired.
But I don’t wanna live a dumb life/ I wanna find a place to live/ every pore on my body wants to say something/ but you kicked me out
I begin to rock/ I will grow my hair long then shave it bald/
I begin to rock/ I will borrow some money to buy a guitar
I begin to rock/ I will drink some beer then find some thoughts
I begin to rock/ do I rock or not\(^{123}\), I want you to…get out, I want you to get out…bah!

The song depicts a hapless youth’s life as boring and oppressed. He was limited to the basic substance of his poor background: born in a peasant/working class family, dad’s not working in government so there was no chance for any “gray” income\(^{124}\). The song addresses sarcastically the unpleasant facts of inequality in the society, which was not likely to be found in the early

\(^{122}\) “Secondhand Rose, our philosophy is to be garish and vulgar \([Ershou\ meigui,\ yansu\ shiwomen\ de\ zhexue]\),” \(http://ent.sina.com.cn/p/i/2003-04-10/2139144222.html\).

\(^{123}\) In Chinese, rock is translated in the combined word of Yao, which means to turn, to shake, to rock, and Gun, which means to roll, it also can be used as a derogatory term which means “get out,” in this verse, the singer uses “Yao Bu Yao Gun,” which if “Yao” is pronounced in fourth tone, to imply the question “do I have to get out?”

\(^{124}\) Gray income, or huise shouru, refers to income outside regular jobs. It is not reported so it is named as “gray”. For example, an official might get such income from bribery.
Chinese rock music. The singer continues to sing for the escape from his hardship, i.e., beginning to rock. Rock music, in this song’s description, offers Chinese lost youth a chance to redo their lives.

“I Begin to Rock” also presents the image of lower-class rockers going to Beijing and seeking a new life in the rock circle. The early rockers at least carry the title of “elite,” the later members have epithets like “society’s idle person [shehui mangliu],” “sanwu people (who cannot provide any identification documents, who do not have a residence permit, and who have no guaranteed source of income).” These rockers either drop out from school or are from less developed places, coming to Beijing in the hope of earning a better life. Yet after struggling in the capital, they find only rock allows them to express their feelings. The anger and other mixed emotions then are adopted in the plain, colloquial lyrics they write. Punk, grunge and heavy metal can be found in bands like Brain Failure (naozhuo), Xie Tianxiao and Cold-blooded Animals (lengxue dongwu), and Ordnance (junxie suo) respectively.

Yet no matter how artistic or how radical rock music and the rock performance are, it is difficult to legitimate rock in mainland China. This is because the mainstream popular music constantly incorporates the resistant expressions of rock music into itself, thus depriving rock music of its original meaning. From a subcultural perspective, such incorporation will place the followers in danger of losing the semiotic power. Marie Huot quotes Dick Hebdige that “if Cui Jian used ‘semiotic guerilla warfare’ then his followers, like Bob Dylan’s followers, are ‘guerillas who have] simply, without their even realizing it, been incorporated into the regular army of the enemy.’”\footnote{Huot, 163.} Thus, in the post-1995 rock period, the repeated occurrences of radical expressive forms, including patriotic bandages, a red flag, ethnic dresses, and transgender performances, are
all re-entering the mainstream, which then lessen the rock’s legitimated power in the mainstream.

What is more, listeners in mainland China are cultivated by the mass media to deny any popular music forms that violate the rules. One of the most-dismissed musics is rock. Rock is depicted as “harsh, noisy and less musical” sounds that listeners will not associate with the mainstream. Once such a concept had been formulated, the Chinese audiences automatically marginalized rock from mainstream popular music. For example, Chinese rocker Zuoxiao zuzhou once replied to an interview that “in China, rock is consistently portrayed by the media as avant-garde music (not mainstream and sounds weird), if a listener finds a rock piece enjoyable, s/he will refuse to admit it as rock.”

The ambiguity of the authenticity of Chinese rock also accounts for the difficulty in legitimizing rock. Yan Jun reports that the majority of Chinese hold a common belief that there are two prerequisites for legitimization to be realized: First, “being permitted officially [mingzheng yanshun];” and second, the “wealth equals to the cultural privilege, so economic advantages will authenticate the cultural product.” This belief prevents rockers from lower-class backgrounds to be valued.

But in the discussion of authenticity, there occurs another conflict between amateurism and professionalism. If we look in a Robert Stebbins “Professional-Amateur-Public (P-A-P) system,” the rock circle is a hierarchical professional-amateur-public system. Atop of the

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128 Yan Jun, Noise Inside, 73.

circle are the professionals who “are too busy to read about the history of their endeavor or about forms, styles, periods, or persons beyond their bailiwick,”\textsuperscript{130} thus the rock standards are established by new rock circle goers and “they send demos to Cui Jian to comment on.”\textsuperscript{131} The amateurs firmly believe that through performing at the parties, they enter the circle; through the party audiences’ acceptance, they become amateur rockers. It is not until they reach media attention, however, either by the mass media or the independent publication that they become rockers. The profession is not judged by income or by album sales, but by the media coverage and by the confirmation from professionals, especially the rock elites. This system shows how rock survives without being legitimized in the mainstream. Regardless of forms, styles, and techniques, the importance lies in being approved by the circle. Once an amateur is approved in the rock circle, s/he is officially a rocker.

However, the authenticity debate over rock music grows in the circle. What is true rock music in mainland China: the rock music led by Cui Jian or the rock music led by the western singers in the \textit{dakoudai}? This debate also reveals the dilemma of remaining in the circle or stepping out from the circle. As the rock circle enlarges, the population of Beijing drifters grows. In the meantime, a thought occurs: do rockers have to rock in Beijing only? Should Beijing be “the hegemonic center of the rock circle?”\textsuperscript{132}

Underground rock in Chengdu led by Little Traven (\textit{xiao jiuguan}) owner Tang Lei, PK14 from Nanjing and Top Floor Circus (\textit{Dinglou de Maxituan}) from Shanghai have become popular

\textsuperscript{130} Stebbins, “What is an Amateur,” 26.

\textsuperscript{131} Yan Jun, “Chinese fatass or Chinese punker [\textit{zhonguo de pang2ke or pang4ke}],” in \textit{Noise Inside}, 67.

from the local to nationwide scenes but they never sojourn to Beijing. Do they belong to the rock circle? The answer is firmly yes. Yet they are among the only underground rockers who succeed in the rock career outside the Beijing circle. Most post-1995 rockers remain in Beijing. For example, the most influential underground rock band Tongue (shetou) travels from Xinjiang province to Beijing, alternative rock artist Zuoxiao zuzhou travels from Shanghai to Beijing, and Wan Xiaoli, folk/rock (minyao) singer, drifts from a small town in Hebei province to Beijing. Since more and more genres are mixed in their music, it is difficult to detect the ideal in Chinese rock music. And with the doubt on the meaning of the Beijing circle, the rockers have become aimless. Not too many of them remain in the circle. Some of the successful ones move to the mainstream and a few others turn to the new emerging scene, indie music, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Despite the fact that the music scene is becoming more complicated, a linguistically interesting approach is adopted by the post-1995 rockers. Rockers are beginning to choose between singing in dialect and singing in English/Mandarin. The rocker Hu Mage has exemplified this approach in his song “Some Potatoes Go to the City.” The excerpted lyrics of this song are quoted below:

The person lives in the neighborhood is an educated man who means no harm/
He says that I’m diligent, brave, kind and innocent that I have no desire/
Then he plays some not enjoyable but noisy music for me/
He says that music is praising us (me and people like me)/
He says he is one of us/
But he has to wear a worthless smile which will be disdained by the powerful person who takes his seat/
He tells me some unpleasant things of this city/
Then he tells me something about hypocrisy/
I don’t understand much of his talking/
So I can only say apologetically that/
I’m not sure about this, I’m not so sure about this/
….
Oh, poor me, I speak with an accent…

The song starts with Mandarin singing then in the line “He says that I’m diligent” Hu Mage switches to the Hubei dialect to describe the dialogue between a local Beijing man and a Beijing drifter. The music the Beijing man introduces to the drifter must be rock music. Here the dilemma of rock music being too aristocratic to be attached with the lower class is proved in the lines “He says he is one of us (the rocker’s intention is to speak for the poor)/ But he has to put smile under his butt on the chair he sits…Then he tells me something about hypocrisy (the rocker has been portrayed by the mass media as an avant-garde artist whose performance displays the nation’s capability of incorporating the western sources, the rock music has been utilized as a tool to promote patriotism)/ I don’t understand much of his talking/So I can only say apologetically that/ I’m not sure about this, I’m not so sure about this (These three lines show how lower class people are unable to identify themselves in the rock music).” The song ends with the fade out line repeating “Oh! Poor me! I have an accent,” showing how Beijing drifters become lost in the capital city. The economic disadvantages have caused these drifters to be less culturally attached to the rock scene in Beijing, thus creating a sub circle which consists of underground musicians from all around the nation.

To sum up Chapter Two and Three, Chinese popular music has welcomed rock music as a peripheral, artistic, and radical expressive form. Rock music itself experiences two stages: being aristocratic, and being diversified while complicated. Encoded in each period is the dominant ideology that develops from stressing importation to stressing both importing and exporting. The complication of rock scenes has led rock musicians to seek a new, a more autonomous and limitless alternative, and this has directly led to the beginning of indie music in mainland China. Chinese indie music is brewed by Chinese rock music. With regard to musicality, indie music
continues to try the creative, unique scores and melody. With regard to musical production, the indie label is a derivative product of underground rock. With regard to the relationship to mainstream popular music, indie music is another self-marginalized musical form against the mainstream.
CHAPTER FOUR: “LET’S GRAZE OUR BAND IN THE CITY” – AN INDIE WAY OF MUSIC MAKING

What is “indie?” Marion Leonard states that “the term ‘indie’ is somewhat problematic as its exact definition and its boundaries are open to dispute.”133 One day the circulation is independent, the next day you see the name of an indie band shine on Billboard. The fact that few outsiders would know that the word “indie” stands for “independent” has led Ryan Hibbett to discover that “indie [rock] exists largely as an absence, a nebulous ‘other,’ or as a negative value that acquires meaning from what it opposes.”134 In Empire of Dirt: the Aesthetic and Rituals of British Indie Music, Wendy Fonarow summarizes various definitions:

(1) a type of musical production affiliated with small independent record labels with a distinctive mode of independent distribution; (2) a genre of music that has a particular sound and stylistic conventions; (3) music that communicates a particular ethos; (4) a category of critical assessment; and (5) music that can be contrasted with other genres, such as mainstream pop, dance, blues, country, or classical.135

Throughout this thesis my work is guided by Fonarow’s definitions. This leads me to the conclusion that Chinese indie music is a type of music whose definition primarily comes from independent record label sales, internet community shares, as well as livehouse136 and musical festival performances. It takes elements from pop, rock, and minyao (Chinese folk). As is shown


136 Livehouse is a type of venue that provides high-quality stereos and a small performance stage for audiences to enjoy a concert with less distance from the musicians. Unlike clubs and bars, the major entertainment there is the music.
in the lyrics, indie musicians manage to use simple words to create deeper meaning, giving Chinese listeners a unique literary attraction. *Xiao qingxin* (the Chinese version of indie pop), alternative rock, and *minyao* are the most commonly encountered musical styles in the Chinese indie music. This chapter will examine how indie music is produced and how Chinese indie musicians convey their expectations through their attractive pieces. In doing so, I hope to answer the question of how indie music is formed in mainland China. The discussion will be divided into three sections which discuss, respectively, *xiaoqingxin*, *wenyi qingnian*, and mainstream; indie rock and underground; and lastly the indie identity.

**Xiao qingxin, the Mainstream Wants to Hear a New Voice**

Here is a piece of music: it sounds peaceful, the lyrics are plaintive yet the emotion conveyed is simple and transitory. You feel nostalgic while listening to the song. And there might be some quotes you love to draw from the lyrics. The MV is hippie-ish: with lo-fi picture quality; shoegazing scenes, sunlight, plants, and still-life tableaux recur. It requires audiences to pay attention to the little things that they simply take for granted and ignore in daily life.

This music is indie pop. A piece of indie pop music like this is given the title *xiao qingxin* [小清新, little freshness]. Around 2005, in search of a new voice, indie, *duli* [獨立, independent] in Chinese, was bundled with *xiao qingxin* for sale in the record market. Taiwanese indie pop musicians such as Chen Chi Chen, Deserts Chang, and Sodagreen were introduced to the public. And soon they became role models of *xiao qingxin*. In explaining the meaning of *duli*, the record companies promoting these artists stress that they have been active in livehouse performances and musical festivals. They are atypical but very talented in music. For example, Deserts Chang is a high school dropout but she is very gifted at writing songs. Though she is unquestionably a pop singer, Chen Chi Chen writes her own songs and remains low-profile in that her album is
free of chaozuo. The band Sodagreen has a unique singer that first-time listeners can hardly believe is male. It is tricky to introduce the word “indie” to consumers by marketing the former indie experiences of Taiwanese pop singers and then selling actually standardized and commercialized pop albums by them. Producers qualify these singers by showcasing their lives as pub singers, marketing them as very non-mainstream and known by only music club goers. The pride for becoming an insider and curiosity over such unique musical experience fascinates listeners to find out what indie sounds like. And this guarantees that listeners will buy the new voice. Hence, the record companies find a way to boost sales by choosing a target group and letting them represent a particular expressive form—xiao qingxin.

Xiao qingxin [小清新], in direct translation, is “little freshness.” The word “little [xiao]” indicates small, delicacy, and subtle changes, while “fresh [qingxin]” can be associated with nature: sky, woods, flowing water, summer blossoms, and rain, to just name a few. To incorporate this “little freshness” into a person, it indicates clean, simple, pure, and innocent—characteristics found in a child. Xiao qingxin in adults is practiced through wearing canvas shoes, cotton clothing, and using lomo cameras (see images 2&3). While this style immediately distinguishes a xiao qingxiner from others, adding the style into pop music has led some audiences to interpret the work as being twee and egocentric. Chinese music editor Wang Ge writes, “Xiao qingxin is a rather sarcastic term to describe a narcissistic lifestyle centered on indie pop music. [And] like people of this kind anywhere in the world, they get mocked for being snobs but remain proud.”

Chaozuo, a popular way to promote an artist to the mainstream audiences, is a way to manipulate the media to report unconfirmed gossip and news about the artist or the album in order for the artist to catch public attention.

Wang Ge, “Chinese musical genres: A bluffer's guide to China's musical styles,” Timeout
With the help of Dr. Jeremy Wallach, I translated *xiao qingxin* as “hipness with Chinese characteristics.” This literary translation intends to minimize the misperception of indie pop music that views indie pop singers as promoting affectedly dainty aesthetics. Meanwhile, the translation intends to provide a culturally similar sense for Western readers. Experiencing *xiao qingxin* is to make a short escape from the bonds of consumerism and from meeting the high standards of socialist development. In China, as higher education has been popularized at the turn of the 21st century, a college degree does not necessarily guarantee a promising job. Income growth hardly meets the pace of the growth of the cost of living. What is more, being the only child of the family, Chinese youth need to take the responsibility of supporting both parents and children in the near future. The future is tough for college students and recent graduates, regardless of whether they are employed; these young people need *xiao qingxin* to soothe them: being poor is not intimidating, they can have a simple but enjoyable life. A choice of white cotton clothing and white shoes therefore is a return to elementary school days. The refusal to, for example, wear jeans, and the appreciation of ordinary goods like a glass mug symbolize


dissidence against consumerism. Also, the style answers the question: if not being judged by economic status or academic achievements, how can one keep himself/herself from being common? Instead, they create their own meaningful codes.

“Xiao qingxiners are less interested in consuming beauty, they focus on building a cultural club where they can share their feelings and opinions towards aesthetics. They are those who have not yet acquired the dominant power in the society, who live in the middle between the very rich and the very poor. A ‘new poor’ according to Zygmunt Bauman best describes them.”

Cultural scholar Zhou Zhiqiang explains that xiao qingxin is a delusion for desolate youth.

But most of all, a laid-back perspective has been created in xiao qingxin music, which more or less soothes the youth’s tired minds. Communicated through the music is the idea that xiao qingxin is not a way to be extraordinary, but one way to be unique. It is an alternative to remain confident in a society which normally values success stories of good education and a promising career, since in xiao qingxin only simple emotion is discussed and beauty is shared, not competed over.

Xiao qingxin diminishes the idea of loser and winner; it is aimless, effortless, and powerless. Such aimless, effortless and powerless characteristics can be found in the song “The Meaning of Travel [lvxing de yiyi, 旅行的意義]” by the Taiwanese singer Chen Chi Chen. In its lyrics, the song reads like a complaint letter to a beloved one who goes on travelling and leaves the writer alone. It consists of a collage of retrospective scenes. For example, it lists the names of tourist destinations to which the “you” in the letter has been: “You tasted the night of Paris/ You walked through the snowing Beijing/ You heartily embraced the tropical islands/ You buried Turkey in

the memory.” Such writing annoys people who consider the *xiao qingxiner* to be ill. One writer asks sarcastically: “Aren’t you an Alzheimer patient who is overly obsessed with memory of the past?”\(^{142}\) As the complaints that “However, you are unable to tell the reason for your love of me/ Unable to say which side of me you appreciate best” repeat in the song, the writer reaches in the end the conclusion that “You force yourself to say that all the letters you have sent me/ Are all your reasons for leaving/ You leaving me/ Is your reason for travel…” The entire song is a show of losing a fight in love and the meaning of travel in the end is meaningless. It is performed in a very sweet voice with a relaxing melody. Listening to the lyrics, one may be confused if the tone is happy or not. And in the end, listeners find that it is numb, it has nothing to say. There is no goal to achieve, no effort that the writer wants to put in, any strength to be put towards anything. This numb feeling is a typical experience *xiao qingxin* listeners will have.

As an escape, *xiao qingxin* does not require an action. Like what “The Meaning of Travel” has provided, *xiao qingxin* gives listeners a familiar story and collages of possible tiny pieces of love, childhood, and travelling scenes to arouse their nostalgia. After all, memories of puppy love, dressing a doll, playing water guns, trying to skip school, or riding on a bicycle are a frequent and touching topic for Chinese youth. For example, on Children’s Day, the *Xinhua* newspaper designs a feature for the 1980s grown-ups, recalling their memories of childhood toys and games.\(^{143}\) How these memories are translated into words and accompanied with music shows the song writing mastery of an indie musician. And this mastery of song writing has made indie pop

\(^{142}\) Da Di, “*Wenyi*, how many twees are using it as an excuse, sending female *wenyi* vocalists to doctors [*wenyi, duoshao jiaqing jia ru zhiming, wei *wenyi* nvsheng bamai*],” *Southern Weekend* [Southern Metropolis Weekly], May, 2010, http://www.nbweekly.com/magazine/cont.aspx?artiID=11235.

music stand out from other genres of music.

**Xiao qingxin and the Cultural Type Wenyi qingnian**

The manner of writing invites a particular group of audiences to join the indie pop circle. *Wenyi qingnian*, Chinese youth who are into arts and literature, are the group of youth who pay attention to the manner of song writing. *Wenyi qingnian* refers to Chinese youth who are emotionally sensitive, intellectually open-minded, and artistically discriminating. *Wenyi qingnian* require delicacy: they appreciate things that touch their deepest feelings. The desire for delicacy is best described in Song dynasty poet Xin Qiji’s poem *Chou nu'er*: “When young I never knew the taste of sorrow… and just to write poems I pretended to be miserable.”

*Wenyi qingnian*, too young to share their life philosophy and too fragile to face reality, spend most of their time digging out the deepest sorrow they believe exists. They focus more on trivial details than the entire picture. They prefer perceptual discoveries over logical reasoning. They sympathize with works written by Franz Kafka, Eileen Zhang, and Haruki Murakami. They find inspiration in independent films and avant-garde artworks. They scorn mainland censored TV dramas and collect films and overseas TV shows downloaded from the internet.

For these youth, literary pleasure is very important for a song. Before indie pop it was Faye Wong, a superstar who captivated them, for she has “a *wenyi qiang*[the refined, implicit, and literary manner, 文藝腔] that urban *wenyi qingnian* quite enjoy.” But in 2005, Faye Wong became less active in the music industry. The market then tries to offer indie pop as a “non-

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145 “*Ting wenyi qingnian zui ai de ge* [Listening to songs favored by youth who are into arts and literature],” *Bulaohu qingchun wenxue*[Bulaohu Youth Literature] no.6 (2008), 109, doi: CNKI:SUN:XYWZ.0.2003-Z1-047.
mainstream [feizhuliu, 非主流]” substitute for wenyi qingnian. As most wenyi qingnian rely on
the friend-to-friend sharing of cassettes and CDs, indie pop producers anticipate the
popularization of the genre when each xiao qingxin singer can show a distinctive feature. And it
is their unique feature that makes their music authentic, delicate, and poignant.

While Chen Chi Chen appears to be self-absorbed, Sodagreen takes a different path in that
their music shortens the distance between musicians and listeners, demystifies a performer and
provides in their lyrics common little things that make one feel happy. For example, Wu Tsing
Fong, the lead vocalist of Sodagreen, offers his thoughts about composition to listeners. He
writes that he composed “Incomparable Beauty [wuyu lunbi de meili, 無與倫比的美麗]” to
thank his best friend Deserts Chang. “It is a flashback when Deserts and I were becoming best
friends for each other after exchanging several text messages and she helped me out of suffering
a great setback.”146 Wu’s statement is recorded by a Taiwanese blogger, and later in an interview
with Next Magazine147 Wu retold the same intention of writing that song. The praise for
cherishing friendship again shows how indie pop takes listeners away from competition. In
almost every piece of Sodagreen’s music, listeners find a way to warm their broken hearts. The
Sodagreen style xiao qingxin heals listeners. This has made their music a great companion for
those fragile, sensitive wenyi qingnian. “A Little Love Song [xiao qingge, 小情歌]” is one
element. The melody flows slowly from piano solo to piano with drums then harmony of piano,

146 This is a blog post by Taiwanese blogger MuZiken, “Introducing Sodagreen’s newly
released album Incomparable Beauty.” The post soon circulated to mainland China and was
reposted to a fan base of Deserts Chang. The original Taiwanese post:
http://tw.myblog.yahoo.com/jw!6zUNqabBhYFqOUkWndWKyKSkw--/article?mid=12092.
The repost to mainland China: http://www.douban.com/group/topic/2085599/.

147 Tian Yuping, “Precious friends: an interview with Deserts Chang and Wu Tsing Fong
[nande you qingren: zhang xuan wu qingfeng zhuangfang],” Next Magazine [yi zhoukan],no. 418
strings and drums, vividly showing a person’s emotional progress. The song represents how, as the feeling of insecurity gets stronger, the need for warmth and care gets stronger. And as Wu sings, “You know even if floods overtake this city/ I’ll give you my embrace,” the insecurity is overturned by love.

While Sodagreen attracts listeners by being very healing, Deserts Chang gains attention through her ambivalent lyrics and use of witty banter before each of her live performances. Acoustic guitar plays a very important role in Chang’s music, yet her music does not sound like that of Chen Chi Chen (Chen also plays acoustic guitar while she sings). Compared with Chen’s music, Chang’s melody is plain and sincere, revealing the strong influence of folk (minyao). Chang’s songs are less likely to be twee. Compared with Wu Tsing Fong’s octave-leaping voice, Chang’s voice is calm and soothing, yet not as indifferently sweet as Chen’s voice sounds. Chang’s writing is interesting in that listeners hardly know what she is singing about. The meaning of the lyrics for an entire song cannot be explained, yet reading one or two verses out of the entire piece is a pleasure. Taking her hit song “Like [xihuan, 喜歡]” as an example:

In this very moment/ something is missing
Something must be wrong
I do not know at this very moment
How I would act/ and how I would hold someone’s hand
The feeling of loneliness may be different (if you are willing to tell)
But I insist on not telling (anyone)
Life is still overwhelming
I’m not so confident about handling that
Yet I’ve learned that loss means giving up
Sometimes I’d rather just listen to your finishing singing a song
In every now and then/ among all the loss and all I’ve got
I like you the most…

This is the first half of the song, yet after nearly two minute’s listening, there is no clue showing what she is trying to say. However, the day after this song was released, you could find many people writing on their online profile that “In every now and then, among all the loss and
all I have got, I like you the most [在所有人事已非的景色里，我最喜歡你].” The popularity of Deserts Chang lies in how frequently her lyrics have been quoted. It also lies in the friendly character she shows to her audiences. She loves to talk before her performances and sometimes she forgets her lyrics and asks the audiences to “remind” her. Such incidents display an indie way of live performance that a professional musician may play at amateurism. And a proper application of amateurism could make an indie musician’s live performance truly relaxing. What’s more, audiences are allowed to drink and they even give cheers to Chang, who holds a bottle of beer in one hand. Deserts Chang has never played large venues except for musical festivals. This keeps her indie identity even though, from the first album she has been signed with SONY BMG, a global record label.

From the three singers discussed above, we could find that the mainstream introduces indie music to audiences by introducing the indie attitude, namely, enjoying an aimless period of time without making any effort and without worrying too much about individual competence. In this way, the mainstream creates a collective musical experience of xiao qingxin in which anyone can find himself/herself a place to fit.

**Indie Rock: The Underground Finds a Way to Voice**

As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, Chinese popular music has welcomed rock music as a peripheral, artistic, and radical expressive form. Rock music itself has experienced two stages: being aristocratic at first, and later becoming diversified and complicated. The complication of rock scenes has led rock musicians to seek out new and more autonomous alternatives, and this has led directly to the beginning of indie music in mainland China.

In 1997, the first indie label, Modernsky [modeng tiankong, 摩登天空], was born in mainland China. The globalization codes decoded from mainstream popular music have been re-
encoded in the creation of this indie label. Modernsky actively pushes forward its bands to foreign audiences, revealing how globalization promotes Chinese rockers on the international stage. In the meantime, though it has caused some indie insiders to doubt its “independent” identity, Modernsky set up a multi-channel marketing model that many subsequent indie labels follow strictly. In this model, online music community, musical festivals and international tours play equally important roles in the label’s operation.

The online music community, *Douban* Modernsky Group for example, provides a Bulletin Board System (BBS) platform in which band and music information is open to sharing and discussion (see image 4). This internet platform shapes audiences’ opinions towards what kind of musical experiences indie can provide, viz. producers and musicians should treat listeners as friends, connoisseurs, and insiders. For those who are not familiar with indie music, the *Douban* Modernsky group is a place to learn the basics. This music community not only provides information on local bands and musicians, it is also a database for finding authentic indie music from the West. Besides these functions, the online discussion groups also promote music festivals which are essential for promoting indie music in mainland China.
Music festival as a new way to sell rock is valued by the “Glorious Path of China Rock’n roll” Festival organizer Huang Liaoyuan as he writes “[it is] only through commercialization

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148 “Glorious Path of China Rock’n roll” festival is up to now the best, biggest, and most profitable rock music festival in mainland China. For more information, see: http://english.sina.com/special_report/040810rockfestival.shtml.
that rock can conquer the mainstream… a successful rock festival should be profitable, and through promising revenue we can proudly announce that rock is not dangerous.”

As it aims at sales, musical festivals blend the formerly incompatible rock and mainstream, finding in them a mutual goal: profit earning; as the later MIDI, Modernsky, Strawberry festivals take indie as the theme, rock, indie and mainstream are mixed together. Indie replaced rock to become financially aggressive and artistically unique.

The commercialized independent label is operated like an individually owned business. It signs musicians and arranges their performances. Artists under such labels have less freedom in both composing and performing, for they have to cater to the market and follow the company’s rules. For example, they can’t perform at certain venues if their contract requires them to sing at the company’s partnered bars. And they can’t release new songs before the company allows them to. Besides these limitations, such independent labels are financially capable of offering indie musicians a chance to perform on world stages. To perform on world stages provides indie musicians with more flexibilities in composing songs. The diversity of audiences has provided them with a new window through which to express their music.

One lesson underground rockers may wish they had learned from Modernsky is to write English lyrics. Writing English texts provides them with much freedom to express their intention directly without angering the authorities. The NPR reporter Lisa Chow has written about how Rebuilding the Rights of Statues [chong su diaoxiang quanli, 重塑雕像權利], a band under Modernsky, utilized this language advantage brought by globalization:

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149 Huang Liaoyuan quoted by Guo Facai, “A Chinese Woodstock or a rocker’s The Same Song show [shi zhongguo de wude situoke haishi yaogun ban tong yishou ge],” in Shackles and Dashing, 262.
The art of making anti-establishment music in a non-democratic state can come in the translation. The three members of Rebuilding the Rights of Statues\textsuperscript{150}, or Re-TROS for short, compose in English. The band is required to translate all of its lyrics into Chinese and submit them to the government for approval. Meng Jin Hui is a manager at Modern Sky [\textit{sic}], China’s largest independent record label. “Maybe sometimes when we translate, it might be wrong,” he says. For example, the band translated the title of its song “Hang the Police” as “the police are laughing.” Often they’ll translate literally. As is the case with any language, the literal translations sometimes don’t make sense. And that can work to the band’s advantage.\textsuperscript{151}

In the meantime, among various styles of rock music in China, Chinese indie music is much influenced by underground rock. Chinese underground rockers have been faced with the dilemma of whether to stay in the rock circle: poor living conditions more or less challenge their heroic rock dreams. The authenticity of rock has also been contested between local Beijing rockers and rockers from outside of Beijing. What is more, there is a growing need for a platform that allows underground rockers to circulate their albums, ideally without being censored. This demand eventually makes indie music self-revealing, sometimes off-kilter and quirky. There are also indie pieces that lack sophistication, but listeners find humor in them, and it is through making listeners laugh at themselves that a radical suggestion has been made. Indie rock music that is influenced by underground rock can be exemplified in the following two songs: “Circle [\textit{quan, 圈} ]” played by The Gar [\textit{ga diao, 嘎調}] and “Roamer Watch [\textit{Luomabiao, 羅馬錶}]” performed by Buyi Band [布衣]. “Circle” is a rock piece that is self-revealing: from the name it can be easily associated with the rock circle. The verse is gloomy and decadent, as it says “We keep drawing a circle/ At the end of the circle is a new beginning/ They keep jumping into this circle/ In the hope of getting a new face/ We keep copying the change/ We

\textsuperscript{150} Some argues that the name of the band is indicatively subversive, for it could be a reference to the statue of democracy erected by the 1989 student protesters.

keep dreaming about all these/ The tomorrow that we keep expecting becomes yesterday. "As the vocalist repeats the chorus in falsetto scream, “You feel the resentment but you don’t wanna leave [ni juede hen que bu likai, 你覺得恨卻不離開],” underground rockers’ mixed feelings (or ambivalence) is well expressed. Again, a typical attraction of indie music, namely, the well-written lyrics, is revealed in this song. The Gar writes Chinese lyrics that go straight into listeners’ hearts. Their lyrics are not radical yet they create fierce feelings. Like in this song, the dead end illustrated by the lyrics leaves listeners helpless, while the conclusion is rhetorically beautiful and philosophically pessimistic in that, as much as one resents it, one loves the circle being drawn. Indie rock bands like The Gar did not avoid expressing the idea of anti-repression. Instead of using foul language, they created an indie way of expressing oneself by writing simple and evocative verses.

Apart from The Gar, there are still indie bands adhering to hardcore, Buyi Band is one of them. Styled in folk rock, Buyi Band displays in the lyrics of “Roamer Watch” an undaunted self-mockery. The song is live, recorded in a bar, and the band’s vocalist claims that “the emotional responses offered by the band’s audiences have become the soul of this song.”152 This claim shows that in indie music, it is important for audiences to participate and share their feedback. For “Roamer Watch,” what make audiences want to join the performance are both the musicians’ self-deprecating humor and the rude chorus following immediately after the verses. As barbaric as its lyrics are, the song cannot be properly placed in the mainstream market. Yet as an inappropriate song, “Roamer Watch”153 credits the underground heritage of indie. The lyrics

152 Wu Ningyue, “Recording Review [luyin xinde]”

153 Roamer watch was a luxury watch imported from Switzerland.
are translated below:

My girlfriend/ She has high requirements/ She wants a Roamer watch/ I am a poor guy/ How can I afford it, afford it/ So I went to steal someone’s purse/ Then I got caught/ She was laughing when standing by my side/ [Swear words] laughing at me/ All I did is for you, for you

My boyfriend/ He has high requirements/ He wants his lady to be sexy/ My body is flat/ How can I satisfy him, satisfy him/ So I went to get plastic surgery/ But the surgery failed/ He was laughing when standing by my side/ [Swear words] laughing at me/ All I did is for you, for you

“Roamer Watch” was a popular street song in 1980s that hooligans [liumang, 流氓]\textsuperscript{154} loved to sing. Reintroducing this old street song appears eccentric; yet with the familiar melody, audiences can easily follow the singer and join the performance. In the music recording right after the start, the audience begins to clap to the beat and yell “eh” or “oh” at the end of every verse. By revealing grassroots life, “Roamer Watch” expands indie music’s scope from showing subtle feelings to showing the actual life of the poor. Indie music like “Roamer Watch” then helps listeners to reject bonding indie with xiao qingxin. The opposite of xiao qingxin that emphasizes appearance, styles and manner, the indie music influenced by underground rock welcomes the spirit of being genuine to be passed on.

**The Indie Identity Debate: Duli or Zhuang**

From its beginning, people have questioned whether indie music is one way for wenyi qingnian to play the saint (zhuang). Zhuang [装] is profanity to describe a hypercritical intellectual who has a sense of superiority and aristocratic sentiments.

*Zhuang* in indie music making appears in that a musician fails to show competence in composing, but tries to please the audiences by covering current affairs and livelihood issues.

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\textsuperscript{154} *Liiumang or pizi* is a cult that came into being to contest the hypocrisy the market economy has brought to the Chinese people. See more discussion on rockers and hooligan culture in Chapter Two.
Although such music pieces accrue huge popularity, they lower the professional requirements for a musician. One example of such criticism is found in the minyao singer Shao Xiaomao (aka. Shao Yibei). Shao is famous for her “A Song for an Old Female Wenyi Qingnian [Daling wenyi nv qingnian zhi ge, 大齡文藝女青年之歌],” in which she jokes about how a female youth of arts and literature fails to find a man to marry. The song responds to a popular summary that is widely passed online in mainland China: “three things showing you are not filial: single, attending graduate school, and earning a liberal arts’ degree.” Equally amusing as the statement is, “A Song for an Old Female Wenyi Qingnian” compares possible husbands (an artist for the lady’s interests and a rich man to her parents’ expectation), teasing the listeners with verses like “Yet some young male artists love art only/ Other young male artists practice art in order to flirt with beautiful girls/ But there is not just one beautiful girl [like me].../Yet a rich man only marries a woman who can cook/ A female wenyi qingnian cannot cook/ She is then only to be the third woman/.../She will then have to follow the rich man’s underlying rules.” While this song gained popularity immediately after Shao’s first performance in a bar in Beijing, critics vehemently attacked Shao, disapproving of her as an indie musician.

One critic points Shao as being a xiao qingxiner (xiao qingxin follower) and a speculator: “Shao knows only basic guitar skills and composes all her songs with the same tone and similar chords. Indie is not about telling the audiences what topics are hot right now. Thus we should not put Shao’s ability to win a headline as a reason she succeeds as an indie musician. We should not treat such low-level pieces as high-quality, low-fi pieces. Such bland songs are not equivalent to works by indie bands like Radiohead and Arcade Fire.”

155 “Underlying Rules [qian guize, 潛規則]” is a popular term that describes the shady deal between rich and powerful person A and person B who is in a subordinate position. One example of underlying rules happens between a male director and a female actress; by following the director’s rules, the actress might win a leading role in the director’s new movie.

However, opposite to Shao’s experience, Chuanzi [川子], who chooses similar topics to sing about, is recognized as being tough and independent [duli]. In an article introducing Chinese indie musicians of the year, Chuanzi is considered the independent musician next to Zuoxiao zuzhou [左小祖咒], the former underground rocker and present mainstream-acclaimed indie musician.157 In his hit song “I Want to Get Married [wo yao jiehun, 我要結婚],” Chuanzi sings, “This world lacks anything but single men and women/ I want to get married, but what can I provide you for our marriage/ I have a car, and it is a used car, yet you are my first wife/… Let’s get married soon/ I have come up with our kid’s name/ We will call him/her Jiang laiyou158/ And S/he will find a lover named Zheng qianhua159” This song illustrates a sincere marriage request from a man who is above the normal age of getting married. It sounds like a new age hooligan who shares the hardship with the people in this nation. The song mocks inequality by portraying the rich in lyrics like “Your boss is much like a lecher”, and “Silver spoons are building a team to date celebrities in the entertainment industry.” Chuanzi imagines an affordable marriage for the poor, he scorns the powerful class, and mocks the tough present by giving two funny names for the offspring of the poor: “will have what we want in the future [jianglai you]” and “will earn money to spend [zhengqian hua].” Listeners give a knowing smile to the analysis of an affordable marriage, appreciating such laughable lyrics that allow them to vent the rumblings of discontent.


158 Jiang laiyou [姜來友], whose Chinese homophone could be “將來有[will have fortune in the future].”

159 Zheng Qianhua [鄭錢花], whose Chinese homophone could be “掙錢花 [earn money to spend].”
The success of Chuanzi dismisses the claim that covering popular topics in indie music is a way of playing the “saint.” The insubordinate attitude in both Chuanzi and Shao Xiaomao’s songs is a legacy from underground rock. The sarcastic writing represents an indie way of expressing dissatisfaction. In fact, the word used in an indie song could be simple, the verses could be colloquial, yet from making audiences laugh with understanding, indie music can distinguish itself from other types of music. Duli is unique, creative, and detached, zhuang is only for a poseur. Though the musicality may sound less competitive, indie is not for poseurs.

But what is indie for? How is duli realized in indie music making? My interview with Dew, a Chinese indie label producer, answers the first question:

Dew 11 is nonprofit. It offers musicians more freedom. Without the limitation of a contract, musicians can work out a music piece that they truly love, bring it to us, and we work together to share their music. Dew 11 is like a personal workshop, it is less involved with business but more focused on delight, enjoyment and an impetus of sharing. For me, it is a post punk do-it-yourself career. Dew 11 released very few albums per year, and the sales can just make both ends meet. I have a day job. I consider indie label producers like me as the professional in the amateurs. We conduct all procedures by ourselves, from selecting the songs to making an album cover. I’m not exaggerating this, but sometimes I know better than major label managers who subcontract all the tasks to different companies. I think indie changes the youth’s perception over music making. Our endeavor tries to prove that objectifying a musician into a hot product is no longer necessary and it is not the only option for making the music to be heard. I think that’s how we realize indie in the first place.  

Two important factors in indie music making are raised by this label producer: sharing favorite pieces with random audiences and refusing to surrender for lucrative success. The former reveals a laissez-faire influence on music making, while the latter beats painstakingly the dominant power of capitalist economy. How indie musicians express these two ideas in the indie practice can be exemplified by Li Zhi[李志] and Omnipotent Youth Society [萬能青年旅店].

On his website, Li Zhi offers free downloading of all his albums, and also a section invites

listeners to buy his albums by naming the price on their own. On the donation webpage (see the left highlighted area of image 5), the webmaster writes (my translation):

We are Li Zhi and his friends. We are not a company, and we do not make a profit. We do not want to act like a moral god who directs people to consume genuine, legal copy. Besides, we think that the standardized price does not guarantee the same value for different people, since every individual has his/her own preference. We think that one’s understanding of a product’s value depends on his/her aesthetics, knowledge, and economic status. To some extent, you have the right to decide how worthy a product is.

Image 5: Donation Page for Lizhi

The intention here is to collapse what Marx called use value and exchange value. Li Zhi is being very strict in inviting his audiences to enjoy an ultimate self-controlled musical experience. On the right side of the picture shown, there is a column that gives hints how much the album costs. It provides four choices: “RMB 50 yuan,” “RMB 100 yuan,” “RMB 200 yuan,” and “Other,” which means to name your own price. And there is no minimum or maximum price limit for the other section. Down the donation page are the hyperlinks to download his albums. The

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webmaster claims that they are offering audiences the best quality files that are free of charge, but those who are downloading Li Zhi’s music should not post it online for commercial purposes, sell it to radios, or use it in public without getting permission from Li Zhi. Interestingly, Li Zhi calls himself *zhuang* and shows the public: if an indie way of music making is considered *zhuang*, then so be it. Yet he is one of the most representative *duli* musicians in mainland China. Li Zhi’s music style is mostly *minyao*, the melody is peaceful, yet his voice is coarse. The lyrics are always sad; listeners claim to have inescapably felt the same sorrow in the song. For instance, his acknowledged piece “Mr. Van Gogh [*Fangao xiansheng, 梵高先生*]” reminds listeners of Zhang Chu, who sings “Loneliness is a Shame.” Both songs drive listeners to feel desperate. In “Mr. Van Gogh,” Li repeats lines of “We were born alone/ We were born to be lonely,” with the accompaniment of a placid, neat guitar melody. Such musical construction creates a pensive mood in the listener, creating a sense of futility. As I discussed in the previous section, a sense of futility is the mark of indie. Li Zhi captures this idea and expresses it well.

Besides Li Zhi, it is the band Omnipotent Youth Society who practices indie rock that shows its resolution in being genuine, creative, and boundless. Omnipotent Youth Society offers listeners the deep enjoyment of words, musicality, and live experiences. Like Shao Xiaomao and Chuanzi, the band addresses social problems. Yet it does not turn the subjects into stunts. Omnipotent Youth Society writes Chinese lyrics only. This requires the capability of creating a semiotic inference that their listeners can quickly identify with. Their music is rich and colorful but not flamboyant. The underlying meaning of every verse creates a compelling interpretation of the song. Take Omnipotent Youth Society’s famous song “Kill that Shijiazhuang People [*shasi nage Shijiazhuang ren, 殺死那個石家莊人*]” for example, the lyrics are:

Get off work at 6 pm/ Take off my work suits for the pharmaceutical factory/ My wife is cooking gruel/ I am going to drink some beer/
To live a life like this for 30 years/ Until the building collapses/ The dark behind the
clouds…ah/ Conceals the landscape in the heart/
At the octagonal counter/ In the crowded Renmin department store/ I use a counterfeit note/
Buying a fake gun/
To protect her life/ Until the building collapses/ Huabei Plain is covered by dark/ Her face is
covered by sorrow/
High school attached to Hebei Normal University/ The boy plays ping-pong faced me with
his back/ Gaze silently at the classroom/ Which students hate to stay
To live a life by experience/ Until the building collapses/ Thousands of runaway horses/
Racing in his mind
To live a life like this for 30 years/ Until the building collapses/ The dark behind the
clouds…ah/ Conceals the landscape in the heart

The song again shows the recurring theme in Chinese indie music—being helpless. The text is
beautifully constructed as one listener manages to interpret it through the different period of
modernization in China. According to this listener, the song shows how, after every social
development, there is hope being trashed. For example, the lyrics states that “in 30 years, the
building [of an ideal life] collapses,” after introducing a worker’s disciplined life in the
beginning. With the introduction of a market economy, the worker is no longer restrained by a
planned economy, s/he can buy things at the octagonal counter in a department store. Yet another
collapse of building reveals the laid-off life following the early 1990s economic downturn. The
song shows that every time people think a promising life has just arrived, they will find their
expectation soon to be dismissed.162 What is worse, another listener comments that “like the
runaway horses in the lyrics, suddenly given the freedom, people fail to search for their dreams
because they already lost the direction.”163 Omnipotent Youth Society is recognized as the best
mainland Chinese indie band. On their album listeners can also find the lo-fi element in that the
eight-minute-long “Qinghuangdao” sounds like a poor cut from the computer system. Besides

162 Chen!, “Kill that Shijiazhuang People,”

that, Omnipotent Youth Society keeps its indie identity by controlling the composing speed to maintain creativity and high quality. They consider themselves to be grazing the band in the city center. The vocalist claims that “I hope our band could live like ‘the grazed sheep,’ being very independent, receiving less media supervision, and aiming less at profit-seeking sales.”

After all, indie, an imported expressive form, could be analyzed as a dialogic process of globalization. However, much influenced by mainstream popular music and Chinese rock music, Chinese indie music is inevitably an encoded cultural product of dominant political/economic ideology. *Xiao qingxin* is manipulated by the mainstream to dominate the market, while Modernsky shows the ambition of Chinese rock music going overseas and becoming legitimate. The indie identity lies in a few bands and musicians who stick to their own rules and write aimless, effortless, or futile pieces.

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CHAPTER FIVE: DOUBAN, MAKO LIVE HOUSE AND TAN RECORD STORE—
DISCOVERING INDIE DISSEMINATION IN MAINLAND CHINA

Unlike its Western predecessors, Chinese indie music flourishes, in a reverse order, from online communities to offline venues, then to indie specified record stores. It is first largely promoted on a website named “Douban [豆瓣].” After accumulating a plethora of fans, indie music reaches offline. Followers gather at musical festivals and live houses. In 2010, I found a Beijing record store that sells only Chinese indie music. The fact that Chinese indie music is disseminated without boundaries convinced me that it has reached its full bloom: it is available on both CD and mp3 files; and it can be found both online and offline.

The indie dissemination reveals what Bourdieu may argue “the process of predisposed cultural consumption, in which taste classifies the classifier.” It is a process how indie audiences accept the codes of aimless, effortless and futile aesthetics encoded in their reception. Thus when coming to the audiences, indie music is “naively” believed by them to represent autonomy and freedom, which allows audiences to enjoy music in quite a different way than usual. What makes the indie musical experience different is the initial process of free-searching and free-sharing on the internet, the subsequent process of getting to know the musicians in real life, and the last process of collecting an artist’s real CD; all of them seems to be self-determined and self-controlled.

Based on the above theoretical assumption, this chapter will examine: Who construct the

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166 Bourdieu argues that “Intellectuals could be said to believe in the representation—literature, theatre, painting—more than in the things represented, whereas the people chiefly expect representations and the conventions which govern them to allow them to believe ‘naively’ in the things represented.” Bourdieu, “Distinction,” 469.
indie audiences? How are the indie aesthetics discussed in Chapter Four translated by these audiences? In order to get the insider knowledge, I have conducted ethnographic interviews with indie fans, asking questions related to standards, forms and functions of appreciating the indie music. This chapter follows the route of indie music development, so it is divided into three sections: the online information base Douban, the Mako Livehouse show and follow-up interviews with livehouse frequenters, and the indie music store tour.

**Douban, a Specific Space on the Unlimited Internet**

Studies have shown people’s online behavior mirrors their real world relations and ideologies. Larissa Hjorth states that “online practices reflect offline relations and ideologies,” and Sherry Turkle discusses that “people who live their second life on the computer screen are still bound with the desires and pain of their real selves.” Douban website, which is a “main online information source on signed and unsigned Chinese bands, offers images, track listings, upcoming gig information and links to artists’ sites, providing information unavailable elsewhere and serving as an extremely useful promotional tool for label producers.” The website has not only represented a group of people with special interests but also collects a community of interests that later became the foundation of indie music. The relationships between musicians and listeners, between label producers and musicians, and between fans themselves, are established and reinforced by the website.

Launched by the end of 2004, the Douban website helps users find books, movies, music

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records, services and people that are valuable to them.\textsuperscript{170} Users praise Douban for “its clean and simple style as well as fast accessibility.”\textsuperscript{171} The website is built with the intention of creating a space where people who have the same interests can share their experiences with each other. According to a survey by Douban, “the majority of users are between the ages of 20 and 30. Most are college students and white-collar workers.”\textsuperscript{172} It is considered, by the creator Yang Bo, a place where “idealism and commercialization can coexist with each other.”\textsuperscript{173}

The original Douban started with book reviews. Following that, the website developed the group [小組] section, where people who are interested in a particular subject can gather together and discuss it; for instance, there is a group named “readers of Chinese writer Yu Hua” [余華讀者] where readers share comments and reflections on his works. Now the website consists of: reviews for books, movies, TV shows, and music; events [同城]; Douban FM, the website’s own online radio station; and Jiudian[九點], a blog subscription site.

Douban serves as a very important platform for users to exchange information on their topics of interest. As a review-based website, Douban gives users rights to vote and voice their opinions, making the personal experience of reading, listening, and watching visible to others. In this way it familiarizes a new book or movie or example of music for web browsers; while letting two people, previously unknown to each other, find interests in common by reading his/her reviews and scores shown on the personal homepage. The website works similarly to

\textsuperscript{170} Jing Xiaolei, “‘Maverick’ of the Internet, the website Douban.com thrives in a difficult environment by offering something different,” \textit{Beijing Review} (December 28, 2006), 24.

\textsuperscript{171} Jing, “Maverick of the Internet,” 24.

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 26.
Amazon.com, where you buy one book and, the next time you log on, books with similar topics or in the same genre will be recommended for you. Once users display their reading/watching/listening history on their Douban homepage, the website will begin to recommend similar things when they log on to their accounts. The review system, along with the recommendation function of the website, certainly helps to introduce new books, movies, and music to users. Besides this, the Douban group helps to gather people of the same interests together, invite them to meet with new friends, and go offline to participate in actual events.

In answering my question “how do you know about and acquire indie music?” 12 out of 15 survey respondents replied “friends recommended.” Accordingly, a friend’s reference plays an important role in disseminating indie music. But how does this work? And why do indie listeners buy it? What kind of role has Douban played in such communication? In this section, I am using the band Omnipotent Youth Society as an example to show how this band is introduced to the browsers on Douban and then receives popularity from them.

Omnipotent Youth Society was formed as early as 1996. But it wasn’t until 2010 that their first album, *Omnipotent Youth Society*, was released. Their album cover was put on the alternative magazine *So Rock* [我愛搖滾樂]^{174} and highly recommended by listeners on the Douban website. It has scored 9.1 of 10 and 20179 people have given their scores, among them 64.8% rate five-star, meaning “highly recommended,” according to the website.^{175} For a Douban frequenter who is unfamiliar with the band, the score and rating are high enough to make one want to try the album. For those who are not number-oriented, the album page gives reader a

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^{174} The magazine published its issue 104 in November of 2010 with a song by Omnipotent Youth Society included in the gift CD.

very long introduction which reads like a personal blog, very informal but friendly enough to close the gap between listeners and producer that is caused by mainstream standardized promotion. The introduction begins with telling where the recording took place: “Our recording studio is the same place where we do the rehearsal, before that it’s at Dong Yaqian’s old home, a four-story red brick building where most dwellers are old people.” It then tells a lot of the poor living conditions and their lack of recording skills and equipment. From the writing, readers can tell how sincere they are and how hard it was to make this album. Also, the album’s introduction indicates to listeners how unprofessional they are. With the “Thank you” at the end, it reads like this album is just another live performance by the band, and the 8-paragraph piece is just some warm-up words. Following the album introduction and song list are the Douban recommended albums for people who listen to Omnipotent Youth Society. The albums listed are all indie, Don’t Stop My Music by Miserable Faith and Mr. Van Gogh by Li Zhi, for example. This recommendation not only helps to categorize the music by Omnipotent Youth Society but also helps listeners to define their interests. After the recommendation are the album reviews. Douban divides the reviews into two types: the most popular reviews and the newest reviews; but it’s only after clicking “newest comments” or “the comments count,” that users can read other comments than the most popular ones. For Omnipotent Youth Society, the most popular comments discuss musicality, lyrics, album concept, to the band’s history for listeners. In reading these reviews, listeners have been led to appreciate particular aspects of the band and their music pieces. The reviews also at times provide lyrics from the album, helping those who download online to read the beautifully written words.

To read the album page is just the beginning of a Douban tour of knowing an indie band. The next step for indie listeners is to find the band’s group and site on Douban. Omnipotent
Youth Society group was established as early as 2007; members of it have grown from 42\textsuperscript{176} to now 9691\textsuperscript{177}. Discussion varies from band interviews by magazines and newspaper, band tour inquiries, song appreciation and analysis, band member fandom, musical skills sharing, band information sharing, and so forth. Joining the group enables listeners from different places to share mutual understanding. Such understanding later becomes insider knowledge. An indie community is thus formed.

Douban functions as a window of display; it not only shows what musicians think and their works, the Omnipotent Youth Society group allows the band members and fans to communicate with each other, and it also gives listeners and musicians respective space to show their works and opinions. For Omnipotent Youth Society, they have a Douban site\textsuperscript{178} that gives them space to write blogs, which the band members use to show their album making, and publish their new songs and other DIY works, like T-shirts.\textsuperscript{179} A musician’s site also gives both the band and fans the right to post music videos and photos.\textsuperscript{180} Such free sharing provides listeners who are unable to join the live performance a chance to watch it online, and those who have been there a chance to show respect to the band, and re-enter the scene whenever they want to. This free sharing has connected musicians and listeners together, making every step the band has made more participatory for audiences. Lastly, the site confirms events for audiences who might discuss the band’s tour. For fans, it is always good to know where to stop by and see Omnipotent Youth


\textsuperscript{178} See http://site.douban.com/omnipotent/.

\textsuperscript{179} See http://site.douban.com/omnipotent/room/103565/.

\textsuperscript{180} See http://site.douban.com/omnipotent/room/103576/.
Society, even if they cannot make the trip. After all, these event updates are definitely another insiders’ privilege. Indie music must be learning this from mainstream fan clubs, but reworks it as a community ritual.

**Going offline: A One Night Xiao qingxin Experience at Mako Livehouse**

As a Douban frequenter, not long before I started my interview with indie fans and musicians, I followed the Douban event notice to an indie pop music concert. The unique experience reminded me how indie music is connected from online to offline, and how indie is conceptualized through offline activity. My journey happened during the summer two years ago:

A stack of cards scattered on a desk covered with red velvet, two people were sitting behind it. “RMB 50 yuan [approximately 7 US dollars] for the show’s ticket, students with ID will be RMB 40 yuan [approximately 5 dollars],” the cashier’s indifferent voice pulled me out of my imagined entrance to the community. I did not know it would be slightly pricey for people who came randomly to watch a live show at Mako. But the price somehow restated that here indie music favored students, or members of the community, as the cashier added that if we had bought it online in advance, which was common among indie fans, the price would have been only RMB 40 yuan each.

Entering Mako, we saw a 5-meter-high model of the Transformer *Optimus Prime* to the right of the stage and close to the bar. Tables and chairs were set in the middle of the venue as well as on the second floor attic. The roof kept its original steel beams. Overall, the live house looked like a piece of post-industrial debris under the watchful gaze of Chinese youth’s childhood hero.

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182 The notice reads, “*Need to Breath* Concert, Beijing X Hong Kong, We Accompany You to Share the Taste of the Two Cities,” [http://www.douban.com/event/12268798/](http://www.douban.com/event/12268798/).
We arrived early, around 10-15 people were at the scene, sitting at the table in the middle area. The performers were relaxing at the front seats, and there was no blocked area that we listeners cannot pass or enter. Soon after 20:30, the live performance begins. The girl performed with a keyboard, with the slow melody sliding from the audio system, the environment cools down and becomes silent. There were only melody and clinks of beer glass floating in the air. One of my friends blinked at me, making a face to show that she feels the little freshness (xiao qingxin) in this song. When the first song was done, we were like in a dream, too lazy to respond to the ending. I looked at people surrounding me; nobody seemed to give applause to the girl. The singing kept going. It took around 30 minutes for the first singer to finish her performance. And this time, the audience, now around 50 people, clapped and talked. But this crowdedness was short-lived; soon after the second singer took the guitar on stage. The venue became quiet again. The singer merely talked, but the audiences began to chat in very low voices. Some people left the venue in the middle of the performance. And my friend went out for a cigarette. One or two members of the audience began to take pictures. I felt the singer’s song had become the

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background sound. Yet, the performance was never interrupted. The singer was so engrossed in her performance that the mellow, quiet music kept on and on. Even I was bored and chilled, yet it seemed there never was an end. Finally, my friend said to me, “this is too much.” Then we noticed the singer stopped and began to introduce her new piece. The talk was like a relief for the audience, everyone listened to her then. Shortly after the music began, the singer was abandoned, but she enjoyed herself very much. The last performer turned out to be a blessing. The live performance ended with electronic indie pop, which immediately burned the peaceful venue with passion and refreshment.

This experience has made me question why people hang out at indie music, especially indie pop scene. Later that winter, I went to Beijing again, and asked my question to people who frequently visited live house performances. Most of my survey participants tell me that they enjoy a relaxing environment with pure music surrounding them.

“The musical experience of xiao qingxin is isolated from the outside chaos world. I feel I return to where I was born. No industrialization, no need to worry about the pollution. Everything is so clean, including the vocal’s voice.” Teresa, 24, a graduate student in Beijing, said.

“Indie music is unique, you know, the feeling that this music can only be made by one singer. I hate to find imitation in popular music. Though not all indie music is good, there are definitely talented ones…say, Dou Wei.” Zongyang Tan, a media professional, said.

“I love the lyrics and musical forms in indie music. At least they are not kitsch.” Jessie, a graduate student, said.

“Mainland China’s popular music has the worst attitude towards industrial operation, from its lyrics to music production, they lack a clear goal. I love indie music which has better
attitude.” Glen, a government staff person, said.

“The melody is great.” Zhou, who works in the service industry, said.

“Indie has got the mood, like the ancient Chinese poetry can present a synaesthetic image of fallen flowers, running waters, and flying birds. Indie reaches our inner world.” Rui Lu, a graduate student, said.

These respondents lead me to conclude that indie music is beyond simple listening entertainment. The live house goers find in live performance a place to visualize their dreamed images and lives. The singer’s engrossment in her musical performance matters more than her actual work. Attitudes, thought, and sympathy solidify their unique existence in Chinese popular music. Since indie voices are independent, individuals choose their own roles at live performance scenes and they are free to do anything. This explains why the first two performances were not attractive but both audiences and singers enjoyed their time. What is more, there are times that listeners cry when they hear an indie singer sing.

“I have listeners telling me they listen to my work ‘dreamland’ when they break up, they cry as they listen.” Fan Shiqi, an indie musician said.

Wendy Fonarow has argued that, for indie, “‘authentic’ music is personal, live, youthful, organic, self-made, original, and motivated by concerns of artistic expression rather than commercial acquisition.” 185 In the world of indie, feeling is free to express. Indie music gives both musicians and listeners a pure space to vent. Hence, to quote Bourdieu, the indie musical experience reveals a “popular aesthetics which in fact is an affirmation of continuity between art and life and reflects the subordination of form to function.” 186 Indie music is expected to function as an ideological escape from the tough, chaos real life.

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185 Fonarow, 188.

186 Bourdieu, 469.
Consuming Indie: taN Record Store

My last stop in Beijing was at a boutique named taN Record Store (taN, see pictures on the last page). I found this store from one of my interviewee’s 1724[拾柒貳肆] records. The store was located at heizhima Alley in Nanluo guxiang, a cultural district where boutiques and bars line both sides of the street. The visit allowed me to find how indie music is materialized, and the aesthetics fans are willing to pay for.

My interview with the shop assistant happened in the winter of 2010. The assistant told me that the store opens for people touring at Nanluo guxiang. These tourists sometimes buy their records. One group of customers that interests the assistant is high school students.

“They listen to everything, even for albums that I personally feel it sounds depressed, they will buy and love it,” the shop assistant said.

taN also attracts indie fans to buy an indie musician’s CDs in real life. The best seller at that time, according to the assistant, was Omnipotent Youth Society, which sold 200. Other popular ones include albums by Li Zhi, who is very popular on Douban. taN sells 1724 label products, and the assistant recommends that I try the band Thumb Girl, who is also under 1724.

According to this visit, in the real world, indie music is sold following how it is popularized on the internet. It is free on the internet, then priced for gig-goers and album consumers. Sales depends on how popular the musician or band is on the internet and how well-received the music has been in live performance. Producers seem to spend time on the look of an album. We can see from the picture I took in that store, that the albums on the stack look quite different from one another, and every one of them has its own style. Some producers use plastic boxes, others design a letter-like cover, while some other producers choose iron as the cover material.

Overall, this chapter describes how indie disseminates, from online to offline, from internet
files to products in the real life. Indie self-control is passed down from performer to audience by enjoying an absolutely free mind. Yet, indie is a collective enjoyment; fans and musicians dwell in a group and form a community where insider knowledge has been created. Aesthetics have been added to the materialization of an album, indie producers try hard to make their works unique not only by sound and by lyrics, but also by the look of the album.
CONCLUSION

Though Chinese indie music has reached overseas, relevant academic studies available for western readers are rare. I consider myself the unabashedly first researcher to introduce Chinese indie music to western academia. With the generous help of the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University, and the help of Dr. Jeremy Wallach who patiently and carefully reviews every details in my thesis; this two-year project has finally reached its closing.

Chinese indie music was born and developed at a time when the entertainment industry in mainland China reached its bloom. It was a time when fierce competition has been on: there were plenty ways to get fame, and many young Chinese raced for it. It was a time when singers could be anywhere: as invisible as only his/her music is played on the internet page, or as glamorous as she could be presented on the nationwide broadcasting reality TV show like Supergirl, whose 2005 winning contestant even caught interests of the Times magazine in US. It was a time when success was read through the ownership of popular consumer products, the Apple product for example. It was, overall, the last time for an art form like indie that looked self-controlled, less commercialized, and futile to flourish. But indie music won, not only did it occupy the mainstream popular music, wiping out the fickleness and flamboyancy over those commercialized songs; but also did it reintroduce alternative rock and underground musicians to the center of the popular music realm.

Because indie music is new for Chinese, and it as a subject is new for academia. I choose to track the contemporary history of Chinese popular music to find how indie music could be developed in China. Since my study is based on the assumption that there are indispensable relationships between indie and the mainstream, indie and the Chinese rock music; I am not providing a unitary and detailed analysis on Chinese indie music as a whole. However, I believe
there will be future studies that focus on the sole subject. Meanwhile, I have read great books that studied British indie music from its performance to its implications of gender roles. I anticipate studies on Chinese indie music will elaborate on these subjects too. So far, as Chinese indie music has incorporated so many interesting aspects including, ethnic and cultural traditions, youth rebellions, underground styles, the attitude that the mainstream is desperately in need of, the rejuvenation of female artists, and the special aesthetics, my study is only a tiny bite of the big apple and it will be expanded in the future.

In this thesis project, I untie the knot between Chinese popular music and Chinese rock music, between pop, rock, and indie, to see individually what each type of music has encoded. Here are my findings:

As discussed in Chapter One, mainstream Chinese popular music is subject to the dominant political/economic ideologies, so that it becomes a propaganda tool for cultivating audiences to conform to collectivism, consumerism, and nationalism. In order to attract audiences from every walk of life, mainstream Chinese popular music constantly absorbs diverse forms of music, commercializes them, and sells the music in a designed framework such as the annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala to standardize the audiences’ subjectivity.

Chinese rock music, on the other hand, is a borrowed musical form that keeps seeking its authenticity, identity, and spirit. Rock music inherits capitalist and globalization ideologies. It becomes the angry counterpart of the mainstream, for it voices too many resistant opinions. Rock music battles between politics and arts; such struggle influences how a Western musical form is localized in mainland China. While the rock circle is formed, rockers seldom get along with each other. This has made Chinese rock music less powerful to tackle the mainstream, but more easily absorbed and oppressed. As the condition gets complicated, rockers face the dilemma of whether
to rock or not.

I spent three chapters discussing Chinese popular music and Chinese rock music mainly because they are the birth mothers for Chinese indie music. Indie reworks codes of collectivism and resistance from the conflicting parents, thus getting a free pass to travel on both sides. It is the mainstream followers, the Chinese rockers, the underground strugglers, who produce indie. Self-control, collective freedom and indie aesthetics give indie music a vivacious, strong existence in Chinese popular music. Travelling free from side to side, indie musicians have such control of themselves that neither the authorities nor profit will scare them away from their ideals.

In the end, when tying indie, mainstream and rock back together. I find that indie music gathers fans from free internet to local live scenes then to self-determined consumption. They vividly reflect a new popular aesthetics that the dominant culture has disposed in indie. Indie music in China does not come out all of a sudden; it is a long process of degrading the mainstream and re-expanding of alternatives. To sum up, Chinese indie music reworks mainstream consumption, yet with the help of the internet, it does not leave musicians unnoticed.
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HSRB APPROVAL LETTER

December 10, 2010

TO: Menghan Liu
POPC

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H11TI00GE7

TITLE: Exploring Indie Music in China

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of December 10, 2010, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on November 28, 2011. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (or email: herb@bgsu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/Modifications:
Please add text equivalent to the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp to the “footer” area of the consent document.

c: Dr. Jeremy Wallach

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7