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Sound, Protest and Business. Modern Sky Co. and the New Ideology of Chinese Rock.

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By the end of the 1990s, popular music in China has become a rather diverse cultural field of differing musical activities and ideologies. In the realm of rock, three generations of musicians move between idealism and heroism, modern realism, and just plain fun. Their struggle over genre, style and meaning is visible in a number of music journals, internet home pages, interviews, and lyrics. Due to China's music industry, which has been expanding rapidly over the last decade, the present range of commercially produced popular music styles covers everything from socialist-pop, *gangtai* light music¹, heavy metal and mainstream rock, to new wave, punk, and even jazz music.² Beijing, praised as the "Hollywood of Chinese Rock" (*yaogun yue de Haolaiwu*)³, is still the centre of these musical activities, with young musicians coming from all parts of China.

Since the early nineties, Chinese rock music has not only been produced and distributed by foreign and Chinese state-run companies, but also by private music companies which, despite the genre's ideological difficulties in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its restricted access to radio and TV programmes, have the courage to record new talents, who are said to form the new mainstream of China's music business. One of the young companies involved is "Modern Sky" (*Modeng Tiankong*), founded in Beijing in 1997. The label signed contracts with bands like "New Pants", "Sober", "The Fly", "Catcher in the Rye", "NO" and several other individual musicians, e.g. Hu Mage and Chen Dili, who came to the forefront and are said to have marked the beginning of what is called "Beijing's New Sound Movement" (*Beijing Xinsheng Yundong*) or "'98 Rock's New Wave" ('98 *Yaogun Xin Lanchao*).⁴

"New Sound" and Ideology

In the following I will look at culture as a signifying practice and a "particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group".⁵ An analysis of modern popular culture, following this definition, must take into account that the subject of study is a negotiated compromise of commercial interests, the mass media, cultural policy, and the consuming audience.⁶ Through this compromise, as John Storey argues in line with Stuart Hall, popular

¹ *Gangtai Yinyue*: gang-tai is an abbreviation used for a particular style of light music (*qing yinyue*) coming from Hong Kong (*Xianggang*) and Taiwan. It is the most popular and dominant music style in the PRC, especially in the south.

² On jazz in China see Rea 1997:129-138 and Storb 2000:18-19.

³ See Fa Man 1998, in the Hong Kong journal "Huasheng".

⁴ See Wang Jiang 1999:26.

⁵ See the definition by Raymond Williams, in: Storey 1993:2.

⁶ I shall also refer to Link, Madson and Pickowicz (1989:3-4), who give the following definition: "In this book, the term popular culture centers around the tension between state and society, [...] popular culture defined as distinct from official culture, that is, the official ideology of the Chinese state. Popular culture, as the term is

culture transforms into a site where "collective social understandings are created" (Storey 1993:5). Ideology, as he points out, "is a crucial concept in the study of popular culture" (Ibid.:2). For Storey, it "is the terrain on which takes place a hegemonic struggle to restrict connotations, to produce new connotations, to fix particular connotations, to produce new connotations" (Ibid.:6). The notion of ideology is particularly useful for an understanding of "New Sound" (*Xinsheng*), which is a relatively young phenomenon in Beijing and not to be confused with "New Music" (*Xin Yinyue*).⁷

First of all, it is the "movement" of a new generation of musicians who are described as being financially independent because of either their job qualification or a well-off family background. They do not carry the burden having to introduce a new art form into Chinese society as the generation before, and regard rock music only as a means for having fun (*yule fangshi*) (Hong Feng 1999:28). "These musicians," writes Hong Feng (1999:29),

"grew up in the calm and quiet 1980s, they had enough food and clothes and information from all around. They had the freedom to choose whatever they wanted, and music was just a means to directly express themselves. They don't need to propagate any idealism, and they don't need to find an excuse for their own music to be interesting to listen to. They are just finishing their album in the middle of a game."

Although these words appear as a rather general statement and surely do not cover all the musicians involved, they reveal a creative spirit which ultimately presents music with a formerly unknown attitude. Obviously, China's cultural, social, and economic changes of the nineties have culminated into a new form of musical practice and ideology that currently receives nation-wide recognition.⁸ However, in China's print media, the movement is played down as an only temporary expression of a group of young people, who — according to their lyrics — have nothing or little to say. On the other hand, it is seen as a positive and necessary new style that adds another "voice" to the growing diversity of China's culture, and above all demonstrates her liberalising policies.⁹ These statements, nevertheless, follow a particular official rhetoric and seem to ignore that the movement has already established its own distribution network and successfully circumvented cultural institutions — as well as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cultural hegemony — in Beijing. Therefore, the term "New Sound", as will become clear later, is not limited to the production of new sounds. It bears different connotations and must be read as a trade-mark, a synonym for a new understanding of cultural and musical activity. In fact, as a closer look reveals, what is going on behind the scenes must be considered not only as a new *Zeitgeist* and "a way of life", but also as a discussion over the meaning of culture, i.e., an ideological challenge directed against the dominance of Beijing's

used here, consists of ideas, beliefs, and practices that have origins at least partially independent of the state. [...] Popular culture includes any kind of culture that has its origin in the social side of the tension between state and society".

⁷ "New Music" usually denotes the new popular rock music that was produced by Taiwan's Rock Records & Tapes Co. and Hong Kong's Dadi Record Co. in the early nineties, e.g., Dou Wei, Zhang Chu, Tang Dynasty, etc. On April 4, 1998, a festival was held in Xinxiang, Henan province, bearing the title: "1998 China New Music Concert" (*1998 Zhongguo Xin Yinyue Yanchanghui*). The concert featured the bands Tang Dynasty, 1989, Overload, Cobra, Sober, Lingdian, Again, Baojiajie No. 43, and Compass. See: Fa Man 1998.

⁸ According to Wang Jiang (1999:26), Beijing's New Sound inspires musicians from Beijing to Guangzhou, Nanchang, Lanzhou, Wuhan and Xinjiang province.

⁹ An overview is given in a variety of short articles by Wang Jiang, Hong Feng, Zhang Xiaodan and Yan Jun in *Yinxiang Shijie* 139(May 1999):26-31.

older music guard.¹⁰

Instead of looking at Beijing's New Sound as only a short-time phenomenon, I shall argue that these musicians do not propagate rock as a liberalising force anymore. They just "do it" within a newly negotiated economic, cultural and socio-political space. My argument is that throughout this process meaning has, in a certain way, shifted from word to sound. While the two previous generations tried to create rock music with Chinese characteristics, and often emphasised the expression of their thoughts and feelings through lyrics, the new generation integrates them into an overall concept of sound. Here, more attention is given to technical skills and musical experiments, adopting Western music styles and global sounds which, as I will demonstrate, does not minimise the meaning of lyrics in general. Words are still written in order to articulate individual stories, but differently and for a new audience. The identification with sound can be interpreted as both a form of resistance against the heavy ideological questions that occupied the old guard, and as a logical compromise of the various participants involved in cultural production, namely the musicians, the music industry, and PRC government policy. As a result, underground rock (*dixia/diceng yaogun*) has turned into an accepted way of "lived" cultural and even socio-political protest, which is available as a commodity in China's music stores today.

In order to address Beijing's New Sound Movement and focus on its future prospects, I will proceed in three steps: The first part summarises the situation of Chinese rock in the early nineties and characterises the political climate between 1996 and 1998. I will then introduce the record label Modern Sky, discuss some of the bands involved and suggest readings of their lyrics as circulating stories that create a new form of young urban discourse. Finally, I shall focus on several opinions concerning Beijing's "New Sound" in China and try to assess its position in the reality of Beijing's present music business.

Ten Years After: Chinese Rock, Still a Revolution?

After the Tian'anmen Massacre in June 1989, the number of rock bands in Beijing increased dramatically. Over the years, however, the genre has changed, and not only because of the PRC's ideological, social, and economic development. Another reason was that, consciously or not, several musicians agreed to "koutou" to a politically responsible and economically motivated music industry in order to reach their goals and release records. Chinese rock has obviously lost its formerly criticised "rebellious spirit" (*fanpan jingshen*) and transformed into a politically lighter version. This process allowed the genre to enter into the mainstream of Chinese popular music. Andrew Jones writes that, by 1994, Chinese rock, "although it remains at the margins of state-sanctioned culture, can no longer be characterised as an unambiguously counterhegemonic form." Instead, Jones continues, "rock music's gradual absorption into China's burgeoning market economy has defused much of its politically opposing potential" (Jones 1994:149).

¹⁰ The "movement", its ideology and links to other elements of popular culture are documented in an art-like high-quality publication, presented by China's famous music critics Ou Ning (publisher) and Yan Jun (author), entitled "Beijing Xinsheng - The New Sound of Beijing", A Sonic China Project, Changsha 1999. Zhang Xueying (2000:48-49) argues in his book review that Ou Ning articulates his views on the movement in a new style which destroys previous reports on Chinese rock, similar to how rock music blew away traditional music. According to Zhang, the book has mounted into a rather ambiguous discussion. Critics claim that its experimental layout was only chosen in order to increase the book sales, while others regard it as a revolutionary work which could help to promote China's social development.

One year later, in 1995, the China Record Corporation (Beijing), released a CD entitled "Chinese Rock Classics" (*Zhongguo Yaogun Jingdian*), emphasising rock music's officially approved access to the world of popular consumer culture. The CD's twelve songs, as the leaflet says, are the "representative works from eight relatively famous and active bands, including Heavy Metal Rock, Blues Rock and Soft Rock; their materials of subject were collected from the countryside, the cities and the western part of China, the style is varied." The CD was compiled and published in order to commemorate China's rock music history and the compositional output of what is termed "10 years way of hardships."¹¹ The text goes on: "Through ten years of struggle, Rock eventually possessed a space in China's music circles, and the Rock Music discs produced in China sell well at home and abroad, this is a matter for congratulation."¹² The analogy one can read behind this rhetoric seems somewhat puzzling. Was the reference of "ten years of struggle" not formerly meant to denote the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976)? Is the history of rock in China likely to proceed in predictable ten year steps, starting with an initial phase of learning, copying and studying (1976-1986), to its transformation from political protest to commercial success (1986-1996), ultimately leading to a "New Sound" in 1997? Or shall these words just remind the audience that this was not just another but the "real" cultural revolution? No clear answers are given, though it was obviously time for a perspective piece, as we can see in the well-documented book entitled "Ten Years — 1986-1996: The History of Chinese Popular Music", which features several articles concerning the decay of Chinese rock.¹³ Additionally, various articles and books have been written on this subject, in China, Taiwan, and in the West.¹⁴ Within these ten years, the genre underwent several changes, either in musical form, practice, distribution, lyrical content, or ideological meaning. With special regard to tape and CD sales, the Asia-wide distribution via MTV-Asia and foreign record companies, music videos and VCDs, one can say that Chinese rock has surely changed from a mere underground counter-culture into one of the many commodity items of popular culture. Nevertheless, the mainstream (*zhuliu*) still consists of popular light music as it is coming from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chinese rock has become nothing but another — though still controversial — "voice" of the Mainland, especially Beijing, and is accepted as a style in its own right. Even the Hong Kong music journal "Music Colony" (*Yinyue Zhimindi*) acknowledged in August 1996: "It seems as if the Mainland is destined to be the place for rock music. Hong Kong and Taiwan only know how to produce stars and idols" (Au 1996:13).

Chinas Music Industry: Cultural Policy, the Market and the Masses, 1996-1998

At a national conference held by various directors of propaganda departments of the CCP in January 1996, it was decided that the mass media continue to remain under the control of the CCP.¹⁵ The power of party secretaries will be strengthened in order to more efficiently

¹¹ China's rock music history began in 1986, when Cui Jian's now-famous song "Nothing to My Name" (*Yi Wu Suo You*) appeared in public for the first time.

¹² See the leaflet of "Chinese Rock Classics" (*Zhongguo Yaogun Jingdian*), China Record Corporation, Beijing 1995.

¹³ Chin.: *Shi nian - Zhongguo liuxing yinyue jishi*, published by Beijing Hantang Culture Development Co., Ltd., Beijing 1997.

¹⁴ See, for example, Weng 1992, Zhao Jianwei 1992, Brace and Friedlander 1992, Jones 1992, Xue 1993, Heberer 1994, Steen 1996.

¹⁵ See: "Die Medien müssen unter der Kontrolle der Partei bleiben" - Machtzuwachs für den KP-

control the activities of publishing houses and radio stations. Official policy underlined the aim "to strengthen the foundation of a socialist spiritual civilisation" (*shehui jingshen wenming jianshe*), as was confirmed on the 6th Plenum of the 14th Central Committee in October.¹⁶ With these guidelines in mind, the following chapter will focus on the widening gap between official Party rhetoric and social practice.¹⁷

In 1996, China's officials launched campaigns against drug abuse and corruption, crime, peasant unrest, pornography, and the internet.¹⁸ Notwithstanding these problems and threats against CCP hegemony, the overall feeling was that of a growing nationalism culminating in the publication of a book called "China Can Say No" (*Zhongguo Keyi Shuo Bu*), which became an immediate best-seller. Popular anti-American sentiments as they were articulated in the book had already taken shape since the early 1990s. On the other hand, China's violations of copyright laws had caused the USA a loss of around US\$2 billion each year. It was in May that year that the US threatened China with trade sanctions. Although the PRC had passed its own copyright laws already in September 1990, the results were not satisfying.¹⁹ According to estimates of the International Federation of Phonographic Industry and Chinese authorities, about 22 companies were involved in the illegal production of discs [video (VCDs/DVDs) 40%, PC software (CD-ROMs) 30%, music (CDs) 30%]. As it happened, it remained to be only a threat, because on May 20th President Clinton signed the Most Favoured Nation clause without any preconditions.²⁰

In the beginning of 1997, China's official state newspaper, the "People's Daily" (*Renmin Ribao*), published the "Regulations for the Administration of the Publication Sector" (*Chuban Guanli Tiaoli*), consisting of seven chapters and 57 paragraphs.²¹ The regulations underline the official policy and simultaneously reveal the fear that the publication sector might run out of control.²² In the PRC, the music sector alone is said to consist of 296 music publication companies (*yinxiang chuban danwei*), which employ 17,724 workers and amount to a total capital funding of RMB 5,200 million (= US\$ 626.5 million). The companies provide the material to supply roughly 30 million private households with hi-fi equipment. Compared with these figures, the annual buying rate of about one million legal tapes

Propagandaapparat, in: China aktuell, 1/1996:9.

¹⁶ See: Das 6. Plenum des XIV. KP-Zentralkomitees: Aufrufe zur geistig-ideologischen Erneuerung, in: China aktuell, 10/1996:953; und: ZK-Beschluß zu wichtigen Problemen der sozialistischen geistigen Zivilisation, in: China aktuell, 10/1996:961.

¹⁷ See also Saich 1994.

¹⁸ In February, the "Preliminary Regulations for the Control of the Internet" (17 paragraphs) were published, and in October, China started its own internet provider, "Infohighway Space", in eight cities. See: China kontrolliert Zugang zum Internet, in: China aktuell 2/1996:148; China beschränkt Zugang zum Internet, in: ibid., 9/1996:860; China startet eigenes Internet, in: ibid., 11/1996:1054.

¹⁹ The Copyright-law of the Peoples' Republic of China (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zhuzuo Quantà*) of Sept. 7, 1990 came into force on June 1, 1991. See: Copyright-Gesetz passiert Ständigen Ausschuß des NVK, in: China aktuell, 9/1990:700-702; auch: Song Muwen 1999:16.

²⁰ See: Konflikt um Urheberrechte: USA drohen China mit Handelssanktionen, in: China aktuell 5/1996:486-487.

²¹ Chapter 3, Art. 25, gives a list of eight items which are forbidden to be published, ranging from anything that is against the Four Cardinal Principles of socialist rule, to the spreading of pornography, superstition and violence, up to hurting China's "unique national cultural tradition." See: Erlaß von Vorschriften für das Verlagswesen, in: China aktuell, 1/1997:14-15.

²² One article mentions an annual publication of more than 120,000 books, 8,000 different journals and magazines, and 12,000 music tapes/CDs (*yinxiang chuban*) (Song Muwen 1999:13).

(consisting of music, and children and language programs) seems to be relatively meagre (Zou Jianhua 1999:5). However, the Chinese population spends about RMB 200 million (US\$ 25.1 million) per year on various forms of music products (*yinxiang zhipin*).²³ Having these estimates in mind, Zhou Jianchao, managing director of the China Record Corporation (Shanghai), concludes that the content of some items produced might clearly serve as "spiritual culture products" (*jingshen wenming chanpin*). But, as he says, musical products exist because they are commercial products (*shangpin*), and their use value is only realised through exchange. Since the use value is mainly determined by entertainment, identification and education, the companies will fulfil these needs of the masses in order to make profit.²⁴ What he describes is, in other words, the conflict between the PRC's mass media and state policy. Probably as a result of the new regulations, 227 newspapers and 346 journals were forced to stop publication in 1997, either because of their quality or for violating the law.²⁵ Between 1994 and 1998, according to official reports, Chinese authorities confiscated nearly 30 million illegal books and periodicals on the one hand, and 35 million illegal audio- and video products on the other. In late 1998, the government announced the continuation of the campaign throughout 1999.²⁶

The above given outline of the CCP's censorship partly demonstrates the efforts that were undertaken to control critical public discourse within the publication sector. An example of how much of an effect theoretical concerns and official cultural policies, aimed at the construction of a healthy socialist spiritual civilisation, had on socio-economic reality was to be read on a banner that was hung over a Beijing street crossing a few days after the death of Deng Xiaoping on February 19th: "Mao Zedong made us go down to the villages (*xiaxiang*). Deng Xiaoping made us jump into the ocean of the market (*xia hai*). Jiang Zemin made us lose our jobs (*xiagang*)." The banner had been removed immediately, of course, but the fact that it came to hang there was more than a sign of widespread frustration.²⁷ Simultaneously, in Beijing alone about 7,000 graduates finished university without being given jobs in 1997 while, on the other hand, the government spent large sums of money for celebration activities related to the reunification of Hong Kong.²⁸

Meanwhile, between popular unrest, nationalism and censorship, people were stimulated to enjoy the world of business, commerce, glitter and glamour as it is distributed through the numerous TV programs, huge street advertisements, and a variety of books and entertainment journals. Among the latter, the Shanghai music journal *Yinxiang Shijie (Audio & Video World)* commemorated its tenth anniversary in October 1997. The journal's history nearly covers the whole period of Chinese rock. Through its nation-wide distribution it has provided its readership with a bulk of information concerning both Chinese and foreign

²³ Zhou Jianchao, managing director of China Record Corporation, Shanghai, 1999:4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See: Reform des Presse- und Publikationssektors, in: China aktuell, 1/1998:16.

²⁶ See: Politische Kontrolle über Medien und Verlagswesen bestätigt, in: China aktuell, 12/1998:1298.

²⁷ Following the removal of the banner, between March and May, China's government was threatened by a new form of violence carried out in a series of bomb explosions in public busses and places. See: Bombenexplosion in Beijing: Politisch motivierte Anschläge und die Sicherheitslage, in: China aktuell, 5/1997:411-412.

²⁸ In 1998, an estimated 90,000 students nationwide (10 per-cent) are said to find adequate jobs by themselves. Following official policy, the number is expected to grow to 50 per-cent in 1999 and 100 per-cent in 2001. See: Chinas Spitzenuniversitäten, in: China aktuell 12/1997: 1190; Reduzierung der Hochschulen in Beijing, in: ibid., 12/1997: 1191; Berufsaussichten für Hochschulabsolventen, in: ibid., 1191-1192.

popular music history and events, music equipment, interviews, and pictures throughout those years. Issue No. 120, October 1997, like many previous editions, is divided into an international section (*shijie bian*) and a Chinese section (*Zhongguo bian*). The journal features articles on bands like Metallica, Bon Jovi, Sonic Youth, Sting, Madonna, Guns 'N' Roses, Nirvana, R.E.M., as well as a number of Chinese artists, e.g., Wei Wei, Liu Huan, Liu Dehua, Tang Dynasty, and Mao Ahmin. Printed on high quality paper with an attractive layout, filled with many advertisements and high-gloss pictures of artists (featuring their clothes, costumes, hair, and life style), the journal — and several others— is not only a leading source of information, but also apt to transfer a certain image of what pop and rock music should look like.

This was, roughly speaking, the cultural-political situation when the "Third Generation" of rock musicians appeared in public, when 30-year-old Shen Lihui took the initiative and founded the record label "Modern Sky" (*Modeng Tiankong*).²⁹

Modern Sky Records & Badhead

Shen Lihui, who is an artist, designer, and the lead singer of the popular funk-pop band "Sober" (*Qingxing*), has transformed his knowledge of "what appeals to young Chinese urbanites — garnered as an art student and musician — into an innovative company that releases more contemporary Chinese rock music than any other Mainland-based record label" (Guo/Su 1999). The company publishes a music magazine with nation-wide distribution and operates one of Beijing's most popular live-music venues, the No. 17 Bar in Sanlitun (Guo/Su 1999). Since Li's career serves as an example for both idealistic cultural-economic activism and the popularity of rock, it deserves more attention.

Shen studied at the prestigious Beijing Arts and Crafts School (*Beijing Gongyi Meishu Xuexiao*) and, shortly before his graduation in 1990, formed the band Sober with some of his classmates. After graduation, he started working at the China Record Corporation designing album covers. He did so for one year, when he felt bored of the daily routine designing folk music cassette covers, and decided to open his own design and printing company. Without any outside investment or experience in doing business, it took him a few years to turn a profit, and by 1994 he had accumulated enough money to engage in a field he was passionate about: music publishing. He co-operated with a small record company in order to produce and distribute a compilation that featured six lesser-known Chinese rock bands: "Rock '94" (*Yaogun '94*).³⁰

The album sold 150,000 official (*zhengban*) and 300,000 illegal (*daoban*) copies without any advertising.³¹ These figures were strong enough to convince Shen that his printing factory could successfully produce and market rock records. Apart from working for the company, he spent his energy composing, producing and performing the debut album of his band Sober. Three years later, in December 1997, "It's Great!?" (*Hao ji le!?*) became the first

²⁹ Information about the label "Modern Sky" was taken from the following sources: Wang Jiang 1999; Guo Jieming and Su Fei 1999; and the internet home page of the company (www.modernsky.com).

³⁰ The compilation contained two songs from his own band, "Sober" (*Qingxing*), as well as "Wa-Minority" (*Wazu Yuedui*), "Tongue" (*Shetou Yuedui*), "Imperial Crown" (*Huangguan*), DD-Rhythm-Band, and "Pink Fog" (*Fen Wu*).

³¹ The figures are mentioned at "www.modernsky.com/artists/sober/index.htm", p. 2.

record released under the newly formed label Modern Sky, which had been founded as an attachment to his printing factory. The record sold well in both China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Its success brought public recognition to the label and allowed Shen to continue working in the music business. The next record was a sampler entitled "Modern Sky 1", released in June 1998. Including one song from his own then-famous band, which helped to attract the audience, the volume featured a number of bands unknown outside the small rock community in Beijing. He was obviously on the right track and, due to what is described as "a relaxed attitude toward music publishing on the part of political authorities", an increasing number of music fans pushed the company to continue making record after record. Since then, Modern Sky has released more than 17 records, and started an alternative label — Badhead Records — to produce music that appeals to what Shen calls the underground, in order to provide the new generation with a means of articulation (Guo/Su 1999). "Rock music is our mirror," says Shen Lihui. "This is not a lie, what 20-year-olds are looking at is a young face, while 50-year-olds can take the mirror and watch their wrinkles. It is the same with music. Permanent rebellion and permanent happiness are a lie, because the world is constantly rotating and time is constantly floating. How can we always say the same things?"³²

Additionally, in order to properly promote new sound and music, his company started to publish a monthly magazine: "Modern Sky Sound Magazine" (*Modeng Tiankong Yousheng Zazhi*).³³ The magazine is said to have already won legions of readers ranging from high-school dropouts who have just picked up their first guitar to music industry professionals and foreign correspondents trying to keep up on Beijing's fast-changing youth culture. The magazine's special feature is its triple-package character: a 48-page large format magazine, a small supplementary pamphlet and — most importantly — a compilation album on tape or CD. Guo Jieming and Su Fei (1999) describe this "package" in the following words:

"Some of the articles in the magazine are about the music on the compilation album, but there are also stories about other music-related topics as well as book and film reviews, cultural commentary and, occasionally, short fiction. Stories that don't fit into the large magazine are printed in the pamphlet, but the raison-d'etre of the pamphlet is technical rather than editorial. The larger magazine is printed on paper cut from standard sheets. The left-over bits of paper are an odd size and would be thrown away if they were not used to make the pamphlet. The compilation album contains a mix of new foreign and local rock music. Each month, about half of the local music section consists of songs by mainstream bands who may already have record contracts; the other half is devoted to "underground" bands. Many of these bands are obscure, either because they are not from Beijing and so have no access to the Mainland's biggest music scene, or because their music is just too bleeding edge to be popular."

With this unprecedented distribution system, Modern Sky is likely to attract its young audience through a new "alternative" music and to circumvent the cultural hegemony of the major companies. However, the combination of journal and CD/tape is not new in China. A magazine called "Music Heaven" (*Yinyue Tiantang*) has been published in Guangzhou this way since 1993, and the aforementioned "Audio & Video World" (*Yinxiang Shijie*), Shanghai, followed the same practice in 1998. But in the case of Modern Sky, it is an ideological dimension that enhances the package's attractiveness. Here we have a young musician, an individual from within the scene, working for the good of his fellowmen

³² At: "www.modernsky.com/artists/sober/index.htm", p. 2.

³³ Also known as "New Music New Life".

(*gemeng*). In an interview, Shen stressed: "The more magazines and music of this kind are available in China, the better for all of us. I hope we are all contributing to a revitalisation and internationalisation of Chinese culture, and I welcome anyone who adds to this" (Guo/Su 1999).

In 1999, the magazine had a circulation of about 30,000 per issue. Of these, 5,000 were distributed with a CD (RMB19.80) and the remainder with a tape (RMB15). The relatively inexpensive price, according to Shen, should help to "make this music available to ordinary people" (Guo/Su 1999). Since the product has already been introduced into the market, the next aim will be to raise its journalistic quality. The magazine's editor-in-chief, 27-year-old Tao Ran, complains that there are only a few people in China who can write knowledgeably about rock music. Many articles about foreign rock are still provided by a Hong Kong company that publishes a similar magazine to "Modern Sky", called "Music Colony" (*Yinyue Zhimindi*). But Tao is not satisfied with the Hong Kong style of writing, and: "We want our magazine's content to be specialised, but popular. I think we already have a fresh style. If we can increase our distribution, we will affect the lives of a lot of people" (Guo/Su 1999).

One of the business tricks involved here is that the company's magazine is produced with a music publishing license and not with a print publishing license. The CD is therefore vital to the journal, as in this way one does not have to negotiate for a publication approval from the State Press and Publishing Administration. Today, Modern Sky is not alone in using such creative means to publish in Mainland China. "In recent years many start-up newspapers and small magazines have used the quasi-legal vehicle of advertising licences to outflank China's conservative cultural czars" (Guo/Su 1999). Guo and Su come to the conclusion that Modern Sky is what can be termed "a typical post-modern PRC paradox." The crucial aspect is that the work space and subject matter of the company are underground, but the music and magazine it publishes are commercially successful. Modern Sky's future as a media empire is difficult to predict, but it has already won much praise for its engagement in Beijing's "New Sound Movement."

Beijing's "New Sound Movement"

The bands that are usually associated with the "New Sound Movement" were founded between 1994 and 1998. Since 1997, all of them — though their styles are very different — have signed contracts with Modern Sky Records. In this section, I will focus on some of the bands and present their lyrics as circulating stories which formulate a discourse of their own. Since these stories have been individually created and seem to attract a relatively large and young audience, they shall offer insight into sentiments and topics that are popular among Chinese youths today.

The movement officially started on December 10, 1997, when Sober released its first record, "It's Great!?" (*Hao ji le!?*).³⁴ By then, Sober — with its five members — had a history of ten years and was already famous within rock circles. The song "Heart of the Tongue" (*Shetou Xin*), recorded and released in 1994, sold 450,000 copies in China. It was not only translated into English as "Shut Up!" and praised in England as "one of the most creative

³⁴ A chronological list of band foundations, record releases and major concerts is given in "The Great Events of Beijing's New Wave" (*Beijing xin lanchao dashi ji*), in: *Yinxiang Shijie*, 5/1999:28.

Chinese rock songs", it also became a success in Japan.³⁵ Therefore, the band was likely to have a good start with an album that contained a variety of different songs composed in the course of the last decade. One of the songs, "I Remember to be Scattered — No Sound" (*Jiyi Sanluo le — Meiyou Shengyin*), was later selected for a sampler entitled "Chinese Rock: The Third Generation" (*Zhongguo Yaogun: Disan Dai*, 1999):³⁶

There are some faces passing in front of my eyes, / there are some stories I unconsciously forget,
 The open country is shrouded in the spacious sky, / everything is quiet.
 Fresh flowers fall in this space without a sound, / skyscrapers' shadows hide my emptiness.
 Catch me, there is a cave, / reveal the secret, blown away by the wind.
 My remembering, / the fallen wind, the fallen flowers,
 the fallen streets, the defeated people, / the kiss in the wind, the melting past,
 penetrate into the nothingness I possess.
 I was awoken by my dream, / I dreamt that between me and this city's twinkling
 it has already become frosty.

The song is sung in a rather monotonous and cool voice, transported via a groovy and pure beat, as it was typical for British pop-rock during the nineties. In describing the dreamworld of a lonely urban individual, it reveals a dreary picture of urban survival, which is also one of the topics of the band "The Fly" (*Cangying Yuedui*). Crowned as "Greater China Grunge Kings" and as "representatives of Beijing's underground punk" (*Beijing dixia pengke de daibiao*), their style is far more aggressive (Virant 1999). Founded in 1994, the four musicians released three songs one year later, and gained fame as China's first "dirty" (*zang*) rock band. The band managed to produce two albums in 1996 and 1998, which were produced and distributed abroad, before Modern Sky released them on the Mainland in 1999.³⁷ Even the British press once described The Fly as China's "dirtiest and trashiest band" (*zui zang zui laji*), while Beijing's media mention the band as the city's most popular and significant underground band.³⁸ Their albums were made with eye-catching covers designed by Song Yonghong and the band's singer Feng Jiangzhou, who is a graphic designer by profession and wrote most of the lyrics, respectively. "City Life" (*Chengshi Shenghuo*) appeared on their first record:

You are really a poor worm, / going to work every day early in the morning.
 I'd like to say, I look down on you, / we enjoy the city life.
 Who told you, / that I loved you or you loved me,
 in my dreams, / everything is the love that you told others of.
 You are really a poor worm, / going to work every day early in the morning,
 or lay lazy and thinking in bed, / it is like taking a taxi or a car.
 Life is like a broken painting, / forever irreparable.

³⁵ See Sober's home page at: "www.modernsky.com/artists/sober/index.htm."

³⁶ On: "Chinese Rock: Third Generation" (*Zhongguo Yaogun: Di-san Dai*) 1999.

³⁷ The Fly: "The Fly > i" (1997/1999); The Fly: "Fallen in Love" (*Lian'ai Zhong de Cangying*) 1998/1999. The band currently released its third record, "The Fly > z", on Jingwen Records (2000). Reviewer Hao Chong (2000) refers to the record as "a milestone for underground music in China", which is among the best selling tapes in June 2000.

³⁸ At: "www.modernsky.com/artists/fly/index.htm", p. 2.

You are like an ink fish, / spraying ink and going forward,
spraying ink and going forward.

The protagonist is passively watching a "you", who is spraying ink. What we are confronted with is an alienated urban individual, a lonely outsider, reflecting on city life. An even more gloomy situation is offered by the band "NO" and their song "Dream of a Badge" (*Xunzhang zhi Meng*):³⁹

My remaining light is not leading you anymore, beloved person, / my fat-swollen face will very quickly be dispatched.

I know that you came to make me feel ashamed.

I am already at the gate on the city wall, and the staying bird nest is shadowless as before.

I am wandering in frozen urine, and see the raising of an illuminating halo,
swallowed up by a lot of pain, swallowed up by a lot of pain.

I will shut down all my functions, stop the buffoon dance I am dancing,
stop myself listening to poems, songs and bright odes, stop myself from watching the movies you have been directing,

stop myself from enjoying your living customs, stop myself enjoying your living customs.

I abandoned my colours without thinking anymore, beloved father,

before the end of my nearing death, before the end,

could you listen to the experience of my loss, listen to the experience of my loss?

NO is the band around singer, composer and lyric writer Zu Zhu. His lyrics are described as "dark, pliable, and tough" (*hei'an rouren*), and, as one article goes, "make our face turn red."⁴⁰ On the other hand, his words are praised as well-written, deep and honest, combining perfectly with his music, which includes styles such as punk, trash metal, rock, soft blues, and elements of acoustic guitar as well as traditional or Asian-sounding melodies. The brilliant and highly symbolic cover of *The Missing Master* bears a special touch, as it features a slightly altered painting by the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) painter Zhou Fang, who became famous for his paintings of beautiful elite women. Represented is a concubine holding a stick in her left hand that is attached by a red leash to a red collar fixed around the neck of a little dog. Here, the dog's head has been replaced with that of Zu Zhu, smiling and sticking out his tongue. One can read a large dose of irony and sarcasm into the scene: the concubine, representing the old traditions and the glorious times of the Tang dynasty, serves as cultural background for the power of the "red collar", which can be interpreted as the CCP, and is wrapped around the neck of a little dog. The dog itself might symbolise the masses and the young generation, which, despite all this, appears strong enough to laugh and mock at the whole situation.⁴¹

"Supermarket" (*Chaoji Shichang*) is announced as China's first true electronic band (*dianzi yuedu*). Founded in 1997, the three members released their first record, "The Look" (*Muyang*), in 1998. The music is a mixture of styles as trance, trip-hop, new wave, hip-hop,

³⁹ On: NO: "The Missing Master" (*Zuoshi de Zhuren*), Badhead Records, 1999.

⁴⁰ See: "www.modernsky.com/artists/no/index.htm", p. 1.

⁴¹ Zu Zhu and "NO" released their first album for Modern Sky Records in 2000: "NO? Tempel Fair Tour". For a review see Mauro Marescialli (August 2000), in: <http://www.chinanow.com/english/features/notemplefair.html>.

house and space music, inspired by Depeche Mode and The Cure, with lyrics sung in Chinese and English. Promoted as a typical sound of the electronic age (*dianzi shidai*), their spherical and space-like sounds create a rather floating atmosphere around the topic of love. "If This Night Comes" (*Jiaru Jinye Lailin*) is sung in English:⁴²

I love you tonight most if you come tonight to someone just says no one teaches you to fly I love you tonight most if you come tonight.

How do I lie if there's less and less time I love you tonight most if you come tonight I have a sign when I come to light.

Another artist in the field of electronic music is Chen Dili, born in 1968 in Changsha. He enrolled in Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1987, and, after graduation, was co-founder of the band "Acupuncture Point" (*Xuwei*, 1992-1994). He worked with other musicians before he finally started his own solo project, released in 1999 under the title *Dili-delirium — I Happily Died* (*Dili-delirium — Wo Kuaile Si le*). Chen, who described himself as a perfectionist (*wanmeizhuyizhe*), proudly states in an interview that all instruments are played by himself.⁴³ Asked about the meaning of "I happily died" (or: "I'm so happy I could die"), Chen says that he does not want to give a clear definition but, of course, the title has to be read as an antonym. His compositions are based on feelings (*ganjue*), which lead him into a world of (midi-)sounds, noises, words, rhythms and melodies, deriving from his love for what he called "pure music" (*chun yinyue*). Since every sound is music, words are not important, and indeed, on the CD cover his lyrics are printed as "a great pile of chaotic numbers" (*yi da dui luanma*) with only a few Chinese characters inserted. Chen explains this by the fact that the meaning of his compositions is not (and shall not be) fixed. Only the title song is given in full text:⁴⁴

Living is not necessary, you have to have your choice, / it is boring but I am not empty, this is my personal solution,

you are not able to know in what kind of mood I am in, / I love this realistic life I am sometimes not interested in.

It is only that I am thinking, I need some extreme joyful pressure, / which will give my body an electric shock

and make my heart quickly go up and down, / to welcome the unknown universe.

I happily died, because I did not pay attention, / I happily died, because I gave up everything.

The aim of his music is to transfer a feeling, a conflicting power (*chongtu li*) that is produced in the moment of listening by the audience itself: "I hope you sit down and close your eyes to listen. I hope you go home and think it over again. Whether you understand it or not, go home and think again. You don't have to clap your hands, I don't want your applause, I only hope you listen with your heart, this makes me really happy. What is interchange? It is not to use music, but to use a sense of hearing (*tingjue*), to use heart and feeling."

Hua Zi, coming from the band "Self Education" (*Ziwo Jiaoyu Yuedu*), released his first solo record, "Continuous Meaning" (*Jixu de Yiyi*) in 1999. Experimenting with styles

⁴² On: "Chinese Rock: Third Generation" (*Zhongguo Yaogun Di-san Dai*), 1999. For an introduction to "Supermarket" see Feng Zi, 1998:51. "Supermarket" released its second album on Modern Sky Records this year: "Seven Types of Weapon" (*Qi Zhong Wuqi*). For a review see: <http://www.chinanow.com/english/features/music/supertongue.html>

⁴³ The interview is at "www.modernsky.com/artists/dili/index.htm", p. 1-3.

⁴⁴ On: Chen Dili: "Dili-delirium" (*Dili-delirium - Wo Kuaile Si le*), 1999.

such as post-punk and new wave, his song "Continuous Meaning" appeared on the compilation "Modern Sky 2" in 1998:⁴⁵

Birds are busy looking for a nest, / fish in the water are bored and nervous,
leaves are everywhere, flying upward.

Intense.

I am afraid you're furious again, / at home the parents are busy discussing.

The skin is icy-cold.

Strong.

This game is very sweet, / asking for continuous meaning.

In the following I will focus on three bands which feature three musicians, playing a style called "little punk" (*xiao peng*) or "new punk" (*xin peng*). The band "Flowers" (*Hua'er*) released "Song of Four Seasons" (*Siji Ge*) in 1998:⁴⁶

Spring drills through the window, Summer is too lazy to come out of my bed,

Autumn's heaven is high and the air is clear, Winter entered into a dreamland.

Coloured flags are fluttering in the air, the sun is hanging at the top,

on the toilet is a person singing songs, the sound is extremely bright and clear.

Oh, (I) opened the rusty window, oh, (I) wore a clean dress,

On this day, the clear and high sun was radiating brilliant rays towards me.

All I am is filled with illusion, making all this fluttering to a distant place.

Spring drills through the window, Summer is too lazy to come out of my bed,

Autumn's heaven is high and the air is clear, Winter entered into a dreamland.

The Flowers later signed a contract with Beijing's New Bees Company (*Xinfeng Gongsu*), where they also released the first album. According to what is written on the leaflet, the band "really wants happiness" (*kuai le*), and focuses on the fun that comes after school or on holidays (*fāngxuē*). The band is described as being "not so love-spreading as New Pants" (*Xin Kuzi*).

"New Pants", founded in 1996, is recognised as China's best punk-pop band. The CD-cover features a comic with three punks who seem to make jokes about everything. They are fans of the British post-punk band Ramones and play uncomplicated punk, fresh and funny, as we can see from the lyrics of "I'm OK":⁴⁷

Today we have no girlfriends, / tomorrow we have no girlfriends,

the day after tomorrow we have no girlfriends, / and afterwards we have no girlfriends.

I'm ok. Ya Ya Ya Ya. / I'm alright!

We lost quite a lot of time, / lost quite a lot of feeling,

⁴⁵ On: "Modern Sky 2" (*Modeng Tiankong 2*), 1998.

⁴⁶ On: "Hua'er" (The Flowers): "On the Other Side of Happiness" (*Xingfu de Pangbian*), New Bees Music Ltd. 1999, and: "Modern Sky 2", 1998. Information is available at: "www.newbeesmusic.com".

⁴⁷ On: "New Pants" (*Xin kuzi*): "Xin Kuzi", 1998. For an interview with "New Pants" see: New Coolth 1999:46-47.

lost quite a lot of true love, / we don't have any future, only the present.

I'm ok. Ya Ya Ya Ya. / I'm alright.

Why am I in my dreams similarly happy, / why can I endure the loneliness of tomorrow,
why has the choice-less world left me?

I'm ok. Ya Ya Ya Ya. / I'm alright!

And a similar assessment can be made of their song "Our Times" (*Women de Shidai*):

Finally this day arrived, everything has changed, / no more worries again, everything is love.

Lalalalalala lalalalalala, / these are our times.

No need to make love in a hurry, / (because) there is absolutely no way to lose.

No more further words, only a lot of time.

Lalalalalala lalalalalala, / these are our times.

Finally this day arrived, everything has changed, / no more worries again, everything is love.

Lalalalalala lalalalalala, / these are our times.

Founded in 1994, "Underground Baby" (*Dixia Ying'er*) was the first Chinese band to release punk music on the Mainland (Hong Feng 1999:29). In 1998, the three musicians successfully sold their first album to Taiwan's Rock Records & Tapes Co. (*Gunshi Changpian*). As the name already suggests, their music is more "underground", meaning heavy, more trash and rock, underlined by a British sounding and typically Western punk voice. Their title song, "Underground Baby", tells this story:⁴⁸

I don't want to observe any regulations anymore, / (I) also don't want to foolishly improvise good or bad.

I feel disgusted if people are here the whole day ... / repeat it over and over, finally it is all but a spit of foam.

There is a pile of shit in my brain, / I exert all my strength to pull it out,
don't tell me to improve and let something happen,

I only want to feel that he accompanies me, / to give me a chance, to give me a chance.

I want to put my head in front of my body, / to put my ass on top of the neck.

I want to dance in the fire, following the burning flames. / Out of the vanishing fire emerges a shining seed.

I want to create the present age and change the future, / I don't believe that the real world does not exist.

As the times are changing I gradually understand, / I raise the ideals that were buried in the underground,

I want to create now, I want to create now ...

Quite popular in China by the late nineties, the title of J. D. Salinger's novel *Catcher in the Rye* was chosen as the band's name (alternately seen in translation as *Maitian Shouwangzhe Yuedui*) by another group of musicians. The band's new punk-rock song "My Sunday" summarises the highlights of a weekly routine:⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Although not under contract by Modern Sky, the band is mentioned here because it is cited as important for the "New Sound Movement". On: "Underground Baby" (*Dixia Ying'er*): "Wake Up" (*Juexing*), 1999.

⁴⁹ The song was produced by Kinn's Music Ltd., Hong Kong, and later released on the compilation "Modern Sky

MONDAY a night without sleep / TUESDAY slept at home one day
 WEDNESDAY again not at home to sleep / THURSDAY I gave way to foolish fancies
 FRIDAY I was occupied with nothing / SATURDAY let's wash and sleep.
 MONDAY watching TV / TUESDAY invite a girl
 WEDNESDAY smoked two packets of cigarettes / THURSDAY I had a brief dream of grandeur
 FRIDAY I was occupied with nothing / SATURDAY I WANT TO ...
 MY SUNDAY! MY SUNDAY!

Another story is told by the new wave band Joke (*Wanxiao Yuedui*) in their song "Modern Love" (*Modeng Ai*, 1996):⁵⁰

In the BAR a song was played, I threw away the flowers, / but my flowers on the floor were still blooming,

then I felt embarrassed, and called WAITER! WAITER!

Take the fire of my heart, and burn them all! / (voice from outside): A decisive struggle? !

The WAITER was watching me. He said: "That's enough, that's enough,
 there is nobody to fight the fire here, they are already sleeping."

(voice from outside): A decisive struggle? !

Every corner, filled with love, fears that we make a fire,
 even if it is my toilet, I'll be forced to continue making mistakes.

On that day I let go, and was only watching what you were doing, / a rose-coloured corner toilet, we were all happy.

The BAR was full of flavour, when another CHANCE appeared, / my flowers were in the alcohol,
 and I drank them ...

(chaotic voices)

I was put in the BAR, you made me drunk, / my flowers on the floor, they are sleeping! They are sleeping?

(voice from outside): A decisive struggle? ! ...

Finally, the rather different new sound of singer and songwriter Hu Mage deserves special mention. Born in 1973, he came from Hubei province to Beijing and is featured as a folk storytelling artist (*minjian shuochang yiren*). Accompanied only by an acoustic guitar, he tells stories about daily life, approaching the stage just like Bob Dylan did three decades ago in the West. Ji Wan points out in his article that Hu Mage adds a formerly unknown style to China's popular music, introducing traditional elements like *ping tan*, *da gu*, and *shuo shu*.⁵¹ In March 1999 he released his first record on the Modern Sky label, entitled "Everybody has a small wooden stool, mine will not be taken into the 21st Century". In his song "Arriving at the Fourth Crossroad, Change to Number 26" (*Dao Si Daokou, Huan 26 Lu*) he describes the atmosphere in an office bureau:⁵²

2", 1998. (Words printed in capital letters are sung in English).

⁵⁰ On: "Modern Sky 2", 1998. (Words printed in capital letters are sung in English.)

⁵¹ *ping tan*: storytelling and ballad singing in the Suzhou dialect; *da gu*: versified story sung to the accompaniment of a small drum and other instruments; *shuo shu*: storytelling. See: Li Wan 1999:42-43.

⁵² On his album "Everybody has a small wooden stool, mine will not be taken into the 21st century" (*Renren dou you yige bandeng, wo de bu dairu ershiyi shijie*), Modern Sky 1999.

Between the desks are still some chinks, some people sit vis-à-vis or back to back, this is my office.

An institutional paper is glued to the wall, saying something about wages. Everybody shall not arrive at the office very late.

If you enter through the door from outside, you will first see my female colleagues.

They are gorgeously dressed, though still complain that it is not enough, but my light over there is really very dim.

[Do] you know, that my desk costs about 20,000 yuan?

[Do] you know, that the washroom is three meters in straight distance from myself?

[Do] you know, that the quartz clock in front of me is twenty seconds slow every day?

You know, you know, with my little troubles it is really difficult to open my mouth.

Several more bands appeared on the Modern Sky label, e.g. "Joke" (*Wanxiao*), "Dark Room" (*An Shi*), "Mu Ma" (Wooden Horse), "Shetou" (Tongue), "Spiky R. K." from Japan and "Charisma" from Hong Kong, some of them managed to release their own records, others contributed to a several rock compilations.⁵³ The above translated lyrics are typical for the "New Sound" insofar as they cover a thematic range from having fun, dreams, feelings, love, storytelling to frustration, boredom and ennui. These topics have always formed the core of Western rock music, and — from a foreign perspective — one might argue that the music offers nothing really spectacular. In the PRC, however, addressing problems and articulating oneself by using such straight forward vocabulary with a certain dose of irony has only a few years ago started to enter public discourse. Modern Sky and its support of the new product, summarised under the term "underground music", surely contributed to musical creativity and the variety of music styles available in record shops today. Additionally, it provides a new means of articulation. Beijing's "New Sound" is characterised by a seemingly unrestricted and queer use of words which speak of disillusionment, laziness and boredom as a reality of a part of China's urban youths, and transfer these feelings into society - via records, tapes, internet homepages and concerts.⁵⁴ Since most of the CD covers are stylishly designed and clearly demonstrate co-operative efforts with artists, one can surely speak of a new aesthetic in the realm of Chinese commercial popular culture, a synthesis of music, art and experiment that reflects a new individualism.

Discourse On the Meaning of Beijing's "New Sound"

In China's music world, the meaning and impact of Beijing's "New Sound" are widely discussed topics. Positive statements say that it truly represents the aspirations of the young generation, including all the different sentiments and viewpoints that exist today. Critics render their lyrics as meaningless and argue that "New Sound" is only a temporary game (*youxi*), because these musicians are by far too young to have a cultural basis, and therefore cannot address problems as skillfully as the older musicians. However, most people, says Wang Jiang, refrain from any making statement; they just sit down, listen and wait (Wang Jiang 1999:27). What, then, is the meaning of "New Sound", after all?

⁵³ See the sampler "Modern Sky 2" (1998) and "Modern Sky 3" (1999).

⁵⁴ The internet homepages of "Modern Sky.com" and "Chinanow.com" frequently provide the audience with reports about new record releases and concerts, held in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou and several other places.

For Shen Lihui, the founder of Modern Sky Co., "New Sound" is both a rebellion against the old guard and a mirror of the present situation. According to his opinion, "today, China's rock has already become ill. It has developed for over ten years, but has already degenerated." Rock music's common failing is that the "rebellion caught an illness" (*fanni chuan ranzheng*), and everybody complains about the same:

"If you are not satisfied with the present situation, then go and die! [...] One irresponsible shouter is leading a group of headless shouters, this is today's situation of Chinese rock music. At present, the irresponsible shouter has already turned into an old chattering woman. Today, without understanding anything, he is still recovering the complaints of his childhood. In fact, apart from testifying Freudian science, this could not say anything to us. This world has already started to change, and the things he is talking about don't have anything to do with us," Shen Lijun said with a smile. *"I think, he or they should go into the museum and get some sleep!"*⁵⁵

These words are, of course, directed against Cui Jian. With all his merits as the forerunner of the genre, he is in an ideologically dominant position, and still counts for the rebellious spirit of Chinese rock in the form of social criticism. But the present generation does not feel the need for (t)his old-fashioned rebellion, and, instead, describes the late nineties as rock music's "best period, with the most powerful rock music" (Zhang Xiaodan 1999:30).

The ideological shift visible behind these statements is both a by-product of China's reform policy and the result of the 1989 crackdown, after which the number of rock bands in Beijing had mushroomed. While the two generations of the "first ten years" (1986-1996) are characterised as being inspired by idealism and heroism, propagating heavy metal, hard rock and long-haired individualism, the present generation is said to feature realism (*xianshizhuyi*), common urban sentiments (*chengshi pingminzhuyi*), and short hair, transported via music styles such as new punk, electronic music, and underground rock.⁵⁶ Shen Lihui says:

*"I think, today's rise of New Music is a realistic and objective reflection and not an imposed change, mainstream and reality are naturally transforming. In this era, our power to endure must be stronger than that of the previous generation, because we can not hang all the suffered setbacks on our mouths. In fact, we have a strong sense of responsibility, we are responsible of ourselves. New Music's function is to link up. In the past, the temperament of [bands like] "Tang Dynasty" was very local. The new bands are much more international. We are preparing to spread many more Chinese New Wave Music in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Europe. Not to make contact and not to exchange is impossible. The Indians also had culture, but they failed to make contact. Therefore, their influence weakened day by day."*⁵⁷

What Shen describes as "local" were the efforts of musicians to create rock with Chinese characteristics. And indeed, the today's bands sound very "international" and global, there is hardly any difference between them and their Western models - except for the Chinese lyrics and occasionally incorporated Chinese sound elements. Obviously enough, this new urban

⁵⁵ At: "www.modernsky.com/artists/sober/index.htm", p. 2.

⁵⁶ See the "Contrasting List of Rock 10 Years Ago and Today's New Wave" (*10 nian qian yaogun he dangjin xin lanchao duibibiao*), provided in *Yinxiang Shijie*, 5/1999:29.

⁵⁷ Cited from "Opinions: Beijing's New Wave" (*Zhong shuo: Beijing xin lanchao*), in: *Yinxiang Shijie*, 5/1999:27.

authenticity provides a different way to handle or identify with a variety of problems, which are not those of the previous generation. Apart from its internationalism, the music still operates in a national urban context and offers young urban Chinese an escape into a space that combines creativity with fun and discontent. The latter shall not be neglected, because rock music and concerts are a means "to let off steam" (*faxie*) and, as Chow Yiu Fai and Jeroen de Kloet observed in 1997: "A new generation of rockers is gradually taking over the scene," and "the audience is younger and wilder" (Chow/Kloet 1997:124).

The new hedonism runs counter to the idealist position of the older generation, especially Cui Jian. Inspired by China's classic philosophers, along with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Sartre, he blames these musicians for their superficiality and criticises them as "a generation of charlatans without culture" (*meiyou wenhua de yidai hunzi*) (Yan Jun 1999:31). For Cui, rock music has a meaning and a certain message, which functions as a cultural force that should aim at social change, or at least make people think.⁵⁸ And still, talking about the past few years, he does not speak of Chinese rock music's "degeneration":

*"In the beginning, the development [of Chinese rock] was very fast and explosive, then its progress became slower and slower. There is nothing more to say, because rock music's effects on society are still restricted, mainly for political reasons. Radio and TV stations are still not allowed to broadcast rock music. ... For me, the chance to organise performances has decreased even more. For those people, who are famous and whose power seems to be difficult to control, the doors will be locked. Political control is definitely not relaxing. ..."*⁵⁹

Apart from political control, Cui sees himself confronted with decreasing record sales, and a situation in which "people only want to listen to my old songs, so that I am caught on stage as in a boxing ring" (Blume 1999:21).⁶⁰ He does not hide his criticism now; but rather, in what looks like a compromise, combines it with new rhythm and music: "In my new songs, the music was composed for the young generation, but the lyrics were written for our generation," Cui said (Fa Man 1998:99). On his latest album, *The Power of the Powerless* (*Wu Neng de Liliang*), he addresses the new generation directly.⁶¹ These are the first lines of the hip-hop and rap production "Slackers" (*Hunzi*):⁶²

No more iron rice bowl, just like my father.
I don't want everyone fussing over me, like all the kids today.
We haven't had it rough, haven't had it good;
So people just say we're a generation of uneducated slackers.
If I had to endure hardship, surely I would cry.
I could go find a job, but I can't bring myself down to that level.
If I talk about anything serious, I always talk around the point.
But when I do anything serious, I have to first think of saving face.

⁵⁸ See Brace 1991, Jones 1992 and Steen 1996.

⁵⁹ See the short interview with Cui Jian (Pekinger Rock: Der große Überlebende) in Blume 1998.

⁶⁰ This happens also to be the case when Cui Jian plays abroad, where a nostalgic Chinese audience still regards Cui Jian as the Tian'anmen revolutionary of 1989 and apparently does not want to cope with his new music. See Shannon May (2000).

⁶¹ Some remarks on "The Power of the Powerless" are given in Blume 1999 and Yi Zhou 1998.

⁶² "Slackers" (*Hunzi*), on: "The Power of the Powerless" (*Wu Neng de Liliang*), 1998. For the translation of the lyrics see also "www.cuijian.com."

What can I do besides deal with what's in front of me?
 What can I think about besides eat, drink, sleep, shit and piss?
 Hey, if you ask me what I think the next generation will be like,
 Then I'll tell you straight out: What's that got to do with me?

Make more money, make more money.
 If I make enough, things will change by themselves.
 But how much is enough? How much is enough?
 Without knowing it, I just keep making money and forget the rest.

Don't talk to me about anything serious. Don't get deep with me.
 These days, money is worth more than any education.
 Whoever says life is hard is an idiot.
 If you just think a little, and grease the wheels a little, you can get it done.

It's okay for me to criticise myself, but not you.
 Even though I have no education, I'm still better than those slackers.
 Don't look down on me, that's all I'm afraid of.
 Because there's a great person deep inside my heart.

I want to believe myself. I want to complete myself.
 But the worst feeling is being hesitant.
 Hey, let's be straightforward and stop wasting time.
 But today the most straightforward thing to say is, "Whatever".

Anyway I don't need to worry about what I eat or what I wear.
 If I really have nowhere to go I'll just live with my parents.
 During the day I work, and at night I just walk around.
 When I see someone I know I say "How's it going?" - "Hey, I'm all right" ...

The music community in Beijing has become extremely diverse, and many bands compete to overcome Cui Jian. In an article entitled "Who will be the best after Cui Jian?", author Yan Jun even complains about the audience: "Cui Jian and his idealism and humanism moved China in a particular period. Ten years later, many more new passions and languages swarm around to speak about the new period. All these lazy ears, why are they still un-open?" (Yan Jun 1998:4). To go beyond Cui Jian and surpass his "outdated" idealism is not an easy task. That his message still attracts many people and is not deprived of its commercial value

was to be read on Cui Jian's homepage in May 2000:⁶³

"Cui Jian was recently featured in a live music special on Hunan TV. The concert was viewed by an estimated 20 - 30 million viewers. It is the first time in 10 years that Cui Jian has received nation-wide television coverage. Click here to view the promotional trailer."

However, Cui Jian is surely not the only musician to connect rock music with a certain social responsibility today. A closer look at the lyrics of the now popular rock band "Thin Man" (*Shou Ren*), formed in 1993, reveals that they sincerely address problems like drug addiction, despair, betrayal, divorce, and even the war in Kosovo [*Zhe yi Zugou* ("Enough Already")]. Their own understanding of rock music as an authentic means of self-expression is summarised by band leader Dai Qin (Ivanova 1999):

We want to show that rock music is not "spiritual pollution". Some of our songs are angry, but emotional release is healthy. Our rage is directed at things that hurt people. We want to show young people how to turn that rage into a life-affirming force, to give them strength to face their problems and be true to themselves.

Thin Man is said to have packed stadium shows, receiving rave interviews in the local press, and putting on "a sea-of-lighters-inspiring performance at the 1999 Annual New Music festival in Xinxiang, Henan province" (Ivanova 1999). Their debut album has already sold more than 60,000 copies. Ivanova observed that at a promotional record signing in the downtown Beijing shopping district of Wangfujing, "the record store sold out of Thin Man cassettes, but that didn't stop eager fans who proffered notebooks, shirts and even bare skin for the band members to sign" (Ivanova 1999). However, the band members stick to the authentic message of rock and claim to sing about the real but lost moral values. In interviews Dai Qin expresses his discontent with China's present situation of "wang qian kan" (look toward the money) and its impact on the music scene: "Now the politics of trendiness and competition are disintegrating. Now the 'circle' [of underground rock musicians] is breaking up into small cliques organized around style rather than substance...."⁶⁴

The growing popularity of Chinese rock music, I conclude, is due to the PRC's reform policy and the opening mass market which is eager to exploit the economic potential of rock music. By producing and distributing a large variety of new music styles, the companies divided the whole genre into different ideologies and audiences. Both the musicians and the audience are given the opportunity to choose between the romantic ideal of revolutionary authenticity, the claim of social responsibility, the lyrical message and/or entertaining fun - New Sound must be regarded as just one option in the contested field of Chinese rock music.

Punk and Censorship

Today, as we have seen, China's music market tries to fulfil the needs of the masses and to cope with what is called the "punk era" (*pengke shidai*), but, as will become clear with the final example, not without serious considerations. In 1999, Beijing's Jinggwen Records released the second edition of Cui Jian's (and China's) first and most successful record, "Rock 'n' Roll on the New Long March" (*Xin Changzheng Lushang de Yaogun*, 1989), to

⁶³ See: "www.cuijian.com".

⁶⁴ In Maya Kovskaya 2000. The phrase "wang qian kan" originally meant "look toward the future" but has been almost universally satirized as homophonous "look toward the money." (Ibid.)

commemorate the record's tenth anniversary.⁶⁵ Also in 1999, the same company produced, recorded, and distributed a double tape/CD of "Bored Contingent" (*Wuliao Jundu*), containing four punk bands: 69, Brain Failure, Anarchy Jerks and Reflector: "Now the average Chinese kid in Shanghai, Wuhan, and Hebei can buy an album at their local record store and listen to Beijing punks sing: We are just losers in the PRC/ We aren't terrible/We aren't strong/At least we have power in our minds" (Loewenberg 1999). Nevertheless, in an interview, Anarchy Jerks singer Shen Yue complained: "We have no freedom of speech, so our way to rebel is to not care, and just do what we like to do." By emerging from the underground and into the mainstream, the author points out, Beijing punks are faced with restrictions they did not have to deal with when they were just playing concerts at local dives. Only a portion of Anarchy Jerks' set was included on the album, leaving out songs that might provoke the censors like "Our Freedom of Speech Has Been Eaten by the Dogs." Other songs by 69 and Brain Failure were edited extensively.

"That is just the way it is in China," explains Liang Wei, the lead singer of 69. "We don't mean revolution like Chairman Mao — we needn't kill anyone," he adds. Liang Wei captures the spirit of the album in a 69 punk rock reprise of the Cultural Revolution hit "Naqi zhi Bi Zuo Baoqiang" ("Lift Up Your Pens and Make Them Weapons"). Liang Wei parodies the revolutionary anthem with words that you wouldn't catch Lei Feng singing: "Our bodies are strong, our minds are empty. All we want to do is have fun." (in: Loewenberg 1999)

Whether this is fun through anarchy, or anarchy through fun, does not matter. Again, the lyrics are important, and criticising, playing with or simply distorting Chinese socialist history is against the law. Therefore, political statements — not sounds — have to be revised, and are revised, in order to become part of the music business.

"Look Toward the Future"

The examples given here reveal, of course, the presence of state control in the music business, but the recording of a punk style double CD and Cui Jian's first public appearance in TV after ten years demonstrate that political liberalisation and democratisation of the cultural market are simply underway because of economic pressure. While it was necessary for the first two generations to sign contracts with record companies in Hong Kong, Taiwan and even Germany (Steen 1996:226), the third generation found its way paved and abstained or abandoned heavy ideological questions and managed to create its own production network. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to speak of "compradorization" in the realm of rock music today.⁶⁶ What is true for Chinese modern art and even film, to gain more recognition and support from outside China, is definitely not the case with rock music.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the feeling of "ennui", usually associated with "grey culture" (*huise wenhua*) during the first half

⁶⁵ See: "Rock and Roll on the New Long March. Reissue of Seminal Album Marks a Decade", in: Beijing Scene, April 30 - May 6, 1999:5.

⁶⁶ In 1992, Geremie Barmé introduced the term to describe the situation of the Chinese avant-garde: "Faced with an often intemperate although not entirely hostile or oppressive official line, innovative artists anxious to pursue their creative careers, make a living and achieve a measure of recognition by being drawn gradually into complex commercial relationships with the outside, whether it be in the form of foreign buyers or Hong Kong, Taiwan interests (publishers, record companies, galleries, film critics, and so on)." See Barmé 1992: 13.29.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., Jonathan Napack's article on Chinese modern art at the Biennale in Venice, 1999:47-49.

of the nineties, had transformed into a disguised non-political activism that tries an escape into fun and individual creativity only to ignore the difficulties of present China. This attitude, though not without political implications and not applicable to all the musicians mentioned above, points to an ideology that is also to be criticised, as e.g. Cui Jian and Dai Qin do, but it is a logical consequence, a trend, and a (new) way out of the dilemma — at least for the moment.⁶⁸

Modern Sky Co., the "typical post-modern PRC paradox", was founded after the death of Deng Xiaoping and the take-over of Hong Kong. In an uncertain period of political and economical tension, it appeared as both a novel invention of the young generation and a company that successfully started to promote and exploit a new market gap. The company's authentically wrapped package seems to be of definitely useful value and, pushed by its own media network, has reached a discursive quality that challenges the old guard of musicians. Although still subversive in content, "underground rock" has become officially acceptable partly because it concentrates on individual questions and introspective thoughts. This individualism combined with a new sound-oriented propaganda that, among youths, turned "underground" into a term with apparently positive connotations. Despite its commercial outfit, it is referred to as non-mainstream, non-conformist, individualistic, authentic, and characterises a particular off-the-beaten track and modern urban lifestyle — often illustrated with pictures of musicians.⁶⁹ To characterise Beijing's (and soon by extension China's?) "New Sound", therefore, I would prefer to describe it as a "rebellion of denial" directed against heavy ideological involvement of any kind. It is just one and another face of modern urban China, a shift towards non-political "commodity rebellionism" with clear features of westernisation and globalisation.

Do the lyrics and their stories not deny what official cultural policy suggests, namely the building of a socialist spiritual Chinese civilisation which draws on the rich sources of China's 5000 year history and 50 years of developing Chinese socialist culture? One possible answer is that no one cares if the cat is black or white, and since the "New Sound" has obviously been integrated into China's popular cultural ocean, one should not underestimate the movement's economic potential. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that formerly visible traces of nativism in Chinese rock (Jones 1994:161) seem not to affect the lyrics of the new generation, but its music industry, which wants to spread China's culture and the new message of Chinese rock world-wide.

Words are not precise anymore;
Can't describe the world.
Different feelings exist;
Just like the music in my mind. ...

Actually I understood a long time ago.
Actually I understood a long time ago.
You and I are living in the 90's.
You and I are living in the 90's.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ See Yan Jun: "Beijing Xinheng - The New Sound of Beijing" (1999).

⁶⁹ "Nanfang Zhoumo" (Southern Weekly) frequently reports about the rock scene. Pictures present the musicians in their sticky rehearsal room or on the street, walking or playing music without t-shirts, smoking a cigarette or simply standing there and talking. This image is, of course, quite different from Hong Kong pop stars. See, e.g., the report about the band "Tongue" (*Shetou*) by Fang and Zhang 1998:4.

⁷⁰ Excerpt taken from Cui Jian: "The Nineties" (*Jiushi niandai*), on: "The Power of the Powerless" (*Wuneng de lilian*), 1998.

Until now, it is only Cui Jian who has been internationally accepted as a rock mediator just because of his "Chinese characteristics", critical lyrics, and rebellious non-commercial attitude. What can Modern Sky offer to an international audience, if the music appears to be a Chinese copy of Western music and sound? Many bands further demonstrate their intentions by putting English names on the CD covers and ornamented their lyrics with popular English vocabulary. Are internet home pages, information transfer and perfect layouts sufficient to promote this new product on the international music market?⁷¹ It is too early to give definite answers. Today, we can only follow Shen's eager plans which are visible and made clear on the company's CD/tape covers: The capital letter "M" symbolises his company, is written on Superman's chest, available as a stamp, painted as tattoo on a bald head, inscribed in nature and — similar to images of computer giant Microsoft — embracing the whole world.

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