

# CHINA POP

## LOVE, PATRIOTISM AND THE STATE IN CHINA'S MUSIC SPHERE

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Popular culture in China is highly dynamic, involving individuals and private companies, both local and international, as well as state-governed institutions. The mass media and new communication technologies naturally play an important role in production, selection and dissemination, while also increasing interaction with international trends and standards. Sheldon H. Lu underscores popular culture's importance in today's China by emphasizing that it is "a defining characteristic of Chinese postmodernity".<sup>1</sup> To him, three factors are crucial, namely its potential to undermine the censorship and "hard-line" cultural hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), its rise as a "major player in the commodification process," and "its sugar-coated apoliticism, [which] pacifies the masses and represses the memory of China's political reality" (ibid.). Popular culture, therefore, is the battleground of various ideologies, forces and interests. Its ambivalent and complex entanglement with politics, society and the musical industry is also addressed in the work of other scholars, such as Kevin Latham, who expresses that "understanding Chinese popular culture very often requires careful attention to how precisely the state is involved in and related to forms of social and cultural activity and practices. Popular culture does not exist outside of or in contrast to the state but very often in a constant and evolving dialogue with it."<sup>2</sup>

This article looks at both conflicts and dialogue in the realm of popular music and attempts to lay out the main contours of China's current popular music scene. More precisely, it investigates the recent transformation of China's officially accepted musical mainstream (*zhuliu*), also called the "main melody" (*zhu xuanlu*), a controlled, contested and promoted space of musical production, almost unknown to Western audiences. I will argue that its recent transformation and obvious popularity is based on three factors: (1) openness regarding musical styles, content and the incorporation of global elements, enforced by young audiences

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<sup>1</sup> Sheldon H. Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, California: Stanford University Press 2001, p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Latham, *Pop Culture China! Media, Arts and Lifestyle*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2007, pp. 31-32.

and new technologies, (2) the necessity to keep up with global trends in order to successfully promote official popular music in a rather fragmented and highly competitive cultural market, and (3) cooperative strategies with the (inter-) national music industry, due to the sheer size and commercial future prospects of China's attractive music market, associated with prestige, fame and profit. All three factors explain popular music's complex situation between promotion, instrumentalization and censorship – from pop to punk: "Whereas the dominant Chinese popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan caters to the market and thus self-censors its space for negotiation, punk rock is relatively marginal and offers an important playground for alternative styles and attitudes within government-directed consumer culture."<sup>3</sup>

China's mainstream is not only caught between economics and politics. It is a particular sphere in which artists, audiences and authorities constantly negotiate the boundaries of the acceptable, creating new forms of participation and dialogue, inclusion and exclusion. In order to grasp the recent changes in China's popular music sphere this article concentrates on the three main areas of musical practice: Mandopop from Taiwan, the musical mainstream of the PRC and (underground) rock music from Beijing.

#### MANDOPOP: EXPRESSION OF LOVE AND INDIVIDUALITY

"Mandopop" originates from Taiwan, stands for popular music sung in Mandarin Chinese and is China's most popular music form. Its roots date back to semi-colonial Shanghai's jazz age of the 1930s and 1940s. However, once the PRC was founded in 1949, the hub of musical experimentation and production moved to Hong Kong. It spread to Taiwan in the 1970s. Shortly thereafter, Hong Kong's Cantopop and Taiwan's Mandopop became very popular in the PRC, yet it was the latter style that developed most powerful, especially after the return of Hong Kong to the PRC in the summer 1997. Due to its historical and socio-cultural development, Mandopop "has created a new musical ethos – a blend of traditional Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Western musical styles that has transformed into something new and delightful for Chinese-speaking audiences."<sup>4</sup>

The first famous songstress of this particular genre was Deng Lijun (Teresa Teng, 1953-1995), whose songs have been loved by Chinese audiences everywhere in the world since the 1980s. Her voice and music, often accompanied by synthesizer-style pop and rhythm, for the first time after several decades carried sentimental messages of longing and love, hometown and nature into PRC homes,

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Field & Jeroen Groenewegen, "Explosive Acts: Beijing's Punk Rock Scene in the Postmodern World of 2007," in Jens Damm & Andreas Steen (eds.), *Postmodern China* (Berliner China-Hefte), Vol. 34, 2008, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Marc L. Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and its Cultural Connotations*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010, p. 3.

and turned her into China's No. 1 pop star, though she never performed in Mainland China. Other pop stars followed, both female and male, from Taiwan as well as from Hong Kong. Most spectacular are Hong Kong's "Four Heavenly Kings", the still beloved stars Zhang Guorong (Leslie Cheung, 1956–2003) and Anita Mui (1963–2003) and Beijing-born Faye Wong (Wang Fei, b. 1969), whose career began after she had participated in a music competition in Hong Kong in 1988. During the 1990s she became a cultural icon and is one of the most popular stars in Asia today.<sup>5</sup>

Mandopop has developed into a rather broad – if not hybrid – musical category, open to global trends and incorporating a variety of different sounds and music styles. Songs may also be adapted from foreign popular melodies and equipped with new lyrics more fitting to the Chinese context. And indeed, the lyrics are identified as an element that adds substantially to the popularity of a song. In the words of Marc L. Moskowitz: "As with Mandopop, this is not to say that their melodies are not appealing, but that in ignoring the lyrics one misses the best part of these songs."<sup>6</sup>

Mandopop songs are usually the result of cooperative efforts between composer, songwriter and the performing artist. Lyrics, therefore, are written by professionals who often share a close relationship with the artist in order to capture her/his particular character, emotions and personal preferences. More generally, Mandopop lyrics deal with issues of alienation, isolation, loneliness, melancholy and disappointment, all of which reflect everyday experiences and sentiments of the individual living in the large and dynamic urban metropolises of Asia. The songs address problems of love and emotional expression, departing and broken love relationships, the longing for being together again, or individual thoughts that help to recover one's psychology after being left alone. It is the subtle quality of these lyrics and carefully placed Chinese characters, which sometimes enlarge the space of textual interpretation that makes Mandopop so attractive for Chinese audience. In a Confucian society, where certain aspects of life are not easily articulated directly, song lyrics fulfill a double function: they may be used to speak for oneself and to others, for example, while singing with friends in a karaoke bar, or they may console oneself, when listening or/and singing alone.

One star in the world of Mandopop is Stephanie Sun (Sun Yanzi, b. 1978) from Singapore, who is of Han Chinese descent. She released her first album in 2000, also recorded Western rock ballads and has now 11 albums to her name. She sold over ten million CDs in Asia and received more than 30 awards for her

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<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Y.H. Fung & Michael Curtin, "The anomalies of being Faye (Wong): gender politics in Chinese popular music", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5 (3), 2002, 263–290.

<sup>6</sup> Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy*, p. 112.

work. Her song *Dang dongye jiannuan* (When the Winter Night Starts to Warm) is from her latest album. Here are the first and the last verses, including the chorus:<sup>7</sup>

A lot of things are not decided by one alone,  
 Even your sadness you still have to bear [alone] in the end  
 All those disappointments started as hopes  
 The facts show that happiness doesn't come easy  
 ...  
 When the winter night starts to warm,  
 when the ocean is no longer quite so blue  
 When the pure white of moonlight turns dark  
 That just means happiness isn't so simple any more  
 ...  
 When each wonderful story ends in regret  
 That's merely being used to believing it was just liking, not love  
 What matters is how we spent those days in love

The lyrics are important, and they are reprinted and discussed on internet platforms. How closely the lyrics are also observed by China's Ministry of Culture became clear when it issued a circular in September 2009, "requiring online music 'disseminators' to submit translations of all foreign song lyrics for approval by Dec. 31. The ministry considers international repertoire and music from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao as 'foreign'", as noted in the American music magazine *Billboard*.<sup>8</sup> However, Sam Duann, president of the label Rock Records, Taiwan, is quoted with the words "everyone in Taiwan knows how far you can push the limits [in China]" (ibid.). In this context, love songs seem to be relatively safe, and the emotional qualities are appreciated in Asia, though the lyrics are often conservative with regard to gender roles and behavior. Above all, Mandopop songs are standardized songs of a sophisticated cultural industry and therefore often criticized as inauthentic and commercial. Audiences, however, ignore this critique, and it is important to understand that this genre actually challenges – in the Chinese context – a wide range of social values.

In allowing people to give voice to their lives in very personal and emotional terms, this seemingly benign music overcomes the almost irresistible forces of both contemporary state demands and traditional expectations of stoic silence and group orienta-

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Text: Teng Jingshu, Music: Rao Shanqiang, Album: Shi shihou (It's Time), 2011. The lyrics originate from <http://www.chinese-forums.com/index.php?/topic/34568-songs-by-stefanie-sun-translated/> (11.10.2012).

<sup>8</sup> Thibault Worth, "Complete Control: China's Online Crackdown Could Boost Anti-Piracy Efforts," *Billboard*, 121/44, 2009, p. 13.

tion. In this sense, these songs of sorrow represent an equally strong impulse to cry for joy – a tearful reminder of the beauty in people’s everyday lives and the importance of each broken heart in an increasingly rationalized world.<sup>9</sup>

Individual love and emotional conflicts are surely at the core of Mandopop, yet to characterize “Taiwanese pop as the apolitical mainstream”<sup>10</sup> is not entirely true. Already in the 1980s, China’s most popular songs were nationalist songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan, e.g. *Wo shi Zhongguoren* (I am Chinese), *Wo de Zhongguo xin* (My Chinese Heart), Hou Dejian’s famous *Long de chuanren* (The Descendants of the Dragon) and Wang Mingquan with *Zuoge yonggan de Zhongguoren* (Be a Brave Chinese, 1983).<sup>11</sup> A few years later, and in addition to praising Chineseness, many composers and musicians from Hong Kong and Taiwan expressed their support for the students on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. However, in Hong Kong, after the handover, as Wai-chung Ho observed, “there have hardly been any songs with political content” because they have little market value. Besides, overseas artists, musicians and their companies were forced to learn their lesson, namely that critique of the CCP or praising Taiwan can have a disastrous effect on ones career in the Mainland.<sup>12</sup>

At present, Mandopop’s most popular representative is the Taiwanese musician, singer, songwriter, composer, actor, music and film producer Jay Chow (Zhou Jielun, b. 1978). His career began with a talent contest in 1998 and two years later he released his first album, entitled “Jay”. He is insofar an exception to the norm, as he writes all his songs himself, and even composes for other singers. His music combines Western and Chinese music styles and by 2010 he had sold more than 28 million albums worldwide. In Asia, and especially China, Jay Chou has the status of a superstar and is not only visible through all his activities, including large-scale stadium concerts in the PRC, music videos, films, commercial advertising etc., but also in online fan clubs.<sup>13</sup> Due to his overall presence and importance to

<sup>9</sup> Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy*, p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Fung, “The Emerging (National) Popular Music Culture in China,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 8 (3), 2007, p. 434.

<sup>11</sup> See Wai-chung Ho, “Social Change and Nationalism in China’s Popular Songs,” *Social History*, 31 (4), 2006, pp. 435-453. On nationalism in Chinese music see also Sue Tuohy, “The Sonic Dimensions of Nationalism in Modern China: Musical Representation and Transformation,” *Ethnomusicology*, 45 (1), 2001, pp. 107-131.

<sup>12</sup> Examples are discussed in Wai-Chung Ho, “The Political Meaning of Hong Kong Popular Music: A Review of Sociopolitical Relations between Hong Kong and the People’s Republic of China since the 1980s,” *Popular Music*, 19 (3), pp. 341-353; Nimrod Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices. Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender and Politics, 1978-1997*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Jay Chow’s social, cultural, economic and political significance have been studied by the Hong Kong-based scholar Anthony Fung. See “The Emerging (National) Popular Music Culture in China,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8 (3), 2007, pp. 425-437; “Western Style, Chinese Pop: Jay Chou’s Rap and Hip-Hop in China”, *Asian Music*, 39 (1), 2008, pp. 69-80, “Fandom,

China's youth, Jay and his managers have to navigate carefully to neither offend officials or the fan community.

Jay presents himself as ordinary, cool and shy, in Western suit or hip-hop clothing. His songs tell stories of love and insecurity, loyalty and brotherhood, visually displayed in modern Taiwan's gangster/underground culture, sometimes in traditional Chinese costumes. He also stresses social and environmental issues, thereby emphasizing the critical musician, but avoids direct political statements, e.g. in the case of Taiwan's independence.<sup>14</sup> Jay combines musical talent and coolness with Chineseness and a dose of Western style, producing a synthesis that is served on a non-political tableau.

His impact is probably best exemplified by the fact that his song *Woniu* (Snail, 2001) was chosen by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission in 2005 to be included in a list of 100 patriotic songs promoted for middle school students and education. The song speaks of self-confidence and endurance to pursue one's own goal, and is often quoted with the line: "I climb up step by step and wait for the warm sunshine. One day there is the sky, just for me." The list also included songs like *Zhongguoren* (The Chinaman) by Hong Kong artist Andy Lau (Liu Dehua) and *Zhenxin yingxiong* (Real Hero) by Taiwan's most successful composer Jonathan Lee (Li Zongcheng). However, the decision inspired a fierce debate that criticized the new emphasis on individualism as a departure from the traditional values of patriotic songs, namely selflessness, collectivism and heroism.<sup>15</sup>

Defenders argued that individual success contributes to the development of society and the decision also shows respect for the young generation. The latter's attitude is surely not to be ignored, if patriotic singing shall continue as an educational practice. A second-grade student of a top senior high school is quoted as follows: "Though I have been an enthusiastic singer since I was five, I always get bored when singing patriotic songs of my mother's, or even my grandma's generation."<sup>16</sup> To include pop stars from Taiwan and Hong Kong in this patriotic list surely is a novelty, if not a revolution, best explained by a closer look at the general transformation of China's musical mainstream.

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Youth and Consumption in China", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12, 2009, pp. 285-303.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Fung, "Western Style, Chinese Pop", p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> See Zhu Kai, "Jinyibu fahui hongse gequ zai daxuesheng sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu zhong de zuoyong" (Further Develop the Role of Red Songs for the Ideological and Political Education of Students), *Beijing Jiaoyu* (*Beijing Education*), 12, 2009, pp. 42; Ma Li, "'Woniu', 'Zhenxin yingxiong' deng ge jiu jin jiaocai le ('Snake', 'True Hearted Hero' and other Songs have Entered the Teaching Material), Xinhuanet, 25.03.2005, see [http://news.xinhuanet.com/audio/2005-03/25/content\\_2741251.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/audio/2005-03/25/content_2741251.htm) (22.09.2012); Echo Chan, "Jay Chow's 'Snail' recommended as patriotic", *China Daily* (online), 15.03.2005; "Patriotic Songs change tune and embrace individualism", *China Daily* (online), 18.03.2005.

<sup>16</sup> *China Daily* (online), March 18, 2005.

### MAINSTREAM POPULARITY: RED SONGS, REVOLUTION AND PATRIOTISM

Mainstream culture in the PRC has long been identified with Socialist Mass Culture, Maoist Culture, Revolutionary Culture or Party Culture. Today, its promotion via the mass media serves political, moral and commercial purposes, yet music had always played a pivotal role in Chinese culture. Confucius and his followers promoted music as an important means of self-cultivation and education, reflected on the power of music and distinguished between “good” and “bad” sounds. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), both Nationalists and Communists were sensitive to musical production and its dissemination for political purposes through the new media. Communist song production for propaganda and mass mobilization began in the 1920s, and its goals were finally standardized in Mao Zedong’s famous “Talks on Literature and Art” in Yan’an (1942), when cultural production was meant to only serve the needs of “peasants, workers and soldiers” and to function as a weapon against imperialism. In the decades following the founding of the PRC, Gu Pengfei emphasized, “[Chinese] Popular music has always been central to the entanglement of ideology and identity.”<sup>17</sup> Music, composed and selected according to criteria set up by the CCP, served the needs of the State, was celebrated during campaigns and festivities and had a strong impact on people’s everyday life. Since the reform policy began in 1978, musical form and content of the mainstream changed considerably, yet the authorities maintained their control over public performances, the media and musical imports. Since 2000, then, “the national popular music has been catering to the mainstream ideology as well as to the idea and the concept of the market economy”.<sup>18</sup>

In the PRC, the history of revolutionary music practice dates back to the famous May Fourth Movement (1919). The movement itself and the musical heritage were constantly promoted over the following decades. As Ho Wai-chung remarks: “Songs have been a source of strength to the Chinese state and are considered to be an inherent component of its political visibility and a sign of its dignity.”<sup>19</sup> The official attention paid to “songs” is also reflected in the PRC tradition of national song contests, which celebrate the state and simultaneously serve the purpose of finding new talent, and the importance of (patriotic) singing in the school curriculum. It is, therefore, no wonder that singing as a collective practice has also been emphasized in the National Patriotic Education Campaign which was implemented in 1991 – and still continues – as a necessary reaction after the Democracy Movement on Tiananmen Square had been crushed.<sup>20</sup> More recently, the importance of China’s socialist musical heritage was particularly felt during

<sup>17</sup> Gu Pengfei, “Zhongguo dangdai liuxing yinyue yu shenfen rentong” (Contemporary Chinese Popular Music and Identity), *Xuexi yu Tansuo (Study & Exploration)*, No. 8, 2012, p. 119.

<sup>18</sup> Gu Pengfei, *ibid.*, see also Wai-chung Ho, “Social Change and Nationalism”.

<sup>19</sup> Wai-Chung Ho, “Social Change and Nationalism”, p. 453.

<sup>20</sup> Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaigns in China.” *International Studies Quarterly*, 52, 2008, 783-806.

the nationwide broadcasted festivities that commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC (2009) and the ninetieth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (2011).

Revolutionary “red” songs are seen as the best representation of the mainstream. Officially approved red songs are defined by the slogan “six good, one strong” (*liu hao yi qiang*) which emphasizes the six “good” aspects that combine to the strength of red music: the Chinese Communist Party, socialism, Open Door Policy, the Great Motherland, People of All Nationalities, and the People’s Liberation Army. Furthermore, red songs are required to express a strong sense of the time and should be easy to sing along with.<sup>21</sup> Strongly influenced by China’s history and experiences of war, revolution and ideological struggle throughout the twentieth century, nationalism and patriotism have always been central aspects of China’s musical production. However, today the mainstream comprises of a variety of musical genres that are – officially – either promoted nationwide or simply accepted because they are not offensive.

Thus, patriotic education, China’s economic rise and growing political strength in world politics went hand in hand. Accompanied by the effects of globalization, a new consumer culture, and the spread of mobile phones and the internet, the young generation not only had access to and engaged in various new forms of entertainment, it also became more diversified and active in numerous “scenes”, cultures and subcultures. Music, due to its individualizing and collectivizing qualities, turned into an important site of struggle and negotiation, reflected also in three large-scale singing contests, which attracted nationwide participation over several months, if not years: “Supergirl”, “Red Song Concerts”, and “The Voice of China”.

In April 2004, Hunan TV, China’s second largest broadcasting network after CCTV, launched the highly successful singing contest and TV program “Supergirl” (*Chaoji nüsheng*). The program is often seen as the Chinese version of the British series “Pop Idol.”<sup>22</sup> It is said that the final episode in 2005 drew more than 400 million viewers and thereby turned it into one of the most popular shows in Chinese broadcasting history. “Supergirl” was a media spectacle, carried out in a number of provinces over several weeks. Every young woman was allowed to participate, no matter of her looks, age, education, and home town. The show, therefore, stood in stark contrast to official music events, which offer a platform for a select number of talented beauties. Its nationwide attractiveness is further attributed to democratic audience participation, because audiences select their stars until the final round via short text messages (sms). The unpredictability of

<sup>21</sup> Chen Yiming and Jiang Hong. “Ge’er wei shenme zheyang hong” (Why are songs so Red?). *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 09.06.2011, <http://www.infzm.com/content/60140#copy> (15.09.2011).

<sup>22</sup> “Pop Idol” started as a British TV series in October 2001. In June 2002, the Fox Network began with “American Idol: The Search for a Superstar.”



the winner, democratic experience and identification with the presumed “star” led to a voting euphoria which in 2005 turned 21-year old Li Yuchun (Chris Li) into a Supergirl. The fact that she “is almost the antithesis of the assembly-line beauties regularly offered up on the government’s China Central Television, or CCTV” challenged media officials, and her success was soon interpreted as an expression of democratic power.<sup>23</sup> Elected by her fans, supported by the media, and awarded a management contract with Tianyu Media, Chris Li quickly became the icon of Mainland China’s new pop music scene. Her rise to stardom unfolded new possibilities within the music sphere, based on the “intriguing new role of ‘prosumers’ that integrates fan production, fan promotion, and fan consumption all in one.”<sup>24</sup> Her later albums feature a hybrid fusion of Western musical forms and styles. Her lyrics never appear to be provocative or political, but avoid raising patriotic and nationalistic emotions.<sup>25</sup>

Chris Li’s career notwithstanding, the success of “Supergirl” was regarded as an unwelcome threat to China’s highly censored mediascape and moral standards. Criticized from within the CCP as “poison for the youth”, the program was cancelled by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) in 2006. Other programs were obviously less provocative, so that in September alone, “a partial listing ... included thirteen singing competitions”.<sup>26</sup> Probably due to the popularity of this entertainment format, “Supergirl” enjoyed a brief revival in 2009, only to be cancelled again in 2011, this time criticized because the broadcasted time of more than three hours by far exceeded what was acceptable, namely 90 minutes. However, insiders speculate about other reasons and seem to agree that accusations of “bad taste” and low brow content were less crucial than the fact that audience numbers exceeded those of national broadcasts.<sup>27</sup> In the end it was the combination of too individualistic performances, nationwide participation and popularity as well as a publicly displayed democratic spirit and the obvious reduction of possible state interference that rendered this program officially unacceptable.

In 2006, and as if competing with Hunan-TV, the neighboring Jiangxi Satellite-TV had decided to organize a song contest entitled “Sing Loudly Jिंगgang Mountain” (*Fangge Jिंगgang*) in order to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of

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<sup>23</sup> Jim Yardley, “An Unlikely Pop Icon Worries China,” *The New York Times (Asia Pacific)*, 05.09.2005.

<sup>24</sup> Ling Yang, “All for Love: The Corn fandom, prosumers, and the Chinese way of creating a Superstar”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12 (5), p. 527.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Fung, “Deliberating Fandom and the New Wave of Chinese Pop: A Case Study of Chris Li”, *Popular Music*, 32 (1), 79-89.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Clark *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, p. 137.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Bristow, “China Takes Popular Talent Show Super Girl off Air,” *BBC News Asia-Pacific*, 19.09.2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14972480> (accessed November 12, 2011); see also Paul Clark, *Youth Culture in China*, pp. 128-138.

the Long March (1934-35). The winners of that competition were invited to perform at the “China Red Song Concert” (*Zhongguo hongge hui*) together with professional singers and other stars. Following a sold-out stadium concert and the overwhelming success of this program, “Red Song Concerts” turned into national annual events, with live-broadcast competitions held in various cities and a promotional internet presence, also for online-registration.<sup>28</sup> Anybody aged 18 years or older is invited to display his/her musical talent in front of a committee and is evaluated by audience response. The competition is not confined to one singing style or “voice,” it is the multiplicity of styles under the heading “Red Song Concert” that attracts participants ranging from 18 to over 80 years of age.

Jiangxi-Satellite TV clearly was on the safe side with its concept of “Red Song Concerts,” both morally and politically. In 2007, the “Red Song Concert” commemorated the 80th anniversary of the Red Army and the Harvest Uprising. The first competition was held at Beijing University, to remind people of where the “May Fourth Spirit” (*wusi jingshen*) was born in 1919. Organized now on an annual basis, each event was promoted with a patriotic slogan, the last one being “Singing Red Songs, Glorious China” (*Changxiang hongge, huihuang Zhongguo*) in 2012.<sup>29</sup> Again, 200 competitors entered the first contest entitled “Striving for Supremacy Contest of the 100 Strongest” in Nanchang in early July. Those who were selected advanced to the next round, a contest called “Red Song War to break out of Encirclement.” From here, only twelve survivors participated in the next six-week “Red Song Hero Gatherings” where finally the champion was chosen.

Red Song Contests look back on a history of seven years and are said to currently attract the direct participation of about half a million lovers of red songs during each concert. “Through the broadcasting of Jiangxi Satellite TV an audience of about 1.2 billion people saw the ‘Red Song Concerts,’ starting a wave of loving and singing red songs all over China”.<sup>30</sup> However, part of the exciting spec-

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<sup>28</sup> Gan Siyou, “Changxiang hongse jingdian, hongyang xianjin wenhua: ‘Zhongguo honggehui’ pinpai fazhan zhi lu” (Loudly Singing the Red Classics, Carrying Forward Avantgarde Culture: the Development of the Trademark “Red Song Concert”), *Nanchang daxue xuebao (Journal of Nanchang University)*, 41, 2010, pp. 9-11; and Yuan Yin, “‘Zhongguo honggehui’ xianxiang yanjiu” (Research Concerning the “Red Song Concert” Phenomenon). *Suzhou Xueyuan xuebao (Journal of Suzhou University)* 26/10, 2011, pp. 79-81; see also the *Red Concert Homepage* at <http://hgh.cjxtv.com>.

<sup>29</sup> See Anonymous, “Zhongguo hongge hui zai qi weimu Jiangxi weishi fengxingwang lian-shou chengxian” (China Red Concerts open again its curtain and are jointly presented by Jiangxi Satellite-TV and the internet platform Fashion-Net), 18.07.2012, <http://ent.xinmin.cn/2012/07/18/15552255.html> (accessed 13.09.2012). For more information, see the very detailed summary provided at Baidu <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1015900.htm> (accessed 13.10.2012). For the most recent competition see the organizers’ homepage <http://hgh.cjxtv.com>.

<sup>30</sup> Yuan Yin, “‘Zhongguo honggehui’ xianxiang yanjiu”, p. 80.

tacle must also be seen as serving as a career path for young musical talents.<sup>31</sup> Equally important, audiences participate via text messages and, supported by a committee consisting of music experts and lay persons, select their favorite “stars” and red songs.

Judging from the visual material available online, for example images and music videos shot during the competition, people seem to be overjoyed by singing songs of the Sino-Japanese War, songs that praise Mao Zedong or the CCP, or songs that strengthen the national spirit. Additionally, one hardly finds any negative comments about these events on the internet. It is, however, difficult to estimate whether the actual people “on stage” are motivated by their patriotic spirit or by public attention and the possibility of a career in the music business. The programs’ organizers realized already in 2007 that many of “the young participants have absolutely no knowledge of red songs” and are very amateur-like.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the show clearly succeeds in the nation-wide celebration and promotion of socialist and patriotic pop music. The degree of “popular identification” with these values is difficult to estimate but – thinking of Taiwanese singer Jay Chou – the young generation probably does not embrace the whole repertoire of red songs. For those who are interested, various books, CDs, and DVDs are available, not to mention the material provided via the internet. Here, for example, one can find the homepage “Chinese Red Songs Online” (*Zhongguo hongge zaixian*), which provides plenty of red songs for free downloads, and a list of “100 Patriotic Songs”, again, with each song available for free in the mp3 format. The introduction defines red songs as follows:

“Red Songs” are the result of the energetic progress that emerged in large numbers during revolutionary period and the period of constructing a new China. Songs that are determined to fulfill one’s high aspirations are all red songs. Real red songs are rooted in popular feeling and sincere. Many people have a very innate understanding of “red songs” and there is no reason to criticize them. But red songs are absolutely not only songs limited to the subject of revolutionary history. The society is developing and also its understanding of red culture has already given way to new interpretations. Outstanding songs only need to positively move upward, develop the true, the good, and the beautiful, and display the flesh and blood of our national culture in order to be called red songs.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Huang Wenhao & Ding Huifeng, “Yule shidai de hongge xinjing” (The New Scene of Red Songs in the Entertainment Age), *Liuxing gequ (Popular Song)*, 6, 2011, pp. 12-15.

<sup>32</sup> Huang Wenhao & Ding Huifeng, *ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> See Anonymous, “Jingdian hongge 100 shou zaixian shiting mp3 xiazai” (100 Red Songs online for mp3 downloads) 2011; even larger is the homepage “Zhongguo hongge zaixian” (Chinese Red Songs Online), see <http://mp3.hot1949.com/>.



*Music Category "Revolution", or: "Red Classics" (Hongse jingdian), Foreign Language Bookstore, Beijing, July 2009, (Author's Photograph).*

That red songs reflect different periods and go with the times is stressed in many articles. The core of the repertoire still consists of revolutionary "classics" which praise Mao Zedong, the CCP, the Communist Revolution, the People's Liberation Army and the Motherland, composed by Nie Er, Xian Xinghai and others. Equally important are the model (Peking) operas of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), created under the guidance of Jiang Qing, Mao's wife. Today, these classics appear

in various releases and have their own shelves in China's music stores, entitled "Revolution" (Fig. 1).<sup>34</sup> New red songs, then, enlarge this repertoire by praising the success of the reform period, emphasizing positive individual and collective experiences as well as extolling China's national unity and strength.<sup>35</sup>

Songs from Taiwan and Hong Kong were accepted into this repertoire since the 1980s, if they praised China, its culture, and landscape or expressed some sort of national emotion. Recently, as has been mentioned above, new songs with different messages are also to be included, though reluctantly and heavily debated on various internet platforms. Critics also argue for the acceptance of specific love songs, based on the argument that love is also a genuine feeling of the working class. However, since the "return" of Hong Kong, musicians, composers and the music industry either from the former colony or Taiwan have realized the importance of China as a market for their products. Critical voices, therefore, are rare, even non-existent, in order to avoid being excluded. Love songs and patriotic songs seem to be the most secure choice for gaining access to China's mass media and its festivals, a promise that also results in new forms of cooperation. One striking example is the song "*Buneng wangji de jinian*" (Do not Forget the Memorial), written to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the destruction and looting of the famous summer palace in Beijing, the Yuanmingyuan, by British and French troops. The lyrics were written by the "new mainstream lyrics writer" and CCP member Wang Pingjiu (b. 1971), the music was composed by Taiwan's famous composer Chen Huanchang alias Xiao Chong (Little Insect). The song was recorded and performed by the male-female duo Han Geng (b. 1984) and Tan Jing (b. 1977), two famous singers and film actors from the Mainland.<sup>36</sup>

China's latest reality talent show that captured audiences from all over the country is adapted from the program "The Voice of Holland" (2010) and started on July 13, 2012. Entitled "The Voice of China" (*Zhongguo hao shengyin*), the music contest was broadcasted weekly over a period of 14 weeks by Zhejiang TV. The final concert, on September 30, took place at the Shanghai Stadium in front of 80.000 visitors.

The series proceeds in three steps: It starts with a blind audition phase of six weeks, during which the contestant performs his/her song in front of four judges/coaches, who can only hear voice and sound, but eventually have to decide if they

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<sup>34</sup> On their ongoing popularity, see also Barbara Mittler, "Popular Propaganda? Art and Culture in Revolutionary China", *Proceedings of American Philosophical Society*, 152 (4), 2008, pp. 466-489.

<sup>35</sup> Sun Hui, "Xin hongge zoujin xin shidai" (New Red Songs Enter the New Period), *Yishu Jiaoyu (Art Education)*, 5, 2012, pp. 81-82.

<sup>36</sup> See Andreas Steen, "'Voices of the Mainstream' – Red Songs and Revolutionary Identities in the People's Republic of China", in Christian Utz & Frederick Lau (eds.), *Vocal Music and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Music: Unlimited Voices in East Asia and the West*, New York: Routledge 2012, pp. 239-240.

want the singer to join their team. In the second phase of “battle rounds,” each team goes through a selection process in which the coach decides who will proceed to the first live round. Then the surviving four competitors of each team will go into battle. Among them, the best act will be chosen by public vote and continue to the “final eight”. In the third phase, the remaining participants compete in live broadcasts, with the TV audience and the coaches equally deciding who moves to the “final four” phase. The last competition is solely decided by public vote.

Through their funny and emotional, competent and critical dialogues as well as comments, the four well-known “judges” contributed heavily to the popularity of the show.<sup>37</sup> As with the programs mentioned before, the participants came from diverse backgrounds and have varied motivations for participating in the event: Simply being chosen to perform, to meet their idol in person or see their skills being evaluated by a large audience were expressed as highly satisfying experiences by many. However, each participant was carefully chosen, well prepared and highly motivated, as revealed in short film clips that introduced each new singer before they appear on stage.

Quite in contrast to the other talent contests, the initial blind audition phase ensures that “The Voice” stands out as the sole criteria for success. The singers chose their favorite song individually, and thereby contributed to a mixed musical program that included a variety of popular Chinese songs, including Mandopop and patriotic ones as well as popular foreign tunes. The final scene, nevertheless, was in many ways similar to the “Red Song Contests”. The chosen winner was Liang Bo, b. 1991, a student at the Jilin College of the Arts, who belonged to the team of Na Ying. His success song was a popular film song from 1979 that later appeared in many interpretations, including one by Beijing’s pop rock musician Wang Feng, entitled “Wo ai ni Zhongguo” (I love you, China). Liang sang the song in the Shanghai Stadium, where 80,000 people joined in, producing a collective experience of a both sentimental and patriotic atmosphere. The first and the final lines are as follows:<sup>38</sup>

A lark flies across the blue sky:  
“I love you, China!”

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<sup>37</sup> The coaches/mentors are established musicians, composers and vocalists in the world of Chinese (Mando) pop: Na Ying, b. 1967, is the only female in that group. She made her first album in 1994, had sold 10 million albums so far and came out with a no. 1 album in 2011. Yu Chengqing (Harlem Yu), b. 1961, is an award-winning singer-songwriter from Taiwan, who released 14 studio albums. Liu Huan, b. 1963, is a singer-songwriter and China’s self-taught King of Pop, who in 2008 performed the theme song of the Beijing Olympics, “You and Me”, together with Sarah Brightman. Finally, Yang Kun, b. 1972, started his career in a cultural troupe in Inner Mongolia, became famous with the hit “Wu suowei” in 2001 and since released three albums.

<sup>38</sup> Lyrics: Qu Cong, Music: Zheng Qiufeng. Translation: Roland Longbow, see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_Love\\_You,\\_China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Love_You,_China) (accessed 13.10.2012).

I love you, China,  
 I love you, China,  
 I love your exuberant seedlings in spring,  
 I love your bountiful golden fruits in autumn,  
 I love your temperament of green pines,  
 I love your character of red plum flowers,  
 I love your home-grown sugar cane,  
 That nurtures my heart like milk.  
 ...  
 I will dedicate my prime youth to you,  
 My mother,  
 My motherland.  
 Ah ..... Ah .....  
 I will dedicate my prime youth to you,  
 My motherland,  
 My homeland.

To summarize: China introduced the entertainment form of reality talent shows with “Supergirl” in 2004. In China’s highly competitive media world, this show was cancelled despite of its success in 2006. In the same year, Jiangxi Satellite-TV began its annual “Red Song Concerts” which last until today. In 2012, Zhejiang-TV started with “The Voice of China,” thereby attracting those audiences who are not necessarily interested in China’s revolutionary and patriotic heritage. All shows are western imports and encourage audience participation and a certain democratic spirit. All shows also attract young “talents” from all over China and from various social backgrounds. They are not only contests and performances; they are also media events and spectacles, accompanied by official internet platforms, discussions in fan groups and reactions of various kinds in the popular online medium *Weibo* (Chinese equivalent to Twitter).

Reality talent shows are obviously very popular, and different audiences participate through various media in the collective democratic and patriotic experience. The official framework for these events is provided by state owned and governed TV-stations and media companies which guarantee the status quo, while simultaneously promoting official ideology in form of patriotism or the glorification of China.

#### UNDERGROUND CREATIVITY: ACCEPTED PROVOCATION

Quite different from the aforementioned musical spheres, Chinese rock music emerged during the 1980s.<sup>39</sup> Associated with today’s “father of Chinese rock”,

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<sup>39</sup> Chinese rock music has been analyzed in various scholarly articles and monographs. For non-Chinese monographs see Andrew Jones, *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contem-*

Cui Jian, and bands like Tang Dynasty, Cobra and musician He Yong, Chinese rock reached its “political” height between 1986 and 1992, when it was seen as a radical challenge to official discourse and promoted by foreign music companies as an alternative sound and new voice of China’s youth. Rock music introduced various aspects to China that authorities had difficulty coping with: Imports of Euro-American critical music and lyrics and new forms of musical practice, production and listening. Most challenging was probably the previously unknown unity of songwriter, composer and singer. Rock music expressed individualism and social critique in lyrics, and its sounds later also proved to be an inspiration for Chinese popular music. The 1990s, however, are usually regarded as a period of rock music’s decline in China, because people concentrated more on rising incomes, consumerism, personal careers and softer sounds. The new trend was promoted and reflected in Viacom’s MTV, the music channel that was installed in Hong Kong in 1991 and four years later became available as MTV-Mandarin in the PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>40</sup> Since the market for popular culture was expanding, many musicians shifted to lighter and less offending versions of rock music in order to secure a certain income. Others, however, went underground and began to experiment with voice and lyrics, sound and noise, e.g. the band NO, The Fly, and Zi Yue.<sup>41</sup>

The year 1997, then, marked a significant change: In March, Deng Xiaoping died, and in July the PRC celebrated the return of the British colony Hong Kong and the end of imperialism in China. In December, Beijing’s underground went into a new phase, when the musician Shen Lihui founded China’s first independent record label, Modernsky (*Modeng tiankong*). The company promoted the concept of “Beijing New Sound” and was not concerned with “Chineseness” as the previous generation of rockers, but with internationalization, or, the promotion of Chinese rock’s international qualities. At the end of the millennium, sounds of Britpop, Grunge and Punk filled Beijing’s music venues, bands began to sing in English and the first music festivals were organized.

Since then, China Rock has turned into a brand name, strongly associated with Beijing, the center of Chinese rock activities. The capital’s (underground) music scene is vibrant and dynamic, performing all sorts of music styles, also in Sino-foreign joint-venture bands. Chinese rock bands have been invited to give concerts in Europe, the USA, Australia and Japan, several independent labels have

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*porary Chinese Popular Music*, Ithaca/New York: Cornell University 1992; Andreas Steen, *Der Lange Marsch des Rock ‘n’ Roll*, Muenster: Lit 1996, Nimrod Baranovitch, *China’s New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender and Politics, 1978-1997*, Berkeley: University of California 2003; Jeroen de Kloet, *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2010; Jonathan Campbell, *Red Rock. The Long, Strange March of Rock & Roll*, Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books 2011.

<sup>40</sup> On MTV in China see A. Fung, “Think Globally, Act Locally—China’s Rendezvous with MTV,” *Global Media and Communication*, 2, pp. 71–88.

<sup>41</sup> See Jeroen de Kloet, *China with a Cut*.



been founded, journals are published and many CDs are also to be found in China's state-owned record stores. In 2006, an *Encyclopedia of China Rock 'n' Roll* listed 180 artists/bands including their CDs.<sup>42</sup> In 2010, the sixth generation of Chinese rock musicians was advertised, and some estimates speak of 500 to 1000 bands in Beijing alone today.<sup>43</sup>

In terms of content, China's underground addresses issues familiar in the Western world, for example individual and social problems, boredom and ennui, love and hate, stories of irony and sarcasm. Lyrics also refer to China's history, include poems of famous Chinese poets and re-work minority songs or classics of China's revolutionary history. The musical spectrum includes all styles known in the West, from punk and heavy metal, to various forms of rock and funk, to hip-hop and rap, to electronic music and folk music. The latest trend is a sort of storytelling and folk music style. Individual singers, accompanied by acoustic guitar and percussion, sometimes also by minority instruments, tell and perform personal stories and songs in an often funny, ironic and critical manner.

China's "underground" is creative and international and communicating through various internet platforms. It is, nevertheless, captured in a rather particular situation when looking at the world of Chinese popular culture in general. Three aspects need to be highlighted: First, China's underground is the space where – apart from Western classical music – probably the most Sino-foreign musical interaction takes place, in terms of joint bands, music performances, music production and invitations from abroad. The underground obviously "speaks" a musical language that easily allows identification, access and participation, more than do Mandopop and China's Mainstream music. Jeroen de Kloet explains the similarities in rock culture by pointing at its qualities as a 'hard' cultural form, "with the rock mythology as its set of links between value, meaning and embodied practice."<sup>44</sup> As such, it is difficult to transform and more likely to transform those who get involved. One may also cite John Storey, who states that subcultural use of music "is perhaps music consumption as its most active. The consumption of music is one of the means through which a subculture forges its identity and culturally reproduces itself by marking its distinction and differences from other members of society."<sup>45</sup> Distinction from Mandopop and the mainstream surely is an important issue, as revealed in many interviews with Chinese rock musicians.

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<sup>42</sup> Li Honglie (ed.), *Zhongguo yaogun shouce (Encyclopedia of Chinese Rock 'n' Roll)*, Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House 2006.

<sup>43</sup> See Anonymous, "The 6th Generation of China Rock – Zhongguo di liu dai xinsheng jijie liangxiang Yugong Yi Shan" (The 6th Generation of China Rock – The New Sound of the Sixth Generation Concentrates and Performs at Yugong Yi Shan) 2010, <http://www.mask9.com/node/11152> (accessed 15.09.2012); and the homepage [www.rockinchina.com](http://www.rockinchina.com).

<sup>44</sup> Jeroen de Kloet, *China with a Cut*, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p. 102.

Secondly, China's underground is less political or revolutionary than the West usually expects. In China's capitalist and competitive consumer oriented society, which emphasizes hard studies for a prospering career, marriage and financial success, ignorance about these values and going underground with an "exotic" hairstyle surely is an attitude and an individual act, if not a political statement, yet it is also a style and a fashion that conforms to the norms of the underground. It is, after all, the chosen life style of young people who belong to a generation that grew up without any political campaigns, experiencing the advantages of the reform period and watching China's rise in world politics. Rock musicians like Zhang Shouwang from the popular band Carsick Cars state that they do not sing about revolution but everyday life.<sup>46</sup> Yang Haisong, lead singer of 'PK14', explains: "We haven't been suppressed by the government, and we don't really understand what they are doing. And because it has not yet happened, I'm not really scared."<sup>47</sup>

The third aspect, then, is the relationship between the underground and the state. Alternative music forms, hip-hop and newly emerging youth cultures always bear the potential to become subversive or counter-hegemonic and as such, in the eyes of the state, need to be observed or changed. Anthony Fung has clearly shown how the Ministry of Culture and the international music industry co-operate in creating a non-threatening but commercially attractive environment for popular music.<sup>48</sup> He argues, "it is also music – the melody, rhythm and tone of it – which can be harnessed to absorb these micro-cultures into the "manageable zone" of the state. The production of popular culture under the umbrella of these "privileged" transnational media corporations in China has the power to define what the popular is and what the elements of popularity are."<sup>49</sup>

This power is exercised through official political guidelines that aim at building a "harmonious society." In the realm of entertainment, "Harmonious means blandly homogeneous, with virtually all contemporary music on the radio consisting of gentle love songs and uplifting ballads."<sup>50</sup> Fu Guoyong, an independent cultural critic in Hangzhou, is quoted to liken

"today's pop music culture to the politically enforced conformity of the Cultural Revolution, when only eight highly idealized Socialist "model operas" could be performed

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<sup>46</sup> Andreas Steen, "Long live the Revolution?: The Changing Spirit of Chinese Rock," in Ian Peddie (ed.), *Popular Music and Human Rights. Volume II: World Music*, Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate 2011, pp. 131-146.

<sup>47</sup> Alice Liu, "China's rockers too pampered for politics", 14.10.2009, in *Asia Times online*, see <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KJ14Ad02.html>, (Accessed 03.10.2009).

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Fung, "Think Globally, Act Locally—China's Rendezvous with MTV," *Global Media and Communication*, 2, 2006, pp. 71-88; and *Global Capital, Local Culture. Transnational Media Corporations in China*, New York: Peter Lang 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Anthony Fung, "Think Globally, Act Locally", p. 82.

<sup>50</sup> Howard W. French, "The Sound, Not of Music, but of Control," *The New York Times*, 25.10.2007.

in China. Nowadays singers can sing many songs, but in the end, they're all singing the same song, the core of which is, 'Have fun', Mr. Fu said. "Culture has become an empty vessel" (ibid.).

Seen in a larger context of (patriotic) "fun", then, many voices of the underground are silenced in the official media which usually determine the spread of popular culture, namely the broadcasting stations and the TV stations. Their sounds, however, are made available via a number of low-budget alternative recording companies and the internet. They are produced especially to be heard and enjoyed in smaller venues in China's large cities and at music festivals.

Due to the high rate of pirated copies, live performances are actually the most important source of income for the musicians. Festivals have been attracting large audiences since around 2000.<sup>51</sup> Most popular are those run by the Modern Midi-School of Music (since 1999) and Modernsky (since 2007), with more than 50 bands/musicians, including foreign acts, who perform on several stages for audiences of about 80.000 people in Beijing and elsewhere. The boom of festival culture reached a new height in 2010, with an estimated number of almost 100 festivals.<sup>52</sup> However, "aside MIDI and Modernsky, few festivals have been so favorably received. With the industry growing so quickly, quality is the last thing on many promoters' minds" (ibid.). According to Wang, there are many points to be criticized: Festivals involve heavy negotiations with authorities and may also be cancelled shortly before they are supposed to start. They are often badly organized, present the same bands on stage and lack interesting foreign top acts. And still, festivals provide a dynamic sphere of interaction, cooperation and conflict between rock audiences and authorities. Local officials agree to it because of financial gain and increasing numbers of tourists to remote regions. Money remains a big concern for festival organizers and foreign concert agencies in China when it comes to foreign top acts, simply because they are too expensive for the budget of an average rock fan.

China's rock culture is not only internationally connected, but also tolerant and co-operative. However, the effects of China's patriotic education and its new nationalism could be felt towards the end of the millennium, when songs about national unity and strength became so popular that even Chinese rock musicians expressed "vehemently anti-foreign sentiments".<sup>53</sup> Two years later, Chinese music fans at the 2003 Midi Festival acted outrageous as the Japanese band Brahman went on stage. As Jonathan Campbell explains: "The Midi School certainly learned

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<sup>51</sup> For a brief overview of early festival organization see Jonathan Campbell, *Red Rock*, pp. 203-217.

<sup>52</sup> Wang Yu, "The Illusion of Music Festival Success", *Beijing Today*, 13.09.2010.

<sup>53</sup> See Geremie Barmé, "To Screw Foreigners is Patriotic. China's Avantgarde Nationalists," *The China Journal*, 34, 1995, pp. 209-234; Huang Hao, "Yaogun yinyue: Rethinking Mainland Chinese Rock 'n' Roll", *Popular Music*, 20 (1), 2001, pp. 1-11.

from the incident, and so have I: Midi's not inviting any more Japanese acts and it has become clear to me that the only way a riot might ensue at a rock show is if there are Japanese on the stage."<sup>54</sup>

However, nationalist emotions, subversive potential and anti-hegemonic possibility notwithstanding, rock concerts and festivals are an accepted part of China's musical landscape today. Many factors seem to come together here: the music scene and its supporters are too big to be ignored or silenced, the growth of the music market and financial benefits, the knowledge that rock musicians are in principal patriotic and not against the state, the understanding that the young generation needs space to let steam off and the notion that concerts and festivals help to provide China with a less authoritarian, liberal, and international image.

This "official" understanding is also manifested in the handling of Cui Jian, who was previously banned from performing. The former rebel has become an accepted artist in the PRC. In 2005 the state-owned TV channel CCTV 10 featured him in the program 'People' (*Renwu*) in a respectful one and a half-hour documentary entitled 'Rock on the New Long March', (prod. Zhao Shujing 2005). Cui is engaged in many cultural activities. In 2006 he performed with the Rolling Stones in Shanghai and his portrait was put on the front page of the first issue of China's *Rolling Stone* magazine (only to be forbidden shortly thereafter). In autumn 2009, he celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the PRC's first rock album on his China-tour entitled 'Rock 'n' Roll on the New Long March'.<sup>55</sup> The visual arrangement was dominated by large images of Mao Zedong and revolutionaries, so that there were striking similarities between his Long March of Rock 'n' Roll and the festivities commemorating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC in the same year.<sup>56</sup> More recently, probably encouraged by the red song hype, his songs even became involved in "red" discourse. "Pop can be 'red,' Rock can also be 'red,'" wrote the critical newspaper *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Weekly) with reference to the established music critics Jin Zhaojun and Song Xiaoming, who emphasize the similarities of the rock spirit and the red spirit, even speaking of a blood relationship. Jin stresses that some of Cui Jian's songs demonstrate a strong social sense of responsibility.<sup>57</sup> The journal *Liuxing gequ* (Popular Songs) takes up these arguments and speaks of Cui Jian as a formerly "non-main melody musician" (*fei zhuxuanlü geshou*) who uses the word "red" in many song titles, obviously suggesting that this qualifies him as a mainstream musician.<sup>58</sup>

This discourse is intriguing, because it seeks to integrate rock music into the realm of red songs, acknowledging its patriotism and "usefulness" for the state. In

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Campbell, "Foreign Devil. Midi Music Festival", 06.04.2005, see <http://www.pop-matters.com/pm/column/campbell050406> (accessed 14.10.2012).

<sup>55</sup> See the homepage [www.cuijian.com](http://www.cuijian.com).

<sup>56</sup> See Steen, "Long Live the Revolution?", and Cui Jian's homepage [www.cuijian.com](http://www.cuijian.com).

<sup>57</sup> Chen Yiming and Jiang Hong, "Ge'er wei shenme zheyang hong".

<sup>58</sup> Huang Wenhao & Ding Huifeng, "Yule shidai de hongge xinjing", pp. 12-15.

2010, Cui Jian was even invited to perform two concerts at the Workers' Stadium in Beijing, the "New Year's Concerts of Rock Symphony." Cui and his band joined the stage with the prestigious Beijing Symphony Orchestra, his former work unit, in which he learned to play the trumpet. Together they created a sensation when performing selected songs of his "revolutionary" repertoire. Western observers may find this irritating, yet it is not. Despite of large audiences, Cui Jian's rock 'n' roll spirit belongs to the past, and the majority of fans are now in their forties, equipped with well-paid jobs and engaging in revolutionary nostalgia. Thus, the realization of the project remains ambiguous. It can be seen as a triumph of Cui's "Long March" and simultaneously demonstrates the flexibility, attractiveness and cooperative power of the mainstream. This was even more the case when in 2013 the annually celebrated, nationwide broadcasted and most popular Spring Festival Gala for the first time ever invited rock musicians to perform, including Cui Jian and others.<sup>59</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF THE MAINSTREAM

If popular culture is "a defining characteristic of Chinese postmodernity", as stated by Sheldon H. Lu, then popular music clearly fulfills the criteria put forward in the beginning of this text: It seeks to constantly challenge and redefine the boundaries of state control, it is the main focus of a highly commercial (inter)national music and consumer industry, and it appears in various entertaining costumes but supports the interests of the state and in this sense is anything but apolitical.<sup>60</sup>

This article looked into the three main scenes of popular musical activities in China, pointing out differences and similarities, conflicts and dialogues between them. Mandopop, red songs and rock music have different roots and clearly define different musical spheres and audiences. These differences are still maintained on a grassroots level and as commercially important musical categories. Besides, this article also highlights tendencies of possible merger and strategic alliances fostered by the CCP's cultural power and market incentives.

Shaping and creating musical taste by promoting certain patriotic programs and stars has always characterized China's official cultural policy. Red songs of various musical genres form a substantial part of modern China's musical heritage over the past century. For various reasons mentioned above, their popularity is not surprising, supported also by the "rise of China", popular pride in being Chinese and a new nationalism. However, despite widespread patriotism, not all youngsters are embracing these messages. Mandopop with its emphasis on individual (emotional) topics provides as much of an alternative to the patriotic

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<sup>59</sup> James Tiscione, "Chinese Rock for the first time televised in Spring Festival Gala", *Global Times*, 04.02.2013.

<sup>60</sup> Sheldon H. Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality*, p. 195.

mainstream as does China's new pop and the rock 'n' roll "underground", though for different audiences.

Messages of love and emotion, as well as the sounds and styles from Taiwan and Hong Kong became popular with Chinese audiences in the 1980s. During the 1990s they were co-opted into the red repertoire, and since the 2000s a selection of these songs officially qualify as patriotic and became acceptable for China's large entertainment shows. Today, and not without serious debates, patriotic "red" songs appear in versions indistinguishable from the sounds of love. In other words, China's cultural authorities gradually up-dated and increased the attractiveness of the mainstream by including new sounds, and also rock music. This is not a one-sided move. For those who are willing to accept the rules, China offers access to Asia's largest consumer market, to an audience that no artist and no music company can afford to neglect. In this context, the role of China's smaller and larger stages for musical performances can hardly be overestimated. Given the fact that CD-sales usually provide little revenue, the aforementioned singing contests, reality shows and large festivals are highly important, because they guaranty nationwide TV-live broadcast, publicity, fame and income.

In other words, new sounds and styles have been incorporated into the mainstream, and messages of love and individuality have been added to the larger patriotic narrative. In all instances the PRC's Ministry of Culture is the main decision maker, either promoting and adopting certain cultural forms and activities, or censoring and banning them. Decisions may vary from case to case, and from time to time, depending also on the size of the venue or the scope of publicity, yet there is no doubt that "the economic viability of any popular star is always secondary to issues of political stability".<sup>61</sup> If this framework is accepted – and the dividing line is clear for everybody working in the music business – anything seems possible. This power of the state is also reflected in the words of Howard French: "Even without resorting to direct censorship, the state has formidable powers for controlling popular music and shaping tastes. They include state ownership of all broadcast media, the screening of lyrics for all commercial music and strict control of performance sites."<sup>62</sup>

Artists and music companies are aware of how the CCP exercises its power, yet they react differently. The French pianist Richard Clayderman, who in 1977 became famous with the recording of *Ballade Pour Adeline*, is probably the most successful foreign musician in China. He performs red songs and Chinese classical pieces with Chinese musicians and children. He first performed in China in 1992 and by 2012 could look back on "a series of unbelievable record of more than 30 tours consisting of 200 live shows with more than 1 million spectators in 70 cities, while hundreds of millions TV viewers enjoyed his performances in special

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<sup>61</sup> Anthony Fung, *Global Capital, Local Culture*, p. 71.

<sup>62</sup> Howard W. French, "The Sound, Not of Music, but of Control".

events.”<sup>63</sup> Another example would be Elton John, who recently gave a concert in Beijing, which he rather spontaneously dedicated to the famous artist Ai Weiwei. Because of this utterance, and similar to the case of Björk (2008), his show was criticized as “political” by the Ministry of Culture and the result was a tightening of rules and regulations for conducting foreign concerts in China.<sup>64</sup> We may also refer to Chris Li, the famous “Supergirl” from 2005, who started her career without the state, elected by fans and supported by the media. Her new Chinese pop music, individual and not patriotic, is now banned from larger stages. “Similar to her predecessors in the earlier waves of Chinese popular music in the 1980s,” writes Fung, “ideologically her career is carefully designed not to run afoul of the authorities”.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, it is important to point out that the PRC’s endeavor to enlarge, standardize and harmonize the “mainstream melody” succeeded not only because of political necessity. Equally important is the support of the international music industry, its artists and institutions. They all seem to accept “the rules” and look for commercial advantages, despite many setbacks. “Sell Your Music to Asian Markets!” was a headline in the popular American music journal *Music Connection* in July 2012, promoting “booming markets” and “great new opportunities.” The article recommended Japan and South Korea in particular, also other areas in South-Asia, but spoke with reservations about China, due to the unsolved copyright issues, pirating and its characteristic as a “low price point”, meaning that people could not afford purchasing a CD for \$10. And indeed, for the international music industry, China remains a small market. In 2010, the International Federation of Phonographic Industries (IFPI) “ranked the world’s second-largest economy only 27<sup>th</sup> in terms of music sales, placing it between Ireland and Turkey.”<sup>66</sup> However, despite its less important role in global music trade, it is seen as a rising and prospering future market, especially within China.

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<sup>63</sup> See “Romantic China – Richard Clayderman China Tour 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert”, see <http://www.spotlighttm.com/search-events/viewevent/250-m-romantic-china-richard-clayderman-china-tour-20th-anniversary-concert?groupid=123> (accessed 03.02.2013).

<sup>64</sup> Tania Branigan, “China tightens concert rules after Elton John’s ‘disrespectful’ Beijing show”, *The Guardian*, 10.02.2013.

<sup>65</sup> Anthony Fung, “Deliberating Fandom”, p. 86.

<sup>66</sup> Louis Hau, “Something from Nothing: Chinese search Giant Baidu’s major-label licensing pacts signal promising shift”, *Billboard*, 30.07.2011, 123 (26), p. 7.

## ABSTRACT

**China Pop: Love, Patriotism and the State in China's Music Sphere**

Popular culture in China is a dynamic and contested sphere of activities, conflicts and negotiations. The effects of globalization as well as new media and communication technologies challenge the authorities and enrich cultural creativity. Today, the state maintains its omnipresence in this cultural sector while promoting a policy of dialogue, integration and exclusion. Cooperation with the state is attractive because it is rewarded with unlimited access to official media, audiences and commercial success.

The article focuses on recent trends in China's most important genres of popular music: Mandopop, (red) mainstream music and rock music. It argues that the state's success in raising the popularity of the mainstream is based on its constant promotion, patriotic education, a general pride in China's strength, nationalism and – equally important – adaptation and the commercial attractiveness of the Chinese market. Mandopop and rock music are carefully integrated, while national/international artists and companies engage in self-censorship and thereby support the mainstream ideology. The transformation of Chinese pop reflects necessary steps towards cultural liberalism, yet it is based on conscious efforts of control and guidance in order to promote a new Chinese national popular culture.