

Underground Rock Music in Inland Chinese Cities: An Ethnographic Study of the Music and
Ideology of the Developing Zhengzhou Rock Music Scene, 2000-2023

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Abstract

Rock music, a Western-originated popular music genre, has existed in mainland China for almost forty years. Emerging in Beijing during the tumultuous and rapidly changing social, political, and economic landscape of the 1980s, Chinese rock music voiced younger generations' concerns about the future of China and expressed subversive perspectives that some echoed with the student movement. Over successive generations, as China underwent significant social, cultural, and economic developments, rock music gained wider acceptance and a growing commercial market in the mainland and beyond. Meanwhile, Chinese youths have developed rock music in various ways that both confirmed and deviated from the original meanings and functions of rock music in the 1980s. This paper investigates these changes from the perspective of the underground rock music scene in the inland Chinese city of Zhengzhou. Through interview-based ethnographic research of Zhengzhou rock musicians, this study aims to understand how an underground rock music movement emerged and rapidly developed a thriving scene, as a part of an underground rock music network among different inland cities, in about twenty years. In particular, this paper hopes to uncover how the original ideologies of 1980s Beijing rock musicians were maintained or changed by Zhengzhou rock musicians and shaped their decisions in the formation and development of the underground rock music scene in Zhengzhou. This study seeks to provide new perspectives on the evolution of Chinese rock music outside of China's large coastal cities, as a way to broaden the understanding of the different methods and modes of adoption and assimilation of rock music into Chinese-speaking East Asia.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Sitong Li. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Local Music In China’s Inland Cities: Ethnomusicological Fieldwork Project Comparing ‘Grassroots’ Popular Music Scenes in Contemporary Urban China”, No. Pro00120433, 11/07/2022.

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Introduction

“What we play is the small market of the small market (小众中的小众).” On a sunny afternoon in August 2022, Dennis, the guitarist of Zhengzhou math-rock band *Ga*, tells me with an easy smile as he leads me into their music base. Despite knowing him for about ten years, this is my very first time visiting his music world in person. “These things can’t make money, we don’t expect to make money from this, and we even throw money in (for this).” He says that to me while pushing the door open, and then I enter *Ga*’s “secret music garden” hidden on the top floor of a business building in the bustling East District of Zhengzhou. In my first impression of the building, it does not seem like a location for a music studio, as it is full of businesses specializing in extra-curricular educational courses for children and a sports complex. After a short rest, Dennis invites me to the rehearsal room where they are practicing for the first time in a month, and I immediately get an up-close, live experience of *Ga*’s music. Immersed in *Ga*’s lively music of complex rhythms and melodies, it is the first time I felt that, in my hometown of Zhengzhou (郑州), such an energetic and creative rock music scene truly exists.

A few days earlier, I talked with a Zhengzhou guitarist, Dingyuan. From our conversation, I receive some perspective on the nature of Zhengzhou’s music scene and its place within the broader rock music landscape across China:

“There is not a lot of original music in Zhengzhou, they mostly just do it for fun. Those capable musicians who want to be famous have gone to Beijing.”

When asking about why Zhengzhou cannot retain music talent, Dingyuan comments:

“Henan¹ is dominated by agriculture, so our industrial foundation and commercial culture are poor. Thus, people’s demand for spiritual nourishment and their consumption power cannot keep up with the taste of this Xiaozhong (小众, ‘small market’) music.”



Figure 1. Location of Zhengzhou in Henan province, China

Dingyuan played in a band before and contributed to the overall arrangement of their original songs. At that time, the lead singer of his band took charge of the songwriting part. Now, Dingyuan is satisfied with running around bars and doing paid performances in his spare time. “I always spend most of my time playing guitar after work no matter what, so why not run around to different stages to perform? On the one hand, I enjoy playing live and being on the stage in

¹ Zhengzhou is the capital city of Henan province (河南省)

front of audiences. On the other hand, I urge myself to practice and improve my skills in this way”.

One month after visiting *Ga*, I was also afforded the opportunity to talk with a musician, Mr. Song, a long-time veteran of the Zhengzhou music scene. A singer-songwriter and music producer and somewhat of a local celebrity, Mr. Song was around in the early years of Zhengzhou’s fledgling rock music scene. He describes how even twenty years ago, how desolate a place Zhengzhou was for a young musician interested in rock music:

“When I first started playing guitar before being in a band, there was basically no learning resource available back then except a few guitar magazines and textbooks.”

People like Mr. Song who picked up the guitar in 1990s Zhengzhou could only learn by listening to pirated cassettes and *dakou* (打口) tapes (cut-outs) received indirectly from larger cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Having played in the underground band scene for many years, Mr. Song has many memories of the early days of the Zhengzhou rock music scene and the types of difficult decisions rock bands faced when considering whether to move to bigger opportunities in larger record companies or stay local. He recalls,

“At that time, Modern Sky (摩登天空) wanted to sign us when our V-BAND won an award, but we couldn't accept those unfair terms on the contract they gave regarding the ownership of the copyright of our songs, the compensation we pay for the change in members and so on”.

From his aggrieved tone, I sensed a powerlessness and anger in Mr. Song's voice, related to the fledgling Zhengzhou underground music scene in the face of pressure and potential exploitation from a Beijing record company. Mr. Song's comment, "I think working steadily to take root in the local area is the greatest return I could give back to this city that I love so much." seemed to sum up his years of dedication to the development of Zhengzhou's local music scene, recounting his personal history with music in Zhengzhou, stretching all the way from his early days in the late 1990s as a young rock musician, to these more recent years in Zhengzhou as a music producer and owner of a small music company.

As a native of Zhengzhou, having grown up in the late-1990s and 2000s (during the same period when the Zhengzhou rock music scene was developing), I was unaware of this music world in my hometown despite the important role music played in my upbringing. I learned to play the piano in elementary school and thus was exposed to Western classical music at an early age. I was not in the habit of listening to much Western classical music nor were any of the people in my family or community in Zhengzhou. It is considered a "petite bourgeoisie" type of high art music - valued by upper-middle-class Chinese parents as a type of cultural cultivation and exposure for their children, so parents who can afford it will have their children learn Western classical instruments such as piano and violin, but a very small percentage of the population listen to it, let alone attend Western Classical music live concerts. Chinese regional music traditions might have even fewer listeners in recent decades and may even face extinction because fewer and fewer younger generations are interested to listen, let alone even knowing that such traditions still exist. Although TV programs featuring traditional Chinese operas can still be

seen, in my perception growing up, only elderly people would choose to appreciate local opera. For example, my grandparents hardly listen to any kind of songs, only Chinese operas.

As for the development of my own musical taste as a teenager in Zhengzhou, I mostly listened to Gang-Tai (Hong Kong and Taiwan) pop just like the majority of the mainland Chinese population. Also, I gradually developed a preference for pop rock and then went on to explore other types of rock music. I suppose part of the reason I never paid particular attention to Zhengzhou's local rock scene was that the audience for rock music was very limited in my mind. In China, besides the rock genre itself as a small market or niche music, sub-genres of rock other than pop rock and folk rock are generally perceived as too noisy or incomprehensible and not pleasing to listen to. Fortunately, through my interviews with these Zhengzhou rock musicians, a once fuzzy and incomplete understanding of Zhengzhou's rock music scene has come into clearer focus.

Today, it has been nearly four decades since rock music was first introduced to mainland China in Beijing in the mid-1980s. Zhengzhou, as a second-tier inland city in the historic Central Plains of China, on the economic rise over the last two decades, reveals a city burgeoning with a new, thriving, and evolving local music culture that scarcely existed twenty years ago. Although different in nature from Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, this inland city, which is often overlooked by larger companies in the music industry, does have a vibrant underground network of young people forming bands and playing rock music in local clubs and livehouses in what could be authentically called a "grassroots" movement, which is driven significantly by the aesthetic and artistic goals of the musicians to bring live music to young audiences in Zhengzhou

who crave it. It is not an amateur endeavor (i.e. creative music as a hobby in their spare time), but a full-fledged professional effort to create music of high quality and high originality. And despite Zhengzhou's often overlooked status in the mainland Chinese music world, Zhengzhou rock bands have attracted the attention of established record labels in larger cities like Beijing.

In this thesis, I will answer a series of questions in an attempt to understand the Zhengzhou underground rock music scene and its place within the broader musical landscape of Chinese-speaking East Asia. Ethnographic research carried out in Zhengzhou from July 2022 through March 2023, combined with a broad body of research literature on the history of popular music in Chinese-speaking East Asia up through the present day will provide the resources from which to answer the following research questions:

1. (a) What does this emergence and growth of the Zhengzhou rock music scene over the past twenty years tell us about the development of Chinese popular music and youth culture in China's inland cities?

(b) What new perspectives can emerge from the critical study of an inland city rock music scene that can expand on a body of existing Western music scholarship on Chinese rock music that tends to focus more on coastal city Chinese rock music that is either socially critical or that exhibits a "Chineseness" by incorporating elements of Chinese music traditions?

2. (c) How has the Chinese concept of "rock spirit" 摇滚精神 *yaogun jingshen* (an ideal of freedom of expression inherited from Western culture in the 1980s) developed in successive

generations of mainland Chinese rock musicians and informed their music-making and professional pursuits?

(d) What does this tell us about how a music genre with a “freedom of expression” ideal can continue to grow and spread in a country where certain policies, social pressure, and cultural norms pose challenges to individual expression?

3. (e) How does the Zhengzhou rock music scene, as a part of a network of inland city rock music scenes, situate itself within the larger historical and geographic context of Western-influenced popular music across Chinese-speaking East Asia (i.e. Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong)?

(f) How does this study contribute to an understanding of overall Chinese identity in East Asia in what could be referred to as “music and identity in the Sinophone”?

Chapter 1: Mainland Chinese Rock vs. Gang-Tai Pop

To understand Chinese rock music, it is essential to consider its emergence within the broader historical context of Western-influenced popular music in Chinese-speaking East Asia, rather than solely examining Chinese rock music in isolation. The story of Western-influenced popular music in Chinese-speaking East Asia began back in the 1920s in Shanghai, spread to Taiwan and Hong Kong in the late 1940s, and evolved into a massive commercial music industry by the 1970s, fueled by record companies in Taiwan and Hong Kong. This commercial popular music is commonly referred to as “Gang-Tai” (Gang = Xiang Gang [i.e. Hong Kong], Tai = Taiwan). Mainland Chinese rock music, on the other hand, emerged in the mid-1980s in Beijing. The Beijing rock music movement, in contrast to the commercialism of Gang-Tai, represented underground music, not for profit but for ideological reasons. This chapter will provide a historical outline of Gang-Tai popular music and Chinese rock music in order to lay a foundation for the understanding of the Zhengzhou rock music scene and how it fits into the larger picture of Western-influenced popular music in Chinese-speaking East Asia. As a consequence of outlining a chronological history of Western-influenced popular music in East Asia, this chapter also brings up issues of interculturalism in music, the process of assimilating foreign music into Chinese culture, reasons for such assimilation, and meanings of Chinese identity within this assimilated music.

1.1 Gang-Tai Pop: the long history of Chinese commercial popular music

Shanghai Popular Music and the Origins of “Gang-Tai”

Shanghai has been at the forefront of China’s modernization and globalization since the late Qing Dynasty, so Western popular music was gradually introduced to Shanghai by foreign musicians and Chinese musicians who received musical education from the West. More specifically, Shanghai’s jazz movement in the 1920s and 1930s followed music and dance trends from the West such as the cha-cha, fox-trot, rumba, waltz, and tango that were introduced by East Indian, Filipino, Indonesian, and Russian musicians, who played both their own music and local pop for the Euro-American expatriate community and for the Chinese elite (Moskowitz 17). Jazz, the ultimate symbol of modern urban sophistication in the early 20th century was popular in Shanghai with jazz artists from different countries contributing to the music scene (Moskowitz 17). This evolved into the first Chinese popular music scene and the establishment of Shanghai-pop (时代曲 *shidaiqu*) as a musical genre (“Drizzle” 毛毛雨 *maomaoyu* as the first Chinese pop song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbqMvGkK5IU>). Nicholas L. Chan describes Shanghai-pop as “the origin of Chinese popular music, rich in fusional characteristics of Chinese and foreign, which came into being with the establishment of the Republic of China, the development of ‘Speak Mandarin Movement’, the rise of national industry and commerce, and the gradual formation of the urban middle class in Shanghai” (Chan 27). Chan points out that, in its one-hundred-year history of diffusion and acceptance, Shanghai-pop encountered a “diasporic” fate which is rarely seen throughout the history of popular music in the world (Chan 27). The reason behind this phenomenon could be attributed to the unstable social and political

circumstances of China in the first half of the 20th century, specifically the dominant official perception of Shanghai-pop as being “decadent” (靡靡之音) in the eyes of both the Nationalists (KMT) and the Communists (CCP), which caused the official ban of this musical genre on both sides of the Taiwan Strait after the Chinese Civil War (Jones, personal interview, Sept 22, 2011, as cited in Bishop).

Gang (Hong Kong): The Fall of Shanghai-pop and Rise of Cantopop Music

Hong Kong was the inheritor of Shanghai-pop after it was increasingly outlawed in the mainland beginning in the late 1940s, as many Shanghai elites and record companies moved to Hong Kong, bringing the “Old Shanghai” (老上海) music with them. The Hong Kong popular music world in the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by Mandarin (Shanghai-pop) and English songs (Chu 26), representing the two predominant cultures in Hong Kong at that time: economically ruling Shanghainese and politically ruling British. Both English and Mandarin were languages imported into a predominantly Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong population. The early dominance of Western and Shanghai-Western popular music was primarily the influence of outsiders (Shanghainese and Westerners), seeing their Western-influenced Shanghai-pop as more cosmopolitan than local Cantonese popular music that may have been perceived as provincial and tedious because it was either love songs derived from the Cantonese opera tradition or social satire songs written in colloquial Cantonese that poked fun at everyday life (Chu 26). Regardless, things began to change as the use of Cantonese language became increasingly attached to the “Hongkongese identity”, which further heightened its status. And with the effort of brilliant early Cantopop musicians such as Sam Hui Koon-kit 许冠杰 (music example: 铁塔凌云, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVNmwzy8eVk>) and James Wong Jim (黄霑), Hong Kong

popular music set a brand-new tone since the mid-1970s with systematic standard rules of song-writing and singing which almost all later Cantopop musicians adopted.

During the 20-year period between roughly 1975 to 1995, the Cantopop industry reached its peak in various aspects such as popularity and influence. Even though a small portion of Chinese people speak Cantonese, the majority of the global Chinese population could more or less sing a few Cantopop songs in either standard or “broken” Cantonese. At the time, there were singers and musicians from Taiwan, mainland China, and overseas Chinese communities devoting themselves to Hong Kong’s Cantopop scene for a promising music career. However, the Cantopop industry afterwards faced many difficulties and started declining in the mid-1990s (Chu and Leung 69). There were several main factors that contributed to this failure, such as HongKongers’ general panic about the return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty to China in 1997 which led to massive scale of immigration into English-speaking countries, the exodus of capital investment, plus the devastating effects of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Apart from these external factors, the long-term negative effects of over-relying on producing multi-media stars and cover songs, as decisions made by major record label executives, also started to show their damage to the organic development ecology of the Hong Kong Cantopop industry (Chu and Leung 68, 70). The rationale behind this was that such an environment of record companies earning “easy money” through cover songs and through other media than selling records, discouraged Hong Kong’s local talents such as original bands and singer-songwriters from writing original music and attempting music hybridization, therefore gradually lost the foundation to maintain the sustainable development of the Cantopop scene, that is, musical creativity and originality.

Tai (Taiwan): From Taiwanese-pop to the Leading Mandopop Centre

Foreign-influenced Taiwanese popular music (i.e. 台语流行音乐 Taiwanese Hokkien pop) took shape during the Japanese occupation period, as foreign occupation influenced the initial stage of forming the “Taiwanese consciousness” and expressing the newly formed Taiwanese identity through music. The establishment of the Japanese-owned Columbia Record Company in the 1920s (the same time as Shanghai was developing its popular music industry) marked the start of the Taiwanese popular music industry. Intellectual and artistic expressions in Taiwan regarding Taiwanese people’s desires for political and social reforms began to develop in a foreign-ruled context (Ho 124). During this period, the hybrid musical elements from the West, Japan, and mainland China with musical sources like folk-song writers, church-trained musicians, and Western classical-trained musicians together shaped what the initial version of Taiwanese popular music sounded like, and the general feature of Taiwanese songs under Japanese colonial rule was Chinese pentatonic scale and the use of a range of melodies stretching to an octave or a thirteenth (Ho 125-126). Similar to what was happening to Shanghai’s music industry at that time, the Taiwanese popular music scene also benefited from the emergence of the film industry and its need for popular music. In the early 1930s, the modern cultural connection between Taiwan and mainland China was resumed through Shanghai movies imported into Taiwan, which offered the first Western-influenced popular music “hit songs” in Taiwan’s history as theme songs of these films. Nevertheless, the growth of Taiwanese popular music paused in the face of the Japanese colonial government’s language policy of banning Taiwanese (Hokkien) to promote Japanese as the “national language”, as a component of the Japanization movement during the last ten years of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan (Ho 127). During fifty years of Japanese rule from 1895 to 1945, the mindset of Taiwanese people

transformed in a similar way Hongkongers did from the 1950s onward; i.e. developing a stronger cultural and national identity in the context of being ruled by a foreign power. The general recognition and use of the “local” language or dialect accompanied by the establishment of popular music scenes sung in this local language played vital roles in this new identity formation process. In Hong Kong, this meant the choice to use the language spoken by its largest group of immigrants - Cantonese, which originated from Guangzhou as their lingua franca. In Taiwan, this meant defining the language spoken by its dominant group of immigrants - Hokkien (Southern Fujian/Min dialect) as “Taiwanese”.

In 1945 following the defeat of Japan in World War II, Taiwan was returned to China and reunited with the mainland for several years. During the second stage of the Chinese Civil War in 1947, the Kuomintang (KMT) government banned the Shanghai-pop genre fearing the prevalence of such soft and feminine “decadent music” would corrupt the morale of their armed forces at this decisive moment of the war. Following KMT’s retreat to Taiwan and the establishment of the PRC in mainland China by the Communists in 1949, Taiwan since then became the base for KMT’s counter-attack to recover the Chinese mainland for several decades. Everything in the post-war Taiwanese society was under strict government supervision and censorship due to martial law, and many Taiwanese (Hokkien) popular songs from the Japanese colonial era with distinct Japanese flavour were banned. On the other hand, despite the official ban on Shanghai-pop, the mainlanders who moved to Taiwan with KMT in 1949 still found ways to listen to Shanghai-style music for enjoyment and nostalgia, yet since the creation base for post-war Shanghai-pop was in Hong Kong, not Taiwan, this “Old Shanghai music” gradually faded out of the stage in Taiwan (Chan 28). Nevertheless, due to the intense promotion of

Mandarin as the “national language” (国语) in post-war Taiwan, popular music written and sung in Mandarin continued developing while songwriters had to adapt to this new environment and audiences, as well as adjust to various new rules and restrictions in terms of styles and lyrics to avoid being banned. In this way, Taipei eventually became the new hub of the Mandopop industry, especially after the fall of Shanghai-pop with the rise of Cantopop in Hong Kong during the 1970s.

At that stage, Taiwan’s music scene experienced a very similar situation to its geopolitical ally, Hong Kong. Both of these capitalist Chinese societies outside of mainland China received lots of popular music influences from the Euro-American music world, and these also determined the overall music style and structure of Cantopop and Mandopop as Western-influenced Chinese popular music genres. In Taiwan, this had something to do with the KMT government’s censorship which focused on “textual Chineseness” in respect of themes illustrated through lyrics, but paid less attention to “musical Chineseness” so there was no such tendency or movement of deliberately incorporating traditional Chinese music elements into the music at that time. Although the whole Taiwanese society was under drastic re-sinicization measures such as the Chinese Cultural Renaissance (中华文化复兴运动) in 1966 to combat the Proletariat Cultural Revolution (无产阶级文化大革命) launched around the same time across the Strait, people in Taiwan especially the educated youngsters were very much immersed in Western popular music and enjoyed foreign cover songs with Chinese lyrics. Particularly after the full involvement of the US military in the Vietnam War in 1965, Taiwan became a vacation centre for the US military stationed in Vietnam. American bars, restaurants, and nightclubs fostered the development of band music and cultivated capable local singers in Taiwan.

In the 1970s, when Hong Kong finally had Cantopop established as its most prevailing music genre, Taiwan also experienced several severe socio-political setbacks that caused the rise of “sing our own songs” (唱自己的歌) awareness among young college musicians. Taiwanese authorities’ withdrawal from the United Nations in 1971 and the termination of their official diplomatic relations with the USA in 1979 were the two most devastating geopolitical events. This shook many Taiwanese people’s faith and determination, and significantly changed the social atmosphere of Taiwan at that time. Ironically, this situation turned out to be the motive for many people’s awakening and led to the famous “Modern Folk Song Movement” (现代民歌运动) as well as the emergence of the genre “campus folk” 校园民歌 (music example: 齐豫 Chyi Yu’s “Olive Tree” 橄榄树, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZb8fJZFhlo>) in the mid to late 1970s. Many of these “campus folk songs” written by composers associated with this movement were not necessarily traditional Chinese or Taiwanese folk music from the masses but rather strongly influenced by the style of American folk singers such as Bob Dylan. The themes ranged from Chinese history, homesickness and nostalgia, modern Chinese poetry, vagrancy, and so on. As these “campus” singers and songwriters later signed contracts with record companies, this new wave of Mandopop music gradually left campuses and entered a larger popular music industry in the 1980s.

After lifting the 38-year martial law in 1987, Taiwanese singers and songwriters developed a new level of comfort in expressing their ideas and opinions freely. As someone who lived through such change, musician Lee Che-Yi (李哲艺) comments, “Before 1987, the government simply treated Taiwan as a counter-attack base and they did not want people to think too much or

express themselves too freely. The local cultures of Taiwan were under suppression and did not receive enough attention. After 1987, it became possible for various kinds of art to grow and flourish with more and more space for free artistic expression in Taiwan. That was when the government really worked hard to run this land and treated Taiwan as what it deserved to be” (Lee, personal interview, July 17, 2017, as cited in Xu). Not only Mandopop, the large-scale Taiwanese (Hokkien) popular music industry finally resumed in Taiwan, and other genres like Hakka and Aboriginal peoples’ music also started developing from the 1990s onward. The impact of lifting martial law in 1987 was huge and profound, as it contributed to Taiwan Mandopop’s dominance in the Chinese-speaking world in the 21st century.

1.2 Beijing Rock Music and the origins of 摇滚精神 *yaogunjingshen* (Rock Spirit) in China

What exactly is mainland Chinese rock Music? Simply put, it is the adoption of Western rock music, first by a circle of Chinese musicians in Beijing in the 1980s. However, to fully understand why Beijing musicians first adopted this Western music style, and what Chinese rock music has developed into over the last four decades, the social, cultural, and political context in China leading up to 1985 needs to be examined. From the beginning of Mao Zedong’s rule in 1949 to the implementation of *gaige kaifang* 改革开放 (“reform and opening up” policy) by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, mainland China was in almost total isolation from Western cultural influence. In the West during the same period, rock music emerged in post-World War II America in the 1950s as part of a broader development of a new youth culture, blossoming in the 1960s onward into a variety of music genres and styles connected with different social-cultural movements (e.g. counterculture movement, anti-war movement) that were expressive of the identity and viewpoints of younger generations. The musical exposure of China’s youth during

the same period was severely limited in scope, only having access to government-sanctioned “red music” or “revolutionary music” full of Communist propaganda and completely oblivious to any music-cultural trends outside of the mainland (Moskowitz 19). At that time, the socio-political environment and lack of expressive channels made it very difficult for younger generations in China to express their viewpoints independently of the state’s dominant established views. Once Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening up” policy was implemented, mainland Chinese people were finally exposed to the outside world for the first time in almost thirty years. This included contact with Western rock music, which made its way into China via cassette tapes that were brought in by American expats who were studying in Chinese universities, or working at foreign embassies, primarily in Beijing (Huang “Voices” 186).

In this context, Chinese musicians began to experiment with Western rock music style, learning to play Western rock music instruments and writing rock songs with lyrics in Chinese. One of the earliest Beijing rock musicians was Beijing Symphony Orchestra trumpeter Cui Jian (崔健), who is generally considered the “father” of mainland Chinese rock music. Cui’s first band, known as *Building Blocks* or *With Seven-Player Band* (七合板乐队 *Qiheban yuedui*) was formed in 1984 with six other colleagues. Along with playing cover versions of Western and Japanese popular songs, the band also played Chinese rock songs written by Cui and other members. On May 9, 1986, Cui sang his original work “Nothing to My Name” (一无所有 *yiwusuoyou*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTm_PgjVbWM) at the Beijing Workers’ Stadium – a performance to a large audience of Chinese youth that is often referenced as the birth of mainland Chinese Rock.

According to Andrew Jones, from his interviews with thirty early Chinese rock musicians in 1990, they were sixteen to thirty-three years old college graduates, high school drop-outs, conservatory-trained musicians, or teenagers who taught themselves how to play guitar (Jones “Like a Knife” 98). A rock music scene emerged and quickly expanded in Beijing in the mid-1980s. Considering the isolation and social struggle in China leading up to the 1980s, it is clear to see how Western rock music offered China’s youth a vehicle for the expression of their own concerns, frustrations, and initiatives regarding an uncertain future. It was a creative and expressive music platform that did not exist in China up to that time. Rock music was adopted by Chinese musicians for the ideological function of the music as much as for the music itself.

In Cui Jian’s song “Nothing to My Name” (一无所有 *yiwusuoyou*), the title and lyrics could be interpreted as referring to his generation, which grew up during the devastating Cultural Revolution, experienced the end of Mao’s era, and the beginning of Deng’s new era. The song expressed their confusion and sense of disorientation in an unknown new market economy, with many drastic changes in Chinese society in the 1980s. Another iconic rock song of the time, “Garbage Dump” (垃圾场 *lajichang*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93xobgXBZKw>) by He Yong (何勇), raised the social issue of the widening wealth gap under the influence of the new market economy, with harsh and angry punk rock sound of the music. And Cui Jian’s first album, titled “Rock and Roll on the New Long March” (新长征路上的摇滚, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fM678l8mbCc>), recontextualized the term “Long March” with a level of ironic subversiveness. The CCP sees the Long March as a heroic act during the Chinese Civil War, but Cui repurposed the term for a new idea of class struggle related to China’s youth, using music that the CCP called “capitalist music” imported from the “decadent

West” (Huang “Voices” 187).

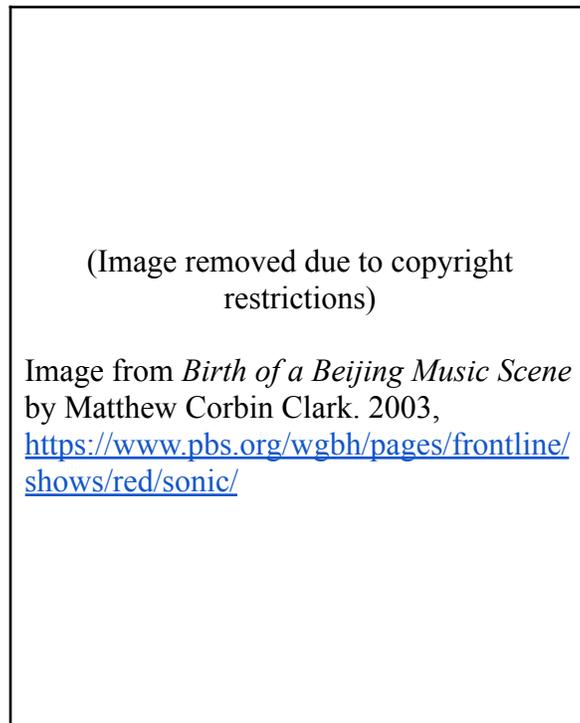


Figure 2. Photo of Cui Jian

This points to the significance of Chinese musicians adopting rock music beyond the music itself. By using rock music as a platform for the expression of youth viewpoints during a crucial transitional time in China’s history, they were also adopting an ideology. Cui Jian himself once commented, “Rock is an ideology, not a set musical form” (Jones “Like a knife” 115). A photo of Cui Jian in Tiananmen Square from the late 1980s could serve as an expression of this ideology. In the photo, Cui Jian stood as a confident and defiant rocker, much in the same vein as Western hard rock musicians of the 1970s and 80s would do in their publicity photos. This kind of photo to some extent demonstrated the rebelliousness of many Chinese youth at that time, as Cui Jian was standing in the symbolic location of Chinese authority (i.e. Tiananmen Square in Beijing). Moskowitz argues that it was the generational social discord of the 1970s and 80s in China that gave rise to a Chinese style of Western-originated rock music, in contrast with other

East Asian Chinese-speaking societies. He says, “It is the state’s presence that fosters an environment for rock; in ‘free’ societies such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, where there is less to fight against, there is little interest in this musical genre” (Moskowitz 24). From this perspective, there could be an environment of state restriction in addition to Chinese youth’s diverse views on social change, so Cui Jian and other early Beijing rock musicians used their music to make their voices heard. In subsequent generations of rock musicians and rock music audiences in mainland China, the term *yaogun jingshen* 摇滚精神 (rock spirit) emerged to refer to an ideology of rock music as a call for “freedom of expression”.

It is also important to note the sharp contrast between the commercial nature of Gang-Tai commercial popular music and Beijing Rock music. Rather than being formed in a top-down manner of Gang-Tai commercial pop music, Chinese rock, by nature of its subversiveness, is entirely a bottom-up endeavor. The early Beijing rock musicians pursued their music primarily based on ideology, not for commercial success. This idea of “music underground” is also an important component in the meaning of *yaogun jingshen* (rock spirit), not just as subversive music, but to place primary importance on pursuing the ideals of the musicians ahead of commercial success - to preserve a purity of artistic goals in the spirit to allow musicians freely express themselves in whichever way they wish. It is certainly an ideology of an underground music scene assimilated from the West, but now completely reinterpreted with a particularly unique Chinese social-cultural-political context that does not exist in the West.

China’s first-generation rock musicians assimilated Western rock music into Chinese culture, not only through the meaning of the lyrics but also by incorporating Chinese folk music

traditions into their songs. In addition to musicians like Cui Jian, who already had training in Western music traditions, many of the early Chinese rock musicians came from a background in Chinese regional instrumental folk music traditions. This created a climate of influence on rock music being written at the time, where part of the belief of constructing rock music with a specific Chinese identity also meant incorporating Chinese music into songs. This is evidenced in Cui Jian's "Nothing to My Name" (一无所有 *yiwusuoyou*), with the presence of the northern Chinese double-reed folk instrument *suona* (唢呐) entering with a wailing solo, in place of a more standard rock guitar solo. Another being rock band *Tang Dynasty* (唐朝乐队) was well known for incorporating Central Asian music references into their heavy metal music. This is meant to evoke a sense of China's international Silk Road past during the Tang Dynasty. Band members turned to Uyghur neighborhoods in Beijing, seeking inspiration from Uyghur folk melodies to incorporate into their heavy metal guitar riffs (Huang "Voices" 191). Such *Tang Dynasty* songs as "Dreaming back to the Tang Dynasty" (梦回唐朝 *menghui tangchao*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ba4jXBnkLvo>) and "The Sun" (太阳 *taiyang*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWatSSIAilo>) are representative of the Chinese and Central Asian influences.

This first wave of Chinese rock music lasted into the mid-1990s with a concert held in 1994 at the Hong Kong Coliseum, symbolizing for many to mark the culmination of the first era of Chinese rock. This concert (摇滚中国乐势力) featured several iconic first-generation rock musicians Dou Wei (窦唯), He Yong, and Zhang Chu (张楚). Dou Wei played the Chinese flute (笛子 *di zi*) for the prelude of his reggae-rhythm song "Be Good, Boy" (噢！乖 *ou! guai*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBhyRzoNJpw>). The song talks about the dilemma of being

a good child under the strain of parental discord, especially in the traditional Chinese culture that over-emphasizes filial piety. He Yong's father played the Chinese traditional instrument "three-stringed lute" (三弦 *san xian*) for He Yong's song "Bell Drum Towers" (钟鼓楼 *zhong gu lou*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRFY0WGtCk4>). The song expresses his bitter mixed feeling of seeing the destruction of modernization to traditional cultures in Beijing.

By the mid-1990s, new genres of rock music such as punk started showing up in major Chinese cities with the large-scale appearance of pirated cassettes, "broken" tapes, and CDs of Gang-Tai and Western artists circulating on the black market of these cities (Amar "Navigating" 26). This was the background in which the second generation of Beijing rock developed, and the key words for it are "punk", "new wave" and "commercialization of rock". As new punk bands like *New Pants* (新裤子乐队) and *The Flowers* (花儿乐队) ("Extinguish" 消灭 by *The Flowers*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTrR1lexQWA>) gained more fame, and Beijing-based record label *Modern Sky* (摩登天空) founded in 1997 signed more bands in the late 1990s, a new rock scene had taken shape featuring the change in ideas and ideology associated with rock music. These punk musicians grew up in a different social environment than their predecessors, and many were believed to be financially independent due to either job qualification or a well-off family background therefore playing music was for fun to them (Steen 41). They were not too focused on creating "Chineseness" by incorporating folk music into their songs or burying socio-political messages in the lyrics, unlike the first-generation Chinese rock musicians (Steen 42). The commercialized trend of rock music in the 1990s was followed by the emergence of a "third wave" of rock music in 2000s mainland China, where new genres of rock music emerged including alternative and experimental rock, and where local rock music scenes emerged in

non-coastal cities such as Zhengzhou, Wuhan and Xi'an.

1.3 Summary

After introducing the history of the three most influential popular music scenes in Chinese-speaking East Asia (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China), it is important to see both the commonalities and the differences between them. Most musical works from the heyday of Hong Kong's Cantopop scene during the mid-1980s to mid-1990s have demonstrated a clear contrast with those from the early stage of the Beijing rock scene around the same time. The nature of Cantopop as fundamentally commercial and profit-driven stands in stark contrast to the grassroots, subversive voices from Beijing Rock, which reflects differences in social, political, and economic conditions between Hong Kong and Beijing at that time (Huang "Voices"; Chu). Taiwan's music scene was unique in the sense that it was neither too commercial like Hong Kong nor too rebellious or outspoken like Beijing, but somewhere in between the two (Ho; Moskowitz). There were certain levels of Taiwanese politics involved as both restrictions and inspirations for musicians, yet not enough to outweigh the effect of the commercial nature of the record industry on music pieces.

In reality, Beijing rock and Gang-Tai pop have never been mutually exclusive categories. There have been interactions between musicians of these different origins and overlap in some of their music styles. For instance, Hong Kong's legendary band *Beyond* held a concert at Beijing's Capital Indoor Stadium in October 1988 when they were about to successfully break into the Cantopop market. They had deep conversations with Beijing's rock pioneer Cui Jian (Qiu,

para.7), which was a milestone event in the history of Chinese rock music as the first “collision” between Hong Kong and Beijing. Several months after that, the renowned Taiwanese Mandopop singer-songwriter Chyi Chin (齐秦) also interacted with Cui Jian as they represented Taiwan and mainland China respectively in London at the Salem Music Awards Show in March 1989 (Baicainuanshu, para.1). Two years later, Chyi Chin and his band *The Red* (虹乐团) performed a concert tour in many cities of mainland China, which caused a sensation with mainland fans naming Chyi Chin “the eternal god of songs” (永远的歌神) (Yan, para.3). Finally, the worldwide popularity of Beijing Rock music had help from Gang-Tai record companies and agents in aspects such as releasing, marketing, and promoting their albums beyond Beijing. For example, the “Three masters of Magic Stone” (魔岩三杰) including Dou Wei, He Yong, and Zhang Chu, all considered towering figures in the early Beijing rock scene, signed contracts with *Magic Stone* (魔岩唱片) under Taiwanese record company *Rock Records* (滚石唱片), released their first solo albums and then held the famous concert along with *Tang Dynasty* at Hong Kong Coliseum in 1994, made possible by Taiwanese agent Landy Chang (张培仁) (Tiancha and Yingtan, “魔岩”). These interactions between music, musicians, and capital forces in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese mainland embody a network deeply rooted in common cultural foundations that unite Chinese-speaking East Asia - a so-called “*Sinophone*” that exists despite significant social-political differences between the three regions.

Musical works produced in these three major music circles in the history of Western-influenced Chinese popular music do have profound impacts on later musicians and audiences in the entire Sinophone world. Ranging from people who enjoy soft ballads in a coastal city of Southern China to heavy metal lovers in inland Northwestern China, these

countless individuals, regardless of whether they become music professionals or not, are all influenced and nourished to varying degrees by these musical works. As we will see in Zhengzhou's rock scene in the 2020s, these rock musicians have received musical influences of Beijing rock and Gang-Tai pop as their main inspirations from Chinese popular music, and the ways that these predecessors wrote and performed Western-influenced Chinese popular music embody how this can be done creatively. At an ideological level, through being exposed to early Beijing rock music and rockers' words and actions, the seeds of "rock spirit" were sown and are now bearing fruit by later-generation rock musicians exemplified in inland cities like Zhengzhou.

Chapter 2 - Creating Chinese Identity in Chinese Rock and Gang-Tai Pop: Drawing on Chinese Traditional Music

This chapter considers how identity is formed in Western-influenced popular music across Chinese-speaking East Asia. As chapter one revealed, the phenomenon of Western-influenced popular music in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese mainland is not one of isolated development in these regions, but rather a series of integrated flows of influence and exchange between the three. In this sense, both the cultural and linguistic identity of “a Chinese people” (中华民族) stretches across these regions and creates a collective identity, however each of these regions has a unique localness to both language and culture. In addition, over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, the political contexts of these three entities differed and had significant impacts on the development of culture and music in each region. Thus a major question in understanding how Western-influenced popular music in Chinese-speaking East Asia was assimilated, first broadly by Chinese-speaking people(s), and how each region assimilated this foreign music in its own particular way, is to look at the choices made by musicians that form both a local/regional and a broader Chinese identity across Chinese-speaking regions of East Asia. To accomplish this, I propose borrowing the term “Sinophone” from the fields of Chinese literature and cinema to refer to a shared music world across Chinese-speaking regions of East Asia, to coin the term: “music Sinophone”. Identifying the ways in which Chinese in East Asia have tapped into their localness and collectiveness to shape identity in Western-influenced popular music, will provide important context for understanding what a critical study of the Zhengzhou rock music scene can tell us about the evolution of Chinese rock music over the last

twenty years in mainland China, and also how the Zhengzhou rock music scene contributes to the understanding of the larger music Sinophone.

2.1 Sinophone and Chinese popular music

The concept of Sinophone was proposed by Dr. Shu-mei Shih, and is employed mainly in literature and film studies to study Chinese works that are “on the margins of China and Chineseness” (Shih 4). The term denotes an attempt to “decentre” mainland China and the PRC regime from its monopolization of the discourse on Chinese identity within literature and film studies that suggest the mainland as the primary location of Chinese identity. The concept of Sinophone therefore seeks to create a broader definition of Chinese identity or Chineseness by recognizing and including underrepresented and marginalized Sinitic-language visual and cultural productions (Amar “Including” 3-4). In my opinion, Gang-Tai popular music is an ideal research subject for Sinophone studies in the music field, especially the popularity of Cantopop and the rise of Taiwanese-pop, which both inherently challenge the hegemonic status of Mandarin in the Sinophone world by offering music sung in different Chinese regional languages/dialects. Even for Taiwan’s Mandopop, despite not challenging the dominant position of Mandarin per se, this genre has taken advantage of their language proximity and played a vital role in “Taiwan’s Musical Counter-Invasion of China” (Moskowitz 2), which I believe has achieved huge commercial success and cultural penetration in the Chinese mainland.

Dr. Nathanel Amar points out that music scholars have largely avoided using this concept, while scholars in other fields have appropriated the term to refer to any works that are in the Chinese language, including those from mainland China (Amar “Including” 3). In my view, since

music itself is also a form of “language”, and the music cultures of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China are inextricably culturally linked, both historically as well as in the modern era (e.g. the inter-circulation of Western-influenced popular music from the 1920s onward relating to the Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taiwan record industries), the concept of a “music Sinophone” is both useful and appropriate. In terms of identity, the concept “music Sinophone” can be applied successfully to situations where the use of Chinese traditional music is used in Chinese-speaking East Asian Western-influenced popular music to evoke a sense of Chinese identity. Regardless of the location (Taiwan, Hong Kong, or the mainland) of a Chinese person listening to this music, the Chinese traditional instrument timbres, melodies, or singing styles would evoke an immediate and shared sense of Chinese identity. At the same time, Chinese traditional regional music styles used in popular music (i.e. melody-dialect combinations, regional styles of instrumental performance) would create an immediate impression of Chinese localness, both for the locals and for all Chinese in the Sinophone, who would be generally familiar with the unique sounds of Northern styles (e.g. *Chuida* music 吹打乐) or Southern Styles (e.g. *Sizhu* 丝竹 or *Nanyue* 南乐).

2.2 Chineseness in C-pop and Chinese Rock

Since the earliest presence of Western music in the Sinophone, there have always been Chinese musicians working to synthesize Chinese traditional music with Western music. In the 1920s-30s Shanghai popular music scene, Li Jinhui 黎锦晖 (the “father” of Chinese popular music), was the first influential Chinese musician to deliberately blend Chinese and Western music elements together into Shanghai-pop songs. Chinese music scholars at that time were mostly trained in Western music education, believed in the “superiority” of Western music over

Chinese music, and thought Chinese popular music should just copy the Western model (Hong 68-69). Li Jinhui withstood both the pressure and criticism, as he insisted on making Chinese pop in his ideal, which put (Chinese) national music as the emphasis. Since Li Jinhui started writing pop songs, his intention was to establish a cultural aesthetic that looks modern but is deeply balanced by traditional elements (Hong 124). The melody is dominated by the words, and the melody is laid out to correspond to the tone of each character, which is the inheritance of a tradition from Chinese poetry 依字行腔 (singing according to the words).

In the context of contemporary (post-1949) Gang-Tai pop and Chinese rock music, musicians such as Sam Hui (Hong Kong Cantopop), Cui Jian (Beijing Rock), and Jay Chou 周杰伦 (Taiwan Mandopop), among multiple others have used this approach to imbue Chinese identity into these Western-influenced music genres. Tellingly, Laowu 老五 (Liu Yijun 刘义军), the former guitarist of *Tang Dynasty*, realized this issue of “foreignness vs. Chineseness” in the early days of Beijing rock, commenting that:

“Rock is based on Blues, and we can never play Blues as well as an American. It’s just not in our blood. We can imitate it, but eventually we’ll have to go back to the music we grew up with, to traditional Chinese music, to folk music” (Jones “The Politics” 159)

A very important and note-worthy aspect in Cantopop song-writing is Hong Kong lyricists’ adherence to 倚声填词 (filling in lyrics according to the harmony between their intonation and the melody), which is another tradition among Chinese literati in dynastic China when they wrote poems based on existing melodies. This practice was exemplified by Sam Hui - the

“father” of Cantopop. This approach takes advantage of the unique “nine tones and six tunes” tonal system in the Cantonese language and matches the intonation of words perfectly with the up-and-downs of music pitch by filling appropriate characters into the given melody, so listeners would be unlikely to mishear the words despite having many homophones in Chinese languages/dialects, which appears both functional and aesthetically pleasing.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sam Hui and Cantopop music producer James Wong set new trends for Cantopop songwriting in the 1970s. In terms of lyrics writing, the trend of writing in standard modern Chinese for the lexical and grammatical parts but sung in Cantonese pronunciation was established and generally recognized as the major standard for later Cantonese songwriting (Chu and Leung 65). Basically, this means writing the Cantopop lyrics in Mandarin for word usage, syntax, and grammar, while still keeping the necessary Cantonese element in Cantopop songs, which is embodied in Cantonese phonetics and phonology of the songs. By doing this, there is a good balance between the 雅 (elegance/refinement) and 俗 (populerness/vulgarity), as an essential balance in traditional Chinese aesthetics. Musically speaking, both traditional Chinese pentatonic scales and Western heptatonic scales were applied to create Cantopop melodies for different needs. For songs addressing Chinese-related topics, or expressing common sentiments with a more Chinese feeling, slow tempo, relatively simple rhythm, and pentatonic melodies were often used. For other songs with a more modern urban vibe, the overall musical side of the song more resembled Western popular music styles in terms of their melody, arrangement, and instruments. This was how Cantopop gradually got rid of the shadow of Cantonese Opera by deliberately borrowing the practices and spirit of 华洋结合、西

乐中用 (mixing Chinese and foreign elements, using Western music in Chinese songs) from the “Old Shanghai” music scene.

Taiwan’s Mandopop star Jay Chou is an influential singer-songwriter in the history of Mandopop as it entered the 21st century. Before releasing his first original album in 2000, there had been new music talents such as David Tao (陶喆) and Leehom Wang (王力宏) who successfully brought the R&B style from the USA into the Taiwan Mandopop scene in the late 1990s. Even though Jay Chou was not the one who first introduced hip-hop or R&B into Mandopop, his first three albums established him as one of the top singer-songwriters adopting Western music styles at the same elite level of talent as David Tao and Leehom Wang. The song “East wind breaks” (东风破 *dongfeng po*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qct0JLjaHDc>) in the fourth album of Jay Chou released in 2003 marked the appearance of a new Mandopop sub-genre: China Wind (中国风 *zhongguo feng*). China Wind songs continued to develop and appear on his successive albums as well. As scholar Chen-Yu Lin describes, Jay Chou’s China Wind is a style of pop music that infuses R&B and hip-hop with the sound of traditional Chinese instruments and laudatory references to Chinese culture (Lin 189). Musically speaking, the idea of China Wind style involves imbuing a predominantly Western-style popular song with flavors of Chinese traditional music via the presence of Chinese instruments, melodies, or singing styles. For example, many of Jay Chou’s China Wind pieces contain Chinese pentatonic scale-based melody, Chinese instruments associated with the Southern regional style of folk music called *jiangnan sizhu* (江南丝竹) and Kun (昆曲) or Peking Opera singing styles. Lyrics in Jay Chou’s China Wind songs evoke the feel of emotional landscapes or atmospheres found in traditional Chinese poetry. Taiwanese lyricist Vincent Fang (方文山) worked with Jay Chou on his China

Wind songs to craft poetic imagery that evoke ancient themes of classic poetry, a sort of romanticized nostalgia for traditional Chinese culture (Lin 191). Although Jay Chou’s China Wind pop is usually more associated with Southern Chinese regional folk music styles, its style is familiar enough to people across the music Sinophone not just through its instruments and opera singing styles, but through its evocation of a shared Chinese history. Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and throughout the mainland would collectively perceive this as a Western-influenced popular music imbued with a flavor of Chineseness. Thus it is a highly marketable commercial product because it appeals to a general historical sense of Chineseness that exists throughout the Sinophone.

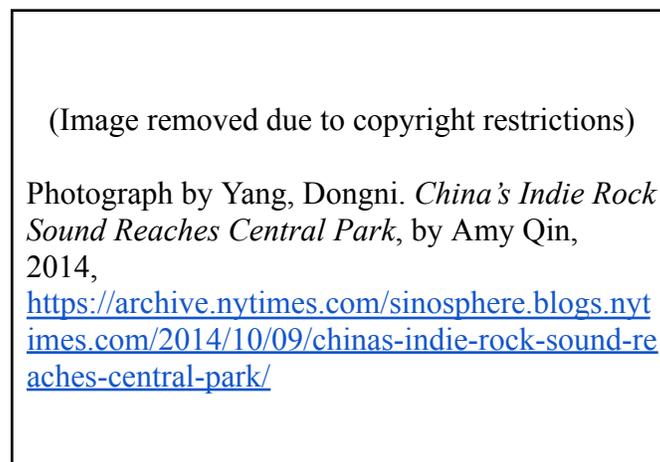


Figure 3. 二手玫瑰 *Second-hand Rose*

In contrast to the “pan-Sinophone” sense of Chineseness of Jay Chou’s China Wind, the Northeast Chinese rock band *Second-hand Rose* (二手玫瑰 *ershou meigui*, music example: “Fate, Subsistence” 命运, 生存 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8oJZi8bdVU>) founded in 1999 in Heilongjiang province (黑龙江省) draws on very localized Northeast regional music traditions that might not be familiar to all Chinese across the Sinophone. *Second-hand Rose* is among the second generation of Chinese rock music, following somewhat in the footsteps of the

first-generation Beijing rock musicians. Their music has the “hard edge” of early Beijing rock along with a trace of ironic subversiveness in some of their lyrics, as social commentary depicting the difficult lives of the rural Northeasterners in China. Musically, the band draws on a number of folk music influences that are very local and colloquial to the Northeast. Instrumentally, the group incorporates into their music the double-reed trumpet named *suona* (唢呐) - a central instrument to the Northeast ritual-ceremonial rural folk music tradition *Chuida* (吹打 - “blowing and hitting music”). They also incorporate the folk instrument *sanxian* (三弦 - “three-stringed Chinese lute”), with some of their songs using *sanxian* sections directly imitating the structure and form of the *sanxian* singing-playing tradition. Perhaps most notable about their incorporation of Northeast Chinese folk traditions is their integration of 二人转 *errenzhuan* (“two-people rotation”) - a local genre of folk song and dance performed by a man and woman. The melody and singing technique of their songs have clear features associated with Northeast folk tunes frequently appearing in *errenzhuan*. On top of these, what makes *Second-hand Rose* stand out also has something to do with their unique dressing on stage, especially the frontman Liang Long (梁龙) who always does cross-dressing in an overall aesthetic that matches the rural culture of Northeast China. The themes of their songs are similar to “Northwest Wind” (西北风) and Beijing rock in essence, because they all center on ordinary people’s feelings in life while living in their homeland. The difference between *Second-hand Rose*’s delivery of messages and the other two predecessor genres lies more in their attitude and way of expression, since *Second-hand Rose* prefers a more sarcastic and humorous approach whereas the two predecessor genres tend to directly point to the issue with more anger or tenacity.

2.3 Global Chineseness vs. Regional Chineseness

The music and musicians discussed in the previous section represent a variety of different approaches by Chinese musicians to establish a strong sense of Chinese cultural identity in Western-influenced popular music in the East Asian Sinophone through the integration of Chinese music traditions into the music. Sometimes such identities are more confined to a region, and this kind of music corresponds to these regional Chinese identities. For example, the Cantonese language lyrics of Sam Hui's Cantopop might pose a difficulty to other Chinese who cannot speak Cantonese, especially for those songs with a lot of Cantonese idioms or slang. However, at the same time, it was musicians like Sam Hui and James Wong who set the standard of writing Cantopop lyrics in modern standard Chinese so that it would appeal to more global Chinese audiences. Such efforts made to mediate between the representation of a regional Chinese identity and the universal Chinese identity were very key to the success of Cantopop on a global scale. Once a popular music genre breaks the regional boundary and enters the life of a much larger group of audience, just like Cantopop did thirty years ago, it would become a collective memory for all ethnic Chinese so that those old Cantopop stars could still make a living by singing their famous songs of the glorious past and selling this nostalgia even today. Moreover, the heyday of Cantopop, together with the supreme status of 1980s Hong Kong in many people's minds, also contributes to the mental construction of a sense of regional superiority for Cantonese-speaking people.

Some may argue that Jay Chou's China Wind music does not represent the people and culture of Taiwan, and if it does, the premise is that Taiwan must be included under the category of "cultural China". Defining Taiwanese culture is a difficult and controversial task even if it

only refers to Taiwanese Aborigines' cultures, because there are many of them. As for the more demographically predominant cultural groups in Taiwan, one can find those Hoklo (闽南/福佬) and Hakka (客家) cultural imprints across the Strait in the mainland as well, which still cannot make it escape from the shadow of China. The true value of this Taiwan-produced China Wind is actually multi-dimensional, ranging from cultural and commercial value to political ideology based on ideas of a shared Chinese identity. Culturally, Jay Chou's China Wind embodies the rich and precious heritage of pre-modern China, which seems even more valuable given the devastation of traditional cultures by the Cultural Revolution in the mainland. Commercially, China Wind music takes advantage of the burgeoning mainland Chinese market in the 21st century by looking to market to a mainland population through this music with a pan-Sinophone Chinese identity using Chinese traditional music in Gang-Tai pop. Politically, such music made in Taiwan with the cultural tag of China is exactly what the Chinese authorities would favor, for the purpose of creating a cultural "united front" with Taiwanese artists.

2.4 Summary

The use of Chinese traditional music across multiple different genres of Western-influenced music throughout the Sinophone provides an example of decisions made by Sinophone musicians to assimilate such initially foreign music into their own cultural world and make it their own. Given the relatively short period of time this foreign music has been in the music Sinophone (i.e. about one hundred years, in comparison with the multiple hundreds of years of Silk Road era assimilation of foreign influences earlier Chinese history during the Han through Tang Dynasties), this recent era of Western music assimilation into Chinese culture could be seen

as being in a relatively early stage. While the blending of foreign and indigenous Chinese music elements in Gang-Tai or Chinese rock is significant, it can also be considered as one of many possible avenues of assimilation. The cultural assimilation process also unfolds on a deeper, and less intentional level, gradually over longer periods of time, and is as much about how the local culture lives with and internalizes the concepts and ideas of the foreign culture as it is about how one can directly hear the presence of two music cultures in the music itself. Thus, beyond the presence (or absence) of Chinese traditional music in Western-influenced Sinophone popular music, one must also focus on the lives of the individual musicians within a society and the collective musical worlds within the society as a whole, to understand the individual and collective perceptions and beliefs as well as the decisions of these music makers based on these perceptions and beliefs. This can build a better understanding of the richness and complexity of the music Sinophone in this foreign-influenced music context as it unfolds from generation to generation.

Chapter 3 - The Rise and Flourishing of the Zhengzhou Underground Rock Music Scene

Turning now to focus on my ethnographic interview-based research on the Zhengzhou underground rock music scene, this chapter will delve into the ideals, perceptions, and beliefs of local Zhengzhou rock musicians and the creative and professional decisions they have made based on these ideals, perceptions, and beliefs. Through a critical analysis of these interviews, and supported by the broader perspective on the music Sinophone developed in chapters one and two, the goal of this chapter is to develop a more subtle understanding of how mainland Chinese rock music has evolved in generations following the first Beijing rock musicians of the 1980s. Specifically, I am interested to understand how concepts like Cui Jian's "rock music as ideology" or the idea of *yaogun jingshen* (rock spirit) has fostered the emergence of rock music underground scenes in less internationally exposed inland Chinese cities where such scenes scarcely existed twenty years ago. And more broadly than the simple concept of the local music scene, this research hopes to begin the process of unearthing an understanding of how these local inland city scenes are part of a larger regional linked network of inland city rock music underground scenes. Finally, after a critical analysis of interviews with Zhengzhou rock musicians, the chapter will close with a consideration of what this Zhengzhou rock music underground can tell us about the progression of youth culture over the last twenty years in mainland China related to this once-foreign rock music (both the music and the ideology) and how does this understanding of recent youth culture development add further detail and definition to the idea of "music Sinophone" as a whole.

3.1 - Large Market Commercial Success vs. Small Market Artistic Purity: the Choice to Remain Underground in Zhengzhou



Figure 4. Zhengzhou-based Math-rock Band *Ga*

“What we play is the small market of the small market”. — Dennis, Guitarist of *Ga*

The quote from my interview with Dennis, the guitarist in the Zhengzhou rock band *Ga*, perhaps could be the most accurate description of *Ga* and their music (examples of *Ga*'s music: “鳃”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RgwzrSfARA>, “The Rehearsal Room in the Corner of the Universe” 宇宙角落的排练室: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZmcU8AhO9E>), in terms of where they consciously position themselves in relation to the vast profit-driven commercial music market in today's Chinese economy. “Small market” (小众 *xiaozhong*) is a commonly used word for the classification of music that appeal to a small fraction of the entirety of the commercial market. *Xiaozhong* stands in contrast to the Chinese term for “large market” (大众 *dazhong*), which designates the large commercial markets driven by record companies looking to turn large profits from pop music like *Gang-Tai*. What is interesting about Dennis'

comment, is that the term *xiaozhong* represents the common lingo among Zhengzhou rock musicians, rather than Western terms such as “grassroots” or “indie”. Another long-time member of the Zhengzhou rock music scene, Mr. Song, comments that he does not relate to the term “grassroots” (草根) as this word reminds him more of the “street performer” type of musicians who might not carry lots of weight of professionalism. This shows that the meanings of the terminology used in the music Sinophone may be different from terminology used in the West, even though such terminology as “indie” used in the West may have the same meaning as what Zhengzhou musicians call “*xiaozhong*”. Also, the use of the term *xiaozhong* shows that there is a sense of commercial market consideration in how the musicians in *Ga* view themselves in relation to the business side of music. In this sense, *xiaozhong* may have a dual meaning that refers both to the market position of the music (i.e. not being mainstream commercial music) and the realization by the band that the artistic direction they have chosen to pursue will never be in the mainstream or “*dazhong*”. Furthermore, Dennis’ choice to intensify the meaning of *xiaozhong* by saying “*xiaozhong zhong de xiaozhong*” 小众中的小众 (small market of the small market) may be because he realized just how much of a sub-genre *Ga*’s music is (i.e. so far outside of the mainstream). But it could also be interpreted as a term that the band uses to describe themselves with a sense of pride, in the same way as terms like “indie” were initially applied to bands in the West, where these groups labeled “indie” were proudly forging a direction in music that was outside of the mainstream. A further meaning in the use of the term “*xiaozhong*” by Zhengzhou rock musicians has to do with geographic locations in China. Dingyuan, another Zhengzhou rock guitarist states:

“Henan² is dominated by agriculture, so our industrial foundation and commercial culture are

² Zhengzhou is the capital city of Henan province

poor. Thus, people's demand for spiritual nourishment and consumption power cannot keep up with the taste of this small market music. — Dingyuan, Zhengzhou rock guitarist

Here we see that the Zhengzhou rock music scene is understood by local musicians as a small market because of its relative geographic isolation from the more cosmopolitan large coastal cities like Shanghai and Beijing, where local rock music scenes are significantly more developed and the audiences for rock music are larger and more sophisticated.

The genre of *Ga's* music itself can help explain Dennis' choice to call it "*xiaozhong zhong de xiaozhong*" (small market of the small market). *Ga's* style of music "math rock" is a type of rock music that, in the West, was coined to describe rock bands that had a particular instrumental virtuosity and rhythmic complexity in the foreground of their music. Bands in the 1970s and 1980s such as the Canadian rock band *Rush* (music example: "Subdivisions", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7_fdU7kUBI) and *King Crimson* were the inspiration for later bands such as *American Football* (music example: "Never Meant", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NfnXdXpjL0) to develop their music that would eventually be labeled "math rock". While these bands have vocalists singing lyrics, their music is well known for their extended instrumental sections where complex and odd-meter melodic-rhythmic patterns were a common feature. Math rock is also a term that has been used to describe Western modern Classical minimalist music that is purely instrumental. For example, the American composer Steve Reich drew both on minimalist ideas of repeating rhythms that were influenced by both rock music and his study of African rhythmic structures in Ghanaian drumming music and complex interlocking rhythmic patterns in Indonesian music. *Ga's* math-rock style is

significantly influenced by several Japanese math-rock bands such as *Toe*, *Lite*, *Envy*, and *A Picture of Her* (music example: “No Exit”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52okluAKhQk>), as well as the American math-rock band *American Football*, all of which are completely unknown to me and likely unknown to the vast majority of the mainland Chinese population, especially in Zhengzhou. However, there is an audience in Zhengzhou that does come out to *Ga*’s concerts and either knows of the music subgenre before hearing *Ga*, or through exposure to *Ga*’s music, came to appreciate the math-rock subgenre. The drummer of *Ga* explained that they themselves did not consciously define their music as math rock. Rather, their audience did. *Ga*’s band members were simply in the pure pursuit of their own aesthetic ideals:

“The definition of (our) music style depends on the listeners. We haven’t had many songs so far, so it’s all about our self-pleasing expression of consciousness. A music fan described us very well, ‘math rock with a sense of loss’.” (Jiang) — Tao, drummer of *Ga*

There are two defining characteristics of *Ga*’s music. First is their rhythmic style, which brings the rhythmic patterns of the drummer to the foreground of the music. The second, and perhaps more significant, is the absence of a lead vocalist, which makes their music purely instrumental. *Ga* as a purely instrumental rock band sets them apart from the first generation of Chinese rock musicians in 1980s Beijing. As previously mentioned, Beijing musicians adopted Western rock music as much for its subversive function of social and cultural commentary expressed in the lyrics as for the energy and dynamism of the music itself. The lyrics of many 1980s Beijing rock songs may be perceived as challenges or reflections on dominant socio-political ideologies and cultural norms in China at that time. *Ga*’s choice to pursue a purely

instrumental style of rock music may seem to deviate from the primary function that rock music served in the West and the original reason why Chinese musicians in Beijing adopted this foreign music. However, remembering Cui Jian's view that "Rock is an ideology, not a set musical form" (Jones "Like a Knife" 115) provides an important point of perspective on how mainland Chinese musicians assimilated rock music into their culture, not just as a style of music, but more importantly as an ideology. While the initial meaning of Cui Jian's "rock ideology" may have emerged in the context of rock as social commentary and expressing youth's mixed feelings about Chinese culture and society in the 1980s, this rock ideology can be more broadly interpreted as a statement on the creative space rock music provides to allow of "freedom of expression", whatever that expression may be. In the artistic choices made by *Ga*, this has less to do with subversiveness related to socio-political aspects or cultural values, and more to do with the freedom to pursue an aesthetic direction which, in the case of *Ga* is instrumental rock music. While this may not seem to be as radical or defiant a choice as the choice to write subversive rock music by those 1980s Beijing rock musicians, it reveals an expansion of choice for youth in mainland Chinese society in the 2000s onwards that is rooted in the ideology of rock music. And the choice by bands like *Ga* to pursue this type of *xiaozhong* rock music in the inland city of Zhengzhou, is in some way a radical choice in the sense that Zhengzhou is an "out of the mainstream" city in mainland China and pursuit of such a non-popular subgenre of rock music in a place that there was (at least initially) no local culture or audience for this music, let alone rock music in general. In the professional sense, remaining in the Zhengzhou rock underground is risky because it is barely economically viable. It was and still is a bold move, especially with *Ga* guitarist Dennis recognizing that there is little expectation that their music will ever move out of

the *xiaozhong zhong de xiaozhong* (small market of the small market) into the *dazhong* (large market). Thus it is a conscious choice to remain in the *xiaozhong* and be okay with it.

It is also important to point out that *Ga* drummer Tao's use of a quote from a fan of theirs which emphasizes "a sense of loss" (失落感) exuded from their music represents *Ga*'s aesthetic ideal of pursuing instrumental rock music for a power it has in a particular type of emotional expression. Other *Ga* members describe the ideal math rock in their hearts as "instantaneous output of sensation" (瞬间感受输出). The choice they made to not have a lead singer in their rock band, is a purely aesthetic one. *Ga* believes in the power of instrumental music to affect the listener in an emotional way, along with their disappointment in singing due to the inability to express such complicated emotions through lyrics. This confirms that *Ga*'s instrumental rock music is a pursuit of an aesthetic/expressive ideal and not simply a strategy to avoid any censorship or controversy by taking subversive lyrics out of their rock music.

Despite the desire of many musicians in the Zhengzhou rock music scene to claim their music as *xiaozhong zhong de xiaozhong* with a sense of pride, there are other Zhengzhou rock musicians interested in or inspired by Gang-Tai pop rock and even Cantopop and Mandopop, which indicates an interest in the *dazhong* 大众 (large market) music Sinophone. Moreover, Dingyuan's comment on Zhengzhou's small market music illustrates another crucial factor when it comes to the classification of "small market", which is the geographical dimension in addition to the musical taste itself. Former Zhengzhou rock band *V-BAND*'s frontman, Mr. Song, is another interesting case that demonstrates the existence of geographical factors in "small market"

perception, and his own experience of dealing with big-market capital may add even more complexity to this issue:

“When I became a teenager, I was drawn to rock music. Bon Jovi’s ‘Hey God’ was a song I listened to in the very beginning. When the sound of guitar distortion came out, I was like ‘it’s soooo good!’. But I didn’t know it’s called guitar back then, and domestic resources were very limited at the time. After asking around about it, people told me it’s called bass. I was like ‘bass is so cool!’.....”

— Mr. Song, frontman of former V-BAND

In his younger years he did yearn for the large market and even the international stage, and lamented himself being stuck in Zhengzhou as a small market in an inland, second-tier Chinese city. In the 1990s, Mr. Song was among the first generation of youngsters in Zhengzhou who had access to Western rock and pop music. Having access to the music of Western rock bands like *Bon Jovi*, *Led Zeppelin*, and *The Rolling Stones*, greatly influenced and inspired him to become a rock musician in the first place. In 2010, after his Zhengzhou-based rock band *V-BAND* (music example: “All In Best” <https://music.163.com/#/song?id=385200>) won a non-official national award³ in China, Mr. Song came to a *xiaozhong-dazhong* crossroads when he was contacted by a record company in Beijing - *Modern Sky*, founded in 1997 by a first-generation Beijing rock musician, Shen Lihui⁴ (沈黎晖). While *Modern Sky* was known for their support of various small market, underground bands in both rock and rap music genres, Mr. Song communicated to me that despite Shen Lihui being one of the original Beijing rock musicians of the 1980s and his label *Modern sky*’s intentions to support *xiaozhong* rock bands, representatives from *Modern Sky*

³ The competition was called: “China Rock Most Powerful Sound”, Sponsored by Red Bull: 红牛新能量之《中国摇滚最强音》

⁴ The frontman of former band *Sober* (清醒乐队)

acted in a more aggressive and controlling way, similar to *dazhong*/large market record companies:

“They wanted to sign us at that time, and we had conflicts with them. They don’t support bands at all, they won’t give you a single penny. They sign you, make you go out and perform, basically leave you all alone to sink or swim. You can just say you are a band under this label, but they don’t give any support when you release an album. I was talking about back then, maybe they’ve changed a bit nowadays……” — Mr. Song, frontman of former V-BAND

Mr. Song’s interactions with *Modern Sky* reveal obstacles and complications to the *dazhong*/large market commercial success for *xiaozhong*, underground groups. The massively famous Hong Kong band *Beyond* for example had a difficult path to mass market popularity and struggle to maintain their aesthetic ideals, ultimately shifting from a pure artistic pursuit of underground rock to a more pop rock, large-market style. This disadvantageous position of underground musicians under big record companies may not only lead to their music being no longer “free and pure” perceived from their fans’ perspective, but also suffer from potential commercial exploitations in different forms for these artists themselves.

Such details of bands interacting and negotiating with record labels that I gained from this fieldwork offer me a new perspective to examine the nature of this innately unequal power relation between the two parties. In contemporary Chinese society with an essentially market economy which features the commercial operation in exchange of interests for both parties, perhaps *Modern Sky*, at least a dozen years ago, represented a different mechanism of working

with their artists than most Gang-Tai record labels, which not necessarily interfered with their music style that much but could potentially lead to artists gradually losing the freedom and originality in their music as a result of running around doing paid performances due to the lack of stable financial support from the label.

These examples of artists from Zhengzhou finding their positions between mass market commercialism and small market underground freedom displayed a new dimension of conflicts or concerns for this generation of mainland Chinese rock musicians different from their predecessors whose primary hindrance might be the danger of stepping into the red line of politics. As today's Chinese rock music is getting less and less socio-political in content, the new dilemma that seems more relevant becomes how rock musicians make a living by doing the music they enjoy in a way that keeps a balance between the commercial, popular side, and their own aesthetic, artistic ambition. This conflict is inherent in any music industry anywhere in the world where talented music groups who perform a niche or subgenre of music are attractive enough to large record companies to take a chance on them in the hopes of reaping large profits. But the transition to large commercial market success often means altering your music to fit what record companies expect would be profitable, and oftentimes this means a compromise of the bands' artistic ideas.

The members of *Ga* speak of their resistance to this conversion to commercialization that happens when signing with *dazhong*/large market record companies, in terms of the limitations of their creativity when playing larger national and international venues, the boredom and

exhaustion that comes with the demands of record companies:

“Wasting all the time, energy and creativity on running around doing various paid performances across the country and always being assigned to only perform those one or two hit songs at music festivals back and forth, what’s the point? It’s not fun and meaningless.” — Ga

This concern for artistic purity in this comment from *Ga* is of the same nature as Dingyuan’s view on what matters most to original rock musicians: the pursuit of freedom of expression over anything else. Even if pursuing a *dazhong* direction, there is no guarantee a group will become commercially successful despite making all these efforts and compromises. *Xiaozhong* and *dazhong* are not mutually exclusive arenas, but a spectrum with no unified standard, and open to individual subjective understandings and interpretations. Rock bands like *Ga* who make a choice to preserve their artistic ideas remaining *xiaozhong zhong de xiaozhong* / small market of the small market, especially in an inland second-tier city like Zhengzhou, exemplify the “rock as ideology” concept of Cui Jan and the 1980s Beijing rock musicians, and shows how the rock music ideology takes root in successive generations of musicians throughout a geographically broader span of China, even in significantly more remote inland cities. It also shows a new or broader interpretation of “rock as ideology” - beyond the initial focus on subversive music, to a broader meaning of rock music as “freedom of expression” to pursue one’s own artistic ideals in the purest way that one wishes to pursue them.

3.2 The Changing Nature of “Rock Spirit” in an Evolving Chinese Society

“Perhaps Chinese rock music has been more spiritualized.”

— *Mr. Song, frontman of former V-BAND*

The idea of *yaogun jingshen* 摇滚精神 (rock spirit) is one of the most frequently used terms related to rock music within mainland China. Despite its widespread use, it is never easy to give a clear, generally agreed-upon definition of this concept, both among the general public and within academic research (Qu 76). The origin of the term understandably had a strong connection with the first-generation Beijing rockers from the mid to late 1980s, whose creative activities expressed the essence of the meaning of “rock spirit” mainly through their music (either recorded or live performance), as well as their words and actions to some extent. Furthermore, the use of some of their rock songs by college students as morale boosters added meaning to the term “rock spirit” because the audience found functions for this music in the context of social movements. In short, the original meaning of the term “rock spirit” in mainland China referred to the courage to seek change for a better future of the motherland, which is exuded from many Beijing rock songs in the 1980s. Even today, the connotation of “rock spirit” still carries, to a greater or lesser extent a meaning of subversive, especially related to youth culture. My participant Dingyuan draws a vivid analogy that gives me a straightforward impression of what “rock spirit” was:

“It’s like you go up and fight them, then the crowd below would yell ‘awesome’!, because you did what they wanted to yet dared not do. That’s very rock ‘n’ roll!”

— *Dingyuan, guitarist*

I think this depiction highlights the bravery of daring to challenge the status quo, which is not something many people would do even if they wanted to. This is hard to not remind me of Cui Jian's supportive act in student movements in the 1980s. Moreover, in addition to my own understanding of the social atmosphere around the late 1980s to early 1990s in China, from *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music*, the first major English publication on contemporary popular music of mainland China written by Andrew F. Jones published in 1992, I can sense where this Chinese idea of "rock spirit" comes from based on the ethnographic data Jones collected from his fieldwork interacting with Beijing rockers back then. Jones divided Chinese mainland's popular music scene roughly into two main genres, one was the officially-sanctioned popular music called *tongsu* music (通俗音乐), and the other was rock music from the underground (Jones "Like a Knife" 3).

"Rock Spirit" in the 1980s - 1990s

Basically, no matter how the content or presentation of *tongsu* music altered, Jones still drew a clear line of distinction between *tongsu* and rock according to their fundamentally different natures (Jones "Like a Knife"). *Tongsu* music was made and disseminated through official channels, meant to convey cultural and political ideologies from the Chinese authorities to the common people, whereas rock music appeared in 1980s Beijing as a bottom-up, grassroots movement that happened naturally without any governmental support, and was oftentimes restricted by the police. Although Jones did not use the word "rock spirit" in his writings, he recontextualized the Beijing rock scene in 1990 based on Birmingham School of cultural studies' subcultural theory and endowed it with the ideology of cultural opposition as a way to make sense of and explain this phenomenon (Jones "Like a Knife" 116-117). This laid the foundation

of the “rock spirit” discourse that gradually emerged in Western scholarship related to mainland Chinese rock. Jones proposed, “If *tongsu* music is a mass cultural phenomena, then the site of the production of ideological contention in rock music might be called subcultural.” (Jones “Like a Knife” 116). As well, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, Western scholars such as Moskowitz and Jones attributed rock music’s rise in China primarily to the presence of a repressive state upon which Chinese musicians felt the urge to take up rock music to deliver a challenging response.

These perspectives on Chinese rock developed by scholars like Jones represent attempts early on in mainland Chinese rock music scholarship by Western scholars to understand the phenomena of Chinese rock through the application of Western models that already existed in the study of Western rock music (Stokes 33). This has had a strong effect on later generations of both Chinese and Western scholarship on this topic (Qu 77). To be sure, on the one hand, statements by 1980s Beijing rock musicians lend credence to this idea of Chinese rock as ideological, first from Cui Jian’s statement “Rock is an ideology, not a set musical form”, also from images of rock musicians looking defiant in locations symbolize Chinese authorities (see Figure 2), and in the meaning of the lyrics of the songs such as Cui Jian’s “Nothing to My Name” (*yiwu suoyou* 一无所有) or He Yong’s “Garbage Dump” (*laji chang* 垃圾场). In this sense, the “spirit” in “rock spirit” could be perceived as subversiveness or rebelliousness, which is in line with the function of rock music in the West.

“Rock Spirit” Beyond Subversive Ideology

It is important to return to Jones’ previously stated supposition that, only when mainland Chinese rock is viewed from a West-centric subcultural theory that is endowed with the ideology of cultural opposition, can one make sense of and explain this phenomenon of rock music. Jones’

use of Cui Jian's quote, "Rock is an ideology, not a set musical form" as a way to align a West-centric subcultural theory with a statement from one of the founders of Chinese rock music. However, there are a number of statements by Cui Jian that could counter the idea that rock ideology in mainland Chinese rock is exclusively subversive. A number of Chinese scholars have brought this out in their research, contending that Western-centric theories of rock music subversiveness are incomplete at best and misleading at worst. Zhao Jianwei points to another statement by Cui Jian that refutes the use of Cui's "Rock is an ideology" to prove Chinese rock as fundamentally subversive:

"When I first started writing rock music, it was mainly to express pure feelings of mine as an individual, which did not intentionally address any social themes." (Zhao 273)

—Cui Jian

From this quote, we can see that Cui Jian probably did not intend to use rock music with the ideology behind it as a means to convey a specific socio-political "rock spirit" to Chinese people. In some ways, it was the audiences of his music in the 1980s and 90s (e.g. students in social movements) who latched onto the emotional expression vented out from Cui Jian's songs, which gradually heightened a subversive ideological spirit in his music. Huang Hao points out another statement by Cui Jian at a press conference in the 1990s where he refutes the idea that his rock ideology is intentionally political:

"I don't want to talk about politics, politics is not my work." (Huang "Yaogun" 9)

—Cui Jian

In fact, the over-politicizing of Chinese rock has been an issue recognized by a number of scholars both in China and the West. David Stokes argues against the common portrayal of Chinese rock music as necessarily subversive and questions the wide usage of this Western-originated “rock ideology” in the study of Chinese rock while neglecting the role of the media in cultural construction (Stokes 32-36), in this case specifically how media helps shape people’s conceptions of Chinese rock (Stokes 36-41). And he also brings up an important concept of “social distinction” based on his survey results and contends that Chinese youngsters becoming rock fans could be an act of showing their unique individuality which doesn’t necessarily suggest serious rebelliousness of any kind (Stokes 41-43). In Chinese academia, Qu Shuwen mentions the “discourse of rock ideology” prevailing in China which grew out of the West yet has become quite different from the West as the mythology of “rock spirit” has been gradually broken in the Western context, whereas music scholars and critics on Sinophone music tend to hold these stereotypical thinkings to maintain discourses about “rock spirit” that centers around rebelliousness (Qu 75). She continues by arguing that these discourses result from an “ideological misinterpretation and selective reading on the history of Chinese rock music” which contributes to the construction of this “male-centric rebellious culture that focuses on political criticism and reflections on current events” (Qu 76). Wang Lihui introduces the emergence of Chinese rock in her book by claiming rock music is known for its strong rebelliousness, but later on addresses early Chinese rock exemplified by Cui Jian as the manifestation of “individuals’ pursuit of self-worth and the awakening of a sense of individuality” through music (Wang 240-242).

The rock music and the musicians during the formative years of mainland Chinese rock music in the 1980s and 1990s led to the emergence of the idea of “rock spirit” in China. Through the meanings of rock song lyrics, the way in which their audiences latched onto and interpreted the meanings of the lyrics, and perhaps also through publicity photography and statements from the rock musicians themselves, the term “rock spirit” related to the first wave of mainland Chinese rock music carries a clear subversive meaning. However, in contrast to earlier scholarship on mainland Chinese rock, which prioritizes the subversive meaning of rock music, more recent scholarship expands the meanings of Chinese rock music to recognize other ways in which both rock musicians and their audiences think about rock music, including a subjective expression of the self and the exploration and development of self-worth and individuality - both of which are fundamental growth experiences of youth in adolescence and as young adults. It is worth noting that during the 1980s and early 1990s, China’s youth were confronted with both of these as a consequence of growing up in their teens and twenties and confronting a tumultuous and uncertain period in the mainland. Thus subversion, youthful exploration, and their development of identity and individuality are interwoven. In this sense, the underlying meaning of “rock spirit” that emerged from Beijing rock music of the 1980s and 1990s is a synthesis of both.

“Rock Spirit” in the 1990s-2000s: Commercialization, Diversification and Dilution of Meaning

“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 Hong and Europe……” (Steen 56)

— Shen Lihui, founder of Modern Sky

As a rock musician from the first-generation Beijing rock scene and afterwards the founder of *Modern Sky* - an important and influential Beijing record label for the development of Chinese rock, this quote from Shen Lihui in 1999 signifies the emergence of second-generation rock scenes in mainland China characterized by de-politicization, commercialism, and internationalism. With various *dakou* (打口 “broken/cut-out”) tapes and pirated cassettes penetrated into China on a large scale in the 1990s, this second-generation Chinese rock that grew out of these had a lot more stylistic diversity than their forerunners. Geographically, overseas music was not only available in major coastal cities but also accessible to large territories situated more inland with a lesser degree of economic prosperity around the mid-1990s in China. With such a larger background, there was also the growing-up of the first-generation Zhengzhou rock musicians that finally formed an underground rock scene in Zhengzhou locally. As a member of that scene, Mr. Song provides me with his own experience to give me a taste of it:

“We were the band with the highest income from commercial performances (商演) in Henan at that time. Back then, the highest pay for a (band) performance was 1200 yuan. That was in 1999, two performances in the morning and one in the afternoon, easily earned monthly income like ten to twenty thousand yuan. I thought I was pretty awesome.”

— Mr. Song, frontman of former V-BAND

Nevertheless, given that Mr. Song was one of the best on the scene; most rock bands did not earn anywhere near this figure. But this at least indicates, top rock musicians in the new era

could make a living from rock music even in a second-tier, inland city like Zhengzhou. In a sense, it was a more ideal state of being than their predecessors who often had to deal with the police in hopes that their performance could run smoothly. Having “appropriate” lyrical content was the price they had to pay for such non-intervention of the police. As already mentioned earlier, the lyrics were a vital tool to carry forward the spirit and ideology of first-generation Beijing rock music, so the censorship of the lyrics has naturally become a focus on the politically sensitive rock genre. In fact, Chinese official censorship of various publications has always been persistent. The way that some famous early Beijing rockers got away with it was by issuing a large portion of their cassettes through Gang-Tai record companies outside of the Chinese mainland (Amar “Navigating” 27), which also did not prevent these songs from flowing back to the mainland and being popular despite in pirated versions or other unofficial forms.

However, for the second generation of Chinese rock, since they did not get as much commercial support from Gang-Tai or oversea labels, self-censorship was necessary before submitting the lyrics to relevant authorities by rock musicians themselves and their new domestic record labels in mainland China to obtain official authorizations to publish their musical works (Amar “Navigating” 27). In other aspects such as rock performances, taking the political center Beijing as an example, there was no rock performance allowed every June from 1990 until 1999 in case of any potentially amplifying, inflammatory effect (Huang “Voices” 189). In 1998, a rock concert with a line-up of multiple bands which was initially planned to be held in Zhengzhou moved to Xinxiang (新乡), the city north of Zhengzhou, due to problems of the site and with the name “98 China New Music Concert (Xinxiang)/98中国新音乐演唱会(新乡)” (“yaogun”). This is what the planner of that concert said about its naming:

“The word ‘yaogun’ (摇滚 rock and roll) was still a somewhat sensitive word at the time…… so we chose the nondescript word ‘new music’ as a cover.” (“yaogun”)

—— Huang Liaoyuan, rock promoter

The fact that such a large rock concert full of both first and second-generation rockers was held in Xinxiang, a third-tier city beside second-tier Zhengzhou, certainly shows how popular rock had become as a genre not only in first-tier cities but literally everywhere in China by the late 1990s. Avoiding the name of “rock” to bypass potential police intervention was just one example of various efforts that were made in the face of state restriction of rock music. Rock music brought about strong power beyond music, as an attitude, a culture, and a spirit, yet possibly perceived by some as ideological confrontation. To some extent, the way the authorities at that time handled Chinese rock also unintentionally played an important role in the construction of this multifaceted “rock spirit” dialectically.

Meanwhile, if we zoom out the lens to see what happened to the entire Sinophone world in this period, rock musicians across this huge area filled in different elements to “rock spirit” according to their own understandings in different socio-political contexts. From the late 1990s to 2000s, as Hong Kong’s sovereignty was returned to China and mutual exchange across the Taiwan Strait increased significantly, rock bands from Hong Kong and Taiwan received more and more popularity in mainland China as well. Hong Kong band *Beyond* continued offering diverse styles of rock with thought-provoking lyrics covering various personal, social, and political topics, which in some ways filled the void of socio-political critique left behind by

mainland rock musicians in this new stage. Taiwanese band *Mayday* (五月天) entered the mainland market and once performed in Beijing's underground bars and livehouses, as a means to pay tribute to those early Beijing rockers who inspired them. Ashin (阿信 / 陈信宏), the frontman of *Mayday* once expressed:

“A lot of what we've been doing is in hopes of more friendly exchanges and mutual understanding between young people on both sides of the Strait.” (Liu)

— Ashin, lead vocalist of *Mayday*

I believe this type of “rock for love and peace” ideology initiated by a band from Taiwan not only echoes with the anti-war advocacy as one of the signature rock doctrines demonstrated by Western rockers in the 1960s and 1970s, but also adds new dimensions to “rock spirit” in the Sinophone context from a standpoint outside of the mainland. These rock musicians from Hong Kong and Taiwan interacted with colleagues and fans from the Chinese mainland, and comparatively they could take advantage of their place of origin to create music with more freedom and ease, which more or less contributed to their prevalence and commercial success in the whole music Sinophone.

For Zhengzhou rock musicians in the 2000s, since it was just one of the many emerging rock scenes, the commercialization of Chinese rock only involved them to a limited degree, and they probably also had not had enough experience or sentiment to internalize rock culture beyond music. Nevertheless, these young Zhengzhou rock musicians from this new rock scene did form their aesthetic preference influenced by musically diversified Sinophone rock scenes.

When I ask Mr. Song whether the 2000s was a low point for Chinese rock (in terms of fame and influence compared to the 1990s), he says:

“‘Earthy rock’ prevailed back then, like ‘something Tianxiao’, ‘something Rose’ and so on, no idea why people liked them. And ‘something Pants’, don’t like either……. Why did we (V-Band) have so many opportunities at that time? Because our songs made people in Beijing blush. They couldn’t imagine that these songs were recorded in a studio worth several hundred thousand yuan in Zhengzhou. Our sound quality and recording effects are ‘scary’, more than seventy tracks, few bands can do it even now.” — Mr. Song, frontman of former V-BAND

The term “earthy rock” (土摇 *tuyao*) that he references here had two meanings. As an adjective, the Chinese character “土 *tu*” has a neutral meaning of “local” or “domestic”, and a derogatory connotation of “rustic” or “vulgar”. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, the traditional dichotomy of “elegant” (雅 *ya*) vs. “vulgar” (俗 *su*) in Chinese culture embodies itself in the representation of some Chinese rock in this period. Just like “rock spirit”, “earthy rock” also does not have a clearly defined meaning. Moreover, it is sometimes hard to tell whether someone is using a neutral meaning or a derogatory connotation of this term. From the three implied bands or musicians that Mr. Song mentions, one way to interpret it is that this term refers to second or third-generation mainland Chinese rock bands or musicians who have mixed a significant portion of regional Chinese music elements into Western-based rock genres as their unique music styles. Two such examples, as Mr. Song references, are Xie Tianxiao 谢天笑 (music example: “Drawing Near” 再次来临 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tpars4u8UjI>) and *Second-hand Rose* 二手玫瑰 *ershou meigui* (music example: “仙儿”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIP99nQy6zM>). They have followed and carried forward the spirit of first-generation Beijing rockers like Cui Jian and *Tang Dynasty*, which was to make “hybrid” rock by adopting Chinese elements into Western rock form. It then becomes an interesting question as to why this title of “earthy rock” has fallen on their heads rather than those first-generation rockers. A reasonable explanation probably needs to take the new context into consideration, as the second or third-generation Chinese rockers mostly abandoned the effort to make “hybrid rock with strong Chinese characteristics”, it naturally made those who still did it more prominent and stand out as targets of criticism or critique.

On the other hand, Mr. Song represented those Chinese rock musicians who preferred more orthodox Euro-American rock styles, so this musical integration of the East and West shown by “earthy rock” clearly challenged their aesthetics of rock music. This is further proven by Mr. Song’s preference for bands like *Black Panther* 黑豹乐队 (music example: “Shameful” 无地自容, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YxjRbs0Gsg>) and *Overload* (超载乐队) over *Tang Dynasty* (唐朝乐队) in Chinese rock circle. More importantly, the later part of Mr. Song’s quote indicates that for a member of a burgeoning inland Chinese rock scene in the 2000s, not looking for cross-cultural musical integration anymore does not mean the loss of artistic pursuit. Rather, he focused on purely musical aspects such as instrumental arrangement and audio quality of his rock songs as something he was proud of which definitely contributed to his award-winning as well. By pursuing the highest quality of performance and aesthetic ideals, beating Beijing bands with delicate original rock music made in Zhengzhou, that is Mr. Song’s spirit of craftsmanship as a Zhengzhou rocker.

In contrast to the idea of earthy-rock, which in some ways recognizes the continuation of underground and subversive rock ideology connected with the beginnings of Chinese rock music in the 1980s, rock music in the 2000s onward developed a strong commercial trajectory, as larger record companies realized the growing popularity of the music style and made attempts to capitalize on it. When rock music became commercialized by large record companies in an attempt to mass market it and reap the profits from massive sales, the core of the rock music ideology rooted in the Beijing rock musicians of the 1980s, a so-called bottom-up ideology, evaporated in the top-down nature of commercial decision-making. In this way, ideology becomes secondary to the concern for profit. Becomes simply a “form of music” that will be shaped in any way that will make a profit. This commercialization of rock music could be referred to as a “popular rock” style, or pop rock. While the talent of pop-rock musicians is unquestionably at a high level of technical and expressive ability, the music and the environment that they are singing in becomes detached from the original core ideology of rock music. This can be seen in a comment made by pop-rock star Liang Bo 梁博 (music example: “That Boy” 男孩, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GmYYyzT_Rs), whose career took off based on winning a commercial-industry-controlled TV music competition *The Voice of China*. In an interview, he made the following comment regarding his view on “rock spirit”:

“It’s a shame, I like rock music so much, but I really don’t know what rock spirit is. And I don’t like talking about rock spirit with others, it’s kind of nonsense, because people who make pop music aren’t necessarily without spirit. Some rock songs sound awful, really not as good as pop songs, it’s an insult to endow them with some kind of rock spirit.” (Liang)

—Liang Bo, Chinese rock singer-songwriter

Liang Bo is, at present, considered a major force in the mainland Chinese pop-rock scene. He has shown to have a knack for creating music that appeals to a wide range of audiences. Because he has been a well-known pop-rock figure in China for a while, many Chinese audiences believe his music and character exemplify what a great rock musician should be. However, for such a rock musician to profess his ignorance of the meaning of “rock spirit” while at the same time criticizing some rock music possibly based on aesthetic standards for pop music, reveals a significant detachment from the roots of mainland Chinese rock. Such remarks and their underlying implications suggest the consequence of the commercialization of rock music in China; He feels no connection to the rock spirit or ideology of previous-generation rockers, nor a sense of artistic urgency to come up with his own personal version of “rock spirit”. His critique of rock music is likely made more along commercial lines than idealistic lines. For many pop-rockers, because rock music is more in the service of selling records so they can “make it big”, the demands of the commercial market obliterate the ideology of rock music.

In addition to establishing and promoting the pop-rock genre, the power of capital forces behind 21st-century Chinese rock scenes has a multifaceted impact on the commercialization of rock accompanied and led to the dilution of the original meaning of “rock spirit”. It is sometimes not the rock musicians themselves who choose to detach from the cultural values of rock, but the reality of China’s market economy in this century which to some extent has forced them to value money over ideals. From a Zhengzhou perspective, guitarist Dingyuan shares with me his take on how capital forces diluted rock spirit:

“Capitals (资本) are never inclined to invest in or promote bands over individual artists. Even Wang Feng had to start his solo career, because Warner Records refused to sign his whole band. No matter what, forced or not, abandoning your bandmates is not very rock and roll.”

— *Dingyuan, guitarist*

It makes sense from a money-making perspective that signing bands may not be as profitable as only signing the core member of the band, especially when this person is the frontman who does most of the songwriting. That was exactly the case that happened to famous rocker, Wang Feng (汪峰), who later gained fame and reached commercial success as a solo rock singer-songwriter while being a target of blame and criticism within the Beijing rock scene for a long time in the 2000s. The struggle between rock camaraderie and better career development backed up with money represents the dilemma some rock talents have gone through during that time. Dingyuan describes such act as “not very rock and roll” (不太摇滚) implying the idea of brotherhood or “brotherly loyalty” (兄弟义气) in Chinese traditional values has been somehow incorporated into Chinese rock ideology as a component of “rock spirit” regardless of whether the original Western version had it or not, which reflects how fluid and adaptive this notion has been in the Sinophone context.

Unfortunately though, the commercialization of Chinese rock did not positively impact all talented rock musicians, particularly those based in non-first-tier cities. Besides *V-Band*'s conflict with *Modern Sky*, which was discussed earlier in this chapter, *V-Band*'s frontman Mr. Song provides me with another aspect that illustrates the perspective of an original rock musician in Zhengzhou:

“When my dad passed away, he told me ‘Making music in China, you chose the wrong profession’. It’s about royalties. Maybe the Copyright Law has been perfected now, but does it deal with the calculation of royalties? Our songs have been played more than ten million times online, I didn’t get a penny in return.”

— Mr. Song, frontman of former V-BAND

I am not sure whether such an unfair situation would have been a bit different if they were under a music company like *Modern Sky*, but I have come to know that both the potentially exploitative acts of these record labels and the lack of a strict, fair regulation about royalties in mainland China have significantly diminished rock musicians’ motivation to enter the market, and their confidence to make a living from music. If music makers constantly feel that they are not getting what they legally and financially deserve, this could form a vicious cycle that discourages young talent from devoting themselves to this music business. After all, as the Chinese saying goes, “Only when one has eaten a full meal can one talk about spirit and ideals” (吃饱饭才能谈精神理想).

To summarize this second stage of Chinese rock from the late 1990s to the early 21st century, it was probably a combination of state restriction, China’s growing economy, and the influence of various new styles of rock music that collectively contributed to the shift in style and expression of Chinese rock. This tendency of “commercialization and musicality” prevailing over “ideology and spirit” made Chinese rock more resemble a form of pop culture with varying

degrees of artistic and commercial values rather than a counter-culture seeking to challenge any mainstream ideologies, dominant societal norms, or cultural values.

“Rock Spirit” in the 2010s-2020s: Perspectives from the Zhengzhou rock scene

Returning now to the Zhengzhou rock music scene, we can compare the comments on the idea of “rock spirit” from pop-rock singers like Liang Bo and those of Zhengzhou rock musicians in the present day. Xiaoyi, a drummer from the Zhengzhou hard-rock band *Dash Bridge* 石桥乐队 (example of *Dash Bridge*’s music: “Retro Car” 老爷车, <https://music.163.com/#/song?id=521164718>) formed in 2015, provides his perspective on rock spirit:

“This (rock spirit) encompasses too wide a scope, let me take examples. If I encounter a stranger being robbed at knifepoint, and I don’t hesitate to rush to their aid anyways, this kind of action is very rock and roll. Or, if someone’s parents always arrange well-paying and conformable jobs for them, but this person still prefers to pursue their own interests at risk of earning little or losing money, this action is also very rock and roll.”

— Xiaoyi, drummer of *Dash Bridge*

What’s interesting about Xiaoyi’s statement is his association of the ideology of rock music, not with subversive statements related to societal problems, but to individual actions of everyday life. The first example in his statement expresses both a sense of heroism and some sense of a code of ethics. The second example expresses a type of courage to follow a path of individuality based on one’s personal convictions. As a young rocker born in 1995, Xiaoyi grew up in the shadow of the Beijing rock musicians of the 1980s and 1990s. His viewpoints echo the sense of

standing up for what is just or courageous pursuit of individuality that Beijing rock musicians expressed in their music, but now more expressed in a more personal way related to situations people face in their everyday lives. This represents an evolution of sorts in the ideology of “rock spirit”, from those in their teens and twenties in 1980s mainland China, to those in their teens and twenties in 2010s mainland China. The Zhengzhou rock musician Dingyuan, who is closer in age to the 1980s Beijing rock musicians uses similar language in a comment of his mentioned earlier in this thesis, when he talks about those who “dare to fight who’s on the stage”, which could reference the spirit of 1980s rock music connected with the energy of student movements as well as having the bravery to forge an individual path by getting up on stage and expressing the power of your own artistic vision.

Xiaoyi’s comment also reflects a situation that existed in the 2010s that did not exist in the 1980s: economic prosperity. Xiaoyi’s second example actually illustrates a significant change that has occurred in Chinese society. If I were to think of the social dynamics and mechanisms for the first-generation rock musicians as well as ordinary people in 1980s China, this example would seem a bit inapplicable or irrelevant because there should rarely be any youngster whose parents could just offer them “well-paying and comfortable” jobs easily. But since Xiaoyi raised such a plausible case as an analogy, plus my own perspective and knowledge as an insider, I would rather say this assumption obviously is not impractical or unrealistic anymore in the current Chinese society. With the economic development in China over the years accompanied by a larger wealth gap, solidification of social classes and power, people who can single-handedly “arrange” jobs for their children are now ubiquitous as long as they are privileged within a certain scope.

More importantly, I think the main point Xiaoyi is making here directs our attention to the anti-establishment or nonconformist values that his second example manifests, which frequently appear as themes expressed in many rock songs and embodied by many rock musicians both inside and outside of the Sinophone. To draw a parallel with some of the well-known figures in the history of Chinese rock, Cui Jian quit his stable job as a trumpet player at the Beijing Symphony Orchestra at the age of 26 in the 1980s, and Wang Feng also threw away his “iron rice bowl” (铁饭碗) as a violinist at the Symphony Orchestra of National Ballet of China at a similar age in the 1990s. Both of them did so undoubtedly under huge pressure from family and society, in order to dedicate themselves fully to the rock career that they felt so passionate about. These rock pioneers led by example showing what can be done and sacrificed to chase after their dreams, which apparently had a great impact on later-generation rockers up until this day. Furthermore, this is just one representation of such anti-establishment or nonconformist values, which can manifest in a variety of ways as long as it rejects mainstream or conventional norms and expectations for the purpose of pursuing individual ideals.

Xiaoyi’s comment about choosing a path handed to you could also be an indirect dig at the commercialization of rock music in mainland China from the 2000s to the 2020s. He mentions at the beginning of the quote that “This (rock spirit) encompasses too wide a scope...” and doesn’t give examples of what the “too wide” part mentions but implies what this is in the second example. While economic prosperity is not inherently negative, the commercialization of rock music into forms like pop-rock has resulted in the diminishment of the original meaning of “rock spirit” as seen in the earlier quote from pop-rock musician Liang Bo. Liang Bo’s

statement, when read in comparison with quotes in this paper from Cui Jian, Dingyuan, Mr. Song, etc, shows that his statement on rock music is distant from the core meanings of “rock spirit” by these other rock musicians, and perhaps reflect how much Liang’s position in a *dazhong* 大众 commercial market (similar to Gang-Tai) disconnects him from the long-held sentiments of “rock spirit” that is imbued into musicians in the *xiaozhong* 小众 (small market), or rock music underground.

Criticism of the disconnection of commercial rock musicians from the original meaning of “rock spirit” is more poignant in this statement from Tao, the drummer in *Ga*:

“To rock stars who remain silent under domestic epidemic-control measures:

They are just good at singing, they pretend to be cool, their slogans are loud, they represent resistance, they make lots of money, their words are fake, their mouths are full of freedom, they are uncultured. What they bring to youngsters, are just waving small fists in the air and sweating buckets with hormones. The reason why you see them being cool is because you never come to know how chicken they are. Cherish wisdom, stay away from mainstream hypocritical rock music.”

— Tao, drummer of *Ga*

These comments represent the essential, original meanings of “rock spirit” in mainland China, stretching back to the Beijing rock musicians of the 1980s that are retained in the Zhengzhou rock music underground in present-day China. Indeed, the very spirit of this core rock music ideology can be seen as a guiding influence in the formation of the rock music scene back in the early 2000s with musicians like Mr. Song and Dingyuan. The opening quote in this

thesis of Dennis, guitarist of the Zhengzhou rock band *Ga* that “We play the small market of the small market” is a reflection of these Zhengzhou musicians holding on strongly and believing profoundly in the original meanings of “rock spirit”. Going further, it could be argued that embracing the original meanings of “rock spirit” and choosing to remain in the rock music underground are inextricably tied; that remaining in the *xiaozhong* is the only way to live by meaning of the “rock spirit” in its purest form. That venturing out into a more commercialized world would mean the increasing sacrifice of that ideology. Of course, this is not simply a phenomenon that is new or only occurs in mainland China or Zhengzhou, but is common with rock music around the world. The observation to make about the Zhengzhou rock music scene here is that it is taking root in mainland China, in a second-tier, inland Chinese city in such a rooted way. That this is happening tells us something about the development of youth culture and youth culture ideas across many different regions of mainland China over the four decades.

Summary

The changing nature of “rock spirit” has been a mirror reflecting the trajectory of rock music in relation to its role in constructing contemporary Chinese culture in Sinophone societies. It started with being a unique medium of music genre suitable for socio-political commentary and individualistic expressions which went beyond music itself with the right timing that coincided with the era of great changes in 1980s China. Through the inevitable de-politicization and commercialization process in the 1990s and 2000s, rock spirit and its ideological values once seemed to fade out of the public stage in an economically fast-developing society where almost everything was driven by money. But at the same time, the style of Chinese rock became more

diverse, which divided rock musicians and fans into smaller categories and communities based on more specific musical tastes. In the past decade of Chinese rock, with the maturity of local rock scenes in various non-first-tier and inland Chinese cities, in addition to further differentiation of rock styles, many of these rock musicians have also had higher artistic pursuits.

“Small market of the small market” bands like *Ga* exist not as an exception, but as a reflection of the actual situation of Chinese rock at present. There are many such bands based in different cities who are willing to stay local in order to continue pursuing their own aesthetic ideologies in their rock music that might otherwise be compromised if they were to sign with a larger record label and be forced to write more commercially successful music outside of their own aesthetic ideologies. There are also of course rock bands who prefer to follow a more commercial path to wider recognition and financial success. These bands tend to pursue fusion styles with popular music styles (e.g. pop-rock or folk-rock) that attract a larger fan base within the Sinophone (e.g. fans of Gang-Tai pop) and provide more lucrative opportunities in the larger mainland coastal cities. As Cui Jian said about rock as an ideology that set the tone for the development of Chinese rock afterwards, things expressed in rock music and rock musicians’ values and ideas in 2020s China vary from each other. With a set of relatively unchanged, stable core values as the common thread, the “rock spirit” in today’s Sinophone rock scenes has been manifested in different ways and endowed with different meanings.

3.3 Regional Rock Music Networks: Zhengzhou as part of an larger inter-city rock music underground

If you head into Zhengzhou and look for live rock music, you would most likely be directed to Nongke Road (农科路) in Jinshui District (金水区), Zhengzhou, which is also known as “a street full of bars” (酒吧一条街). More precisely, it refers to the section of Nongke Road between Huayuan Road (花园路) and Jingsan Road (经三路). Since there are many different types of bars one after the other, it has naturally become a place where music fans gather to enjoy live music performances of various styles. One example is 迷蝶 (*Midie*) *Reggae Bar*, which features original music works of local Zhengzhou musicians. There are themed music shows every week for different music genres performed by local singers and musicians, and different styles of rock music account for a significant proportion of it. Guitarist Dingyuan has also played in this bar and collaborated with a number of musicians on its stage. According to Dingyuan, *Midie Reggae Bar* is among one of the best bars in Zhengzhou now in terms of musicians’ virtuosity and performance level. But speaking of where in Zhengzhou has the best live rock music, Dingyuan tells me without hesitation:

(Image removed due to copyright restrictions)

Image from *7LIVEHOUSE*, 爱音乐现场 [Ilivehouse]. 2021,
<http://www.ilivehouse.com/changdi/js7livehouse.html>

Figure 5. *7LIVEHOUSE* in Zhengzhou

“Definitely around Dashi Bridge (大石桥) and Xintong Bridge (新通桥), there is a venue called ‘7LIVEHOUSE’, that’s the old one. Nowadays there’s another one called ‘7LIVEHOUSE+’ which is newly established one in Zhengdong New District (郑东新区).”

— *Dingyuan, Guitarist*

As Dingyuan describes, the music performance venue most dedicated to rock music in Zhengzhou is *7LIVEHOUSE* located in central Zhengzhou, and its newer version *7LIVEHOUSE+* in the vibrant Zhengdong New District (郑东新区) situated in the East side of the town. The first *7LIVEHOUSE* was established in 2007 by a Zhengzhou local who noticed the lack of such a professional music venue for live band performances in this city back then. As the Zhengzhou rock scene was gradually maturing in the 2000s with the emergence of various bands such as Mr. Song’s *V-Band*, the very limited number and conditions of music venues like bars started to seem insufficient to support the growing number of local bands who wanted to showcase their music through performances. So the establishment of *7LIVEHOUSE* sixteen years ago on the one hand seized this business opportunity, on the other hand also provided an

upgrade of ‘hardware conditions’ for both local music fans and rock musicians which in turn has fostered the development of this music scene.

Although it is a blessing to have such livehouses that host performances for both local and domestic, famous and unknown bands in Zhengzhou, Dingyuan seems to hold a relatively conservative and cautious view of the local rock scene and the livelihood of rock musicians in this city. In terms of the local audience, he thinks that since the government’s positioning of Henan province has primarily been agricultural, it leads to people having neither a high demand for “spiritual nourishment” (精神食粮) nor abundant purchasing power to willingly consume such niche music. On top of this, the lack of policy support and commercial investment has resulted in the outflow of rock talents to Beijing for better career advancement. As an insider born and raised in Zhengzhou, I can get the points Dingyuan is making; they make sense to me. Nevertheless, subjective truth is not necessarily equal to objective reality, especially in regard to the attribution of these complex and multifaceted issues. I would imagine opening a musical instrument training center or investing in a bar is not something every local rock musician has the capability to do because it requires a certain level of financial capital. But for statements I heard such as “rock musicians with higher virtuosity tend to prefer being a commercial performance musician over instrument teacher” is more like a subjective opinion with some truth to it.

Despite the flourishing of live music venues in Zhengzhou over the last fifteen years, including ones that are dedicated to rock music, Zhengzhou was not the first inland Chinese city to develop a rock-music underground. Longtime Zhengzhou underground rock musician Mr.

Song describes his travels in 2000 to Xi'an (西安), another major historical inland city about 500 km west of Zhengzhou.

“At the time (around 2000), I just felt that Xi'an was an ancient city with a rich cultural heritage, so I wanted to go there and explore it. After all, rock music should be integrated with culture. I didn't join any bands there, but talked with many of them and performed rock music together many times. The biggest feeling was their friendliness and inclusiveness, so when I formed V-Band afterwards, our drummer was from Xi'an.”

— Mr. Song, frontman of former V-BAND

As a rock musician from Zhengzhou, Mr. Song's immersion in the Xi'an rock scene took place at a time when a solid rock scene had not even taken shape in Zhengzhou. That was exactly a big motive for him to make such a decision, because learning from the experience of the Xi'an rock scene which developed earlier than Zhengzhou could be an opportunity to help hometown Zhengzhou's rock music advance. It may also indirectly reflect the rationale behind the different positioning of Zhengzhou and Xi'an from music labels' angle in respect of which city to host their music festivals. The fact that Mr. Song brought a drummer from Xi'an to his Zhengzhou-based *V-Band* exemplified how to connect local rock musicians from different cities so that a network of rock music among nearby inland Chinese cities can be gradually built upon. It is not a goal (from rock musicians' individual standpoint), but rather the result of collective efforts made by many individual musicians, collectively and organically growing into an established network.



Figure 6. Map of Inland-China Rock Underground Network

Underground rock music networks between major cities around Zhengzhou include Xi'an to the west as well as Wuhan(武汉) to the South. The relative importance nationally of these networked inland city rock music scenes is evidenced by the number of times important rock music festivals have been held in each city. One of these major music festivals was only held once in Zhengzhou, which was a two-day Strawberry Music Festival⁵ in 2014. In contrast, the Strawberry Music Festival was held four times in Xi'an between 2010 and 2015, and in Wuhan six times during the past twelve years. Despite significantly less than Xi'an and Wuhan, considering the fact that other closeby major cities Jinan (济南), Taiyuan (太原), and Shijiazhuang (石家庄) have never hosted these festivals, Zhengzhou is at least on the mainland map of cities important enough to hold such large music festivals. Such large music festivals do not usually feature local bands but mostly solo musicians or bands who enjoy a certain level of fame at least within a geographic region or musical community (not necessarily all rock music).

⁵ 草莓音乐节, founded by Modern Sky(摩登天空) since 2009. It's the second musical-festival brand of Modern Sky, the first was Modern Sky Musical Festival(摩登天空音乐节) since 2007.

These festivals do have an impact on the growth of audiences for rock music in this inland region. As Mr. Song states:

“Hosting large music festivals such as Strawberry Music Festival (by Modern Sky) and the Midi Music Festival⁶ have had a greater impact on the growth of Chinese rock. Many people now view attending live music performances as a trendy thing to do.”

— Mr. Song, frontman of former V-BAND

While rock music festivals play an important role in establishing a larger audience for rock music, especially in developing cities like Zhengzhou, their occurrence is usually annual or biannual and different in nature than established rock venues that remain the backbone of local rock music with daily or weekly shows. One very interesting phenomenon over the last fifteen years in these networked cities of Zhengzhou, Xi’an, and Wuhan is the emergence of performance venues called “Live House”. Aside from the previously mentioned 7LIVEHOUSE and 7LIVEHOUSE+ in Zhengzhou, Xi’an and Wuhan have their own live house venues as well. These “Live House” venues were established by a combination of local rock musicians and concert promoters with capital investment from local businesses. They were established exactly because of a perceived need for this type of venue to help develop local rock music scenes and provide a good concert space for growing local rock music audiences.

Live Houses are also networked between Zhengzhou, Xi’an, and Wuhan in a couple of ways. First, Live House owners in the different cities know one another and coordinate bookings

⁶ 迷笛音乐节, the first original music festival founded in mainland China by Beijing Midi School of Music (北京迷笛音乐学校) since 2000.

of local bands or out-of-region bands touring through to perform in these networks of Live Houses. Secondly and perhaps most importantly, some of these Live House owners run independent record labels that support and promote local rock bands through the recording and distribution of the music of local rock bands. Record “label” (厂牌 *chang pai*) in China is different from the conventional term “record company” (唱片公司 *chang pian gong si*). The latter refers to large corporate record companies focused on the *dazhong* 大众 large commercial markets involved with music like Gang-Tai. “Labels” are often associated with *xiaozhong* 小众 music and would be equivalent to the Western term “indie label”. Live House venue owners take charge of the bands under their label and often cooperate with their partners from different cities to book bands in the Live House venues. For instance, several bands under a label from Taiyuan will be booked to perform at Zhengzhou’s *7LIVEHOUSE* with Zhengzhou-based bands under *SONICE* (a Zhengzhou-based label) and vice versa. It shows that even for inland cities that are less commercially inclined such as Zhengzhou and Taiyuan, there are not only vibrant local underground rock scenes, but also a network characterized by music genre and taste supported by indie labels and live houses that connect rock musicians from different locations.

3.4 Summary

Using a combination of ethnographic data collected by myself and a body of scholarship on rock music in mainland China by both Western and Chinese scholars, this chapter has set out to understand how an underground rock music scene in Zhengzhou has emerged over the past two decades. A closer analysis of the Zhengzhou rock musicians’ use of the term *xiaozhong* 小众 (small market) revealed the desire to uncompromisingly pursue creative/aesthetic ideals rooted in

a rock ideology stretching back to the Beijing rock musicians of the 1980s. To pursue these goals, Zhengzhou rock musicians made a conscious decision to remain in the *xiaozhong* (small market or “underground”) rather than to have their ideals threatened by having to compromise them if they pursued commercial success in the *dazhong* 大众 (large market). The term *yaogun jingshen* 摇滚精神 (“rock spirit”) was investigated to understand its origin and meanings, how meanings changed as rock music in China developed, and how the root meanings of the term (i.e. both a spirit of speaking up for what one believes in and the dedication to one’s pursuit of personal ideals of individual expression) guided Zhengzhou musicians’ decisions to remain in the underground and pursue individual artistic ideals. The last section of the chapter examined the inland city network of underground rock music scenes between Zhengzhou, Xi’an, and Wuhan, the nature of interconnective activity within these networks, and how these networks provide a broader perspective on how rock music and rock music culture is developing and manifesting itself across different regions of inland China.

Conclusion

The emergence and growth of the Zhengzhou rock scene over the two decades highlight the diverse and multifaceted development of Chinese popular music stretching out to various inland regions in the first quarter of this century. As a vehicle of youth culture, rock music has taken on a new and unique direction in the inland city of Zhengzhou in the 2020s, building on the foundation of China's first-generation rock ideology. While the socio-political and cultural subversiveness is no longer emphasized directly through music due to changes in society that now mostly seek stability under the status quo, the pursuit of freedom of artistic and rightful expression remains a constant and consistent theme. As rock music, a Western-originated music genre, enters more and more ordinary Chinese people's day-to-day cultural life, various expressions of rock along with different artistic pursuits manifested in the Zhengzhou rock scene, suggest that it has entered a mature stage of foreign music assimilation into Chinese culture.

My ethnographic fieldwork on underground rock musicians in Zhengzhou in 2022 has revealed a growing and thriving local music community that is generating new and original music for a small but growing local audience. The Zhengzhou rock scene is not an isolated scene, but a part of the stretching network which displays how rock culture stretches out like a web. It is a community in which many of the musicians have chosen to stay local (as opposed to turning toward larger commercial markets) as a way to both stay true to their artistic ideals and cultivate a local and regional environment of musicians who share the same rock music ideology. It demonstrates the evolution of a subculture and youth culture in contemporary China in a region where this channel of expression did not even exist twenty-five years ago. In the context of the broader music Sinophone, this study can provide a new perspective on how an originally Western

music genre with its own ideology has been assimilated and developed over multiple generations of youth on the Chinese mainland. In comparison to assimilative processes of Western rock music in Taiwan and Hong Kong (i.e. before and following Hong Kong's return to China), this study on recent developments in mainland Chinese rock music can provide a more complete understanding of the Sinophone. This study could serve as a pilot study for a bigger research project that aims to understand the inter-connection, differences, and similarities between underground rock scenes of different cities in greater detail, which could reveal some significant patterns and broader socio-cultural trends behind this network beyond the scope of one or two cities. Furthermore, such a potential research project could look beyond mainland China and aim for other regions of the Sinophone world such as Taiwan. It would be very interesting to examine the underground network of Taiwan's rock musicians in comparison to the Chinese mainland, to see whether there would be some major differences in a place like Taiwan where rock music along with the popular music industry has been introduced and developed earlier than its mainland counterpart. Further studies to compare diverse rock scenes across the Sinophone world would also shed more light on where Zhengzhou has situated itself within this larger socio-cultural landscape.

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