



Lei (Nada) Peng

INTERROGATING CHINESE ROCK

A Cross-Cultural Journey Integrating
Research and Identity

Cultural Anthropology

Collection Editors

NILA GINGER HOFMAN

&

JANISE HURTIG

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



INTERROGATING CHINESE ROCK

Lei (Nada) Peng

INTERROGATING CHINESE ROCK

A Cross-Cultural Journey
Integrating Research
and Identity

Cultural Anthropology

Collection Editors

Nila Ginger Hofman & Janise Hurtig



First published in 2025 by Lived Places Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790, Lived Places Publishing expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

The author and editors have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication, but assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or omissions. Likewise, every effort has been made to contact copyright holders. If any copyright material has been reproduced unwittingly and without permission, the publisher will gladly receive information enabling them to rectify any error or omission in subsequent editions.

Copyright © 2025 Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781916704497 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781916704510 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781916704503 (ePUB)

The right of Lei (Nada) Peng to be identified as the Author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing
P.O. Box 1845
47 Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com

The root of suffering is our false belief in a solid, separate, substantial self.

– Buddhist teaching on *anattā* (illusion of self)

Abstract

Interrogating Chinese Rock chronicles author Lei (Nada) Peng's autoethnographic journey as a Chinese rock listener and researcher between mainland China, France, and the United Kingdom. Bridging scholarly analysis and lived experience, this work traces how rock – a Western genre – is reimagined within China's socio-political landscape. It explores the dynamic interplay between Chinese rock music, cultural hybridity, global power structures, and personal identity, positioning music as a site of resistance, mystification, and self-discovery. Through an interdisciplinary lens, it challenges narratives of authenticity, ideological restriction, neoliberal globalisation, and interrogates the tensions between artistic expression, national identity, power, and belonging. This work also explores the ways in which the author navigates cross-cultural currents to forge identities that defy rigid categorisation.

Key words

autoethnography; centre and periphery; Chinese rock music; Chinese social transformation; cross-cultural identity integration; culture imperialism; fluid belonging; global power structures; marginal voices; music and society

Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xv
Learning objectives	xxi
Introduction	xxii
Prelude: My encounter with rock 'n' roll in the People's Republic of China – A call for self-awareness	1
PART I Understanding Chinese rock, or <i>Yaogun</i>: A socio-political history and metaphor for 'identity searching'	9
Chapter 1 The rise of Chinese rock: A vessel for collective aspirations and echoes of individual liberation	15
Chapter 2 Constructing myth: Revolutionary narrative of rock	27
Chapter 3 Unveiling the myth of <i>Yaogun</i> : A reassessment of rock's 'periphery'	41
Chapter 4 'China Fire' under the 'Modern Sky': Transforming Chinese society before the dawn of a new century	69
Chapter 5 'New Sound of Beijing' and ' <i>Dakou</i> generation': 'New clothes, new life!'	95

Interlude: From <i>Dakou</i> to the ‘new era’ – Navigating the spectacle of ‘Chinese independent music’ and the unfinished journey	121
PART II Cross-cultural identity in motion: Navigating the journey from ‘me’ to ‘us’	127
Chapter 6 Leaving home: From Kunming to Beijing – The awareness of centre and periphery	129
Chapter 7 Departing China for France: The second move and the disillusionment of an ‘enlightened Europe’	147
Chapter 8 Departing France for England: The third move and the disillusionment with the ‘liberal world’	169
The unfinished finale: From ‘me’ to ‘us’ – Metamorphosis of cross-cultural identity integration	197
Suggested projects, assignments, and discussion questions	217
Notes	223
References	227
Recommended further readings	236
Index	239

Preface

This book is an unfinished artifact – a living fragment of my cross-cultural journey, shaped by nearly two decades of intertwining academic inquiry into Chinese rock music and the relentless excavation of my own identity. It is not a conclusion but a testament to motion: a pilgrimage that has been as much about intellectual rigor as it has been about spiritual awakening.

This journey has been neither linear nor solitary. It is marked by the friction of existing as a persistent ‘other’ standing ‘in-between’: a Chinese woman challenging gendered expectations in the male subcultures of rock; an unmarried and childfree scholar defying societal scripts of femininity across borders; a migrant navigating the invisible hierarchies of Europe. Each confrontation with marginalisation became a mirror, reflecting to me the fractures of a world obsessed with labels – nation, race, class, gender – and the systems that weaponise them. Yet in those fractures, I also glimpsed light: the possibility of a self and a society, unshackled from the illusion of separation.

From the outset, my exploration of Chinese rock – a genre born of rebellion, dissonance, and a collective quest for personal freedom and authenticity, and imbued with many revolutionary and Enlightenment myths – mirrored my own quest to reconcile the fractures within myself. To study this music phenomenon was to confront questions of resistance, belonging, and voice in a society oscillating between collective conformity and individual

yearning. Yet as I delved deeper, the chords of academia and spirituality began to harmonise. Through Buddhism and Taoism, I encountered teachings on impermanence, non-self, and non-attachment. These teachings reframed my understanding of identity, not as a fixed monument, but as a river – fluid, adaptive, and perpetually carving new paths through the bedrock of culture, politics, and memory.

This realisation emerged alongside my personal struggles, which were multi-layered. As a Chinese teenager, my love of rock music was an act of rebellion against a society deeply rooted in collectivist thinking and hierarchical order. As a woman, being a rock enthusiast in China – whether as a fan or a musician – was both ‘cool’ and alienating, forcing me to navigate a male-dominated subculture that often marginalised my presence and voice. Later, as an independent, unmarried, and childfree scholar, I confronted the gender violence of contemporary China’s mixed feudal-neoliberal-patriarchal order, which relegates women who defy traditional roles to the symbolic periphery – labelled ‘too tough’, ‘weird’, or even gendered as ‘the third sex’. Under neoliberalism’s commodification of identity and the state’s reinforcement of ‘family values’ in contemporary China and many other places, women like me face intensified exclusion; our refusal to sign the silent emotional contract that centres marriage or motherhood as core values for women renders us deviant. Yet, in hooks’ terms, the periphery is also a site of radical possibility. My defiance – as a rock fan, as a scholar, as an independent thinker and spiritual seeker, as a woman unwilling to shrink – becomes a way of reclaiming agency from the margins.

Moving to Europe further deepened my awareness of the divisions between 'centre' and 'periphery'. As an Asian woman with no pre-established social capital, I encountered invisible barriers – glass doors – in everyday life, from finding housing to pursuing an academic path to securing employment. These experiences highlighted the intersection of race, gender, and class as key factors in marginalisation, whether in China's state-controlled market logic, France's 'egalitarian' ideals, or the neoliberal diversity of the United Kingdom.

In these pages, the personal and the political, the scholarly and the spiritual converge. This is not a story of arrival, but of becoming – a chronicle of how the study of music, critical inquiry, the practice of mindfulness and self-regulation, alongside the labour of cross-cultural survival can dissolve the boundaries between the many labels I have been assigned and to which I have adhered, revealing their inextricable dance.

Through nearly two decades of research, movements, lived experiences, and reflection, I have come to understand that the most marginalised people are often found at the intersection of these divides. The more I questioned the labels that were meant to define me – 'model student', 'rock girl', migrant, Asian, neo middle class, 'woman PhD' – the more I glimpsed the spaces between them. In Buddhist meditation, I sat with the ache of feeling 'invisible' in Europe, the sting of being 'too much' in China, slowly recognising them not as personal failures but as symptoms of a world obsessed with separation. My research into Chinese rock music also revealed this tension: musicians shouting against societal constraints, yet reproducing gendered, regional, and

class hierarchies in their subculture. It mirrored my own struggle – to resist being pigeonholed by others while confronting the ‘boxes’ I’d internalised.

To move forward, my path required reimagining belonging not as a battle between ‘me’ and ‘them’, but as a mosaic of interdependencies. It meant seeing my ‘rebellious’ teenage self, my ‘foreigner/immigrant’ self, my ‘single woman scholar’ self, my ‘spiritual seeker’ self, not as conflicting identities, but as currents in the same river – shaped by culture, yes, but also shaping it. This is the heart of my autoethnographic reckoning: a refusal to let the world’s fractures become my own.

This vision is not merely theoretical; it arises from my lived experience of integrating opposing narratives into my way of being. My cross-cultural journey – from China to France to the United Kingdom – has been about more than surviving as an ‘Other’ in both ‘home’ and ‘foreign’ lands. It has been about embodying and integrating this ‘Otherness’ within myself, in an ongoing process of transformation with no fixed destination. Two decades of cross-cultural journeys and academic and personal inquiry have led me to the conclusion that to cultivate a future of peace and harmony, we must bridge the gap between mind, heart, and action, aligning our conceptual understanding with practical life. Without this harmony, we remain isolated, unable to connect meaningfully as a collective.

I have come to see that this journey involves work in two intertwined frameworks: the conceptual and the practical. At the theoretical level, I draw from a variety of intellectual and philosophical traditions: critical theory, as articulated by Michel Foucault, which

challenges power structures and questions subjectivity; post-colonial perspectives, particularly those of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, James Baldwin, Edward Said, and Arundhati Roy, which critique imperialism in all its forms, interrogate the psychological legacies of colonialism, and unravel the complexities of hybrid identities and cultural 'third spaces' (Bhabha, 1994); Buddhist and Taoist notions of *non-self*, which emphasise interdependence and the futility of ego-driven self-attachments; feminist and queer studies, informed by thinkers like bell hooks, Dai Jinhua, and Chizuko Ueno, which challenge patriarchal, neoliberal, and orthodox norms while imagining new ways of living, caring, and reclaiming agency as individual and as community. These theoretical tools provided me with the conceptual grounding necessary to understand identity beyond rigid boxes and binaries.

Yet theory alone is insufficient.

On a practical level, this journey requires introspection and connection. It means asking myself: 'How am I feeling? How am I relating to others? Am I listening without judgement? How can I help without imposing my views and values?' Practices like meditation, journaling, and spending time in solitude provide a foundation, but so does fostering connection with others – seeking common ground, showing vulnerability, offering empathy, and sharing struggles. This unity of theory and practice – a grounding praxis – has been central to my process of intercultural identity integration.

From Kunming, China to Lyon, France to Liverpool, England, from a young girl enchanted by rock music to an academic navigating cultural, social, and political narratives, I have learnt that there is

no fixed 'true self' to discover. Instead, there are countless 'selves' in constant flux, shaped by encounters, reflections, and struggles. This insight aligns with Buddhist teachings on non-self (*anattā*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which assert that the self is fluid, without a fixed essence, constantly changing in response to its conditions.

In recognising this *non-self*, I have found a deeper sense of belonging – not as an attached component of a family, work unit, ethnical group, or nation, but as part of a shared human journey. Moving from 'me' to 'us' is not about losing oneself; it is about embracing a collective ground, finding strength in interdependence, and acknowledging our interconnected struggles. In an increasingly divided world, where technology and dualistic ideology threaten our very existence and the environment in which we live, this understanding feels more urgent than ever.

Perhaps it is in *emptiness* – free of rigid identities and conventional narratives – that we can begin to imagine a new Self, as elaborated in Carl Jung's (1968) framework. Perhaps it is from a 'ground zero' of invisibility, where we detach from the ego, that we can imagine a world beyond existing binaries.

Ultimately, this book is driven by a deep aspiration, inspired by the Buddhist tradition of setting intentions:

May we never seek to be seen through the eyes of those who refuse to see us.

May we never cling to the illusion of a solid, separate, and substantial self, but find ourselves in the fluidity of interdependence – interwoven with others, nature, and the cosmos, like a raindrop dissolving into the infinite ocean of wholeness.

Acknowledgements

How do you keep a drop of water from drying up?
Just put it in the ocean.

– Engraved on a stone in the film *Samsara*
(Pan Nalin, 2001)

This quote above first anchored my doctoral acknowledgements a decade ago, a testament to five years of solitary, self-funded struggle. Today it resurfaces as I complete this book – a project born out of that thesis, but deepened by another decade of wandering across a different landscape. Today, at a time when the world is fracturing into deeper conflict and division, the metaphor holds even more strongly: like a single drop sustained by the ocean, this work exists only through the boundless support of countless elements and souls that have shaped my journey.

I extend my deep gratitude to Professor Gregory Lee, whose open-minded guidance and intellectual rigour were the nurturers of my critical voice in France. His unwavering faith in his vision of transcultural studies, coupled with his passion for bridging academia and lived experience, provided the intellectual foundation for this book.

I cannot forget the scholars who stimulated my academic curiosity during my years at Peking University. Among them, I am thinking in particular of Professor Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, who not only inspired and motivated me to explore issues related to

cultural studies but also encouraged me to relate these explorations to my own life experiences and reflections. I remain deeply grateful for the opportunity to attend many of her lectures and seminars as an immature and naive student at Peking University.

I was captivated by her profound knowledge, charismatic eloquence, and her egalitarian grace – how she welcomed every question with warmth, dissolving hierarchies between teacher and student. I will never forget her response to my fumbling question nearly 20 years ago – ‘What is ideology?'; she answered succinctly: ‘Ideology is something that obscures while making you believe that nothing is obstructed or hidden.’ This answer made a deep impression on me and still resonates with me today. In many ways, Professor Dai has been a lifelong role model for me, embodying the ideals of intellectual pursuit and the possibilities of being a woman scholar.

To the spirit of Chinese rock – *Yaogun* – thank you. However subjective it is, its impact on me – marked by raw authenticity, sincerity, passion, and defiance – has been a constant, if quiet, presence. This energy I experienced in Beijing’s underground scenes over two decades ago carried me through years of displacement, grounding me even as I drifted between cultural peripheries. It taught me to question, to resist, and to find home and belonging in dissonance.

I would like to thank Lived Places Publishing and all its members. Lived Places appeared at a pivotal time – after a global pandemic and a long period of isolation and quarantine – when I began to question many aspects of the academic publishing system itself. It emerged as a bright light in an otherwise grey and confusing

atmosphere, giving me the courage and motivation to merge dissertation and memoir, and to integrate my lived experiences in various places with academic inquiry. I am particularly grateful to David Parker, co-founder of Lived Places, for his vision, principles, and commitment to a publishing project that broadens the scope of traditional academic disciplines and provides a platform for many underrepresented and previously unheard yet valuable voices. Without the emergence of publishers like Lived Places, this project would probably not have found its place on library shelves.

My heartfelt gratitude to Nila Ginger Hofman and Janise Hurtig, editors of the *Cultural Anthropology* collection, for accepting the proposal for this book and including it in their series. Their encouragement and vision came at a crucial moment when I was uncertain about how to approach the realisation of such a project. It was their suggestion to adopt autoethnography as a method that offered me the inspiration and clarity I needed to convey the messages within this work. Throughout the writing process, they have been unwaveringly supportive, dedicating their time and expertise to reading, editing, and providing insightful and thoughtful feedback. Their anthropological and musical insights, their values, and their professional integrity have been invaluable to me, and I am deeply appreciative of their generosity and care. This work would not have been possible without their steadfast support and encouragement, and I thank them sincerely from the bottom of my heart.

A big thank you to my friends near and far in different places around the world: Zhou Chunxi 周纯曦, Chai Xiaobei 柴晓蓓, Song Yalan 宋雅兰, Cheng Rui 程蕊, Liang Hongling 梁宏

玲, Rachel Huang 黄蕊, Chan Kit 阿杰, Rajohn Ali, Zora Lee, Bob and Sylvie, Rose, Laetitia, Françoise, Chi, Erwan, Jean-David, Laure, Kakuko, Lionel, Pauline, Fred, Antonio, Shwan, Barbara, Nelson, Lucy, and Ed Saul, who took the time to listen to me and found subtle, thoughtful ways to offer their encouragement and support. I am equally grateful to the many other friends, students, and 'anonymous strangers' I have met over the years who have shared moments of vulnerability or compassion with me. Their support has come in invisible ways, often without them realising how much it means to me. I would also like to thank Poppy, my cat, who has been a constant presence, a true family member, and a stable source of emotional support. Each of them, in their own way, shared precious moments with me during my years of living and researching in France and the United Kingdom, far from my family. Without their company and care, this journey would not have had the same meaning. I truly appreciate their presence in my life.

My heartfelt thanks go to my flamenco dance group (Achilipus!) and to the swing/blues dance communities (Mersey Swing and Dockside Blues) in Liverpool. Dancing with them became an essential remedy and a source of joy, offering a much-needed counterbalance to the intellectual fatigue, emotional turbulence, and daily weariness encountered throughout the making of this book. Their companionship and vibrant energy accompanied me every step of the way.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, whose support has sustained me throughout a journey that, for Chinese parents, may have seemed unconventional and uncertain. I am thankful for the trust and precious freedom they have given me. Despite

occasional conflicts and disagreements, their presence has been a constant source of strength. In particular, I would like to thank my maternal grandmother, my mother, and my aunts, whose personalities and ways of being have always inspired and encouraged me. This work is for the women of my lineage – their resilience lives in these pages.

Special thanks are also due to the ‘Dandelion Plan’ of the multicultural transdisciplinary training programme, which I participated in during the realisation of this book. I am grateful to all the mentors, tutors, and fellow participants who shared this journey of growth and exploration with me. I am grateful to Fang Man 方曼, the initiator of the Dandelion Plan, whom I first met at the Seahorse Planet podcast (China’s first feminist podcast 海马星球) gathering in Berlin in 2023. The gathering itself – and meeting Man – was both empowering and a reminder that my experience of living as an ‘Other’ standing in between, within patriarchal structures, and my journey towards cross-cultural identity integration, was neither isolated nor in vain. Fang Man’s words ‘If being in-between is a destiny, then make the cracks an oasis’ resonate deeply with me.

At various stages during the realisation of this work, a fundamental question kept coming up: ‘At the end of the day, does any of this actually matter and make sense?’ ‘Is Chinese rock music – and my personal life journey – really worth all this time and effort to write about? Would anything be different if these stories remained untold?’

These doubts mirrored the existential crises I had experienced while writing my dissertation. Once again, I found solace and

renewed motivation in the teachings of the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama), who, more than 2,500 years ago, offered the profound wisdom: 'Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.'

Maybe this is where the sense is: the enduring commitment, spanning nearly two decades, to exploring Chinese rock and the complicated questions of my own identity. The persistence – the irresistible impulse – to return to these themes, even after countless temptations to abandon them, has become a defining thread in the fabric of my existence. I have come to realise that the true meaning of such work lies not in its final product or conclusions but in the journey itself: the permission to get lost and find oneself again; the ambiguity that exists between meaning and non-meaning; the unforeseen perspectives that arise from constant questioning. These experiences weave together into a tapestry of contradiction and richness.

Through years of research, reflection, and writing, as well as periods that I once dismissed as 'lost' or 'dead', I have come to believe that it is this intertwined, contradictory, and unpredictable process that defines my way of being in the world. Embracing this awareness has transformed the whole endeavour into an unforgettable odyssey – imbued with the liberating joy that can be found even in the most uncertain, the most difficult moments.

I am deeply grateful for this discovery and wish to share it with all who might find resonance in it. Ultimately, this work is a tribute to the infinite wisdom and compassion that silently permeate the universe.

Learning objectives

- Critically explore Chinese rock music as a cultural lens for understanding China's socio-political transformation and its entanglement with global power dynamics in the post-reform era.
- Understand the relationship between self-perception and social/structural conditioning. Learn to interrogate how a persistent, solid, independent, yet ultimately illusory selfhood is constantly forged through intersecting cultural, historical, and geopolitical forces, using autoethnography as a method of inquiry.
- Analyse the dynamic interplay between artistic innovation, ideological constraints, and market commodification in shaping cultural production, authenticity, and resistance.
- Investigate how transnational movement and cross-cultural encounters challenge fixed notions of self, otherness, and belonging.
- Reflect on how knowledge and media production can both contest and reinforce power asymmetries, shaping narratives of authenticity and influencing whose voices are heard in global discourse.
- Develop an understanding of how reflective engagement with personal experience in cultural exploration can foster intellectual, emotional, and spiritual transformation.

Introduction

This book traces the evolution of Chinese rock music – from its rebellious emergence in the late 1980s to its complex and often invisible/contradictory role in today's global cultural landscape. But it is not just a story about music. As I argue throughout this work, Chinese rock music is deeply implicated in the broader social transformations that have shaped contemporary China, particularly in the wake of the reform and opening period that followed the Cultural Revolution.

Through key historical moments, I explore how Chinese rock music evolved from an authentic, defiant expression of individual and collective yearning for greater freedom and openness into a cultural product increasingly shaped – and at times constrained – by market forces and consumerist ideologies. This transformation paralleled China's accelerated transition to a state-led, market- and technology-driven economy in the twenty-first century, illuminating the tensions between cultural resistance, ideological restriction, and commodification.

More than a chronicle of musical history, this book examines China's profound social metamorphoses over the past few decades. It traces how the evolution of rock music has mirrored the nation's changing identity, as it navigates a complex path from its revolutionary past to its aspirations to become a prosperous and powerful modern socialist state, while simultaneously embracing a market economy. In this light, the history of Chinese rock

becomes a lens through which to examine the dynamic interplay between artistic expression and ideological restriction, between countercultural authenticity and commercial influence. It also offers insight into the contested and evolving discourse of national identity within an increasingly globalised power structure.

At its core, this work is as much a personal journey as it is an academic inquiry. Since childhood, I have been haunted by questions that seem both intimate and universal: What makes me who I am? Ultimately, who am I? As a lifelong fan of rock and alternative music, these questions naturally converged with my academic and emotional engagement with Chinese rock music – its history, its cultural meanings, and its power to shape individual and collective self-perceptions.

Leaving China and living in different cultural and social landscapes in France and the United Kingdom over the past two decades has added new layers of complexity to my reflections on identity. My experiences abroad have often challenged the assumptions I once held about Europe and the West, forcing me to rethink not only the myths of the 'Other', but also those embedded in my own upbringing and cultural conditioning. Gradually, I came to realise that my sense of self was not only rooted in my Chinese heritage, but was also deeply influenced by trans-cultural currents that transcended national boundaries. Growing up in post-reform China, my identity has been constantly shaped by global power dynamics, historical legacies, and ideological undercurrents – forces that work quietly but decisively to shape how I see myself and the world.

This book, then, does not simply analyse Chinese rock music as an object of study; it links its cultural evolution to my own search for integration between research and lived experience. It is both an academic exploration and a personal narrative and introspection – one that interweaves music, society, and the unfolding journey of self-understanding.

Throughout, I argue that personal introspection is never an isolated act – it is always mediated by broader cultural, socio-political, and structural conditions and is influenced by deep-rooted power dynamics. As I reflect on my own evolving sense of identity, I also examine how the trajectory of Chinese rock reveals enduring tensions: between individual expression and collective belonging, between ideological constraints and creative resistance, between authenticity and commodification, between rebellion and assimilation. Beyond China's internal socio-political currents, I also argue that this trajectory cannot be disentangled from global dynamics shaped by Western hegemony, cultural imperialism, and the lingering shadows of colonial history.

In this way, *Interrogating Chinese Rock* becomes more than a study of music. It is a deeper examination of how cultural and personal identity is constantly shaped, challenged, and renegotiated within shifting landscapes of power, ideology, and global interconnectedness.

Prelude

My encounter with rock 'n' roll in the People's Republic of China – A call for self-awareness

Is rock music still holding its ground in the contemporary soundscape? In an age where many struggle to commit to entire albums with repeated lyric immersion, the cultural discourse and urban nightlife scene have pivoted towards indie, lo-fi, electronic, instrumental, atmospheric, and dance music. The heyday of alternative rock and folk, with their emblematic calls for universal love, wider justice, or those progressive eight-minute guitar riffs, seems to have waned. The rebellious labels and socio-political undertones once synonymous with rock appear to be dissipating in the digital era, largely influenced by the rise of tailored consumer-oriented, highly personalised listening experiences, and streaming platforms.

In our era of constant information flow and fast-paced living, it's understandable that many find it challenging to sustain focus and patience. Instead of immersing themselves in entire albums,

people are inclined to buy singles or individual songs, especially those with succinct lyrics that demand minimal scrutiny, navigating the rapidly evolving musical landscape. Presently, rock music no longer serves as the primary symbol of musical expression delving into raw emotions ‘from the guts’, a role that has shifted largely towards genres like rap. It no longer stands as a force challenging established orders or the status quo, nor is it perceived as a dedicated vehicle for activism promoting collective justice, peace, and freedom, however subjective these concepts may be.

Nevertheless, my initial encounter with Chinese rock music as a 14-year-old eighth-grade student in 1997 in the city of Kunming (capital city of the Yunnan Province, in the southwest of China) surely played a pivotal and significant role for me. It not only awakened my individual subjectivity but also sparked my curiosity to question the broader social structures and mechanisms in which I was embedded and conditioned.

I was a diligent student who always achieved excellent grades at school, earning praise and being viewed as a ‘role model’ by teachers and other adults. I was also a dutiful daughter, always comporting myself as a respectful junior for my parents and their acquaintances, conforming to societal expectations and Chinese traditional values. In the broader context of Chinese society since the 1980s, girls have often been labelled as ‘nice’ and ‘gentle’ and positioned as models of virtuous behaviour. This ideal has been consciously or subconsciously embodied in my own behaviour.

From an early age, my fascination with music was apparent. However, my musical exposure remained confined to select

world-famous classic music extracts featured on national TV and radio channels, comprising traditional Chinese folk songs and the 'revolutionary tunes' ingrained in my parents' generation, echoing through our home in repetitive cycles. It wasn't until the mid-1990s, during my junior high school years, that the floodgates to the expansive realm of global popular music swung open. The transformation was facilitated by the circulation of stereo sets such as CD/VCD players and Walkmans into private households, as well as the accompanying burgeoning market for popular music. In addition, the advent of foreign TV channels – including Hong Kong and Taiwan channels and MTV – broadcasting on Chinese television and the proliferation of record shops in major cities across China contributed to my transformation.

My initiation into the world of popular music was orchestrated by my uncle, a passionate popular music amateur and university student in engineering at the time. Under his influence, I discovered a rich tapestry of popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Like many of my peers in junior high, I was captivated by the allure of charismatic idols, dazzling outfits, dynamic performances, and the rhythmic beats of popular tunes from these regions. The music exuded a freshness and modernity, placing little emphasis on moral messages or aesthetic standards, but rather on expression and enjoyment. In a China marked by a strong collective mindset and strict social norms, navigating life as a teenage girl, a dutiful daughter, and a 'model student' in perfect alignment with societal expectations, this musical realm resonated intimately with my young, inquisitive heart. It provided an indirect avenue to process the inner voices and subtle

feelings of individuals, which had limited space for expression at the time.

In the summer of 1997, during my last days of junior high school, a good friend lent me two tapes of *Yaogun* (摇滚; the Chinese term for rock music and a literal translation of the term 'rock'n'roll'). One was titled *Shameful Being Left Alone*, by Chinese rocker and songwriter Zhang Chu 张楚, and the other was titled *N. 43 Baojiajie Road* by the Beijing-based rock band No. 43 Baojiajie Road (鲍家街43号). Initially challenging to grasp and appreciate, the melodies and lyrics weren't always smooth, often punctuated by disruptive notes and noise. The lyrics carried an obscure and sometimes 'dark' and angry tone. Yet, there was an inexplicable allure to the music, the rhythm, the sound, and the lyrics, which prompted me to listen to these songs repeatedly:¹

Bless these people who are ready to sell
themselves,
who are ready to get moved.
They don't want to die, and they don't
know the destination.

'God bless those who'd been fed well'

《上苍保佑吃完了饭的人民》

(Zhang Chu 张楚)

There's no happiness there.
Just a big wall.
I'm like a little bird
Reality is a cage
I'm like a little bird