

Navigating Censorship: Latest Trends in Chinese Rock and Roll

Moren Mao* and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee†

*†Pace University

Abstract

The rapid development of Chinese rock and roll, or *yaogun*, signaled the country's transition from the ideological remnants of Mao's era to a relatively autonomous environment in the Reform period. Yet, in the early twenty-first century, the Chinese rock music scene has witnessed an era of internalised censorship. This article examines the intersection between censorship and resistance in the sphere of Chinese rock and roll. The analytical focus is on *yaogun* as an evolving genre in the face of state censorship and commercial pressures. By combing through Chinese social media posts, internet forums, interviews, song lyrics and other rock-related publications, this study highlights the scattered efforts by contemporary rock musicians to combat censorship and engage in self-expression and social criticism.

Keywords: *China, Censorship, Rock and roll, Social media, Yaogun.*

* Moren Mao is a graduate of Pace University with a BBA in Accounting. Email: Morenmao1618@gmail.com.

† Joseph Tse-Hei Lee (corresponding author) is a professor of history at Pace University. Email: jlee@pace.edu.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In the 1980s, Cui Jian (崔健), the godfather of Chinese rock and roll, brought rock music onto China's cultural stage, and a community surrounding *yaogun* (摇滚) began to take shape. The term *yaogun* literally means shaking (*yao* 摇) and rolling (*gun* 滚), refers to the rock music that became immensely popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Mainland during the early 1980s. Soon afterwards, street vendors sold the first batch of *dakou* (打口 cut-out) cassette tapes, giving youths a unique window into the stigmatised West in the same way as Beijing dancers learned about the "king of pop," Michael Jackson (1958-2009) and other hip-hop styles (Wilcox, 2022). Aside from *dakou* tapes, people from that era had no other way to listen to foreign music (Chuizi, 2015: 9). These tapes opened a cultural landscape beyond the socialist state's purview, and the development of Chinese rock and roll coincided with the country's gradual transition from the ideological remnants of Mao's era to a relatively autonomous environment in the Reform period. This article dissects the intricate interplay between censorship, commercialisation and artistic resistance in the sphere of Chinese rock and roll. By viewing *yaogun* as a separate genre from Western rock, this study highlights musicians' adaptation of the formal features of imported rock music into China's cultural domain. To make *yaogun* more appealing, musicians strove to uphold the rebellious, unconventional and primal nature of rock music (de Kloet, 2005: 236).

Conceptually, *yaogun* has been recognised for its challenge against officially approved popular music (*tongsu yinyue*) and the entertainment songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan (*gangtai yinyue*) (Huang, 2001: 186). The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the widespread circulation of *dakou* tapes of rock music on the black market, and the collaboration of rock musicians with record companies in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West. In today's digital age, certain rock songs officially deemed as controversial have been censored, but listeners can access the banned music using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Thus, the rebellious spirit of *yaogun* is embedded in its alternative access and circulation for listeners.

Beginning with a methodological discussion of the scholarly literature on censorship and resistance in Chinese rock music, this article examines the scattered efforts by rockers to pursue new modes of self-expression,

and to shield themselves and their audiences from the onslaught of socialist propaganda since 2000. It shows that Chinese rock musicians have not only blended foreign musical styles with indigenous cultural elements, but also circumvented the intensifying censorship measures, nationalistic sentiment and cut-throat market practices.

2. Reflections on Scholarly Literature and Methodological Problems

Much has been written about the dynamic scene of Chinese rock music since the 1980s, examining the multiple forms of musical aesthetics, expressions and practices, including “underground,” “independent,” “do-it-yourself (DIY),” “experimental” and “avant-garde” (Charrieras & Mouillot, 2021: 2). Researchers have contextualised the emergence of this genre from historical, socio-political and gender perspectives, and the overall emphasis is on the diversity of *yaogun* genres in China. The popularisation of *yaogun* is closely tied to the appropriation and collision of Western rock genres that arose within specific temporal and spatial settings (de Kloet, 2010). As with rock music scenes elsewhere, *yaogun* is characterised by “a fever for aesthetic and technological experimentation, politically often by a contestation and a resistance to pre-established official structures and ideologies within music industries, and operationally, by a quest for multimodal survival” in the public and private, online and in-person venues (Charrieras & Mouillot, 2021: 2). While *gangtai* and *tongsu* music dominated popular culture by adhering to the conventional cultural norms and operating under institutional support, *yaogun* grew as an underground subculture. The *yaogun* community remained unregulated in the 1980s-1990s, and was allowed to “not heed the demands of the propaganda chief (write a song that represents the youth) or submit their work to a censor before recording” (Jones, 1992: 100). The state’s tolerance was, and still is, key to the growth of unique rock styles.

Since the early twenty-first century, Chinese rock musicians and festival organisers have had to deal with the problems of censorship and commercialisation. The constraints which did not affect *yaogun* during its formative years have resurfaced, and the autonomous space created by musicians is taken over by the state through marketisation. Studying audience reactions at live urban music concerts, Nathanel Amar discusses a new trend of “improvisatory and participatory practices” between musicians and listeners. Such spontaneous reactions nurture “alternative spaces of cultural and political expression,” frustrating local police officers assigned

to monitor the live performances (Amar, 2021: 190). In view of this trend, the censors have imposed more restrictions on physical and virtual concerts, prompting punks to seek their own performance venues (Amar, 2021: 192). The following analysis builds on the current scholarship to investigate how Chinese rock musicians are navigating evolving censorship measures. It seeks to provide an empirically grounded analysis of the range of rock music expressions and practices often discussed in the existing literature.

Methodologically, data access is the first challenge to overcome. To document instances of censorship in the *yaogun* community, Moren Mao initially planned to interview Chinese nationals and Chinese Americans to gain an insider's perspective. This proved immensely difficult for many reasons, with technological factors being the primary obstacle, as almost all Chinese social media sites require users to complete real-name verification before granting full online access. Users are required to upload a photo of their identification document and a photo of themselves holding that document. The purpose is to allow the censors and public security authorities to track each user's online footprints. Mao frequented two popular social media sites, Bilibili (哔哩哔哩), the Chinese equivalent of YouTube, and Douban (豆瓣), the Chinese equivalent of IMDb and Rate Your Music, but towards the end of the research, Mao was denied access to both websites from the United States unless she underwent the real-name verification process. It was too great a risk to disclose personal information to these online companies. Mao then used a verified Chinese friend's account, but she had to be mindful of the critical information that she searched on the websites. The difficulty of accessing Chinese online data from abroad exemplifies the severity of the internet censorship regime aimed at enforcing "the boundary within which any cyber activities can be restricted by norms and rules prescribed by the Chinese government" (Liu, 2012: 93). The Chinese state is determined to tame the internet by blocking (*fengsha* 封杀) controversial songs and performers. Apart from implementing a strict surveillance policy, the government has employed softer tactics to harmonise (*hexie* 和谐/河蟹) online opinions. The censors compile and circulate a list of words and idioms deemed to be problematic, instructing private online service providers to remove them from videos and forums. The only way to bypass such restrictions is to use substitute words and shorthand symbols. In 2022 alone, there was an alleged list of 35,467 censored terms related to China's top leader Xi Jinping (习近平), including English phrases, pinyin

initials, character substitutions and emoticons.¹ This reveals the state's fear of the internet frontier, as it blames social media platforms for sharing uncensored information and causing turbulence.

As bad as online surveillance is, so too is self-censorship. Moren Mao reached out to a Chinese rock musician performing in New York City's Flushing. Mao chatted with him over the phone regarding the rock bands they both liked. When Mao mentioned the politically sensitive nature of *yaogun* culture, he became irritated. Mao sensed the hostility and ended the interview. Other interviewees shied away from critical topics related to rock and roll. Much of their defensiveness stemmed from profound anxiety about state surveillance in the diaspora. Attitudinal constraint is more damaging than ideological compliance or mere censorship. Constant surveillance prompts informants to internalise the sense of being watched, driving them to police their own speech. They cling to debilitating norms and defensive practices that breed deep suspicion towards outsiders. When they do voice dissent, they rely on unconventional slang and esoteric references. Trapped by compliance with China's pervasive censorship apparatus, these individuals fail to realise personal autonomy or engage in civic activities. Despite these constraints, we employ content analysis to examine censored rock lyrics and musician interview transcripts.

3. Resistance and Non-Compliance Through Yaogun Music

The inherent nature of rock and roll provides a fertile breeding ground for critical political vocabulary. Once this lexicon emerges, a discourse community forms, leveraging linguistic and sonic tools to cultivate shared ideas and emotional solidarity. In the pursuit of artistic, non-violent activism, rhetoric provides a direct channel for articulating independent thought. *Yaogun* music and culture have flourished in urban China since the 1980s. Amid a cut-throat market economy during the era of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," early rockers boldly voiced their desires for greater freedom and societal progress, and "university students or privileged children of party cadres had the leisure to dabble in the rock lifestyle" (Huang, 2003: 193). Beyond a mere manifestation of youth subculture, *yaogun* carried deep political resonance, meaning that the first generation of rock stars was inextricably bound to a political lens. Despite his track "Nothing to My Name" (一无所有) becoming the unofficial anthem of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and his subsequent albums serving as sharp social critiques,

Cui Jian repeatedly denied any intention of conveying subversive messages. In 1994, punk singer He Yong (何勇) released his sole album, “Garbage Dump” (垃圾场). The title track was written during and undoubtedly inspired by the Tiananmen Square protests (Huang, 2003: 184). The album’s penultimate track, an instrumental piece titled “Ghost” (幽灵), adapted the traditional Chinese composition “Dance of the Yao People” by adding a spoken-word monologue and an outro that incorporated the wailing, screams and gunshots recorded during the June Fourth Massacre. Finally, the heavy metal band Tang Dynasty (唐朝) reinterpreted “The Internationale,” which student activists had used as a revolutionary rallying cry. However, neither He Yong nor the Tang Dynasty ever became formal dissidents; by operating just short of the state’s political red lines, these *yaogun* artists carefully navigated boundaries to define what is culturally authentic and truthful.

The political stance of *yaogun* takes is more akin to subtle resistance than outright activism. While propagating what the state deems the “wrong” ideology, musicians and fans successfully pursue alternative forms of defiance. Resistance within the *yaogun* community differs from revolutionary incitement. The mere act of accessing banned rock songs symbolises disobedience that pushes back against authoritarian constraints. Despite escalating official censorship in recent years, political and social commentary remains resilient within the genre. Even though Baidu (百度), the Chinese equivalent of Google, and major streaming platforms heavily restrict access to sensitive content, listeners regularly bypass the Great Firewall by installing VPNs to view blocked materials. Thus, digital technology nurtures sophisticated methods of evasion, ensuring that the state can never entirely purge undesirable content.

Another effective anti-censorship tactic is acquiring physical CDs. As one online blogger wrote, “buying a physical album has more meaning than saving the album playlist online. Albums are cut into singles, and singles are cut into thin air. Holding a physical copy gives you more confidence than holding a digital one” (milu9797, 2020). Although many original *yaogun* albums are long out of print, listeners circumvent state-enforced distribution roadblocks by purchasing second-hand copies or downloading pirated files. While neither method generates royalties for the musicians, this strategy enables audiences to safeguard forbidden media. In 2014, Wu Wei (吴维), the frontman of the Wuhan punk band, SMZB (生命之饼 The Bread of Life), recalled their distribution struggles:

“In 2002, SMZB publicly released its first album, titled “Ten Years Rebellion” (十年反抗), but the lyrics of all the songs were either deleted or altered. We released the second CD in 2008. We had just one request: that none of the lyrics in our songs be changed. Not long after our album hit the shelves, the police began checking every audio-video media shop. They found our album and asked the shop retailers, “What are you rebelling against?” Then they confiscated all the CDs” (Wang, 2014).

SMZB’s defiant ethos clashes with state censors over lyrics that directly critique Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution: “Ten years fun, ten years down, ten years chaos and rebellion.” Their work captures a profound generational disillusionment, as shown in lines such as: “Mom, I do not want to live like you, I do not want to die like Dad. I said: Mom, I do not want to waste my life. I do not want to wait forever. I do not want to live without dreams.” By adopting the biblical metaphor of Jesus Christ as “the bread of life” (生命之饼) for their moniker, SMZB crafts a sonic space that satisfies a deep-seated yearning for individuality and autonomy. This band unequivocally opposes injustice and prioritises moral and spiritual self-determination over the collective.

4. Upsetting the Status Quo

Creative artistic expression in China has long been subject to state supervision. Decades of economic reform have given young people fresh opportunities to pursue individual desires over national interests, a process characterised by anthropologist Yunxiang Yan (2009) as China’s embrace of individualisation. Within an arts sector that “stresses innovation and newness, which inevitably brings along controversial ‘Western’ notions of free experimentation and competition between small companies or individuals,” this attitudinal shift has challenged the government’s preference for the “group over the individual, authority over liberty and responsibilities over rights” (Huntington, 1990: 24). When the pursuit of individuality trumps the state’s discourse of harmonious co-existence, deviant cultural norms are condemned as hazardous. Although the state’s obsessive control has intensified censorship, top-down oppression inevitably leads to discontent and resistance. This friction culminated in 1989, when the defiant values of rock culture spilled over into a broader socio-political

arena. Listeners adopted rock music as a vehicle to express their grievances, “stressing the individual, the self, and rebelling against all sorts of authority” (Jones, 2002: 298). Yet China’s autocratic system leaves little room for alternative artistic expressions. Zhou Shidong (邹世冬), the keyboardist of the band Breathing (呼吸), has argued that feudalism must be challenged through the force of “spiritual liberalisation” in order to emancipate people from psychological “close-mindedness” (Jones, 2002: 297). While social and cultural autonomy has expanded the space for young people to seek psychological freedom, *yaogun* often evolves into a form of escapism when these newfound desires collide with harsh realities. Subsequently, censorship and rebellion feed into each other at rock music festivals. Even under strict official surveillance, these concerts become “small and conflicted heterotopias” in which “punk performances produce new kinds of social relations between the musicians and the audience that are both anti-authority and egalitarian” (Amar, 2021: 201). During the 2017 Shenzhen Midi Music Festival (迷笛音乐节), police forcefully intervened to arrest pogo dancers and stage divers, signaling an intolerance for the standard “expressions of joy usually associated with rock concerts” (Amar, 2020: 29). Authorities were particularly on edge during SMZB’s performance, prompting the band to intervene a few times and urge police to stop harassing the crowd (Amar, 2021: 199-200).

As rockers in the early 1990s grew familiar with the rock genre as a “form,” they began focusing more on its textual and musical “content.” Following the *dakou* era, the distinct sub-genres of *yaogun* paradoxically emerged from an initial lack of genre literacy among musicians. Li Yang (李洋), the frontman of Demerit (过失乐队), admitted that “nobody was there to teach us: this is metal, this is punk, this is grunge, this is garage, this is emo. We were just not clear on this in the beginning” (*Radiolab*, 2021). Demerit instead operated within a hybrid stylistic space, producing a sound reminiscent of “70s American punk and 80s British metal” (*Radiolab*, 2021). This cross-genre mixing and matching, while broadly accepted under the *yaogun* umbrella, was common throughout China. “Loud punk was tempered by traditional Chinese instruments; synthesiser dance music would spin into jazz improvisation—all sometimes during the same song” (Mihalca, 1992: 34). SMZB similarly exemplifies this fluid approach by incorporating Scottish bagpipes into their punk instrumentation. By subverting rigid genre boundaries, these musicians continually challenged conventional Western

expectations of how rock and roll should sound.

Rather than borrowing from Western frameworks, many rockers aligned their music with domestic Chinese values (Jones, 2002: 304). For instance, Tang Dynasty used historical imagery in its lyrics to express a “longing for a strong and influential China” (de Kloet, 2005: 237). Their 1992 debut album, “A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty” (梦回唐朝), evoked nostalgia for an imagined golden age to critique contemporary social ills. This conceptual framing—where “the ‘splendor’ of Tang times is only a dream, and the dreamer is left with only ‘grievances’ and ‘longing’” (Jones, 2002: 305)—took on a nativist tone. Tang Dynasty’s non-confrontational aesthetic satisfied official expectations of acceptable artistic behaviour. By tolerating the marketisation of certain rock music, the state effectively “depoliticised culture and thereby mitigated the stigma of rock music” (Groenewegen-Lau, 2014: 9). However, this uneasy compromise placed both musicians and authorities in a state of ongoing ideological contradiction. Censors rejected the rebellious ethos of rock as a subversive Western import, yet the state simultaneously co-opted nationalist bands to compete against the growing influence of Western and *gangtai* (Hong Kong and Taiwan) music. The *yaogun* community remains caught in a dilemma, torn between the pursuit of authentic creativity and the pressures of commercialisation and state co-optation.

5. Commercialisation of *Yaogun* Music

Since the 2000s, market forces and the state have transformed *yaogun* music into a form of commercial entertainment, with profitability becoming the primary concern for rock musicians, concert organisers and record companies (Groenewegen-Lau, 2014). In recent years, *yaogun* reality and entertainment shows such as *The Big Band* have gained massive popularity among younger viewers. Wu Hongfei (吴虹飞), the vocalist of the band *Happy Avenue* (幸福大街), has blamed political pressure for corrupting the ecology of rock music:

“I believe it’s not just the business environment. It’s also the oppression of freedom and culture, which creates a distorted collaboration between commerce and yaogun. This, as a result, also distorts our voices as musicians. Those who are floating on top might not be making real yaogun music, while the real yaogun

musicians are underground and unable to speak... So, I believe the precondition for yaogun is freedom. You must let the musicians sing nonsense, sing anything they want. Only then can you have a little bit of good stuff that emerges...” (Fu, 2016).

Rock music is historically rooted in rebellion, but its subversive edge has been subdued by commercialisation. Musicians “floating on top” sing lyrics pre-approved by censors, while those “underground” retain their creative integrity but are too marginal to be impactful. Today, few contemporary bands produce explicitly political tracks because musicians find it more financially viable to make music than to make a statement.

6. Censorship in Action

Direct censorship within the Chinese rock scene manifests in the systematic banning of tracks on streaming platforms, search engine filtering and the erasure of social media posts. In this hostile digital environment, blacklisted musicians are prohibited from staging live performances or registering official social media accounts, forcing fans to access banned songs through convoluted, unofficial networks. The following cases illustrate the changing mechanisms of state censorship over the last two decades. The Pangu (盘古) band was permanently blacklisted by the authorities for its unambiguously violent lyrics and direct criticism of the state. Today, the band’s erasure is so complete that netizens must use shorthand and symbolic codes to search for any historical information about them online. Launched in the early 2000s, the *Oasis Music Website* (绿洲音乐网) was one of the earliest online hubs for domestic *yaogun* enthusiasts. In 2004, the forum experienced a severe wave of state-imposed censorship and subsequent self-censorship. Cao Shi (曹石), who ran the website, described the chilling effect of this state intervention:

“[The incident] began with a call from the police station, asking if I was managing the Oasis Music Website. I said yes. He [the police officer] said there was a problem with my website, that they had shut it down, and that I needed to come to the station. I was shocked and didn’t know what was going on. I went there, and they explained that the website contained sensitive topics. I said there shouldn’t be, because I had already done a lot of keyword

blocking, for instance all the “anti-Japanese” stuff. They then said it was because someone had shared Pangu’s lyrics. I didn’t expect that Pangu would become such a sensitive topic. But well, this was also right after Pangu had their incident.² I asked them what I should do now. They said to shut down the website; I refused because I had already hosted the website for so many years. They then said to pay a fine, but I told them I didn’t have any money either. In the end, they said to shut down the website for a month and do some self-reflection. So, Oasis Music Website was down for a month... When the website resumed operations, I found out who posted the Pangu lyrics. It was a middle school girl from Xi’an. I told her this to scare her. I told her that the police were out looking for her, and she should get her toothbrush and towels ready for a couple of years in jail. I just wanted to teach her a lesson. Afterwards, we put Pangu on the keyword-blocking list as well. Then I hired several people to monitor the website every day. If there was anything potentially sensitive, it would be deleted immediately. I realised that once a website gains traction, there will be many pairs of eyes watching you, waiting for something to happen. Back then, Oasis Music Website was shut down many times over. This is the way things are: it’s fine when you aren’t being watched, but they will always find faults when you are being watched” (Chuizi, 2015: 67).

Cao Shi’s experience reveals the decentralised mechanics of authoritarian control: instead of directly managing every infraction, the state outsources surveillance to platform moderators. Driven by fear of crossing fluid political red lines, website managers, record companies and event organisers exhibit signs of conformity. This internalised censorship heavily permeates the yaogun community. In the summer of 2019, the popular iQiyi variety show *The Big Band* (乐队的夏天) gathered thirty-one rock bands for a televised competition. While the programme provided a career boost for independent musicians and ushered radio-friendly rock into mass commercial spaces, it exposed the hybrid reality of a state-supervised, privately managed entertainment industry. This ecosystem creates overlapping webs of censors

and corporate investors eager to regulate public sentiment for maximum profit, thereby compromising the anti-authoritarian spirit of rock and roll. The airing of a rock-centric variety show appeared to signal a loosening of the state's ideological grip on *yaogun* culture, but censors still strictly dictated which lyrics were appropriate for broadcast. The following four tracked amendments demonstrate how original lyrics were sanitised to gain bureaucratic approval:³

- In “*Shengming Yinni Er Huore*” (生命因你而火热) by New Pants (新裤子乐队), the lyrics were changed from “the revolution that couldn’t continue” to “the poem that couldn’t continue”;
- In “*Bairi Menglan*” (白日梦蓝) by Hedgehog (刺猬乐队), the lyrics were altered from “society is a game of trauma” to “the world is a game of trauma”;
- In “Where Are You Going” by Mr. Sea Turtle (海龟先生), the lyric “Lord, where shall I go” was secularised to “where shall I go”; and
- In “Bob Beijing Nanhai” (北京男孩) by Summer Sunshine (夏日阳光), the line “I traveled all across China, and have yet to find the life I want” was localised to “I traveled all across the city, and still can’t find her pulse.”

Throughout the program, politically and socially sensitive phrases—monarch, lord, revolution, society, hooligan, drugs, rape, death, smoking, market economy, Jesus, utopia and sex—were replaced by “tactful” substitutes designed to align with the official discourse of unity and harmony (Amar, 2020: 27). Furthermore, media regulators and broadcast producers imposed strict aesthetic demands on the physical appearance of performers. Tattoos, piercings, cross-dressing and dyed hair were banned or digitally blurred, while male musicians with long hair were instructed to tie it into conventional buns. Although some of these restrictions stemmed from anticipatory self-censorship by production companies rather than direct bureaucratic decrees, the result remained an aggressively sanitised on-air presentation. In a censored article, blogger Li Linan (2020) characterised this phenomenon as a “cultural castration” enacted against the people’s will.

Nonetheless, commercialisation has been a double-edged sword for Chinese rock. While it provides indispensable financial sustainability and broadens subcultural visibility, it reinforces voluntary self-censorship.

Because domestic audiences retain rigid, counter-cultural expectations of what authentic *yaogun* must represent, compromising these values causes musicians to lose credibility. Balancing artistic authenticity with the irresistible allure of commercial fame, market capital and fandom remains an acute dilemma for rock musicians. A notorious example of this co-optation is the state's appropriation of the critical song, "Kill That Man from Shijiazhuang" (杀死那个石家庄人), originally written and performed by the Omnipotent Youth Society (万能青年旅店). The original track evokes the plight of the working poor in Shijiazhuang, conveying the suffering they endured during the Reform era. Through its bleak portrayal of post-socialist reality, the lyrics depict a world in which individuals lose hope and suffer in silence, leading to the haunting declaration of the chorus:

To live like this for thirty years
Until the building collapses
Darkness hidden deep in the clouds
Flooding the panorama in our hearts

Residents enter the workforce as early as sixteen to support their families. Daily life is monotonous, mirroring the repetitive and mechanical motions of factory labour.

Get off work at 6 p.m.
Change out of the pharmaceutical factory uniform
My wife is making congee
While I go and have a few beers
To live like this for thirty years...

By critiquing the inequalities experienced by the working poor, "Kill That Man from Shijiazhuang" challenges the official image of social harmony. The first verse centers on forgotten workers, the second reflects the emptiness of a materialist age, and the third alludes to the pressures generated by China's rigid and competitive education system. These strands converge in the refrain: "To live like this for thirty years, until the building collapses." The "building" serves as a layered metaphor. It signifies the family institution and the collective work unit, but it also extends inward to the individual psyche—a structure composed of introspection, expectation,

imagination and fragile hope. Yet, this edifice of lived experience ultimately collapses, indicating the breakdown of both social stability and inner meaning under the weight of systemic inequality.

In 2021, the Communist Youth League of Hebei Province released a new version of the song titled “That Man from Shijiazhuang Cannot be Killed” (杀不死的石家庄人), reframing the original work as a celebration of individual resilience in the industrial heartland. The revised lyrics are infused with state-sanctioned “positive energy” (*zhengnengliang*), aligning the song with patriotic messaging. Phrases such as “gathering our dreams and taking off,” “picking up the faith we lost” and “perseverance is written in your name,” are designed to uplift audiences and encourage perseverance in the face of hardship. However, these alterations backfired, with many listeners criticising the censors as tone-deaf and detached from the harsh realities the original song sought to depict. In response to negative social reception, “That Man from Shijiazhuang Cannot be Killed” was subsequently removed from streaming platforms. One listener remarked, “It’s a shame the music video on Bilibili was deleted. This is the best post-modern performance art that I have seen this year, a role model of modern comedy” (Langzi lanshan, 2021). Such reactions underscore how the original song had come to function as a form of memorialisation for the working poor, giving voice to experiences of structural precarity. Listeners pushed back when “That Man from Shijiazhuang Cannot be Killed” betrayed the original song’s critical integrity. In this context, Liang Long (梁龙), the frontman of the band Second Hand Rose (二手玫瑰), has argued, “Rock musicians shouldn’t stand with the avant-garde, rock should instead help the middle class, to express for them what they might need or believe in, rather than a new artistic standard” (Gao, 2006). More broadly, *yaogun* culture occupies a unique position: it can both criticise painful social hardships and gesture towards alternative forms of meaning and expression.

In more severe cases, music perceived as a direct threat to authorities has been subject to outright censorship. Li Zhi (李志), a folk singer from Nanjing, is known for politically charged works such as “Square” (广场), which incorporates recorded voices of Tiananmen activists to commemorate the dead, and “People Need No Freedom” (人民不需要自由), a provocative critique of those who disavow the value of freedom. His allusions to the June Fourth Massacre and his explicit rejection of dictatorship made him an obvious target. In April 2019, a central government directive led to

the removal of Li Zhi's music from all streaming platforms, alongside the suspension of his Weibo and WeChat accounts. He subsequently disappeared from China's virtual sphere with his current whereabouts remaining unknown (Amar, 2020: 31). In an earlier interview, when asked about his greatest fear, Li responded: "You're not even able to save yourself, you can't promote humanity's progress" (Mai, 2019). Li Zhi's silencing illustrates the extent to which artistic production is vulnerable to political control. In such cases, the withdrawal of platforms and visibility creates a condition of enforced absence, leaving both rock musicians and fans with a pervasive sense of helplessness.

7. Conclusion

Several important lessons can be discerned from the trajectory of Chinese rock and roll in recent decades. The first is conceptual. Literary scholar David Der-wei Wang (2020) examines the survival strategies of contemporary Chinese writers and classifies them into two broad categories: those who remain inactive under constraint and those who actively push back against censorship. Wang writes:

"However, one must learn to appreciate the ideological and rhetorical acrobatics in fiction writing at this time, as any misstep could lead to fatal consequences. Thus, as censorship and the demand for bowdlerisation escalated, so too did the enthusiasm for imagining and inscribing the Maoist sublime. This fervour gives rise to a unique aesthetic. Those who discerned the irrational quality of this new literature either willingly suspended disbelief, hoping that things would take a turn for the better, or mutely protested by engaging in a form of internal exile through ceasing to write. However, there were writers who engaged in quixotic combat at the expense of their careers and lives" (Wang 2020: 39).

Wang's analytical distinction between compliance under domination and resistance to domination is also useful for understanding the field of Chinese rock and roll. The landscape of *yaogun* is not monolithic, but instead encompasses a spectrum of strategies, aesthetic perspectives and political orientations. Some bands "willingly suspend disbelief" and adapt to censorship regimes to survive commercially. The Tang Dynasty band, for

example, appropriated traditional cultural symbols in ways that aligned with state ideological narratives, while other rock musicians have periodically altered lyrics to gain access to televised or state-approved platforms. At the other end of the spectrum are figures of internal exile. Cui Jian and He Yong exemplify this position. Cui, who has described himself as “an apolitical figure,” has consistently rejected institutional co-optation (Jones, 2002: 296). His refusal to modify the lyrics of “Nothing to My Name” for the 2014 CCTV Spring Festival Gala illustrates this stance (Ye, 2014). Similarly, He Yong ceased releasing new material after “Garbage Dump,” effectively withdrawing from the commercial music industry. Opposed to both accommodation and withdrawal are what might be termed “quixotic combatants,” including Pangu, SMZB and Li Zhi. Exiled members of Pangu continue to produce politically inflected music in Sweden, while SMZB persists in embedding subversive messages in their music. Li Zhi occupies this oppositional register through explicit cultural dissent and political critique.

The second lesson concerns the contingent role of relatively lenient censorship in the rise of Chinese rock during the 1980s and 1990s. This permissive environment enabled a proliferation of experimental bands and facilitated the emergence of *yaogun* as a vehicle for urban youth expression. Limited regulatory oversight paradoxically contributed to both the popularisation and commercialisation of the genre. By contrast, under Xi Jinping’s administration, censorship has intensified across cultural and digital spheres. In addition to formal state regulation, informal social pressures further constrain artistic expression, making it difficult for rock musicians and festival organisers to challenge dominant ideological norms.

The third lesson reveals the ongoing negotiation between authenticity, marketability and historical memory within contemporary rock culture. *Yaogun* should not be evaluated solely through Western aesthetic frameworks or linear narratives of musical “development.” Nor can Chinese rock simply replicate the trajectories of Western rock traditions. Rather, the key challenge facing contemporary musicians lies in balancing commercial viability with a commitment to authenticity and expressive truth. Authenticity is inseparable from lived experience. When contemporary rock fails to meet popular expectations of *yaogun*’s earlier rawness and political intensity, it is often interpreted as a loss of a “golden age.” This perception reflects a generational divide between middle-aged listeners who nostalgically recall

a comparatively open cultural moment in the 1980s and younger audiences seeking new forms of expression in the present. Navigating these competing temporalities and affective expectations remains central to the future of Chinese rock music. After the 2001 Midi Music Festival, Wu Tun (吴吞), the frontman of Tongue (舌头乐队), articulated this intergenerational ethos:

“The world belongs to our successors; we will one day become paving stones or obstacles. Until that day, you and everyone else must have thought about being trampled underfoot. Bones should not be buried in the ground; they should become a ladder, or tools, or ropes. But seeds must be buried in the soil so they will grow into a tree and become the torch that you need. Yaogun music is not important. You are important” (Wu, 2021).

The pioneers of *yaogun* thus paved the way for this genre to take root in China. What began as a subcultural, semi-underground experiment evolved into a socially resonant cultural practice that opened up space for individual expression in an authoritarian state. Its persistence demonstrates the possibility of cultural survival under constraint. Yet the continued vitality of *yaogun* depends on whether a new generation of rock musicians can rearticulate its relevance to their own historical moment and cultivate communities grounded in shared concerns.

Notes

- ¹ A partial list of censored words and idioms can be found here: “小红书审查百科：习近平敏感词库 [Little Red Book Censors Wiki: Controversial Terms about Xi Jinping]”, China Digital Space (中国数字空间). <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/小红书审查百科：习近平敏感词库>.
- ² When Pangu performed in Taiwan in 2004, the drummer shouted, “Independence for Taiwan”. China subsequently placed the band on a wanted list, and its members sought asylum in Sweden.
- ³ Douban user DreamReaver has posted a comprehensive list of lyrical changes for the first season of The Big Band: <https://movie.douban.com/review/10309335/>.

Reference List

- Amar, N. (2020), “Navigating and Circumventing (Self) Censorship in the Chinese Music Scene”, Romain Dittgen (trans.), *China Perspectives*, No. 2, pp. 25-34.
- Amar, N. (2021), “Radical Participation: The Politics of Performance in Chinese Punk-Rock Concerts”, in Damien Charrieras & François Mouillot (eds.), *Fractured Scenes: Underground Music-Making in Hong Kong and East Asia*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 189-203.
- Charrieras, D. and Mouillot, F. (2021), “Introduction: Nomadism, Fragmentation, and Marginality—The Hong Kong Music Underground in the East Asian Context”, in Damien Charrieras & François Mouillot (eds.), *Fractured Scenes: Underground Music-Making in Hong Kong and East Asia*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-22.
- Chuizi (2015), “昨日不辞而别：废都摇滚记忆1990-2014 [Yesterday Left Without Saying Goodbye: Memories of Rock and Roll in an Abandoned City, 1990-2014]”, Xiamen: Lujiang Publishing House.
- Communist Youth League of the Hebei Province (2021), “杀不死的石家庄人 [That Man from Shijiazhuang Cannot be Killed]”.
- de Kloet, J. (2005), “Authenticating Geographies and Temporalities: Representations of Chinese Rock in China”, *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 2/3, pp. 229-255.
- Fu, R. (2016), “少年心气 [The Youthful Spirit]”. <https://youtu.be/S8V0d4KHah8?si=zJ8iZLtQl-tKsoSz>.
- Gao, W. (2006), “摇滚多多 [China Rock]”. <https://youtu.be/2ECmow3x4Ss?si=q5SdOC9hI3A-oIAO>.
- Groenewegen-Lau, J. (2014), “Steel and Strawberries: How Chinese Rock Became State-Sponsored”, *Asian Music*, Vol. 45, No. 1, pp. 3-33.
- He, Y. (1994), “幽灵 [Ghost]”, Magic Stone.
- Huang, H. (2001), “*Yaogun Yinyue*: Rethinking Mainland Chinese Rock ‘n’ Roll”, *Popular Music*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 1-11.
- Huang, H. (2003), “Voices from Chinese Rock, Past and Present Tense: Social Commentary and Construction of Identity in *Yaogun Yinyue*, from Tiananmen to the Present”, *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 183-202.
- Huntington, S. (1990), “Democracy’s Third Wave”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 12-34.

- Jones, A. F. (1992), *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Jones, A. F. (2002), “The Politics of Popular Music in Post-Tiananmen China”, in Susan D. Blum and Lionel M. Jensen (eds.), *China Off Center: Mapping the Margins of the Middle Kingdom*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, pp. 291-308.
- Langzi Lanshan (2021, December 31), “河北共青团《杀不死的石家庄人》歌词 [The Communist Youth League of the Hebei Province and the lyrics of “That Man from Shijiazhuang Cannot be Killed”]”, Zhihu [知乎]. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/451833214>.
- Li, L. (2020, August 7), “江南少庄主: 对! 不! 起! 我不愿意活在一个自我阉割和马赛克时代里! [Jiangnan’s Young Estate Owner: Sorry! I Don’t Want to Live in a Self-Castrated Mosaic Age!]”, *China Digital Times* [中国数字时代]. <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/651869.html>.
- Liu, S. T. (2012), “Harmonious Online Society: The China model in the Information Age”, in Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Lida V. Nedilsky and Siu-Keung Cheung (eds.), *China’s Rise to Power: Conceptions of State Governance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 91-110.
- Mai, X., et al. (2019, May 21), “六四, 永远的未央歌: 8964: 不能遗失的时代密码 (之二) [June 4th, Everlasting Endless Song: 8964: An Unforgettable Code of the Time (No. 2)]”, *Radio Free Asia*. <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/duomeiti/64/64-05212019120542.html>.
- Mihalca, M. P. (1992), “Chinese Rock Stars: New Generation Emerging Following Political Liberalisation”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 155, p. 34.
- milu9797 (2020, June 18), “近人可读 [Readable When Close By]”, *NetEase Cloud Music*. <https://music.163.com/#/album?id=91171945>.
- Omnipotent Youth Society (2010), “杀死那个石家庄人 [Kill That Man from Shijiazhuang]”, Independent Label.
- Radiolab (2021, October 22), “Mixtape: Dakou”, WNYC. <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/mixtape-dako>.
- SMZB (2008), “十年反抗 [Ten Years Rebellion]”, Maybe Mars.
- SMZB (2014), “中国来信 [A Letter from China]”, Maybe Mars.
- Tang Dynasty (1992), “梦回唐朝 [A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty]”, Magic Stone Records.
- Wang, D. D.-W. (2020), *Why Fiction Matters in Contemporary China*,

- Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.
- Wang, S. (2014), “SMZB纪录片：绝不松开我的拳头 [SMZB Documentary: Never Release My Fist]”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPYyR7DzcqQ>.
- Wilcox, E. (2022), “Moonwalking in Beijing: Michael Jackson, Pillwu, and the Origins of Chinese Hip-Hop”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 302-321.
- Wu, T. (2001), “2001年迷笛音乐节舌头乐队吴吞 [2001 Midi Festival, the Tongue, Wu Tun]”. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1t4411M7Ua/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=8c1b2b50e2d53bf548fc4df382d5d11.
- Yan, Y. (2009), *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, Oxford: Berg.
- Ye, J. (2014, January 18), “网民热议 ‘中国摇滚教父’ 崔健拒上央视春晚 [Netizens Discuss the “Godfather of Chinese Rock and Roll” Cui Jian’s Refusal to Perform in the Spring Festival Gala]”, *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2014/01/140118_cctv_gala_cui_jian.