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Banned Subversive or State-Promoted "Pathbreaker"? Re-Interpreting the Rise of Chinese Rock

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Abstract: Music has long been at the forefront of social activism and some genres have built their global reputation as a weapon of resistance and empowerment. When these genres spread into a country like China and gain considerable popularity, the world celebrates the decline of the authoritarian system and sees them as threats to ideological hegemony. However, centralized control of musical activities is more than manufacturing standardized propaganda products. In mainland China, the system also operates to generate "out of control" phenomena, to channel people's desires to act beyond restrictions. This article focuses on the rise of Chinese rock, a happening that has been interpreted in the existing body of scholarly literature as successful rebellion and as indicating the democratic nature of China's popular music culture. After a reflexive discussion on the limits of prevalent data-collection methods in the study of Chinese popular music, this article reveals the state's leading role in the promotion of Cui Jian, who is globally renowned as the Father of Chinese Rock. This article challenges a prevalent understanding in the existing body of literature on Chinese popular music, that is, Cui Jian and his rock songs were subversive and banned in the 1980s. It examines how a state-led music reform was turned into the people's choice and into the outcome of a successful rebellion.

Keywords: Chinese rock; Cui Jian; rock mythology; musical rebellion; music and politics

Introduction

Music has long been at the forefront of social activism. Genres such as rock and roll have built their global reputation as a weapon of resistance and empowerment. When these genres spread into a country like the People's Republic of China and gain considerable popularity, the world

celebrates the decline of the authoritarian system and sees them as threats to ideological hegemony. However, authoritarian control of music is more than manufacturing standardized propaganda products to foster homogeneity. My research suggests that, in mainland China, the system also operates to promote "rebellious" popular music phenomena to channel people's desires to act beyond restrictions. Before proceeding further, it is necessary to discuss the personal and research experiences that led me to write this article.

Born in a provincial capital in northern China, I was one of the Chinese youths who were attracted to *yaogun* (the literal Chinese translation for "rock and roll") culture due to its widely reported subversive, countercultural nature. The Chinese rock songs repeatedly played by radio stations and the loudspeakers on shopping streets familiarized me with this form of music as early as the 1990s. From the popular music magazines I purchased at the newsstands and from *People's Daily* and *People's Music*, publications subscribed to by my parents, I learned about how pioneering Chinese rockers, particularly Cui Jian, subverted the established norms, frightened the authorities, and defeated censorship to win the support of the young generation. Feeling both the imposed restrictions and the urge to break the restrictions at the time, I soon became a frequent rock concert-goer and began traveling across the country to attend rock festivals. In the fan clubs in the early 2000s, I made friends with many young Chinese who were also captivated by the stories of successful rock rebellion and had been pursuing their cultural freedom and exercising their nonconformist spirit by listening to rock songs and attending rock concerts.

In summer 2010, I returned to China as an ethnomusicologist and started a two-year research project with some migrant workers. It was a time when an increasing number of rural laborers were flowing into the cities to make a living because of the Chinese state's preferential policies and the consequent economic imbalance between rural and urban areas. These migrant workers were disadvantaged in job markets and excluded from the social welfare system in the cities. Some of these migrants turned to rock and roll, a reportedly subversive form of music, to vent their frustration and anger against the government and its irresponsible decisions. Encouraged by the mutually consistent stories they read in newspapers and magazines about Cui Jian's successful rock rebellion, these migrant rockers were confident that they would be able to find a way to circumvent censorship and to use their music to win the support, or at least the attention, of the public.

I participated in the musical life of these migrant rockers from 2010 to 2012. I have been witnessing to this day these migrant musicians' failed attempts to publish songs that warn the people to be vigilant about the absolute power of the ruling communist party and call on them to rally for a real democracy that allows every citizen to vote. Over the past years, these migrant rockers and I have been trying to find censorship loopholes, but those rock songs have not succeeded in appearing in any published recordings, traditional or online media, or public concerts.

At the same time, some other migrant rock bands toured throughout the country to give public concerts at urban concert halls, construction sites where migrant laborers worked, and even the headquarter of the Communist Youth League of China. Their public concerts were themed "Sing Out Loud" (*Dasheng Chang*), and their songs sang about the "angry fire in the hearts"[1] of the migrant workers toward the social discrimination, as well as the harsh living conditions they experienced. They criticized the foreign invested companies and domestic private enterprises that violated the rights of the migrant workers: "Don't think poor people can be easily erased and fooled. Fuck off all the hypocritical and unfair."[2] These songs were included in dozens of released albums, such as *Labor and Dignity* (2014) and *Break the Fetters* (2015). Newspaper reports and magazine articles describe their music as "authentic voices from the underclass" and as "leftist rock" that manifests the strength and courage of migrant workers.[3]

Does the success of Cui Jian or the "leftist" migrant rock bands indicate that it is possible to circumvent China's pervasive censorship? Why could some rock artists express their criticism and opposition while some others could not? Is Chinese rock music a subversive form of music challenging the state's ideology? These are questions I would like to discuss in this article. Because the "leftist" migrant-worker rock bands refuse to be discussed in my academic publications under this topic, this article will focus on the rise of Cui Jian, globally renowned as the Godfather of Chinese Rock, in the 1980s. This historical study has contemporary relevance. Media and academic publications have portrayed Cui Jian as a subversive whose success in the 1980s indicates the failure of the authoritarian system or the democratic nature of Chinese popular music culture. For most rock practitioners I have worked with during the past decade, it was Cui Jian—or to be more specific, the story about his successful rebellion—that inspired them to join China's rock scene. However, in this article I argue that Cui Jian's success resulted

from a series of activities arranged by the state. Rather than challenging the ideological foundation of the Communist regime, Cui Jian served as a "pathbreaker," facilitating the state-led sociocultural reform in the 1980s. This article aims to dispel the prevalent myths about Chinese rock and to rethink the uniqueness of China's music industry and the study of Chinese popular music.

Dispelling the Myths about Chinese Rock

Jeroen de Kloet draws attention to the prevailing tendency in academic and journalistic discourses to romanticize Chinese rock as a genuinely subversive, countercultural movement.[4] Andrew Jones, for example, contends that Chinese rock music is "essentially a subversive form of expression" and an authentic voice of rebellion produced outside the state-controlled music industry.[5] Nimrod Baranovitch argues that China's rock music in the 1980s and early 1990s served to challenge the officially sanctioned discourse, practices, and ideology. Cui Jian's rock music not only creates a sense of alienation and nonconformism, Baranovitch further argues, but also indicates his "subversive, illicit agenda."[6] De Kloet points out that such a romantic reading of Chinese rock—in his words, "rock mythology"—is not only a projection of researchers' desire to see the dominant ideology subverted but is also based on the false assumptions that Chinese rock is a monolithic whole and that Chinese politics and censorship are total and consistent. However, while reminding the readers that Chinese rock is a highly fragmented world, de Kloet uses the term "subversive" to describe Cui Jian's rock music like other scholars. Chinese politics are "characterized by factional struggles within the Party."[7] de Kloet argues. That is why Cui Jian and other subversives could consistently contest and circumvent censorship to challenge China's current authorities and dominant ideology.[8]

I agree with Jeroen de Kloet that dismantling the rock mythology could facilitate the understanding of how Chinese rock culture is constructed. As de Kloet recognizes, it is the mythology that attracts many Chinese rock practitioners and audience members to the fragmented Chinese rock culture and functions as the glue that binds them together.[9] However, my research suggests that China's censorship is not internally contested but has been effective enough to eliminate unwanted sounds. To dispel the myths about Chinese rock, this section will first examine the key terms frequently used in

these misrepresentations.

To determine whether a kind of music is subversive or not, we need to first decide what qualifies as subversive. I would like to first revive a theory from Gustave Le Bon that every civilization is the outcome of a few fixed fundamental beliefs, on which its institutions and mode of existence evolve and on which mainstream ideas constantly change like the sand on the surface of a rock.[10] In the case of the People's Republic of China, the socioeconomic system has been evolving since the end of Maoist era; different generations of Communist leaders have implemented various policies, replaced old rules and norms with new ones, and promoted different sets of mainstream ideals and opinions. At the same time, several beliefs remain fixed and unchallengeable, such as the belief in the leadership of the Communist Party—that is, in the ability of the party to lead the Chinese people towards prosperity—and in the legitimacy of the Communist Party's monopolistic control of the country.

Does a song question the legitimacy of the Communist Party's absolute and exclusive control of China? Does a performance question the ability of the Communist Party to lead the Chinese people? The answers to such questions decide whether the song or performance is fundamentally subversive in China's sociopolitical context. However, I have searched over the past two decades in national and regional libraries, public audiovisual archives and private collections, flea markets, and catalogues preserved by record companies, and I have attended public concerts in different parts of China. But I have not encountered one single published or publicly performed song that challenges these two fundamental beliefs.

In most of the cases, including Cui Jian's case, musicians or songs are labeled as "subversive" because they violate some rules established by the government or criticize some mainstream ideas. However, China's social and economic systems have been under reform since the 1980s; China's dominant ideology is a collection of ideas that have incessantly been replaced one after another. Therefore, it would be misleading to simply describe the music as opposed to the "official ideology" or as an expression of dissent and resistance to "the dominant" or "the mainstream." Instead, it would be helpful to dig deeper into the specific restrictions that the musician breaks and the specific ideas the song undermines: Are these broken rules still in effect at the time of the performance or have they already been discarded by the current Central

Committee of the Chinese Communist Party? Are these criticized ideas still being promoted by the state or have they already been replaced with new ones? Or does a song or its performance just include some elements that Western societies presume are being suppressed in China, such as queer love or a symbol from the Maoist Cultural Revolution?

In summary, I argue that the unclarified use of expressions such as "subversive," "official ideology," or "resistance to the state" has been one of the primary causes of the romanticized impression and reading of Chinese rock. China's ideology is a set of ideas that are ceaselessly being modified or replaced. Different generations of Communist leaders always set up new regulations and discard old ones. What qualifies as subversive is only the songs and performances that question the legitimacy of the regime or leadership of the ruling party, violate the rules in effect enacted by the current Central Committee, or challenge the ideas currently being promoted by the state. At the same time, some musicians and music that have been called rebellious and reported as having been banned by the state-owned media reach a national audience of millions breaching rules the state has already decided to discard and inducing people to embrace imposed changes in their daily cultural life as fruits of youthful rebellion.

Censorship in China's Music Industry

To understand the special features of China's music industry, it is also helpful to dispel false impressions and fictions about Chinese rock. State control of musical practices and expressions is a global phenomenon. Academic works have contextualized state censorship to discuss the protective or restrictive mechanism of suppression and exclusion in different parts of the world.[11] As Geoffrey Baker points out, even musicians in authoritarian countries can always find a way to record, reproduce, and distribute their music independently and to give public performances regularly despite pervasive and strict censorship.[12] In the existing body of scholarly literature, Chinese rock has been discussed as a form of music produced and distributed through independent market channels, despite the state's attempts to ban and suppress it.[13] When people chose to switch off government-controlled radio and TV and turned on personal tape players to listen to a rock album of their own choice, Hao Huang contends, the very act of listening suggested the power of individual agency.[14] In this section, I argue that China's music

market is not an independently operating system that is sometimes harassed by governmental interference. Instead, the state-controlled organizations have been the core, unavoidable parts in the process through which popular music artists, including Cui Jian and other Chinese rockers, reach the Chinese public. Censorship is not "internally contested" or carried out in China's music industry by individuals who make decisions on the basis of flexible guidelines or subjective opinions. Rather, it is realized through nationally standardized procedures by rotating teams of censors who strictly execute the same instructions from the central government.

I became a faculty member of Peking University after 2015. This affiliation gave me opportunities to conduct research within China's music publishers, television and radio stations, and regional cultural bureaus. In mainland China, higher education and research institutions are mostly state-owned and function as part of the centralized cultural administrative system. After showing a letter from the university confirming my affiliation and an identification card evidencing my citizenship, I was always welcomed as a fellow cadre by cultural bureaus in different cities between 2016 and 2019. Starting in 2017, I received several invitations from publishers to serve as a musicologist-expert in the productions of folk music and heritage albums. These chances allowed me to conduct casual interviews with staff members and directors, to obtain access to their archives, and to witness how censorship operates in these core parts of China's music industry.

First, the albums of Cui Jian and other early Chinese rockers were produced by a variety of record companies in mainland China, but these companies were not independent free agents on the market. The registration records of these record companies from the 1980s preserved in the state's business administrations indicate that they were sponsored and directed by government ministries and that the members of these companies were civil servants transferred from the ministries. Although private and foreign-invested record labels have been allowed to exist since the 1990s, sponsorship and supervision by government agencies and departments is a requirement for an audiovisual publisher's license, or in other words, for becoming a music publisher. Only these licensed, state-directed publishers are eligible to apply for a standard recording code from the National Press and Publication Administration, a division of the Central Propaganda Department, as both a unique identifier for a recording and legal permission to make a recording available to the public. Private companies and independent artists

can only release their productions through these state-directed, licensed publishers. The recordings they produce thus have to undergo the nationally standardized, multi-level procedure of censorship before reaching the public.

The nationwide removal and suppression of unwanted music has been realized via two stages in the publishing procedure. First, at the archival departments of the publishers I visited in Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, I found their annual publishing plans listing the albums to be released in the coming years, dated from the early 1980s to the late 2010s.[15] The stamps and signatures on these preserved plans indicate that they were reviewed and approved by both the regional and central administrations before the start of each year. The historical records of publication show that these publishers fulfilled these plans. This measure effectively eliminated any unwanted artists, subjects, and genres as early as the planning stage.

Second, after receiving a music album produced by individual artists or companies, the publishers began the nationally standard three-level inspection procedure. One after another, three teams of censors examined what was on each recording, as well as the texts and images on album covers and booklets. After ensuring the thorough removal of forbidden content on the instructions received from the National Press and Publication Administration, these censors signed their names on the inspection sheets. "It means that we will bear all consequences if we fail to fulfill our duty," explained a censor of a music publisher I visited in winter 2018 in Guangzhou. This "three-level inspection" was established as standard procedure as early as the 1980s, when "the [censorial] inspection was only stricter."[16] At the same time, I observed that the censors have the freedom to make their own decisions and request revisions concerning aspects not on the list but potentially objectionable, such as sexual slang, swearing, or comments on non-sensitive affairs.

In the first half of the 1980s, professional popular music artists were affiliated with state-owned song and dance troupes. When discussing the public performances of popular music in China in the 1980s, journalists and academic publications highlighted the term *zouxue* (literally "going to the caves," commonly translated as "moonlighting"). Quoting from artists who shared their experiences moonlighting in the 1980s, they fostered an impression that professional singers could freely give public performances in China's liberated cultural market to make extra money outside the institutions

they worked for. In fact, the term *zouxue* has been employed in two common ways in the Chinese media and academic discourse: First, it is used to describe the experience of some young amateur musicians recruited by state-owned troupes of non-major cities and towns who earned better-than-average salaries by giving popular music performances as members of the troupe.[17] Second and more commonly, *zouxue* refers to the phenomenon that musicians and actors who were members of prestigious state-owned institutions located in major cities and had already achieved some extent of national renown made extra income by giving performances at non-state-arranged, for-profit concerts, mostly in non-major cities and towns.[18] Did the young musicians recruited by state-owned troupes give popular music performances under the state's regulations? Who was qualified to organize these for-profit concert tours? Although these questions are worth discussing, they are not relevant in this article, because the public music performances leading to the rise of Cui Jian and his rock songs in the 1980s happened in Beijing, the national capital.

Although singers affiliated with Beijing-based art troupes participated in the *zouxue* activities, most of these *zouxue* activities were located outside Beijing. The non-Beijing-based artists and troupes also did not give *zouxue* performances in Beijing. In spring 2012, during my research on state-sponsored music-making in Beijing, I got to know some venerable singers who used to be members of Oriental Song and Dance Troupe, one of the most active troupes in China's popular music scene in the 1980s. I had maintained friendships with some senior members of Beijing Dance Drama and Opera, formerly Beijing Song and Dance Troupe, since my time studying at the Central Conservatory of Music. When conducting research on the musical representations of China's ethnic groups in 2016, I had the opportunity to conduct research at the Central Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe. Many of these singers had experience moonlighting in the 1980s, but their for-profit performances were commonly held outside Beijing. One main reason is that it was not hard for Beijing residents to purchase tickets to watch the regular concerts of these state-sponsored troupes. Therefore, only a few for-profit concerts were held in Beijing before the end of 1980s, and each of them featured a mix of famous artists from different state-owned troupes. When I asked these singers whether they were able to perform something that was not allowed in their home troupes' regular concerts to attract the Beijing audiences, their answers were unanimously negative; they told me

that they "didn't even try." All concert venues in Beijing were owned and managed by the state in the 1980s. Qualified organizers were supposed to submit a detailed proposal to the culture bureau for approval, and the bureau could contact the home troupes of the proposed singers for confirmation of permission. Without the approval, singers and agents were not allowed to rent and use the venues.

In summary, Cui Jian and early rock music did not reach the public through channels independent from the state control, because all of China's publishers were owned by the state, and musicians were unable to give public performances in Beijing's concert venues without permission. The nationally standard three-level inspection censorship procedure was implemented not only by the publishers but also by all television and radio stations in China, particularly in the 1980s and the early 1990s, when most broadcast music programs were prerecorded. Each recording was thoroughly examined by multiple teams of censors who worked with the same instructions received from and updated by the central administration. Censorship has been effective enough to prevent unwanted sounds from being heard by the public. For example, we cannot find any song published or broadcast in the past four decades that questions the Communist Party's monopolistic control over China, though I have witnessed many failed attempts to do so. Besides, under China's Penal Code, enacted in 1980, producing or distributing an unlawful music publication is a felony resulting in up to ten years of imprisonment. If the unlawful recording and unapproved public performance is politically related, the offender will be convicted of "inciting subversion of state power" and facing up to life imprisonment.

Data Collection Methods in the Study of Chinese Popular Music Rebellion

China's censorship has been effective enough to prevent unwanted sounds from reaching the public. Why could renowned music rebels like Cui Jian succeed in releasing albums and giving public concerts, if their music frightened and angered Chinese officials and was banned? To answer this question, we need to first locate the sources that inform us about the attitudes and actions of "Chinese officials" toward this music. When discussing Cui Jian and early rock music as being banned in the 1980s, the existing academic works rely chiefly on three sources: Chinese newspapers and magazine

articles; books published by several "Chinese critics," such as Jin Zhaojun, Zhao Jianwei, and Wang Xiaofeng; and interviews conducted with these critics.[19] A large portion of the scholarly literature assumes as common knowledge, without citing sources, that Cui Jian was banned in the 1980s and early 1990s.[20] Andrew Jones is one of just a few scholars who once interviewed Cui Jian. But Jones does not quote Cui Jian when stating that Cui was banned. Instead, he adopts the accounts provided by China's newspapers and magazines, as well as books by the aforementioned "critics," which state consistently that Cui Jian's rock music "provoked the ire of" Beijing's municipal officials and that he was banned from performing at large-scale concerts in May 1987.[21] Although such a story has been repeated and established as common knowledge, fostering the impression that China's politics and censorship are internally contested, an examination of Cui Jian's public performance activities could easily prove it to be false or fictitious. However, according to the "1988 Records of Public Cultural Activities," preserved at the Culture Bureau of Beijing City, Cui performed at multiple large-scale concerts between May 1987 and summer 1988. In January 1988, for example, Cui gave a solo concert at Forbidden City Concert Hall, a major concert venue located in the very center of Beijing, adjacent to the central headquarters of the State Council.

It is understandable why the Chinese print media and "critics" have been major sources concerning the successful rebellion in the domain of Chinese popular music. As the hero portrayed in the media's story of successful rebellion, Cui Jian has never said in any public or published interview how he was banned or by whom, nor does he refute the media's account of his experience of being banned. Between 2016 and 2019, I communicated with four Chinese popular artists who were once reported by the print media as (and who were thus well known as) "banned by the government." None of them could give clear information on who banned them, when they were banned, and how they managed to perform in public or publish albums while being banned. Moreover, immersing oneself in China's everyday musical life provides only limited information concerning these popular music phenomena. Even those who sit in the audience at a stadium do not see what happens to the artists and their music before they appear on stage. The rock listeners I interviewed lived in different parts of the country in 1984–91, and some of them later joined rock scenes as practitioners. They witnessed only two aspects of Cui Jian's successful rebellion with their own eyes and ears:

the emergence of a rule-breaking kind of music and the widespread nature of the music. It is the Chinese media and the books of the "critics" that provide the rest of the story by helping people to imagine what happens in the places they have no access to and relating to them the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of those they have no chance to meet.

However, like the television and radio stations, all print media are owned by the state in mainland China and always provide mutually consistent accounts of events. Over the past four decades, thousands of these central and regional print media have demonstrated their capacity to give nationally consistent fictional or partial accounts of sociocultural events: from the interethnic conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang to the imprisonment of human rights activists and the Covid-19 statistics during the recent pandemic. As a frequent contributor to music magazines, I experienced the multi-level censorial review and centralized coordination of content production. The "critics" interviewed and quoted in scholarly publications are not independent individuals expressing their own opinions about music and musical events but the chief editors of state-owned media who supervise the censorial inspection and coordinate the delivery of the nationally consistent accounts. Jin Zhaojun became the editor of *People's Music* in 1986; Zhao Jianwei began to serve as a journalist and editor of *Chinese Music Newspaper* in 1988 and *Chinese Broadway* in 1993; and Wang Xiaofeng became editor of *Music Life* and *Chinese Broadway* in 1993. All these newspapers and magazines were sponsored and directed by the Ministry of Culture, and Jin, Zhao, and Wang were affiliated with the ministry when they conducted the interviews for and wrote, for instance, "Cui Jian and Chinese Rock" (1989),[22] "Rock in Beijing" (1990),[23] and *Cui Jian: Cries When Nothing to His Name—a Memoir of Chinese Rock* (1992),[24] all of which are frequently quoted in the existing English-language academic literature.

If we have to use Chinese media as a source of information about Chinese popular music, I suggest that we distinguish between three types of media publications. Those belonging to the first type are news reports or news in brief (*jianxun*), which are short accounts of current cultural events. These reports give factual information on the who, where, and when, despite the bias introduced by the selection of events. The second type is publications that aim to direct the public's attention toward a specific kind of music or a musician. These publications foster prevalent views by answering the how and why. They are normally written in the form of a feature or opinion piece, and they appear in the mouthpieces of the state, regional mass

newspapers, or magazines designed for popular music enthusiasts. These articles explain the extra-musical implications and significance of the music directly or indirectly by portraying the experience of its performer(s) and the responses from different social positions and groups. The portrayals can be fictitious, and the explanations are determined by the goals the music and musician are promoted to accomplish. The books written by "critics" such as Jin Zhaojun, Zhao Jianwei, and Wang Xiaofeng can also be categorized as belonging to this type. The third type is opinion pieces published in professional periodicals for musicians, musicologists, instrument manufacturing companies, and so on. An opinion repeated successively by a number of pieces in one or multiple professional magazines always reflects the state's decision and plan for action.

Besides these Chinese publications, I draw in this article on governmental documents preserved in the archival departments of regional government branches, publishers, radio and television stations, and performance venues. These historical records offer important information about the state's intentions and decisions. Moreover, the archival data are verified and supplemented by ethnographic data, particularly interviews with individuals who took part in the happenings but did not directly benefit from the stories of rebellion and were not restricted by confidentiality regulations. These individuals include musical instrument factory workers who participated in the manufacturing of electric guitars in the early 1980s, clerks of audiovisual shops, maintenance workers at the Zheng-Xie Hall where Cui Jian held his first rock concert, and so on.

State-Led Reform, Pathbreakers, and Media Stories of Rebellion

In the following parts of this article, I will argue that Cui Jian's rock songs were not "subversive" and did not intend to destroy the monopolistic control of the Communist regime. Instead, Cui was one of the "pathbreakers" promoted during the state-led reform leading Chinese people to break with the old norms that the state had already decided to abandon and mobilizing them to embrace the coming sociocultural changes as the result of the collective will. These "pathbreakers" consistently reached national audiences via state-coordinated musical activities, while the Chinese media claimed that the officials were making efforts to ban their music but were frightened by the

mass enthusiastic support of the music.

On October 30, 1979, Deng Xiaoping, the freshly inaugurated paramount leader, convened the Fourth All-China Congress of Literary and Arts Workers to announce new guidelines for making Chinese culture to facilitate the reform. Zhou Yang, chairman of the congress and assuming the position of deputy propaganda minister, stressed at the meeting the necessity of promoting some "pathbreakers" (*chuangjiang*) who would "cross the current horizon of art in our country," "break the old thoughts and principles," and sing songs of the new era.[25] Renowned as the Father of Chinese Rock, Cui Jian was neither the only nor the first "pathbreaker" promoted during this state-led reform.

The first pathbreaking task was to remove the dominance of Maoist propaganda music. Around 1980, the regime was making efforts to restore order from the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), during which China's cultural life was dominated by propaganda songs and operas deifying Mao Zedong and justifying violent actions. In his keynote speech at this meeting, Deng called for artistic innovation and individuality and a reduction of monotony: "Whether majestic or delicate, solemn or amusing, lyrical or philosophical, every artwork that can educate, inspire, and entertain the people should have its position in our garden of literature and art."[26] "We now need not only songs that fuel fighting spirit but also pleasant lyrical songs and light music," elaborated Chairman Zhou.[27] Two months later, the light, lyrical song "Attachment to My Homeland" (*Xiang Lian*) was born.[28] Its singer, Li Guyi, became the first pathbreaker and the principal character in the rebellion stories.

Officially acknowledged as the first popular song in post-1978 mainland China,[29] "Attachment to My Homeland" was composed by state-commissioned musicians, sung by a state-sponsored singer who, according to the decree enacted at the time, was usually appointed or at least permitted to give each public performance, recorded at the state-owned national radio station, and disseminated via state-owned publishers and television stations. The song was written in December 1979 by Ma Jinghua, a documentary director of China Central Television, and Zhang Piji, a composer working for China Broadcast Art Troupe, and recorded at the studio of China National Radio by Li Guyi, a solo singer from the state-owned Central Philharmonic Orchestra. On December 31, 1979, the song was played in prime time on

China Central Television. In February 1980, it began airing on Beijing People's Radio's *The Song of the Week*, at the time a highly influential music program that repeated a selected song throughout a week to increase its popularity among the public. On February 4, 1981, at a concert jointly organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Beijing city government, Li presented the song for the prime minister, the vice president, state councilors and ministers, and over fifteen thousand representatives of the people.

Although "Attachment to My Homeland" was created by state-commissioned musicians and promoted via state-coordinated concerts and prime time shows on a state-owned broadcast station, China's news media helped the people to form an idea that the state was making efforts to ban this song and to suppress the reformist spirit embodied in Li's music. In a first step, newspapers and magazines began generalizing the Maoist propaganda songs as homogeneously high-pitched, fast-paced, loud, and absent of personal feelings.[30] In a second step, the media defined "Attachment to My Homeland" as a light song expressing an individual's genuine emotions, the sorrows and joys suppressed during the Cultural Revolution.[31] In addition, they described Li Guyi as a reformist suppressed by conservative authorities for her artistic innovation—her sentimental and soothing singing style that conveyed the humanity of the people. The national newspaper *Enlightenment Daily,* for instance, released a feature article on October 8, 1980. The article not only described passionate fan letters from anonymous individuals of different social categories but also suggested that the state officials had banned this song because they were afraid of the people's power to reform society.

Right after Li Guyi performed "Attachment to My Homeland" at the China Central Television Spring Festival Gala, aired on February 12, 1983, the media proclaimed that the song had been unbanned and informed the people of what had happened offstage in the television station's studio on that evening: hotlines were set up outside the studio, allowing viewers from all regions of the country to request a song to be played at the gala and broadcast live. Administrative assistants answered the calls, wrote down each request on a slip of paper, and put the request slips in a tray. The assistants handed the tray to the general director of the gala and told him that "Attachment to My Homeland" was the most requested. The director worried that airing a banned song of this kind would jeopardize his career and thus asked the assistants to show the tray to the minister of the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). The minister chose to disregard the tray at first but

broke out in a cold sweat when five more trays were placed in front of him one after another. The minister paced around, watched the number of requests for the song rapidly increase, and finally stamped his foot, submitting to the will of the people. The singer still couldn't believe her ears when singing the song on stage, and tears welled up in her eyes: "The enthusiasm of the audience can change China's cultural policy. How great it is!" This story of successful rebellion has been recounted repeatedly over the years by Chinese newspapers, magazines, and broadcast programs, such as Zhang Yi's "Cui Yongyuan Demystifies How 'Attachment to My Homeland' was Unbanned at the Spring Festival Gala," published in 2004 in *Yangtze Evening News*;[32] Liu Jitong "A Discussion on How to Emancipate the Mind with the Case Study of 'Attachment to My Homeland,'" published in 2008 in *Government and Laws*;[33] and Chun Zi's "Twists and Turns in the Process of Singing 'Attachment to My Homeland' Out Loud," published in 2021 in *Journal of the Party's History*.[34] The administrative assistants and other staff members of China Central Television were restricted by confidentiality agreements they had signed as part of their contracts, and the others, including regular journalists, did not have access to the backstage of the studio of the television station. It would have been impossible to pass the multi-level censorial review even if one of these witnesses had tried to challenge the credibility of these accounts. Therefore, this story has been repeated by the media and established as common knowledge to this day, turning the public performances of "Attachment to My Homeland" into a democratic expression of the collective will.

Father of Chinese Rock: A Subversive or a Pathbreaker for the State-Led Reform?

Cui Jian, Father of Chinese Rock, emerged right after the national success of Li Guyi and was the first and only mainland Chinese rock singer to consistently reach large audiences in the 1980s. Though Cui and Li made music in different styles, they had several things in common. First, both singers were members of state-owned troupes directly supervised by the Ministry of Culture when they gained public attention. Second, their first hits were premiered in the context of state-organized cultural activities, after which their songs continued to be nationally disseminated through state-controlled publishers, state-approved concerts, and state-owned media. Third, their hit songs embodied the ways of thinking and music-making that were encouraged by

the state via official directives. Fourth, both Cui and Li were banned in the mutually consistent accounts repeated by the sole media network of China.

Was Rock and Roll a Banned Form of Music in China in the 1980s?

The existing body of scholarly literature discusses Chinese rock as a form of music that was suppressed by the state in the 1980s. However, I argue that the state did not suppress Cui's music but played a leading role in the promotion of Chinese rock. In this section, I will quote directly from Chinese leaders to reveal their decisions and instructions. To discuss how these decisions and directives were realized in the 1980s, I will supplement the data from governmental archives with news in brief from professional journals and ethnographic interviews.

First, state-owned music instrument factories started producing electric guitars and keyboards around 1980, providing the necessary equipment for people to make rock music in the first place. As early as the 1979 All-China Congress of Literary and Arts Workers, the paramount leader Deng Xiaoping announced the task of borrowing modern musical techniques and styles from foreign developed countries to make new Chinese arts and to galvanize Chinese youth to strive for modernization with these new artworks.[35] In the same year, state-directed academic and professional journals began to release opinion pieces linking electronic musical instruments to modernity.[36] In July 1979, Harbin Musical Instrument Factory produced two prototypes of electric guitars. A former manager of the factory told me in February 2017 that, after the successful production of the electric guitar prototypes, he and two of his colleagues immediately brought these prototypes to the Ministry of Light Industry, which supervised all of China's music instrument factories at the time. In September 1979, a symposium and a pilot concert were held at Beijing Musical Instrument Association, where these two electric guitars they brought were introduced to the attendees from instrument factories located in different parts of China. According to the news in brief of *Musical Instruments* and *Instrument Technologies,* two professional periodical publications circulated within China's music instrument industry, trial production of electronic keyboards also commenced in this year at the Beijing Music Instrument Research Institute, Shanghai Industrial Research Institute for Cultural and Educational Supplies, and Tianjin Musical Instrument Factory. The state-owned art troupes had started presenting these electric

instruments to the masses.[37]

When state-owned factories started manufacturing electric guitars and keyboards, the mass media began to introduce *yaogun*, the literal Chinese translation of the English term "rock and roll," to the public. Rather than criticizing this form of music, China's mass media described rock and roll in positive or neutral terms and linked it to social reform and to the young generation's discontent with society. At the 1981 Propaganda Work Conference of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the paramount leader Deng stated: "Some young people are discontented with the current condition of society, which is neither surprising nor frightening…but we must focus on how to channel the discontent."[38] The mass-circulation magazines soon released articles defining rock as an advanced art form galvanizing the West and also as a way by which Western young people expressed "dissatisfaction with the present condition of their society, challenged conventions and customs, and appealed for social reform."[39]

In addition, Cui Jian, well known as the Father of Chinese Rock, reached the public via state-organized concerts, state-owned publishers and television station, and state-controlled performance venues. In 1984, Cui founded a rock-style band called Qiheban with seven members. Qiheban was not the first rock band in China,[40] but it was the first state-sponsored rock band. All seven members, including Cui, were affiliated with the Beijing Song and Dance Troupe, which was a state-owned public service institution directly supervised by the Ministry of Culture. In 1985, Qiheban gave their first concert at the Zheng-Xie Assembly Hall, as confirmed by its members in separate interviews conducted by radio hosts.[41] What they didn't mention was that Zheng-Xie Hall was the official meeting place of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the workplace of its standing committee. In 2016 and 2019, I had the chance to talk to two retired workers of the hall's managing team. They told me that the hall had been the workplace of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference's standing committee throughout the late twentieth century and was used exclusively for government-arranged political and cultural activities at the time.

Cui Jian's "Nothing to My Name" is seen by many as China's first rock song. Cui's performance of this song at the 1986 International Year of Peace 100 Pop Star Concert has been acknowledged as marking the start of Chinese

rock.[42] Held in front of an audience of over ten thousand at Beijing's Workers' Stadium, the concert was co-organized by Oriental Troupe of China and China Audio-Video Publishing House, both of which were under direct supervision of the Ministry of Culture. The concert was broadcast by Beijing Television Station, and copies of its video recording were distributed nationally to the public via that state-supervised publishing house. In his conversions with Zhou Guoping, published as *Free Style*, Cui Jian recalled that he was asked to record two songs in the studio immediately after this concert. "Nothing to My Name" was made the leading song of the published album *Selected Songs of the 100 Pop Star Concert*.[43]

Rock Music as a Means to Facilitate the State-Led Reform

I argue that Cui Jian's songs were not subversive but met the state's propaganda needs in the 1980s. To support the understanding that Cui Jian's songs were a subversive expression of resistance to government control and hegemony, academic works gave evidence relating to three aspects. First, Cui often deployed symbols from the regime's past. Gregory Lee discusses such deployments as subversive nostalgia that disrupted the present official order by recalling what the state wanted to forget.[44] The scholarly discussion of subversive nostalgia ranges from song texts, Cui's rock covers of Communist song classics, and red stars Cui wore on stage to a concert flyer designed in the style of a victory map used to represent the route of the Long March. "The flyer suggests that the rock of Cui Jian would liberate China from its current authorities," argues Jeroen de Kloet.[45] Second, Cui's music spoke of individual experience and feelings. By focusing on the personal and the individual, Nimrod Baranovitch points out, Cui trivialized the official practice in which singers were expected to serve as the voice of the state.[46] Third, Cui's songs reminded people of the ideals. Jonathan Matusitz contends that Cui's music was fundamentally rebellious because his songs attacked the state's abandonment of idealism.[47]

I argue that Cui Jian's rock music neither challenged the monopolistic control of the Communist regime nor disrupted the rules in effect established by Deng Xiaoping, who had assumed the role of supreme leader in 1978. Instead, Cui's songs met the propaganda needs of the state in the 1980s. Indeed, Cui Jian frequently used symbols from the regime's past in his songs and even in concert flyers and what he wore on stage. When the state's

guidelines for historical representation do not receive the deserved attention in these nostalgic elements, they are interpreted as subversive by people who are looking for reasons why Cui's songs were forbidden. The guidelines were codified in the "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China," which was the first strategic directive drafted under paramount leader Deng and General Secretary Hu Yaobang and announced at the Sixth Plenary of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in June 1981.[48]

The resolution divides the history of the regime into several periods. The term "mistake(s)" (*cuowu*) appears dozens of times in the resolution's comments on the party's activities between 1957 and 1976, the year in which the Cultural Revolution was ended. It attributes the mistakes to Mao's self-complacency, his arbitrary judgments about the actual condition of the country, and the fanatical worship of Mao. "It is impermissible to overlook or whitewash mistakes, which in itself would be a mistake and would give rise to more and worse mistakes,"[49] states the resolution and demands the correction of wrong policies and a thorough purge of the influence of the mistakes. Nevertheless, the resolution defines the directives and policies enacted in 1949–1956, during which China was transformed into a socialist country, as correct. Moreover, it maintains that the people's struggle against foreign aggressors and domestic enemies turned from disastrous failures to great victories in the 1930s and 1940s, because Mao designed and executed the correct strategies that led the people toward the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The resolution demands the use of the historical achievements to strengthen the people's faith in the party's leadership during the reform, and it specifies the Long March, a series of strategically victorious marches undertaken by the Red Army from October 1934 to October 1936, as a critical turning point.

These guidelines were embodied in Cui's rock songs, which reminded the people of the historical accomplishments the state wanted them to remember. The state likened the modernization process to a new Long March. Throughout the year 1986, the state convened national and regional assemblies to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the victory of the Long March, spreading the new Long March spirit of following the party faithfully and resolutely on the hard and complex road toward socialist modernity. This year marked the appearance of a number of popular music pieces containing folk tunes borrowed from the rural Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia

area, the destination of the Long March, and bore the collective memory of the historical triumphs.[50] Among these songs was "Nothing to My Name," whose premiere in May 1986 has been commonly seen as marking the dawn of Chinese rock.[51] In 1987 at Capital Stadium, a major concert venue in Beijing with a capacity of about eighteen thousand and under the direct management of the state, Cui delivered a rock cover of "Nanni Bay," a classic propaganda song composed in 1943 to glorify the people's arduous and victorious efforts under the party's leadership in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia area.[52] The uniforms of the Red Army in the 1930s and 1940s and maps representing the Communists' successful strategies and operations in that period were also transformed into nostalgic elements in Cui's performances and advertisements. These songs were included on *Rock 'n' Roll on the New Long March* (1989), widely considered to be the first rock album in mainland China. In 1989, Cui Jian gave his concert "Rock and the New Long March" at Beijing Exhibition Center Theatre.

Furthermore, the prohibition on expressing individual experience and personal feelings had already been lifted seven years prior, in 1979, by freshly inaugurated paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, who encouraged artists to generate "life-like and emotionally compelling artistic images of new socialist individuals in the reform age."[53] Cui Jian's songs portrayed such a reformist, who embodied the state-promoted new Long March spirit of remaining faithful and optimistic when experiencing obstacles and derision on the socialist road toward modernity. In "Nothing to My Name," when "always being laughed at for having nothing," "I" did not stop and repeated the call to the audience: "Now you will follow me." In the song "Rock on the New Long March," "I" thought of "the snow-capped mountains and marshes" conquered by Communist forerunners, who kept their noses to the grindstone when they were being battered by "wind and rain."

Meanwhile, to diminish the influence of the old norms established by Mao Zedong, the state encouraged expressions of disapproval of the mistakes made in the Cultural Revolution, during which Mao was deified. "A Piece of Red Cloth," for instance, is a song premiered in 1989 and included in Cui's 1991 album.[54] It has been interpreted as one of Cui's most subversive, largely because of its opening line: "That day, you used a piece of red cloth to blindfold my eyes and cover the sky." On the basis of the clarification of its meaning from the books written by newspaper editors, scholarly works discuss this song as a "historical elegy"[55] about the people's Cultural

Revolution experiences: being blindfolded by fanatical worship of Mao and forgetting the economic backwardness of the country, or, in the words of the lyrics, "I forgot I didn't have a place to live." But failing to make the distinction between the Cultural Revolution and other periods of the regime's past described by the resolution, they read the sentence as a subversive attack upon "you," the party-state. However, this reading does not take into consideration the expression of affection for and loyalty to "you" throughout this song: "You ask me where I am going. I say I will follow your road"; "I will be with you like this forever, because I know your pain." "A Piece of Red Cloth" is one of Cui's most frequent concert pieces to this day, has been covered by contemporary idol groups, and has been performed on China's most-watched television shows.

In addition to these nostalgic elements, reminding the people of "the ideals" was also a propaganda task of the state at the time. In March 1985, paramount leader Deng highlighted the task of propaganda to foster the ideals among the young generations.[56] "The ideals" (*lixiang*) referred to Communist ideals but often appeared without that political adjective in the official discourse, mass media, and mainstream artworks in the 1980s. "We must educate our people, especially our youth, to have the ideals," Deng stated, because it was the Communist ideal that enabled "us" to overcome difficulties in achieving success in the past.[57] The common and firm ideal would unite the people to conquer obstacles in the process of socialist modernization.[58] Later in this same year, Cui Jian released a song entitled "Hard Journey" ("Jiannan Xing"), on the band Qiheban's first album. The song depicted the courage and persistence of "we" who were united to overcome "rainstorms," "precipitous mountains," and "demons blocking the road" with faith in a bright future. It repeated one sentence: "Ideal, ideal, should not turn to ashes."

Turning a State-Awarded Pathbreaker into a Heroic Rebel

In the previous two sections, I argued that Cui Jian's rock music did not question the monopolistic control of the Communist regime but met the state's propaganda needs in the 1980s. These needs had three dimensions: first, mobilizing young people to join the state-led reform by channelling their discontent with the present situation of the country; second, fostering the common Communist ideal among the people by reminding them of

their historical achievements under the leadership of the party; and third, accelerating economic development and the modernization of the country, which was a primary goal of the reform and also what the shared ideals were fostered and evoked to accomplish. I also argued that it was through the state-controlled television stations and music publishers that Cui's songs were widely disseminated, and it was at a state-organized concert that Cui Jian premiered the renowned "first Chinese rock song" in front of an audience of over ten thousand. In the 1980s, Cui delivered performances at Beijing's major state-managed concert venues, from Workers' Stadium to Capital Stadium, from the Forbidden City Concert Hall to Beijing Exhibition Center Theatre.

Cui Jian also received multiple awards from the Ministry of Culture. In December 1988, he was awarded the "Top Ten Golden Song Award of the Reform Age" by the Ministry of Culture. In March 1989, Cui was granted the Outstanding Singer Award by the China International Cultural Exchange Centre, an organization directed by the Ministry of Culture, before he started representing China at music festivals and competitions overseas in Europe, the United States, and Japan. In May 1990, Cui was awarded the All-China Teen Choice Award jointly by the National Administration of Radio and Television, the Ministry of Culture, and the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League.

At the same time, China's sole media network and the books written by the editors of these state-owned newspapers and magazines began to supply mutually consistent accounts of Cui's successful rebellions. The media's story about the rise of Cui has a plotline very similar to that of Li Guyi: (1) a singer courageously presents a song or a style that breaks the constraints; (2) the people are enthusiastic about the song, but the authorities punish the artist and ban the song; (3) the people then demonstrate their power to make their own decisions and force the authorities to lift the ban. Such stories turned the songs and the state-led sociocultural reform into the people's choices. On July 18, 1988, for example, *People's Daily* published the score of "Nothing to My Name" along with a headline feature article. As the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, *People's Daily* guaranteed nationwide mandatory institutional subscriptions to the country's schools, factories, music troupes, artists' associations, and community cultural centers and was accessible for free to those studying, working, or spending their leisure time at these institutions. The article first

portrayed Cui as one who had shaken off the fetters of conventional aesthetic principles to ride a current global trend. It then suggested that Cui was "being denounced, scorned, and unfairly punished" for breaking the conventions. It also told the readers that Cui's music was "striking a chord with countless college students, teachers, workers, and businessmen," who were designated as the backbone of economic reform in government documents of the 1980s.

In the tone of independent investigators or "critics," newspaper and magazine editors later wrote reportage-style books to complement the media's story of rebellion with more details. A detail repeated by these books is that Cui was banned from May 1987 to summer 1988 because of his performance of a rock version of "Nanni Bay," which was widely cited by scholarly publications. However, as I mentioned above in the section on data collection methods, records archived at Beijing Culture Bureau indicate that Cui gave multiple public performances during this period. It was not hard to find people who attended Cui's solo concert at Forbidden City Concert Hall in January 1988, because they were very proud and eager to share this information with other rock lovers. "I purchased the ticket from a ticket scalper. It cost me 90 Yuan, nearly my whole month's salary," said a Beijing resident at a rock club gathering I visited in Dongcheng district in March 2012. "But it was totally worth it. It was Cui's first solo rock concert."

More often, these books provided details whose credibility could only be denied by the individuals portrayed and government staff members. In *Cui Jian: Cries When Nothing to His Name—a Memoir of Chinese Rock* (1992),[59] Zhao Jianwei, who was the editor of *Chinese Music Newspaper* at the time, depicted unnamed government officials who expressed aversion and helpless anger toward Cui's rock performance out of the public's sight. In addition, according to the *People's Daily* article and later media articles and books, such as *Cry Out: For Chinese Rock in the Past* (2003),[60] Cui was unfairly punished by Beijing Song and Dance Troupe, the state-owned organization with which he was affiliated, because of his rock music performances. Cui himself has not stated in published interviews that he was denounced or punished by the troupe, nor have his supervisors. It is a fact that Cui left the troupe around 1988. But neither Cui nor the Beijing Song and Dance Troupe clarifies whether he was fired or voluntarily abandoned his state-sponsored identity. In 1985 and 1988, the State Council enacted two opinions on reforming performing arts groups to encourage the members of state-owned troupes to abandon their identity as "state-sponsored" artists and to assume their new roles as "independent"

artists to diversify the music market being built up. Beijing Cultural Bureau began to issue for-profit licenses to these independent singers, agents, and private companies as early as 1987. In 1988, the year in which Cui left the state-owned troupe, the movie *Young Rocker* was produced by the state-owned Beijing Youth Film Studio, promoting the images of young artists who quit their stable jobs as members of state-owned art troupes and found their own values on bigger and more vibrant stages on the free market.

Epilogue

In this article I argue that in order to dispel the prevalent myths about Chinese rock, it is necessary to clarify the definition of the term "subversive" and to realize that China's "dominant ideology" is a set of ideas constantly being modified. My research suggests that Cui's rock songs and performances were not "subversive" as commonly discussed in the existing body of literature, because they did not question the Communist regime's monopolistic control over the country, faith in the socialist system, or any rules in effect enacted by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Drawing upon both archival and ethnographic data, I argue that the state did not suppress Cui Jian but played a leading role in the promotion of his rock songs in the 1980s. Cui Jian's rock songs met the state's agenda of fostering the ideals among Chinese youth, facilitating the remembrance of historical achievements under the party's leadership, and leading people to abandon old norms to join the state-led reform.

In *China's New Voices,* Nimrod Baranovitch notes a kind of "symbiotic relationship"[61] between the state and Cui Jian: "The state and one of its most articulate dissidents could cooperate at least temporarily because of mutual needs." Cui Jian and Chinese rock helped to represent a democratic and modern image of the country, not only within China but also to global audiences. At the same time, the state helped Chinese rockers "through its oppressive image."[62] As Robin Moore points out, popular music artists in authoritarian contexts receive more local and global attention and thus play a potentially valuable role in changing society.[63]

Although this article further argues that Cui Jian was not a dissident but a state-promoted pathbreaker facilitating sociocultural reform, I agree with

Baranovitch that Cui and later "leftist" migrant rockers benefit largely from their "dissident" or "subversive" reputations. To help establish such a reputation, the state-owned print media reported that Cui Jian was banned by the "conservative" Chinese officials while describing his music only in favorable, positive terms and linking it with youthful passion, modernity, and reform to attract listeners and supporters. Cui and later Chinese rockers maintain that their songs are not political and refuse to answer questions about political issues in interviews.[64] Nonetheless, they also do not refute Chinese media's stories of their successful rebellion, though they in fact gave concerts and released albums via state-owned publishers during the period when they were reportedly banned. Without counter-evidence on what happened outside the public's sight, listeners embrace these stories of successful rebellion as fact.

Chinese citizens have the freedom to attend any public concerts and to choose among legal music publications. Rather than imposing restrictions on members of audiences, the state decides who and what can be available for people to choose. As I argued in this article, China's censorship has been efficient enough to ensure that unwanted sounds are unable to be published or performed in public concerts and on media stages. Meanwhile, the image of rock rebellion fosters the false impression that even subversive music can be published, be publicly performed, and gain popularity after winning enough support from the masses. Nonetheless, the audience members attracted by the image of successful rebellion make new meanings through their own readings of these rock songs or by becoming rock practitioners in China's highly fragmented rock scene. Some of them, like the migrant rockers I mentioned at the beginning of this article, make subversive music of their own and are making efforts to be heard by the public. The most recent rock club gathering I attended was in April 2022 at a basketball court located in Chaoyang District, Beijing, at which the club members watched a live online rock concert of Cui Jian together as a way to protest against the government-imposed Covid-19 lockdowns. About forty-five million people watched this live stream concert.

Notes

1. Quoted from "Wode Jita hui Changge" (My guitar can sing"), a song by Sun Heng and New Worker Art Troupe. Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions and translations in this article are by the author.

2. Quoted from "Chengshi de Shenghuo" (City life), a song from the album *Our World, Our Dream* by the New Worker Group.

3. See, for example, Niao Kun, "Zuoyi Yaogun Qingnian zhi Xingongren Yishutuan" [Leftist rock youngsters: The New Workers' Art Troup"], *New Weekly*, November 29, 2013; and Hongzhe Wang, "Dagong Chunwan Disinian: Yici Diceng Gongren Qunti de Wenhuazijue" [The Fourth Migrant Spring Festival Gala: A cultural self-awareness of the grassroots worker community"], *The Paper*, February 15, 2015.

4. Jeroen de Kloet, "'Let Him Fucking See the Green Smoke Beneath My Groin': The Mythology of Chinese Rock," in *Postmodernism and China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 239–74.

5. Andrew F. Jones, *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* (Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992), 92.

6. Nimrod Baranovitch, *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978–1997* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 34.

7. Quoted from de Kloet, "Mythology," 243.

8. See also Jeroen de Kloet, *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music*, Monographs 3 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 30.

9. See de Kloet, *China with a Cut*, 26.

10. Gustave Le Bon*, The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002).

11. See, e.g., Martin Cloonan, "Popular Music Censorship in Africa: An Overview," in *Popular Music Censorship in Africa*, ed. Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Ursula Hemetek, "Roma and 'Their' Music in South-Eastern Europe: Silenced Voices? Exclusion, Racism, and Counter-Strategies," in *Researching Music Censorship*, ed. Annemette Kirkegaard et al. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); Ariana Hernandez-Reguant, "Artistic Labor and Contractual Citizenship in the Cuban Cultural Industries," *Anthropology of Work Review* 23 (2002): 3–7.

12. Geoffrey Baker, "Cuba Rebelión: Underground Music in Havana," *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 32, no. 1 (2011): 1–38.

13. See, e.g., Jones, *Like a Knife*.

14. Huang Hao, "*Yaogun Yinyue*: Rethinking Mainland Chinese Rock 'n' Roll," *Popular Music* 20, no. 1 (2001): 1–11.

15. See also the State Council's 1982 government work report, delivered at the fourth meeting of the Fifth National People's Congress.

16. Interview with a previous staff member of the China Record Corporation (Zhongguo Changpian Zonggongsi) on August 28, 2017.

17. See, e.g., Qi Cheng, "'Zouxue' Geshou: Wushou Ge Chuang 'Jianghu'" ["Zouxue" Geshou: "Erring across the water margin" with five songs], *Luoyang Evening News,* July 25, 2008; and "Nanwang zai Wutaishang Changge de Nazhong Ganjue" [Hard to forget the feeling of singing on the stage], *Tianjin Daily,* July 12, 2022.

18. See, e.g., Hua Tang and Zhao Yining, "Gexing 'Zouxue' Siyan de Beihou" [Behind the "zouxue" performances of popular stars], *Outlook Weekly* 5 (1988): 21–23; and Zhaojun Jin, *Wuwei Guangrong Danzhu Menegxiang* [Not for honor but for dream: 40 years: A memoir of Chinese pop song] (Tianjin: Baihua Wenyi Publishing House, 2023).

19. Baranovitch, *China's New* Voices, 8, 52.

20. See, e.g., Gregory Lee, "The 'East is Red' Goes Pop: Commodification, Hybridity and Nationalism in Chinese Popular Song and Its Televisual Performance," *Popular Music* 14 (1995): 107; Wai-Chung Ho, "Social Change and Nationalism in China's Popular Music Songs," *Social History* 31, no. 4 (2006): 446; and Zhaoxi Liu, "Cui Jian: Extolling Idealism Yet Advocating for Freedom Through Rock Music in China," *International Communication Research Journal* 51, no. 1 (2016): 8.

21. Jones, *Like a Knife*, 94.

22. Jin Zhaojun, "Cui Jian yu Zhongguo yaogun yue" [Cui Jian and Chinese rock], *People's Music* 4 (1989): 32–33.

23. Jin Zhaojun, "Yaogun zai Jingcheng" [Rock in Beijing], *Beijing Youth Daily*, March 23, 1990.

24. Jianwei Zhao, *Cui Jian: Zai Yiwusuoyou Zhong Nahan—Zhongguo Yaogun Beiwanglu* [Cui Jian: Cries when nothing to his name—a memoir of Chinese rock] (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 1992).

25. Quoted from Zhou Yang's speech titled "Carry Forward the Cause, Promote the Literature and Arts of the Socialist New Era." The speech was published in the Combined Issue 1979 November-December of *Literature and Art Newspaper*.

26. Quoted from Deng Xiaoping's "Speech at the Fourth All-China Congress of Writers and Artists," delivered in 1979.

27. Quoted from Zhou's 1979 speech. "Lyrical song" (*shuqing gequ*) refers to a light song style that expresses personal feelings and emotions.

28. "Attachment to My Homeland."

29. For instance, see Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Leading Group for the Celebration of the 40th Anniversary of Reform and Opening Up, *Vanguards in the Reform and Opening Up* (Bejing: Dangjian Duwu Publishing House, 2019).

30. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inxfjjQgchI and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLSWzOYujEY for examples of the Maoist songs.

31. See Shi Guangnan, "Shuqing gequ yaozou zijide lu" [Lyrical songs should find their own road], *People's Music* 3 (1980): 3–4; and Lu Yi, "Mantan gao, kuai, xiang, ying" [A rambling discussion on high-pitched, fast-paced, loud, and moodless songs], *People's Music* 8 (1980): 12–13.

32. Yi Zhang, "Cui Yongyuan jiemi 'Xiang Lian' dengshang chunwan neimu" [Cui Yongyuan demystifies how "Attachment to My Homeland" was unbanned at the Spring Festival Gala], *Yangtze Evening News,* December 4, 2014.

33. Jitong Liu, "Cong 'Xiang Lian' jiejin kan sixiang ruhe jiefang" [A discussion on how to emancipate the mind with the case study of "Attachment to My Homeland"], *Government and Laws* 17 (2008): 13.

34. Zi Chun, "'Xiang Lian' shi ruhe yibosanzhe changxiang de" [Twists and turns in the process of singing "Attachment to My Homeland" out loud], *Journal of the Party's History* 2 (2021): 46–48.

35. See Deng Xiaoping's "Zai Zhongguo Wenxue Yishu Gongzuozhe Disici Daibiaodahui shangde zhuci" [Speech at the Fourth All-China Congress of Writers and Artists], *Studies of Literature and Arts* 4 (1979): 3–6.

36. For examples of such opinion articles, see Naixiong Liao, "Xifang xiandai yinyue chutan" [An introduction to Western modern music], *Musical Art* 1 (1979): 77–89; and Cheng Zijian, "Zaitan yinyue yishu he Xiandaihua" [A rediscussion of musical art and modernisation], *People's Music* 10 (1979): 18–23.

37. For examples of such news reports, see Yue Sheng, "Haerbin yuqichang dianjita zuotanhui" [A symposium for the electric guitars from Harbin Musical Instrument Factory], *Instrument Technologies* 8 (1979): 61; and Han Dong, "Guonei dianziqin shizhi jiankuang" [Brief report on the condition of the trial run of electronic keyboards], *Musical Instruments* 3 (1979): 20–21.

38. Quoted from Deng Xiaoping's 1981 "Guanyu zai sixiangzhanxian shangde wenti de tanhua" [A talk on the problems of the ideological frontline], in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 2 **(**Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1994), 389–93.

39. Quoted from Gong Li, "Jiakechong gexing: Lennon" [Lennon: a star from the Beatles], *Global Knowledge* 6 (1981): 35, which is an article from the mass magazine *Global Knowledge*. For another instance, see also Meiyu Li, "Xifang yinyue de zhuyao qingxiang" [Major tendencies in Western music], *Collected Translations of Cultures* 3: 70–84.

40. As early as 1979, a rock group called Wanlimawang was founded at Beijing International Studies University, and the middle school art teacher Ding Wu started the band Fuchongji in 1982. These rock musicians were not from state-owned art troupes, were not reported as being banned, and did not have a chance to become known to the public in the 1980s. Unlike these earlier and contemporaneous rock bands, Cui Jian received the opportunity to perform state-organized concerts, to release albums via state-owned publishers, and also to be reported on by state-owned media.

41. For instance, see Lu Lingtao and Li Yang, *Nahan: Weile Zhongguo cengjing de yaogun* [Cry out: For Chinese rock in the past] (Nanning: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2003), 9, 16.

42. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTm_PgjVbWM for a video excerpt of Cui Jian's performance of "Nothing to My Name" at the 1986 concert.

43. Jian Cui and Guoping Zhou, *Ziyou Fengge* [Free style] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022), 84.

44. Lee, "East is Red."

45. de Kloet, *China with a Cut*, 30.

46. Baranovitch, China's New Voices, 32–33.

47. Jonathan Matusitz, "Semiotics of Music: Analysis of Cui Jian's 'Nothing to My Name,' the Anthem for the Chinese Youths in the Post-Cultural Revolution Era," The Journal of Popular Music 43 (2010): 156–75.

48. See "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China," *Beijing Review* (English Edition) 24, no. 27 (July 6, 1981): 10–39.https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1981/PR1981-27.pdf

49. Ibid., 15.

50. Because the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia area is in northwestern China, these songs have been discussed as *xibeifeng* (literally "northwestern wind"). For further discussions of the northwestern wind songs, see, e.g., Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, 18–26; Ho, "Social Change"; Marc L. Moskowitz, *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow: Chinese Pop Music and Its Cultural Connotations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); and Ying Xiao, *China in the Mix: Cinema, Sound, and Popular Culture in the Age of Globalization* (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 18–51.

51. For a detailed analysis on how Cui combined the folk music elements from China's northwest with those from Western music culture in "Nothing to My Name," see Ya-Hui Chen "Modernizing Chinese Vernacular Music," in *The Evolution of Chinese Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

52. For an audio recording of "Nanni Bay," see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oRrhS_H58o.

53. Quoted from Xiaoping, "Speech at the Fourth All-China Congress."

54. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niohIE6x7Zk for a video recording of "A Piece of Red Cloth" performed at Cui Jian's 2016 solo concert at Beijing's Workers' Stadium and attended by tens of thousands.

55. Translation quoted from Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, 238.

56. See Deng Xiaoping's 1985 speech "Yi kao lixiang, er kao jilv caineng tuanjie qilai" [Unity depends on both ideal and discipline], *Correspondence Party School* 7 (1999): 15.

57. Ibid.

58. See also Deng Xiaoping, "Yong jianding de xinnian ba renmin tuanjie qilai" [Unite the people with unshakeable faith], *People's Forum* 60 (1997): 1.

59. Zhao, *Cui Jian*.

60. Lingtao and Li Yang, *Nahan*.

61. Baranovitch, *China's New Voices*, 228.

62. Ibid., 229.

63. Robin Moore, *Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba* (University of California Press, 2006).

64. Cynthia P. Wong, "Cui Jian: Rock Musician and Reluctant Hero," *ACMR Report: Journal of the Association for Chinese Music Research* 9, no. 1 (1996): 22–23; Cui and Zhou, *Ziyou Fengge*.