

# Sound, Protest and Business. Modern Sky Co. and the New Ideology of Chinese Rock.

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By the end of the 1990s, popular music in China has become a rather diverse cultural field of differing musical activities and ideologies. In the realm of rock, three generations of musicians move between idealism and heroism, modern realism, and just plain fun. Their struggle over genre, style and meaning is visible in a number of music journals, internet home pages, interviews, and lyrics. Due to China's music industry, which has been expanding rapidly over the last decade, the present range of commercially produced popular music styles covers everything from socialist-pop, -*gangtai* light music [1], heavy metal and mainstream rock, to new wave, punk, and even jazz music. Beijing, praised as the "Hollywood of Chinese Rock" (*yaogun yue de Haolaiwu*), is still the centre of these musical activities, with young musicians coming from all parts of China.

Since the early nineties, Chinese rock music has not only been produced and distributed by foreign and Chinese state-run companies, but also by private music companies which, despite the genre's ideological difficulties in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its restricted access to radio and TV programmes, have the courage to record new talents, who are said to form the new mainstream of China's music business. One of the young companies involved is "Modern Sky" (*Modeng Tiankong*), founded in Beijing in 1997. The label signed contracts with bands like "New Pants", "Sober", "The Fly", "Catcher in the Rye", "NO" and several other individual musicians, e.g. Hu Mage and Chen Dili, who came to the forefront and are said to have marked the beginning of what is called "Beijing's New Sound Movement" ( *Beijing Xinsheng Yundong*) or "'98 Rock's New Wave" ('98 *Yaogun Xin Lanchao*).

## "New Sound"

"New Sound" is the "movement" of a new generation of musicians who are described as being financially relatively independent because of either their job qualification or a well-off family background. They do not carry the burden having to introduce a new art form into Chinese society as the generation before, and mainly regard rock music as a means for having fun (*yule fangshi*).

China's cultural, social, and economic changes of the nineties have culminated into a new form of musical practice and ideology that currently receives nation-wide recognition. However, in China's print media, the movement is played down as an only temporary expression of a group of young people, who -- according to their lyrics -- have nothing or little to say. On the other hand, it is seen as a positive and necessary new style that adds another "voice" to the growing diversity of China's culture, and above all demonstrates her liberalising policies. These statements, nevertheless, follow a particular official rhetoric and seem to ignore that the movement has already established its own distribution network and successfully circumvented cultural institutions -- as well as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cultural hegemony -- in Beijing. Therefore, the term "New Sound", as will become clear later, is not limited to the production of new sounds. It bears different connotations and must be read as a trade-mark, a synonym for a new understanding of cultural and musical activity. In fact, as a closer look reveals, what is going on behind the scenes must be considered not only as a new *Zeitgeist* and "a way of life", but also as a discussion over the meaning of culture, i.e., an ideological challenge directed against the dominance of Beijing's older music guard.

The musicians of Beijing's New Sound do not propagate rock as a liberalising force anymore. They just "do it" within a newly negotiated economic, cultural and socio-political space. Throughout this process meaning has, in a certain way, shifted from word to sound. While the two previous generations tried to create rock music with Chinese characteristics, and often emphasised the expression of their thoughts and feelings through lyrics, the new generation integrates them into an overall concept of sound. Here, more attention is given to technical skills and musical experiments, adopting Western music styles and global sounds which does not minimise the meaning of lyrics in general. Words are still written in order to articulate individual stories, but differently and for a new audience. The identification with sound can be interpreted as both a form of resistance against the heavy ideological questions that occupied the old guard, and as a logical compromise of the various participants involved in cultural production, namely the musicians, the music industry, and PRC government policy. As a result, underground rock (*dixia/diceng yaogun*) has turned into an accepted way of "lived" cultural and even socio-political protest, which is available as a commodity in China's music stores today.

### **Ten Years After: Chinese Rock, Still a Revolution?**

After the Tian'anmen Massacre in June 1989, the number of rock bands in Beijing increased dramatically. Over the years, however, the genre has changed, and not only because of the PRC's ideological, social, and economic development. Another reason was that, consciously or not, several musicians agreed to "koutou" to a politically responsible and economically motivated music industry in order to reach their goals and release records. Chinese rock has obviously lost its formerly criticised "rebellious spirit" (*fanpan jingshen*) and transformed into a politically lighter version. This process allowed the genre to enter into the mainstream of Chinese popular music.

In 1995, the China Record Corporation (Beijing), released a CD entitled "Chinese Rock Classics" (*Zhongguo Yaogun Jingdian*), emphasising rock music's officially approved access to the world of popular consumer culture. The CD's twelve songs, as the leaflet says, are the "representative works from eight relatively famous and active bands, including Heavy Metal Rock, Blues Rock and Soft Rock; their materials of subject were collected from the countryside, the cities and the western part of China, the style is varied." The CD was compiled and published in order to commemorate China's rock music history and the compositional output of what is termed "10 years way of hardships." [2] The text goes on: "Through ten years of struggle, Rock eventually possessed a space in China's music circles, and the Rock Music discs produced in China sell well at home and abroad, this is a matter for congratulation." The analogy one can read behind this rhetoric seems somewhat puzzling. Was the reference of "ten years of struggle" not formerly meant to denote the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976)? Is the history of rock in China likely to proceed in predictable ten year steps, starting with an initial phase of learning, copying and studying (1976-1986), to its transformation from political protest to commercial success (1986-1996), ultimately leading to a "New Sound" in 1997? Or shall these words just remind the audience that this was not just another but the "real" cultural revolution? With special regard to tape and CD sales, the Asia-wide distribution via MTV-Asia and foreign record companies, music videos and VCDs, one can say that Chinese rock has surely changed from a mere underground counter-culture into one of the many commodity items of popular culture.

### **Modern Sky Records & Badhead**

This was, roughly speaking, the cultural-political situation when the "Third Generation" of rock musicians appeared in public, when 30-year-old Shen Lihui took the initiative and founded the record label "Modern Sky" (*Modeng Tiankong*) [[www.modernsky.com](http://www.modernsky.com)].

Shen Lihui, who is an artist, designer, and the lead singer of the popular funk-pop band "Sober" (*Qingxing*), has, as Guo Jieming and Su Fei put it, transformed his knowledge of "what appeals to young Chinese urbanites -- garnered as an art student and musician -- into an innovative company that releases more contemporary Chinese rock music than any other Mainland-based record label". The company publishes a music magazine with nation-wide distribution and operates one of Beijing's most popular live-music venues, the No. 17 Bar in Sanlitun. Modern Sky has released more than 17 records, and started an alternative label -- Badhead Records -- to produce music that appeals to what Shen calls the underground, in order to provide the new generation with a means of articulation. "Rock music is our mirror," says Shen Lihui. "This is not a lie, what 20-year-olds are looking at is a young face, while 50-year-olds can take the mirror and watch their wrinkles. It is the same with music. Permanent rebellion and permanent happiness are a lie, because the world is constantly rotating and time is constantly floating. How can we always say the same things?"

Additionally, in order to properly promote new sound and music, his company started to publish a monthly magazine: "Modern Sky Sound Magazine" (*Modeng Tiankong Yousheng Zazhi*), also known as "New Music New Life". The magazine is said to have already won legions of readers ranging from high-school dropouts who have just picked up their first guitar to music industry professionals and foreign correspondents trying to keep up on Beijing's fast-changing youth culture. The magazine's special feature is its triple-package character: a 48-page large format magazine, a small supplementary pamphlet and -- most importantly -- a compilation album on tape or CD.

One of the business tricks involved here is that the company's magazine is produced with a music publishing license and not with a print publishing license. The CD is therefore vital to the journal, as in this way one does not have to negotiate for a publication approval from the State Press and Publishing Administration. Today, Modern Sky is not alone in using such creative means to publish in Mainland China. "In recent years many start-up newspapers and small magazines have used the quasi-legal vehicle of advertising licences to outflank China's conservative cultural czars". Guo and Su thus come to the conclusion that Modern Sky is what can be termed "a typical post-modern PRC paradox." The crucial aspect is that the work space and subject matter of the company are underground, but the music and magazine it publishes are commercially successful. Modern Sky's future as a media empire is difficult to predict, but it has already won much praise for its engagement in Beijing's "New Sound Movement."

## ***Beijing's "New Sound Movement"***

The bands that are usually associated with the "New Sound Movement" were founded between 1994 and 1998. Since 1997, all of them -- though their styles are very different -- have signed contracts with Modern Sky Records.

The movement officially started on December 10, 1997, when Sober [[www.modernsky.com/artists/sober/index.html](http://www.modernsky.com/artists/sober/index.html)] released its first record, "It's Great!?" (*Hao ji le!?*). By then, Sober -- with its five members -- had a history of ten years and was already famous within rock circles. The song "Heart of the Tongue" (*Shetou Xin*), recorded and released in 1994, sold 450,000 copies in China. It was not only translated into English as "Shut Up!" and praised in England as "one of the most creative Chinese rock songs", it also became a success in Japan. Therefore, the band was likely to have a good start with an album that contained a variety of different songs composed in the course of the last decade. One of the songs, "I Remember to be Scattered -- No Sound" (*Jiyi Sanluo le -- Meiyou Shengyin*), was later selected for a sampler entitled "Chinese Rock: The Third Generation" (*Zhongguo Yaogun: Disan Dai*; 1999). [3]

The song is sung in a rather monotonous and cool voice, transported via a groovy and pure beat, as it was typical for British pop-rock during the nineties. In describing the dreamworld of a lonely urban individual, it reveals a dreary picture of urban survival, which is also one of the topics of the band "The Fly" (*Cangying Yuedui*) [[www.modernsky.com/artists/fly/index.html](http://www.modernsky.com/artists/fly/index.html)]. Crowned as "Greater China Grunge Kings" and as "representatives of Beijing's underground punk" (*Beijing dixia pengke de daibiao*), their style is far more aggressive. Founded in 1994, the four musicians released three songs one year later, and gained fame as China's first "dirty" (*zang*) rock band. The band managed to produce two albums in 1996 and 1998, which were produced and distributed abroad, before Modern Sky released them on the Mainland in 1999. Even the British press once described The Fly as China's "dirtiest and trashiest band" (*zui zang zui laji*), while Beijing's media mention the band as the city's most popular and significant underground band. Their albums were made with eye-catching covers designed by Song Yonghong and the band's singer Feng Jiangzhou, who is a graphic designer by profession and wrote most of the lyrics, respectively. "City Life" (*Chengshi Shenghuo*) appeared on their first record. [4] The protagonist of this song is passively watching a "you", who is spraying ink. What we are confronted with is an alienated urban individual, a lonely outsider, reflecting on city life. An even more gloomy situation is offered by the band "NO" and their song "Dream of a Badge" (*Xunzhang zhi Meng*). [5]

NO is the band around singer, composer and lyric writer Zu Zhu. His lyrics are described as "dark, pliable, and tough" (*hei'an rouren*), and, as one article goes, "make our face turn red." On the other hand, his words are praised as well-written, deep and honest, combining perfectly with his music, which includes styles such as punk, trash metal, rock, soft blues, and elements of acoustic guitar as well as traditional or Asian-sounding melodies. The brilliant and highly symbolic cover of *The Missing Master* bears a special touch, as it features a slightly altered painting by the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) painter Zhou Fang, who became famous for his paintings of beautiful elite women. Represented is a concubine holding a stick in her left hand that is attached by a red leash to a red collar fixed around the neck of a little dog. Here, the dog's head has been replaced with that of Zu Zhu, smiling and sticking out his tongue. One can read a large dose of irony and sarcasm into the scene: the concubine, representing the old traditions and the glorious times of the Tang dynasty, serves as cultural background for the power of the "red collar", which can be interpreted as the CCP, and is wrapped around the neck of a little dog. The dog itself might symbolise the masses and the young generation, which, despite all this, appears strong enough to laugh at and mock the whole situation.

"Supermarket" (*Chaoji Shichang*) is announced as China's first true electronic band (*dianzi yuedui*). Founded in 1997, the three members released their first record, "The Look" (*Muyang*), in 1998. The music is a mixture of styles as trance, trip-hop, new wave, hip-hop, house and space music, inspired by Depeche Mode and The Cure, with lyrics sung in Chinese and English. Promoted as a typical sound of the electronic age (*dianzi shidai*), their spherical and space-like sounds create a rather floating atmosphere around the topic of love.

Another artist in the field of electronic music is Chen Dili

[[www.modernsky.com/artists/dili/index.html](http://www.modernsky.com/artists/dili/index.html)], born in 1968 in Changsha. He enrolled in Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1987, and, after graduation, was co-founder of the band "Acupuncture Point" (*Xuwei*, 1992-1994). He worked with other musicians before he finally started his own solo project, released in 1999 under the title *Dili-delirium -- I Happily Died (Dili-delirium--Wo Kuaile Si le)*. Chen, who described himself as a perfectionist (*wanmeizhuyizhe*), proudly states in an interview that all instruments are played by himself. Asked about the meaning of "I happily died" (or: "I'm so happy I could die"), Chen says that he does not want to give a clear definition but, of course, the title has to be read as an antonym. His compositions are based on feelings (*ganjue*), which lead him into a world of (midi-)sounds, noises, words, rhythms and melodies, deriving from his love for what he called "pure music" (*chun yinyue*). Since every sound is music, words are not important,

and indeed, on the CD cover his lyrics are printed as "a great pile of chaotic numbers" (*yi da dui luanma*) with only a few Chinese characters inserted. Chen explains this by the fact that the meaning of his compositions is not (and shall not be) fixed.

The aim of his music is to transfer a feeling, a conflicting power (*chongtu li*) that is produced in the moment of listening by the audience itself: "I hope you sit down and close your eyes to listen. I hope you go home and think it over again. Whether you understand it or not, go home and think again. You don't have to clap your hands, I don't want your applause, I only hope you listen with your heart, this makes me really happy. What is interchange? It is not to use music, but to use a sense of hearing (*tingjue*), to use heart and feeling."

Three bands which feature three musicians, play a style called "little punk" (*xiao peng*) or "new punk" (*xin peng*).

The Flowers (*Hua'er*) signed a contract with Beijing's New Bees Company (*Xinfeng Gongsi*), where they also released the first album. According to what is written on the leaflet, the band "really wants happiness" (*kuai le*), and focuses on the fun that comes after school or on holidays (*fangxue*). The band is described as being "not so love-spreading as New Pants" (*Xin Kuzi*). "New Pants", founded in 1996, is recognised as China's best punk-pop band. The CD-cover features a comic with three punks who seem to make jokes about everything. They are fans of the British post-punk band Ramones and play uncomplicated punk, fresh and funny. Founded in 1994, "Underground Baby" (*Dixia Ying'er*) was the first Chinese band to release punk music on the Mainland (Hong Feng 1999:29). In 1998, the three musicians successfully sold their first album to Taiwan's Rock Records & Tapes Co. (*Gunshi Changpian*). As the name already suggests, their music is more "underground", meaning heavy, more trash and rock, underlined by a British sounding and typically Western punk voice.

Finally, the rather different new sound of singer and songwriter Hu Mage deserves special mention. Born in 1973, he came from Hubei province to Beijing and is featured as a folk storytelling artist (*minjian shuochang yiren*). Accompanied only by an acoustic guitar, he tells stories about daily life, approaching the stage just like Bob Dylan did three decades ago in the West. Ji Wan points out in his article that Hu Mage adds a formerly unknown style to China's popular music, introducing traditional elements like *ping tan*, *da gu*, and *shuo shu* [6]. In March 1999 he released his first record on the Modern Sky label, entitled "Everybody has a small wooden stool, mine will not be taken into the 21st Century".

Several more bands appeared on the Modern Sky label, e.g. "Catcher in the Rye", "Joke" (*Wanxiao*), "Dark Room" (*An Shi*), "Mu Ma" (Wooden Horse), "Shetou" (Tongue), "Spiky R. K." from Japan, "Charisma" from Hong Kong etc., some of them managed to release their own records, others contributed to several rock compilations. The topics of the above mentioned bands are typical for the "New Sound" insofar as they cover a thematic range from having fun, dreams, feelings, love, storytelling to frustration, boredom and ennui. These topics have always formed the core of Western rock music, and -- from a foreign perspective -- one might argue that the music offers nothing really spectacular. In the PRC, however, addressing problems and articulating oneself by using such straight forward vocabulary with a certain dose of irony has only a few years ago started to enter public discourse. Modern Sky and its support of the new product, summarised under the term "underground music", surely contributed to musical creativity and the variety of music styles available in record shops today. Additionally, it provides a new means of articulation. Beijing's "New Sound" is characterised by a seemingly unrestricted and queer use of words which speak of disillusionment, laziness and boredom as a reality of a part of China's urban youths, and transfer these feelings into society - via records, tapes, internet homepages and concerts. Since most of the CD covers are stylishly designed and clearly demonstrate co-operative efforts with artists, one can surely speak of a

new aesthetic in the realm of Chinese commercial popular culture, a synthesis of music, art and experiment that reflects a new individualism.

## ***Discourse On the Meaning of Beijing's "New Sound"***

In China's music world, the meaning and impact of Beijing's "New Sound" are widely discussed topics. Positive statements say that it truly represents the aspirations of the young generation, including all the different sentiments and viewpoints that exist today. Critics render their lyrics as meaningless and argue that "New Sound" is only a temporary game (*youxi*), because these musicians are by far too young to have a cultural basis, and therefore cannot address problems as skillfully as the older musicians. However, most people refrain from any making statement; they just sit down, listen and wait. What, then, is the meaning of "New Sound", after all?

The ideological shift visible behind these statements is both a by-product of China's reform policy and the result of the 1989 crackdown, after which the number of rock bands in Beijing had mushroomed. While the two generations of the "first ten years" (1986-1996) are characterised as being inspired by idealism and heroism, propagating heavy metal, hard rock and long-haired individualism, the present generation is said to feature realism (*xianshizhuyi*), common urban sentiments (*chengshi pingminzhuyi*), and short hair, transported via music styles such as new punk, electronic music, and underground rock.

The new hedonism runs counter to the idealist position of the older generation, especially Cui Jian. Inspired by China's classic philosophers, along with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Sartre, he blames these musicians for their superficiality and criticises them as "a generation of charlatans without culture" (*meiyou wenhua de yidai hunzi*). For Cui, rock music has a meaning and a certain message, which functions as a cultural force that should aim at social change, or at least make people think. And still, talking about the past few years, he does not speak of Chinese rock music's "degeneration":

"In the beginning, the development [of Chinese rock] was very fast and explosive, then its progress became slower and slower. There is nothing more to say, because rock music's effects on society are still restricted, mainly for political reasons. Radio and TV stations are still not allowed to broadcast rock music. [...] For me, the chance to organise performances has decreased even more. For those people, who are famous and whose power seems to be difficult to control, the doors will be locked. Political control is definitely not relaxing. ..."

Apart from political control, Cui sees himself confronted with decreasing record sales, and a situation in which "people only want to listen to my old songs, so that I am caught on stage as in a boxing ring". This happens also to be the case when Cui Jian plays abroad, where a nostalgic Chinese audience still regards him as the Tian'anmen revolutionary of 1989 and apparently does not want to cope with his new music. He does not hide his criticism now; but rather, in what looks like a compromise, combines it with new rhythm and music: "In my new songs, the music was composed for the young generation, but the lyrics were written for our generation," Cui said. On his latest album, *The Power of the Powerless* (*Wu Neng de Liliang*), he addresses the new generation directly. [7]

The music community in Beijing has become extremely diverse, and many bands compete to overcome Cui Jian. In an article entitled "Who will be the best after Cui Jian?", author Yan Jun even complains about the audience: "Cui Jian and his idealism and humanism moved China in a particular period. Ten years later, many more new passions and languages swarm around to speak about the new period. All these lazy ears, why are they still un-open?"

However, Cui Jian is surely not the only musician to connect rock music with a certain social responsibility today. A closer look at the lyrics of the now popular rock band "Thin Man" (*Shou Ren*), formed in 1993, reveals that they sincerely address problems like drug addiction, despair, betrayal, divorce, and even the war in Kosovo [*Zhe yi Zugou* ("Enough Already")].

Thin Man is said to have packed stadium shows, receiving rave interviews in the local press, and putting on "a sea-of-lighters-inspiring performance at the 1999 Annual New Music festival in Xinxiang, Henan province". Their debut album has already sold more than 60,000 copies. Maranatha Ivanova observed that at a promotional record signing in the downtown Beijing shopping district of Wangfujing, "the record store sold out of Thin Man cassettes, but that didn't stop eager fans who proffered notebooks, shirts and even bare skin for the band members to sign"

The growing popularity of Chinese rock music is thus due to the PRC's reform policy and the opening mass market which is eager to exploit the economic potential of rock music. By producing and distributing a large variety of new music styles, the companies divided the whole genre into different ideologies and audiences. Both the musicians and the audience are given the opportunity to choose between the romantic ideal of revolutionary authenticity, the claim of social responsibility, the lyrical message and/or entertaining fun - New Sound must be regarded as just one option in the contested field of Chinese rock music.

## ***Punk and Censorship***

Today, China's music market tries to fulfil the needs of the masses and to cope with what is called the "punk era" (*pengke shidai*), but, as will become clear with the final example, not without serious considerations. In 1999, Beijing's Jinggwen Records released the second edition of Cui Jian's (and China's) first and most successful record, "Rock 'n' Roll on the New Long March" (*Xin Changzheng Lushang de Yaogun*, 1989), to commemorate the record's tenth anniversary. Also in 1999, the same company produced, recorded, and distributed a double tape/CD of "Bored Contingent" (*Wuliao Jundui*), containing four punk bands: 69, Brain Failure, Anarchy Jerks and Reflector: "Now", as Anna-Sophie Loewenberg remarks, "the average Chinese kid in Shanghai, Wuhan, and Hebei can buy an album at their local record store and listen to Beijing punks sing: We are just losers in the PRC/ We aren't terrible/We aren't strong/At least we have power in our minds". Nevertheless, in an interview, "Anarchy Jerks" singer Shen Yue complained: "We have no freedom of speech, so our way to rebel is to not care, and just do what we like to do." By emerging from the underground and into the mainstream, Loewenberg points out, Beijing punks are faced with restrictions they did not have to deal with when they were just playing concerts at local dives. Only a portion of "Anarchy Jerks" set was included on the album, leaving out songs that might provoke the censors, like "Our Freedom of Speech Has Been Eaten by the Dogs." Other songs by 69 and Brain Failure were edited extensively.

"That is just the way it is in China," explains Liang Wei, the lead singer of 69. "We don't mean revolution like Chairman Mao -- we needn't kill anyone," he adds. Liang Wei captures the spirit of the album in a 69 punk rock reprise of the Cultural Revolution hit "Naqi zhi Bi Zuo Baoqiang" ("Lift Up Your Pens and Make Them Weapons"). Liang Wei parodies the revolutionary anthem with words that you wouldn't catch Lei Feng singing: "Our bodies are strong, our minds are empty. All we want to do is have fun."

Whether this is fun through anarchy, or anarchy through fun, does not matter. Again, the lyrics are important, and criticising, playing with or simply distorting Chinese socialist history is against the law. Therefore, political statements -- not sounds -- have to be revised, and are revised, in order to become part of the music business.

## "Look Toward the Future"

Modern Sky Co., the "typical post-modern PRC paradox", was founded after the death of Deng Xiaoping and the take-over of Hong Kong. In an uncertain period of political and economical tension, it appeared as both a novel invention of the young generation and a company that successfully started to promote and exploit a new market gap. The company's authentically wrapped package seems to be of definitely useful value and, pushed by its own media network, has reached a discursive quality that challenges the old guard of musicians. Although still subversive in content, "underground rock" has become officially acceptable partly because it concentrates on individual questions and introspective thoughts. This individualism combined with a new sound-oriented propaganda that, among youths, turned "underground" into a term with apparently positive connotations. Despite its commercial outfit, it is referred to as non-mainstream, non-conformist, individualistic, authentic, and characterises a particular off-the-beaten track and modern urban lifestyle -- often illustrated with pictures of musicians.[8] To characterise Beijing's (and soon by extension China's?) "New Sound", therefore, I would prefer to describe it as a "rebellion of denial" directed against heavy ideological involvement of any kind. It is just one and another face of modern urban China, a shift towards non-political "commodity rebellionism" with clear features of westernisation and globalisation.

### Footnotes

[1] *Gangtai Yinyue*: *gang-tai* is an abbreviation used for a particular style of light music (*qing yinyue*) coming from Hong Kong (*Xianggang*) and Taiwan. It is the most popular and dominant music style in the PRC, especially in the south.

[2] China's rock music history began in 1986, when Cui Jian's now-famous song "Nothing to My Name" (*Yi Wu Suo You*) appeared in public for the first time.

[3] There are some faces passing in front of my eyes, / there are some stories I unconsciously forget,  
The open country is shrouded in the spacious sky, / everything is quiet.  
Fresh flowers fall in this space without a sound, / skyscrapers' shadows hide my emptiness.  
Catch me, there is a cave, / reveal the secret, blown away by the wind.  
My remembering, / the fallen wind, the fallen flowers,  
the fallen streets, the defeated people, / the kiss in the wind, the melting past,  
penetrate into the nothingness I possess.  
I was awoken by my dream, / I dreamt that between me and this city's twinkling  
it has already become frosty.

[4] You are really a poor worm, / going to work every day early in the morning.  
I'd like to say, I look down on you, / we enjoy the city life.  
Who told you, / that I loved you or you loved me,  
in my dreams, / everything is the love that you told others of.  
You are really a poor worm, / going to work every day early in the morning,  
or lay lazy and thinking in bed, / it is like taking a taxi or a car.  
Life is like a broken painting, / forever irreparable.  
You are like an ink fish, / spraying ink and going forward,  
spraying ink and going forward.

[5] My remaining light is not leading you anymore, beloved person, / my fat-swollen face will very quickly be dispatched.

I know that you came to make me feel ashamed.

I am already at the gate on the city wall, and the staying bird nest is shadowless as before.

I am wandering in frozen urine, and see the raising of an illuminating halo,  
swallowed up by a lot of pain, swallowed up by a lot of pain.  
I will shut down all my functions, stop the buffoon dance I am dancing,  
stop myself listening to poems, songs and bright odes, stop myself from watching the movies you have  
been directing,  
stop myself from enjoying your living customs, stop myself enjoying your living customs.  
I abandoned my colours without thinking anymore, beloved father,  
before the end of my nearing death, before the end,  
could you listen to the experience of my loss, listen to the experience of my loss?

On: NO: "The Missing Master" (*Zuoshi de Zhuren*), Badhead Records, 1999.

[6] *ping tan*: storytelling and ballad singing in the Suzhou dialect; *da gu*: versified story sung to the accompaniment of a small drum and other instruments; *shuo shu*: storytelling.

[7] These are the first lines of the hip-hop and rap production "Slackers" (*Hunzi*):

No more iron rice bowl, just like my father.  
I don't want everyone fussing over me, like all the kids today.  
We haven't had it rough, haven't had it good;  
So people just say we're a generation of uneducated slackers.  
If I had to endure hardship, surely I would cry.  
I could go find a job, but I can't bring myself down to that level.  
If I talk about anything serious, I always talk around the point.  
But when I do anything serious, I have to first think of saving face.

What can I do besides deal with what's in front of me?  
What can I think about besides eat, drink, sleep, shit and piss?  
Hey, if you ask me what I think the next generation will be like,  
Then I'll tell you straight out: What's that got to do with me?

Make more money, make more money.  
If I make enough, things will change by themselves.  
But how much is enough? How much is enough?  
Without knowing it, I just keep making money and forget the rest.

Don't talk to me about anything serious. Don't get deep with me.  
These days, money is worth more than any education.  
Whoever says life is hard is an idiot.  
If you just think a little, and grease the wheels a little, you can get it done.

It's okay for me to criticise myself, but not you.  
Even though I have no education, I'm still better than those slackers.  
Don't look down on me, that's all I'm afraid of.  
Because there's a great person deep inside my heart.

I want to believe myself. I want to complete myself.  
But the worst feeling is being hesitant.  
Hey, let's be straightforward and stop wasting time.  
But today the most straightforward thing to say is, "Whatever".

Anyway I don't need to worry about what I eat or what I wear.  
If I really have nowhere to go I'll just live with my parents.  
During the day I work, and at night I just walk around.  
When I see someone I know I say "How's it going?" "Hey, I'm all right" ...

Slackers" (*Hunzi*), on: "The Power of the Powerless" (*Wu Neng de Liliang*), 1998. For the translation of the lyrics see also <http://www.cuijian.com> (<http://www.cuijian.com/>).

[8] "Nanfang Zhoumo" (Southern Weekly) frequently reports about the rock scene. Pictures present the musicians in their sticky rehearsal room or on the street, walking or playing music without t-shirts, smoking a cigarette or simply standing there and talking. This image is, of course, quite different from Hong Kong pop stars.

## Web Links

Beijing Scene (<http://www.beijingscene.com/>)

ChinaNow.com (<http://www.chinainow.com/>)

Cui Jian (<http://www.cuijian.com/>)

Modern Sky (<http://www.modernsky.com/>)

NEWBEES (<http://www.newbeesmusic.com/>)

## Discography

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Cui Jian: Wu Neng de Liliang (The Power of the Powerless), China Record Corporation 1998.

Dixia Ying'er (Underground Baby): Juexing (Wake Up), Rock Records & Tapes, Taiwan 1999.

Hu Mage: Renren dou you yige bandeng, wo de bu dairu ershiyi shijie (Everybody has a small wooden stool, mine will not be taken into the 21st Century), Modern Sky 1999.

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