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Chris Heselton
University of California, Irvine

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Rock is not Revolution

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By Chris Heselton

Rock is revolution! Rock is rebellion! Rock is democracy! Well, at least Axl Rose seems to think so with his new album Chinese Democracy. A rock legend singing to democracy in China seems almost poetically fitting. When people tend to think of China and rock music, it almost always comes back to democracy, more specifically, the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Rock was the theme genre of the liberal, underground democratic movement. Ever since Cui Jian (崔健) played "I Have Nothing" (一无所有)—sometimes translated as "Nothing to My Name"—at the protest, rock music has been associated with democracy in China, and this song its theme song.

Few think of Chinese rock as a popular mainstream conformist genre, but they would be mistaken to believe that rock is impervious to pop music trends and the lure of a larger audience (and profit). Since the turn of the century, Chinese rock has made a roaring comeback – surging this time not into a political movement but into the mainstream of Chinese language music. This rock music is different from the rock of the 80s and 90s. Mainstream popular music has now fused with rock to form a musical genre fitted to the popular music taste of young Chinese listeners. Whereas rock in the 80s dealt with depressing themes of individualism, social alienation, and disassociation (though plenty of young people who listened to Cui Jian then also consumed their share of gentle and sometimes upbeat Canton Pop on the side), now bands are looking to the same themes that have always figured in modern pop, regardless of the country – love, loss, nostalgia, upbeat felicitation.

What’s to account for this change? Some have argued it is government repression of more underground rock music in the recording industry, but I think that is probably giving the government too much credit. Many non-mainstream rock bands do get recorded – just this year one of the elites of Chinese rock, Tang Dynasty (唐朝), came out with its new CD, The Knight of Romance (浪漫骑士, 2008); however, many of these albums from non-mainstream groups never achieve the popularity that turn them into musical figures of national adoration. Even Cui Jian, the father of Chinese Rock, had his latest CD Show You Color (给你一点颜色, 2005) bomb. To put it simply, the majority of Chinese youth generally find it hard it to relate to the lyrics and melodies of some of the more hardcore rock.

A video about the band Tang Dynasty
For rock to enter the mainstream, bands have had to adapt and conform to popular music taste to which a young general audience can relate and find acceptable. It is no different from popular music trends in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, or even American rap music in the 1990s. Musicians have the option of either conforming to the mainstream and hitting the big time or remaining in obscurity. For many rock bands, this means breaking away from themes of individuality and emotional detachment from society and singing more generally about love. The instrumentals also become subtler and lighter, and swear words and inappropriate themes are generally avoided (with exceptions). The influence is not one way, however. Many elements of rock music have entered into the repertoire of, especially Taiwanese, pop singers/groups like S.H.E. and Jay Chou (周杰伦).

This does not mean that the good old days of rock are gone though some may think so. It really shows a new diversity in the options of artistic styles. Not everyone has to be the non-conformist anti-social rocker to be a rock star. Rock stars and groups like Xu Wei (许巍), Zheng Jun (郑钧), May Day (五月天), and Shin (信乐团) have all become household names in recent years employing the electric guitar with softer lyrics showing the influence of Cantonese pop music. Leading the way in this popular transition of Chinese-language rock are Taiwanese bands, but this does not mean that Chinese musicians have been left in the dust. Even some of the old school rock stars like Tang Dynasty and Cui Jian are willing to be at least partially co-opted to achieve a portion of fame and their proverbial slice of the pie.
Meanwhile, the more hardcore groups like Overload (超載), Yaksa (夜叉), ChthoniC (閃靈樂團), and Brain Failure (腦濁), although they all have several albums, are relegated to an underground subculture unable to capture large audiences with their rebellious lyrics and rough instrumentals. This diversity of approaches in Chinese rock is a far cry from the revolution, rebellion, and democracy that some once believed rock stood for, but it is the new dichotomy of Chinese rock as some have become popular rock stars and others underground cult favorites.

The lyrics are where one really can see the differences. To show you how these bands are made, in the next section of the article, I would like to share with you the lyrics of several popular rock songs that do succeed and compare them with those that did not.

[Part II can be found here.]

Chris Heselton is a graduate student at the University of California, Irvine.

Tags: Chinese music, Cui Jian, Jay Chou