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I Know, It’s Only Rock’n’Roll (But They Don’t Like It)

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This posting about the politics of pop concerts in Shanghai is mostly about an American duo (Jan and Dean), whose hits included “Surf City,” and the hard-to-categorize Icelandic songstress Bjork, who last week made headlines and drew the ire of the Chinese state by saying the words “Tibet, Tibet” after performing a song called “Declare Independence” (on the heels of which, there was apparent tinkering with Harry Connick Jr.’s song list at a recent performance). It still seemed right, though, to give the piece a title adapted from a song by a famous British band. Why? Because the Rolling Stones, like Bjork and Jan and Dean back in 1986, made headlines when they played Shanghai. And because the band’s lead singer, Mick Jagger, made the funniest statement I’ve ever come across regarding the often singularly unfunny topic of censorship in the PRC. When told before the group’s 2006 concert that the authorities forbid them from playing “Brown Sugar” and several other sexually suggestive songs, at a concert that Jagger knew would probably be attended largely by Western men, accompanied by either Western or Chinese women, his comment (made with his famous tongue firmly in cheek) was: “I’m pleased that the Ministry of Culture is protecting the morals of the expat bankers and their girlfriends that are going to be coming.”

So what, you may be wondering, could efforts to pre-censor the Rolling Stones (not a new thing for them to deal with, since Ed Sullivan had made them change the lyrics of “Let’s Spend the
Night Together” to “Let’s Spend Some Time Together” almost four decades earlier) and the outrage that came in the wake of Bjork’s reference to Tibet (from official spokesmen and also from some Chinese fans) have to do with Jan and Dean? Well, as far as I know, none of the songs on that surf band’s play list was deemed unacceptable when they performed in Shanghai, back when I was doing dissertation research in the city (though, alas, I didn’t make it to their concert). Nor did they make any statements before, between or after they played that caused a stir. Still, as I’ve noted elsewhere before, their concert, too, involved efforts by authority figures to limit freedom of expression—in that case by Chinese members of the audience that came to hear the music. According to reports that quickly made the rounds at Shanghai campuses, when some of these fans, students from Tongji University, eager to be part of the history-making first rock concert held in their city, got up to dance in the aisles, security guards told them to sit back down—and in a few cases, pushed them around a bit.

It is widely known, among China specialists at least, that rock music played a significant role in the Tiananmen protests of 1989. Wu’er Kaixi and other student leaders of the time cited Cui Jian (who would seventeen years later join the Stones onstage in 2006 for the Shanghai renditions of their song “Wild Horses,” by the way) and other performers as having influenced and inspired them, while Hou Dejian’s “Children of the Dragon” was a popular anthem at Tiananmen Square—where the song’s author, who had moved from Taiwan to the mainland, joined the protesting crowds. What has sometimes been forgotten is that anger at
the way students were treated at the Jan and Dean concert played a role in the 1986 Shanghai demonstrations that, while smaller and more short-lived and far less dramatic than the ones to follow in 1989, helped pave the way for the Tiananmen movement.

What are the lessons to be drawn by this brief look back at rock music’s role in Chinese political struggles and cultural upsurges of the late twentieth century—a history that has been documented in insightful and detailed ways by the likes of Geremie Barmé, Linda Jaivin, Andrew Jones, and Andreas Steen? It might suggest that the authorities are right to worry about what happens during pop concerts. I would argue, though, that the line running from Jan and Dean to Bjork suggests something a bit different. Namely, that China’s rulers want their country to be one in which world-class events take place routinely in the cities of their country, but also want those same urban centers to be kept free from unexpected forms of expression. They want to be able to bring to China performers who gained fame partly through defying expectations—before her concert, in an article prophetically titled “Bjork’s Shanghai Surprise,” one officially sponsored China-based English language website enthused about the Icelandic star as someone known for her capacity to “surprise the public and the media with her new artistic directions, her quirky sense of fashion and her controversial attitudes”—and then have them eschew doing anything “quirky” or “controversial” while in the PRC. (Presumably an over-the-top fashion statement, such as the much-talked-about swan dress she wore to the 2001 Academy Awards would have been okay.)

A desire to control the script of public performances is not unique to China, with Ed Sullivan’s call for Jagger to tone down one of his lyrics and the flap over Janet Jackson’s “wardrobe malfunction” during a recent Super Bowl half-time show being just two American cases in point. Still, it is hard to have things both ways, to convince international observers that your cities now offer the same things that London and New York do and to persuade students within your own country that they can be part of global youth culture without venturing abroad, and yet keep the occasional unexpected thing from happening in public. This is worth keeping in mind as the Olympics near, for individual Games are often remembered for surprising things that happened
during them. And it might actually be better for China if the 2008 Olympics were remembered for some small, embarrassing surprises—a few moments like that which came during Bjork’s performance in Shanghai—than for being such a tightly controlled mega-event that it was drained of excitement. A mega-event so stripped of spontaneity that felt off somehow, like, well, a rock concert where everybody in the audience sat quietly in their seats.