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Punks and Posers in China

A Muted Rebel Yell Emerges in Nation Where Dissent Is Suppressed, Fads Rule

By Maureen Fan
Washington Post Foreign Service
Wednesday, August 9, 2006

BEIJING -- Shortly after midnight, in a smoky bar in a western Beijing neighborhood, a lanky 33-year-old in blue jeans and thick, black-rimmed glasses took the stage, looking every bit like an engineering student.

But as the guitarists on either side of Yang Haisong began thrashing out minor chords, he left little doubt about his credentials. He contorted his face, uttered an anguished cry and jerked his head to the frenetic rhythm that is universally recognizable to fans of punk rock.

"At the moment when blood flows out," Yang sang, "make a V sign, and scream loud!"

For Chinese punks today, it might take screaming to be heard. They make up a small slice of the music industry here, and they play to a largely underground scene. But their struggle to gain attention provides a glimpse of what it's like to be a rebel in a country that suppresses dissent and individuality, and an artist in a culture that worships money and Western fads.

"Most bands are into punk because it's fashionable. They are more like copy bands, cover bands that copy the lifestyle. Punk rock should be more dangerous, more deep. You should establish your own style," said Yang, the lead singer of P.K. 14, which has a sizable following and performed Saturday night at a bar in Beijing's Wudaokou district.

"We want to be a dangerous band, like Fugazi or The Clash or Bob Dylan. Woody Guthrie's folk music influenced me a lot," Yang said. "But because the government doesn't care about us, we are not forbidden from playing. Maybe we are not dangerous. It's sad."

In the West, punk rock is about annoying your parents and confronting the establishment at every turn. In theory, it's the same in China.

Punks here believe they can say whatever they want. They are pierced and sullen, with spiderweb tattoos on their elbows and cheap dye in their hair. Band slogans include "No future" and "Revolution for your life." Their lyrics urge fans to "never forget the lessons from Orwell" and to fight the police "until dead."

But in China, bands can't publicly turn the national anthem into a rock statement, as Jimi Hendrix did at Woodstock. Artists can't publish anti-government songs in Chinese. Just last month, the Culture Ministry announced a plan to help prevent the spread in karaoke bars of "unhealthy or obscene" music, or songs that have inappropriate sexual or political content.

As a result of these limitations, would-be anarchists in China have to be flexible. Chinese punks may admire Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols, but their methods

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are different.

One popular band sings sarcastically about its destructive need for Zhongnanhai cigarettes, a brand that happens to share its name with the residential compound for China's top leaders. Another band sings about "the square of hopelessness," without ever mentioning Tiananmen.

Still, some punk rockers say they don't shy away from making a statement.

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"You *can* confront the government," insisted Lei Jun, 31, lead singer for Misando, a band named after a sweet traditional Chinese dessert.

Lei said he started listening to bootleg tapes of punk music in 1996. He and his friends attended their first live show a year later, more than two decades after punks began shocking audiences in New York and London.

"First, we liked the music. We felt excited," said Misando's drummer, Guo Yang, 20. "The characters. The personality. Sid Vicious. The power of 'Anarchy in the UK' and 'God Save the Queen.' We liked the energy and the fact that they could say what they were saying on stage."

Today, Lei wears combat boots, black T-shirts and white suspenders, and he shaves his head. It's a look, he said, meant to connect with the working class. He speaks of a "stress between the people and the government."

"Of course the government tells you what to do. It tells Americans what to do," he said. "The politics everywhere are ugly. It looks different here, but the nature of it is the same."

Li Yang, 23, is the lead singer for a band called Demerit. He spent \$3 to dye a chunk of his black hair blond. He gave a tailor another \$3 to narrow a pair of black pants and add huge zippers and chains. A button on his jacket said, "No Life, No Future."

At a recent day-long punk festival at a drive-in movie theater, where even the resident dog had a mohawk, Li argued that Chinese punks have rejected the drugs and violence of some of the punks who gave rise to the genre in Europe and the United States.

"They were troublemakers," said Li, who is also known as Spike. "We are trying to change the image of punk rockers. We just want to tell the audience that the music is pure and that we are nice and not violent."

Many punk rockers in China are long on style and short on substance, critics say. Few of them can articulate what they stand for or explain what their songs mean. Some claim to be voices for the downtrodden but aren't familiar with true poverty.

Critics point out that most of the punks are members of a generation born in the 1980s, and the first to be raised in the one-child-only families mandated by the government. Their parents are seen as more indulgent, willing to let their only children lead the lives that they want.

"They don't know what they want because they want so many things," said Lu Bo, chief executive of Scream Records and owner of a now-defunct club that helped popularize punk music in Beijing eight years ago. "Those born in the '60s and '70s were told by their

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teachers and parents, 'This is the way you should lead your lives.' No one told this group. They're free to follow new trends."

Some analysts say that, in a way, China's punks can afford to be a little aimless. Many of them are more well-off than their parents.

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"We have a lot of anger, but because of the high speed of the economic growth, it has covered the anger, the injustice," said Guan Kai, a sociologist who was among the protesters at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Back then, a subversive song called "A Piece of Red Cloth" by Cui Jian, the father of Chinese rock-and-roll, became an anthem for the students:

That day you used a piece of red cloth
To blindfold my eyes and cover up the sky
You asked me what I had seen
I said I saw happiness
The feeling really made me comfortable
Made me forget I had no place to live
You asked where I wanted to go
I said I want to follow your road

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The new generation of musicians don't have the same sense of mission, Guan said.

Even as they claim the freedom to say whatever they want, punks admit there are lines they cannot cross.

"When we were younger we believed in politics, but we found it to be useless," said Lei, Misando's lead singer, listening to a mix of The Pogues and Madness on his bassist's home computer. "We used to have a song about police injustice, called 'The Soul of Chinese Cops.' But we're not politicians or the president. We can't change the system."

The obstacles to China's music, filmmaking and painting are not always from government censors. China's pressure-cooker university system has been criticized for destroying creativity and preparing students only for exams. Much of the most interesting art is found underground. Often, it is society that is unsupportive.

"If a filmmaker shows the dark side of society, for example, homosexual life, even if the government doesn't stop you, people will not come out to see the film," Lu said. "If you are a singer and you have your own style of music and only five people come to see you, can you survive?"

At a recent concert, a Chinese punk rocker was "just following the script for punkness" and attacking President Bush, said Michael Pettis, owner of the club where P.K. 14 performed. "Chinese punks should be attacking Hu Jintao, but that's not the way it works in China. That's dangerous."

Cui Jian, an icon for some punks in China, said cooperating with government censors doesn't necessarily mean you have to change the meaning of a song. "Chinese punks want to show they're angry. That's enough. They don't have to make a big statement," he said in an interview. "The most important thing is don't lose yourself."

Yang Haisong, the lead singer of P.K. 14, said Chinese are looking for meaning in a country that is changing so drastically. "The average man has to look for support, something to live for," he said. "The government told people you should live for money, a house, a car, a bigger house. So more people get rich and more people get poor. It's a bad situation. Some foreigners say China has a bright future, but I say there's no future.

"I try to sing about this, express this in our music," Yang said. "I am not a fighter, a protester, a politician. Music is what I do, I can only do that."

Researcher Jiang Fei contributed to this report.

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