Wuhan is a massive industrial city in the center of China. Dirty and corrupt, like Manchester in the UK, it seemed an unlikely birthplace for one of China’s most vibrant punk scenes. The city proved fertile ground to a young musician and activist Wu Wei, who founded the legendary band SMZB and launched Wuhan’s punk rock revolution nearly twenty years ago. The following article was provided by Nathanel Amar who holds a PhD in cultural anthropology. Nathanel Amar draws on over six years of personal experiences and interviews to overview the history, key places and people that comprise Wuhan’s punk scene.

The first time I arrived in Wuhan on a cold December morning, the song “Big Wuhan”, by SMZB, popped into my head: “Here is a punk city—Wuhan! We sing this song for you—Wuhan! We start to rebel and fight in Wuhan! Everybody cheers for you!” Proud of the rebellious spirit of his city, Wu Wei, the singer of Wuhan’s SMZB highlights that “In 1911, the Wuchang Uprising [the catalyst for China’s first revolution] fired here.” In another song he lobbs harsh criticism at Wuhan’s local urban management bureau officials called chengguan, who are responsible for numerous beatings of street vendors by proclaiming that “Wuhan doesn’t need a chengguan revolution.”

SMZB’s A Letter from China contains powerful songs, with lyrics detailing everyday violence in China (“Violence in Public”), Mao’s cult of personality (“Smash his statue”), and hope for democratization (“Waiting For This Day” “等待那一天”). SMZB’s songs are a call to never forget the past. As Wu Wei puts it during his live performances: “only by studying the past can one avoid making the same mistakes.”
This statement is strangely close to what Ba Jin, the most famous Chinese anarchist novelist, wrote after the Cultural Revolution: he wanted to “build a museum of the Cultural Revolution, so that every generation will remember these ten painful years, so that we won’t tolerate the repetition of this event.”

SMZB represents the living memory of China, participating in the creation of a symbolic museum of past Chinese social movements. Last September, SMZB released a new album entitled *The Chinese are Coming*, which contains “The Song of the Seagull” (“海鸥之歌”), a poem written by female intellectual and communist activist named Lin Zhao who was arrested during the anti-rightist movement of 1957. She was murdered by the CCP in 1968, but prior to that wrote this poem in prison using her own blood, since the guards refused to provide her a pen.

Probably the most respected punk in China, Wu Wei has never stopped criticizing the Chinese government and the society it created. For the 25th anniversary of the Tian’anmen Square Massacre in 2014, he produced one of the boldest protest albums in Chinese history, entitled *A Letter from China*. The cover features a tank rolling over a helpless person and photos of the 1989’s Tian’anmen student movement are collected in the liner notes. The album itself represents a challenge to the Communist Party, who tried to make a whole generation forget the most important Chinese social movement of the last fifty years.

Wu Wei grew up in Hankou, the oldest district of Wuhan. After graduating from high school, he didn’t feel like going to University. Instead he spent most of his time outside roaming the streets with his friends. When his friends started doing too many drugs, Wu Wei realized he had to get away from his hometown. When he saw an ad for the Beijing Midi Music University, he decided to apply even if he knew nothing about music, let alone rock’n’roll.

In February 1995, Wu Wei arrived in Beijing and began to learn bass guitar at Midi University. During his studies he discovered foreign as well as Chinese rock bands like Cui Jian, Tang Dynasty and Hei Bao. With the help of *dakou* CDs and his studies at Midi University, Wu Wei started to learn more about rock and punk music. Literally “cut” (*dakou* – 打口), these foreign CDs were sent by cargo to China in order to be recycled, and cut on their edges to prevent them from being resold. Unfortunately for Western major companies, a CD is read from its center to its periphery, so cutting it only prevent the last song from being listenable. *Dakou* CDs were sold
on the black market, and in the 1990s you could find them everywhere on the streets.

After a three month program at Midi, Wu Wei decided to stay in Beijing, during which time he found two other musicians from Wuhan: drummer Zhu Ning and guitarist Han Lifeng. They lived and practiced together and by the end of 1995, they all went back to Wuhan together.

In 1996, they formed Wuhan’s very first punk band, SMZB (Shengming zhi bing – 生命之饼), literally “pancake of life”, a reference to the biblical New Testament. After their studies in Beijing, there was no turning back. Punk rock was their way of life and Wuhan would be the center of punk rock in China.

Being a punk rocker in Wuhan in the 1990s was not easy. There was no money to be earned nor venues for performances. Wu Wei remembers this era: “It was hard to perform. We went to KTV [karaoke parlors] in Hankou. We would talk with the owners and sometimes they would let us play. If they let us perform once, they wouldn’t let us perform twice! We were too noisy, too drunk, and nobody had any money to buy their alcohol!”

Despite the difficulties of material life for the punks in Wuhan, SMZB attracted a lot of people during their concerts and instigated the creation of new bands. Among them were Sidoule (死逗了 – Play to death), Discovery, Angry Dog Eyes, Big Buns and Polang (破浪). Since there were not yet enough drummers in the scene, Zhu Ning the original drummer for SMZB, had to play for five bands at the same time.

At this time money was scarce in the punk community, but what the bands lacked in money, they made up for in energy, creativity and craziness. The favorite sport of Wuhanese punks was then luoben (裸奔), running naked in the streets after drinking too much often with police in close pursuit. This is not quite the image that comes to mind for a “harmonious” society.

In keeping with a traditional punk ethos, punk fans were becoming active in supporting their community. In 2001 a young women named Kang Mao dropped out of school and opened up a bar in Wuhan called Boys Toys to host punk shows. It lasted only a few months, but it opened the door for the Wuhanese punk community to create their own spaces. Kang Mao went on to form the first Wuhanese female punk band with drummer Hu Juan, who later joined SMZB. She later formed the famous emo-punk band SUBS together with Wu Hao, the guitarist of Angry Dog Eyes, and moved to Beijing.

Zhu Ning felt that the Wuhan alternative scene needed its own place for bands to perform and the community to get together. He subsequently dropped his own music career to open a livehouse called VOX, whose motto written on the door reads “Voice of Youth, Voice of Freedom”. VOX, for eleven years, has been the musical heart of the Wuhan underground, and is now an indispensable place for all punk and rock bands touring through Wuhan.
Wu Wei himself worked for VOX, before opening a bar with his friends located just below called “Wuhan Prison,” or “Folkhand”. The name itself is a reference to an SMZB song, “Wuhan Prison,” and a verse of their song “Big Wuhan”: “She will be beautiful, she will get Freedom. It won’t be like a prison here forever.” Wuhan Prison is more than just a bar—it has fostered a community in the Chinese punk scene. One can easily identify the Wuhan Prison punks in concerts, as they all wear the “Wuhan Prison” t-shirt. It’s a sign of recognition but also a political statement, as Wuhanese punk is the most politically engaged movement in China.

An average night in the present punk scene is spent on Lumuo Road, the site of both VOX and Wuhan Prison as well as the heart of Wuhan student’s district in Wuchang, a colorful mix of college students, street vendors, and foreigners, passing by, eating, drinking and sometimes arguing with the chengguan. Punk kids gather in front of VOX’s gates, waiting for the show to start, or drinking in Wuhan Prison. Next to the bar there is now a tattoo shop called “Wuhan Prison Ink,” where you can get a free “Wuhan Prison” tattoo.

Further along Lumuo Road is Donghu, Wuhan East Lake: a huge lake in the Wuhan countryside just 20 minutes from Wuhan Prison. In 2011, SMZB sang the beauty of Donghu in “Jianghu Escape” (Jianghu dataowang – 江湖大逃亡): “City escape! The rebel bus is what we take. Drinking and swimming in Singo beer. Diving in the East Lake.” Donghu is an important place for Wuhan punks. It’s where they go to escape from the city and its noise in order to swim in the lake or just to hang out with friends.

Next to Donghu, is the Wuhan botanical garden, and the house where Mai Dian lives. Mai Dian was the guitarist of Sidoule and Sibaiji (四百击 – 400 Blows), two major punk bands in the early days of the Wuhan punk movement. He is the founder of “Our House” (Women jia – 我们家), the closest version of a squat in China, providing books, shelter and food to the city’s activist minded punks. “Our House” promotes an alternative way of living, based on autonomy and solidarity, something not found in other Chinese cities and their punk communities.

Mai Dian often organizes conferences about the defense of Donghu, which is constantly threatened by real estate speculation. In March 2010 an article written in the Gangzhou-based newspaper Times Weekly revealed a corruption scandal concerning the development of the Donghu area, which included the construction of an amusement park, luxury hostels and shopping malls. Mai Dian and Wu Wei were at the front of the public protest in defense of Donghu alongside intellectuals, villagers, and students. They even organized a march, which was shut down. Wu Wei’s phone and emails were monitored by authorities as a consequence. This didn’t deter them however, Mai Dian still organizes public conferences in “Our House” about Donghu, with the “Donghu for all” (Meigeren de donghu – 每个人的东湖) activist group.

The musicians and activist from Wuhan have had extensive influence on the development and character of punk scenes across China, yet retain a strong local identity as Wuhanese punks. Wu Wei’s commitment to his hometown and the people who live there is at the core of the Wuhanese punk ethos. His own tireless efforts in particular have shaped the development of punk in Wuhan into a highly communal and political scene. As he states in the song “Big Wuhan”:

I live here with my dream, I walk on the street with my hope, I want to change this city, Because she belongs to you and me!