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Radical Participation: The Politics of Performance in Chinese Punk-Rock Concerts

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On December 30, 2012, the Beijing punk live venue School Bar organized a New Year punk concert with an impressive line-up, including some old and respected punk and skinhead bands—as Misandao 蜜三刀 or Ouch 哎咿—and younger bands like Gum Bleed 牙龈出血, Discord or Hell City. The old ska-punk band Ouch was the last to perform at 2 A.M. The audience was sparse and drunk; the skinheads were still excited after the performance of Misandao and were shouting in front of the stage. The band Ouch began to play, and immediately pogos began to form. Misandao's late singer Lei Jun took the microphone from the stage and began to sing, audience members invaded the stage and disturbed the musicians, but everybody seemed to enjoy themselves, and the concert was only interrupted when the drummer began to vomit on his shoes. The band apologized, saying that it was too late, the drummer was drinking all night long and could not continue to perform. Even if Ouch performance was interrupted, the audience and the band considered the

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concert a success. Concert audience participation is an essential component of the punk performance. The band is not only performing a song that the audience listens to, they create a unique sonic experience together, one in which the audience and the musicians are separated neither physically nor symbolically. This is of course not specific to China, many other punk communities around the world function in the same fashion. Punk was originally conceived as a way to negate the professionalization of rock musicians and to assert the right for everyone to “form a band”, as it was stated in the punk fanzine *Sideburn* in 1977, or that “even ugly you can still play”, as Joe Strummer famously said (Hein 2012, p. 21). But in the Chinese case, punk communities have to deal with an authoritarian state that still controls popular cultural expression (Jones 2010; Baranovitch 2003). The way these communities organize and play concerts is in total contradiction with the way concerts are officially organized in China. Audience participation at live music events is indeed something that the Chinese authorities aim to prevent, as evidenced by the management of official concerts by the Chinese police. Through a description of various punk concerts in different spaces, both in underground and official live venues, this chapter will show how the radical participation of the audience during punk concerts is creating alternative spaces of cultural and political expression in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This chapter is dedicated to live performances in the PRC, whose social, political and economic situation is very different from other regions of the Sinophone world. In Hong Kong, for instance, the struggle for some underground music communities to find proper spaces to perform is often linked to real estate price levels, political tensions or the Lands Department bureaucracy which grants public entertainment licenses. The Hidden Agenda, a legendary live venue discussed elsewhere in this book, has epitomized these issues.

Creating a Scene in a Hostile Environment

The history of Chinese punk rock, which emerged in the mid-1990s, has to be replaced in the longer story of the Chinese underground musical communities in general, and the Beijing rock community in particular.

In the early 1980s, the first Chinese rockers had to find spaces to rehearse and perform, in universities or international hostels where they could organize rock *parties* (Capdeville-Zeng 2002). They also took advantage of the public spaces opened by students and intellectuals in the wake of the democratic movement of 1989 (Béja 1992). After the Tiananmen crackdown of 1989, prominent Chinese rockers were banned from performing in official venues in Beijing (Campbell 2011), and the rock community had no choice but to perform in unofficial parties, in bars newly opened by Beijing rockers such as Li Ji 李季, the singer for Bu Dao Weng 不倒翁, one of the first Chinese rock bands (Xue 1993). In 1995, Liu Yuan 刘元, a saxophonist playing with China's most prominent rock musician Cui Jian 崔健, opened the CD Café, a bar located in the Chaoyang 朝阳 district of Beijing. If Chinese rock was marginalized after the Tiananmen crackdown, pirated albums from Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also *dakou* 打口 (“saw-gashed”) CDs and tapes,¹ fostered a new generation of Chinese musicians. In the mid-1990s, newly formed punk and indie bands began to play in the alternative spaces opened by Chinese rock musicians, sharing the stage with more traditional rock bands. At that time, it was not uncommon to see concerts featuring punk and garage bands alongside older rock acts such as Dou Wei 窦唯, Cobra 眼镜蛇 or Cui Jian. As mentioned in David O'Dell's memoirs, an American exchange student who witnessed firsthand the emergence of the Chinese punk-rock movement, Beijing punks had also to create their own rehearsal spaces, like the one set up by the Gao 高 brothers (members of one of the first Chinese punk band UnderBaby 地下婴儿) in their parents' roast duck restaurant (O'Dell 2011). In the late 1990s, bars specifically dedicated to the punk community began to appear in Beijing and other Chinese cities, like the Scream Club 嚎叫俱乐部 or the Happy Paradise 开心乐园, but they all had to close after a couple of years of activity for financial issues or due to administrative pressure, replaced by new bars and live venues, which have to constantly negotiate their existence with local authorities.

¹A term which refers to unsold Western tapes sent to China to be recycled but sold on the black market throughout the 1990s for a fraction of the original price. For more, see De Kloet (2005) and Amar (2018).

While the origins of punk live events in the PRC were predicated upon a kind of parasitic relationship to more traditional rock venues, the specificities of punk aesthetics and practices gradually made such relation increasingly uneasy for Chinese punks. Sharing the stage with other alternative music communities also fostered resentment and tensions inside the punk community, which often accused rock live venues of voluntarily marginalizing their performances and not sharing fairly the revenues of the shows. As pointed out by the singer of street-punk band Discord after a concert at the old MAO Livehouse in Beijing, “the manager of the bar decided by himself the line-up of the concert, we performed at the very end, after all the rock bands. Then, the manager fled with tonight tickets’ money, we had to threaten him in order to get our share. And it was less than the other bands”.² Other bands also criticize rock venues for not showing them enough respect, a claim based on the perception that these venues typically provide less free alcohol to punk musicians before their shows. Additionally, the spatial arrangements of these rock venues were ill-suited for punk performativity. These spaces generally consist of an elevated stage for the band and a lower pit for the audience with these two relatively distinct areas usually being separated by a barrier. As a result, audience members and musicians are not on the same physical level, and it is rather complicated for the public to invade the stage—except during stage-diving, when a member of the audience jumps onto the crowd from the stage. Within rock venues, audience participation revolves mainly around pogo, circle pit and stage-diving, practices shared by many alternative music communities such as the hard-rock or metal fans. But these kind of performance spaces are not entirely suitable for punk shows, which need a more interactive spatial setting: punk audience members often invade the stage in order to sing with the band, thus actively participating in the performance itself—sometimes voluntarily disrupting the concert by taking the microphone or the instruments away from the musicians. Resentment toward and tensions with more rock-oriented event organizers and their venues as well as physical space limitations in these concert spaces encouraged the Chinese punks to open their own venues in order to manage their performances by themselves. Spatial

² Z., Y. (2013, April 19). Personal interview.

infrastructures are crucial for the formation of a viable punk community. As O'Connor (2002) points out, the creation of a “punk scene” is only possible when bands find venues to play, perform and live cheaply.³ Thus, Chinese punks had to stop relying on the already existing rock community to create spaces where they could set their own rules (Image 14.1).

The Politics of Pogo Dancing

When Spike, the singer of the punk band Demerit 过失 decided to open a live venue dedicated to punk rock in Tongzhou 通州⁴ in 2013, his project was linked to the marginalization of punk music in Chinese rock festivals. In 2013 for instance, the Strawberry Music Festival 草莓音乐

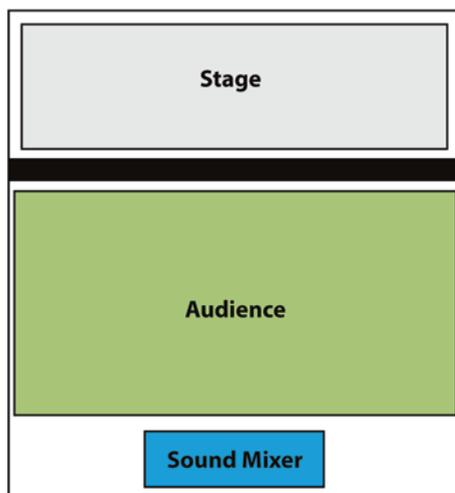


Image 14.1 The space of a Chinese rock live venue

³As pointed out by O'Connor: “When punks use the term ‘scene’ they mean the active creation of infrastructure to support punk bands and other forms of creative activity. This means finding places to play, building a supportive audience, developing strategies for living cheaply, shared punk houses, and such like” (2002, p. 226).

⁴A suburb located in the Eastern part of Beijing.

节, created by the independent record label Modern Sky 摩登天空,⁵ did not schedule any punk band, even though the festival was organized in Tongzhou where a lot of Beijing punks live due to cheap rents and the proximity of the Beijing Contemporary Music Academy 北京现代音乐学院. Spike thus decided to organize his own punk festival, entitled “Strawberry Fucktival” in Tongzhou, which led the foundation to the first punk bar in Tongzhou, the DMC (Dirty Monster Club). Between 2013 and 2015, the DMC was a major site of punk experimentation, where local punks could manage their own performances, and share the money generated by the concerts equitably. In this space, the organization of concerts was also thought as a kind of democratic process, as opposed to the way Beijing rock bars traditionally organize their group line-ups. While live venues managers generally decide themselves which band will start and close a concert, the punks at the DMC decided to organize a beer competition between the bands with the fastest drinker choosing the line-up (Image 14.2).

The beer competition is not the only example of a punk style of management at a live venue like the DMC. The space of the concert itself is



Image 14.2 The beer competition at the DMC. (Photo by the author)

⁵Modern Sky is also known for having participated in the commercialization of indie rock music in the 1990s; see Steen (2000).

designed to welcome a punk show, during which the audience participates actively to the performance. Indeed, in lives venues managed directly by the punks—such as the DMC in Tongzhou, the School Bar in Beijing or the Wuhan Prison in Wuhan—the stage is not separated from the audience by a barrier. The public often storms the stage, and the musicians also often invade the audience's space to play among them—except for the drummer who has to stay on stage because of the weight of the drum kit. Members of the audience frequently take the microphone from the singer to sing their favourite songs, play with the guitar or the bass and sometimes disturb the concert violently by jumping on the singer.⁶ Punk dances include the “pogo”, but also “slamdancing” or “moshing”, which “brought increased body contact to the original pogo” (Tsitsos 1999, p. 405), “headbanging” or stage-diving.⁷ These dances have been analysed as political “assertions of individual presence” (p. 407) in the punk scene and as an opposition to the mainstream, allowing “punks to present the threat of chaos while still maintaining unity among themselves within the pit” (*ibid.*). While violent in appearance, these dances also show solidarity between participants of the pogo, since everyone who falls is quickly lifted and taken care of (Image 14.3).

Like the pogo, an apparently violent and non-aesthetic dance, audience participation during a punk concert is not only an expression of ritual violence, it is first and foremost a way to negate the traditional distinction between the audience and the musicians. Punk concerts are a political expression of radical equality between members of a punk community, whether they are musicians or audience members, and therefore implicitly state that everyone can, and in fact has to, participate in the creation of a punk show. The radical democratic experience of a punk show is not specific to China of course and can be found in many other punk communities worldwide (see Baulch 2007, Wallach 2008, and

⁶ See, for instance, a 2007 concert of the punk-rock band Joyside at the D22 in Beijing, where an audience member jumps on the singer: <https://youtu.be/8gxhmlkAQbM>

⁷ “Pogo” refers to a famous punk dance in which the dancer jumps up and down. “Slamdancing” (or “moshing”) is a variant of pogo dancing in which participants push each other forcefully. According to Tsitsos, it “brought increased body contact to the original pogo” (1999, p. 405). “Headbanging” means shaking one’s head vigorously following the rhythm of the music. To “stage-dive” means jumping into the audience from the stage. It is often associated with “crowd surfing”, when a person is passed overhead during a concert.

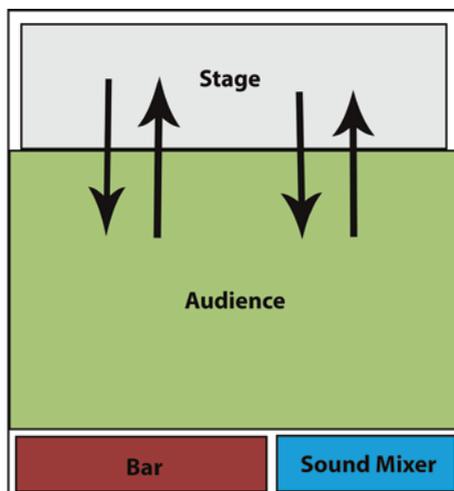


Image 14.3 The space of a punk show and the interactions between the musicians and the audience

Kürti 2012). However, this way of organizing a concert by involving the audience is in total contradiction with the management of concerts by the Chinese authorities. To understand the political implication of a Chinese punk concert, we have to analyse how the Chinese authorities envision the management of a concert, and the conflicts it generates with the audience (Image 14.4).

Disciplined and Punished: The Visible Hand of the State During Punk and Rock Performances

Official suspicion toward audience participation during a concert is not something new in China. Baranovitch describes how, in 1986, the Chinese authorities had to violently intervene during a concert of the surf-rock American band Jan and Dean in Shanghai, as “some members of the audience started to dance in the aisles, and some even jumped onto the stage. The security people present at the concert, who were



Image 14.4 Invasion of the stage during a Demerit concert at the Wuhan Prison on September 1, 2018. (Photo by the author)

completely unfamiliar with this kind of spontaneous and ‘undisciplined’ audience participation, tried to arrest one of those who took part in the dancing” (Baranovitch 2003, p. 35). This incident eventually led to a student demonstration after the arrest and beating of a student from Jiaotong University during the concert. These kinds of incidents did not stop over time, and it is still rather frequent to witness police or security guard interventions during concerts when the audience tries to actively participate. In September 2018, a scandal erupted after a concert of the English pop singer Dua Lipa in Shanghai when videos of security guards beating members of the audience were uploaded on the internet. Some fans were forcefully removed for waving an LGBT flag, and others for dancing or simply standing up.⁸ Police intervention can also take a more humoristic turn, for instance, during the Rocket Music Festival 火箭音

⁸ See the video online: https://youtu.be/D5Xlx3DR_Qk

乐节 in Jinan 济南 in September 2018, when a police officer came on stage during rocker Xie Tian Xiao's 谢天笑 performance to warn the audience to stop "throwing water" or dancing the pogo,⁹ and threatening to cancel the performance because of the recent "crackdown on crime to eliminate evil" (扫黑除恶). However, instead of feeling threatened, the audience laughed at the policeman, and Xie Tian Xiao himself made fun of him while translating the policeman's words into acceptable conditions for the public ("what our uncle policeman [警察叔叔] said, it's just for your security").

Chinese authorities' management of music festivals has taken a more drastic turn in the past few years. Local police now closely manage rock festivals and try as far as possible to monitor the space of the performance. For instance, the Midi Music Festival 迷笛音乐节, organized on December 30 and 31, 2017, in Shenzhen 深圳 was heavily controlled by the local police, from the entrance—with bag checks, facial recognition software and ID scan of each spectator—to the stage. The management of the performance space was, in this respect, paradigmatic of a Foucauldian panopticon: the "pit" for each stage was divided into different areas separated by steel barriers. In each area, a policeman was seated in a highchair, monitoring the audience from above, while other policemen, on the ground, were armed with a metal rod that allowed them to single out any suspect individual. This sort of disciplinary mechanism was famously described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, where he analyses Bentham's *Panopticon* as an "enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded" (Foucault 1995, p. 197). The spatial position of the policeman during the concert is similar to the panopticon supervisor, which can monitor each individual. During the two days of the festival, pogo and stage-diving were criminalized by the police, allegedly for the safety of the audience. Every time a member of the audience stage-dived, a squad of policemen ripped through the crowd to seize them violently and bring them to the ground. This gave rise to acts of solidarity between the members of the audience against police authority: once a stage-diver was

⁹ See the video online: <https://youtu.be/u5juMIj1bnA>



Image 14.5 A policeman in his monitoring highchair during the Shenzhen Midi Music Festival, December 31, 2017. (Photo by the author)

brought to the ground by the police, audience members spontaneously placed themselves between the stage-diver and the police, giving the former enough time to escape and disrupting the disciplinary structure of a working panopticon during rock festivals (Images 14.5 and 14.6).

The Wuhan punk band SMZB 生命之饼 was the last band to perform during the Shenzhen Midi Music Festival on December 31, 2017, in front of 10,000 people. The police were particularly on edge, since SMZB is supposed to be the most political punk band in China. The concert was sprinkled by numerous incidents involving the audience and the police, pogos and stage-diving. The tension was so tangible that the band itself had to intervene several times, asking the police to stop harassing the

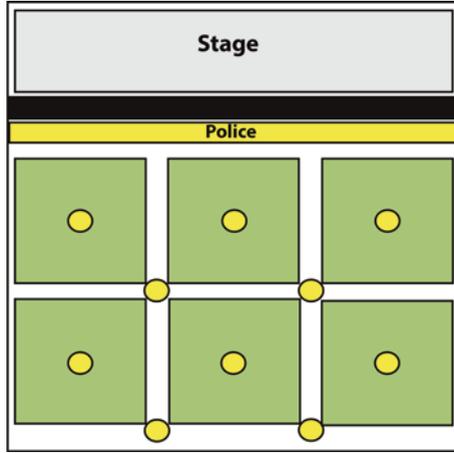


Image 14.6 The stage setting during the Shenzhen Midi Musical Festival, December 2017

audience. Eventually, the microphone of the singer was shut after he sang a song that was not approved by the authorities.

The space of the music festival combines elements of Foucauldian discipline—with its own version of Bentham’s panopticon—and security governmentality. While the space of the concert is managed by the police through disciplinary methods, the space of the festival, with the profusion of security apparatuses including scanners and facial recognition devices, is typical of another strategy of governmentality, studied by Foucault in a lecture published under the title *Security, Territory, Population* (2007). Unlike discipline, which tries to manage the body and behavior of individuals, security apparatuses try to discriminate between good and bad circulation and eliminate dangerous elements. Against this new modality of governmentality, Foucault tries to identify strategies of resistance, which he names “counter-conducts”, “in the sense of struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others” (p. 201). In the case of contemporary punk concerts in China, pogos and stage-diving represent small acts of counter-conducts that challenge the intervention of the police during a rock festival.

Conclusion

If the space of rock festivals like the Shenzhen Midi Music Festival is filled with security apparatuses and discipline mechanisms, we can analyse the space managed by the punks as yet another Foucauldian concept, *heterotopia*, or “other spaces”. *Heterotopias* are according to Foucault “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1986, p. 24). The Chinese punks themselves recognize the utopian component of the space they create. The DMC, opened by Spike, is also known as “the utopia of Tongzhou” 通州乌托邦, since the punks manage the bar which functions in a radical democratic way themselves. In Wuhan for instance, the punk guitarist Mai Dian 麦颠 opened an “Autonomous Youth Centre” named “Our House” 我们家, inspired by European squats (Amar 2016), where anyone can come, stay, eat and have discussions with each other. All these experiences have a similar goal: trying to find another way of living and collectively participating in an authoritarian state that usually manages the conduct of the individuals strictly. In their own way, Chinese punks are experiencing radical democratic way of organizing themselves in the spaces they create, while dealing with the authorities and the market when they perform in a rock live venue or in a music festival. At the same time, the disciplinary space of the music festival created by the police is disputed: people challenge the authorities by continuing to stage-dive, mosh, smoke, drink alcohol and escape the police. These punk concerts, even under the supervision of the authorities, remain a small and conflicted heterotopia. In the context of contemporary China, punk performances produce new kinds of social relations between the musicians and the audience that are both anti-authority and egalitarian.

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