

Youth Culture, Music, and Cell phone Branding in China

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Abstract

This article tracks the relationship between music and youth culture in China in the context of transnational cell phone branding. A research project conducted by the author as a participant observer/temporary marketing researcher at the Beijing office of transnational advertising agency Ogilvy is used to explore a primary academic concern: in what terms should we understand the relationship between music, youth culture, and cool culture in metropolitan China? The article examines the place of music in an emerging brand-conscious youth culture in China and examines what this means for the single-child generation. It questions the assumption that there is a simple equation between cool youth and cool music and concludes by placing the discussion in the context of musical subcultures and musical tribal cultures in China.

In July 2004, Apple and Motorola broke new ground in the mobile music industry with a news release: 'Motorola and Apple Bring iTunes@ Music Player to Motorola's Next-Generation Mobile Phones' (Motorola, 2004a). The new partnership will enable millions of music lovers to transfer their favourite songs from the iTunes@jukebox to Motorola's next-generation 'always with you' mobile handsets via a USB or Bluetooth connection. The handset maker's attempt to build a rich interface between music and cool marketing came to be materialized at a lightening speed.

The news caught my attention because I had just returned from a research trip in Beijing. While there, I was deeply impressed by a popular commercial film, a box office hit *Shouji* (Cell Phone) debuted at the end of 2003. Being one of its primary sponsors, Motorola made a coup with product placement in the film and successfully generated a hype that turned its name into the most talked-about cell phone brand in the country. That was the starting point of my interest in the branding strategies of the mobile phone maker. Motorola's evolution into a bona fide entertainment brand constitutes one of the twin foci of this article. The second focus is on music and youth culture. 'Mobile music' is said to be the panacea that cuts across cultural borders, able to lure global 'cool' youth to become earnest users of smart handsets. Will this music formula work for China's youth market?

In the second half of this article, I examine the relationship of music to Chinese youth culture in the context of cell phone branding. Central to my inquiry is a field project on 'Chinese cool' for the Beijing office of the transnational advertising agency Ogilvy in summer 2004. While my critical perspectives on Motorola's brand strategies are based on an independent academic research unrelated to my fieldwork at Ogilvy, the methodology underlying the second half of this article relies heavily on a digital photo-narration project that

I designed at the ad agency. This qualitative research had the aim of discovering some consumer insights into the youth market in China. I was also keen to explore whether the digital photo-narrative was a feasible methodology for future research on youth culture.

Music and the Youth Market

During summer of 2004, Motorola was preoccupied with redefining its niche in China's saturated mobile phone market. The handset maker was faced with a conflicting set of representations. As a brand name, Motorola was seen as both old and new, and its culture both hidebound and progressively modern. Chic advertising images associated with the 'Moto campaigns' and smart product placement in feature films had raised the visibility of Motorola as an adventurous brand in China. But when it came to preferred brand choices, Nokia occupied the No. 1 position across all age groups. Korea-based Samsung emerged as the leader of cool aspirations for China's youth segments, tailgating Motorola in a tight race for the second place. What opportunities were there for a Motorola revival in China under such circumstances?

The company's answer was to try its global formula in China, namely, launching a music marketing platform targeting China's youth segment. Motorola was not alone in jumping onto the mobile-music bandwagon and investing in the new music capability for its handset models. Nokia was headed in the same direction with its partnership with Warner Music and Loudeye. The underlying premise for such initiatives was the assumption, propagated by transnational marketers, that music was the fastest way into the mind and soul of today's youths. In the West, it rarely needs to be argued that music is the global language of the 'Now Generation'. According to a BRANDchild study, nearly 50 per cent of wired urban teenagers frequently download music from the Internet (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003: 20). In terms of the cell phone business, mobile music consumption of keen young fans will increase cellphone traffic and pour revenue into the pockets of phone makers, record companies, and mobile operators.

Foreseeing the importance of mobile music for future business expansion, Motorola developed a number of high-profile strategies to become a mobile entertainment brand and enhance its music offerings to the youth market, beginning with a \$75 million marketing pack with MTV (ClickZ Network, 2003). In summer 2004, Motorola launched MotoMusic in Beijing, an online music service provider from which subscribers could download music content drawn from cutting-edge, 'emerging artists in China' (Motorola, 2004b). This culminated in the July deal between Apple and Motorola, which consolidated the link between Motorola brand and 'cool music'. Both the 'Emerging Artists' platform and iTune-enabled music phones will eventually deliver an avant-garde mobile music society thriving on an edgy and cool youth culture.

In 2004, the phenomenon of music marketing had gripped the attention of the Chinese advertising and marketing trade magazines. Various assumptions were being made about the relationship between music and youth culture in China yet very little research had been conducted on what were the 'current (cultural) drivers' behind Chinese youth's adoption of new music tastes. Moreover, while the views of music critics and professionals were readily available online and in industry publications "consumer insights," a key component to relationship branding and marketing, is the weakest link in the research chain. Whenever the term 'youth' was mentioned, it was cast in the same frame as 'global youth', and the pattern of music consumption of Chinese youth seen as comparable to that of young people in the Western world. But was (is?) it correct to assume that the relationship between 'youth' and 'music' in China was (is?) the same as in the West?

From Music Culture to Youth Culture

My research undertaken at Ogilvy was an attempt to develop a location-sensitive inquiry into the relationship between music and Chinese middle-class youths. It became clear that it was more useful to focus on 'youth culture' rather than 'music culture.' Results of initial interviews with young people from a diverse range of age groups, showed that, generally speaking, while in the Western hemisphere, market segmentation of tweens and youths takes place primarily on the basis of their musical taste (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003: 20), no such equation can be drawn in China. Not only do Chinese youths have an extremely eclectic musical taste but they particularly like those singers with a knack for creating a 'chop-suey' musical experience. Loyalty (or disloyalty) to a single pop singer for long is rarely the case, nor is Chinese youth sticking to a stable set of mixed genres. Musicians who command a shifting fusion of styles and genres stand the best chance of appealing to such a fickle clientele.

Transnational youth marketers' logic that 'brand preferences correlate with musical taste' (ibid. 21) is difficult to apply in China. 'Music' is a backseat driver, second to the dress code, in the total picture of cool culture consumption, and should not be taken as a privileged force in influencing brand adoption. Indeed, for those transnational marketers who draw an easy equation between cool music and edgy content, they will be surprised to find that Chinese 'cool youth' do not consume Indie labels. The intimate link of cool culture to alternative music, which seems a marketing reflex in the developed world, is a risky ploy to adopt in China. The most urgent question became less about cool music, more about the culture and characteristics of *linglei* youth themselves¹.

¹ Cool youths are described as "linglei." It translates into "radical elements," or more literally, the "other species." Since its discovery by Western journalists and marketers, the term has undergone a process of fast and total commodification. Today, the "new edge" has gotten so incredibly predictable, it is no longer ultra cool to label oneself as *linglei* in metro-China.

The limits of a location-specific study are obvious. However, while Shanghai and Guangzhou can claim a vibrant commercial culture and brand culture, Beijing is the cradle of avant-garde music and art, a place where cultures on the margin have a chance to flourish. For those who can remember Cui Jian and Tang Dynasty, music trends in the capital are the barometers of the larger Chinese pop music scene. In the course of many contacts - both casual and purposeful - with Chinese youth on the streets in Beijing, in the food courts and music stores, the same questions kept being raised: Have multinational marketers drawn their conclusions a bit too hurriedly about the role that 'cool music' plays in the life of Chinese youth? Are Chinese hip hop and punk fans equivalent to the radical elements seen on New York and London streets? What could field observations about Beijing youth tell us about 'cool music' in the Chinese context?

Mobile Phone Market in China

Motorola serves as an excellent vehicle to navigate into the mind of cool youth in metropolitan China, as the mutation of Motorola from a technological brand to a 'cool' brand in the world's largest market relates three stories simultaneously: the shifting brandscape of China's mobile phone market; the allure of music marketing for transnational handset makers; and the link of mobile music with cool culture.

The Chinese cell phone market has come a long way since 1995. Back then, 85 per cent of China's total market shares were divided among Motorola, Nokia, Ericsson, and another 10 per cent distributed between Siemens, Samsung, Philip, and Panasonic. Local Chinese makers did not enter the fray till 1998 with a slim share of 2 per cent. By the end of 2002, however, that had risen to 30 per cent, breaking the market domination of transnational handsets (Ji Xin, 2002: 56). The turning point was in 1999 with the entry of the 'Three Musketeers', domestic heavyweights Ningbo Bird, TCL, and Xiaxin. Bird and TCL, in particular, commanded marketing strategies that put their transnational rivals on the defense. TCL entered the competition from the premium end by developing WAP enabled cellphones; Ningbo Bird launched a 'channel' offensive by developing a seamless web of 50,000 handset shops and service centers spread all over in district towns, county towns in second and third tier cities, bypassing the metropolises where the presence of transnational handsets was dominant. Such a powerful channel strategy, which can be best captured in the Maoist slogan 'the countryside surrounding the cities', is characteristically Chinese.

In such a competitive environment, it was no small wonder that Nokia, Motorola, and all the other transnational cellphone makers were eager to spend big on branding and advertising campaigns. The Chinese cell phone market now shifted its focus from technology to design and aesthetics and onto the pursuit of new unique selling points such as music marketing. As 'musical taste' had become such an important demographic index for youth marketing in developed countries, the mission of developing mobile music content and music applications was pushed to the top of the agenda of transnational handset

carriers. All of a sudden, mobile phone makers were devising business strategies that matched 'mobile entertainment' to device.

Motorola exemplifies how a handset maker can successfully turn itself into a 'cool' brand by adding entertainment value to the communication-based device. The turning point for its brand strategy was the 'Moto' campaign. A sound-bite turned into a hot brand concept, 'Moto' was first discovered in Taiwan and tested in China in 2002. It kicked off a mainland 'Moto' craze and turned Motorola into a fashion brand overnight. The two-syllable affix has appeared user-friendly for almost any occasion under the sun: MommyMoto, MultiMoto, SohoMoto, 911Moto, MotoMusic, Kara(oke)Moto, etc. As the shortest fashion statement in the cellphone world, the chic slogan has given a soul to Motorola. It was a definitive moment in the history of the company.

Ultracool lines of Motorola cellphones were produced to live up to the cheeky new language. 'Moto' was a perfect solution to the challenge facing Motorola, namely, how to bring into its fold the younger generation of white-collar workers, college and high school kids. It is a segment for which rival handset makers are all competing. The 'new cool' associated with 'Moto' offered exactly the kind of antidote that an ageing brand was seeking.

In one of the most dramatic Moto commercials, a zany lad embarks on a quest for the coolest ring-tones for his C289. 'There is a soul in every sound,' he mutters. Yelling 'Moto' in a triumphant spirit, he hops from one scraping sound to the next and finally reaches the most dangerous sound on the railway tracks – at his own peril. The stake gets higher and higher. In the final frame, a roaring train brushes against our hero in the nick of time. A trompe-l'oeil fools us into thinking he may be under the wheels. But no, in the next frame he reemerges safe and sound with the perfect ring tone captured in the nick of time on his cell. The message about the brand? It is intelligent, crazy, adventurous, and above all, cool and fun! Combining the Moto sound with the Moto attitude, Motorola was only a tiny step away from becoming the icon of a full-blown entertainment culture.

In China, Motorola's utopian promise to create a cool musical experience gave birth to the 'Emerging Artist' platform. It seemed that Motorola's mission was to discover new music talents who were seen as a bit edgy and somewhat removed from mainstream pop icons. One such 'emerging' music artist made over into a brand endorser for Motorola was the Beijing-born singer Pu Shu², who sang at the gala party for the launch of E398 (an MP3 smart phone) and of MotoMusic as a digital music server in July 2004, held in the famous 798 Factory in Beijing's avant-garde art district.

***Linglei* Youths and the Punk Syndrome**

It was at the MotoMusic launch party that I met Chun Shu, a *linglei* high-school dropout made famous by her controversial tell-all memoir *Beijing Doll (Beijing Wawa)*. She came across as an intelligent, precocious, and sensual looking young woman. She impressed me with that strange mix of a defiant and vulnerable look on her face. She talked about her upcoming visit to the United States and how she yearned for an admission to Harvard or Columbia - the 'best universities in the US' - to resume a student's life. She enjoyed being rich (with royalties) and famous (as the cover girl for *Asia Times*). Her uncool language and uncool aspirations put everybody present at ease but a minute later, she changed as our conversation shifted to punk. I asked her to comment on the current popular take on pseudo-punk, attributing the theory about 'fake punk' to Ye Ying, my journalist friend who accompanied me to the MotoMusic soiree. At first, Chun Shu tried to avoid the topic. Mistaking her reservation for shyness, I pressed her for an answer. She turned to Ye at that instant and gunned her down with a tirade of angry allegations. Of course, what did Ye Ying know about 'punk'?! How could anybody who has such a vulgar taste about fashion – Chun Shu now turned our attention to the multi-colored sequin-studded skirt Ye Ying wore that evening – how could such an uncool spirit comprehend the world of punk? For a punk original like Chun Shun, the 'pseudo-punk' talk was sheer blasphemy.

The Chun Shu incident was a small indication that the counterculture spirit of punk is not dead in China. I had already interviewed several music professionals and pop music researchers in Beijing and Guangzhou. We had also held several substantial discussions with Ye Ying who works for *The Economic Observer*, on China's punk phenomenon. To consciously go beyond our Beijing focus, we went over blogs that had an extensive coverage of materials on 'Chinese punk.' The general online and offline consensus is that Chinese punk is a fashion accessory for hip kids. It is not the 'real thing.' When asked about the percentage of 'angry young folks' (*fenqing*), an interchangeable term with 'punk fans' in China, a marketing manager at Maitian Record Company replied, 'They are a minority. Besides, although they are considered the avant-garde among the young generation, their expression is far from being radical.' Shanghai and Guangzhou youths are considered too practically minded to appreciate punk. But what about Beijing where rock rebel Cui Jian took off?

Punk fans and musicians in the capital are nicknamed spiritual 'fatsos.' It is a pun on the word 'fat guests' which sounds exactly the same as pangke as in 'punk,' with only a tonal difference apart. Online satirical takes on punk vs. fatsos are required readings for anybody interested in the current music scene in China: 'Punk is an opportunistic trend born from the restless upstart mentality characteristic of sons and daughters of the middle class' (Da Zhi, 2003).

'Deep in their blood, [Chinese punkers] are neither rebels nor extreme fun seekers. They are 'potbellies.' It is an obesity not rooted in real fat genes. 'Pang' as in "fat guests" points to a lifestyle of leisure and safe boundaries, a lifestyle that is marked by insatiable desires for fame and money and besieged by an intense mental anxiety that made them tiptoe on a tight wire all day long' (Yan Jun, 2001).

The last quote from Yan Jun, the most authoritative Chinese music critic, was particularly effective in upsetting the myth about the equation of Chinese punk with a carefree spiritual life. There is an entire generation of angry young high school kids (to which the 17-year-old Chun Shu once belonged) who live under the yoke of the oppressive system known as the College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*). Many jump on the bandwagon of punk music to seek solace. A small minority of dare-devils rejects rote-memorization by opting for the most radical means of rebellion, i.e., walking out of the system completely. Together with those like-minded spirits, Chun Shu made 'high school dropout' a new social segment to be reckoned with. *Beijing Doll* is a best seller precisely because it exposes the spiritual torture that an arch rebel has to pay for rejecting the norm. Expose youth literature rose in China quickly as a new genre precisely because it struck a chord with those repressed young minds in terms of profanity and nihilism. A small wonder that many of those youth, like Chun Shu herself, developed a strong bond with punk rockers.

Prior to my meeting with Chun Shu, I had discovered the generational logic underlying the high-school punk phenomenon via a different means of research. I had immersed myself in pop music magazines which feature a section where exchanges between young fans and magazine editors can be found. But it was my encounter with Chun Shu that drove home the crucial link between high school students and the Chinese punk syndrome. Once I was made aware of that link, I found it peppered everywhere in those fan letters written by impressionable high school kids and college freshers who sent their missives from different parts of China. Below is a sample of typical letters I spotted in the pages *I Love Rock (Wo ai yaogunue)* and *Hit Light Music (Ji qing yinyue)*.

'Han Shunyuan (an 18 year old): I became very distressed in the face of the pressure of the entrance exam. That was [the burden] I shared with my peers in common. Then I discovered Linkin Park. [I was drawn] to their discontent about reality and their rage against it. I feel empathetic with their music. The college entrance examination is behind it all – it deprives us of a world of precious things. . . Listening to Linkin Park made me feel as if I was listening to myself!' (Qing yinyue, 2004: 95).

Da Li (a freshman): 'The last six years of my middle school and high school life was a total misery. ('Readers Ring up,' 2004: 61).

Haozi (a high-school senior): 'Living like this day and night and living under such tremendous pressure is driving me nuts. I feel like killing somebody. I feel like dragging somebody over by his collar and punching him hard once and twice. My reason stopped me from doing that . . . it is too difficult these days. I am exhausted! . . . I have had endless nightmares in the evening and headaches during the day. I asked myself: was I just surrendering myself to a life sentence imposed by the entrance examination without any resistance? . . . I can't stand it any more. I can't!' (Ibid.)

These heartfelt outcries are testimonies to a genuine culture of youth anger in China. Iconoclastic youth there, like their counterparts everywhere else in the world, share a resolve to turn the norm upside down. Music that delivers rapture and total disjunction has a winning appeal to them. It is not that a real punk culture cannot root or thrive in China. It is just a *short-lived one* with a high turn-over rate of faithfuls. Once the hurdle of the entrance examination is passed, the majority of college freshers will just switch their loyalty from real punk idols to hip Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop singers, and to other tamer genres. Those erstwhile anarchistic young men and women move on quickly. As an *Asia Times's* article on the new radicals in China says, *lingleis* in the country are 'like dogs wearing electric collars that know just how far they can stray without getting shocked' (Beech, 2004: 37). Most *linglei* originals, like Chun Shu, felt compelled to grow up fast to adapt to society's demands while keeping their nostalgia for the punk spirit alive. Much less can be expected from their followers – the punk wannabes. Most likely, their brand of radicalism will exhibit some rough edges – in their fashion code, not in their musical taste.

Photo Narratives and Storytelling

My discussion of the Beijing punk phenomenon via Chun Shu serves two purposes. First, it shows the importance of our treating 'punk' as a sociological, rather than a musical phenomenon from the start. This proves that although 'music' is undoubtedly a fertile entry point, it should not be taken as an anchor for our study of Chinese youth culture. Second, my inquiry into Chinese punk also taught us that 'age' rather than 'musical taste' is the most important demographic index for youth market segmentation in China. Different age groups develop and define their own cultural preferences and cool standards (for musical taste). As mentioned earlier, punk's central position in the cool culture of high school kids stands in little doubt. But college matriculation often entails an immediate switch of their cool allegiance away from punk to a mixed genre of musical styles. That is, 'cool' music is an unstable category that changes from one sub-age group to another. 'Age,' therefore, rather than 'musical taste,' is the major driver and crowning determinant for brand adoptions by middle-class youth living in metropolitan China.

Armed with this insight, my research partner and I went out to the 'field.' After a month's deliberation, we picked five candidates (three men and two women), each belonging to a different age segment (spread between age 16- 23) but sharing a common middle class background (evidenced by the size of their monthly pocket money). We took care to select those candidates who expressed a liking for the following music genres, i.e., light pop from Taiwan and Hong Kong, electronic, Euro-American rock, Japanese pop, punk, and film music. With one exception, none pledged a single allegiance to a particular genre. Their tastes, as I emphasized previously, are not only eclectic but fast-shifting. The only exception I mentioned was Jian Cui,³ a 20-year old high-school dropout, as unique and non-conforming as his friend Chun Shu. He is a music maniac, an elitist and thus understandably, a minority of the minority, representing the cultural behaviors that separate the 'subculture' groups from the 'tribal' culture groups, two extreme poles on the spectrum of Chinese youth culture, a point I will return later to elucidate.

The objective of giving those five candidates a creative assignment of photo-narration was to empower the ethnographic subject and to motivate each of them to narrate through their *own* camera eye how they construct meaning around their specific lifestyle and taste culture. Once turned into her own ethnographer, the consumer subject is driven to exhibit and record her innermost thoughts and feelings in vignettes about any ordinary day. No shots in her photo diary are random as there is an emotional logic to trace. Our candidates were each asked to take fifty photographs on their digital cameras in a week for a small pay of 150RMB (approximately \$19). They were told to capture (1) events and moments in their daily lives that excited them; (2) what disgusted them; (3) 'cool' objects and 'cool' people; (4) happy moments and dejecting moments; (5) objects in their own rooms. We asked them to come back and tell us the 'story' behind each shot as it flashed over the screen in the conference room. We supplemented the photo-narrative methodology with a creative survey and a three-hour long in-depth interview conducted with each candidate.

Each photo series has a story to tell: a picture contains seeds of a life story that reveals the truth about the self - if we have the deciphering skill. We often exercise our storytelling capabilities not only through the medium of the written word, but through our camera eye. Photo narration has been used in various sociological and marketing studies to help discover the vantage point of the camera holder, the subject under scrutiny. The five mini-photo archives we acquired vary in their richness as visual tales. I will single out three of them to showcase the vantage point of the youth under study.

The first archive, authored by a designer kid (age 21, male) who used to worship Nirvana, is built on the recurrent motif of 'beauty' represented through various shots that highlight the creative spatial relationships between the objects that he felt drawn to. He defines beauty in spatial terms. Architecture and natural

landscape shots loom large, as well as mundane objects in his daily life such as his CD collection. The center piece of his archive is what I would dub 'a room with a view,' a collage pasted on the wall in his own room, which is unmistakably a miniature visual autobiography. It lays bare all his hobbies, past and the present, i.e., art, music, guitars, and computer games. Each image set off a story within a story that he eagerly shared with us, stories that tell us all about his childhood and young adulthood, growing pains as well as happy memories.

Archive #2 delivers a collection of photos cohered around an 'ideal leisure mood' which the photographer (age 23, female) captured with close-up shots of a dragon fly, her precious collection of old Chinese comic books, and her boyfriend's pet dog caught in his various naughty poses. In her own words, she travels back through time, via those shots, into some of the most precious (i.e., warm and fuzzy) moments in her childhood. It is an elusive mood rather than a particular event that she tried to catch and present. Each photo contains a memnic clue revealing an angle of her childhood sensibility around which she hopes to construct an 'ideal condition for her future life.'

Archive #3 was provided by a 16-year old girl. Her archive is made up of a hundred fun shots of cell phones images and fashion magazine collages. This candidate is an ideal target for us. She hangs out with her friends all day long, a typical young nomad who never sits at home. Her photo collection is thus about her colorful peer culture, the fun moments collectively produced and consumed, and the fun spots frequented by her group. A large number of shots are about a ceiling collage collectively made by her and her girlfriends. It was a performance art piece because she recorded faithfully the entire process of its production. Another dozen photos tell us what she likes to wear – Converse shoes and sweaters of the safari motif. Then there are the images of Samsung cellphones covered seamlessly from front to back in stickers. Some comparative shots tell us that she has developed a distinct taste for cellphone decorative art. Some stickers look 'so ugly' and 'uncool' that she can tell 'the cellphone user is a boring personality.' Like several other candidates in this project, she loves the idea of keeping pets, a squirrel for now, thirty mice a while ago. Mixed in the photographs are also shots about things and places that made her 'depressed.' So we saw the kitchen and dining room of her (parents') home - she hates regular meals and lives on potato chips. It is from this particular archive that I found the most interesting marketing ideas, one of which is '*linglei gongshe*' (linglei commune), a tag line she pasted on the front door of their apartment. Another idea is the necessity of looking more closely into the cellphone sticker culture. And all three archives strike home the importance of examining the storytelling potential of collage art displayed in their own room.

All in all, all five individual archives testified well the merit of photo narration as a methodology for marketing field work. I should note that 'music culture' plays a relatively minor role in the photo collection. What stands out instead is an emerging pet culture, a different kind of companion culture than peer culture. Those photographs definitely reveal a culture of loneliness specific to the single-child generation, to which marketers thus far have paid scant attention. So much emphasis has been put on the narcissism of global youth that it is easy to ignore the fact that these single children are in constant search for companionship, from animate and inanimate objects, in friends and pets, and in cellphones and other techno-gadgets. A music culture catering to the single-child generations needs to build on metaphors of companionship and happy childhood side by side with the conventional emphasis on 'self-expression' promoted by transnational marketers. Those are fast-drawn impressions. The photo archive yields more inspirational insights than solid data.

To complement the photo-narrative exercise, candidates were asked to choose from a list of thirty-nine expressions and phrases, those descriptors that best described their emotional, spiritual, mental, and social orientations. Surprisingly none of them circled the adjective 'cool' (ku). This conscious evasion was itself interesting. They also bypassed adjectives linked directly to the notion of 'cutting edge.' As some cool-hunters have already suspected, we may be on the verge of entering a marketing era when the 'center' is becoming the new edge, and the uncool will become the new cool (Grossman, 2003).

Second, although most of them confessed that they love to 'indulge themselves' (*ai zongrong zij*), they are all committed to living a 'life of purpose.' One defined 'purpose' as 'studying English and becoming an air stewardness;' another, 'passing entrance examination, becoming a financier in the future.' 21-year old Li Xiao aspired to become 'an influential computer software designer.' Even Jian Cui, our music fanatic candidate, a 20-year old iconoclastic male high-school dropout, said that he is committed 'to becoming an established researcher on music.' Radical-looking junior Xiao Zhang was most precise in differentiating 'different purposes for different stages of her life.' In her vision, she would live a colourful life in her twenties to win other people's envy; at thirty, she aims at becoming a 'well-acknowledged' authority in 'professional matters of intelligence'; at forty, she wants to feel 'accomplished as a happy wife and mother.'

Third, with one exception, none professed a passion for 'going to an extreme' (*xihuan zou jiduan*). Why? As Jian Cui, our rebel music fanatic, puts it, 'There is no need for that. Too much self-exposure is not good. I believe in an old Chinese saying, 'whenever water comes, there is a channel for it.' There are always opportunities for self-realization.' Another says, 'Those who are content are happy. I don't like big ups and downs.' Still another wants to learn 'how to position himself in the middle' for perfect balance.

Even the radical-looking female candidate (according to our first impression) Xiao Zhang, professes to frown upon 'eccentric vogue' in favor of 'a moderate and nuanced fashion sense.'

The only one who checked the descriptor 'I love to go to an extreme', Xiao Liu, was a sixteen-year old 'Miss Cool' - an apparently ideal specimen - found in the food court of the Hua Wei Department store at Xidan, hanging out with a small gang of *linglei* youngsters. (Hua Wei is where fans of Japanese manga and idol culture and the Korean fashion tribes gather.) She stood out among her peers as a sharp punk stylist, wearing green-coloured contact lens, a reddish hair stuck out in furious spikes, and more than two dozens of bracelets on each of her wrists. The long, slender necktie she wore had a distinct Japanese fashion stamp. An obvious opinion leader, she was flanked by more than half a dozen peers sitting idly around the table smoking and chatting away lazily. She was impatient, cold and cool, with a pierced tongue and lower lip. After intensive persuasion, Xiao Liu agreed to participate in the photo-narration project.

However, on that much anticipated day, 'Miss Cool' showed up with bare wrists. Her wicked green contact lenses were now a conventional dark blue. She did not wear any fashion ties. Her tiny tongue stud was also missing. She had shed just about everything that would remind us of her punk fashion heritage except the pierced ring underneath her lips. Dressed in a plain sweater and a pair of blue jeans, she looked completely tame and 'ordinary.' Not a trace of rebelliousness survived. The testy cold-blooded punk artist who could not wait to get out of my sight at our previous rendezvous had turned herself into an ultra-friendly, patient, and talkative young lady well versed in all the etiquettes that befit social conventions.

The facility with which she turned herself from a bad girl into a 'good' girl carries great analytical value. She knew exactly what separated the 'extreme' from the 'normal.' And I would argue that her 'role tailoring' can by no means be equated with a punker's commitment to a constant flux toward chaos in Hebdige's terms or 'floating insignification' in Barthes's terms (Hebdige, 1979: 126). What should I make out of this brand of 'cool' that can be packaged and shed in such quick turns? Is our Miss Cool too pragmatically minded to remain committed to her radical cause?

An article in the *Asia Times* argued that a Chinese rebel 'isn't exactly channeling James Dean or a young Bob Dylan' (Beech, 2003: 33). That finding coincides with one of the major viewpoints articulated in the first China Cool Hunt Survey by Hill & Knowlton (2004): Chinese college students seek brands that will help them 'say 'I am unique'' without making them 'look weird or socially unacceptable' (Smith and Wylie, 'China's Youth Define 'Cool,' 2004). While this survey reinforces a conventional wisdom that Chinese youth aspires toward 'independence' and 'individualism,' it also says that 35 per cent of respondents name

their parents, rather than cool celebrities, as their 'idols,' and that their outlook on life is built on an optimism characteristic of entrepreneurs at large. All this implies that they know and respect their boundaries well, and indeed, they will think twice about trespassing them. Translated into ethics and beliefs, this insight highlights an uncool link between the cool-looking youth and the golden rules they are supposed to challenge. Deep in their heart, they are all entrepreneurs. It is that entrepreneurial spirit that turned the majority of the Me-Generation into pious observers of the 'golden mean.' Xiao Liu, Xiao Zhang, the middle-school kid, and the college students whom we had interviewed in the course of those two months are all products of this double-faced culture of the single-child generation.

There was another surprise in the Hill & Knowlton Survey about the relationship between pop music and coolness: international artists lag far behind Asia's own star singers like Faye Wang and Jay Chou. 'Asian, not Western, musicians are viewed as cool by this generation' (ibid.). This finding reinforces the necessity of a locality-specific definition of 'cool' music: singers like Jay Chou, Faye Wang, and Motorola's Pu Shu sell so well precisely because their type of 'coolness' involves no real risk-taking iconoclasm.

Subcultures vis-a-vis Tribal Cultures: A Conclusion

In China, music is seen primarily as an entertainment culture rather than a vehicle of serious self-expression. The music club culture at Sanlitun flourishes because young folks use clubs as a networking venue where they party for fun and for a quick accumulation of human capital. Very few go clubbing for a soul-lifting musical experience, much less for alternative music of any kind. Those who do, a contingent of music culture elite, I can safely assume, will most likely not be target consumers for transnational cell phone makers. This small slice of young musical hobbyists listen to counterculture cool music and constitute what I would call active producers and consumers of a 'musical subculture' that thrives in Beijing and Chengdu, much less in Shanghai and Guangzhou. I distinguish that kind of elite music culture from tribal music culture in China much along the same logic that separates 'subculture' from 'tribal' cultures.

I have written elsewhere about the departure of the tribal paradigm from subculture and the theoretical challenge that French sociologist Michel Maffesoli posed to Hebdige (Wang, 2005). To recap it briefly, Maffesoli argues that contemporary consumer society witnesses an explosion of style cultures that are organized around brand names and role-playing fantasies. Each tribe affiliated with a style niche is fluid in its aggregation and dispersal, with a commitment to a given tribal identity that lasts no longer than the turnover of cool fashion (Maffesoli, 1996). While the subculture gangs are irreverent with a purpose (i.e., resisting the status quo) and self-consciously performing a politics of in-group solidarity, the optimum strategy of the tribal members, in contrast, is to 'tap into a number of lifestyles, adopting whichever one

best fits the situation to hand' (Clark, Doel *et al*, 2003: 137). The politics of resistance built into subcultures is thrown to the winds as neo-tribes happily shift from one cool style to the next.

Although a strict dichotomy of subculture vs. tribal cultures cannot be so neatly drawn, yet the Chinese music scene can be effectively conceptualized as a spectrum. On one end is a music subculture, on another is pop music that is essentially tribal in nature. Fans and artists, usually in their late 20s, of sub-musical-cultures have distinct elitist musical tastes. They constitute a tightly knit cult circle in pursuit of a spirit (*jingshen*) that 'soulless' pop music is considered lacking. Whether their heroes are Cui Jian or some emerging electronic music bands like Panda Twin, the spirit of subculture (*ya wenhua*) is characterized by an intense desire for belonging. In sharp contrast, the music tribes (teens, late-teens, and mid-twenty somethings) chase after cool fashions and revel in their skin deep allegiance to the changing idols on the bulletin board. As the example of Miss Cool shows, lifestyle is a matter of choice and musical taste is not reliable as a sustained marker of personal and social identities even for metropolitan youths in China, and that the equation between cool youth and cool music is not a simple one, especially for transnational [cell phone](#) marketers. The research focus, once again, should be placed on the consumers themselves, the single-child generation who sets their own agendas and who knows how to get what they want with a determination and optimism rarely seen in the previous generations. Nobody can hold them hostage for long.

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Notes

² Pu Shu has won six trophies at the annual Pepsi Music Chart Awards. He was also the only mainland Chinese singer who was given the title of Asia's "popular male artist" at the 2004 MTV Asia Music Award.

³ Jian Cui's pseudo-name is the reverse of rock singer Cui Jian's name. It was a naming strategy aimed at reminding people of his admiration for music subculture. Cui Jian is, of course, his hero.