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Xiao, Jian. *Punk Culture in Contemporary China*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 220 pp., £79.99, ISBN: 9789811309762.

### Keywords

punk, china, ethnography, globalisation, subculture

Since its emergence in London and New York in the late 1970s, punk music has subsequently become a global phenomenon (see Dines, Gordon, Guerra, & Bestley, 2019), spreading across the world to regions as diverse as Mexico (O'Connor, 2003), South Africa (Basson, 2007) and Indonesia (Prasetyo, 2017). In the early 1990s, punk music reached China. This book by Jian Xiao (with some co-authored sub-chapters by Jim Donaghey and Paula Guerra) situates this arrival within a global context, tracing the history of punk, its meanings, norms and identity, and referencing handouts and performances that capture the punk scene. The influence of punk music is generally understood in terms of how it challenged established meanings and narratives, including capitalism and globalisation. However, most of the narratives in question related to Western contexts, and the authors note a “general lack of discussion about punk phenomena in Asian contexts” (p. 1). This opens new avenues of interpretation that are likely to be of interest to cultural sociologists who explore meaning-making and those with an interest in post-colonialism.

The book's nine chapters are organised as two main sections. The first (and longer) section investigates punk in China while the second compares the punk scenes in Indonesia and Portugal. All of the case studies emphasise the need to look beyond established narratives to understand these marginal punk scenes. As the opening chapter explains, a sub-cultural approach is inadequate in the Chinese context, where punk music is characterised by a plurality of styles and sub-genres, and its devotees come from diverse classes and professional backgrounds.

To develop this pluralistic notion of punk, the authors ground their theoretical approach in Howard Becker's notion of *art worlds* and Pierre Bourdieu's *cultural fields*. To more fully develop their interpretation, one might have welcomed a slightly riskier approach referencing authors who look beyond established Western narratives—for instance, Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Other—but these are surprisingly absent. Nevertheless, in acknowledging the role of the “myriad of complementary activities” (p. 8) in the production of cultural objects, the discussion of art worlds and cultural fields is somewhat adapted for the Chinese context.



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In particular, the link to post-subcultural approaches and the concept of *scenes* is used to explain the circumstances of particular cultural practices without assuming a coherent culture that unites these as a subculture.

The book draws on interview data and participant observations of the punk scenes in Wuhan and Beijing. Chapters 2 and 3 use these data to trace the historical development of punk scenes. This historical approach follows two routes: a historian's more general narrative, and the story told in the third chapter through the eyes of a participant (Mr Li). The contrast between these accounts is interesting in itself, especially in an age of post-colonial awareness, and this methodology might prove useful in future studies to elucidate these differences of perspective.

Chapters 4 to 6 are devoted to the everyday formation of punk scenes. In Chapter 4, we learn that China's educational context plays a significant role in becoming a punk. In China, the education experience is geared to a specific career path, accompanied by strong social pressure. This engenders notions of resistance, and punk becomes a tool for realizing other possibilities and escaping those pressures without abandoning the needs of everyday life. It would have been interesting to reflect further on how this implicit anti-education narrative relates to other forms of resistance mentioned elsewhere in the book. The authors invoke the concept of 'punk spirit' to characterise how many people mitigate the pressures of ordinary jobs through punk music and involvement in the punk scene. For most, this is a way of connecting these two worlds; a small number of punks have abandoned their day jobs to pursue a less stable and more radical lifestyle, but this is a micro-level tendency rather than a broader social movement.

Chapter 5 details the inner workings of the punk scene. This account of the distinctive characteristics of punk in China leads on to a deeper discussion of a common internal conflict related to issues of resistance and authenticity: whether punk musicians should sing in Chinese or in English. Punk music is a global phenomenon, but to what extent should Chinese punks resist mere replication of global influences while also pledging allegiance to the punk world beyond China? These issues arise in informal settings like restaurants or apartments, which are not just meeting places or music-sharing venues but contribute to boundary-making and scene identity formation. Chapter 8 elaborates further on the importance of these offline spaces in the evolution of the punk scene. The role of digital media is also discussed, as these platforms extend beyond the local scene to connect like-minded punks across China; the Punk Forum, for example, has more than 8000 active members (p. 130). While these forums share many elements of the local punk scene, they do not inculcate a strong identity and do not contribute directly to local scene recruitment. To that extent, it remains unclear how online and offline spaces contribute to punk meaning-making in a Chinese context.

The second part of the book compares the Chinese punk scene to developments in Indonesia and Portugal. This avoids the often stereotypical comparisons between East and West and sheds welcome light on punk scenes beyond the Anglo-American context. The China-Indonesia comparison highlights some similarities related to ideas of youth culture and resistance. However, although Indonesia's punk scene is far more politicised than in China, Indonesian society views punk more as religious heresy than as a form of political resistance (p. 158). The Portuguese punk scene dates back much further to the 1970s, when Lisbon was its primary centre. At that time, punk music represented a unifying anti-politics stance. However, unlike developments in the Anglophone world, the Portuguese scene never achieved commercial status in shops or the music industry (p. 194). While these comparisons are informative, they remain quite descriptive, and it seems clear that concepts like *art world* and *cultural field* are of limited use as a framework for any more structured comparison.

Overall, *Punk Culture in Contemporary China* is a timely contribution to the field of punk music and subcultural studies. Despite its global rise, punk in Asia has been largely overlooked, and this

book serves as a useful starting point for new research. In particular, the rich empirical material in this book has significant implications for the further development of existing theoretical frameworks. The transnational comparative approach makes a welcome and novel contribution to the study of subcultural scenes. At the same time, the book highlights the need for new conceptual avenues that can more fully accommodate the globalisation of meaning-making.

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