

AMAR, Nathanel. 2022.
*Scream for Life: L'invention
 d'une contre-culture punk
 en Chine populaire.*
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I GRÉGOIRE BIENVENU

is a doctoral candidate at the IRMECCEN of the Sorbonne Nouvelle and LabEx ICCA, and at the ICS of the Communication University of China. Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Paris Nord, 20 avenue Georges Sand, 93210 La Plaine Saint-Denis, France (gregoire.bienvenu@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr).

In *Scream for Life: L'invention d'une contre-culture punk en Chine Populaire* (The invention of a punk counterculture in the People's Republic of China), Nathanel Amar analyses Chinese punk (*pengke yinyue* 朋克音樂), a musical movement that took off in Beijing during the 1990s. Unlike the scientific literature that all too often fosters the exoticism of Chinese subcultures, Nathanel Amar has based his work on a long field study, the result of which is a precise and richly documented analysis of the local punk scene. The author uses an innovative ethnographic approach and ideas issuing from *cultural studies* to examine the constitution of Chinese punk as a musical counterculture that challenges a regime "that is in the habit of controlling all forms of public expression and which does not hesitate to silence intellectuals" (p. 13). Whilst the support of rockers for the democratic movement "led to their repression by the authorities" (p. 65), punk has developed within the interstices of the Chinese capital to the point where it has attracted a wider section of the country's youth who, from Wuhan to Chengdu, have every intention of "speaking – or shouting – on behalf of those who cannot do it for themselves" (p. 12).

Examining a counterculture in the Chinese context means firstly questioning the idea of culture and giving an updated account of the political injunctions that structured artistic production "even before the arrival of the Communists to power" (p. 25). From the writing of Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, "the first Chinese Marxist to move the revolutionary struggle from the economic to the cultural sphere" (p. 28), to the Maoist cultural campaigns, modern Chinese culture has been built on a critique and a repression of its players by politicians, dictated by the requirements of the struggle for a communist hegemony. Although the opening-up policy adopted by Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 offered young people "new ways of producing and consuming culture" (p. 45) and made possible the creation and multiplication of Chinese rock groups (*yaogun yinyue* 搖滾音樂), the artistic expression "of a certain disquiet amongst

post-Maoist youth" (p. 59) nonetheless became a political statement that was impossible to express after 1989. It was therefore within the post-1990 generation, the "*D-generation*" – for 碟 (*die*, the disc), 盜版 (*daoban*, pirating), and 打口 (*dakou*, recycled cassettes and CDs) – that cultural poaching and musical exchanges with foreign students became widespread, engendering the creation of the first Chinese punk groups in Beijing.

To this primary breeding-ground, Nathanel Amar has added a second layer that forms the principal environment for his study: the city of Wuhan, where the punk scene is known "both for its highly subversive aspect (...) and the social origins of its musicians" who maintain a lively "political and ethical rivalry" with punk from the capital (p. 95). With the help of a network study built up from flyers and posters for punk concerts and other sources, the author demonstrates, in an original manner, the way in which punk culture has progressively taken root, and its mutation into collective action involving various players and "happy places" where rehearsals and performances can occur: from back kitchens and karaoke bars to dedicated concert halls and bars.¹

Although the author promises in his introduction not to try to define punk, the third chapter nevertheless provides some concrete elements of a definition of punk-rock in the Chinese context. Extolling the art of "Do It Yourself (DIY)," the members of the community engage in a "democratic amateurism" (p. 128) that abolishes any separation between audience and performers. To be able to issue their albums and ensure their concerts can take place in the face of government censorship, the musicians use various strategies such as self-production, bribes, camouflaging sensitive lyrics, and the use of the English language. To be punk also means adopting voluntarily provocative "punk paraphernalia": "a way of recognising each other" (p. 157) and living on the margins of society. Moreover, Chinese punks see their activities as taking place in the 江湖 *jianghu*, that imaginary space "of the rivers and lakes" often used to "describe marginal Chinese communities" (p. 227). Vulgarity and violence are constituent parts of this, often aimed at the Chinese government, but it is also ritualised through the exhibition of genitals and mosh pits. Although this "virile opposition to all forms of authority" links punks to defiant (*haohan* 好漢) writers, it also raises problems such as the place of women in this musical world.

Nathanel Amar then analyses the construction of a punk "public space" through the example of two specific places created by and for punks: the social centre for youth "Our House" (*women jia* 我們家), a place for meeting others and popular education, and the DMC (Dirty Monster Club) of Tongzhou, a bar that hosts punk groups. These utopic places, together with the development of a specialist music press (p. 275), have allowed the emergence of a specific public place that is both "atypical" and "uncertain," but also a place of "social and political experimentation" (p. 308-9). The last chapter seems to offer at last an overall explanation of the role of punks today in China. Punk lyrics are an instrument, the purpose of which is to contest the "two monopolies of the

1. As the quotations from French rap that the author surreptitiously places at the head of the chapters suggest, it is interesting to note that Chinese punks and rappers originally shared the same musical space.

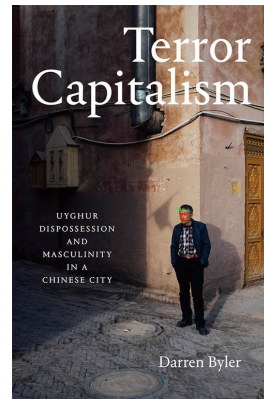
Chinese Communist Party” (p. 312), that is to say truth and memory. Punks undertake to deconstruct the figureheads of Communism, acknowledging the crimes of the Chinese authorities and putting forward an alternative pantheon to the official history, using their art as a “place for uncovering hidden memories” (p. 328). As such, the repression of 4 June 1989 represents a structuring element of Chinese punk that includes the keeping alive of memory through words, illustrations, and coded messages to the public.

Scream for Life offers us an insight into one of the least-known musical universes in China, yet one of the most fascinating, whilst at the same time enriching a literature on Chinese popular music that has not yet been sufficiently developed. If punk has been saddled with numerous clichés since its appearance in Great Britain, Nathaniel Amar, like Dick Hebdige (1979) several decades ago, has successfully met the challenge of revealing the political and artistic meanings conveyed by this counterculture in the context of contemporary China. The retranscription of long ethnographic notes and the use of a large body of (translated) song lyrics give this work a fluidity that makes it of interest to both academics and music lovers.

Translated by Elizabeth Guill.

References

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BYLER, Darren. 2022.

Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City.

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I ANDREW B. KIPNIS

is Professor of anthropology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong (abkipnis@cuhk.edu.hk).

Darren Byler has written a moving, powerful, and timely book, though the titular framing of “terror capitalism” obfuscates more than it illuminates. Byler conducted his research in the city of Ürümqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China, between 2011 and 2018. He set out to do research on rural-urban migrants there, including migrants of Uyghur, Han (mainstream Chinese), and other ethnicities, but as the Muslim men he met were increasingly surveilled, dispossessed, and disappeared, he shifted his focus from migration to dispossession. These two themes interrelate, as dispossession in rural areas often leads to migration to the city, where further forms of dispossession can occur.

There is a hopeful aspect to the earlier parts of his research, which Byler presents under themes such as friendship, anticolonial politics, and cosmopolitan Islamic religious flourishing. Despite Islamophobia, anti-Uyghur racism, and increasing surveillance, until roughly 2016, migrant Uyghur men were able to survive in the city, living in Uyghur spaces, caring for their friends, and sharing forms of religious piety and hope on Chinese social media and in neighbourhood mosques. As Chinese president Xi Jinping began his “people’s war on terror” in 2015, the spaces for Uyghurs to live in the city contracted, surveillance intensified, and the Uyghur men Byler knew were forced to return to their rural homes, where they were rounded up and sent to detention camps.

Because of these policies, but also reflecting a dynamic seen in many places in the world, social media for Uyghurs in Xinjiang transform from a source of hope to a means of oppression. At first, even the Chinese social media platform WeChat opened up a space for migrant workers to form friendships, and to share and learn from religious memes, art, poetry, and other content. But after a few years, this space of sharing becomes a tool of surveillance, in which every contact and act of religious sharing – not to mention location data – serves as a pretext for labelling migrants religious extremists or terrorists.

Byler learned both Uyghur and Mandarin, and uses his linguistic competence well when exploring the subtleties of terms from both