Book Review. China With a Cut

Marc L. Moskowitz, University of South Carolina
Yet McCarthy demonstrates how the minorities (or at least some minority élites) view these acts of cultural preservation as “an end in itself”, and at times seek to challenge stereotypes and normative schemas by pioneering different forms of “citizenship practice”, that is “ways of participating, or attempting to participate, in the imagined community of the nation” (p. 171). She argues that, by framing this cultural revival in “minority-centric terms”, minority élites are actively involved in constructing a shared yet hybrid sense of Chineseness. In the author’s words, “cultural revival can be as much about being Chinese as it is about being minority” (p. 9).

McCarthy’s focus on different modes of citizenship practice pioneers an important new line of inquiry in the field of Chinese minority studies. It successfully complicates many of the neat dyads that underpins our thinking and forces us deeper into the messy complexities of identity politics in contemporary China. Yet I, at least, was left wanting more evidence of the nature and scope of this citizenship sentiment and practice among the minorities under study. One is forced to wade through 69 pages of background material, including long sections where McCarthy attempts to position herself (dissertation-style) within a growing body of literature, before arriving at the heart of her ethnographic data, three chapters and just under one hundred pages on the Dai, Bai and Hui respectively. These chapters contain a number of thought-provoking vignettes and short snippets of dialogue with minority informants and state officials, but more detailed interviews, survey and statistical data, and ethnographic observations could have strengthened the author’s argument. Perhaps a more thorough and deeper focus on just one of these groups would have made this task easier and more manageable.

That said, McCarthy’s fine study is an important new contribution to evolving understandings of “multiculturalism with Chinese characteristics”, forcing readers to contemplate how competing forms of ethnic nationalism interact with shared forms of citizenship practice. This book is a must-read for both scholars and students of ethnic relations in Reform-era China.

James Leibold
La Trobe University


As Jeroen de Kloet points out in his introduction, most of the English language scholarship on Chinese rock has not addressed anything after the mid-1990s and as such there is a whole new generation of musicians and fans to be accounted for who have grown up in a very different political economy, surrounded by new technological innovations that have transformed music industries and cultures. De Kloet’s contemporary focus with historical contextualization is therefore a most welcome addition to the growing field of scholarship on Chinese language music.

De Kloet provides a wonderful overview of different musical styles that connect to Chinese rock including folk rock, punk, underground rock and mainstream pop rock, among others. He deftly analyzes an array of important
issues such as rock’s contemporary claims of being both Western inspired and emblematic of Chinese identity, and the ways in which Chinese rock incorporates old Communist cultural revolution ideologies to be one of the people, to serve the people or, in the case of punk, to create anarchy. He examines gender issues in the hyper-masculine world of Chinese rock and rock artists’ claims to musical authenticity in relation to their portrayal of pop.

As with any text, there are a few points that I would quibble with. De Kloet, for example, uses the term Gang-Tai pop to refer to the wildly popular pop music produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan, failing to recognize that the term is very much a PRC construction that centers Chinese music and culture in Beijing.

A second, related point is that in spite of the title’s claim that the book is on popular music, China’s rock is not very popular. De Kloet acknowledges both that rock has very low sales in relation to mainstream pop from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and that Western scholarship has for the most part focused on Chinese rock (p. 103). Rather than using this to problematize English language scholarship, however, he seems to draw on these points as validation for an even greater academic focus on rock and on Beijing as China’s supposed musical and cultural epicenter.

The result of all of this is the occasional distortion of information. This inverted logic places pop, and not rock, in the chapter entitled “subaltern sounds”. Graphs on the findings from his surveys (especially those on p. 149) create the erroneous impression that rock is only slightly less popular than pop music from Taiwan and Hong Kong which, if one looks at music sales, is not even close to the truth. Clearly the respondents to his survey are not reflective of the majority of Chinese consumers. Nor is he reflexive about the ways in which this might influence his analysis and assertions about the music or Chinese culture as a whole. In Chapters 3 and 4, de Kloet argues that female musicians are stigmatized subalterns whose voices have been marginalized in rock, and that Chinese rock revolves around men’s reaction to feeling emasculated on a global level. De Kloet’s analysis of these issues is both eloquent and insightful. Yet in choosing not to rearticulate rock’s own subaltern status at this juncture, he undermines the larger theoretical implications of his analysis for gender relations in China as a whole. Rock in China is approximately as central to the average Chinese person’s life as jazz is in the US. It is therefore a mistake to take Beijing rock’s obsession with machismo as emblematic of Chinese language music’s themes, especially in light of the centrality of women and what in the West might be categorized as androgynous men in mainstream pop, which is what most people are listening to.

I should point out that these problems are symptomatic of English-language studies on rock as a body of scholarship rather than arising because of any individual eccentricities of the author. When de Kloet explicitly situates his analysis in rock, with no larger claims about Chinese music as a whole, the results are nothing less than fantastic. He explores the strategies with which female rock artists negotiate their places in this male domain, for example, and the ways in which male rock artists, the media, and the state engage with female rock musicians’ different personas. Employing Foucauldian analysis, he links music to technologies of the
self. He also uses music as a means of better understanding China’s new youth in relation to the dramatic shifts in family structure that have ensued in recent years, their surprising nationalism given how important global culture has become to their identities, their dismissal of the theme of rebellion in Western rock because of its associations with chaos during the Cultural Revolution, and the ways in which censorship both stifles and fans the flames of creativity.

*China with a Cut* is a superb work—one of the best books on China to come out in a long time. It is articulately written, insightful and, at times, poetically lyrical in its prose. Reading this book is a must for anyone hoping to gain a better understanding of Chinese music, pop culture, youth culture or, indeed, modern China.

Marc L. Moskowitz
University of South Carolina


*Red Lights* is an impassioned and highly personal ethnography of the karaoke sex entertainment industry in Dalian during the reform era. The book is unique in studies of the Chinese commercial sex because it is based on months of difficult and dangerous participant observation research by a Chinese woman graduate student. There is no better work on the subject in English or Chinese, providing an insightful and highly readable scholarly account of one corner of what is already perhaps the largest commercial sex industry in the world.

The narrative becomes most personal, even poignant, in Tiantian Zheng’s account of her own awakening to the socially constructed nature of filial piety and the oppressive norms of female chastity that she was educated into while growing up in China. Zheng describes the humiliation she felt at her mother’s fierce admonitions about what may strike most readers as minute violations of sexual propriety. Most of this short but vivid personal account occurs in the first chapter, but it remains a theme throughout the volume. The aspect of themselves that Chinese women are shown to value most—their self-definitions as virtuous daughters—is the very one that most traps them in a pattern of subordinate relations with men and the larger society. Hostesses resist their subordination only to the degree that they subvert and appropriate signs of gendered servility and docility in relations with clients. They achieve this most spectacularly by making their clients emotionally dependent on them and “cheating” these men out of money and gifts. Still, Zheng argues, hostesses cling to an idea of “home” as a place that they can be their best true selves, taking care of their natal families financially, while hoping for a good marriage and family for themselves.

Zheng’s strong suit is the authority of her ethnography. As a participant in the daily routines of the clubs, she witnesses both the front stage and backstage behaviors of clients and hostesses. Hostesses serve customers in the club with conversation, flirtation, drinking, dancing and sexual touching. Most, but not all, hostesses also “go out” of the clubs to have sex with customers, also for cash tips. The text provides