

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Finding Youth in China

In the late 1960s, when American youth were longing for or enjoying summers of love, their Chinese counterparts were engaged in somewhat different activities. Some were still active as Red Guards, the shock troops who answered Chairman Mao's call for continuing revolution and for the overthrow of his rivals in the leadership. Millions of young Chinese had started the journey to rural exile, to learn from the peasants and deepen their Maoist faith. Youth culture, epitomised by Woodstock and the wider Western youth rebellion of the 1960s, seemed to have passed China by, though Red Guards represented their own kind of revolt against established norms. Twenty years later, China was more open to outside connections and young Chinese knew about Michael Jackson, the Beatles, and much more. Distinctive youth cultures had emerged in a nation undergoing rapid change. Forty years after Woodstock, young China formed the largest mass of Internet users in the world. Despite government efforts at control, Chinese youth took to the opportunities the 'Net offered with the kind of gusto with which American youthful rebels had embraced rock 'n roll and rebellion a generation or two earlier.

This book seeks to trace the emergence and elaboration of youth cultures in China over this forty-year period. It will show that China's youth, even in Mao's time, were as active in their own ways at asserting their ambitions and difference as their Western counterparts. Three historical junctures in the formation of Chinese youth identity – 1968, 1988, and 2008 – provide key moments on which to map the rise of Chinese youths' engagement with the world as China moved from the relative isolation of Maoist times to what appears to be invasive globalisation, symbolised by the Beijing Olympics. We will plot the emergence and elaboration of youth cultures from the time of the Red Guards in the 1960s through the 1980s to the current world of the Chinese Internet. The study will illustrate how the interplay between indigenous factors and foreign influences has continued, over more than forty years, to shape youth identities in

the People's Republic. Chinese youngsters have seized on opportunities to turn hip-hop, the Internet, and other popular cultural elements to their own, particular, and varied purposes. In China globalisation of youth culture has a distinctive Chinese cast. This study raises the question of whether globalising influences might obliterate Chinese culture in a few generations. Or could Chinese youth culture enjoy the same currency around the world in this century that American popular culture achieved in the last century?

THREE HISTORICAL MOMENTS

In 1968, China, seemingly cut off from the rest of the world, including parts that were in the throes of their own youth rebellion, was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. The destruction of lives and the abuses of power in these years cannot be ignored. But, as Red Guards, some young people found a space to assert their difference from older generations. The sending of millions of youths to the countryside starting in late 1968 gave these developments new impetus, by providing opportunities for youthful exploration in new writing, performance, and collective artistic practice, as conditions eased and as this generation returned to the cities even before the end of the Cultural Revolution era in 1976.

By 1988 the innovations of the 'search for roots' and other post-Cultural Revolution intellectual and artistic movements had combined in popular youthful imaginations with greater knowledge and interest in the world outside China. Several of the developments that attracted young China in 1988 were related to film. Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* struck a remarkable chord among young Chinese audiences with its portrayal of a primitive, instinctual world without Confucianism, Marxism, or any 'ism' other than nationalism. The popularity of the film helped spawn a new kind of rock music that mixed folk with foreign elements to express youthful rebellion. The so-called hoodlum novelist Wang Shuo captured the mocking tone of the times in his stories, five of which were in preparation as films in 1988. The year marked a transition between the autochthonous youth experimentation of the late 1960s and the overwhelming global influences of the new century to come. The possibilities for further liberalisation seemed enormous in 1988, as even state-owned television broadcast (and soon after, rebroadcast) the documentary series *River Elegy*, which presented a new interpretation of Chinese history that largely ignored Marxism and most Communist achievements. In the following year, however, state power brutally asserted itself against youthful rebellion on June 4 in Tiananmen Square.

The year of the Beijing Olympics saw a range of youth culture phenomena, including spontaneous volunteer service to help victims of

disaster and to assist in presenting a successful international sporting festival. By 2008 young China had embraced the Internet with unexpected, complex consequences for themselves and for the rest of society. The global reach made possible by the Web brought increased international influences to the lives of young Chinese, adding to the range of choices the virtual world made available to the young. Japanese comics, Korean preppy fashion, Chinese-style hip-hop, and fandom for instantly created television stars were all part of the new, consumerist youth culture that many young Chinese were creating for themselves. A kind of nationalist undertow, in part encouraged by the state, worked behind this apparent popular globalisation.

By examining these three points in the development of youth cultures, this book hopes to avoid the kind of breathlessness about contemporary developments and rapid change that dominates journalistic accounts of present-day China. Tracing the origins of current phenomena and showing the ways in which these Chinese developments have drawn on roots springing from previous generations' experiences help explain how and why China has taken these paths to popular cultural modernity. The study hopes also to show that changes in Chinese elaborations in youth cultures, even in very different political and social circumstances, were often rather similar to the experience of Western societies. This book shares with Jon Savage's study of the emergence of the teenager the aim to tell 'the story of how youth struggled to make itself heard, if not totally on its own terms, then in terms it could recognise and accommodate itself to.'¹

This study invokes the concept of subcultures, using for example Dick Hebdige's emphasis on self-styling as a means to promote a sense of belonging and distinguish oneself or a group from others. The idea of subcultures is relatively new in mainland Chinese contexts. The word for subculture (*yawenhua*) only began to be fitfully used by sociologists in the 1990s, a half century after its association with the Chicago school of urban research and more than twenty years after Hebdige's early studies as part of the Birmingham school of cultural studies.² In China the dominant political discourse in the second half of the twentieth century spoke of 'the people' and 'the broad masses,' an approach that seemed to deny space for subcultures. This book will trace the roots of subcultural practice among educated youth in the 1970s. When subcultures emerged publicly in the 1980s, they were not necessarily anticommercial, transgressive, oppositional, or spectacular, unlike their earlier Western counterparts. The following chapters, however, will show that elements of these characteristics were present and grew as youth cultures were further elaborated. Chinese young people tended to engage with gusto in the new mass culture and massification that came with economic growth and opening to the outside world. The attractions of the new commercialised

mass culture were as all-encompassing or totalising as the earlier Maoist version of culture for the masses. The new, however, also offered space for subcultural distinctions.

YOUTH AND THE CHINESE REVOLUTION

The concept of youth as a distinctive period in a person's life emerged in China at about the same time as in the Western world. An awareness of a period between childhood, with its dependence on adults, and the assumption of the full adult responsibilities associated with marriage slowly dawned in premodern China. Part of the perpetual appeal to Chinese readers of the vernacular novel of the eighteenth century, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (*Honglou meng*) lay in its indulgent depiction of a world of youthful dreams, ambitions, and disappointments. As a modern education system developed in the late nineteenth century, associated with efforts by Christian missionaries and separate from the traditional Confucian training that boys (and some girls) received, the concept of youth took hold. In the political disorder of the second decade of the new century, a New Culture movement called for a rejection of old values and habits. In the pages of *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*), magazine writers called for the adoption of Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy, symbols of the Westernisation they saw as China's saviours. Student demonstrations in Beijing and other cities on 4 May 1919 gave the label May Fourth Movement to this effort to promote social and cultural modernisation. One feature of the movement was advocacy of free marriage choice for young people, in contrast to the usual custom of arranged marriages. Free choice tended to encourage later marriage, so that the period of youth, from puberty to setting up one's own household, was extended, providing an incentive for the elaboration of youth cultures. Frank Dikötter has noted the rise in the first half of the twentieth century of a focus on the young body as a site for the inscription of nationalist and modernist ambitions.³ This present study will suggest the same has been true of the era since then.

In the midst of these changes the Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921. A minor figure at the first meeting, Mao Zedong was himself a product of the ferment of ideas that had given rise to the May Fourth Movement. Throughout his life, Mao held tight to the idea that the future belonged to the young. The relative youth of many leaders of the Communist Party and its army during the War against Japan and in the civil war that ended with victory in 1949 was striking. In his new regime, Mao kept returning to the enthusiasm he associated with youth. Speaking to Chinese students and trainees in Moscow in 1957, on the second of the two trips he ever made abroad, Mao declared: 'The world is

yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you.... The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you.⁴ Youth may have been valorised in this way in the 1950s and early 1960s, but it was a dependent, politicised period in the lives of Chinese citizens, with limited opportunities for distinctive and independent expression. Youth in the Maoist era was often regarded as simply a junior version of adult commitments and responsibilities. Young Pioneers put red scarves around their necks as children and joined the Communist Youth League as teenagers in preparation for adulthood in the Party.

The Cultural Revolution changed this pattern and created spaces for the establishment of youth cultures expressing distinctive identities. As in the May Fourth era, political upheaval helped create the conditions for new ideas and patterns of behaviour to take root. Mao regarded young people as the vanguard force for his revolt against his own regime. For themselves, Red Guards seized the opportunities to indulge in rebellion against teachers, parents, and the establishment. Many groups took up creative activities to propagandise Mao's cause. The transfer of millions of youth to the countryside, the army, and to other occupations beginning in the late 1960s afforded many young people the freedom to elaborate further some of these creative activities. The purpose tended to shift to a different, even individual, urge to express themselves. In the absence of close supervision, underground creativity took hold as some rural sent-down youth became linked with urban salons discussing new ideas and new art.

The return to the cities after Mao's death in late 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution produced an explosion of youthful creativity, enthusiasm, and alienation. Soon 'reform and opening up' promulgated by Deng Xiaoping saw a widening of the resources available to China's youth in its continuing quest for self-expression. Foreign films, novels, television programs, music, fashions, and foods opened up new worlds for all Chinese, but the young took particular interest in the new possibilities. Concern about the impact of these new trends, combined with a determination that young Chinese had somehow 'lost their way' as a result of the Cultural Revolution, was behind an episode in 1980 in which a letter supposedly from a young woman named Pan Xiao sparked widespread media discussion on youth alienation and lack of ideals.⁵ By 1983 elderly conservatives in the Communist Party were grumbling about 'spiritual pollution' among China's young, epitomised by permed hair, bell-bottomed trousers, and excessive fascination with Western popular culture. An official campaign against such alleged evils gained little traction and was abandoned. By the late 1980s the rhythms of Western,

Hong Kong, and Taiwan pop and rock music were competing with local versions for youthful attention. Breakdancing, bodybuilding, and sports provided exercise for young bodies, while some youth took an interest in the indigenous breathing exercises and seemingly magical powers of *qigong*. New spaces, such as the pool hall, bar, and video hall, emerged in which young people could gather to share a sense of solidarity and difference from older and younger citizens. China's youth keenly embraced a mix of international and local cultural practices.⁶

Continued economic growth opened up further possibilities for young Chinese. Income growth began to accelerate around 1995, so that, for those with money, life began to change dramatically. Private home ownership, private cars, and open choice in finding employment had become established by the turn of the millennium. A new space emerged for youthful expression, as the Internet became a fixture in young lives, first in Internet bars (cafés) and later in college dormitories and private homes. The virtual space of the Web brought new music, including from other parts of Asia, to youthful Chinese fans. A 'Korean wave' took hold and television talent quests made young Chinese dream of individual fame, while a foreign education became an ideal for others. Fans – of pop stars, film stars, talent show contestants, cartoon characters, or of more esoteric activities like cosplay (dressing up as fantasy characters) – found likeminded conversation partners through the Internet and in urban spaces devoted to idol worship. Globalisation took root in Chinese popular culture, with most young Chinese happy to live lives of global connectedness. But the indigenous and local could also find space in the new youth cultures, as indicated by the success of a televised talent show based on *A Dream of Red Mansions*, a novel enjoyed for centuries by Chinese readers. This hybrid mix of influences was characteristic of the new youth culture throughout the post-1978 reform era.

DISCOVERING YOUTH IN CHINA

By the 1990s the rise and elaboration of youth cultures, and the new attitudes that these cultures reflected, were hard to miss. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the term *youth* (*qingnian*) had been stretched from its usual thirty-five years-old cut-off to include even people up to the age of forty-five who had lost ten years of their careers during the Cultural Revolution. By the 1990s youth was more narrowly defined, though some writers included those in their thirties. This present study applies the term to those aged from about fourteen to about twenty-five, from teenagehood to before marriage. We should acknowledge of course that a fourteen-year-old usually has different outlooks and tastes from someone who is in their mid-twenties.

Social commentators in the 1990s began to use a label that soon gained wide currency: the post-1980 cohort (*80 hou*, read as *baling hou*). It was coined to acknowledge the new kind of young Chinese who had been born in the first decade of economic reform. These young people had no direct experience of the economically straitened times or of political campaigns or movements (the events of the spring of 1989 and June 4 occurred in their childhood). The materialism and high expectations of China's new youth were nicely summed up and explained by this new label, 'post-1980.' As had happened in filmmaking in the mid-1980s when a critic identified a Fifth Generation of directors, a calculation of previous and subsequent generations was made. A post-1990 cohort (*jiuling hou*) was seen to succeed the slightly older group, with an allegedly even greater devotion to consumerism and their own pleasure. By 2011 a post-2000 label was being applied to some youth phenomena. Others counted backward and came up with a post-1970 generation (identified with events in the spring of 1989) and even a post-1960 group.⁷ In the new century, printed collections of nostalgia for each of the decades beginning with the 1960s appeared frequently in Chinese bookstores. Profusely illustrated with pictures of everyday objects, television and movie stars, grain and cotton ration coupons, school uniforms, and favourite comic books, these works were a symptom of a sense of rapid change and growing prosperity. Chinese readers seem to have welcomed these collections as a kind of anchor for memories in a tidal wave of development and change.

This book prefers to map changing youth cultures across four decades in ways that avoid the restrictions that these group, cohort, or generational identifiers impose on what is a moving picture of differently paced streams of development. The twenty-year spacing between the main focal points of the study are less than the usual twenty-five-year gap granted generations. The fans of rock musician Cui Jian in 1988, therefore, were not the children of 1968's Red Guards. Only some of the netizens of 2008, hunched over computer screens in their bedrooms to escape the censure of parents who still listened to Cui Jian's ancient lyrics, were the offspring of 1988 rebels. The twenty-year space allows a freedom from generational labels that can offer more nuanced insight into the changes taking place over this period of forty-plus years.

A study like this is unable to cover the whole country and all of Chinese society. Given the differences between habits of life in village China and those in urban centres, there is a bias toward urban China in this study. Cities, especially large conurbations on the eastern seaboard were the nodes through which international and other new influences presented themselves to young Chinese. A kind of trickle-down effect, facilitated by the increasing movement of rural workers to urban workplaces, took new fashions and ways of behaving to the farthest reaches of the land. Pirated

videotapes and DVDs, for example, could be found on sale or broadcast on ancient television sets in the remotest village, even if a petrol-powered generator drove the equipment. But the action, including innovations that created Chinese versions of new phenomena originating outside the nation, was in the big cities. Youth in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou were at the forefront of change, even if some indigenous responses, such as the Northwest Wind in rock music in the late 1980s, drew on remoter Chinese places.

This study also tends to examine young people with the resources to participate in the new cultural practices. These resources were not just financial, though the circumstances to buy new fashions, watch movies, attend rock concerts, subscribe to magazines, and use or own Web-connected computers were essential to access the real and virtual spaces of the new youth cultures. Resources also included the educational level to appreciate new writing and new ideas. Education was perhaps less important in terms of the body-related phenomena that helped constitute youth culture. Even if elaborate sports shoes might have been out of reach of poorer urban youth, in the 1980s at least, a cheap T-shirt and pair of jeans could be sufficient to make a statement of identity. The rhythms of the new youth cultures might at least be enjoyed from radio or television, even if attendance at rock concerts was beyond the resources of many urban youth.

In addition to these differences in social status, this study tries to acknowledge the importance of gender and regional differences in the youth cultures of these decades. As in most other societies, teenage boys and girls did not necessarily enjoy similar opportunities or appreciate the same pastimes or aspirations. Red Guards and sent-down youth in the 1960s and 1970s were imbued with a notion that boys and girls were equal and equally capable. Physical difference, especially different strength in farm labour, however, could not be overlooked. Much of youth culture in the 1980s took on a masculinist tinge. The popularity of the film *Red Sorghum* in 1988 was a distinctly male, and northern, phenomenon. The songs that took hold after the film, including Cui Jian's husky anthem 'Nothing to My Name,' appealed as much to young women as to their male peers, even if other rock groups tended to attract more young men. Cui and his rock cohort found their keenest fans in Beijing: Many Shanghai youth affected indifference. The rise of the Internet and its virtual connectedness had the potential to obliterate gender difference, but it also offered more opportunities (often anonymous) to elaborate these differences. Access to the 'Net and to mobile phones required a certain level of resources. The opportunities for niche cultures and narrow but widespread groupings of fans and mutual interests allowed for all kinds of differentiation, by region, gender, age, and inclination.

The research draws on almost forty years of personal observation in China, particularly in Beijing. Primary materials, including memoirs, films, magazines intended for youthful readers, and discussions and blogs on the Internet, have been augmented with sociological and other work by Chinese researchers. This latter material includes surveys, interviews, and a great deal of anecdotes and examples. Much of this kind of research in China is couched in terms of shaping policy for officials charged with what is called ‘youth work.’ But this purposefulness does not negate the usefulness of the content of these reports. We should acknowledge the pioneering work of Stanley Rosen in building on this Chinese research in his studies of the attitudes of youth during and especially since the Maoist era.⁸ In his 2009 book, *Research on Contemporary Chinese Youth Culture*, Lu Yulin presents a useful and up-to-date overview of youth research in China, couched in a Marxist framework.⁹ He includes coverage of popular culture among 14- to 25-year-olds, which is the focus of this present study.

In attempting to trace themes identified with bodies, rhythms, and spaces across five decades, this study has avoided a simple structure based around the three points in time that are our focus: 1968, 1988, and 2008. The first time-point is the subject of a separate chapter, but the natures of youth cultures at that time do not amount to a kind of baseline against which to measure subsequent developments. The other chapters range across the period since the Cultural Revolution, with a degree of concentration on the latter two dates. This matrix approach should not obscure the trajectories of nativist pride and global engagement that have driven changes in Chinese youth cultures in the reform period. Broadly speaking, the development from the late 1960s to the end of the 1980s was an elaboration of local cultural resources for youthful purposes in complex relationship with opening up to outside, particularly Western, cultural influences. In the two decades after 1988, these developments were intensified and complicated through processes that have not very usefully been called ‘glocalisation.’ This study suggests how complex these ostensibly local and international interactions and entanglements had become by the twenty-first century. The technologies of change had shifted from the radio to television, the video and DVD, and to the Internet and mobile phone. Bodies had been exhausted, built up, and displayed across these decades, to a changing soundtrack derived from a mix of the folk and the foreign, and in spaces that became at once more public and more intimate.

CHAPTER 2

Marking Out New Spaces

Red Guards, Educated Youth, and Opening Up

The decade of the Cultural Revolution saw the creation of distinctive modes and spheres for the assertion of youth identity. The developments in these years laid the groundwork for the emergence of youth popular culture in the 1980s and later. The Cultural Revolution is conventionally dated from 1966 to 1976. The phenomena in the first three years associated with Red Guards account for the mapping out of a space in which young people could conduct their own activities, whether in support of the current political campaigns or from more personal motivations. When Red Guards became ‘sent-down youth’ (or ‘educated youth’), starting in late 1968, the spaces for the development of youth popular culture extended to the countryside. Groups from the cities took their new sense of the possibilities for self-expression to the rural communes and even to the militarised settlements in harsher environments. Although authoritarian and bureaucratic control remained high in many areas of life, young people found an outlet by participating in performance troupes and other cultural activities. Some of these activities soon took the form of unofficial or underground cultural production. The hand-copied novels and poetry circulated among urban youth in rural settings allowed for considerable experimentation and creativity. Urban salons of returned youth and others provided a new context for discussion and debate on these new cultural phenomena. Mao’s death in September 1976 allowed these youthful expressions of identity to emerge alongside mainstream discourse, setting off a further elaboration of youth popular culture as China opened up to more outside influences. But the Cultural Revolution origins of youth culture in China are unmistakable. This chapter will explore these origins better to assess the flourishing of youth cultures from the mid-1980s to the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The spaces for the expression of youth popular culture thus moved from cities (with Red Guards) to the countryside (with sent-down youth) and back to the cities (with literary salons and other groupings). Each of