

Cut-out:

**Music, Profanity, and Subcultural Politics
in 1990s China**

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis examines the subcultural politics of the “cut-out generation” in 1990s China. It is driven by a double aspiration, and aims to bridge gaps in two main fields of literature. The first aspiration is a historical one: I offer a fine historical account of the “cut-out generation” as a slice of 1990s Chinese society, which remained overlooked in Chinese studies. The second aspiration is a theoretical one: I interrogate existing theories and concepts in the larger field of cultural studies, including music and materiality, subculture and profanity, regime of value and structure of feeling, with evidence found in this Chinese case, and point toward a comprehensive framework for the analysis of subcultural politics. The methodological approach consists of 72 in-depth life history interview and archival analysis of a “cut-out archive”, both conducted through an “ethnographic imagination” lens.

The thesis unpacks subcultural politics by looking into the materiality of subcultural objects, the sensuous interactions between people and things, and the dialectical interplay between a subculture and its historical, structural settings. It has three main empirical foci corresponding to each empirical chapter and organized under three theoretical themes: politics of value, dialectics of profanity, and structure of feeling. The first empirical chapter (politics of value) investigates three contested materialities of the cut-outs as plastic scrap, defective records, and “music info”, demonstrating in this way the different regimes of value which the cut-outs travelled through. The second one (dialectics of profanity) reveals how the cut-outs became a music object whose profanity was realized in various sensuous and creative relationships formed with Chinese consumers. The last empirical chapter (structure of feeling) provides a historicized analysis of the structure of feeling of the “cut-out generation”, which functioned as an affective infrastructure which both “emerged” from and “penetrated” the historical context of 1990s China.

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1 Introduction

Bring the world to us, we can take it.

把世界搬过来吧，我们装得下。

(Yan Jun, 2002)¹

1.1 Overview

This study examines the subcultural politics of the “cut-out generation” in 1990s China.

The term “cut-out” is used here as a translation of “dakou” (“打口”), literally “to give a cut” in the Chinese language. The term denotes a special type of music recording products - most commonly cassettes and CDs - named after their physical shape, which was characterized by a notch cut on the edge. Ending up as leftovers in their original Western market, these records were dumped by major labels and supposed to be physically destroyed by plastic recycling companies. Some, nonetheless, survived with only partial damage or no damage at all. The story went on into the early 1990s when cut-out cassettes, and later CDs, began to appear in a rapidly expanding grey market in mainland China where they were repaired and resold, and eventually constituted a vibrant informal economy. During the two decades that followed, the importation, circulation, and consumption of the cut-out records² developed into a massive wholesale and retail business, built up new discourses of Western rock and alternative music, and changed the social life of an extensive group of Chinese youth born in the years from the late-1960s to the early-1980s. The “cut-out generation” (“打口一代”), as it became known, was arguably one of the most expansive and vigorous music subcultures in modern Chinese history.

Today, although the cut-outs have long disappeared from the street, they keep on existing as a mark of history, as a powerful metaphor for Chinese urban life and youth culture at the turn of the century. Frequently celebrated by its now middle-aged members in an increasingly nostalgic manner, this subculture has almost become a myth in contemporary

¹ In the rest of the thesis, all the interview quotes and subcultural texts were translated by the author from Chinese.

² In the rest of the thesis, I refer to “cut-out records”, including cut-out cassette tapes, CDs, and all other formats as the “cut-outs”, as the word *dakou* was also commonly used as a noun in Chinese.

Chinese media. The term *dakou* has been taken to stand for the alternative, the subversive, and the anti-commercial side of 1990s Chinese life which has sunk into the past as China steps into its “New Era”.



Figure 1 A cut-out cassette³

The central question of this thesis concerns the various dimensions of cultural politics - or “subcultural politics” as I may term it - of the “cut-out generation”. In particular, my investigation pays attention to the contested materialities of music objects, the sensuous interactions between people and things, and the dialectical interplay between a subculture and its historical, structural settings. As will be argued in this thesis, the subcultural politics of the “cut-out generation” evolved primarily around the “profane” (Willis, 1978; 2000) materiality of the cut-outs, which was sensuously and creatively used by a group of Chinese people as a resource for meanings, value, and self-expression. Through this process, the group lived out a unique structure of feeling which is both an active articulation of and a collective response to the society in which they lived their life.

Examining 1990s China from a subcultural angle, this study asks the question of what it meant to be subcultural in 1990s China, and tells the story of how 1990s Chinese society generated its unique subcultural landscapes. This thesis is driven by a double aspiration, aiming to bridge gaps in two main fields of literature. The first aspiration is a historical one: I aim to pay due attention to the cultural phenomenon of the “cut-out generation” with an “ethnographic imagination” (Willis, 2000), and to offer a fine historical account of the

³ All photos were taken by the author unless otherwise stated.

cut-out subculture as a slice of Chinese society in the 1990s. The second aspiration is a theoretical one, placing the thesis in dialogue with theories of subculture, materiality, profanity, and structure of feeling within the broader field of cultural studies. I aim to interrogate these theories and concepts through this Chinese case, so as to construct a comprehensive framework for the analysis of thing-centred subcultures across space and time.

Methodologically, this study is conducted primarily using historical research methods, including in-depth life story interviews and archival analysis, while also aims to maintain a “spirit” of ethnography, taken here as a general methodological approach which understands culture on its own terms. Approaching the cut-out subculture in a holistic manner, I aim to investigate its rich elements of lived experience, to unpack its dynamics and politics at both micro and macro levels, and to draw a picture of “what was going on” from a participant’s perspective. This “ethnographic spirit” also guides the balancing between the theoretical and the empirical sides of this research. As Foucault (1982, 778) points out, theory and practice always exist in a relationship of mutual “constant checking”; although I do not follow a pure grounded theory approach, I aim to arrive at an analytical framework through a comprehensive and in-depth engagement with the “field” itself. In my writing, I emphasize the role of interview quotes and historical narratives, and present my empirical findings in a correspondingly “ethnographic” manner.

In this chapter, I will first give a brief introduction of the origins of the cut-outs and the “cut-out generation”, before offering a summary of the historical background of 1990s China and its contested popular music landscape. The chapter then reviews three selected studies on the “cut-out generation” from which I identify inspirations to build on and gaps to fill in. The chapter ends with an outline of the thesis structure.

1.2 Introducing the Cut-outs

The term “cut-out” was first commonly used by American vinyl diggers to refer to the records they found in the so-called “cut-out bins” of local record stores. These records consisted mainly of deleted titles or overpressed copies, and they were typically marked by the record labels with a notch-cut on the sleeve, as a means of indicating their “non-returnable” status. The term “non-returnable” originated in the early period when physical records were generally sold by the distributors to the retailers on a consignment basis, meaning that the retailers had the right to return any unsold copies for a full refund.

According to a survey published in *Billboard* in 1966, nearly half of American record retailers chose to return unsold copies of a “dead” title within half a year (see Figure 2).⁴

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 2 Survey results, published in *Billboard*, Jan 22 1966, p.54

The original use of the term “cut-out” contained two levels of meaning: on the one hand, according to Burgess (2013, 287), the term comes from “a customary method of cutting a slot (1/8” x 1/8”) in the rear spine of the packaging”, thus denoting a record’s defective physical shape; on the other hand, it also refers to the act of “deletion” in the music industry, meaning that a title is to be taken out of the “catalog” - the entire group of titles on sale - of a label, usually due to poor market potential. A deleted title would then be withdrawn from normal distribution and declared out of print, with the remaining copies no longer treated as proper stock items, meaning that no artist royalties or sales taxes could be generated from them (Marco & Andrews, 1993, 525; see also Knoedelseder, 1993).

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 3 Power Cuts, a record store in 1980s and 1990s Manchester, named after the cut-out vinyl it specialized in⁵

In the 1980s, when major labels gradually ceased to dump their overstocks to the “cut-out bins”, cut-out records became less often seen in Western record stores. As an alternative, overproduced copies were increasingly disposed of as “scrap”, meaning that they were sent out to be processed by local recycling companies at a nominal cost. While the labels no longer conducted the cut themselves, the physical wounds on the records they dumped

⁴ However, not every record with a notch cut on it was necessarily a “cut-out” as defined from the label’s perspective, that is, a “deleted” title. This is because at times labels would also dump what they deemed as overproduced copies of a title - the so-called “over-presses” - but would not necessarily delete the title from their catalogs. This normally happened when the label estimated that a title would sell significantly fewer copies than produced in the promised period. In this case, a non-cut-out copy could also become a non-returnable, and thus bear a notch on the corner.

⁵ Picture and information provided by Steve Hanson.

didn't disappear. In reality, most recycling companies in the West were yet another transfer station for the scrap records on the way to their final destinations: developing countries such as China and India. Before selling them abroad, the recycling companies would justify the "scrap status" of these records with measures of damaging that were more violent than the original way of "cutting-out". Compared with the cut done by the labels which only touched the record sleeve, the cut done by the recycling companies targeted directly at the records inside. The scrap records were treated in a variety of ways from saw-gashing to laser burning, with the aim of physically destroying both the records and the music data they stored. After this process, the scrap records were baled and palletized, entering the global market of plastic scrap as standard units of commodity.

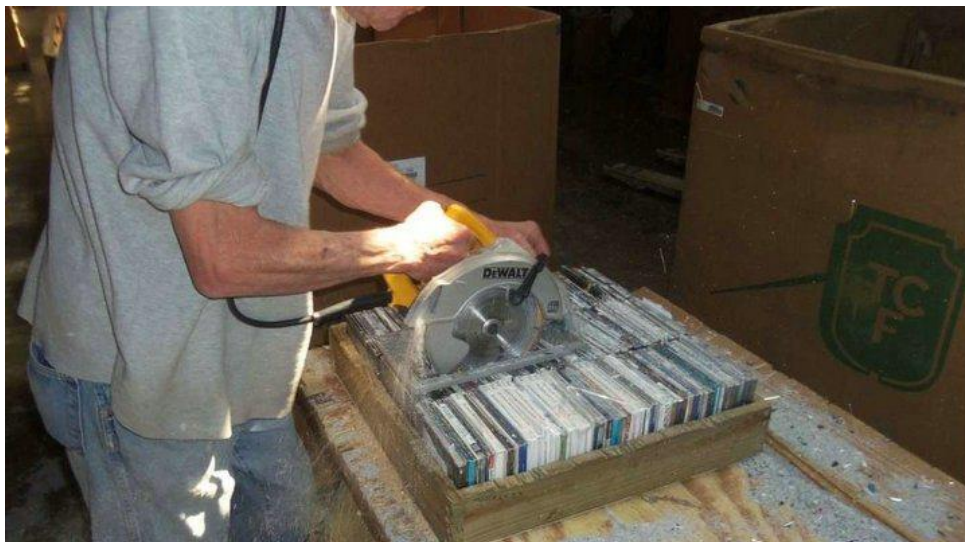


Figure 4 Notch-cutting in a Western recycling company⁶

This explains why the cut-out business in China originated as a parasite on the nation's scrap recycling business which, following Deng's economic reform, grew rapidly in the coastal regions in the 1980s. Thanks to the high demand for solid waste as raw material input into industrialization and the abundant supply of cheap manual labour in the Pearl River Delta, Chinese dealers were able to overtake foreign waste processors in the global market of plastic scrap by offering an overtly "aggressive" higher price (NAPCOR, 2003). In this way, prior to their being re-discovered as music records, the first batch of cut-outs arrived in China under the category of so-called "foreign garbage" ("洋垃圾"), a term used

⁶ Photo provided by an interviewee whose name I choose not to disclose.

to denote all kinds of solid waste imported from developed countries, ranging from secondhand clothes to electronic waste.

The birth of the cut-out business, by contrast, was a more historically contingent event. While no one really knows who the first person was ever to repair a cut-out cassette, by 1993, the economic value and market potential of the scrap records as playable music records had become gradually recognized and ready to be exploited in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. It quickly became obvious that a ton of these “goods” would generate way more profit if they were sold on the retail market as music records than if they were recycled as raw plastic materials, and a burgeoning industry of cut-out wholesale and retail, located around the town of Heping (和平)⁷, took shape. In this way, the scrap records were given a second life on the local grey market, and stepped into a trajectory similar to that of their precursors in the “cut-out bins” of the West: they became *dakou*, the Chinese cut-outs.



Figure 5 A long box, or *tiao*, one of the standard units of cut-out wholesale⁸

⁷ Heping is under Chaoyang District of Shantou, Guangdong Province.

⁸ Photo taken at Hang Tian's home in November, 2017.

The arrival of the cut-outs marked the first time Western rock, or Western popular music in general, became available in mainland China on a large scale. In less than ten years' time, the consumption of the cut-outs effectively opened up "a musical space that did not exist officially in China" (de Kloet, 2005, 617). By the end of the 1990s, the Chinese youth who grew up in the last decade of the century - including music makers, music listeners, or both - had started calling themselves the "cut-out generation". A representative piece of text of the period was a web post which first appeared in 1998 before being published in *New Sound of Beijing*, an art book exploiting the emerging local music scenes. In the book, the text was given the title "Cut-out Youth" ("打口青年"), with the photo of a broken cut-out cassette printed on the background, its tape pulled out through the notch cut on the case (Figure 6). The text goes:

We are a group of youth cowering on the edge of the city, we have nothing to do all day long, but we love to fiddle with our twin-cassette recorder in the cramped room, from where the sound we produce makes the adults on the street curse. We are always wandering around in the small hutongs on our dreadful bicycles, we run all over the city looking for one particular cut-out cassette, we search over and over again on the cut-out stalls with our shaking hands in the cold winter just for one unknown name... we always feel discontented and repressed, yet we can do nothing but murmur like a child... we will be buried and disdained soon, because we have been given a cut by this strange time, we have become the cut-out youth for ourselves. (JAR OF FLYES, 1999, 1)

In Chinese, "da" (打) means to hit, to break, and to strike, and "kou" (口) stands for opening, entrance, and cut. Put together, the term "dakou" delivers a particular complex of signals and emotions which, interpreted from a variety of different angles, speaks powerfully of the historical time of the 1990s. In the next section, I outline the general background and key themes of this crucial and controversial period of great change.



Figure 6 The article “Cut-out Youth” in *New Sound of Beijing*

1.3 Historical Background: China in the 1990s

In modern Chinese history, the 1980s and 1990s are not only decades, they are also considered as two distinct cultural-historical eras termed as “the Eighties” (“八十年代”) and “the Nineties” (“九十年代”). In this cultural sense, they don’t necessarily match the length of an actual decade: the Eighties, for example, is argued to have been terminated in June 1989, when the military crackdown on Tiananmen Square brought a sudden and dramatic end to a decade of utopianism and political zeal at its high point (Wang, 2004). The Nineties, consequently, starts one year earlier and goes on to span, as Zhang (2008, 1) argues, twelve years, ending at China’s hard-earned entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) which marks the nation’s firm incorporation into the capitalist world order⁹. Compared to the 1980s, whose cultural profile has been well established as an age of modernization, enlightenment and utopianism, as the liberal good old days celebrated

⁹ The cultural-historical decade of the 1990s roughly matches the formative and flourishing periods of the cut-out industry. In my empirical research, I place my main focus on the period from 1990 to the early 2000s. This scope was chosen for two reasons. On the one hand, after 2003, the so-called “complete discs” started dominating the cut-out market, largely ruling out the relevance of my arguments on the defective materiality of the cut-outs; on the other hand, around the same period, the Internet became rapidly popularized, bringing a whole new different subcultural landscape for what could be termed the “download generation”. Although significant continuities and ruptures can be observed between these two “generations”, due to the limited space, I will not explore the role of the Internet in this thesis.

nostalgically every now and again, the 1990s has been identified through a much more controversial and often contradictory set of images. Despite witnessing China's economic growth and political stability which eventually pushed the nation into the foreground of the world's economic stage, the 1990s has been regarded as an age of dramatic tensions and diversification, if not chaos and disorder. It also gains much less attention from, and remains highly contested in, scholarship in history and cultural studies. While it's impossible to draw a comprehensive picture of 1990s China in this section, I highlight in the following paragraphs three crucial aspects: the reconfiguration of economic and social structure, the development of private economy and urban consumption, and the transformation of media and cultural landscapes, each of them nurturing as well as conditioning the cut-out subculture in a different way.

The 1990s, in the cultural-historical sense, started with one of the most traumatic events in modern Chinese history, the Tiananmen Crackdown, which became a crucial part of the formative memory of the post-60s and post-70s generation. However, the overarching theme of the period, without a doubt, is the deepening of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, which declared in 1978 the end of Mao's Cultural Revolution. The iconic event was Deng's Southern Tour in 1992 which reaffirmed the reform agenda and led the reform into its "urban reform phase", effectively speeding up the market-oriented transformation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the implementation of the opening-up policies. In late 1992, the establishment of a "socialist market economy" as a declared objective of the state was written into the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party and later into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China itself.

This corresponded to Harvey's (2007, 120) observation of "the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control" in China, which he argues was in parallel with the neoliberal turn in the Western world. Gradually finding its place in the global capitalist system, China headed towards becoming "the world factory" (MITI, 2001, cited in Sun *et al.*, 2006), relying on a huge pool of cheap labour, which was accompanied by a phenomenal growth in the volume of foreign trade. The Pearl River Delta, in particular, stood out as a centre for various types of labour-intensive manufacturing industries (Zhang, 2006). This process paralleled the emergence of new social mobilities, especially labour migration, as a result of both the market-oriented reform of the SOE sector and the pragmatic reform of the agricultural economy since 1978 (Oakes & Schein, 2006). In the

1990s, the numbers in the so-called “floating population” (Zhang, 2001) grew significantly when more “surplus rural labourers” (Li, 1996) moved from their hometown to big cities. This led to Wang’s (2013) call for a “return to class politics”. As arguably the most profound outcome of the market-oriented reform, China’s old structure of social strata in the socialist context, having lasted for almost three decades, was radically reorganized. The decade saw the rapid social polarization and relentless differentiation of Chinese society as a result of the uneven economic development, unequal wealth distribution and new sets of social relations produced by the “socialist market economy”. Apart from the existing strata of the workers, the peasants, the state cadres, and the intellectuals, Wang (2000, 4) points out four new strata: the “new rich”, the white collar, the laid-off workers, and the “peasant-workers” (or migrant workers).

The reform generated tremendous transformations in Chinese urban life. Perhaps most remarkable was the revitalization of the private economy (Vactor & Sonja, 2012; Hsu, 2006; Gold, 2017), comprised of private enterprises – legally defined as economic organizations with eight or more employees (Tao & Ho, 1997) – and the self-employed *getihu* (“个体户”) sector. As increasingly more parts of the urban landscape were converted into both licensed and unlicensed market sites, China embraced the rise of a burgeoning urban consumer culture termed by Davis (2000, 1) as “the consumer revolution”, noting the rapid growth of not only material standards of living, consumer behaviours, and forms of leisure, but also “commercial freedom” which arguably “nurtured individual desires and social networks that challenged official discourse and conventions”. The decade also witnessed, along with the significant growth of cultural industries, the establishment of a nationwide, multi-layered, and consumer-oriented media infrastructure. Dai (1999, 23) observes an “explosive development” of the mass media system - most notably the rapid expansion of the television industry and the proliferation of local newspapers, fuelled by “the dual forces of decentralization and commercialization” (Meng, 2018, 66). By 1993, the number of the Chinese television audience had reached 800 million (Lu, 2000), the CCTV expanded from three to eight channels accompanied by a wave of relaxation of political control (Kops & Ollig, 2007; Hong *et al.*, 2009), and a large number of regional channels also mushroomed, providing more entertainment-oriented content as a result of their closer relationship with the roaring advertising industry (Dai, 1999, 23). The popularization of the “discursive construction of leisure culture” (Wang,

2001, 72), in effect, declared the end of the 1980s moral idealism cultivated in the so-called “high culture fever” (“文化热”).

Within Chinese-speaking academia, this phenomenon was captured by the concept of “mass culture” (“大众文化”) which, as Li (2000, 3) defines, “owns a bare commodity nature, and doesn’t intend to hide its relation to capital”. However, despite the fact that China had been witnessing a new class structure in formation, the discourse of class culture was “never ideologically legitimized” in the 1990s, neither did it enter mass media discourse or public discussion (Dai, 1999, 12). Instead, the 1990s saw the emergence of a heated media discourse, especially in relation to cultural consumption, centred on the Chinese urban “middle class” which managed somehow to become the only new class, or probably even the only class, that was visible in the cultural landscape. The essence of this mysterious mismatch between the boisterous discourse of the middle class and the reality of social structure, as Dai (1999, 13-14) argues, was the “education, discipline, and normalization of a future group of middle class” by the mass media.

What the bizarre and bustling landscapes of media and culture of the 1990s revealed was the contested politics operating at a more structural and historical level. For Zhang (2008, 13), the cultural landscape of 1990s China consists of two overlapping “chambers of resonance”, one being the state-form with socialist legacies in which “the historical force of global capitalism orchestrates itself”, the other being the contemporary capitalist world market, in which the “national-political specificities of Chinese modernity/postmodernity are to be analyzed”. Wang (2001, 87) points out the manipulating role played by the Party-State in the process where the “arrival of the age of consumerism disrupted the consensus of elitism rooted in the humanities”, and goes on to argue that, in the 1990s, the Chinese state “rediscovered” culture as “a site where new ruling technologies can be deployed and converted simultaneously into economic capital”. Wang (2004) summarizes the closely intertwined relationship between the power of the Party-State and the force of marketization in the ideology of what he terms “Chinese neoliberalism”:

Upon the premise of a continuity of its political system, China has promoted radical marketization; in addition, under the guidance of state policy, China has become one of the most enthusiastic participants in the global economy. This continuity and discontinuity has lent a special character to Chinese neoliberalism. ... Its extrapolitical and anti-state character is thus utterly dependent upon its inherent links to the state. That is, in the absence of such a policy/state premise, neoliberalism would be incapable of concealing unemployment, the decline of social

security, and the widening gap between rich and poor using the mystifications of a “transitional period”... (Wang, 2004, 7-8)

In the next section, I outline the landscape of popular music in 1990s China in which the subcultural politics of the “cut-out generation” was specifically situated.

1.4 Popular Music Landscape

1.4.1 Gangtai

The history of popular music in modern China began in the late 1970s, when the so-called *Gangtai* (“港台”) pop¹⁰, that is, popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, started circulating in non-official and semi-official channels following the initiation of the project of reform and opening-up. The most remarkable voice of this period belonged to Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng (鄧麗君), whose soft and gentle singing, enhanced by the use of “more electronic sounds and slicker production values” (Huang, 2001, 2) immediately captured millions of Chinese youth. With titles such as “Sweet as Honey” (《甜蜜蜜》) and “Fine Wine plus Coffee” (《美酒加咖啡》), Teresa Teng’s sweet pop ballads brought the worldly image of modern Western lifestyles and the expression of love and affection, for the first time, to the context of music listening in post-1949 mainland China. Listening to these songs, initially labelled as “yellow songs” and “sound of decadence” (“靡靡之音”) and blamed as the embodiment of a licentious lifestyle and anti-revolutionary values, was a thrilling sensuous experience of guilty pleasure which, in Li’s (2012, 74) words, “made your face turn red and it made your heartbeat accelerating”.

¹⁰ The tradition of *Gangtai* pop took root back in the pre-1949 Shanghai recording industry which produced the then burgeoning genre of Mandarin popular songs, namely the so-called *shidaiqu* (時代曲). Following the establishment of the PRC, the production centre of popular music shifted to Hong Kong and then Taiwan, and the original Shanghai style had been considerably changed under the influences of Western popular music (Chun *et al.*, 2004; Jones, 2001).



Figure 7 Teresa Teng's *Greatest Hits, Vol. 1*, her first officially imported release in mainland China¹¹

This initial feeling of shame and unease turned into curiosity and a sense of taboo-breaking as *Gangtai* pop quickly spread non-officially through the new medium of home-taped music cassettes. As Teresa Teng became a public secret shared by every urban household, the mid-1980s eventually saw *Gangtai* pop prevailing in a right and proper manner, characterized by the massive inflow of *Gangtai* pop stars such as Chyi Chin (齊秦), Lo Da-Yu (羅大佑), and Leslie Cheung (張國榮) through both officially imported and more commonly pirated cassette records. Consequently, for the mainland pop music industry which had just started from scratch, the 1980s became a period of primitive growth through relentless imitation of *Gangtai* music-making. The late-1980s then witnessed the establishment of the identity of the “music fan” (“歌迷”) who embraced (predominantly *Gangtai*) popular music listening as a devoted hobby. Seen as a hallmark event was the initiation of China’s first music fan club, the “*Audio & Video World* fan club”, in 1989, which soon became a model for numerous university-based or area-based fan clubs.

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 8 The 7th issue of *Pop Music Bus*, the members-only zine of the “*Audio & Video World* fan club”¹²

¹¹ Imported by CNPIEC in 1987, insert scan provided by Zhao Sancai.

¹² Zine provided by Ma Ke.

After a decade of imitation, 1994 saw the mainland music industry produce China's first generation of pop music idols, the so-called "94 New Generation" ("94 新生代") who joined forces with top *Gangtai* stars including Hong Kong's "Four Heavenly Kings" ("四大天王") and the Taiwanese boy band "the Little Tigers" ("小虎隊"). The second half of the 1990s became, as Li (2012, 176) argues, "an age of pop idols" in which mainland listeners' relationship to popular music eventually turned into entertainment-oriented rituals of mass consumption. Characterizing this period was the transformation of the identity of the "music fans" into the "star chasers" ("追星族") whose interests, arguably, were no longer limited to the music performed, but extended to encompass everything in relation to the performers themselves (Li, 2012). Concurrently, large-scale and professionally staged live music concert tours, which brought the stars face to face with their chasers, emerged as a new stream of revenue for the music industry (Zhan, 1996, 15).

1.4.2 Tongsu

The voice of Teresa Teng also brought changes to music production from within "the system". From the mid-1980s on, as more and more professional musicians tentatively tested the water by adding pop elements into their work, the socialist revolutionary "red songs" which dominated the wired radio loudspeakers of the Cultural Revolution era gradually retreated from major channels of public broadcasting (Li, 2012; Kielman, 2017). The style of popular music, after long and intense ideological debates, was finally granted official sanction. As a result, the term "*tongsu*" ("通俗", meaning "popularized"), coined as a "politically correct" substitute of "*liuxing*" ("流行", meaning "popular"), was used to refer to mainland Chinese popular music in general. Jones (1992, 19) distinguishes between *liuxing* and *tongsu* in terms of everyday usage, arguing that the former denoted a wider range of *Gangtai*-influenced music styles consumed by the youth, while the latter referred to a specific genre "indistinguishable from folk songs without the accompaniment of electrified instruments" which catered for the older generations and was arguably more tightly controlled by the Party-State¹³.

¹³ Jones' reading of *tongsu* has been criticized by Wang (2007, 45) who adds a layer of the linguistic distinction between "popular-as-populist" and "popular-as-mass", and by Baranovitch (2003, 2) who places an emphasis upon the multi-vocal and heterogeneous forces behind *tongsu* music.

In the second half of the 1980s, the former tradition, that is, what Jones identified as *liuxing* music, gave rise to a number of commercially driven popular music fads (see Baranovitch, 2003), notably the “Northeastern Wind” (“西北风”), “Prison Songs” (“囚歌”), and the Disco craze, while the latter tradition crystalized into a formalized, government-backed genre which Li (2012, 192) terms “plebeian pop” (“百姓流行”). Like Teresa Teng’s love ballads, “plebeian pop” songs often utilized Western harmonies while retaining the Chinese pentatonic scale, typically with decorations of traditional Chinese music elements. While these songs leaned towards a more humane and relatable line of themes away from explicit political propaganda, they also distanced themselves from the typically romantic subjects of *Gangtai* pop with a shared pool of topics such as patriotism, kinship, and wellbeing, which firmly adhered to the traditional image of the Chinese nation-state and the moral and ideological values advocated by the Communist Party. This was evident in the titles of plebeian pop hits throughout the decade: “All is Well for Good Man” (《好人一生平安》), “Big China” (《大中国》), and “Come back Home Often” (《常回家看看》).

1.4.3 Yaogun

It was against this background that the seeds of rock, or *yaogun* (“摇滚”), started growing. Evolving in informal “parties” taking place in privately-run restaurants and university cafeterias, the genre of *yaogun* took shape in mid-and-late-1980s Beijing in an underground scene whose initial growth was made possible by “the combined presence of a large foreign diplomatic community, a sudden influx of American foreign exchange students, and an inquisitive Chinese university population” (Huang, 2001, 1). The leading figure in Beijing’s rock underground was Cui Jian (崔健), heralded as the “godfather of Chinese rock”, who originally emerged as a *tongsu* singer of the “Northeastern Wind” style. In the second half of the 1980s, Cui Jian created a distinctive musical profile, blending his Chinese folk roots with elements of Western rock, and went on to earn a cult following among young people, especially university students in Beijing. The 1989 movement marked the moment at which rock fulfilled its capacity as an “agent of ideology” (Jones, 1992, 3; also see Barne, 1999) in China. During the movement, both Cui Jian and He Yong, who would later stand as one of the “Three Idols” of *Magic Stone*, brought their bands to play for the students occupying Tiananmen Square, with songs like “Nothing to My Name” (《一无所有》) becoming anthems of the student protest.

From its birth, rock had suffered from strict censorship regarding live performances and on all platforms of public broadcasting, yet after Deng's southern tour which reaffirmed the reform agenda, rock soon rose from the underground to be recruited as a new force, under the label of "China New Music" ("中国新音乐"), in the rapidly growing music industry invigorated by flourishing *Gangtai* investment (Wang, 2007). The incorporation of rock into the mainstream music business brought fundamental changes to its media of dissemination: while only one rock album, namely Cui Jian's *Rock n' Roll on the Long March*, was released nationwide prior to 1990, the early 1990s saw a number of "China New Music" titles becoming best-sellers on the cassette market, successfully bringing the influence of rock out of its initial, rather elitist Beijing circle to a much wider fan base. A crucial player was *Magic Stone* (魔岩唱片), the mainland division of Taiwanese major Rock Records (滚石唱片), under which Beijing's heavy metal band Tang Dynasty (唐朝) released their eponymous debut album in 1992. The first press of 100,000 copies immediately sold out. Under *Magic Stone*, Tang Dynasty was joined by three alternative singer-songwriters - Dou Wei (窦唯), Zhang Chu (张楚), and He Yong (何勇) - heralded as the "Three Idols" ("魔岩三杰"). Among local popular music fans, the rock fad marked a new divergence of taste away from the sweet, romantic voices of *Gangtai* pop and its mainland adaptations.

Rock's nationwide commercial success was nonetheless only momentary. In late 1994, Cui Jian's new album *Balls under the Red Flag* sank as both a commercial and a critical failure. Following the retreat of *Gangtai* majors from the mainland market, domestic indie labels such as *Modern Sky* took over. However, the lack of a healthy and sustainable commercial mechanism became a tough issue which local rockers had to face, along with stricter restrictions from above and the decrease of interest from below (Wang, 2007). In their post-*Magic Stone* careers, neither Tang Dynasty nor the "Three Idols" succeeded in producing new work which could match the influence of their early-1990s releases. Chinese rock, in Li's (2010, 136) words, "parted from the mainstream stage, and walked into a long period of aphasia".

1.4.4 Western

The closure of the Chinese market itself, which had lasted for several decades before the 1980s, was the main reason for the lack of Western popular music in mainland China. Although the category of "foreign music" did exist in China prior to Deng's reform, it

included only folk music or revolutionary tunes from ideological allies, especially the Soviet bloc. The official importation of Western popular music records started shortly after the importation of *Gangtai* pop, and was conducted exclusively through the CNPIEC (China National Publications Import & Export Corporation) with the list of imported titles overseen and approved by government officials. Prior to the arrival of the cut-outs, the local consumption of Western music was limited to a small group of artists whose names were almost countable: in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a handful of Western artists in the field of pop and rock – notably, Wham! (in 1985), Julio Iglesias (1988), Paul Simon (1991), and John Denver (1992) – managed to hold concerts in China, the media coverage of which effectively made their music known to a wider public. By the end of the 1980s, in addition to a number of classic English hits featured in imported foreign films or English learning textbooks¹⁴, the music of Michael Jackson and Madonna had also become well-known to the Chinese youth when the “disco fad”¹⁵ swept over (Li, 2007; 2012). In addition, the late 1980s also saw an increasing number of physical copies of Western music records carried by individuals – embassy employees, foreign visitors, and Chinese people living overseas – into China. These music titles, albeit random, were able to be disseminated through small circles, thanks to the vibrant home-taping scenes.

In all, these above introduced factors - the dominant popularization of *Gangtai* and *Gangtai*-influenced pop, the government-backed growth of *tongsu* music and “plebeian pop”, the brief prosperity of *yaogun*, and the decades-long shortage of Western music - formed the backdrop against which the cut-outs took the stage. The initial round of nationwide expansion of the cut-out market took place at more or less the same time as the peak of the rock fad hit China, around 1993, by which time the term “*yaogun*” had been commonly used in newspapers such as *Beijing Youth Daily* (《北京青年报》) to describe the music of Cui Jian and the like. While some of my Beijing and Shanghai interviewees came across the cut-outs earlier, most people who grew up in other parts of China only found access to the cut-outs after they had listened to Cui Jian and Tang Dynasty. By the

¹⁴ Li (2007) provides a list of Western artists who were known in China in the 1980s which stands almost as an exclusive one: Michael Jackson, Madonna, Kenny Rogers, Carpenters, John Denver, Paul Simon, Nana Mouskouri, Julio Iglesias, ABBA, Bee Gees, Air Supply, The Supremes, Lionel Richie, and Whitney Houston.

¹⁵ The “disco fad” would evolve into the “breakdancing fad” (“霹雳舞热”) following the import of *Breakin'* in 1987, yet in both fads, most of the disco music being consumed in China were not Western imports, but locally produced “covers” ripped off by mainland session musicians (see also Brownell, 1995).

mid-1990s, stable partnerships had reportedly been formed between major cut-out suppliers in Guangdong province and their distributors in different regions all over the nation.

1.5 Previous Studies

Since the 1989 democracy movement, rock in China has received a fair amount of academic attention (Friedlander, 1991; Jones, 1992; 1994; Steen, 1996; Efir, 2001; Huang, 2001; 2003; Baranovitch, 2003). Despite rock's marginal status in Chinese music industry, scholarship on Chinese rock has in fact outnumbered those on China's other popular music cultures such as *Gangtai* and *tongsu* pop. Within this field which we may term "Chinese rock studies", focus has been placed primarily on the pre-1995 Beijing *yaogun* scene, which reached its commercial peak in the mid-1990s.

In studies on this period, rock in China has long been tied to oppositional politics. Naming his book, *Like a Knife*, with a provocative song title by Cui Jian, Jones (1992) first established the classic image of Chinese rock as a rebellion against the hegemony of the Communist Party-State, which he analysed through the contested politics of genres. This account has been repeatedly challenged (Huang, 2001; Baranovitch, 2003; Stokes, 2004) for imposing a reductive and simplistic dichotomy of resistance versus domination. Still, in studies after *Like a Knife*, the scope of empirical focus rarely reached beyond 1995, and rock was generally seen as, as Baranovitch (2003, 36) read it, "yet another fad" in the Chinese music landscape which died down after the "Three Idols". Since the mid-2000s, more attention has been given to the diverse landscapes of post-1995 rock and indie music. In particular, Wang (2007) challenged and critically assessed the thesis of what he terms the "crisis" of rock, arguing that rock continued with its influence in China throughout the 1990s. This argument has since been supported by other studies (Steen, 2008; Campbell, 2011; Qu, 2017; Xiao, 2018) which cover both the current situations of various local scenes and the "rebirth of Chinese rock" (de Kloet, 2010, 16) in the late 1990s. Rock music, it seems, has continued to be alive and relevant in China.

1.5.1 Signs and Infrastructures

Despite the wealth of academic interest in Chinese rock, the "cut-out generation" remains barely touched upon. Since the mid-2000s, the cut-outs have received systematic and in-depth investigations from very few scholars (Ivanova, 2009; de Kloet, 2010; Yang, 2014;

Keilman, 2017). The first study which deserves a mention is Ivanova's ethnography on a circle of underground musicians in late 1990s Beijing. In her doctoral thesis *Limning the Jianghu: Spaces of Appearance and the Performative Politics of the Chinese Cultural Underground*, Ivanova (2009, 2) combines the ethnographic approach with a linguistic one, unpacking the "performative politics" of China's Post-Tiananmen music underground by demonstrating how "public space is performatively constituted and socially constructed through speech and action". In her thesis, Ivanova (2009, 57) spends a whole chapter on the object of the cut-out cassette, which appeared as an exciting fieldwork discovery. She offers a detailed analysis of the "multimodal significance, meanings and performative function" of the cut-out cassette in the "transnational transmission of alternative culture and the constitution of community".

Adapting a Peircian semiotic approach, Ivanova analyses the cut-outs primarily as signs. The cut-out cassettes, she argues, can be seen as an "iconic sign" (based on resemblance and similarity) with reference to four terms: 1) they stand as "an iconic sign of authenticity" because the cut-out cassettes derive its status from being "authentic and non-pirated Western music"; 2) they "signify independence from the workaday world of the dominant society" in their function as a means for the underground musicians to make a living; 3) they represent the "illicit freedom" believed to be given by rock music as a way of life in China, because the tapes themselves are "smuggled contraband" that "got around the system"; 4) the label of the "cut-out generation" - or in Ivanova's translation, the "slashed generation" - stands as a powerful icon because the members also consider themselves "slashed" and "unable to fit in with the dominant society" (Ivanova, 2009, 252-3). Meanwhile, the cut-outs also function as "indexical signs" (based on contiguity and concurrence): the sale of the cut-outs is indexical because of its "relative autonomy from Party-State controlled economic institutions such as the work unit system", and the use of the cut-outs is also indexical as "a form of cultural secondary syncretic production" (Ivanova, 2009, 255). The cut-out case reveals, Ivanova (2009, 262) concludes, that globalization of culture is transformed by the "creative agency of people" who actively transform foreign culture through "their own patterns of use and investment with meaning".

The contribution of Ivanova's study is that it singles out the cut-outs as a cultural artefact bearing a distinctive complex of cultural meanings, and it offers a systematic investigation of the retail, use, and music-making practices around the cut-outs. In this way, her

ethnographic account stands as a precious subcultural document in itself, and it is, arguably, still the most in-depth academic depiction of the cut-out market and subculture. Its limitation, however, is also obvious: in her study of this materially distinct cultural object, the route Ivanova takes is a heavily, if not exclusively, symbolic one. Although the cut-outs did play profound symbolic roles, they were more importantly *things* which were traded and owned, and were experienced with all human senses. This limitation is most evident in her analysis of the use of the cut-outs where it is far from sufficient to touch merely upon the indexical dimension, as their use was fundamentally a sensuous practice.

This point leads us to the most recent research in relation to the “cut-out generation” which is Kielman’s (2017) doctoral thesis, titled *Zou Qilai!: Musical Subjectivity, Mobility, and Sonic Infrastructures in Postsocialist China*. Based on his ethnography of two Chinese indie folk bands, Kielman (2017, 2) examines the “emergent forms of musical creativity and modes of circulation” in the context of China’s political and economic reforms. While Kielman places his focus on contemporary Chinese society, he does so with the help of a historical lens. Drawing on insights from sound studies and anthropology of infrastructure, Kielman puts forward the notion of “sonic infrastructure”:

By “sonic infrastructure”, I mean to encompass and connect many things - the technical infrastructures that transmit mediated sounds...; the political systems that contextualize and promote certain sounds; the informal social relationships that bring musicians and listeners together in new places; the corporate relationships that seek to influence what is heard, where, when, and by whom... I mean to suggest, furthermore, that the evolution and accretional layering of new and changing sonic infrastructures, as well as the particular ways of listening that they bring about, reveal and contribute to broader social, political, and economic transformations. (Kielman, 2017, 219)

The perspective of “sonic infrastructure” allows Kielman (2017, 34) to examine the history of the media systems which enabled music circulation in China, and to position the shifting modes of listening practice within the “broader transformations of state, society, and space”. This is where the cut-outs enter the story. Seeing the cut-outs as a “peculiar sonic infrastructure embedded in the global waste trade”, Kielman (2017, 228) argues that the story of the cut-outs is one in which “official culture was circumvented by new media flows enabled by small-scale entrepreneurialism, and neoliberal desiring subjects were formed through new listening practices”. In particular, Kielman (2017, 229) notes the potential affective influences of the cut-outs’ defective materiality on the experience of

listening, and uses this case of “the unusual voyage that a polycarbonate plastic container of sound has made” as evidence for the “poetics” of infrastructures, that is, sonic infrastructures can “act as signifiers in and of themselves”.

Compared with Ivanova’s predominantly symbolic-oriented approach, Kielman’s study takes a bigger step towards the distinctive politics of materiality which defined the cut-out culture. It also stands as arguably the first academic attempt to approach Chinese rock culture from what we may term a “thing-centred” perspective. His examination of the role of the wired broadcasting system in the revolutionary period also provides an important but often overlooked aspect of the historical background to Chinese rock. However, while Kielman’s work points towards a potential paradigm shift in this field, his thesis itself only briefly mentions the cut-out culture which serves mainly as part of the historical background for his contemporary focus. Although Kielman manages to draw a link between the story of the cut-outs and China’s broader neoliberal turn, he does it rather hastily: drawing data from the life stories told by only two musicians, his study is still far from a thorough investigation of the ways in which the cut-outs functioned as a level of “sonic infrastructure” to mediate music, social relationships, and cultural practices in 1990s China.

Put together, Ivanova’s and Kielman’s studies form an analytical spectrum ranging from the semiotic/linguistic approach which treats the cut-outs as primarily signs to the material/infrastructural perspective which sees them as concrete things. This theoretical tension, as I will show in my theory chapter, is one which is continuously pressing both in the field of music studies and in cultural studies in general. While I acknowledge both the symbolic/metaphoric roles and the infrastructural functions of the cut-outs, as said, I regard the former as a product of the latter at a less fundamental, discursive level. From a researcher’s perspective, the cut-outs may matter equally as signs and as things, but as I came to realize during fieldwork, for the “cut-out generation” themselves, the more immediate, concrete, and sensuous meaningfulness of the cut-outs mattered more. The conceptual framework which I build as a guide for this study is, therefore, one which aims to place a particular emphasis on the materiality of cut-out culture.

1.5.2 The Rock Mythology

Titled *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music*, de Kloet’s (2010) book on the cut-out-inspired music scenes stands as a milestone in the field of

“Chinese rock studies”. It is also the major academic work which this thesis is built upon, and with which it is in dialogue. In his study, de Kloet provides a well-constructed account of the production of rock and alternative music cultures in China in the cut-out period, detailing the dynamic mechanisms of interactions and interdependence between Chinese music producers, audiences, and the state. In particular, de Kloet develops the conceptual framework of the “rock mythology” as a means to explain the scenic politics and taste performance of rock in China:

...the rock mythology... consists of a set of narratives which produce rock as a distinct music world that is, first and foremost, authentic, but also subcultural, masculine, rebellious and (counter) political. ...It is the rock mythology, as this book will show, supplying the glue that binds producers, musicians, and audiences together; it is the basis of the production of the rock culture. (de Kloet, 2010, 26)

The rock mythology, according to de Kloet, imposes a hierarchical map of music styles, the core of which is a relatively rigid repertoire of “hard sounds” such as metal and hardcore punk, while on the periphery is a loose set of “softer” styles, such as folk and pop-rock which, while performing the norms of the rock mythology, are also constantly pushing its limits. The rock mythology is a strong force of territorialisation in that it evokes “the claim on authenticity, the negotiation of place”, the “catering to masculine identifications”, and the “articulation of generational fault lines” (de Kloet, 2010, 164); in this way, it creates strong senses of belonging, marks distinctions of tastes, and produces distinct scenes.

Within this framework, de Kloet (2010, 83) offers a more nuanced picture regarding the rebellious potential of Chinese rock. At its “hard” centre, the rock mythology accumulates authenticating power by referring to political opposition, thus the late 1990s witnessed “the reappearance of the political” in the music of underground bands; however, on the periphery, the “softer” sounds tend to resort to the “negation of rebelliousness” to authenticate their styles. The above thesis exemplifies the critical capacity of the rock mythology, used as a theoretical device, to deconstruct the univocal and homogeneous image which has been imposed on Chinese rock by outside observers. This allows de Kloet to problematize a number of stereotypical binaries: rock versus pop, the global versus the local, the communist versus the capitalist, and the passive audiences versus the active ones. Identifying the nature of the rock mythology as “an authoritative discourse” which generates uniform meanings and excludes certain voices and sounds, de Kloet (2010, 200;

166) arrives at the conclusion that rock “simultaneously contains and liberates, and its power lies in this very ambiguity”.

While the rock mythology promises considerable explanatory power, the danger of relying too much on this framework in the analysis of the “cut-out generation” lies in an assumed causal relation it imposes on the production of local music landscapes. Participating in local scenes as a researcher, de Kloet fills in this theoretical framework with evidence collected in his ethnography. The rock mythology, therefore, remains largely a descriptive framework; it is generalized from empirical observations, but offers limited explanations as to the long-term generative mechanisms behind them. In de Kloet’s research, he says little about how rock gained its mythological power historically in China. Drawing heavily on the sociological tradition of rock’s performative politics and ideology of authenticity (see Bennett, 1993; Frith, 1996), de Kloet seems to suggest that the rock mythology was a Western import transplanted by the cut-outs to China, as he writes:

The pop-rock divide is thus anything but a Chinese invention; instead, it is a globalised dichotomy that has its (imagined) origin in the West. (de Kloet, 2010, 203)

While this argument is valid in itself, it risks taking for granted the territorializing force of rock as a universal principle and as one sufficient to explain the making of Chinese rock cultures. This logic faces two problems. First, the rock mythology which de Kloet comes up with can only demonstrate the politics and characteristics of Chinese rock scenes, but cannot prove that it was the power of “rock”, originally a Western ideal, that produced these politics and characteristics. This leads to the second problem, that is, this approach easily overlooks the unique historical dynamics and local politics which shaped the forms and politics of rock in China. The assumption that it was the cut-outs that brought the rock mythology into China from its Western origin can be misleading even after one acknowledges the “glocalized” manner of this transplantation. Rock is definitely an import from the West, yet its related politics, scenic or subcultural, was locally cultivated and performed as a response made by local participants to their own conditions of living. As material items, the cut-out records could have been transported to China physically whole, as they were in the West, but the rock mythology, if there was one in the West, couldn’t easily arrive unscathed: as a set of symbols, norms and narratives, it had to be drawn, performed, and taken seriously by local participants themselves.

Therefore, to fully unpack the explanatory and critical power of the rock mythology, research that combines a historical and an ethnographic perspective is much needed. Only when the rock mythology is historicized can we get to know which parts of the original, Western “rock” ideal were received in the local context, and which parts not. The danger of resorting fundamentally to the discursive power of “rock” to explain the politics of local music scenes is that one can easily foreground this ideal cultural form as the primary agent of change, but overlook the politics, dynamics, and dialectics of *history* which is arguably a larger, more all-encompassing discourse. Building on this point, I employ the notion of “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977) to deconstruct – through historicization – and reconstruct - through ethnographic imagination - the rock mythology in the Chinese context. In this way, I investigate the historical process in which the Chinese version of rock mythology was originally constructed through local youth’s engagement with the cut-outs, and I ask how this process of engagement was conditioned and “re-contextualized” by the affective infrastructure which was accreted in China’s historical past.

1.5.3 Music Scenes

A critical engagement with de Kloet’s scenic approach also led to my decision to adopt a subcultural perspective. In his book, reflecting on the typically linear “narrative of progress or regress” which has been imposed on the history of Chinese rock, de Kloet (2010, 39) starts his investigation from the perspective of music scenes which, as he argues, provides a better anchor point from which to observe and analyse the fluidity and fragmentation which characterized more recent developments in Chinese rock culture. While the virtue of this scenic approach has been sufficiently demonstrated, its inherent weakness is also responsible for the limited scope, both empirical and analytical, of his study. Despite exploiting the metaphor of *dakou* to the fullest, arguing ambitiously that “popular cultures are... profoundly *dakou*, if not polluted”, de Kloet’s (2010, 195) study itself says very little about the actual industry, communities and cultural practices directly related to the consumption and circulation of the cut-outs. His engagement with the cultural object of the cut-outs, therefore, remains at a symbolic level.

Anchoring its main focus to the sites and politics of music production, a scenic approach (Straw, 1991; Shank, 1994) often pays comparatively little attention to the consumption side of music culture especially the consumption of popular music records. Seeing the “cut-out generation” as primarily an array of music scenes, de Kloet understandably overlooks much that was going on distant from the practice of local music-making, and

when he does talk about audiences and reception, the focus never deviates from the consumption of locally produced music, namely Chinese rock and pop. Thus in the picture de Kloet draws, those who produced, sold, and bought the cut-outs are seldom visible. In addition, the scenic focus also largely directs his attention away from the crucial period of the early-to-mid 1990s, in which the cut-out industry and its nationwide market were being rapidly built from scratch, while local cut-out-inspired scenes were still yet to emerge.

In fact, often rock in China is assumed to be equal to Chinese rock, or rock made in China. This explains why, despite a fair amount of media coverage (e.g. Goldkorn & Loewenberg, 1999; Gough, 2003), the cut-out culture is rarely touched upon in academic research. Yet arguably, the very charm but also significance of the cut-out case lies in the fact that it was born out of an unexpected clash between rock records that were not intended to be consumed by any listeners and Chinese consumers who did not prepare themselves to listen to Western rock music. If we compare the role of Qiu Dali - the so-called “cut-out godfather” who will appear repeatedly in the rest of this thesis - with Cui Jian, the older “godfather” of rock, in their own, successive “scenes”, it becomes clear that the nature of “musical collectivities” (Hesmondhalgh, 2005) relating to rock music in China was effectively changed by the advent of the cut-outs. While Cui Jian was an artist who performed and recorded his own songs, Qiu Dali did not make music at all; instead, his primary job was cut-out dealer and music critic, selling and introducing Western rock records to the Chinese audiences. Therefore, going back to the academic debate on the “crisis” of rock (Wang, 2007), I argue that while both sides are valid in their particular ways, the debate itself has missed something more crucial: in the second half of the 1990s, Chinese rock scenes did fade out of mainstream sight, they also did continue to exist in the underground, but the more important fact was that the next generation of rock listeners in China were increasingly turning to those easily available Western rock titles carried by and circulated through the cut-outs.

A comparison can be made in terms of the scale of dissemination. As de Kloet (2010, 43) notes, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the sales figures of rock albums released by acclaimed underground bands such as Tongue and The Fly under local indies rarely exceeded the 30,000 copies mark. However, around the same time, a successful cut-out wholesaler, like Gao Qiu whom I interviewed, could sell in one day 600 “pre-arranged” boxes of cut-outs, which amounted to 135,000 cassettes/CDs in total. The fact was that, in the context of post-1995 Chinese rock culture, the central figures were no longer just the

producers but also the “intermediaries” (Bourdieu, 1984)¹⁶ of culture. In this sense, de Kloet’s scenic approach falls short, as it fails to leave space for the core mechanisms of culture production in this case, which evolved primarily around the *circulation* of the cut-out records. As I will show in the following chapters, the identity of the “cut-out youth” derived primarily from that of the “rock fan”, but not the “rock musician”. Many of my interviewees weren’t self-considered participants of rock scenes, in a great number of cases, they buried themselves in the seas of the cut-outs, digging into the vast history of Western music, while having little knowledge of what was going on in the local rock underground. Yet they were also practising, and in the meantime building up, the same rock mythology as their underground musician peers were doing.

This point also relates to our conception of the thing we call “music”. A scenic approach largely constitutes itself through a sound-centred, if not songs-centred, conception of music. That means little attention is paid to the everyday, concrete medium which stores and transfers music. For most “scenes” where live music performance plays a dominant part, this inclination makes perfect sense. Yet in the case of the “cut-out generation” who almost never got the chance to see their favourite Western bands performing live during the 1990s, and who eventually chose to name themselves after the physical medium of the music they listened to, the physical record which stored and mediated sound was also an important part of the materiality of music. Here, music worked more powerfully as a moveable, exchangeable, and valuable “thing” than as sound only.

Compared with a scenic approach, analysing the “cut-out generation” as a subculture brings a wider, more inclusive scope: it gives attention to cultural practices beyond music-making, especially the consumption of music which was locally consumed but not locally made, it takes into account people who did not engage in music-making but still contributed to the circulation of music records in different ways, and it gives due credit to music’s everyday material extensions and the more basic layer of “infrastructure of listening” (Straw, 2012, 232) they constituted. Having said this, I acknowledge the danger of over-determination and homogenisation of a subcultural approach in this case (de Kloet, 2010, 40), and therefore I aim to rework the concept of “subculture” through an experiential, materiality-focused, and practice-based framework.

¹⁶ See also Hesmondhalgh’s (2006, 226) discussion on Bourdieu’s cultural intermediaries in the modern music industry.

1.5.4 Gaps and Further Thoughts

Apart from the arguments already addressed, the aforementioned studies reveal a few more gaps which generate further thoughts; I summarize them in two main points. First of all, as much scholarly focus has been on what the cut-outs stood for rather than what they actually did, what is needed is a more “thing-centred” approach, taking the materiality of the cut-outs as a starting point. As all existing research on the cut-outs only reaches as far as the cut-out retailing business and the related culture of consumption, we see an important gap in the literature: a holistic analysis of the cut-out industry based on empirical investigation of its different stages, including importation, wholesale, and retail, and an in-depth analysis of the genetic mechanisms of the cut-out market, in other words, its underlying politics of value.

This draws my attention to another field of literature which, while not directly related to the subject of cut-out culture, bears a significant resemblance to it in relation to context: the body of work on cultural piracy and the “dark side of globalization” (Mattelart, 2009, 318). In his work on Nigerian video industries, Larkin (2004, 290; 297) lays stress on the materiality of piracy and its sensory uses, depicting how the system of a “parallel unofficial infrastructure” of piracy formed a relationship of “parasitism” with official flows of globalization. Similarly, Wang and Zhu (2003, 102; 99) demonstrate that film piracy in China relies heavily on a global informal economy which “operates through and around formal institutions such as the state, its regulatory and enforcement capacities, and its sovereignty”. The phenomena of informal, non-legal systems of “shadow economy” which facilitate the traffic of non-official cultural goods have also been studied by scholars such as O’Regan (1991), Mattelart (2009) and Ganey (2014), with a main focus on Post-Soviet states.¹⁷ While the cut-out industry operated under mechanisms different from both the piracy business and the Soviet black markets, it does stand as a special case of “secondary economy”, especially when examined against the background of China’s official route to globalization through Deng’s radical opening-up policies. The relevance of this field of

¹⁷ In addition, from within “the West”, Straw (2000, 176) offers an interesting case study, comparing the rapid growth of global music retail chains with the similarly paced expansion of the secondary economy of exhausted music commodities in charity shops, and regards them as two commercial extremes indicating that “two very different kinds of globalization are at work”. While he may not be aware, those exhausted records in the latter, secondary kind of globalization he recognizes are highly likely to have ended up as cut-outs in mainland China.

literature here lies not only in its fundamentally materialist approach with a focus on the flow of cultural objects, but also in its analysis of the informal economies/cultures which situates them within a larger historical and geo-political context. By interrogating the shared vision of modernity, these studies have shown the potential for more in-depth theoretical contributions to the globalization thesis than simply problematizing the global/local binary.

This leads to the second major gap I identify, which concerns the ways in which the “cut-out generation” has been analytically linked to its historical settings. In general, going through existing studies on Chinese rock culture, one observes a recurring theme around the notions of subjectivity and the self. Ivanova (2009, 110) bases her analysis on the ordinary language approach which emphasizes “both performative subjectivity and creative agency”; de Kloet (2010, 141) embraces the Foucauldian notion of “technology of the self” as a means to capture how the densely compressed modern experience - the “perpetually new” - is internalized into the reflective project of the self; similarly, Kielman (2017, 8; 33) regards sonic infrastructures as “the connective tissue in which subjectivities are embedded” and resorts to what he terms “musical subjectivity” to unpack the “intersection of personal histories, national histories, and creativity”.

This theoretical focus is a reflection of the fascination with a “newfound subjectivity” (Zhang, 2008, 8) of youth in post-reform China in the broader field of research into 1990s Chinese culture. Typically following a Foucauldian governmentality approach, scholars have made efforts to theorize, based on a variety of case studies (e.g. Zhang and Ong, 2008; Farquhar & Zhang, 2005; Zhang, 2010), a post-socialist subject both “under the neo-liberal principles of private accumulation and self-interest” and under the sovereign power of the state (Ong and Zhang, 2008, 1). This subjectivity-centred approach, however, reveals its limitations once situated within the multivocal, shifting, and often self-contradictory historical dynamics of 1990s China. The search for a “subject” of the new generation may not be as fruitful as it seems, because there is hardly a coherent, homogeneous subject which is able to stand for 1990s China. The existence of the “cut-out generation” who claimed, as quoted earlier from the article “Cut-out Youth”, to dwell on “the edge of the city” was solid evidence in itself. This justifies not only the subcultural angle but also the lived, ethnographic approach of this study. By studying the “cut-out generation”, my aim is not to draw a comprehensive, full picture or a representative group profile of youth in 1990s China, but rather to describe and critically interrogate the

concrete cultural practices, life stories, and structure of feeling of a particular group of them. The lived experience of this particular group is as general as it is specific, it matters not only because it stands as a component part of Chinese urban life in the 1990s, but also because it is a collective response to, and a concrete, lived critique of, this overall historical time in which they made their life meaningful.

1.6 Thesis Outline

To summarize, this thesis aims to depict a comprehensive picture of the cultural politics surrounding the circulation and use of the cut-outs. Identifying the gaps in the literature, I place emphasis at a conceptual nexus of the materiality of the cut-out records, the politics of value in the cut-out “shadow economy”, and the structure of feeling of the “cut-out generation”. Combined, this conceptual starting point enables me to account for the richness, distinctiveness, and historical depth of the lived experience of the “cut-out generation”. The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 lays out the guiding theoretical framework of the thesis. I start by justifying my choice of a subcultural approach, before employing a reworked concept of “subculture” based on the notion of “profanity”, originally coined by Willis. Centred on this notion, I then construct a framework of “subcultural politics” which comprises the main conceptual scaffoldings of materiality of music, politics of value, and structure of feeling.

Chapter 3 introduces the methodological approach employed. I start with a discussion of the historical and ethnographic aspirations of this research and then reflect on the possibility of achieving both through an “ethnographic imagination” lens. I outline the research design and the fieldwork process which consists of two parts: document analysis in the “cut-out archive” and in-depth, biographical interviews. I go on to demonstrate my analytical framework before ending the chapter by reflecting on research ethics.

Chapter 4 unpacks the politics of value in the cut-out industry. Taking materiality as a point of entry, I start by presenting three distinct dimensions of materiality of the cut-outs: plastic scrap, defective records, and “music info”, each of them connected with a “regime of value” at different levels of the cut-out business. I then investigate the politics of materialities, knowledge, and value embedded in each stage of the cut-outs’ “social life”, demonstrating the mechanisms of evaluation and pricing in the cut-out wholesale sector, and the process of knowledge production on the retail market. I conclude the chapter by

arguing for a co-evolutionary relationship between the development of the cut-out industry and the establishment of a system of “music info” in 1990s China.

Chapter 5 deals with the different ways in which Chinese cut-out consumers engaged with the cut-outs, and the profound dialectics of profanity that defined this cultural relationship. I first introduce the practice of manual cut-out repairing, and I go on to demonstrate how the cut-out consumers made sense of the cut-outs both visually and sonically during “cut-out hunting”, how music-making practices in local scenes were inspired by cut-outs “tape-stripping”, how a local system of “music info” was established through cut-out “learning-by-listening”, and how cut-out niche media producers initiated a unique style of cut-out music criticism in the Chinese discourse.

Chapter 6 extends the enquiry into the structure of feeling of the “cut-out generation”, with an emphasis on its historical and affective dimensions. I first demonstrate the cut-out subculture’s “emergence” from and “penetration” of the dominant soundscapes of 1990s China. I then analyse structure of feeling as an affective infrastructure whose impulses of penetration were manifest in various dimensions of lived experience, including, as I demonstrate in the chapter, the rumours of “confiscated cassettes”, the cut-out retail infrastructure, the social relationships in the cut-out “circles”, and the anti-business logics of practice in the cut-out business.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarizing the different levels of subcultural politics depicted above, point out the links between them, and situates them within the broader historical context of China’s project of modernity.

2 Subcultural Politics: A Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the theoretical framework for my examination of the “cut-out generation”. Drawing on a number of traditions in cultural studies and anthropology, I formulate a conceptual framework of *subcultural politics* which is designed to be a guiding approach to subcultures evolving in the context of the circulation and consumption of particular objects. Fundamental to this framework is the recurring theme on materiality, sensuousness, and lived experience, drawing on which I try to achieve a more affective and thing-centred approach to subculture. Ultimately, the framework of subcultural politics I employ investigates the dialectical interplay between the material, the human, and the historical, and addresses the question of what it means to be “subcultural” for certain groups of people who engage with certain types of objects in a certain historical period.

The chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part introduces Willis’ concept of profanity in dialogue with the long-standing tradition of subcultural and post-subcultural studies. I argue that the “sub-ness” of subculture, in its classic sense, is still relevant here taken as the dialectical interplay between creative human agency and its structural, material conditions, and that the notion of profanity provides crucial insights which function to “rescue” subculture from its post-subcultural critiques. After critically engage with Willis’ notion of “penetration”, I point towards a profanity-inspired conceptual framework of subcultural politics which I illustrate in the second part of the chapter. The second part starts with a reconsideration of the materiality of music, paying more attention to its concrete material forms and medium. I then proceed to introduce the perspective of “regime of value” as a means to investigate the circulation and consumption of subcultural objects. The chapter ends with a revisiting of the notion of structure of feeling, which accounts for the affective and historical dimensions of subcultural politics.

2.2 Subculture and Profanity

2.2.1 From Subculture to Post-Subculture

A term with a long history, subculture remains one of the most contested notions in social sciences. First employed by the Chicago School in the study of juvenile crime and delinquency, the notion of subculture was later developed by Cohen (1955) and Becker

(1963) who suggested taking a broader perspective to situate subcultures within their specific social contexts and to see subcultures as not inherently deviant, but as socially constructed, alternative systems of values. In the post-WWII decades, the collective research effort of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) established British subcultural studies as a solid academic tradition. Building their work on Williams' (1958) perspective of cultural materialism, the CCCS approached subculture as "resistance through rituals", where working-class youth employ "styles" - practices and outlooks in the sphere of leisure including "dress, music, ritual, and argot" (Cohen, 1972, 54) - as an expressive, symbolic form of resistance against the dominant structure of capitalism.

Leong (1992) identifies two key theses in this classic theoretical account of subculture: "resistance as deviance" and "resistance as appropriation". On the one hand, seeing deviance as a strategy of working class youth to deal with their conditions of living, the CCCS emphasizes the fundamental role of class structure in determining the cultural forms of resistance. From this perspective, subculture is defined and conditioned by a "double articulation" (Clarke *et al.*, 2006, 8): first, the relation between a subculture and its "parent culture", and second, the relation between a subculture and the "dominant culture". On the other hand, equally important is the CCCS's stress upon the symbolic nature and creative dimensions of subcultural struggles. The appropriation thesis stresses the creativity of "subcultural terrorists" who seize commodities from the capitalist market and transform them into their own symbolic weapons. Hebdige (1979, 104), notably, argues that working-class youth create styles by making subversive meanings out of conventional objects and signs in the form of "bricolage", that is, they appropriate commodities by "placing them in a symbolic ensemble which served to erase or subvert their original straight meanings". Seen in this light, subcultural styles are sites of meaning contestation and weapons of "semiotic guerrilla warfare" (Hebdige, 1979, 105) over forms of representation.

The decades which followed the CCCS's decline witnessed the rise of so-called "post-subcultural" studies, a thematic unity among a new generation of scholars who saw the classic CCCS subculture theory as a "revered, yet critical, benchmark" (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, 4), against which they raised a series of critiques (Blackman, 2005; Williams, 2007; Bennett, 2011; Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Osgerby, 2014). A major line of post-subcultural arguments attack the structural determinist relations of resistance: the CCCS is accused of reducing the reality of the rich dynamics of subculture into a simple

binary opposition (the working-class versus the middle class) which is built on the assumption of a conscious and unified resistant subject, and an essentialist causal relationship between this class-oriented opposition and the form of subcultural resistance. In response, studies on post-war “consumer reflexivity” (Chambers, 1985) emphasized the role of commodities in effectively fostering identities, creating communities, and shaping ways of life. Bennett (1999, 602), for example, argued that “post-war consumerism offered young people the opportunity to break away from their traditional class-based identities, the increased spending power of the young facilitating and encouraging experimentation with new, self-constructed forms of identity”. Along similar lines is Straw’s (1991, 373) theory of music “scenes” which reverses the causal link between cultural forms, that is, musical practices, and their “stable” structural settings. This means that the appropriation thesis is in danger of being turned upside down: the cultural “styles” traditionally conceived of as means seized by the subcultures may have actually produced the subcultures themselves.

Also under attack was the CCCS’s theorization of subcultural authenticity. Once a subcultural style is incorporated by commercial business, it is argued to be “bought up, sanitized, made safe and resold to the wider youth market”, and thus becomes the fake, commercialized version of the “real” (Clarke & Jefferson, 1976, 148). However, putting the “commercial defusing” of styles in opposition to “genuine grass-roots reappropriation”, the CCCS ended up only posing another grand binary, that is, the subcultural versus the commercial. As a result, the practice of mass consumption is deprived of any possible resistant agenda while “authentic” practices of cultural resistance are limited to an almost negligible degree. Thornton (1995, 223), among others, points out the lack of credit given to the essential commercial processes in which subcultures “crystalize”. Pushing the critique further, champions of cultural pluralism argue that nowadays there is no longer a single style which marks the subcultural identity of a given group, rather, what we have is “a supermarket of styles” (Polhemus, 1997, 150) where people pick and mix to express their inner selves as unique individuals. Terms like “lifestyle” (Chaney, 2004), “neo-tribe” (Bennett, 1999) and “clubculture” (Redhead, 1997) are invented as substitutes for the term “subculture” in order to capture the fluid nature of contemporary youth affiliations in the age of late-modernity. As scholarship grows, the idea of a solid, homogeneous subculture has been deconstructed by theses of individualization and fragmentation. A subculture is seen as “no longer articulated around... the structuring of class, gender or ethnicity”

(Muggleton, 2000, 49), with the potential for resistance regarded as a mere “illusion” (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, 4-5).

To summarize, the post-subcultural critiques cited above challenge the very “sub-ness” of subculture by attacking its implication of an overwhelming, coherent “main culture”. In the heyday of British subcultural studies, this “sub-ness” implies a will of class resistance through the anti-commercial use of commodity items, which is argued to have become obsolete or irrelevant in the contemporary context. Chaney (2004, 47), for example, claimed:

The once-accepted distinction between “sub” and “dominant” culture can no longer be said to hold true in a world where the so-called dominant culture has fragmented into a plurality of lifestyle sensibilities and preferences. (Chaney, 2004, 47)

Arguably, the problematization of the “sub-ness” of subculture arises from two attempts which are proved to have failed: one to justify the relevance of old cultural forms in a new historical period, the other to apply theoretical devices designed for working-class subjects to the more diverse landscape of contemporary youth cultural affiliations (Williams, 2007, 578). However, if we look beyond the historical and methodological specificities of case studies of subcultures old and new, we can locate the central concerns of this tradition - manifest in the key theses of deviance and appropriation - which I believe still apply to key issues in the study of youth cultural affiliations (Gelder, 2007; Hodkinson, 2002). On the one hand, despite the danger of sliding into determinism, one of the virtues of the deviance thesis has been its view of subculture as a collective response made by the youth to the structural conditionings of their time. On the other hand, looking back to the appropriation thesis, we see a clear emphasis on the agency of subculture participants realized in their creative use of culture forms. In this sense, subcultures can be seen as growing out of the tensions between, on the one hand, the inescapable structural and historical conditions, and on the other hand, the quest for meanings, values, and identities by individuals living within these conditions. This entanglement of material structure and human agency is what I see as the key spirit - the “sub-ness” - of subculture, defined not only as the shadow of its dominant mainstream other, but also by the creative humanness of its participants.

Even though historical changes have made “subculture” a contested notion, I argue that the continuities between the tradition of subcultural theories and their post-subcultural critiques are evident: no matter how fragmented and slippery the “dominant culture” may

appear to be, a sense of relative positioning is always pertinent. In many cases, this spirit of “sub-ness” is not imposed by any researcher’s methodological perspective, but is rather to be found in the mindsets of the participants themselves. This relative positioning, typically against a mainstream structure or system, is a continuous element deeply rooted in the structures of feeling across different generations of youth seeking cultural resources for the expression of a different voice. While it may not characterize all forms of existing cultural affiliations in the world, to exclude this sense of relative positioning from a researcher’s theoretical framework risks falling into an arguably more serious pitfall, that is, the uncritical celebration of consumerism (Hesmondhalgh, 2005, 25). Therefore, as I see it, it is this outcry for something different born out of the creative tensions between structure and agency, the human drive to “remake the world for ourselves as we make and find our own place and identity” (Willis, 1990, 10), that ultimately defines the “sub-ness” of any subculture.

2.2.2 Profanity

The sense of “sub-ness” identified above is neatly summarized in Willis’ thesis of profane creativity which attempts to capture the ways in which “cultural practices make active sense of their structural conditions of existence”. Willis (2000, 14) sees the notion of creativity - to “produce something that was not there before” by “utilizing the expressive potential of surrounding forms and materials” - as lying at the very core of human agency. Bringing a classic Marxist sense of material structure - manifest in the existence of “concrete materials, bearing humanly appropriate-able symbolic form” - into the picture, Willis (2000) develops the idea of creativity into a situated notion and arrives at an approach of “socio-symbolic analysis” which attempts to juxtapose structure and agency in the situation of meaning-making:

There is a need to bring a form of humanism, understood as specifiable human practices, into relation with a material structuralism, understood as the properties of form upon and through which those practices have effects. (Willis, 2000, 23)

While this combination of material structuralism and humanism exemplifies the key theses of deviance and appropriation which define the CCCS tradition of subcultural theories, what distinguishes Willis’ approach is his emphasis on the sensuousness of cultural relationships and the materiality of cultural forms. Willis (1978, 3) sees cultural experience “essentially as shared material experience”, and argues that it is through sensuous relations

that the human and the material-structural generate creative tensions. Warning that “not everything has the sole purpose of signifying”, Willis (2000, 19-20) emphasizes the “use value” of concrete items, stressing their potential for being experienced and engaged with through all human senses. The sensuous use of an object, Willis insists, is largely independent of and as important as its signifying use, for it is in the sensuous interactions with an object where one can find the “immediate means of satisfaction and bodily fulfilment” and the “fullest expansion of human capacities”. Subcultures, in this sense, are not merely wars of representations, and subcultural items are not just appropriated symbolic weapons - instead, subcultures exist in, and are fundamentally defined by forms of sensuous human engagement with the concrete materiality of things.

It is based on this line of thought that Willis coins an original notion of *profanity*, denoting the capacity of a material object to be experienced sensuously and to generate “sensuous meaningfulness” out of this process. As Willis (2000, 27) argues, compared with symbolic and linguistic meanings, meanings generated in a lived manner are “relatively resistant to, or destabilize, linguistically borne ideological meanings”. In other words, when material objects are experienced sensuously, space can be opened up for potentially liminal and alternative meanings which stand against the existing symbolic codes imposed by the dominant structure. Willis (2000, 36) describes this process as follows:

Whereas ideological and official linguistic forms seek to annex all lived meanings to their own powerful constitution of meaning – good citizen, worker, student, etc. – socio-symbolic practices stabilize alternative liminal, uncoded or residually coded identities and meanings. They are held sensuously and practically and therefore relatively outside and resistant to dominant linguistic meaning. They refuse to be swallowed whole. (Willis, 2000, 36)

Willis (2000, 19) states that concrete material items “must be understood as their own profane forms” and gestures towards an approach to cultural analysis which “poses everything as profane or as capable of being made profane” (Willis, 2014, xxiv). A subculture, seen in this way, directs its members to sense and exploit the possibilities within the wider material structure they live in as a response to this structure. Willis (2000, 34-35) terms this process a subculture’s “penetration” - with a double sense of “seeing through” and “making way, of entering into or finding new space of” - of its wider historical and structural settings. Profanity, therefore, is essentially a situated notion, and the examination of the full profane meanings of a subculture demands a contextualized

perspective in its historical context. *Profane Culture* presents two case studies - the “rockers” and the hippies - of subcultures in 1970s Britain which were characterized by their profane penetrations:

These cultures work through profane materials: simple functional commodities, drugs, chemicals and cultural commodities exploitatively produced by the new “consciousness industry”. And yet from the rubbish available within a preconstituted market these groups do generate viable cultures, and through their work on received commodities and categories, actually formulate a living, lived out and concretized critique of the society which produces these distorted, insulting, often meaningless things. (Willis, 1978, 4-5)

The potential for a concrete item to be profane is termed by Willis as its “objective possibilities”. The notion itself is an indication of the dialectical interactions between the objective structure coded on the item, and the item’s sensuous potential for alternative meanings which can be released through its subjective, human use. This creative link between the human and the material-structural is a bi-directional process of “choice, selection, intervention and two-way influence”. It is, in essence, a series of “integral circuits” (Willis, 1974) between agency and materiality in which the subject and the object constantly define and shape one another:

Having itself been confirmed and developed in specific ways, agency continuously reselects and resets the structures of the “objective possibilities” - so shifting the range of their profane as well as of their intended meanings. This produces further reverse effects on sensibility and feeling and, in their turn, new potentials for concrete human choice and intervention, all in the direction of tightening socio-symbolic congruencies as well as in the direction of producing unprefigurative future possible meanings. (Willis, 2000, 26)

Seen in this light, creativity and profanity are essentially two sides of the same coin: a material object is made profane by human creativity, meanwhile an individual realizes his or her creative capacity through the profane potential of material objects. Eventually, the profane materials and the subcultural group nourish and build each other through co-production of meanings. We then arrive at what Willis (1978, 5) terms the “homological” relationship between human and things:

The essence of the cultural relationship I explore... is that certain items in the cultural field of a social group come to closely parallel its structure of feeling and characteristic concerns. (Willis, 1978, 5)

This dialectical, profane relationship between people and things, between subjectivity and materiality, and between agency and structure, is what I see as the defining element of subcultural practices. Through the notion of profanity, Willis brings materiality into the politics of subculture. His approach thus provides possibilities to go beyond the often binary oppositional accounts of subculture held by orthodox CCCS theorists, and to arrive at a more comprehensive and nuanced model, which regards a subculture as the dialectical interplay between three entities: the social group, the cultural objects, and the conditions of history. It is from this point where I see the potential to save the “sub-ness” of subculture from its post-subcultural critiques.

2.2.3 “Penetration” Reworked

Despite an unfortunate lack of attention (Trondman *et al.*, 2011, 574) to Willis’ approach to subculture, in the decades after the notion of profanity was first coined, the areas Willis had travelled to have been visited by more and more cultural theorists. Looking back to Willis’ work today, we can identify traces of his influence in what later have become turning points of entire disciplines. His emphasis on the materiality of culture, for example, heralds the so-called “materiality turn” which took place in the social sciences in the 1990s; his point on sensuous meaningfulness also inspires the field of sensory studies which employs “a cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture” (Howes, 2018, 226). Having said this, I argue that Willis’ original approach comes with obvious weaknesses which need to be addressed before we can “save” the notion of subculture with his theory of profanity. These weaknesses are largely situated within the limitations of the whole CCCS tradition from which it originates (Middleton, 1990; Muggleton, 2000). Marcus (1986, 173), for example, points out that the commitment to the “Marxist system” is still there, and it very much pre-determines the scope of Willis’ ethnography.

In the theoretical dimension, this limitation is reflected in Willis’ definition of the notion of “penetration”. One of the most insightful concepts in Willis’ framework, “penetration” points towards a powerful way to address a subculture’s relationship with its broader context of existence. However, in the way in which this notion has been used, there lies a clear sense of ambiguity: at times, the notion is employed to emphasize the agency and creativity of subcultural participants, yet it has also been defined in a manner which separates a “penetration” from the concrete and lived experience of these participants. In Willis’ (1977; 1978) work, penetration is used as an abstract notion denoting the collective

patterns of cultural practices, in a subculture, which is observed from an objective “God’s eye view”, and it is inherently associated with a Marxist agenda. As Willis (1977, 174) argues in *Learning to Labour*, penetrations “tend towards an exposure of inequality and the determining relationships of capitalism”.

To a certain extent, we must admit that the power of the idea of “penetration” lies in a strong anti-hegemonic, if not retaliatory, tone of romanticism it essentially bears - just like the notion of “subculture” does. By theorizing the “penetration” of a subculture, Willis attempts to tell the story of how a subculture challenges, shakes, and breaks through the dominant system: a subculture “breaks through” the system not in reality, but through reasoning, it does it by unmasking the hidden relations of power and by exposing and criticizing the logics of domination. Yet the question is: is this sense of “breaking through” something in the minds and experiences of the subcultural participants themselves, or is it a reflection of the researcher’s own agenda? Willis wants to address both with the single concept of “penetration”, but he fails to overcome their inherent conflict: while the working-class lads, for example, were definitely angry about the society they lived in, they didn’t see what Willis, as a sociologist, could see; therefore, *their* “penetration” - through everyday cultural practices - was bound to differ from the ideal sense of penetration which Willis envisions and which is able to expose the structural relations of capitalist domination. As a result, Willis has to speak about “penetration” by seeking a middle ground: in his theory, the subject who “penetrates” is neither the individuals inside the subculture nor the researcher outside of it, but the subculture itself, personified, regarded as being capable of thinking like a sociologist. As he writes:

Penetrations can be imagined as a means of a culture ‘thinking’ for its members. (Willis, 2000, 34)

This is problematic because cultures don’t think like researchers do. A culture engages, sometimes in confrontational and critical ways, with its surrounding structural conditions, but it needs not “penetrate” it with a classic Marxist vision of capitalist domination in mind. Willis’ original theorization of penetration largely reduces the richness and liveliness of cultural practices - the very qualities which he tries to stress through the concept of “profanity” - into a rigid script of class struggle, and in doing this, it risks sliding into another “polarity” between agency and structuralism (Hesmondhalgh, 2005, 25).

But the power of “penetration”, as a theoretical device, has already been demonstrated in Willis’ work, and the solution to its problem, I argue, is not a very complicated one: we simply let subcultures “think” in their own terms. A subcultural “penetration” needs not touch on the underlying structural politics - whatever a researcher may think they are - which cause it. The reason is, a subculture stands as subculture not because it has seen through how the society works, but because it sensuously and concretely responds to its immediate conditions of existence. A subculture “penetrates” what its participants identify - both through their thoughts and their senses, both reasonably and unreasonably - to be their “enemies”. Thus penetrations reveal the structural and historical contexts which define the profanity of a subculture, and it is for the researcher to analyse, after seeing what participants in the subculture could not see, how and why the profane meanings made in these penetrations have hit or missed the politics taking place at deeper structural levels¹⁸. In this sense, while Willis bases his arguments tightly on a working-class agenda, class consciousness and political resistance is but one of the many possible kinds of penetration which can take a wide diversity of different forms according to their historical contexts. Reworked in this way, the paired concepts of penetration and profanity, I argue, lead to a new conception of “subculture” which can be taken as the core of a comprehensive framework of subcultural politics.

This profanity-inspired framework allows a subculture to be “deviant” but not necessarily structural-determinist, and to be “creative” but not necessarily symbolic-oriented. On the one hand, taking the materiality of cultural items into account, the politics of subcultures can be liberated from the reductive agenda of political resistance and class struggle which, as I hope to demonstrate in the empirical chapters, fits in with the context of 1990s China which is distinct from the Western circumstances of both the post-war era and the late-modern age. From this perspective, the study of subcultural politics will first and foremost start with the investigation of the profane use of cultural items. In this way, a subculture is no longer positioned against commerce or the media. Instead, any mechanism which functions to mediate and facilitate the circulation and consumption of the cultural items under investigation is to be seen as integral to the politics of the subculture.

¹⁸ I acknowledge that, to some extent, this reworked concept of “penetration” bears similarity to Hall’s (1985) notion of articulation.

On the other hand, the reworked notion of penetration provides a more open perspective from which to examine a subculture's practices, styles, and politics. As Willis (1978, 224) argues, subcultures make their points "not through words", but through "concrete transformation of objects, style, thought and consciousness" manifest in their ways of living. This is to say that, analysis of subcultural politics means not only to uncover traces of symbolic performance and "semiotic warfare", but also to interrogate the more practical, immediate, and possibly unarticulated sets of experiences which members of the subculture live out with their bodies and senses. It thus includes not only the study of thoughts and ideologies, but also of a wide range of affective elements such as feelings and emotions, fun and pleasure, and hopes and imaginaries.

In Willis' own studies of profane cultures, he barely offers any in-depth investigation into how the profane items he focuses on were produced and distributed in the society, and thus subcultural politics, as a guiding theoretical framework, remains largely undertheorized. It is therefore my ambition in this thesis to push Willis' original theory towards a more comprehensive and nuanced approach - also, perhaps, a "reconstruction" such as Trondman *et al.* (2011) attempted to achieve - which employs a number of additional theoretical devices to further elaborate on the various dimensions of subcultural politics. Ultimately, the idea of subcultural politics demonstrates what a subculture has to say in its time, and conversely, what it means to be "subcultural" in a certain historical period. While it may not apply to all existing forms of cultural affiliations, this profanity-inspired approach promises explanatory power for a rich variety of what I may term "thing-centred" subcultures across space and time, defined by a centredness upon the use and consumption of certain cultural items. The remaining of the chapter can be seen as my attempt to provide the essential conceptual scaffolding for this framework: I draw on insights from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies in order to theorize the key dimensions of materiality, value, and structure of feeling which constitute the politics of a subculture.

2.3 Subcultural Politics

2.3.1 Music and Materiality

In the case of the "cut-out generation", the first step in the illustration of its subcultural politics is a reconsideration of the materiality of music. In this section, I examine a theoretical tension in the field of music studies between, on the one hand, the conventional

insistence on the centredness of “music itself”, and on the other hand, the more recent call for a “material turn” to explore the physical forms in which music cultures are embedded. Acknowledging the space for a conceptual spectrum in between these two poles, I argue for an approach that pays due attention to music’s multiple dimensions of materiality which include, but are not limited to, its sonic existence.

The discussion of music’s materiality began when music was considered as bearing no materiality. The dominant conception of music in the 19th century, according to Goehr (1992, 2), was the transcendent “musical work”, perceived to be completely detached from all sorts of mundane expressions it may attract, be it “physical, mental, or ideal”. Today, while the sonic materiality of music has been recognized and investigated as “sound studies” becomes an emerging field of new scholarship (Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2012), the long-standing assumption to separate the non-material system of musical notes from its everyday concrete medium still persists. Wallach (2003, 34), for example, argues for “a consideration of musical sound itself as a semiotic/sensible phenomenon”. In a similar vein is Born’s (1995; 2011) more influential thesis that:

Musical sound in itself is alogogenic, completely unrelated to language, non-artefact, having no physical existence, and non-representational, referring in the first place to nothing other than the specific musical system(s) or genre(s) to which it is related. That is, musical sound is a self-referential, aural abstraction. This bare core must be the start of any socio-cultural understanding of music, since only then can one build up an analysis of the mediations surrounding and constructing it, and so of its multitextual being. (Born, 1995, 216)

This underlying assumption that the sonic has to be taken as the “bare core” is also manifest in Attali’s (1985, 4) definition of music as “the audible waveband of the vibrations and signs that make up society” where music is represented solely by the state of vibration, while the *thing* which vibrates is almost absent. Arguably, this clear boundary - music “itself” on one side, its forms of mediation on the other - represents music scholars’ long endeavour to “rescue” the ontology of their demising subject matter in the modern context, beyond “the overwhelming presence of intermediaries, of instruments, scores, media, languages, institutions, performers, professors” (Hennion, 1993, 13).

Building on the legacy of Gell (1988) to theorize music as a “distributed object”, Born (2011) proposes an ambitious approach to music’s “four planes” of mediation which emphasizes sound’s capacity to create affective coalitions and multiple socialites. Along

similar lines, Hesmondhalgh (2005, 35; 1999) has called for a music-centred approach to youth culture in combination with the theories of genre and articulation, arguing that music's "ability to connect up audiences, texts and producers" provides a more promising theoretical basis than the notions of subculture, neo-tribe, or scene. In *Why Music Matters*, Hesmondhalgh (2013, 2) further develops his thesis based on the "affective turn" in music studies (Finnegan, 2003; Brackett, 2005; Sloboda, 2010), demonstrating music's role as a "remarkable meeting point of intimate and social realms". A systematic attempt to elaborate on music's transformative capacities at different levels in the modern context, *Why Music Matters* does not approach music as a transcendent ideal, but anchors its analysis firmly on musical sound's mundane, everyday forms of mediation. In particular, Hesmondhalgh (2013, 10) examines both the "co-present sociability" and "mediated commonality" which music generates, and argues that music's greatest political potential lies not in the "directly political", but in its capacity for drawing people together.

While sound is undeniably an essential and defining component of what we call "music", arguably, the sonic dimension of music is not always the answer to "why music matters" (Li, 2016). Music matters in different ways according to different contexts, and therefore, I argue, that no conceptual hierarchy regarding music "itself" should easily be taken for granted. As Straw (2000, 4) points out, music, especially its modern recorded form, does not "simply succeed each other in time; they also accumulate in space". Notably, the recognition that, since the end of the nineteenth century, sound recording technology has effectively transformed music into a "thing" (Shuker, 2010, 3), has established a connection between music studies and the field of material culture studies, giving birth to a new topic of enquiry: music collection. Echoing early "collection theorists" such as Benjamin (1968), Baudrillard (1994), and Pearce (1995), music collection has been analysed as a "social practice" (Shuker, 2013), as a form of "affective archiving" (Long. Etc., 2017), and has been linked with the politics of identity in translocal contexts (Vályi, 2010) and to the typical mentalities of late-capitalism (Reynolds, 2010; Moist & Banash, 2013). This trend of recognizing the "thinglike" (Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2012, 5) status of music parallels the shift of interest in music studies from the exclusive focus on "Western classical music" (Small, 1998, 3) to a more inclusive scope of investigation into a wide range of popular music phenomena in the global context. In the emerging field of sound studies, a number of scholars have also reflected critically on the sound-centred inclination in music studies, with the shared acknowledgement that "sound is no longer just sound; it

has become technologically produced and mediated sound” (Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2012, 4). For instance, the “auditory culture” approach championed by Bull (2000; 2007) sees sound as deeply intertwined with the multisensory mediation of modern technologies and people’s social experience in the urban space. Others have also reflected on the practice of listening, conventionally taken for granted as “a cognitive act”, and demonstrated the importance of listening’s “practical and sensory dimensions” (Hirschkind, 2006, 25).

With insights from the thread of “thing theory” in the humanities (Appadurai, 1986; Gell, 1998; Latour, 1993; 2005), Straw (2012, 228) calls for a “material turn” in the study of music which hasn’t yet made its way as influentially as in cultural studies in general. He suggests that the thesis of materiality does not have to do with the “essential matter of music”, but rather finds its place in its more tangible “material extensions”. Elsewhere, Willis (1978, 10) has put it in a more blunt way: “In the age of pop music, the only text is the actual record”. As we are now living in a world “marked by the sedimentation, circulation and collection of artifacts”, music’s movement as a concrete commodity form has become its essential feature, which sometimes even overwhelms its sonic content. In this sense, music is bound to bear a “double mobility” in the modern age: its sonic transmission embedded in, and shaped by, its material circulation “from places of commerce to contexts of listening” (Straw, 2012, 233).

This perspective guides Straw’s (2001) seminal study of the informal economy of leftover and second-hand records. An analysis of most music’s oft-neglected destiny as cultural waste, Straw’s (2001, 159; 163) study demonstrates how “the paths and velocities through which cultural commodities move help to define the rhythms and the directionality of urban life”, and how the accumulation and collection of used records reflect “a deeply-rooted structure of taste and sensibility”. In particular, Straw (2012, 233) highlights the formats of storage - LPs, CDs, and cassettes marked by their “distinctive sizes, storage capacities, and characteristic relationships between musical and non-musical information” - as “protocols of listening” in our engagement with music. By showing how a record can become outdated, Straw’s study indicates that music, as a commodity, can be “exhausted” even before it is listened to. Straw pays close attention to the commodity status of popular music in its recorded forms, where musical sound and the associated sonic experience function as a kind of “cultural use value” which may or may not be realized in the end.

I regard Straw’s approach as a thing-centred one which demonstrates the potential for critical enquiries into music’s material extensions and the everyday conditions of its

circulation. It recognizes the fact that the physical “things” which store and mediate music are not lifeless as they are assumed to be (Latour, 1993), that they are not only produced by people, but also actively shape people and their ways of music consumption. Approaching music from a circulatory view of culture, Straw (2012, 232) establishes a solid layer of materialist analysis - “a perspective that seeks to map the mobility of music rather than of human beings” - on which our sonic experience is based. This approach recognizes music’s “non-human agency” (Straw, 2012) as a thing-in-motion which not only illustrates but also actively shapes its human context. In this way, Straw is able to reach out to the politics surrounding the music object way beyond its original context of production, and bases his argument on a global standpoint¹⁹.

While positioning them as an opposite pair, I do not regard the sound-centred thesis and the thing-centred one as contradictory or incompatible. Instead, I see them as two ends of a conceptual spectrum within which a researcher’s conception of music and its materiality, which is bound to be case-specific, can be situated. Although my focus in this study of the “cut-out generation” - a globally contextualized, consumption-based culture which named itself after the storage medium of music - will be more inclined to the thing-centred side, it’s also my objective to include the analysis of the mediating role and affective functions of musical sound, with the aim of demonstrating how sound can be woven into rather than merely mediated by its material extensions.

2.3.2 Politics of Value

If we follow Straw to pay attention to music’s material, modern commodity form, the next step to take is an analysis of how the music object circulates within a subculture. Within cultural studies, one of the strongest traditions is that which deals with cultural consumption and its related politics of taste and value. This tradition goes back to the works of Simmel (1957) whose study of the fashion industry lays out the foundational claim that consumption is essentially cultural. The argument goes, as Silverstone (1994, 106) neatly summarizes: “No exchange without meaning. No economy without value. No culture without exchange.” The moment when a thing enters the realm of economic exchange, it becomes a valuable commodity on the market as well as a symbolic entity

¹⁹ For example, in his study of the MP3-filled CDs on the street markets in Mexico City, Straw (2012, 235) concludes that while these discs made possible a transmission of music through space and time, they also “reasserted the centrality of ...authoritative musical canon dominated by the global North and West”.

within a system of social meanings. Bourdieu (1984, 2), along similar lines, regards consumption as “a stage in a process of communication”; it thus follows that the system of consumption is a system of social differences articulated in the dynamics of taste and distinctions.

In this tradition, with particular relevance here is Thompson’s (1979) work on the theory of rubbish. Seeing rubbish as a socially defined category, Thompson (1979, 9) positions the object of his study between what he terms “the durable” and “the transient”: when a transient object gradually declines in value yet continues to exist in “a timeless and valueless limbo”, it slides into the category of rubbish, where in the future it may be rediscovered, endowed with value, and rescued into the realm of the durable. The category of rubbish is where transmissions between boundaries of value most intensely take place, hence it is also the area where conflicts about what is valuable unfold under the social construction and control of value (Thompson, 1979, 10). Thompson thus arrives at a theory of two types of chain between object and person, one we may term thing-centred, another subject-centred:

The first kind of chain consists of the careers of particular objects as they traverse an environment of individuals and groups; the second consists of the careers of particular individuals or groups as they traverse an environment of objects... In one situation it may be reasonable to assume that people are being manipulated by objects, in another to assume that people are both manipulating objects and being manipulated by them. (Thompson, 1979, 135-136)

Building on Thompson’s first chain, it is Appadurai’s (1986) and Kopytoff’s (1986) monumental work on the social life of things that first achieves a reversal of perspective which gives full credit to the agency of things in fostering cultures. Arguing that “it’s the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context”, Appadurai (1986, 5) calls on cultural researchers to “follow the things themselves” and to find the meanings and value of commodities “inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories”. Following Simmel’s (1978) argument that exchange is the source of economic value but not *vice versa*, Appadurai (1986, 13-14) sees the existence of “commodity potential” in all things, and regards commodities as things in a certain situation rather than things of a certain kind. Accordingly, different social and historical contexts have different sets of “commodity candidacy” which define the exchangeability of things. This notion implies the discursive power of systems of classification which, by grouping certain things (but not others)

together, function to attach and distribute meanings and value to different things in possibly different ways. Appadurai (1986, 13) goes on to argue that in a situation of commodity exchange, there need not be a “complete cultural sharing of assumptions”: in fact, distinct cultural frameworks can be brought together into one context of commercial exchange, even though they may hold totally different definitions about the objects in question, the trade can be done as long as a shared understanding in terms of value is reached. Hence, we arrive at the notion of “regimes of value” which accounts for commodities’ “constant transcendence of cultural boundaries” (Appadurai, 1986, 14). Such is the process by which commodities gain their own “life stories” or “cultural biography” (Kopytoff, 1986) in the age of global cultural flows.

The crucial insight here lies in the connection Appadurai makes between the value of things and the values of people: the former exists only in an economic sense, while the latter digs deeply into the logics of social practices (Thomas, 1991; Myers, 2001). With this proposal, Appadurai (1986, 13) aims to open up “a comparative and processual” dimension in the study of cultural politics. In his own writings, by demonstrating how the flows of commodities are always subject to “social control and political redefinition”, Appadurai (1986, 41-43; 56) argues that the creation of value is in essence a “politically mediated process”. The idea of politics which Appadurai sets out to theorize here contains a fresh and novel dimension, it refers to the politics which mediates regimes of value and specific flows of commodities. For Appadurai (1986, 57), such politics take root in the tensions between existing structural frameworks and “the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks”. This conception of the politics of value, I argue, is a crucial component of subcultural politics which has long been overlooked partly due to a lack of attention paid to the materiality of subculture. Compared with more refined accounts of contemporary capitalist cultural industries, Appadurai’s theory of “regimes of value” fits better with the case of the Chinese cut-out industry which, as I will demonstrate, operated in a more “primitive” way. In my empirical chapters, I will demonstrate how, in each stage of the “social life” of the cut-outs, their multiple material statuses were connected to different commodity candidacies within each “regime” of the cut-out industry.

2.3.3 Structure of Feeling

Having addressed the sensuousness of cultural practice, the materiality of music, and the social life of things, I will now conclude this recurring theme with Raymond Williams’ theory of structure of feeling, which adds a historical and affective layer to subcultural

politics. Widely considered as the founding father of British cultural studies, Williams (1958) sets the tone for this tradition by approaching culture as “a whole way of life”, a position against the then dominant Leavisite tradition of cultural criticism. Trying to achieve a balance between the over-elitist “great tradition” and the over-determinist Marxist view of culture, Williams (1980, 34-35) arrives at a perspective of cultural materialism from which he reworks the basic Marxist idea of determination into the “setting of limits and exertion of pressures” rather than predetermined causation. This is the context in which Williams’ idea of lived experience takes shape. Williams aims to capture the rich qualities of human life which are “formally undefined” (Pickering, 1997, 34), that is, they are prior to any cultural articulation, irreducible to formal description, and meaningful only in the actively lived sense. As a system of “practical consciousness”, lived experience provides the immediate impetus for social action, and it thus functions to constantly condition cultural formations but never rigidly determines them.

Structure of feeling, as Williams (1961, 64) coins it in *The Long Revolution*, denotes a particular “community” of lived experience which delivers the “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time”, in other words, it gives “the sense of a generation” (Williams, 1977, 133). This doesn’t mean that structure of feeling is a static system where the ethos of a generation is imprinted. Rather, it is bound to be an ever-changing structure of active, relational tendencies. The lived nature of structure of feeling determines that it is a system of “social experience in solution” (Williams, 1977, 133) which constantly reflects on itself, thereby simultaneously accommodating and shaping the dynamics of historical changes. It is, in other words, a cultural pattern which is never fully a pattern.

Williams (1977, 128) regards structure of feeling as a notion accounting for the “forming and formative processes” where the past crystalizes in and crashes onto now. As Williams (1977, 130) argues, apart from the “already articulate and defined”, structure of feeling is bound to contain feeling, values, and experiences which are still in “an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange”, namely the “emergent”. The notion of emergence is designed to illustrate the internal dynamics and relations both within and diachronically beyond a structure of feeling. Defined against what Williams (1977, 121) terms the “dominant” and the “residual”, the emergent is situated within a structure of cultural domination and struggling to manifest itself out of the cracks of it, it is therefore inherently counter-hegemonic.

In Williams' emphasis on the lived nature of experiences and on the counter-hegemonic role of emergence, we see the roots of what would grow to become Willis' notion of penetration. As Williams (1977, 126) argues, the emergent is most powerful in its embryonic phase as "a pre-emergence, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated", and when emergence turns from an active movement into a formalized system, its oppositional nature cannot remain unaffected. However, it is also in the process of articulation through existing cultural forms that the emergent clashes with the real world, seeks its way within dominant meanings and values, and fully realizes itself in lived experiences. In this sense, what Willis terms "penetration" is the lived out form of what Williams calls "emergence": when emergent elements of a structure of feeling anchor themselves on the profane materiality of certain cultural items, they become lived out and realized, thereby penetrating the overarching system.

This line of thought leads to Willis' (2000, 40) thesis that a thing can only be purely profane in an unprefigurative state. Once profanity is lived out and becomes a penetration, the forms it takes often end up as "the very means through which what they seem to oppose is reproduced". Willis (1977, 119) terms this the inevitable "irony" of penetration, arguing that all penetrations are bound to be "limited" and "partial" and to "bound back finally into the structure they are uncovering". In this sense, the profane rarely become the subversive in the end; yet, no matter how predictably profane cultures end up reproducing the existing system, their penetrations should be regarded as a lived assessment, a voice of critique, and "a collective, imaginative response" (Pickering, 1997, 34) to their historical conditions of existence. It is through this never-ending process of "heroic failures" (Kahn-Harris, 2004, 96) - where what is currently emergent may become the dominant in the future, and the dominant the residual - that history is passed on to new generations. In this sense, the notion of structure of feeling is essentially a political one tied closely to the vision of progressive cultural changes. As Filmer (2003, 203) summarizes:

The processes which have produced the distorting and constraining structures of the present are the results of human agency which has been lived and may thus be reflected upon consciously to produce changes. Structures of feeling are, for Williams, the evidences of those reflections in their initial orientations towards change and the developing possibility of realizing claims to the legitimacy and significance of the differences of otherness from established order. (Filmer, 2003, 203)

Seen in this light, structure of feeling offers a generative model of how human agency forms a co-evolutionary relationship with the objective structure in which it is situated. It captures the ethos of a subculture in a down-to-earth manner. The notion of structure of feeling occupies a pivotal position in the framework of subcultural politics. While it presents a “participants’ perspective on culture” (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015, 1) which is active, sensuous, and utterly subjective, it also broadens our conception of the materiality of subculture from its conventional forms of infrastructure to encompass a level of we may term “affective infrastructure” (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015, 2)²⁰.

While the notion of “infrastructure” has been conventionally and broadly defined as networked material structures that enable the movement of things, more recently, anthropologists have embraced a so-called “infrastructural turn” which re-examines the forms and functions of infrastructures, looking beyond the mere technical and material characters of an infrastructure to its role as a “sociotechnical assemblage” (Amin, 2014, 138), a “way of living in the world” (Larkin, 2013, 331), and a “socio-technical process with diverse agentic powers” (Harvey, 2012). Emerging literature lays stress upon the once overlooked affective dimensions of infrastructure - its “liveliness” (Amin, 2014) and aesthetics - which have been acknowledged as sometimes even predominating over their provisional functions. Building on Jakobson’s (1985) definition of the “poetic” in the linguistic sense, Larkin (2013, 335-336) coins the “poetics” of infrastructures as the metapragmatic moment when an infrastructure’s aesthetic form is “loosened” from its technical function, linked directly to the “ambient conditions of everyday life” and the “bodily reaction to lived reality”; the notion of aesthetics, in this light, is also reworked into “an embodied experience governed by the ways infrastructures produce the ambient conditions of everyday life” (Larkin, 2013, 335). This new conception of aesthetics, I argue, broadens the “aesthetics of the music” in de Kloet’s (2010, 40) scenic approach. It offers an approach to subcultural practices beyond the symbolic dimension, to the sensuous, materialist, and often unspoken “styles” (Williams, 1980, 154) of a subculture which manifest its urgent concerns and real conditions of existence.

²⁰ In this sense, Williams’ work prefigures the conspicuous interest in today’s affect studies (Ahmed, 2004; Clough & Halley, 2007; Blackman, 2012; Wetherell, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015) which aim to explore the entanglement of “the material, the social, the biological and the cultural” (Wetherell, 2013, 350).

This approach to viewing structure of feeling as an affective infrastructure brings new insights on how to illustrate and unpack the elusive notion of structure of feeling. While deemed to be “formally undefined”, structure of feeling can be approached through the investigation of its relationship with and manifestations in other tangible dimensions of infrastructures and of social practices. The task is to investigate how people’s affects themselves - feelings, values, attitudes, and beliefs as constitutive “elements” of lived experiences - also function *as* an infrastructure of a given subculture, which actively interacts with and shapes other aspects of it. This leads us to revisit existing scholarship on the “referents” (Fine & Kleinman, 1979) of a subculture. The literature stands in two traditions: on the one hand is the emphasis on the system of social networks enabling cultural communication and production, visible in Becker’s (1982) “art world” approach, which has more recently been pursued by sociologists like Webb (2007) and Crossley (2015) towards a relational model of subculture; on the other hand is the stress on the role of media discourses and representations inspired by Cohen’s (1972) study on the “folk devils”. In particular, Thornton’s (1995) study of UK club cultures offers a sophisticated account of the mechanisms through which multiple levels of media discourses - including what she categories as mass media, “micro-media”, and “niche media” - are inextricably involved in the authentication of a subculture. In my analysis of the “cut-out generation”, I pay attention to the system of social networks - made up mainly of buyer-seller relations in the retail market and the peer communities of the cut-out “circles” - and the role of various forms of media, and I analyse them in relation to the emergent structure of feeling of the cut-out subculture.

2.4 Conclusion

The key concepts discussed above constitute the driving parameters of a conceptual framework informing this study’s exploration of the subcultural politics of the “cut-out generation”. Following Willis, I see subculture as defined by the “profane” practices of sensuous meaning-making through which human agency responds to its structural conditions via the use of cultural items. Building on Willis’ theorization of profanity and penetration, I gesture towards a comprehensive framework of subcultural politics by adding three dimensions of politics: 1) the politics of materiality, which in this case invites a reconsideration of the balance between music’s sonic and material forms in the modern context; 2) the politics of value, which enable the circulation and exchange of subcultural

items, and; 3) the politics of affects, which is rooted in history and manifests in lived experiences.

In its totality, my theoretical framework of subcultural politics constitutes a thing-centred approach which emphasis the role of materiality, sensuousness, and lived experience. It connects to my empirical findings in the following ways: in Chapter 4, I illustrate the politics of materiality and value which emerged and were established by and through the cut-out industry; in Chapter 5, I focus on the profanity of cut-out consumption experiences and demonstrate the elements of sensuousness and creativity they contained; and in Chapter 6, I investigate the structure of feeling of the “cut-out generation”, situating it within the historical context of 1990s China where its emergent spirit was conditioned and defined; and I map out its manifestations in various dimensions of lived experience in the cut-out subculture.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter delineates the methodology of the thesis. In order to investigate the past using a systematic, bottom-up, and qualitative approach, my research design employs historical research methods, including oral history interview and archival analysis, and approaches these methods through an “ethnographic imagination” (Willis, 2000) lens. The chapter is divided into two main parts. Beginning with an anecdote from the field, I first justify my methodological approach as one which sits in the overlapping field between historical study and ethnography. I then apply “ethnographic imagination” as a guiding framework for collecting and analysing the three kinds of data, namely memories, documents, and subcultural objects, in relation to the cut-out subculture. The second part outlines my research design and the fieldwork process. I introduce my analysis which was conducted in two rounds: first through a “cut-out archive” I built for document analysis, and then through a large, representative sample of in-depth, life story interviews in various Chinese cities. I then delineate my framework of thematic analysis which emerged from my fieldwork, and I finish the chapter with some ethical reflections.

3.2 Rationale

3.2.1 The “Ethnographic Imagination”

In March 2018, I interviewed Shi Qian, one of the most successful cut-out dealers in the post-2000 period, in his storehouse in Shunde, Guangdong province. By the time we met, Shi Qian was also one of the last few who were still in the business, which had been in steep decline since the late 2000s. During our talk, Shi Qian showed me a hand-drawn map which, as he told me, guided his very first trip to Heping to buy in stock (Figure 9). It was drawn by Shi Qian’s friend, cut-out dealer Qiu Dali, Shi Qian told me the story:

I went to Sun Yat-sen University to study, I didn’t really gain much knowledge but I learnt one “cut-out proverb”: fortune favours the bold. I got to know Dali because I was brave and I took the initiative, and he brought me all these opportunities... I bought stock from Dali a few times, and then I told him directly that I wanted to go to Heping. Dali drew me a very detailed map with telephone numbers of the dealers, this map is so important, it is so precious to me. I attached some sellotape to prevent it from decaying, if there will ever be a “cut-out museum”, it has to be included in the collection... He drew me this map and I went down,

examined and uncovered, the “cut-out generation”, which evolved primarily around the unique materiality of the cut-outs, remains a culture first to be identified and described before being critically analysed. This justifies the necessity of an ethnographic approach which is capable of unpacking the undertheorized, “profane” liveliness of the cut-out subculture, and which connects with my empirical focus on sensuous engagement, lived experience, and structure of feeling.

The identification of these characteristics of the subculture under investigation points towards the direction of participant observation, a methodological approach which has long been the default for scholars of subcultural (and post-subcultural) studies (e.g. Thornton, 1995; Blackman, 1995; Arnett, 1996; Malbon, 1999). In other words, the most effective methodological approach is simply “to be there”: to participate, to observe, to listen, and to try to feel what others feel, using the body of the researcher as the tool. In today’s China, however, both the cut-out industry and the cut-out subculture have become part of our history. The subculture is no longer alive but “lived”, its related cultural practices can only be retrieved and narrated in the past tense, and its structure of feeling can only be “reconstructed” based on the limited availability of relevant data. In other words, as a belated researcher, I am only able to generate empirical findings through historical interviews and archival analysis. This subtle position regarding the time when a researcher “arrives” - and its consequential (dis)advantages - has yet to be fully recognized and reflected on by cultural scholars. In this sense, my research design has potential contributions to a broader range of research situations which many scholars will also encounter.

The question is, how to sustain the “ethnographic spirit” of the study without the existence of the living “field” for participant observation? How can a researcher reconcile the historical nature of his/her research with an ethnographic vision, when all available sources of data are records and memories of the past? The immediate answer to this question would be a clarification of the notion of ethnography as a methodological approach. As Forsey (2010, 566) suggests, ethnography should be defined “by its purpose” as a formation of study aimed at understanding “the cultural context of lived experience”, and it, in this sense, is not in conflict with historical research methods by definition. In fact, this particular kind of “belated” research situation dates back to the beginning of the cultural studies tradition. When Williams (1980, 151; 152), recognizing the “historical distance” between him as a researcher and the “Bloomsbury group”, envisions a “modern cultural

sociology” which takes into account both the typical outsider’s view of formal analysis and the subjective experiences of the members of the group themselves, he is gesturing towards a methodological approach which combines the historical and the ethnographic. This methodological ambition is realized in the notion of structure of feeling, which can be seen as an ethnographic vision of history in itself. Thus, Williams’ work represents an attempt to trace the “the sense of lived lives underpinning the cultural record we can access from the archives” (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015, 1).

In a similar vein, Willis proposes a methodological perspective with a broad conception of ethnography not as a specific method in a researcher’s toolkit, but as a form of “imagination” equipped in one’s research habitus. Juxtaposing “ethnography”, which represents the empirical and the concrete, and “imagination”, which “transcends the everyday”, Willis (2000, viii; ix) gestures towards a novel way of seeing social realities, namely to “understand the raw materials of everyday lived cultures as if they were living art forms”. Art in this context denotes a quality of “human meaning making” accomplished through “work upon forms” situated within the broad structure of social connections. This methodology is based fundamentally upon Willis’ (2000, 36) theory of profanity and is designed to be sensitive to the sensuous meaningfulness of cultural items. The sense of ethnographic imagination, Willis (2000, 113) argues, is not exclusively tied to the method of participant observation, but is “relevant to the production of all kinds of intellectual work” including non-field-based ones.

Willis’ emphasis on the “ethnographic”, as I see it, comes twofold: first, it requires “a degree of sensuous immersion in the field” which brings the researcher’s sensibilities “closer to, or clarified in relation to, those of agents”; second, it invites the researcher to focus on the “uses of, and meanings attributed to and derived from, objects, artefacts and texts within the life spaces of agents” (Willis, 2000, 115). This line of methodological thinking in the British tradition of cultural studies corresponds with many other scholars’ efforts to bring history and ethnography together as a new discipline under a variety of labels: “ethnohistory” (Braum, 2013), “anthrohistory” (Murphy *et al.*, 2011), and “historical anthropology” (Axel, 2002). Schuyler (1988, 22), for example, argues from an archaeological background that what he terms “historic ethnography” must “give equal attention to the archaeological and the documentary records, and possibly other sources” including oral history. With this perspective in mind, we can now examine the existing types of data for collection in this research.

While the “field” of cut-out subculture, in a spatial-temporal sense, is no longer available for direct “sensuous immersion”, three types of existing data sources can still be located: people, documents, and objects. By people, I refer to individuals who have had close engagement with either the cut-out market, the cut-out subculture, or both. Their lived experiences in relation to the cut-outs can be reconstructed in the form of memories, or life stories, through in-depth interviews. By documents, I mean textual data which can be extracted from magazines, fanzines, newspapers and other types of print media associated with the cut-out subculture. These sources of textual data form a special type of historical “archive” where subcultural practices are recorded, celebrated, and sometimes debated. Lastly, by objects, I refer to the cut-out cassettes and CDs (and the recorded music they contain) - some still kept and treasured by their owners - which serve as effective facilitators of memory in the “imagined” ethnographic field.

3.2.2 Fieldwork in the Archive

Speaking of doing ethnography with documents, the first point is to reconsider the relationship between conventional approaches of ethnography and the so-called “archive” as a data source. The archive, considered as the main site of historical work, is traditionally seen as an assembly of texts and a “depository of and for history” (Dirks, 2002, 47) where primary records of historical data are stored. From the 1960s on, following the “crisis of representation” in the humanities, researchers have begun to see the archive as a discursive formation, as a “regime of truth” (Stoler, 1997) where knowledge is not only stored but also produced out of power struggles.

Among the early advocates of an interdisciplinary project combining history and anthropology, Cohn and Guha (1987, 2) call for researchers to “treat the materials of history the way an anthropologist treats his field notes”. This notion of “ethnography in the archive”, or “fieldwork between folders”, has been adopted by many researchers especially those with a background in subaltern studies (Dirks, 1987; Guha, 1988; Stoler, 1995; 1997) who aim to give voice to the voiceless.²¹ In this thread of research, we see a more comprehensive and inclusive conception of the archive which draws upon unconventional data sources and marginalized voices. This idea of “ethnography in the archive” is in line

²¹ Although the “sub-ness” of subculture is not identical to that of the subaltern, most subcultures are indeed often excluded in official archival sources, and the situation is no difference for the “cut-out generation” in China. Therefore, my “ethnography” also bears the potential contribution of making visible a “subcultural archive” for academic study.

with Willis' ethnographic imagination which treats documents themselves as cultural forms and explores their possibilities of meaning-making.

In this research, an "ethnography" of subcultural documents (music magazines and fanzines) leads to two strategies. On the one hand, in the process of data collection, the ethnographic imagination demands a broader view of what constitutes the relevance of textual data: texts are to be included not only for their depiction of the cut-out subculture itself, but also in order to reconstruct an "immersion" into its general historical context. In other words, as a researcher, I aim to read what the "cut-out generation" read, rather than merely to read what is written about them. On the other hand, in terms of analysis, the ethnographic imagination places the researcher's attention not only on the information contained in subcultural documents, but also on their roles as media forms, and as sites and processes of meaning production, value creation and social interactions.

3.2.3 Ethnography of Memory

While a subcultural "archive" can be helpful to reconstruct the past, in this research, the most productive "field" of ethnography is people's memories. Compared with archival evidence, this type of data, to be recorded through historical interviews and generated from "an active human relationship between historians and their sources" (Perks, 1998, ix), can be extraordinarily rich and lively. More recently, the term "oral history", in contrast to the official, archival type of history, has been used to label research practices of this kind. The practice of oral history grows from "a surviving tradition of field-work within history itself" (Bornat, 2017, 66). The label suggests that all existing accounts of "history", no matter whether verbal or literary, are by nature representations of history, in other words, they are only "history-as-recorded" instead of "history-as-lived" (Tonkin, 1995, 2). As Schwarz (2009, 139) maintains, the arrival of memory as an object for study brings to researchers' attention a subjective and discrete dimension of historical time: "a conception of time of the inner life, of the mnemonic itself". This corresponds to recent reflections on the dominance of the singular, linear conception of historical time (Huysen, 1995; Schwarz, 2009; Figlio, 2009). Memories, in this sense, not only represent history, but also contain "what history forgets" (Radstone & Hodgkin, 2009). Using oral history thus also allows subcultures, often voiceless in officially made history, to speak for themselves.

While people do forget and misremember, as noted in memory studies, the focus of historical analysis in recent years has shifted from the notion of memory as either "true" or

“mistaken” to an emphasis on memory as process, and how to “understand its motivation and meaning” (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003, 4). Memory is “not only individual but cultural”; it is rooted in the broader context of surrounding cultures and is “inserted into larger cultural narratives” (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003, 5). Contextualizing the analysis of memory within its sociocultural settings, we arrive at a position which we can call the ethnography of memory. This position echoes Willis’ (2000, 115) point that we need to treat language as a form in itself and to focus on its use “for a purpose in concrete contexts of location and human action”, or in other words, how language “mediates” sensuous meanings. In the case of a subculture, which arguably is fundamentally “a matter of narration” (Gelder, 2007, 2), the ethnography of memory should be concerned with not only how memory depicts the subculture, but also how memory grows from within the subcultural context. In this sense, the neutrality and accuracy of memory fade into the background: as Gelder (2007, 2) reminds us, every narrative by or about a subculture is “a matter of position-taking” both within and outside of it.

A related field of research is the so-called “life stories” which, although falling within a similar methodological tradition, places an emphasis on the lived, biographical, and diachronic aspects of oral history. This approach which seeks to dig into lived experience of the past and to “re-present that experience in a narrative form”, as Caughey (2006, 484) points out, is in line with the descriptive and analytic vision of Mills’ “sociological imagination”. In this sense, the “contextual location” of collected life stories in their broader cultural settings makes a study of “life history” (Caughey. 2006, 484). In my “ethnography” of memories of the cut-out subculture, I employ life story interviews as the primary method to generate oral history, and ask my interviewees to start their narration from their “first contact” with popular music. Navigating through a person’s life history in relation to popular music which usually spans more than two decades, I am able not only to conduct an ethnography of the cut-out subculture as a historical event, but also to achieve in my analysis a depth reaching through different periods of history which contextualize the structure of feeling of the cut-out subculture.

3.2.4 Biographical Objects

Lastly, to do interviews with an ethnographic imagination also means to bring elements of sensuousness and materiality into the interview process as facilitators of storytelling. In order to bridge the gap between memories and narratives, between “a life as experienced” and “a life as told” (Hoskins, 1998, 6), we need to figure out how the lived experiences in

question are coded into memory. Practically, the basic task is to extract what is remembered in a way which can be traced back to how it is remembered. In the field of media and cultural studies, despite the fact that “senses can act as a mnemonic device or a trigger to remembering”, oral historians have not yet fully engaged with senses other than sound and listening in verbal communication (Hamilton, 2016, 104). However, in the lived experience of the “cut-out generation”, the materiality of objects played an undeniably significant part: apart from listening to the music, there were also ways such as seeing, desiring, feeling, repairing and collecting of music records as material objects which utilized a variety of human senses.

In this light, the cut-out records in my study serve as a useful type of “archaeological” data with which both the researcher and the interviewees engage, and as a means of achieving a retrospective sensuous immersion in the “field”. Providing particularly useful insights here is Hoskins’ (1998, 4) work on the “autobiographical” use of objects, in which the objects serve for the narrators “as the cornerstone of a story about themselves, a vehicle to define personal identity and sexual identity”. The “biographical objects” which are endowed with personal characteristics, as Hoskins (1998, 7-8) argues, can “anchor” the owner to a particular time and place and consequently be used as “part of a narrative process of self-definition”. Similarly, the presence of the cut-out records in the interviews performed such a biographical function: the cut-outs acted as a bridge between now and then, allowing the interviewer and the interviewee to share the sensuous experience pointing back to the past, in which process relevant subcultural memories were generated²².

3.3 Research Design

The collection and analysis of empirical findings in this research was organized into two main parts: the collection and analysis of textual data, and the collection and analysis of in-depth interview data. In general, while interviews were the main data source, analysis of textual data functioned as an initial “immersion” in the imagined field, guiding and preparing me for the design of in-depth, historical interviews. The combination of these two methodological approaches also enabled a form of data triangulation. On the one hand, the textual data produced in the cut-out period reflected more directly the lived experiences

²² A similar case is Pink’s (2006) study where the interviewees are encouraged to video their sensory home to give the interviewer a “tour” along with their narration.

of the “cut-out generation” which were re-told in the life history interviews; and I was thus able to corroborate findings across data sets collected through different methods. On the other hand, as the production and consumption of media discourses and subcultural texts was also part of the lived experiences in the cut-out subculture, my interview data also helped to better interpret the published texts in the cut-out niche media.

3.3.1 The “Cut-out Archive”

The textual analysis was organized into three phases: 1) data collection, 2) initial analysis, and 3) in-depth analysis. One of the major challenges of this part was that the “subcultural” status of the textual data in question determined the limitation of their public access. Given the fact that there was no existing subculture-themed archives in China, I spent a considerable amount of time and resources building my own “cut-out archive”.

As mentioned earlier, the primary function of subcultural documents in this research was not to provide a record of the past, but to allow the researcher’s initial “immersion” in the past. Therefore, my sampling strategy for textual data was not one aimed at representativeness: as the list of existing cut-out “niche media” was a reasonably short one, I aimed to collect as many published textual data on the cut-out subculture as possible. My collection of documents started in early 2016 when I made a list of 20 titles of music magazines/fanzines which I identified as “niche media” sources containing potentially cut-out related contents (see Appendix 1). Among all the magazines, only the two most popular titles, namely *Popular Songs* and *Audio & Video World*, were available to read in public libraries. In December 2016, I spent two weeks in the National Library of China glancing through issues of these two magazines published from the late 1980s to the early 2000s and made copies of selected articles. From early 2016 to early 2018, I tried to gather other titles on the list through a variety of means including purchases from second-hand markets, borrowing from friends, and digging out digital or scanned copies on the Internet. Eventually, I managed to build a partially digitalized “cut-out archive” containing 19 of the 20 magazine titles on the list (apart from the fanzine *Random Sounds*) with a collection of over 200 selected articles which I divided into three categories: 1) narratives of individual’s own cut-out experiences, or reports of the local cut-out market, 2) reflections and criticisms on the “cut-out generation” as a cultural phenomenon, and 3) those which were not directly related to the cut-outs, but touched upon relevant themes and issues such as local rock scenes, media piracy in China, and the practice of music collection, these I regard as the “paratexts” of cut-out subculture writings (see Appendix 3).

The first round of analysis ran parallel with the phase of textual data collection described above, and the next phase of in-depth analysis lasted from June 2018 to January 2019, in parallel with my interview analysis²³. In the first round of analysis, the act of “glancing through” as a research practice aims not only to locate and select data, but also to experience these textual data as a reader, as members of “the cut-out generation” did in the 1990s. This turned out to be an insightful immersive experience in the imagined “field” of subculture which generated crucial guidance for my in-depth interviews. Although not every issue published in the cut-out era was successfully found, glancing through the collected subcultural documents, especially those under the third category of “paratexts”, gave me a detailed overview of relevant topics, typical concerns, details of everyday life, and the general conditions of structure of feeling expressed by participants of the subculture. More importantly, I was able to identify six major “sites” (Shuker, 2010) where cultural practices in relation to the cut-outs took place: 1) the non-retail sectors of the cut-out industry including the scrap recycling business and the cut-out wholesale sector; 2) the cut-out retail market where retail practices took place; 3) the relatively more private context where individuals consumed - in particular, listened to - the cut-out records they bought; 4) the so-called cut-out “circles” which functioned as the social space for locally formed cut-out consumer communities; 5) local music scenes in which cut-outs played an important role in underground music-making; and 6) the cut-out “niche media” where writings on the cut-outs, especially music reviews, were published.

3.3.2 Sampling and Recruitment

Although crucial insights were gained from the “cut-out archive” I built, it was my fieldwork interviews that provided the majority of primary data which I relied on in this research. In comparison with textual data from the available subcultural documents, the advantages of interview data are twofold: on the one hand, in terms of context, the interviews cover a much wider range of people and practices than do published texts in cut-out “niche media”. For example, while the cut-out wholesale business was rarely reported on in music magazines, I was able to receive useful information through

²³ Only the first two categories, namely the textual data directly related to the cut-out subculture, were included in the phase of in-depth analysis. While I employed a similar thematic approach to analysis for both the textual and interview data, the former serve mostly as a complementary source to the latter. I will discuss this phase in detail in the later section on interview data analysis.

interviews with a few former cut-out dealers. On the other hand, I was able to use more structured and controlled ways to generate the interview data, which guaranteed their relevance to the major concerns and theoretical focus of my research. Designed with an ethnographic imagination, I intended my interviews to be conducted in an in-depth, historical, biographical, and “sense-full” (Willis, 2000, 34) manner.

My “desired informants” (Wengraf, 2001, 96) were people who engaged routinely with either the cut-out industry or the cut-out subculture or both from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. Given that it was impossible to map the whole population for probability sampling in this study, the sampling process was designed to be purposive (Bryman, 2012, 418). Therefore, unlike in the case of textual data, the main aim was not to achieve a comprehensive overview of the whole “cut-out population”, but to recruit a group of story-tellers whose memories provided a representative collection of lived experiences covering different “sites” of the cut-out subculture.

The primary method of sampling I employed was “snowball” sampling (Patton, 1990) in which interviewees functioned as initial points of further networks where new interviewees could be recruited from among their acquaintances. This sampling strategy is justified by the fact that snowballing networks often provide narratives of the same stories told from different perspectives, thereby enriching their details as well as providing triangulations. Prior to my first interview in September 2017, I made a list of around 100 potential interviewees whom I had known directly or indirectly. This initial list served as both a pool of backup interviewees in case my snowballing strategy didn’t yield enough reachable networks, and as an “imagined sample” which I used to test potential sampling criteria before the fieldwork started. Among the 100 people on the list, I marked 16 with whom I had built a stable connection and/or from whom I had gained permission for the interview: these people served as the starting points of my snowballing process.

From September 2017 to September 2018, I interviewed 71 people in total whom I reached through a dozen snowballing networks. These 71 stories, plus another interview I had conducted earlier in May 2015, comprise the full sample of interview data. In the process of recruitment, I was constantly balancing the limitation of the purposive and subjective nature of snowball sampling with my objective of the ideal, theoretically perfect sample. After completing data collection, I further adjusted the composition of my interview sample, eventually reducing the sample size to 50 interviews which I transcribed and used for analysis (Appendix 1). The main principle of the adjustment process was to make sure

that the data to be analysed reach the point of “theoretical saturation” (Seale, 1999) according to three criteria: 1) identities, 2) locations, and 3) age and gender. This adjustment was also necessary because of the limited time I had for transcription and the low quality of a few interviews which I decided to exclude from my analysis. In the following, I will illustrate the three main sampling criteria I employed one by one and present them in relation to the composition of my adjusted interview sample.

The first criterion concerns what I termed “cut-out identities”, that is, one’s role(s) in relation to the cut-out industry and culture. From the six “sites” which emerged out of my initial analysis of textual data, I identified five different types of “cut-out identities” to be included in my recruitment process: 1) cut-out wholesalers and/or scrap dealers; 2) cut-out retailers; 3) cut-out consumers; 4) local underground musicians; 5) niche media producers (including radio DJs and music critics). In reality, few people bear only one “cut-out identity”, and some “cut-out identities” were inherently overlapping. Among the 50 interviewees in my adjusted sample, 9 can be categorized under the first identity, 26 the second, 50 the third, 15 the fourth, and 16 the fifth. This I regarded as a relatively balanced sample of the five “cut-out identities”, guaranteeing both the breadth and width of the interview data to be analysed.²⁴

The second criterion concerns geographical location(s). Although the cut-out subculture is a distinctively urban Chinese phenomenon, different cities in China can have quite different conditions of cut-out market and subcultural communities. Specifically, an interviewee’s location can be assessed in two dimensions: 1) the degree of urban development and 2) the wider geographical region to which these cities belong. The first dimension distinguished the traditionally conceived first-tier Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou – these three cities were also admittedly China’s three largest cut-out markets - from second-tier and lower ones. The second dimension is related to regional cultural differences within mainland China. In particular, the divide between

²⁴ However, I am also aware that this was still far from a perfect sample: due to the subjective nature of snowballing, the interviewees I was able to contact tended to be devoted music lovers. For example, all the cut-out dealers I interviewed used to be cut-out consumers, and all the cut-out wholesalers I interviewed used to be cut-out retailers, yet as I will illustrate in later chapters, a large group of cut-out dealers were actually not interested in music. The lack of voice of this group of non-music-lovers in my primary data was the major limitation of my interview sample.

North and South China has been argued (de Kloet, 2010) to bear significant correlations with the conditions of local rock culture.

In addition to the location(s) of individual's cut-out stories, in the sampling process, I also considered each person's current geographical location which helped me to plan the route of my fieldwork visits. These two locations, of the past and the present, didn't always overlap. In both categories, Beijing was the most commonly occurring city; this was largely because it is quite usual for people working in the cultural industries to relocate to Beijing, arguably still the cultural (and subcultural) centre of mainland China. Apart from Beijing, I marked Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Nanjing, in all of which I had connections to kick start the snowballing process. Among the 72 interviews I conducted, 38 contained cut-out stories which took place in Beijing, 10 in Guangzhou, 9 in Shanghai, 6 in Nanjing, and 5 contained stories of the cut-out industry in Heping/Shunde, I also collected stories in other cities including Tianjin, Shijiazhuang, Changsha, Taiyuan, Shenyang, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, and Tangshan which were told by at least two interviewees. In my adjusted sample, I used 27 Beijing stories, 8 Guangzhou stories, and 5 Nanjing stories as the three main "cut-out networks" on which I focused my analysis.

The third category was age and gender. While these two factors were not considered as major determinants of the subcultural politics of the "cut-out generation", I was fully aware of their potential influences on the narration process. Based on my initial textual data analysis in which many authors had argued that the "cut-out generation" actually contained more than one generation, I identified three major age groups within the "cut-out generation": 1) those born in the 1960s; 2) those born in the 1970s; and 3) those born in the early 1980s. In reality, participants in the cut-out subculture were not evenly distributed among these three age groups, rather, the composition of the "cut-out generation" should be seen as a spindle-shaped structure, with the "post-70s" group being the majority of the population. Among the 50 interviewees who made up my adjusted sample, 8 belonged to the first age group, 27 the second, and 15 the third. In terms of gender, given that the cut-out subculture, and rock culture in China, was undoubtedly a predominantly masculine culture (Baranovitch, 2003; de Kloet, 2010), I found it necessary to make sure that stories told from a female perspective were included. During fieldwork, this male-dominated structure was also confirmed by the difficulties I encountered in the process of recruiting

female interviewees. Eventually, I managed to interview 7 females and included 5 in my adjusted sample²⁵.

3.3.3 Interviews

My interview design follows Schütze's (1983) approach of "free-association" narrative interview, the basic idea of which is "to reconstruct social events from the perspective of informants as directly as possible" (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, 3; see also Hollway & Jefferson, 2001). As an underlying principle, the fewer directional signs imposed by the interviewer, the more spontaneous the narration process will be, and the more closely the story will reflect the narrator's own perspective and lived experiences.

Following Schütze's proposal of four basic phases of narrative interview, I divide the interview process into four stages: 1) the initiation stage in which I clearly formulated the topic for narration - the stories involving the narrator and the cut-outs - and introduced procedures and ethical concerns of the interview, I then warmed the conversation up by asking the interviewee's current relationship with and tastes in music; 2) the main narration stage which I initiated by addressing the narrative generating question(s). The initial question was always "when and how did your relationship with popular music begin" which naturally led to the interviewee's narration about their engagement with rock music and the cut-outs. In cases where the interviewee didn't naturally go on to volunteer such a narrative, I addressed the second and third questions: "when and how did your relationship with rock music/the cut-outs begin?" After the narrative generating question(s), I then took the more receptive role of active listener (Wengraf, 2001), trying to hold back any intervention which could impose my view points on the narration process while at the same time showing interest in the story. This process continued until an end was clearly indicated by the narrator; 3) the question stage where I, based on attentive listening in the previous stage, asked "immanent questions" - only using words of the narrator and referring to events mentioned in the story - in order to bridge the gaps of information in the story told; and 4) the concluding stage when I talked informally with the interviewee with

²⁵ One of the two excluded cases with female interviewees was used as a pilot study, the other was not considered as a successful interview as it lasted less than half an hour and the interviewee didn't provide sufficient relevant narratives regarding her cut-out consumption.

the recorder switched off, which often helped the subsequent interpretation of the interview data (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, 7).

While in Schütze's ideal model of narrative interview, the narrator is to be given minimal instruction and the structure of the conversation is to be imposed with minimal control by the interviewer, in reality, not every interviewee takes this role as an active narrator. Therefore, I developed an interview guide based on my conceptual framework of subcultural politics as a back-up plan in case a rich biographical narrative was not spontaneously generated. This interview plan also functioned as a guide for my "immanent questions" in the third phase of the interview in which themes and topics which were not included or not fully unfolded in the narratives were raised. The guide consisted of nine parts which correspond to the six main "sites" of cut-out subculture I identified: 1) briefing: current relationship with music; 2) personal history in relation to popular music; 3) cut-out consumption; 4) cut-out "circles"; 5) cut-out wholesale & scrap dealing; 6) cut-out retail; 7) local music scenes; 8) niche media production; 9) reflections. For interviewees of different "cut-out identity", these component parts were recombined in different ways (see Appendix 2).

Three pilot interviews were conducted in September and October 2017. Prior to my departure to China, I did two interviews, one with a male cut-out consumer who lived in Nanjing and the other with a female musician who used to live in Beijing, both currently based in London. I did a third pilot interview with a male cut-out dealer in my hometown Jinan, before locating to Beijing which was my main fieldwork base. These three interviews helped me to test the practicality of the narrative interview approach, my interview guide, and my analytical framework, as well as offering me the chance to reflect on my own communication skills. I kept developing and adjusting my interview guide and strategies of communication throughout the whole fieldwork process.

I moved to Beijing in October 2017 and did 21 interviews before the end of the year. I travelled to Shenzhen on December 28 and did 3 interviews during the New Year's Midi Music Festival. I did 17 more interviews in Beijing from January to March 2018 and travelled to Guangzhou for 6 interviews. From Guangzhou, I travelled to Shunde of Shantou city which was the wholesale centre for China's remaining cut-out business, now existing almost exclusively online, and did one interview while observing the area. I then travelled to Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Wuhu from March to April and did 11 interviews in total, before returning to Beijing for my final round of 8 interviews. I did two

additional interviews in August and September 2018 when I travelled to Beijing and to Berlin.

Prior to each appointment with my interviewees, I prepared for the interview with in-depth research into the interviewee's experiences in the cut-out period and the general conditions of the cut-out market and subculture in the interviewee's area. While I relied on online information in many cases, the "cut-out archive" I built with textual data played a significant role in this preparation process, and sometime it also provided written accounts of the same stories which later were told in the interviews. I was therefore, in most cases, able to have a good knowledge the "cut-out identities", music tastes, and relevant social networks of my interviewees before the interviews took place. Most of the interviews were conducted at a place chosen by my interviewees, preferably their homes or work places. Among the 72 interviews, 19 were conducted at the interviewee's home, and 18 at their office/place of work. 18 out of the 72 interviews could be considered successful free-association narrative interviews, in which a full extensive life history was smoothly generated, and most of the other interviews were done in a manner which fell between the ideal narrative interview approach and the more conventional semi-structured interview approach (with the help of my interview guide). In these, I found myself adjusting back and forth between the questioning and active listening modes and between being an instructor and a "story-facilitator" according to the flow of the interview. In the 50 interviews which comprise my adjusted sample, most yielded a relatively well organized biographical narrative consisting of a series of life stories, and most were done in a more loosely organized and open-ended manner than normal semi-structured interviews. The selected 50 interviews lasted a little more than two hours on average, the longest one taking over five hours. All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and were recorded with a portable digital recorder (Sony ICD-SX2000). During fieldwork, I kept brief fieldwork notes in Chinese after each interview, and though I didn't include them in the data analysis process, these notes turned out to be helpful in reconstructing the situation of the interview and the interpretation of the recorded conversations. As part of the fieldwork process, I also took pictures of important materials mentioned in the interviews, and I will present some of these in my empirical chapters.

I employed the idea of the "biographical object" which turned out to be a productive interview strategy. When discussing the time and place of the appointment, I invited my interviewees to bring their cut-out collection to the interview (if the interview was not in

the same place as their music collection). This strategy worked out well in 12 cases, mostly those taking place in the interviewee's home, in which I discussed details of the materialities of these cut-outs with their owners and asked about stories concerning the purchase of specific records. In 5 of these cases, I listened to music together with my interviewees and discussed the music being played. In 4 other cases, while the physical collection was no longer available, online-streaming platforms were used to play music which was mentioned. In all the above mentioned cases, the narration process was evidently more lively and in-depth than those without the presence of "biographical objects", and my relationship with the interviewees was closer because of the experience of engaging with the cut-outs together. In some cases, this relationship could be analogized to a pedagogical situation where the interviewee worked as the teacher (more accurately the "leader" in the original Greek sense) to lead the interviewer to re-experience the objects as he or she used to. The biographical narration, as a result, was transformed further away from a one-way process of story-telling to a co-present situation in which the researcher learnt from the narrator the meanings attached to these objects through a variety of senses beyond language, including seeing, hearing, and touch. Apart from the cut-out records themselves, this strategy also brought to me related objects including photocopies of cut-out album inserts circulated in early music fan circles and the typical storage boxes used to store the cut-outs which came in a few different sizes.

3.3.4 Thematic Analysis and Presentation

From June to October 2018, I transcribed the 50 selected interviews in their full length into Chinese texts. In parallel, I also started the analysis of both the textual and interview data. After transcription was finished, I used the NVivo 12 software to assist coding. This round of in-depth thematic analysis was applied to both the 50 selected interview transcripts and the first two types of my textual data, namely first-hand narratives and reports and retrospective reflections of the cut-out market and subculture. Although in the analysis priority was given to the interview data in determining the final analytical framework and in the presentation of research findings, the first two types of textual data functioned as crucial data sources which provided corroboration for the analytical results and findings I obtained from the interview data. Of particular relevance here were the analytical themes related to emotions, values, and aesthetics: as I was aware that a person's impression of thoughts and feelings could be significantly shaped by the distance between the past and the present, what my interviews generated were thus thoughts and feelings as recalled,

which could be different from thoughts and feelings as experienced. Therefore, I relied on my textual data, mostly produced in a first-hand manner in the cut-out period, to confirm the findings which emerged in my interviewees' reflective storytelling.

As mentioned earlier, my analytical framework was generated in an "ethnographic" manner primarily from bottom-up rather than top-down. This process unfolded in three steps. First, during the process of transcription which went on side by side with initial analysis, I roughly mapped out a number of larger sections of interview texts in which key "themes" emerged. These sections were largely in parallel with the six main "sites" of the cut-out subculture. After transcription was done, I coded each section of data with a number of emerging "nodes" which were grouped under larger "themes". Finally, I drew links from the identified "themes" and "nodes" to theories and concepts which made up the theoretical framework of my research. I present the analytical framework in Table 1 below.

In my empirical chapters, I aimed to present my analytical findings in an ethnographic manner which emphasized the lived and biographical qualities of my interview data as life stories, preferably through a way in which participants of the subculture speak and tell the stories themselves. Although due to the limitations of length, I was not able to present full life stories as they were told (the average length of my interview transcripts was about 20000 Chinese characters), I tried to achieve a balance between the thematic and narrative manners of writing, using a number of long interview quotes to sustain an ethnographic flavour. Moreover, when choosing interview quotes in each chapter, I gave priority to a few individuals whom I identified as "protagonists" of different cut-out "sites". This strategy of presenting quotes from the same persons throughout each chapter was employed to show the life stories I collected closely and organically intertwined with my theoretical and analytical themes. These "protagonists" included, for example, Dai Zong and Gao Qiu in Chapter 4, Li Kui and Suo Chao in Chapter 5, and Wu Song (and his Nanjing "circle") and Gongsun Sheng in Chapter 6. In comparison, published textual data often provided more concise summaries of what I found through the analysis of interview data, and I have cited a few of these as a complement to "raw" interview data.

Topics	Themes	Nodes	Theory
Personal History in Relation to Popular Music	Genres	“Red Songs”, <i>Gangtai</i> Pop, “Plebeian Pop”, Rock	Sonic Infrastructure, Emergence & Structure of Feeling
	Media	Cassette, TV, Karaoke, MTV, Radio	
	Identities & Taste Performance	“Music Fan”, “Rock Fan”, “Star-chasers”, “Cut-out Youth”	
Cut-out Consumption	Senses	Visual, Hearing, Touch	Sensuousness & Profanity
	Knowledge	Learning-by-listening, “Gem Picking”	
	Medium & Materiality	Cassette; Cut-out Repairing	
	Misinterpretations	Lyrics, Music, Title, Price	Emergence, Penetration & Profanity
	Tastes	Aesthetics, Rock Mythology	
Ethics	Stealing		
Cut-out Retail	“Conditions”	Defectiveness, Classes, Cut-out Repairing, “Complete Disc”	Materiality
	“Titles”	“Top Goods”, “Dross Swill”, Genre Discrimination	Materiality, Knowledge & Regime of Value
	Retail Practices	“Rock Preachers”, Media Effect, Bargaining, “Know”	
	Retail Outlets	Non-legal-ness, Shabbiness, Liveliness	Penetration & Infrastructure
	Ethics	The State, The Market	
Cut-out Wholesale & Scrap Recycling	Thingness	<i>Liao</i>	Materiality, Knowledge & Regime of Value
	Value	“Price Deferential”, Unit Arrangement, Genre Discrimination, Knowledge	
	Structure	Cut-out Pyramid, Geography	
Local Music Scenes	Tape-stripping	Failure, Improvisation	Profanity & Creativity
	Aesthetics	Rock Mythology, Glocalization	
Cut-out Circles	Social Networks	“Music info”, Cassettes, Commercial Exchange	Penetration, Infrastructure
	Ethics	The State, The Market	
Cut-out Niche Media	Music Critics	Soft & Hard Knowledge, “Hormone Community”	Profanity
	Cut-out Market	Cut-out VIP; Supply & Demand	Knowledge & Value
	Taste	Aesthetics, Rock Mythology	
	Political Position	The State, The Market	
Reflections	“Cut-out Generation”	Hunger, Defectiveness	Emergence, Penetration, Structure of Feeling
	1990s China	Political, Cultural, Economic	

Table 1 Thematic Analytical Framework

3.4 Ethical Considerations

With the use of in-depth interviews, this study involved a human element, so prior to the fieldwork, I identified three sources of potential risks: 1) the non-legal, if not illegal, status of the cut-out business, 2) the potential intense emotional engagement during the narration

process, and 3) the involvement of memories and narratives which are considered “political”, and thus sensitive, in contemporary mainland China (e.g. memories of the Tiananmen Crackdown and the Cultural Revolution). The first risk turned out not to be relevant: I was reminded by one of the cut-out wholesalers I interviewed of the fact that, even if cut-out dealing was ruled as a crime, its limitation period of prosecution, which would be 10 years at most, had already passed according to Chinese criminal law.

In order to deal with potential ethical concerns, I employed the following measures to guarantee transparency, consent, and confidentiality of the research. First, prior to the start of the interviews, I introduced myself and the purposes and the whole procedure of the research to my interviewees, and also informed them that they could choose to leave whenever they no longer felt like participating. Second, all interviews were conducted with the interviewees’ consent to record the interview and use the materials for academic purposes²⁶. Third, the interview data, including the personal details of all participants, were carefully stored with password protection, and were not uploaded to the Internet. I also replaced my interviewees’ real names with pseudonyms and modified other potential identifiers involved in order to prevent details of my research quotes being linked with specific persons. Finally, I maintained contact with all my interviewees on Wechat after fieldwork, I shared the interview transcripts with them and received eight updated versions with corrections. I also promised to share my complete research findings with them when requested.

²⁶ The decision to grant only verbal consent instead of a written consent form was made after two of the three interviewees of my pilot interviews told me that the written form made them feel “distanced” or “too formal”.

4 Politics of Value: Materiality, Knowledge, and the Cut-out Industry

4.1 Introduction

This chapter looks into the structure and mechanisms of the cut-out industry through an in-depth analysis of the different regimes of value at each level of commodity exchange.

Taking materiality as a point of entry, the chapter presents three distinctive dimensions of materiality of the cut-out records, and arrives at a politics of tastes and knowledge which was deeply embedded in their circulation as cultural commodities.

The chapter is divided into two main parts, the first one investigates two distinct material statuses of the cut-outs as plastic scrap and as defective records, and the second part presents a third, rather non-material dimension of materiality as “music info”. All three, I argue, are not reducible to the dominant sound-centred conception of music. In the first part, I start by presenting an overview of the structure and history of the cut-out industry in China, I then examine the regime of value in the scrap recycling business where the cut-outs displayed their fundamental “thingness”, before elaborating on the dynamics of “conditions” in the cut-out wholesale sector where they were defined and evaluated by their own physical defectiveness. In the second part, I first introduce “music info” as a specific dimension of materiality of the cut-outs and a special type of knowledge in the cut-out business and subculture, before depicting the mechanisms of “title” selection and “unit” arrangement in the wholesale sector; I proceed to draw a full picture of the dissemination and construction of knowledge in the cut-out retail sector and lay stress on the role played by niche and micro media in this mechanism. I conclude the chapter by demonstrating the co-evolutionary relationship between the development of the cut-out industry and the establishment of a system of “music info” in 1990s China.

4.2 Contested Materialities

4.2.1 The Cut-out Pyramid

Generally, the structure of the cut-out industry resembles the shape of a pyramid, divided into three main sections from top down: the scrap recycling business, the cut-out wholesale business, and the cut-out retail business. In reality, the whole cut-out industry derived from the scrap recycling business which had existed years before the appearance of *dakou* on the retail market. In other words, in the pre-cut-out period, all the scrap records shipped to

China would end up being recycled for industrial reuse. This conventional route of commodity flow was altered by a new awareness of the “music status” of what was previously treated only as scrap. By the end of the 1980s, a complete chain of cut-out business had emerged from the scrap recycling industry, directing part of the scrap records to be sold as *dakou* on the retail market. Following this diversion, a handful of scrap dealers, who ran partnerships with Western scrap record suppliers, achieved a state of monopoly. While the control of exclusive access to the cut-out supply changed hands several times, this state of monopoly persisted throughout the 1990s.

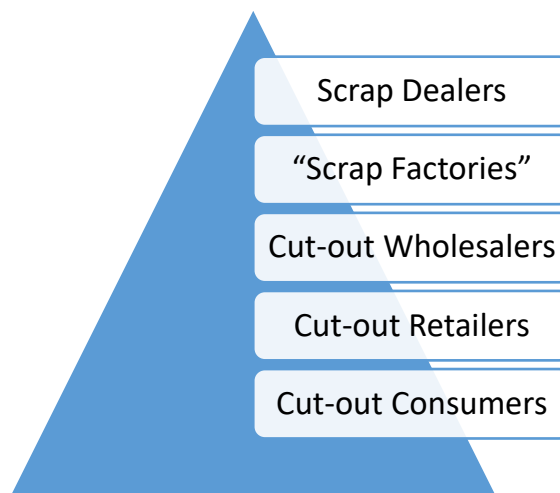


Figure 10 Structure of the cut-out industry

The pyramid structure of the cut-out business existed in terms of both geographical scale and the number of participants involved. Throughout the 1990s, the cut-out industry expanded from a small group of Guangdong dealers to a nationwide structure consisting of multiple rounds of business exchange at different geographical levels. Carried by locally hired trucks when travelling within Guangdong province, and by public logistics services to other parts of China, the cut-outs would eventually reach as far as China’s northern and western borders. While Guangdong was always the central hub of China’s cut-out distribution networks, a few other cities including Hangzhou, Wuhan, and Tianjin also functioned as secondary hubs for the transportation of the cut-outs up north. Dealers in these cities, as a result, occupied a higher level in the cut-out business chain²⁷. In each provincial region, the cut-outs’ trajectories of circulation pointed generally from a few

²⁷ For example, in the first half of the 1990s, two resellers in Tianjin who controlled the exclusive access to Heping managed to monopolize the supply of cut-out cassettes in Beijing and almost the whole North China region.

more cosmopolitan spots - in most cases the capital cities - towards the larger, relatively less developed and less populated areas, and retailers in big cities would routinely resell their “dead” stock to those in smaller cities and towns nearby. Therefore, speaking in the original American sense of the term, a cut-out record which had made its way to the township level was itself already a victim of multiple rounds of “cut-out” process.

Sustaining a complete chain of supply and demand, the three levels of the cut-out pyramid relied upon one another to cash out the stock they bought in: owners of big scrap recycling plants usually formed exclusive partnerships with specific wholesalers in Heping, who also had exclusive clients in different provincial regions to distribute stock nationwide. In the rest of the chapter, I follow this chain of business to elaborate the politics of materiality and value at each level, and to investigate the distinctive regimes of value where the exchangeability of the cut-outs was defined by different aspects of their contested materialities.

4.2.2 The Thingness of *Liao*

The “headquarters” of the cut-out business were based around Heping. Originally a small town with a little over 160,000 population, Heping stood out in the early 1990s as the national wholesale centre for the cut-outs where hundreds of so-called “scrap factories” (“料厂”) were established. “Scrap factories” was the name given to local waste processing plants in which scrap records were manually broken into different component parts before being granulized for industrial reuse, a process local people referred to as “scrap dismantling” (“拆料”). The standard process of “scrap dismantling” started with manual procedures of disassembling and sorting in which workers literally “dismantled” each cassette/CD packaging by hand: they would remove the plastic shrink wrap and place it in one pile, take the cassette/disc out of the jewel case and put them in another pile, pull out and throw the album inserts and booklets into another pile, and lastly, dismantle the jewel cases into pieces for another one or two (coloured and transparent cases) piles. This was followed by a series of processes through a set of recycling machines including sanders, granulators, and pelletizers, converting the dismantled parts of a record into different types of reusable plastic granules, referred to by the local as *liao* (“料”, literally “scrap”). Eventually, the “dismantled” *liao* would be sold to plastics manufacturing industries, construction industries, and pulp and paper industries.

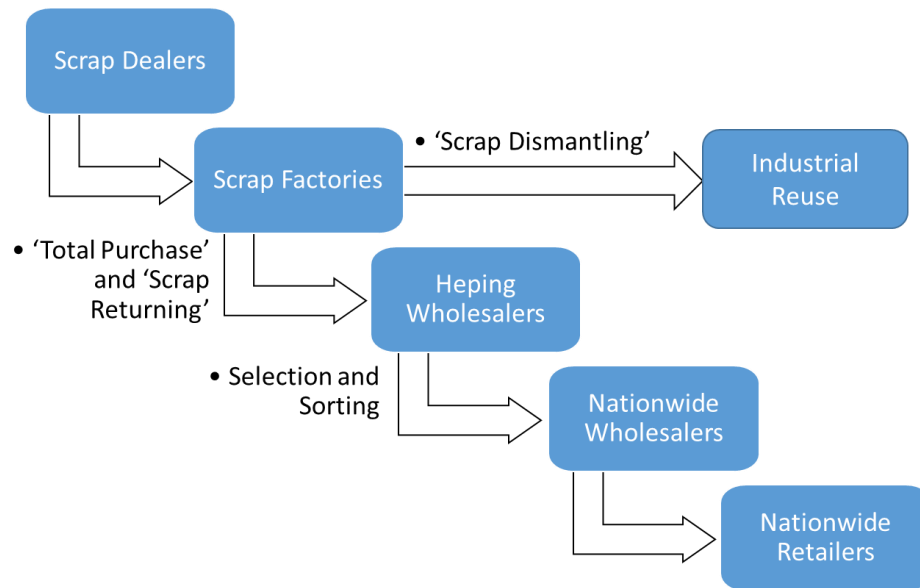


Figure 11 Trades in the cut-out industry

Scrap recycling businesses, the section on the very top of the cut-out pyramid, were formed between the scrap dealers, most of whom were based in Guangdong or Hong Kong²⁸, and the scrap factory owners who ran recycling plants in Heping and a dozen other nearby towns included Shalong (沙陇), Danshui (淡水) and Gangtou (岗头). Typically, scrap factory owners first purchased from the scrap dealers what was generally referred to as “goods” (“货”), that is, batches of scrap records taken directly from freight containers, they then hired local workers to undertake “scrap dismantling” in their factories, and finally sold the processed plastic granules to the various recipient industries. From the 1980s on, a large proportion of these raw materials ended up contributing to the local light industries: Heping was witnessed to transform into “an industry cluster which combines the manufacture of DVD-r/CD-r, cassette cases, CD cases, and other types of associated products”, and eventually became the second largest production base of recordable optical discs in the world (*China News*, 2009)²⁹. In the meantime, a rapidly growing stationery industry had also established itself in Heping and nearby towns, with many local brands achieving a nationwide success (*Shantou News*, 2003).

²⁸ Because of Hong Kong’s convenient geographical location and tax haven status, most scrap dealers chose to register their companies there. Hong Kong was also the place where the scrap dealers hired workers to transport the imported scrap from the original containers into the type of containers accepted by the Chinese customs, a process referred to as “container transfer” (“倒柜”).

²⁹ In 2008, for example, 75% of China’s imported DVD-r/CD-r were reportedly from Shantou city.



Figure 12 Boxes of cut-outs in containers³⁰

As I learnt in my interviews, for the top-level dealers who worked with, or ran their own, scrap factories, the cut-outs were first and foremost regarded as *liao*, classified into several different types, each with its own market value and industrial usage. A cut-out CD in its complete packaging, for example, contains four main types of *liao*, three of them plastics: the compact discs were referred to as “PC” (polycarbonate, #7 according to the ASTM International Resin Identification Coding System), the transparent jewel cases as “PE” (polyethylene, #1), or what Hepingers called “transparent *liao*”, the non-transparent cases as “PP” (polypropylene, #5), and the album inserts and booklets as papers.³¹ In the interview, Dai Zong, a former cut-out retailer who later entered the wholesale business, recalled the standard price for each type of *liao* in early-2000s Heping:

The plastic shrink wrap was worth about 300 yuan per ton, but you needed to remove all the price stickers first; the jewel cases cost about 5500 each ton, if you separate them, the black cases cost about 3000, and the transparent cases 8000; and the papers about 1000 per ton, those were the general market quotations back then. The discs themselves cost a bit more than 10000, at its peak it was worth as high as 22000 per ton. So,

³⁰ Photo provided by an interviewee whose name I choose not to disclose.

³¹ The situation for the dismantling of cut-out cassette tapes is comparably less clear: cassette shells are also made of “PP”, and the magnetic tape itself “PE”. Reportedly, in the pre-cut-out years, the magnetic tape had also been directly reused, after demagnetization, by local tape producing companies such as the famous brand *Sihai* (“四海”) in their blank cassette tape products.

speaking from a purely business perspective, if there was one full container of goods, which would be about 20 ton, I trucked them back to my factory and dismantled them right away, I could still make some money. How much profit could I earn in this way? If we count in the cost of the containers and the transportation fee which would be about two or three thousand yuan, in the end the profit I could earn was about 50 yuan per ton; that was the business most of the scrap factories were doing.
(Dai Zong)

In the cut-out business, the process of “scrap dismantling” was commonly described as “cases to cases, discs to discs, papers to papers”, a variation on the old saying “ashes to ashes, dust to dust”. Materiality here related only to the body, but not the soul: named directly after its major type of plastic resin as “PC”, a cut-out CD’s value had little to do with the intangible music data it stored, but only the types of raw materials it was made of. Gao Qiu, a cut-out wholesaler and scrap factory owner in post-2000 Heping, gave me a down-to-earth analysis of a compact disc from his perspective:

The disc we call it PC, it is only useful under the following conditions: first, there is a film of lacquer which is useless, so you need to get rid of it with float glass; second, the outer ring of a disc is the rim, that is also useless and needs to be removed; third, the inner ring is made of a different kind of plastic, you need to squeeze it out and put it aside. Having done all the above, what’s left is the actual usable part of a disc, less than half of its size only. (Gao Qiu)

Gao Qiu’s judgement on which part of a disc was “useful” makes a good case in point. His account gives full credit to a cut-out CD’s various concrete dimensions of “thingness” - its weight, shape, physical and chemical components - but none to the “music itself”. At this level, the materiality of a cut-out is reduced radically to that of its basic physical substance, and has nothing to do with its particular affordance as a cassette or a CD. Thus in the “disassembly line” of a scrap factory, two cut-outs of different titles bore no difference in nature, as they would eventually end up as the same kinds of plastic granules. In this sense, the cut-outs’ existence and circulation as *liao* stand out as a simple, separate layer of materiality in stark contrast to their assumed “music status”.

In the heyday of the cut-out business, this layer of materiality held by players occupying the top of the cut-out pyramid rarely exposed itself to the world outside. Throughout the 1990s, scrap recycling remained an industry monopolized almost exclusively by local – predominantly Teochew and Cantonese - businessmen who exploited the locational and social resources they were born with. The scrap recycling businesses typically ran in the form of “family firms” (Choi, 1998) whose networking was based heavily on family and

lineage. This explains why the access to both the scrap recycling industry itself and information about this industry had long been significantly blocked. As a result, few scrap dealers in Heping cared about what types of music were stored in their scrap factories, and few cut-out collectors knew, even though most of them were more than eager to, where the cut-outs they treasured originally came from. This didn't stop the "cut-out origin" from being the mysterious wonderland where every cut-out collector dreamed of a gold rush. During fieldwork, three of my interviewees mentioned similar teenage stories in which they left home by themselves for a reckless hunt down south, none of them succeeding in the end in finding the cut-out Shangri-La of their imagination. The journey took 18 year-old Ruan Xiaowu more than 40 hours on the hard seat train from Nanjing to Guangzhou, and even longer for Yang Bo who set off from Taiyuan, as he recalled:

We knew nothing really back then, no clue at all, we were just feeling the anxiety getting unbearable day by day, so we went. (Yang Bo)

A few years after his first journey to Guangzhou, Yang Bo was finally able to travel to Heping with the help of a cut-out dealer friend. Yang Bo's experience in the cut-out wonderland, however, was full of disappointment, if not disillusion:

...I only stepped into one warehouse where I totally collapsed after digging for a while in the mountains of cut-outs. That was the first time that I realized the true origin of the cut-outs: rubbish.

In Taiyuan, I had a friend who would cover both sides of the inserts of every single one of his cut-out collection carefully and tightly with transparent sellotape, he would wipe them thoroughly to make every one of them clean and shiny, and put them on his bookshelf under different categories like treasures on display. Every time before listening, he would wash his hands twice with soap. Yet in Heping, what I saw was nasty, dunghill-like wreckage of plastics piled all over among faeces of roaches and mice, a large number of cut-outs there were saw-gashed into halves or steamrollered into broken pieces: The Beatles, Nirvana, the Sex Pistols, you name it... All these albums I dreamed of owning were just lying totally wrecked on the ground, it was like a mass grave.

I asked myself: if I happened to be born as a Hepingner, living day by day in these mountains of cut-outs, would I still love music like I do now? (Yang, 2014)

It was evident from my interviews that Yang Bo's intense emotional reaction was shared by a few other outsiders who stepped into Heping for the first time. Arguably, their experience of loss and distress, in which for the first time the system of categorization they employed to sort their music collection stopped working, was triggered not by the "truth"

itself but a more immediate shock of materiality: it was the overwhelming and unpleasant material qualities, the very “thingness” of the cut-outs as scrap, characterized by dirtiness, brokenness, and massiveness, that forced them to reflect upon their own conception of the cut-outs as music, and pushed them to face the irresolvable conflict between the music ideal deemed pure and noble and its material extensions which appeared out of shape and deprived of dignity.

This shock of materiality vividly echoes Brown’s (2001, 4) thesis on how we “begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” and when an object is taken out of the context of a fixed subject-object relation. The cut-out’s materiality as *liao*, seen in this light, did “exist, but in no phenomenal form” (Brown, 2001, 5). If we take this thought further, the social life of a cut-out record from its scrap origin to the retail end throughout the cut-out business is also the journey in which a “thing”, in Brown’s definition, is invested with value, meanings, and human engagement, thereby becoming an “object” with a purpose. In the next section, I look into the wholesale sector which lay in the middle of this journey, with the aim of demonstrating the politics of physical “conditions” of the cut-outs as defective music records which in a way connect their loathsome scrap origin with their final destiny of cultural commodities.

4.2.3 The Turnstile of Value

Cut-out wholesalers, including both the first-hand Heping dealers and lower-level resellers residing in other cities, comprised the middle level of the pyramid. As I learnt during fieldwork, the typical progression of trades in this section was one in which Heping wholesalers purchased whole batches of “goods” from the scrap factories and then sold a selected part to cut-out resellers and retailers all over the nation. Taking shape in the late 1980s, the wholesale sector became a crucial point of transition, as well as diversion, in the social life of the cut-outs. By directing some “goods” out of the conventional value chain of scrap recycling into a divergent trajectory, the cut-out wholesalers adventurously opened the path to a new regime of value. In this alternative commodity phase, the commodity candidacy which defined the exchangeability of the cut-outs was radically shifted from one organized around the cut-outs’ commodity status as *liao* to one which regarded them primarily as music records. In this section, I will provide an overview of the mechanisms at work in the wholesale sector which enabled its role as a turnstile of materiality and value.

As people came to realize that a ton of scrap records would generate way more profit if they were sold as *dakou* rather than being dismantled in the scrap factories, the profit of “scrap dismantling” became a basic reference value for Heping wholesalers, generating a key formula at this level of business:

$$\text{Price Differential} = \text{Record Price} - \text{Liao Price}$$

“Liao price” and “record price” referred respectively to the standard amount of money that could be made if a ton of scrap records was sold as *liao* for industrial reuse, and as *dakou* on the cut-out retail market. “Price differential” (“差价”) was thus the extra price - on top of the *liao* price - a cut-out wholesaler needed to pay in order to purchase each ton of goods from a scrap factory. As a standard procedure in 1990s Heping, cut-out wholesalers would first buy in a whole batch of goods from the scrap factory owners, a process referred to as “total purchase” (“包货”), and after a process of selection and sorting, they would sell what they deemed as having little market potential back to the original scrap factories for a standard *liao* price, a process locally termed as “scrap returning” (“退料”). Below was a story told by Dai Zong on the first bulk of goods he traded in Heping:

I was very lucky with the first batch of goods in my career. I asked the boss: how much is the price differential? He said: “the *liao* price is about 8000 yuan per ton, give me 1000 as a price differential”. That means: I give him 20000 for the 20 tons of goods... If, for example, I didn’t select a single saleable disc out of the whole batch, I would sustain a loss of 20000. If I selected one ton to be sold as records, I would pay him 8000 yuan extra, and he would dismantle the rest. If later I failed to sell this ton of cut-outs, I could always sell them back to the original scrap factory for a price of 8000, which was the amount of money they would get by dismantling this ton.

So, in that case, I paid him 20000, I selected and trucked back a good amount of what looked saleable, and paid him 8000 for each ton. As it turned out, the quality of that batch was simply fabulous! I managed to pick out 20 boxes of Canadian notch-cut discs, the kind of notch-cut that was arrow-shaped, do you know what titles they had in there? Fuck, after that I didn’t see such good titles for years... there were Eric Clapton, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, and also some Tom Waits, they were all Warner releases... the type of saw which the Canadians used was especially good, the cut was very shallow, and loads of them were “complete discs”. In the end, I made them into many boxes of “arranged units” and wholesaled them for 900 yuan per box, meaning that I only needed to sell ten boxes out of each ton to earn my cost back, and all the rest was my own profit! (Dai Zong)

Dai Zong's case serves as a good example covering the complete chain of value in the cut-out wholesale sector through which profit was generated from the "surplus value" between the cut-outs' value as plastic scrap and as music records. In reality, while *liao* price existed as a commonly acknowledged market quote, record price tended to be more of a fantasy than a fact, requiring the dealers themselves to estimate and make a bet based on their evaluation of the quality of the given batch and their anticipation of the market prospect.

The art of the cut-out wholesale business resided not only in a dealer's capacity to decide whether a batch of "goods" was worth a "total purchase", but also the ability to distinguish the truly valuable cut-outs in a total batch - in the above case, Eric Clapton and Neil Young - from others. Serving the latter function was a system of stock selection and sorting developed by the Heping wholesalers at the heart of which was a set of criteria based upon both the "conditions" ("品相") and "titles" ("品种") of the cut-outs. Typically, a batch of cut-outs bought in by a Heping wholesaler would go through several rounds of selection and sorting, in order to determine which part of the batch was to be sold to the retailers and which part to be returned to the scrap factory. In this process, the cut-outs were first filtered according to their physical "conditions", after which those in an acceptable condition would be classified again based on their record "titles". The latter task required more advanced skills: while the sorting of conditions was usually done by locally hired manual labour, the selection of titles would be handled by a more educated group of so-called "technicians" ("技术员") who were able to identify different artists, labels and genres. A "technician" in Heping for five years, Dai Zong offered an example:

...that batch weighed about 400 tons in total, each ton contained around 9000 discs. When the whole batch arrived, technicians like me wouldn't directly go and start selecting, we would first hire about 30 female workers. We trucked the CDs to our factory, eight to ten tons each time, then the female workers started throwing the CDs into different piles. In this round, they didn't pay any attention to the titles but only to the conditions of the discs. For example, if a CD had a very deep notch, like this deep, you would throw it away immediately... After this round of selection by the workers, there would be about 10 tons of goods left, 10 out of 400, and then it was my turn to go and select "titles" from these 10 tons. I would get rid of all the rubbish titles, and split the rest into different piles according to their genres: classical, jazz, pop, rock, etc... After this round, we would let the workers go through the CDs all over again, one by one they would open the cases and check the discs inside. If it was a "complete disc", they would pick it out because those were the most profitable stuff. And then you had those with only a shallow cut, they could possibly have no songs ruined, but some of them suffered

from cracks generated in the cutting process, so we needed to eliminate the cracked ones too, usually only half of all the discs could survive this round. (Dai Zong)

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Figure 13 A series of photos of cut-out selection in Heping, published in *I Love Rock 'N' Roll*, Vol. 11

The dual criteria of “conditions” and “titles”, as Dai Zong depicted in his story, functioned to effectively sustain a gap of value between “*liao* price” and “record price”. In reality, these criteria were never fixed but rather elastic, constantly being redefined in response to the fluctuation of price on the market. In the times when “goods” were hard to get from overseas scrap dealers, the standards of selection would be loosened, turning more “goods” into records. On the contrary, in the good times when there was a wealth of supply, most wholesalers would make the selection standards as strict as possible. Moreover, what Dai Zong’s case also implies is that this turnstile in the flow of value was simultaneously a turnstile in the passage of materialities. The juxtaposition of “conditions” and “titles” suggests a distinctive dimension of materiality which finds itself subtly between the “music status” and “scrap status” of the cut-out records. Compared with the scrap dealers who regarded and referred to the cut-outs primarily as *liao*, for those working in the wholesale sector the cut-outs stood more as *records*, that is, the physical storage media of recorded sound. In the following section, I demonstrate how the very physical defects of the cut-outs constructed a lively vocabulary which defined their classes and value.

4.2.4 The Vocabulary of Defectiveness

On the cut-out market, the “condition” of a given cut-out was often stated after its record title, we could say, for example, a “Bob Dylan hole-drilled tape” or a “Kiss wide cut disc”. In the cassette era, there were three major types of cut-outs which were widely acknowledged, namely “notch-cut tape” (“打口帶/口帶”), “hole-drilled tape” (“扎眼帶/眼帶”), and “demagnetized tape” (“消磁帶”). This typology became more complicated when CDs took over. “Notch-cut discs” (“打口盤/口盤”), the most common type of cut-out CD, could be further classified according to the width of notches they bore into “narrow/thin cut disc”, “wide cut disc”, and “mouse-gnawed cut disc” (“耗子口”). Apart from the notch-cut disc, there were also three other major types of cut-out CDs, namely “laser-burnt

disc” (“激光盘”), “steamrollered disc” (“轧路盘”), and “hole-drilled disc” (“扎眼盘”), as Xu Ning introduced to me in the interview:

Laser-burnt discs had intact packaging, but when you opened the case all the discs would be left with a big crack burned by laser, making them impossible to play. ... As for CDs from European companies, BMG for example, they were very likely steamrollered discs, meaning that they had been run over by a steamroller as a means of destruction. However, it was very common that only the CDs piled on the surface were destroyed but those underneath them were not. ... In addition, there were also loads of hole-drilled discs, although the number of holes to be drilled might vary significantly. Some were drilled with three holes, some had five. If a batch of CDs arrived with three holes, you wouldn't expect to find many good-condition ones, because the holes would all penetrate the disc, but if they were drilled with five holes, there would be a larger possibility that all the holes were drilled on the corners of the jewel case without touching the disc inside. Some only had one hole, in that case if the hole happened to be drilled through the spindle hole of the disc, you would have a perfect “complete disc”. (Xu Ning)

It quickly became clear that the Western majors tended to employ different specifications in the defacing processes of their scrap records. After a short period of inductive self-learning, experienced cut-out dealers could easily deduce the country of origin, sometimes even the record label, of a given cut-out according to the wound it had suffered. For example, as I learnt in the fieldwork, demagnetized tapes were typically Warner Music releases, steamrollered discs came almost exclusively from French labels, and laser-burnt discs German ones. In my interviews with “technicians” like Dai Zong, one of the key concepts frequently mentioned was that of “proportion”: in Heping, experienced cut-out wholesalers would routinely observe and record the proportion of qualified-condition goods in one batch after each round of selection, using this as a means to calculate profit as well as to predict future “price differentials” on the market. As it turned out, cut-outs with different types of wounds could differ significantly in terms of “proportion”: while only 10 out of 400 tons of American notch-cut discs could pass the first round of selection, in the case of French steamrollered discs, 6 out of 10 tons could be considered functional according to this basic standard.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that the physical damage to a cut-out record might well not affect its music content. In the cassette era, apart from demagnetized tapes whose sound quality was always incurably ruined, notch-cut and hole-drilled tapes were very likely still playable once the broken ends of the tape were spliced together. If the break occurred in the leader tape part (which was most likely the case with unplayed

cassettes), no music content would be lost. As for CDs, since most albums lasted a considerably shorter time than the maximum duration of a disc, if the drilled-hole/notch-cut/laser-burn didn't reach the data region, the music content would remain complete. As a CD plays from the centre outwards, the shallower the cut and the shorter the album length, the more likely it was that its full music content would survive. Consequently, cut-out CDs were further divided into three classes priced from low to high on the market: “cut-out with songs ruined” (“打口伤歌”), “cut-out without songs ruined” (“打口不伤歌”) or “cut-out complete” (“口原”), and “complete disc” (“原盘”)³². This explains the common procedure in Heping where a batch of cut-outs would go through two rounds of condition test: the first aiming to eliminate the bad-condition ones, and the second to single out the most valuable “complete discs”.

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 14 Bob Dylan Hole-drilled cassettes³³

The story took an unexpected turn in the early-2000s, as some Heping dealers managed to reach an informal type of deal with their European partners in which they would pay a higher price for an intentionally shallower notch-cut on the disc. As widely acknowledged by my interviewees, 2002 was the “year zero” of the complete disc era after which the proportion of cut-outs with only minor wounds grew significantly in each batch of goods. Adapting to the new situation in Heping, Gao Qiu quickly developed the sorting method in his factory to single out “cut-out completes” - those physically defective but with complete music content - in addition to “complete discs”:

I said: “We will lose a lot of profit if you still price them in the old way, there are so many discs than only have a tiny scratch on the margin!” So I told them to teach the workers to check whether a CD had songs ruined or not... We installed a light bulb above for each worker so that they could check the area of data on the disc under light. We sold cut-outs

³² The distinction between cut-outs with and without “songs ruined” was much less evident in the cassette era than the CD era, this is because even in the case of a cut-out tape “with songs ruined” – that is, a cut-out tape whose break is not located on the tape leader – only a tiny amount of music, often as much as a couple of seconds, was lost.

³³ Photo taken in Hang Tian’s home in November, 2017.

with songs ruined for 450 yuan per box, those without songs ruined for 1000 yuan per box, and complete discs for 3000 yuan per box. (Gao Qiu)

While the marketability of the “cut-out complete”, that is, those physically defective but musically complete, speaks powerfully for the subtlety of the cut-outs’ “thing status”, the entanglement of materialities was perhaps most evident in the case of the “complete disc”. The most costly kind on the market, the “complete disc” derived its value not only from its rarity, but also the promise of both a presentable disc needing no repair and a complete, pleasant listening experience without disruption³⁴. Still, in the late 1990s when all cassette tapes on the market were gradually replaced by CDs, the most common type of cut-out available was “cut-outs with songs ruined”, making a complete listening experience quite a luxury. For music lovers who valued highly the intactness of an album, a “cut-out with songs ruined” was like a “chicken rib”: tasteless to eat, but a pity to throw away. While most of them learnt to live with it, for a smaller group of “elite”, perfectionist music lovers, “complete disc” was the only kind of material medium that was competent to hold the thing called “music”. In my interview with Wu Yong, a famous rock radio DJ in China, I was told that he despised the cut-outs so much that he never played a single cut-out record on the radio in his career. However, I was surprised to learn that the “complete disc” was regarded by him as something of a totally different nature:

I always felt very unpleasant, imagine you are playing a CD at home, but it’s a cut-out! It’s simply unbearable to put a CD with a cut into my CD player... but it’s completely different when we started having “complete discs” from early-2000 on, I bought loads of “complete discs” at that time, because “complete discs” gave me the feeling of buying a secondhand record. (Wu Yong)

Despite coming from exactly the same origin and sold on the same market as other types of cut-outs, the “complete disc” was distinguished by its physical completeness, which was sufficient but not necessary for its musical completeness. The dynamics of “conditions” vividly demonstrates how the thingness and musicness were deeply intertwined in the materiality of the cut-outs. Here, a cut-out cassette/CD was treated as a music record on its own rather than as indistinguishable matters of “PC” or “PE”. Not only its sound-mediating capacity but also its own physical appearance was fully recognized. The

³⁴ In the case when the damage affected the data region, a CD could lose from the last song to more than half of the whole album, and, when played, it would perform a sudden ending usually accompanied by a harsh noise.

(in)completeness of music's "material extensions", in this way, constructed a distinctive layer of meanings parallel to, and at times interwoven with, the music being stored, attaching both economic and symbolic value to the cut-outs.

If the dynamics of "conditions" still took root in the concrete thingness of the cut-outs, the politics of "titles" arguably revealed a distinctive non-material dimension of materiality. At the retail end of the cut-out industry, the "music status" of the cut-outs was seen as almost self-evident by their consumers, especially when they justified their consumption behaviours. One needs to look no further than a cut-out consumer's own collection to know how the cut-outs are labelled and categorized as if they exist only as musical works: songs, albums, genres, etc. In this conception, the physical substance of a cut-out record downgraded to the role of storage media, and the determining power of its exchangeability came from the music that was stored. This dimension of materialities, as I will argue, corresponded to a politics of knowledge taking place around the pricing mechanism of different "titles". In the second part of the chapter, I will demonstrate how the negotiation of tensions between gaps of knowledge profoundly shaped the politics of value in the cut-out wholesale and retail sectors.

4.3 Valuable Knowledge

4.3.1 "Music Info"

In the introduction to *Social Life of Things*, Appadurai (1986, 41) distinguishes between two types of knowledge in the context of commodity exchange: knowledge that "goes into the production of the commodity" and knowledge that "goes into appropriately consuming the commodity". As "the social, spatial, and temporal distance between producers and consumers" increases, Appadurai (1986, 41) argues, the divergence between production knowledge and consumption knowledge will also grow proportionately. Seen from this perspective, the Chinese cut-out market makes a strange case where the production knowledge was barely visible, if not totally absent. In the cut-out context, the concept of knowledge therefore denotes particularly a politics of connoisseurship in relation to cultural tastes and music consumption.

During my interviews, while some did use the word "knowledge", more people preferred a different term, that is, "music info" ("音乐资讯"). It is important to note that the meaning of the term, at least in the cut-out context, had little to do with the system of professional

music knowledge - music theory; instead, “music info” here should be better understood as a sum of all informative resources concerning cut-out consumption, especially in relation to the record “titles”. Most frequently, the system of “music info” bore a taxonomic function, defining a given title by supplementing more related information such as facts about the band and label, or by situating it in one or more musical genres and styles. Li Wan (2007, 127) offers an example of a friend who apparently had plenty of “music info”:

Tong is a live dictionary, he is familiar with the origins and relevant reviews of every musician, every band, every genre and every album, regardless of their styles, schools or countries of origin... Tong never drinks, smokes, or flirts with women, and doesn't care at all about his appearance, but his home is China's biggest treasury which stores the widest range of cut-out “top goods”. (Li, 2007, 127)

What Li Wan depicts is in fact a typical image of a knowledgeable, almost intellectual type of music lover in 1990s China, who incessantly accumulated “music info” through a devoted, sometimes obsessive habit of cut-out consumption. In the early period of the cut-out business when Western-music-related media content was scarce, the inserts/booklets in the packaging of cut-out records functioned as an important source of “music info”, eventually nourishing those who would grow to become the first generation of China's cut-out niche media producers. In my interviews, many described how they carefully studied, translated, and added annotations to texts in the cut-out inserts (Figure 15). As Yang Bo (2014) recalls:

The first ever piece I published in my life was a music review of Dead Can Dance, it was published in *Music Heaven*. Part of the material in that article was translated directly from the insert of one of their cut-out tapes I bought. In fact, as far as I know, in the group of so-called “music critics”, at least for myself and Qiu Dali, the texts from cut-out inserts were our key, or even the only, source of information for foreign music reviews. (Yang, 2014)

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Figure 15 Cut-out cassette inserts with annotations³⁵

³⁵ Photo provided by Zhang Jing.

In China's earliest popular music fan club, the "Audio & Video World fan club" which was initiated in 1989, cut-out album inserts were frequently photocopied and circulated via mails sent between club members. Lu Junyi, an early member of the club, told me in the interview:

We exchanged those regularly, he'd tell me what he had and I told him mine, and then we made copies and sent them to each other... basically we exchanged stuff like album inserts, and all kinds of information, because information was so hard to find back then, whoever owned something like this would be absolutely adored... it was not cheap to make photocopies back then. For example, I graduated in 1993, my salary for the first year was 150 yuan in total, and it cost 2 yuan to make each copy, so it was some cost for me. Therefore, each time after the photocopying was done, we would do the binding very carefully. That was how we did it, the exchange through mail linked you to friends who were living all around the country and became an important source of information. (Lu Junyi)

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 16 Photocopies of cut-out album inserts which circulated in early fan communities³⁶

Apart from their existence as plastic scrap and as defective records, I argue that the cut-outs bear a third dimension of materiality as "music info", that is, as an embodiment of cultural knowledge. Crucially, a distinction should be made between this dimension of materiality and the sonic materiality of musical sound, that is, the dominant conception of "music itself" in the field of music studies. While the dimension of "music info" could be closely intertwined with that of musical sound, its informative and at times taxonomic nature leads to a distinctive symbolic dimension which played a crucial role in the development of the cut-out wholesale and retail sectors. As in the cases of Lu Junyi and his penfriends who took the paper inserts as tangible carriers of "music info", cut-outs could be regarded as a "material extension" of knowledge just as they were the "material extension" of sound. In this kind of circumstances, the cut-outs *were* "music info", standing as both the referent and the reference in one entity. Arguably, this "unmediatedness" was a product of the unique historical conditions in 1990s China, and I

³⁶ Photos taken in Ma Ke's home in January, 2018.

will explore this point further in the later chapters. Here I present one quote from Song Jiang which powerfully illustrates this point:

To be honest, back then, the cheapest source of information had to be the cut-outs themselves. ... Think about it, most of the books that we read in the 80s which had made a great contribution (in introducing Western culture) were properly translated and published by official publishers, but only in the case of the cut-outs, we were facing directly the fucking first-hand source of information! Fuck, we just saw them out of nowhere, with no changing hands and no intermediaries, nothing in between.
(Song Jiang)

Having said this, I will also show the important roles different types of media played in shaping the regime of value in the cut-out retail sector and the politics of music taste in the “cut-out generation”. In the rest of this chapter, I first outline the mechanisms of “title selection” and cut-out “unit arrangement” in the wholesale sector which imposed a hierarchy of taste and value from the top down, I then proceed to demonstrate how this hierarchy was challenged and constantly restructured in the retail market, and I conclude with a description of the co-evolutionary relationship between the construction of the local system of “music info” and the development of the Chinese cut-out industry.

4.3.2 “Doing Titles”

Among all types of “bosses” in Heping, the cut-out wholesalers were commonly referred to as the bosses who “do titles” (“做品种”), as opposed to their suppliers, namely the bosses who “do *liao*” (“做料”). The story began when the bosses who “did titles” knew nothing about titles: as I learnt during my fieldwork, the first generation of Heping wholesalers mostly started as local motorcycle taxi drivers whose daily work was taking the out-of-town cut-out dealers from one scrap factory to another. As the business boomed, the drivers soon transformed their job of helping their passengers to buy cut-outs into the job of obstructing them from doing so: they formed an informal “trade union” to monopolize the goods from local scrap factories, and hired members of street gangs - the “rotten boys” (“烂仔”) as they were locally called - to threaten any potential competitors with assault and battery. This explains why in the embryonic period of the cut-out business, there existed barely any categorization of stock based on record titles in both the wholesale and retail sectors. Reportedly, in the early days, there were only two ways of pricing - selection or non-selection - for cut-out dealers who came to buy stock, in Chao Gai’s case “2.5 yuan per tape if you wanted to select, or 10 yuan per kilo without selection”. As a result, the

early cut-out wholesale business worked in a similar way as the retail business which always rewarded those with more knowledge of “titles”. As Guangzhou cut-out dealer Zhang Heng’s told me:

When I first went to Heping, you could still select stock by yourself, they hadn’t yet started hiring people to sort their stock professionally, and they only divided the cut-outs into large piles which were roughly categorized into a few classes, and we would go directly to the cheapest pile. Back then, you could frequently find (in the cheapest pile) top titles, for example Pink Floyd, David Bowie, all those big names which you could sell for a good price... later, those bosses in Heping came to realize that some top titles could earn them a lot more money than others, and then they hired “professionals” to help them sort their stock... that was when we started to find fewer and fewer mispriced gems in Heping, and soon after that, they began to sell what we called “pre-arranged units” of goods. (Zhang Heng)

The “professionals” whom Zhang Heng referred to were the group who Dai Zong termed as the “technicians”. This group consisted mainly of devoted music lovers who had trained themselves to be experts through cut-out consumption. In the formative years of the cut-out wholesale sector, a growing number of these possessors of knowledge were recruited as “technicians” who brought their expertise to Heping, working either full-time, settling in Heping to help first-hand wholesalers to “do titles”, or as occasional employees hired by lower-level resellers to assist stock selection in their visits to Heping. In my fieldwork, many avid cut-out consumers mentioned their partnerships with dealers with whom they became accidentally or proactively acquainted. These stories had one more thing in common: in most cases, the “technicians” weren’t paid by their employers with cash, but with (at least in part) cut-out records instead. For example, Sun Mengjin (2001, 8) vividly recalled one of his early “technician” experiences:

This time I went to help a Shanghai boss to select CDs. The payment was for me to take back one hundred cut-outs, whichever titles I wanted. I still remember when I became over-excited seeing thousands of death metal cut-outs in a dealer’s home. My excitement led directly to a great loss of money for the boss I worked for, but I just couldn’t control it as I knew there was not going to be another batch of death metal cut-outs with such great titles... I remember back then the CDs were all stored in local wholesalers’ own houses, hundreds of boxes of them piled up very high, each time the selection would take over ten hours. My friend, in those days I really endured all the hardships for those one hundred CDs! ... The time which I have spent selecting cut-outs would be enough for me to write ten books, but I really think no single book can be more breath-taking and fascinating than the book of cut-out selection. (Sun, 2001, 8)

Arriving with a more sophisticated categorical system of record titles, this new class of “technical” workers eventually sparked a revolution in the business model in the cut-out industry. By 2003 when “complete discs” began to arrive in unprecedented quantities, cut-out dealers who came to Heping were no longer allowed to select stock on their own. Instead, they found themselves dealing with a new mechanism of tie-in sale, known as cut-out “unit arrangement” (“配统货”), meaning that they could only purchase sealed boxes of cut-outs which were already “pre-arranged”. Typically, a pre-arranged cut-out “unit” - sometimes referred to as a *jian* (“件”) of goods - was a large storage box which consisted of nine thin paper boxes of cut-outs. Each thin box, referred to as a *tiao* (“条”) of cut-outs, could hold 25 standard CD jewel cases positioned endways, making one cut-out “unit” 225 records in total. In a pre-arranged unit, the nine *tiaos* of cut-outs were positioned three by three into three classes from top down. Visually, a pre-arranged cut-out unit itself displays a pyramid of value: the three *tiaos* at the top level contained cut-outs with the highest priced titles on the market, referred to as the “top goods” (“尖货”), the three *tiaos* at the bottom level held cut-outs with the rubbish titles, or the so-called “dross swill” (“糟泔”), and the three *tiaos* in the middle were those averagely priced. The art of arranging cut-out units required the careful handling of a balanced mix of top and dross titles as well as the precise calculation of each unit’s total retail value, as Yang Zhi told me in the interview:

When I did the arrangement myself, the proportion of “top goods” to “dross swill” never changed. This is because for each unit, we had to be very clear about how much money was to be made from the “top goods” it contained, and how much money to be made from the “dross swill” it contained, we had to really do the calculation because, otherwise, if you failed to make a good arrangement of titles, the retailers would sustain losses when they broke the unit down to sell them. To be honest, in the end the calculation was so accurate that we could almost give you the total amount of money you could retail each unit for... In the “complete disc” era, in each pre-arranged unit, there would usually be one *tiao* of pure “top goods” which could be sold for at least 40 to 50 yuan each, and one *tiao* of those worth 30 to 40 yuan. Basically each CD in the three *tiaos* at the top level should be worth an average price of 30 yuan, the middle level an average price of about 20 yuan, and the bottom level you could sell them for any price or even give them away. This was the proportion which I stuck to. Normally, our anticipation was that a retailer could earn back his basic cost after selling out the three *tiaos* at the top level, therefore his profit came from selling the middle and bottom level, which would depend on the quality of his customer groups and his own retail skills. (Yang Zhi)

Typically, the making of a cut-out unit consisted of two steps: sorting and mixing. When a batch of cut-outs passed the selection of “conditions”, the eligible ones would first be sorted into a number of subgroups according to the estimated retail price of their titles - this process of sorting was sometimes referred to as “dispersion” (“打散”). The next step was to mix a calculated proportion of cut-outs from each subgroup in order to get a well-composed “unit”. Gao Qiu’s interview offered a detailed description of the process of unit arrangement:

When I handled the arrangement process, ... I would disperse them into five different boxes: the first box was the “top goods”, those were the most valuable and the easiest to sell, the second box was the upper-middle level, the third box the average level, the fourth box was for the cut-outs which could only be used to fill in the bottom, and the last box was for the “large titles” in particular. In this way, I could make sure that the goods were very dispersed and evenly distributed. After finishing sorting the whole batch, we would do the calculation. For example, if we had 17 boxes of cut-outs in the first “top good” category, and I needed to arrange 24 units, I would do it according to this calculated proportion. In this way I could easily control the quality of the units by myself, so that I could offer cut-out units with different prices. Back then I sold units worth 3000, 2500, 2250, 2000, and 1800 yuan... At the prime of my business I sold 600 units a day, 225 CDs each. I hired two truck drivers to transport my goods from Heping to Xiashan, and they worked in shifts for the whole day. (Gao Qiu)

Gao Qiu’s story shows how the distribution of value was carefully steered in the wholesale sector towards a standardized pattern regulated from top down. From a wholesaler’s perspective, the invention of this mechanism of tie-in arrangement was a response to the general conditions of demand in the cut-out retail market, and a means to make sure that they could cash out the less popular titles at the same pace as the in-demand titles. The standardization of a product range also brought stability to the cut-out value chain: precise calculation of costs and earnings ensured that all parties participating in the trade could share a fair amount of profit, and this played a decisive role in the consolidation of business partnerships between different sectors of the cut-out business.



Figure 17 A former wholesaler introducing the composition of one cut-out “unit”³⁷

The arrangement of “units”, in fact, was not a rare practice, especially in business sectors where products come in a range of different price levels. However, what made China’s cut-out market special was that the price hierarchy among different titles was never a given fact. In other words, suppliers in the cut-out business invested no extra value in a “top good” than in a “dross swill”; the variation of products in the range, as manifested in their “titles”, was rather symbolically constructed. Therefore, by attaching a variation of price levels to different titles, the tie-in arrangement system in the cut-out wholesale sector also grouped them under different categories, thereby actively constructing a new regime of value where the exchangeability of commodities was defined according to a set of knowledge-based standards. In this regime, commercial value was generated primarily out of the symbolic differentiation of individual cut-out records - once treated all the same as indistinguishable substances of scrap materials - from one another. Thus, it was the

³⁷ Photo provided in the home of an interviewee, whose name I choose not to disclose, in December, 2017.

producers and intermediaries of knowledge who played a significant role in determining the rules and principles of commercial exchange in this regime.

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 18 Cassette album of *Metallica - Live Shit: Binge & Purge*³⁸

This explains why, following the inflow of employed “technicians”, the ability to recognize, distinguish, and evaluate music of different albums, bands, labels, and genres - or in other words, a well-rounded set of music taste supported by the mastering of a wide range of “music info” - gradually became the determining skill in the cut-out business. Eventually, the power of knowledge overwhelmed the geographical and social advantages which local dealers once relied on, and led to the collapse of Hepingers’ monopoly on cut-out supply as a number of former “technicians” successfully established themselves in the wholesale business. In the tales widely circulated in the cut-out business, the first “technician” who settled in Heping was a man known as Prof. Ye, a former university lecturer who entered the business after quitting his job to “jump into the sea”. Gao Qiu related one of the stories in which Prof. Ye beat the local competitors with his “professionalism”:

The most classic case was – this was also why later Prof. Ye rarely purchased stock from that source – when Metallica released that double live album in Mexico (Figure 18), there arrived a batch of Warner cassettes, in many boxes the whole *tiao* were only that one title, top quality! And then Big Lin (Ye’s employer) took Prof. Ye to check the goods, he asked Ye: “Look at that big skull on the cover, is that a good title?” Ye said, “This is rubbish! Worthless Disco stuff, don’t touch this.” So he cheated his boss, and then he returned to purchase the whole batch himself. Eventually, Ye sorted out more than 100 *jians* of that Metallica double cassettes along with some other titles, and he sold them to Beijing for 3000 yuan each, 3000 at least, the most expensive one for 4500. Even though the cost was high as such, all the dealers involved in the trade of that batch earned money. (Gao Qiu)

In fact, the development of the cut-out industry was deeply intertwined with the spread of “music info” from Heping to everyone involved in the business. In the early 1990s, in most

³⁸ Retrieved From: <https://www.discogs.com/Metallica-Live-Shit-Binge-Purge/release/3402529>

second-tier cities where cut-outs were all sold at 5 yuan each, neither the consumers nor the dealers themselves could identify many titles on display; consequently, few titles could stand out as “top goods”. The practice of cut-out unit arrangement, in this context, bore an important communicational and even educational function: by projecting a hierarchy of value onto the typology of record titles, the visual positioning of a pre-arranged “unit” let retailers know clearly which titles and what kinds of titles *should* be worth a high price. A “unit” was thus itself the intermediary of “music info” invested with the cultural tastes of its arrangers. Xu Ning, one of the dealers who managed to establish his business in Heping, proved this point in the interview:

Cut-out units were designed for the retailers who didn’t “know”. Previously they were selling them simply at random, but now you gave them a pre-arranged unit, then they would know: “oh, these were the good ones which should be priced higher than the rest”... This was how you helped others by using the advantage of your knowledge, which was also my only advantage in my competition with the local dealers: the local dealers only knew the trade, they didn’t know the goods, but we could recognize the titles. So in many cases we could grab a batch full of good titles at a very low cost, and then sell them for a high price, this was also because my partnered retailers could recognize and sell those good titles. (Xu Ning)

As the above cases illustrates, it was vital in the business that one “knew” (“懂”): a wholesaler had to “know” in order to evaluate and purchase goods from the scrap factories at a reasonable cost, a “technician” had to “know” in order to arrange a well-balanced cut-out unit, and a retailer had to “know” in order to sell his stock for the right price to the right group of people. The importance of being “in the know” existed in every part of the cut-out business chain as the full value of the “top goods” could only be cashed out with no missing link from above. So the cut-out value chain both facilitated and was at the same time driven by the flow of knowledge. Dai Zong proudly describes this process in the interview:

The group of “technicians” like us was a very important force which pushed the development of this business to a new level ...before we came none of them “knew”, gradually they “knew” during the process of doing business, even if they just saw the album covers and labels day by day, in the end they would “know”. (Dai Zong)

4.3.3 “Preaching” Rock

The spread of “music info” found its biggest classroom in the retail sector. Inheriting the pre-arranged units from Heping, cut-out retailers in different cities equipped themselves with a secondhand set of music taste, and passed it on to their consumers in the processes of chatting and bargaining. As I discovered, none of the cut-out retailers I interviewed had ever used a price tag - not to mention a price list - on their commodities on display; instead, the final sold price of a cut-out was always the result of verbal negotiation on the spot. This explains why the showcasing of knowledge on a title easily added to its value. Moreover, the knowledge of which genre/style a specific title belonged to also built links between one title and others in stock, which was arguably the most efficient way of emptying a customer’s pocket; as former cut-out vendor Zhang Shun summarized: “every title is connected in one way or another.” Zhu Tong, who started his cut-out retail career as a college student in Beijing, told me what he really “studied” in his college years:

You know, for those who came to buy the cut-outs, at least half of them, they “knew”. They would ask: “hi bro, do you have this?” They would name the titles or genres they wanted, so I needed to introduce and recommend all the related titles to them. This was basically like my major, this was the knowledge which I really learnt, you know? Because, to be honest, I was really fooling about all day in the university, but every day I dedicated myself to this. I loved it crazily, I bought all the music magazines and I collected newspaper clippings, I knew every band and every genre – I deserved a degree. (Zhu Tong)

In the cut-out years, enthusiastic cut-out retailers gradually earned themselves the reputation of “rock preachers” (“摇滚传教士”), spreading and improvising on the “music info” they had to the large crowd they encountered in their day-to-day retail practices, as Chao Gai, retailer from Beijing, proudly announced:

I am proud to be one of the rock preachers in China. After 1996 I had known about a lot of bands when selling cut-outs, I could even elaborate on some anecdotes about those bands. Most of the kids who came to buy cut-outs didn’t have an idea of what to listen to, sometimes a kid would ask me: “I want to listen to bands like New Pants³⁹, do you have any?” I would tell him: “Why are you listening to that shit? Try Ramones directly!”... I like selling things to people who need them. This is my respect for music! (Chao Gai)

³⁹ New Pants (新裤子), a Chinese pop punk band.

Not all titles, however, enjoyed the same level of promotion by the “rock preachers”. Within a pre-arranged cut-out unit, the destiny of the cut-outs sitting on the top level differed significantly from the bottom ones. Once entering the retail market, those marked as “top goods” would be singled out and occupy the most conspicuous position in a cut-out store, in which a whole wall of “top goods” lined up together was always the most eye-catching landscape. In fact, the “top goods” were usually the only ones able to display their full cover image in the limited space of a cut-out store/counter, with all the others having to huddle together endways in storage boxes, showing only their spine to the customers. On the cut-out retail market, almost no maximum price limit applied to the “top goods”, especially for those blessed with high rarity. In cut-out dealer Chai Jin’s words: “the final price had little to do with how much it cost me, but how eager you were to hear it.” Today, tales of terribly overpriced cut-outs are still widely circulated: a deeply notch-cut cassette of Jesus & Mary Chain’s *Darklands*, for example, was reportedly sold for over 200 yuan⁴⁰ in Beijing in the early 1990s.



Figure 19 A few “top good” titles collected by the author

By contrast, the destination of “dross swill” titles was usually shabby bargain bins in the “sale” section or simply being scattered on the ground. Usually, they were sold in bundles for a uniform price such as 3 for 10 yuan, and of course, few retailers would bother to introduce what those titles were about. As a result, a title’s market price itself naturally became an effective indicator of its artistic value. In my interview, Zhang Tianshi told me an interesting story of how a cut-out dealer justified the profit he earned to his customers:

⁴⁰ Taking the exchange rate of December 1995, 1 British Pound sterling equals 12.75 Chinese yuan.

His cassettes were always more expensive than others, for example, if there was a title others sold for 10 yuan, he would sell for 15. And he explained to me, in Cantonese, he said, “I am actually doing the job of selecting good titles for you, I am the intermediary of music, so I earn from you a bit more, does it make sense?” I thought, yes, it did make sense. (Zhang Tianshi)

Seen in this light, the cut-out pyramid was also a pyramid of knowledge dissemination, and the “technicians” who designed the composition of a cut-out unit at the very top had a substantial degree of power in terms of taste manipulation. This, as I learnt during fieldwork, was indeed a role they wanted to take. In my fieldwork, almost every handler of cut-out unit arrangement confirmed that music genre was a major criterion in their sorting of “titles”, for example, in Yang Zhi’s case:

When we did the sorting, we first put them under broad categories, classical and jazz as one category, rock music one category, world music one category, and so on, after this we would start arranging the units... the titles which no one recognized - such as the French albums - they were all dross. (Yang Zhi)

It soon appeared that a general pattern could be confidently identified showing a significant correlation between the generic characters of different cut-out titles and their market value. The hierarchy of value within a cut-out unit thus led naturally to a state of “genre discrimination” in the wholesale sector, this is illustrated by Xu Ning’s summary of the distribution of music styles in his unit arrangement:

-What kinds of titles were put in the middle level of your unit?

-Those would include blues, country music, and so on... In the bottom level were those we couldn’t recognize, including the “large titles”, rap music, dance music, and all the minority languages, for example French and German titles, and also some gospel titles. It was quite a wide range, sometime country music would also end up being “dross swill”, take Elvis Presley as an example... (Xu Ning)

In the wholesale sector, this pattern of genre discrimination remained largely stable throughout the cut-out years. Within the broad genres of rock and pop music, some styles clearly had a higher status than others: for example, while a heavy metal title would be treated as “top good” by even the most ignorant wholesaler in Heping, funk, country, and dance music would never appear in the top level of any pre-arranged cut-out unit. In particular, titles by musicians who sang in non-English languages were considered as the least valuable, in Dai Zong’s words:

Latin music, Italian music, no matter how big their names were, those would never ever make it into the good-quality class. (Dai Zong)

However, when I talked with the frontline cut-out dealers and consumers, the landscape of “top goods” and “dross swill” turned out to be far more dynamic and complicated than a pre-written script. It emerged from my fieldwork that, the generic definition of “top goods” was perhaps the biggest myth in the cut-out market. In reality, the criteria for “top goods” often tended to be very local, sometimes even situational. As I found out, significant variations in music taste had always existed between different provincial regions, and between cities of different sizes and levels of development. In other words, cut-out consumers tended to develop their own local tastes in music. For example, listeners from North China clearly had a much better appetite for heavy metal music than the Southerners who preferred more modern styles such as Britpop and indie rock. As Wu Song told me, when he and his band P.K.14 moved from Nanjing to Beijing to join the underground scene in *Shucun* (树村) where they met musicians from other provinces, he was surprised to find that they grew up listening to quite different kinds of cut-outs:

I don't know why, for example, it seemed that the batch of cut-outs he grew up listening to in Urumqi was completely different from what we listened to in Nanjing... I think the kind of music that was cherished in a city would definitely influence bands who grew up there. In Nanjing what we saw as “top” was quite different stuff, so I couldn't maintain a discussion on music with them for very long...” (Wu Song)

The shifting landscape of “top goods” was a result of both the indeterminate nature of cut-out supply and the active human agency of local cut-out consumers. While the readiness and reliability of any given record was always an unknown quantity, no single title was guaranteed to remain on the top forever. Expulsion from the “top good” category often occurred in the case of the so-called “large titles” (“大品种”), namely the titles which were too large in quantity to be sold for a decent price. In most cases, “large titles” were mainstream pop/rock releases which were far from undesirable on the market, yet their value was destined to be diluted by the huge quantities. For “technicians” in Heping, “large title” existed as a trans-genre category in the unit arrangement process: according to Dai Zong, a title which counted more than 2000 copies in a batch would be regarded as a “large title” and removed immediately from the top level. In the cut-out years, it was frequently the case that titles once highly sought after fell overnight from grace when their rarity no longer held. The complaint below by cut-out collector Cai Jing is a good example:

I had absolutely no fucking idea why there were so many of those titles at that time, in the end, King Crimson was like a plague! Oh, and also the band Tortoise, when I first spotted a Tortoise CD I was so surprised, I was like, “How come? This is impossible!” ...but later, fuck, mountains and mountains of Tortoise titles began to appear, and it was never ending... Do you know how much those King Crimson CDs were sold for in the end? 20 yuan each! But when I first discovered them, I paid over 100! (Cai Jing)

Such were the typical circumstances in which a “top good” was turned into “dross swill”. Yet, perhaps more often the transgression of boundaries was initiated from the other direction, that is, when a dross title jumped from the bargain bins into the “top good” gallery. On the retail market, despite the line between “top goods” and “dross swill” being drawn in Heping for every unit of cut-outs prior to its departure, new titles of “top goods” kept emerging from out of the dross, causing disturbance and disruption to Heping’s grand market plan. In reality, far from sitting on the top of the pyramid and watching their script unfold, the wholesalers had to frequently consult frontline retailers in order to adapt to the ever-changing conditions of the retail market.

In my fieldwork, many mentioned cases they had witnessed in which a “dross swill” was turned into a “top good”, and most of these stories shared a common setting: the process of “cut-out hunting”, literally “to *tao* cut-outs”. In Chinese, the notion of “*tao*” (“淘”) as a particular version of buying, that is, one that involves the work of selection and the joy of discovery, echoes Friedberg’s (1993, 57) discussion of the practice of shopping which “implies choice, empowerment in the relation between looking and having”. In the case of cut-out hunting, the joy of “*tao*” was typically generated in “gem picking” (“捡漏”), which meant successfully identifying an ought-to-be valuable title and purchasing it at a modest cost. In the cut-out retail market, caught in the gaps of an existing price hierarchy, a “gem” could be roughly defined as the “top goods” which were ignorantly put into the “dross swill” category, and thus mispriced. In this sense, the basic requirement of cut-out hunting was the possession of enough knowledge on “titles”. Song Jiang illustrated this process in the interview:

To be honest, today I no longer need to worry about whether or not I can afford this or that specific record, but for me the level of excitement is far less than in the cut-out days. Now even when I am in those world-famous record stores, I feel completely calm. But in those days when I was digging among the cut-outs, fuck, you never knew, you never knew what you would come across, and you never knew when you would pick up a big gem! For example, Oasis, when I first found an Oasis title in the

cut-outs, it was only a couple of months after the official release of their debut album in England. Apart from me, nobody in that store had any idea of who the fuck this band was! ...In this kind of situation, if there were friends coming along, you would whisper right away, “grab this, quick, you need to fucking grab this!” When the dealer still didn’t know, it cost 5 or 10 yuan, after half a year, it would turn to fucking 30 or 50!
(Song Jiang)

Song Jiang’s story reveals that cut-out hunting was always a battle of knowledge between the consumers and the retailers. As Sun Li neatly summarized, “if a dealer knows more than you, he can sell you anything; if not, then you can steal gems under his eyes.” This logic justifies the numerous stories of “cut-out learning” I have gathered during the fieldwork. As former cut-out retailer Tong Guan put it: “at the end of the day, this business was all about learning really.” Suo Chao, for example, told me a hilarious story of a Shenzhen retailer, nicknamed Da Ding, who was famous for an obsession to know what his customers had bought from him:

This guy used to buy in this huge bulk of Japanese discs which we kept returning to his store for, he was fucking hilarious... we would bargain with him: “20?” “10!” “Deal!” So we bought this record for 10 yuan, and the boss would ask: “bro, now can you tell me what this thing you bought really is?”... This dude didn’t know anything about this genre, and we kept picking gems in his place, loads of Japanese avant-garde discs! ... Every time he would wait till after we paid, and then: “now can you tell me about this?” My brother Kui would say: “this is experimental music!” ...it was always like this. (Suo Chao)

The process of “gem picking”, I argue, was the first step in the generative mechanisms of a highly localized and ever-changing price system, embedded in the rapidly growing body of “music info” on the cut-out market. Driven by the thrill (and low cost) of the chase for misplaced “gems”, cut-out consumers anxious to find loopholes in the price hierarchy set by Heping actively sought out genres that were unfavoured and titles that were unknown. When doing this, they created their own tastes in music which inevitably confronted the pre-arranged script imposed from the wholesale sector. In the end, behind the practice of “gem picking” was a conscious or yet-to-be-conscious reflexivity on the value of music by average cut-out consumers. Many, including Chai Jin I quote here, admitted that in fact they only got the chance to “hear a large amount of not-so-mainstream stuff from the ‘dross swill’”. Liu Tang, who eventually became a cut-out retailer himself, told me in the interview:

When I selected cut-outs, sometimes I intentionally selected those who they thought as “dross swill”... because in fact many of these dealers didn’t listen to music themselves, they only regarded the well-known ones as good ones, like Enya and Enigma for example, but they didn’t necessarily know rock music... therefore, many titles they thought as dross or unsaleable, I considered them as good titles. For example, back then nobody listened to electronic music, all electronic titles were “dross swill”, but I had loads of Depeche Mode cut-outs! (Liu Tang)

In this game of knowledge, the best “gem pickers” were always devoted fans who equipped themselves with a considerable amount of “music info” which they kept accumulating from every gem they picked. To investigate the circulation of the “music info” they gathered, I now proceed to another crucial mechanism of the cut-out pricing system, that is, the various forms of media which distributed “music info” within the cut-out market and subculture.

4.3.4 Cut-out Media

In *Club Culture*, Thornton (1995) differentiates between the spheres of what she terms micro, niche and mass media in a subcultural setting. Although arguably, “music info” in relation to Western rock had an “ever-increasing visibility in the Chinese print media” from the late 1980s on (Stokes, 2004, 37), it was the mid-and-late-1990s which saw the birth of China’s first generation of niche media producers becoming experts in popular music. Parallel to the nationwide expansion of the cut-out market, a dozen rock-themed zines, termed by Stokes (2004) as “critical pop magazines”, including *Music Heaven* (《音乐天堂》), *Popular Songs: Rock* (《通俗歌曲: 摇滚》), *I Love Rock 'N' Roll* (《我爱摇滚乐》), *Punk Time* (《朋克时代》), and *Random Sound* (《杂音》) emerged in different cities and attracted a wide readership among Chinese youth. In these zines, a number of writers who started as devoted cut-out listeners themselves - a group later known as cut-out “music critics” (“乐评人”) - began to publish regular reviews of the cut-out titles they discovered. Among them, the famous ones such as Yan Jun, Zhang Xiaozhou, Li Wan, and Qiu Dali also had their own music columns on established newspapers and magazines such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* (《南方都市报》), *Music Life News* (《音乐生活报》), and *Life Week* (《三联生活周刊》). In 1996, the book publishing industry also witnessed the first best-seller on Western rock music titled *Nirvana: The Life of Kurt Cobain* (《灿烂涅槃: 柯特科本的一生》) written by Hao Fang. The success of this title would then be followed by a trend towards rock music and

culture in the publishing world when collections of both cut-out music reviews and translations of Western classics came out in print. In parallel, a generation of Chinese radio DJs with a niche taste in music also emerged, dipping their toes into rock-themed radio shows broadcast by their local radio stations, the most famous of these including Beijing's Zhang Youdai, Shanghai's Sun Mengjin, Tianjin's Zhan Hua, and Nanjing's Wu Yuqing. In my interviews, most music critics and radio DJs recalled an established routine of "gem picking" in the cut-out years, and many proudly presented themselves as the first discoverers of legendary acts in rock history: Qiu Dali, for example, claimed the patents of introducing bands including Concrete Blonde and Primus to Chinese audiences, all of which were picked out by him from the "dross swill" and later rose to be "top goods" on the market. By providing fresh "music info" to both the "gem pickers" and cut-out dealers, the cut-out niche media created the most effective way to transform an unknown title into a "top good" through the invisible hand of supply and demand, as Lin Chong complained to me in the interview:

I think a large number of Chinese cut-out dealers were reckless with greed. They would change the price immediately according to, for example, the columns of "Modern Talking" and "Dialogue on Rock Music" published in *Audio and Video World*, as long as it was a title mentioned on the magazines, they all asked for a very high price... The more the magazine had covered it, the more interest people had in the title, the higher its price would be! (Lin Chong)

This explains the sense of urgency in Song Jiang's overjoyed whisper to his friends quoted earlier: "quick, you need to fucking grab this!" The fast reaction by the market to the "music info" released by the niche media made cut-out hunting a racing game between individual recognition and media exposure. In addition, also at work was what Thornton terms "micro media" in the subculture, which in this case were the words-of-mouth circulating on the market between both cut-out consumers and the "rock preachers". Dong Ping, host of a then hugely popular radio programme in Tianjin, told me his story:

When I started working on *China Musicboard*, we clearly had a powerful guiding function to the cut-out market: whichever musicians I mentioned in the programme, the sale of their cut-outs would immediately boom the next day. The funniest thing was, because you know back then we were required by the radio station to translate all the English names: band, musicians, albums, and songs, we had to translate them all into Chinese, only very few of them had been translated by magazines like *Audio & Video World*, and I did all the rest. Then we aired the programme, the next day, I found the whole cut-out market was using my translations!

Those cut-out vendors didn't know much English, neither did they know rock music, but they all listened to my radio show, because they had to know which musician I had newly introduced! ... And then, it didn't take long before I became the star of the cut-out market in Tianjin, because they all found out that it was Dong Ping who did this programme, and I loved to hang around in the cut-out stalls... Gradually I became the VIP of many cut-out stores, after which I no longer needed to buy any cut-outs I wanted: they would let me take the cassettes back home and make a copy for free, I just needed to return it the next day. They would even try to suggest to me: "hey, play this one next time, will you?" (Dong Ping)

Dong Ping's case vividly shows how the cut-out market itself functioned as a universe of micro media in the spread of locally produced "music info", in this case, the band names he translated into Chinese. More importantly, it also demonstrates how the niche media producers played the role of opinion leaders among the crowd, effectively shaping the rules in the regime of value of the retail market. This led eventually to the situation where the personal buying choices of the niche media producers became a new set of standards for the retail market, as in the case of Song Jiang, who was apparently also warmly welcomed in the local cut-out market:

I was definitely one of the leading customers... Do you know what troubled me back then? As soon as those dealers identified that this person was that Song Jiang, what they sold to others for 10 yuan, they would sell to me for 20! Therefore, in the end I was forced to establish a more intimate relationship with them, including Zhao Jun and the Gao brothers, we became close acquaintances. The situation became that, I told them, if you don't raise the price for me, in return I'll tell you which titles are the real "top goods". That's why later in the Beijing cut-out business, at least two big stores gave me the priority of first-hand selection, because they believed whatever I had selected must be a "top good", and then they would raise the price of those fucking titles I picked, you know? In the end it became this kind of strange alliance of interest. (Song Jiang)

4.3.5 "Too Much Good Music"

In the cut-out retail market, the hierarchy of value manifested in the pricing system was constantly contested, reshaped, and restructured from below by the niche media producers, micro media participants, and profit-seekers in the business, a group which included practically everyone involved in the cut-out retail market. Song Jiang, now a veteran in the new media industries, linked the bottom-up-ness of cut-out knowledge production to the trendy idea of "user generated content" in his field:

To speak in the terms we use now, it was largely facilitated by the users themselves, it conforms greatly to the spirit of the Internet, it was not a result of someone wanting to do the business, it was completely a fucking user behaviour! (Song Jiang)

Incessantly accumulating “music info” through the practice of cut-out hunting, devoted “gem pickers” trained themselves to become the very group from which Heping’s bosses hired their “technicians”. In this sense, the hierarchy of value in the cut-out retail market was simultaneously shaped by two opposite logics of music evaluation - and two divergent systems of music taste - held by different members from the same crowd of music lovers whose tastes were disseminated through different channels and towards different directions. On the one hand, those who became Heping’s “technicians” spread their knowledge of music downwards through the mechanisms of title sorting and unit arrangement, thereby setting the basic structure of the cut-out price system; on the other hand, those who engaged in day to day grassroots “music info” production and “gem picking” disseminated their knowledge from bottom up via the niche and micro media, effectively destructing and in the meantime enriching the existing rules of the market.

This was a “war” of tastes, and it was a war which made sense not only in a metaphorical sense: the battles over which titles ended up as “top goods” and which didn’t eventually shaped the distribution of value between the wholesale and retail sectors. By continuously constructing knowledge and digging out buried, unknown “gems”, participants of the retail market effectively created value out of what was previously deemed valueless; the frontline retailers, in this way, were able to grab a larger proportion of profit from the hands of the Heping wholesalers. The more autonomous and vibrant the process of grassroots knowledge construction was, the less money Heping could earn from the cut-out value chain. Dai Zong, for example, told me that he was shocked to discover that the non-English titles which he classified as “dross swill” in Heping were actually not cheap in the retail market:

Because later we ended up selecting stock in a formalized, fixed logic: classical, jazz, pop, rock... Non-English? Throw away! But they (the retailers) did it differently. In the stock they bought in were those French ones, German ones, Brazilian ones, they sold them well and they sold them really not cheap, 20 yuan each! I can’t even remember what those titles were, because I never listened to non-English ones back then... I mean, they could sell anything. Those we thought to be top, in the end we couldn’t sell them; those we treated as rubbish, they were selling them for high prices! (Dai Zong)

Yan Qing told the same story from a different perspective, introducing a cut-out retailer he knew who only bought in and sold titles which were considered dross:

This guy was a figure in Shanghai's cut-out history, his name was Wang Chun. His strategy was: he would buy in whatever titles that were cheap. That means, he bought in all the titles which other retailers didn't buy. And you can imagine the situation: those Metallica complete discs were of course already taken by others, what was left were all sorts of strange titles, nobody knew what they were, and nobody bought them. He bought them all in. But these, man, these were actually the most valuable goods, because, apart from Metallica, there is still so much good music in the world! ... For those consumers who "knew", his store was exactly the place to go. (Yan Qing)

The dynamic interactions between these two seemingly antagonistic systems of connoisseurship, I argue, was the engine that drove the perpetual expansion and revolution in the cut-out business. With each new batch of cut-outs which arrived, this contest of tastes and value continued, and was in itself also a process of knowledge exploration and accumulation. In the course of the 1990s, the landscape of "top goods" in the Chinese cut-out market went through a bizarre and intricate process of development. While it is difficult to summarize in a few sentences, at least one conclusion can be drawn: the map of Western rock had been extensively opened up in this decade, with more titles discovered, recognized, and treasured by Chinese cut-out listeners. Although some top titles did fall from grace due to unexpected amounts of supply, many more were dug out from the unknown and boosted into the "top goods" category. By the mid-2000s, the system of "top goods" had expanded from a combination of a few "big names" (such as Nirvana and Guns 'N Roses) and top genres (such as classical music and heavy metal) in the early 1990s, into a kaleidoscope of titles composed of a variety of celebrated music labels (such as *4AD* and *Earache*), niche genres (such as hardcore punk, death metal and industrial rock), and "big names" of each genre cherished by different taste groups as their own most valuable artists. These newly discovered titles became bricks in the edifice of "music info" slowly building up in the Chinese discourse, as Yan Jun (2001a, 6) poetically wrote:

That system of rock music which was never ever complete, is being filled up bit by bit with the so-called "dross swill"... restoring truth in numerous points of rupture and blankness. (Yan, 2001a, 6)

In 2000, Wang Xiaofeng and Zhang Lei co-edited a book titled *A Guide to Occidental Popular Music* (《欧美流行音乐指南》) with over 800 entries of artists. A more comprehensive encyclopaedia, *The Bible of Rock and Roll* (《摇滚圣经》) edited by Li

Hongjie, arrived two years later, marking a summary and milestone of the whole decade of digging for music and “music info”. In the preface he wrote for *The Bible of Rock and Roll*, former “rock preacher” Zuoxiao Zuzhou (2013, 1) states:

After buying this book, boys and girls will no longer need to hunt for the music that suits them, like we did back in those years, in the piles of cut-outs arriving in carriage after carriage. The book covers the origins of rock music, its genres and the most representative works of the most representative bands in each genre, it tells you everything about the records that are worth buying, you just need to follow the instructions and you will waste no time... In the end, it always goes back to this saying: there is too much good music in this world. (Zuoxiao, 2013, 1)

In fact, it was also the constant, inexhaustible emergence of “good music in this world” that invigorated the cut-out industry which had always been a highly profitable business throughout the 1990s. In the decade-long endeavour of knowledge production by the cut-out consumers, cut-out dealers at different levels of the business accumulated capital by exploiting each round of newly discovered “top goods”, and with the profit earned, they were then able to buy in new supplies where potential new sources of “top goods” were stored. In this process, cut-out dealers managed to tilt the balance between the scrap recycling business and their own business of “doing titles”, diverting a larger and larger proportion of scrap records into the cut-out value chain, instead of being dismantled in the scrap factories.

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 20 *A Guide to Occidental Popular Music*

The shifting dynamics of “top goods” also guaranteed the sustainability of growth of the business. Fuelled by the strange mechanisms of grassroots knowledge production, the Chinese cut-out industry which had not a single employee working on the production and marketing of culture, as conventionally defined, managed continuously to launch new products to the consumers and generate demands which didn’t exist before. In this process of capital accumulation, the cut-out industry significantly expanded, headed towards standardization and professionalization, and branched out into new kinds of business, including the resale of cut-out DVDs and cut-out video game discs. Development also took place at a more structural level: after 2000, it became common for one boss in Heping to

own a whole chain of businesses covering both scrap recycling and cut-out wholesale and retail, in order to achieve economy of scale. As a result, the access threshold to the cut-out business was also considerably increased. As Zhang Heng told me:

Later, I saw many wholesalers from the north coming in, apparently they had enough capital to drop into the business, and they would rent a place in Heping and stay there... Gradually, it became more and more difficult for me to get good titles in Heping. Eventually, if you wanted to buy the good ones, you had to invest more money. (Zhang Heng)

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have drawn a comprehensive picture of the cut-out business, presenting three different regimes of value by unpacking the entangled dimensions of materiality of the cut-outs. The cut-out record, as argued, is a cultural object bearing a unique “social life”, travelling through different sectors of the Chinese cut-out industry. In each phase of this journey, new possibilities were discovered and exploited from the materiality of the cut-out record, eventually transforming it from a bare “thing” into an object defined by certain “conditions” and “titles”. This process of discovery, or perhaps more precisely “rediscovery” considering their Western origin, of the cut-outs was based on a co-evolutionary mechanism of knowledge and value production in which both economic profit and cultural knowledge were constantly generated.

In the Chinese context, the cut-outs were defined by and evaluated according to the very body of knowledge established in the process of their circulation. This mechanism, I argue, was one in which dealers of cut-out records and producers of “music info” facilitated and delimited the work of each other. In the cut-out years, the system of “music info” and the cut-out business in China developed together in a co-evolutionary relationship, realized in what Song Jiang called a “strange alliance of interest” between speculators and connoisseurs, and between primitive entrepreneurship and the love of music. By extracting knowledge from the cut-out they selected and bought, cut-out consumers created new business opportunities for dealers embedded in the cut-out chain of value, who would in return bring more unknown titles to be discovered. For subcultural studies in general, this link between the cut-out business and the cut-out culture brings new insights and nuances to Thornton’s (1995, 23) thesis that “commercial culture and popular culture are not only inextricable in practice, but also in theory”. However, although the cut-out subculture was a consumption culture in nature, it was never only a culture of consumption. In the next chapter, I will illustrate the different kinds of subcultural practices Chinese cut-out

consumers engaged with the “objective possibilities” (Willis, 2000) of the cut-outs in the 1990s, arguing that they bore the spirit of what Willis terms “profane” creativity.

5 Dialectics of Profanity: Sensuousness, Creativity, and Cut-out Consumption

5.1 Introduction

Having illustrated the politics of materiality and value in the cut-out industry, I now turn to the ways in which Chinese consumers engaged with the cut-out records, looking primarily at the dialectics of “profanity” (Willis, 1978) which defined these practices of cut-out consumption. As I will demonstrate, in the context of 1990s China, the “cut-out generation” interacted with the cut-outs in an unprefigurable, sensuous and creative manner, and made profound affective meanings out of their “objective possibilities”.

In this chapter, I first introduce the unique practice of cut-out repairing which demonstrates the essentially sensuous nature of cut-out consumption. I then offer a historical outline of the conditions of “music info” in 1990s China, which provided the context that defined the profanity of the cut-outs. I go on to demonstrate how the “cut-out generation” made sense of the cut-outs through sight and hearing, how they made their own music by means of cut-outs “tape-stripping”, how they constructed a local system of music knowledge through “learning-by-listening”, and how they established a critical and affective genre of cut-out music criticism. In each section, I present empirical data to show the different dimensions of sensuous meaningfulness attached to the cut-outs.

5.2 Cut-out Repairing

While Chinese consumers’ other ways of engagement with the cut-outs – including record digging, music listening, and “tape-stripping” - could all be observed in music subcultures elsewhere, manual repairing was a set of rituals performed only by the “cut-out generation”. A unique way of coping with the defective materiality of the cut-outs, cut-out repairing defined the relationship between the cut-outs and their consumers as a primarily sensuous one. In this section, I will demonstrate how, through the process of cut-out repairing, the “material extensions” of music on the cut-outs generated profound sensuous meaningfulness for their human users.

Although some retailers offered cut-out repairing as a charged or free service, almost all my interviewees reported that they usually repaired the cut-outs they bought by themselves. This was not only because unrepaired cut-outs were normally sold for a lower price, but also largely due to the fact that the process of repairing itself was often

accompanied by enjoyment and pleasure. The sense of achievement after painstakingly solving a problem, or after successfully advancing one's repairing skills, was frequently mentioned by my interviewees as an important factor in making their cut-out consumption a memorable experience.



Figure 21 Cut-out repairing⁴¹

The methods and skills of cut-out repairing varied according to the different types of defectiveness a cut-out might suffer from, and at times required a degree of creativity and intelligence. For cassettes whose tape was cut broken, repairing meant opening the cassette shell, with or without a screwdriver, and splicing the broken ends of the tape together with pieces of sellotape cut into suitable tiny shapes. For some cassettes whose shells were severely damaged, repairing often meant replacing the broken shell with a complete one. For CDs with physical wounds that affected their readability, the process of repairing included clearing the tiny plastic pieces left by the wound and then rubbing the surface flat, which was usually achieved through burning with a lighter or carving with a knife or a drill bit. In the interview, Gongsun Sheng described to me the bustling atmosphere of cut-out repairing in his local cut-out “circle” in Lanzhou:

I always repaired the cassettes by myself... for several times we almost

⁴¹ Photos provided by Shen Liuzhen.

ran a competition for cassette repairing, because everyone thought he/she was the best repairer, you know? Me, I remember, a tweezer, scissors, and sellotape, these were all I needed! Everyone had their own special techniques... We would exchange skills on how to do it occasionally. For example, later, when hole-drilled CDs appeared, how should you repair a hole-drilled CD? It was not until I came to Beijing that I found out that those guys in *Wudaokou* were using a more advanced method to repair hole-drilled CDs: they used the drill bit! It was the perfect method because the hardness and size of the drill bit fitted the hole quite well, and you only needed to turn it for a couple of rounds, all done. You wouldn't need a knife or anything like that. (Gongsun Sheng)

A self-taught, collectively developed set of skills, cut-out repairing had evolved in the 1990s into a kind of specialty in the cut-out market, if not yet a form of art. Following the expansion of the cut-out business into more and more global territories, new technical challenges kept emerging - for example, the opening and restoring of American-produced cassette shells which were sealed without screws, or the side effects of burning a CD which resulted in generating more cracks in the future. These problems were all eventually solved by collective intelligence. Throughout the 1990s, cut-out repairing existed as a crucial component of cut-out consumption, and became closely intertwined with the act of music listening. Yet the fact that it took place in the clearly “pre-music” stage highlighted the essential mediating role performed by the material storage medium of recorded music. Looked at from another angle, the successful repairing of a broken cut-out also signified the completion of its transformation from a “thing” to a functional music object. From the perspective of the listeners, this unique additional procedure also invested more agency of the listener into the practice of music consumption. As a number of interviewees recalled, apart from physically repairing the cut-outs, they had also tried to alter the sonic content they stored especially in the case of cut-out cassettes. As Ruan Xiaoqi, for example, told me with regret:

The cassette was something different, because it was like... like a material item, with a lot of things you could do to it, for example, repairing a cut-out cassette, or even replacing the shell... back then, I had too many cassettes, so when I felt that there was a certain part of the music in a record that I didn't like, I would erase that part and record something else on it. Now I feel some regret, because although I wasn't into those kinds of music back then, I'd like to go back to listen to some of them now, for example, I used to erase Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* just because I couldn't get what the hell was going on, it was such a shame! (Ruan Xiaoqi)

This wilful behaviour of “doing something” to both the material and sonic properties of a cut-out cassette exemplifies Willis’ thesis on the profanity of cultural practice which plays out essentially through sensuous interactions. Arguably, behind this common practice there were a number of distinctive historical conditions pertaining to 1990s China: the fact that most cut-out titles came as mysteries unknown and unknowable, the extreme abundance of cheap dross titles on the market, and perhaps most importantly, an already established image of the cut-out record as something defective and unfinished, like a cold-out engine waiting for its human driver to wake it up through creative labour. Unlike the brand new record taken directly from the shelf in the Western context, in 1990s China, there was no such a thing as a whole, complete cut-out record. Jin Dajian, for example, reflected on this point in the interview:

Because no matter how good it was, it had already been damaged, there were always some flaws on its appearance... therefore we had this assumption beforehand that it was a damaged object, and, because so often we needed to repair it or to replace a shell, or something like that, we never had this (obsession) about whether or not it was the original packaging, or how perfect the condition should be, we never had these concepts back then. (Jin Dajian)

As I discovered, this defective materiality taken for granted by the “cut-out generation” eventually became embedded in their own collective cultural sensibilities. During fieldwork, one of the big surprises for me was that a large number of “cut-out youth” didn’t regard the defectiveness of a cut-out record as aesthetically unpleasant, rather, some of them even identified within the cut a degree of beauty. This aesthetic appreciation of defectiveness was certainly not a given trait, but learnt and cultivated in their everyday sensuous engagement with the cut-outs. In my interviews, some claimed that although initially they felt that the wounds on the records were displeasing, they gradually learnt to accept them; a few others recalled that although they tried to cover the notch cut on the cassette with tape or fabric in the early days, they eventually stopped doing this as cut-outs flooded into their cities in greater and greater quantities; more interviewees told me that, in the end, they found the cut an appealing and relatable symbol which had something to do with their own life, as Lu Da told me:

Initially, I felt it was a mystery, later this very cut evolved into something symbolic, something iconic, it was like, fuck, it was only cool with this cut! Because back then you didn’t have anything else to choose from, I remember when the concept of the “complete disc” first emerged, I felt rather a sense of loss. Of course back then there were various kinds of

approaches to make up for it, the one that I hated the most was to fill the cut up with glue, I felt that they were fucking mad to have done that...
(Lu Da)

Gongsun Sheng spoke in a similar way about how the defective materiality of the cut-outs eventually left an affective mark on him:

Back then the music that was stored in the cut-outs, I once thought, was more important to me, I didn't think too much about the cut itself. Yet after such a long time, I find that I've always felt the disc actually looked better with a cut on it, and then I realized that this aspect was actually more meaningful to me... now I know that this material part, the part that was cut-out, the part which made me think it looked better, was an imperceptible influence from back then. (Gongsun Sheng)

Gongsun Sheng's words illustrated the long-term, unconscious influence which the cut-outs imposed on him through daily sensuous engagement. This influence is a good example of Willis' point on the dialectical interactions between agency and materiality, in which the latter actively affects and shapes the former: the objective possibilities of the cultural item "set limits for, as well as enabled particular kinds of human meaning-making in specific kinds of sensuous interaction" (Willis, 2000, 25), thereby cultivating and developing a specific structure of feeling parallel to its own material characteristics. While the practice of manual repairing vividly demonstrates the sensuous nature of cut-out consumption, the quality of sensuousness is only a part of the profound profanity which defined the cut-out subculture. In the rest of the chapter, I will illustrate a series of more intricate dialectics of this profanity which, as I will argue, was deeply rooted in the historical circumstances of 1990s China.

5.3 "Music Info": A Brief History

A material object's "objective possibilities", as Willis points out, never arise merely from within the object itself. The profanity of the cut-outs, I argue, was historically invested as a result of the absence of a system of relevant "music info" - defined as the cultural information corresponding to the music on the cut-outs - in 1990s mainland China. As mentioned in Chapter 4, "music info" covers a wide range of data and information, including details of the album, artist, music label, and the history and typology of different musical genres and scenes. The knowledge of "music info" operates at a cognitive level of reasoning parallel to the sensuous process of listening. On seeing a cut-out record and hearing its music, the equipment of relevant "music info" enables a person to associate the

image and sound to related cultural references and meanings, on which basis he or she can understand, appreciate and make aesthetic judgements on the music in question. In this sense, we can follow Genette (1997) by considering “music info” as a system of “paratext” surrounding their “main texts”, namely the cut-out music recordings themselves. Crucially, paratexts form a “cognitive frame” (Berlatsky, 2009) which functions to effectively shape the public’s reception and interpretation of the “main texts”. In 1990s mainland China, Genette’s paratext theory was to some extent proved by contradiction: it was the absence of relevant “music info” on Western music that gave rise to the unique situation where most of the in-flooding cut-out records were engaged with by local consumers who were not equipped with a standard “cognitive frame”.

By the time the cut-outs became commonly available in most second-tier cities, “rock” as a music style was no longer a new discourse in mainland China, yet both the quantity and quality of information on Western popular music were still strictly limited. Before the widespread emergence of music zines in the mid-1990s, “music info” of this kind was only available from a handful of sources. The first major inflow of “music info” concerning Western rock was to some extent incidental. During the “high culture fever” of the 1980s, two translated monographs on the subject of American history - *The Glory and the Dream* (《光荣与梦想》) by William Manchester, and *Gates of Eden* (《伊甸园之门》) by Morris Dickstein - stood out as a surprising treasury of Western “music info”. As the earliest translated works on 1960s-and-70s American history, both books became extremely popular among college students, but they meant something even more special to music lovers who read through every line in order to dig out every single band name associated with the label “rock”. For those who would become the “cut-out generation”, these two translated monographs served as the most informative index book in the pre-cut-out years, from which they discovered names such as the Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin and Bob Dylan. While Manchester and Dickstein were by no means the best introducers of rock, they accidentally laid the first bricks for the discourse of “music info” in mainland China.

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 22 Early imported version of *The Glory and the Dream* and *Gates of Eden*

The first journalistic medium to feature Western popular “music info” was the newspaper *Reference News* (《参考消息》) published by the state-run *Xinhua News Agency*, the only official channel for foreign news articles in China. Made available to the general public (formerly only to party cadres) in 1985, *Reference News* would feature a small number of translated cultural editorials selected from foreign media which occasionally touched on the subject of popular music. Shortly after, the year 1987 saw the birth of mainland China’s first popular music magazine, *Audio & Video World* (《音像世界》), established by the state-owned *China Record Corporation*. In 1989, the magazine started to feature articles introducing popular music from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West. While “music info” of similar types would also appear sporadically in some evening papers and weekly magazines, *Audio & Video World* remained the only Chinese magazine providing Western-pop-related information on a regular basis until the mid-1990s.

The discourse of Western rock witnessed its first round of steady growth following Deng’s Southern tour in 1992. From 1992 to 1994, a serial of articles titled “dialogue on rock music” (“对话摇滚乐”) by Wang Xiaofeng and Zhang Lei was published in *Audio & Video World*. Bringing terms such as “psychedelic rock” and “heavy metal” into the Chinese context for the first time, the column quickly became the most influential introductory text on Western rock in early-1990s China. In parallel, China’s first rock-themed radio programme, titled *New Music Magazine* (《新音乐杂志》), was established on Beijing No.1 radio channel in early 1993 and started introducing Western rock songs, largely from DJ Zhang Youdai’s personal record collection. Still, this wealth and accuracy of rock “music info” was far from enough once young people became aware of the existence of the genre as a whole. For example, in my interviews, looking back to his early readings on Western music, Wu Yong regretfully told me:

Just now you asked me when did I started listening to rock music in a systematic way, I tell you: in China you didn’t have a system at all. Back then you thought that you had found a system, which was those articles published in *Audio & Video World*, you thought that “dialogue on rock music” was a system, actually they were just misguiding you. (Wu Yong)

Part of Wu Yong’s complaint relates to the form of so-called “edited translations” (编译) in which “music info” was typically presented in *Reference News* and *Audio & Video World*. As a normal procedure, Chinese editors would find articles from music magazines including *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, translate selected parts, and organize them into a new

introductory piece. One of the problems regarding translation lay in the fact that the editors normally didn't include the original English texts in the articles. This issue became especially outstanding when the first "encyclopaedia" of rock music, *An Overview of Rock Music of the World* (《世界摇滚乐大观》) edited by Huang Liaoyuan, was published in 1992. As Li Kui told me in the interview:

...at that time there was simply no way for you to get anything from that book, because all the names were translated awkwardly into Chinese, you totally couldn't find out who was who. (Li Kui)

In addition to the formidable language barrier, the real problem of "edited translation" was arguably that it was essentially a transportation of secondhand information. In the pre-cut-out years, in an *Audio & Video World* article on a Western musician, it was typically the case that both the readers and the writers themselves had never actually listened to the music that was introduced. Therefore, for most music lovers at that time, Western rock existed more as texts than as sound. In Song Jiang's words:

At that time, many of us first perceived the existence of a relatively different type of music from written texts, we didn't start by hearing the music first. (Song Jiang)

In this sense, the establishment of an embryonic discourse of Western "music info" preceded the general availability of Western music itself in mainland China: before they could purchase and listen to the cut-out records, Chinese readers had been able to absorb bits and pieces of "music info" which built up their conception and expectation of Western rock as "a relatively different type of music". Thus in mainland China, the system of "music info" and its corresponding market of music records had historically been separate from one another. This mismatch was turned completely upside down into another equally significant one by the arrival of the cut-outs: the landing of thousands of tons of cassettes/CDs brought a sharp increase in the supply of music records without the availability of related "music info". The establishment of a nationwide cut-out market thus marked the moment when the availability of "main texts", namely cut-out records, significantly surpassed their "paratexts". Every month, whole catalog of music labels poured in from thousands of freight containers each with countless unfamiliar artists who arrived simply too fast to be properly introduced. In the late 1990s, the unsatisfied reader who had to imagine the actual sound of band names he read about in *Audio & Video World* had become the confused listener who had to guess the background information of music

records he bought on the cut-out market. The typical first-time experiences at a cut-out stall, as frequently mentioned in the interviews, were filled with confusion, frustration and shock as a response to the realization of one's own ignorance on music. Guan Sheng, for example, described his first cut-out purchasing experience:

The first time I saw the cut-outs was in Beijing, probably in 1992... there was a street near *Longfu Temple*, if you walked into that street and went straight ahead, you would find a small house on the left hand side, north of the road, that house had a window, and from the outside you could see numerous colourful Western cut-out tapes displayed one by one...so I stopped by, approached the window to look closely: fuck, I couldn't recognize even a single one! (Guan Sheng)

Similarly, as Wu Song admitted to me in the interview:

You know what? In fact, I bought these records not because they were famous or I had known them before, but rather because I didn't know who those bands were. It was basically out of curiosity. (Wu Song)

It was in this sense, I argue, that Chinese cut-out consumers' exploration of the world of Western rock resembled the ancient tale of the blind man and the elephant. This resemblance is two-fold: on the one hand, discoveries were never achieved in a fully systematic way, every cut-out consumer's conception of Western rock was largely determined by what he or she individually came across, through "gem picking" on the cut-out market, which usually turned out to be a mere tip of the iceberg; on the other hand, without the knowledge of a corresponding system of "music info", a listener in the seas of cut-outs was just like a blind man faced with a giant elephant, the only way to make sense of it was by touching. Gongsun Sheng, for example, emphasized to me the intuitiveness of cut-out hunting in the interview:

-But you would select the titles?

-We did select for sure, but our sort of selecting was to a large extent based on intuition, you know? I mean, you had no idea what it was, in a way it felt right, more or less, so you would purchase it and take it home. (Gongsun Sheng)

This, I argue, is where the point of sensuous meaningfulness comes in. In fact, it was the very shortage and obscurity of "music info" that made the cut-out records remain, in Willis' (2000, 26) term, yet "uncolonized" in the Chinese context, with their meanings largely unstable and open, ready to "interrupt the cultural stillness of received forms". A

listener's relationship with a cut-out record in this context tended to be unprepared and unrefigurable, and more open to liminal and alternative ways of meaning-making. In the following, I will illustrate this argument by presenting a variety of ways - including seeing, listening, learning, and copying - in which the "cut-out generation" produced sensuous meaningfulness out of the images, materials, and sounds of the cut-outs they engaged with.

5.4 Visual and Sonic Sense-making

While the appreciation of cover art has always been an essential part of modern music consumption, what distinguished seeing in the cut-out context was that it happened at a more immediate, unprepared level, and before the purchase. In my interviews, "looking at the covers" ("看封面") was widely acknowledged to be the most common strategy of cut-out hunting, as Yan Qing explained to me in the interview:

In the old days, cut-out hunting was equal to looking at images within the seas of records, and then you would have a more intuitive, primarily visual kind of resonance, isn't it? You were like, "hmmm, this one is interesting", and you would have the desire to listen to it, and then you put it in the machine and you listened, "wow, it really is interesting!" You will never have that excitement and orgasm kind of experience now. That was what mp3 has killed for us, and that was the source of basically all my joy and pleasure back then. To be honest, for all those bands, such as Massive Attack for example, I knew them all from the cover art! First you saw, then you were like, "oh it sounds nice", and then you looked it up, and you realized, "oh my god, they are a big act indeed!" (Yan Qing)

Yan Qing's description presents a clear sequence of actions in the process of cut-out consumption: seeing went first, listening second, and the last came the acts of reading, learning and knowing. Others also mentioned that, when looking at the cover art of a cut-out record, their attention would first and primarily fall on the images rather than the band names and album titles which were mostly printed in English. In this sense, the role played by text and language was significantly downgraded below that of more immediate sensuous interactions. This point was confirmed by Song Jiang who added in the interview that "trial listening" ("试听") was another means to determine whether or not an unfamiliar record was worth buying:

Back then there really were loads of stuff which I was totally ignorant of or never listened to before. So one way was to look at the cover art... this was based on the way they looked. The other way was to listen: sometimes you just plugged in the cable and gave it a brief listen, everybody did that back then. Since the listening decks were always

crowded, sometimes I would bring my own Walkman. When I found a cut-out that looked interesting, I would take out my machine, plug in the cable, and give it a listen. If it sounded right I'd take it, if not, pass. I could spend my whole day in the store just doing that. You felt exhausted at that time, but that was a lot of fun. (Song Jiang)

The visual and sonic engagements prior to one's purchase of a cut-out record, I argue, stand as a distinctively "bodily" kind of music consumption – a more active attempt to make sense of a cut-out record rather than the passive use of it. The practices of "looking at the covers" and "trial listening" on the site of the cut-out market were clearly distinguished from the appreciation of purchased records at home which took place in a relaxed, aesthetic, and immersive manner, take Yan Qing's example:

I would make a pot of *Tieguanyin* and light a *Zhongnanhai*⁴², when the room was filled with smoke, I would start listening. ...I would be half-lying, it had to be the most comfortable position. When I stretched out my arm, I made sure that I would be able to reach the CD player. So my routine was: to select half a box of CDs, put them down, lean myself comfortably, reach out when I needed to change the disc. I had a tea table with my cup of tea on my side, then I had a sip, took a smoke, and started looking at the album cover. That was the most smooth and peaceful thing to do. (Yan Qing)

This distinction echoes the thesis which Hirschkind (2006, 25; 8) raised in *The Ethical Soundscape* on two types of listening: one is listening as a "cognitive act" which takes "aural comprehension and aural aesthetics" as its core, and the other is listening which "recruits the body in its entirety". Hirschkind (2006, 218) traces this distinction back to the philosophical debates on phonocentrism, which problematize the relationship between the acts of listening and of understanding. In terms of the sense of hearing, while the former grasps the signifying dimension of music as language: its rhythms, melodies, harmonies, etc., the latter deals with the highly sensuous, non-signifying dimension of hearing which addresses music as sound itself. During fieldwork, from time to time I heard people describing their cut-out listening experiences in non-musical terms which referred to the immediate immersion of the body as a whole. This kind of experience stood more accurately as a process of music "hearing" rather than "listening", it focused on the moment when the human body confronted waves of sound, and on the immediate affective

⁴² *Tieguanyin* is a premium kind of Chinese oolong Tea and *Zhongnanhai* is a Chinese cigarette brand.

reactions which were triggered. For example, Suo Chao talked about his first occasion of listening to Nirvana:

-...My deepest impression of the moment when the impact force of rock music opened me up right away was that time when I went to his home and he played to me a song by Nirvana.

-Which song was it?

-”Rape Me”, from *In Utero*. I knew completely nothing about it at that time, but I just felt that the whole thing immediately knocked me down, fuck, that feeling was really... it kicked me down right away! I was like: “wow, this is so fucking powerful!” Actually his cassette player was a very low-quality one, it had only one speaker, you know? But the volume was turned really loud. I felt like, fuck, it was like a very strong force that blew me down, you know? It was that kind of feeling. Then I was like: “fuck, what is this?” I just felt that this thing had a power that was really overwhelming, you know? (Suo Chao)

It was telling that, when describing his first impression of the song “Rape Me”, Suo Chao, now a professional drummer who had played in many bands, referred not to the specific instrumentation, composition, or lyrics of the song - which he did mention elsewhere in our interview - but only the overwhelming physical impact of the sound waves. For him, the “impact force” of rock was primarily a bodily experience during which what played out from the cut-outs was first felt as sound before it was recognized as music. It was experienced as strongly by the ears as by the whole body, engaged with at a more instantaneous and straightforward “pre-music” stage before the sound was decoded into musical language. Similarly, Ruan Xiaoqi referred directly to the novel stereo effect as his first impression of Jimi Hendrix:

I usually listened with earphones in my dorm room. I remember when I first started listening to Jimi, it was the double album *Electric Ladyland*. You know at one point it had that special sound effect which arrived earlier to your left ear and then bounced to the right... Yes, that feeling I can still recall after so many years. (Ruan Xiaoqi)

In the cut-out years, music consumption at this bodily level played an unprecedentedly significant role, precisely because the cut-outs arrived in China without a stable “cognitive frame”. In the early days of the cut-out market when dealers knew no more than their consumers about what they were selling, it was rare that one could pronounce a band name or album title in English, not to mention the lyrical meanings and cultural references involved. As a result, sight and hearing came into prominence in this “uncolonized”

situation (Willis, 2000, 26) and defined the unique sense of profanity in cut-out consumption. In fact, during fieldwork, the most common way used by my interviewees to refer to an album title was still to describe its cover image; reportedly, the visual and sonic “first impressions” of cut-out records also became the primary strategy for the “intuitive” method of cut-out hunting which Gongsun Sheng described. Examples abound in my interviews when people told me stories of how visual images persuaded them to buy a specific record and went on to shape their listening and interpretation of it. These kinds of stories happened not only to consumers hunting at the cut-out stalls, but also to cut-out retailers in the process of new stock selection. Here’s Lin Chong’s story about how he discovered the music of British band The The through their album cover (Figure 23):

In 1995 I went to Chaoyang and came across the debut album of The The released by label 4AD, it was called *Burning Blue Soul*. At that time nobody had ever introduced this band before, but the moment I saw its cover art I felt its impact force, because it was a very abstract and very neurotic portrait of a man, and the image was extremely colourful. I was sure that the music inside must be very imaginative, and later when I listened to it, I became just overexcited. (Lin Chong)

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Figure 23 Album cover of *Burning Blue Soul* by The The⁴³

In addition to the cover art, a similar market-guiding role was also played by the visual images of the band members themselves, especially their dress code and hair styles. One typical example was the photographs of long-haired male musicians printed on heavy metal albums. Ruan Xiaoe, a former factory worker from Nanjing, recalled his first encounter with the cut-outs when a photo of glam metal band Mötley Crüe caught him:

...I went there to see a film with my fellow workers, and there was a row of shops over there, so we went to have a look before the film started. I was so excited when I first saw them, they were all foreign, imported cassettes, and some of the cover images immediately attracted me. I was very young back then, and liked the long hair, leather jacket kind of things, that left me the deepest impression. After the film, I couldn’t

⁴³ Retrieved from: <https://www.discogs.com/The-The-Burning-Blue-Soul/release/1076715>

wait, and I rushed there, and bought that cassette. (Ruan Xiaoer)

In early 1990s China, the showy images of the so-called “hair metal” bands like Mötley Crüe (Figure 24) and Guns N' Roses became a craze among cut-out consumers. While the gaudy glam aesthetic had already gone out of date in the West, for the “cut-out generation”, the visual impact of the long-haired metal gods in flashy leather jackets corresponded with the striking sonic effects of distorted electric guitars and harsh vocals, both brand-new sensations. Eventually, the so-called “big long-hairs” (“大长毛”) became recognized as a marker for heavy metal releases on the cut-out market. This visually-based practice of “gem picking” persisted throughout the cut-out period and was later applied to a wider range of “top” genres beyond metal. However, while each musical style does tend to have a distinctive aesthetic of design, the visual appearance of a cut-out record couldn't always guarantee the music inside. At times, the way a cut-out looked simply did not correspond to how it sounded. Qiong Ying, for example, admitted in the interview that her visually-based predictions frequently failed:

...you never knew, sometimes it looked like what you expected but it turned out not, then your money was wasted. (Qiong Ying)

In Hua Rong's case, the photography of long-haired, leather-jacket rockers on the cover of a cut-out record he bought didn't bring heavy metal as it was supposed to, but gave him punk instead (Figure 24):

The first punk cut-out I bought was a Ramones cassette, but I didn't know they were a punk band, I bought it because I thought it was heavy metal, because of how they looked, you know... (Hua Rong)

In my interviews, these kinds of hilarious mismatches and failed predictions were countless, eventually establishing the stereotype of the cut-out market as a world full of uncertainty and unreliability, where one's gain at the end of each round of hunting was determined mainly by luck. Wang Xiaofeng (2006, 110) evokes a vivid analogy:

It was like when we go out to sea for fishing, you never knew which group of fish you would come across once your net was cast: you had to live with what you got. (Wang, 2006, 110)

To summarize, through examples above, I have shown how the “cut-out generation” made sense of the cut-outs through sound and image in their practice of consumption. Prior to meaning-making processes at the cognitive and linguistic levels, they first arrived at a

more immediate sensuous meaningfulness through which the cut-outs were felt and imagined in a lived sense. While these feelings and imaginings tended to be less reliable than the specific texts of “music info”, as I will illustrate in later sections, their uncertainties generated new possibilities of engagement and meaning-making and thereby achieved a special sense of creativity.

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 24 Album cover of *Girls Girls Girls* by Mötley Crüe (left) and *Ramones* by Ramones (right)⁴⁴

5.5 “Learning-by-Listening”

In addition to the widespread experiences of the bodily kind of hearing described above, the majority of cut-out music listening experiences also proceeded at a cognitive level, relying upon one’s knowledge base of “music info” for points of reference. As I will demonstrate in this section, the profanity of cut-out listening not only manifested itself directly as a shock felt by the body but was also played out in a subtle politics of sensuous knowledge building. This politics gave birth to a special practice of “learning-by-listening” through which the “cut-out generation” produced their own bodies of music knowledge which were built up in a rather sensuous way by meanings generated through unrefractable confrontations with new sounds and symbols.

Music listening, for the Chinese “cut-out generation”, was inherently tied to knowledge. As shown in Chapter 4, this link had its roots in the mechanisms of the cut-out business in which one’s ability to “know” was closely associated to his/her position in the different regimes of value in the cut-out industry. As consumers and at times retailers, the “cut-out generation” engaged actively in the battles of tastes and knowledge, effectively shaping the conditions of the market from bottom up. The key to this battle was the accumulation of “music info” through ceaseless listening. Song Jiang proudly explained to me his erudition in music:

I was listening fucking tirelessly all the time, it’s true... in this way you

⁴⁴ Retrieved from: <https://www.discogs.com/M%C3%B6tley-Cr%C3%BCe-Girls-Girls-Girls/release/3318498> and <https://www.discogs.com/Ramones-Ramones/release/7979964>

always listened more than other people, and you always got to listen to the newest music before other people. (Song Jiang)

Yan Qing, a Shanghai cut-out dealer who started his career working part-time in a local cut-out store, offered me a good example from the retailer's perspective. On the first day at his work, Yan Qing was assigned the task of becoming familiar with all the stock. As he told me, this job induction turned out to be a mind-blowing experience of music listening:

...he left me with a task, he said: "this week I want you to classify all we have in this store, split them into categories: rock, classical, pop, jazz and so on." He left and told me he'd be back after three days, I said ok. There were about 3000 records in the store. I didn't leave that night, I put the roller shutter down and listened to music all night long... When morning came the next day, my eyes were shining! That was the moment when it all opened up in my mind. Before that I put these music all under the category of rock, I had never heard so many different styles of music in my life! I listened for three whole days. After those three days' listening, do you know how I fucking felt? I rejected who I was radically, I felt that the guy I used to be was a complete idiot. God, I finally knew music could be made in ways like those! (Yan Qing)

In Yan Qing's story, cut-out listening was an eye-opening experience in terms of both musical sound and "music info": he was able to hear while identifying artists and musical styles that didn't exist in his knowledge before. In this sense, it was not a coincidence that in my interviews many likened the practice of instore "trial listening" to the process of education and learning. For example, Chao Gai told me that in the cut-out store he often went to, "each time I usually just bought one cassette but spent several hours in the store... this was a great opportunity for learning." Similarly, Suo Chao told me in detail about the guilty pleasure of "bumming music off" ("蹭听") his local cut-out store where he obtained all his knowledge of "music info":

There were a couple of cut-out stores in Hohhot, but that one was the best, every musician and every cut-out collector went there, the owner of the store knew a lot... For quite a while my routine was like this: I was quite poor at that time, hanging around day by day without much work to do, so if I was free, I would go to that cassette store in the afternoon. I was acquainted with people who worked there so they didn't bother. I would just sit there with a Walkman, and listen to all their cassettes one by one. I would spend the whole afternoon there, and I didn't buy anything, you know? That was so funny! It was during that time it all flooded in to me, so many different kinds of music, I remember especially, for example, PJ Harvey, Black Flag... I got to know these bands at that time... Sometimes I would meet people who knew more, when I saw them, I would say: "hey, let's go have a look at the tapes!"

And then those older brothers would tell you: “listen to this, this is good! Listen to that, that one is nice!” So your “music info” would open up once again. It all went like this. (Suo Chao)

The cut-out store functioned as a site of self-taught music education where the primary means of learning was the most practical and time-consuming one: to listen “blindly” with the aim of trying out new music as much as possible. Li Kui recalled the enjoyment of this particular state of blindness:

Back then I bought cassettes for listening only: desperate, repeated listening over and over again. You didn’t know what it was, you just listened. I think that was a fantastic state of mind. (Li Kui)

The motivation behind the diligent practice of cut-out learning, one that was undertaken collectively by the “cut-out generation”, lay partly in the painful joy of seeing millions of unknown records constantly flooding in. Compared with standard capitalist record industries, the absence of a pre-existing system of “music info” made the Chinese cut-out market a special case, where basic mechanisms of marketing, promoting, and in particular the “formatting” of products did not exist (Hesmondhalgh, 2018; see also Denisoff, 1986; Hull *et al.*, 2011): apart from the individual efforts made by the “rock preachers” and music critics which were themselves limited by the lack of information, there was barely any formal top-down mechanism to make the customers aware of what was for sale, no advertising or album-signing, not to mention live music tours. In most cases, the “cut-out generation” rarely knew the music on a cut-out before listening to it, they got to know *by* listening to it. Ruan Xiaoqi’s words prove this point:

It was different back then, I think the experiences of music listening were all quite first-hand. Normally you only knew a name, or even didn’t know the name at all, the rest relied all on your own exploration. Yes, it’s just about your own listening, you felt what you felt when you listened to it... now it’s very likely that you will have heard a lot from other people on what it is before you actually listen to it. (Ruan Xiaoqi)

The “first-hand-ness” of cut-out listening which Ruan Xiaoqi identified was a valid indicator of the overwhelming “unprefigurability” (Willis, 2000, 26) in this process. Typically, cut-out consumers tended to rely on their personal likes and dislikes, or others’ personal like and dislikes, as their guide to consumption. As a result, in the cut-out period, the circulation of “music info” was initiated more often from bottom-up than top-down,

gathered inductively by the “cut-out youth” through exploratory listening day and night⁴⁵. In this way, the “cut-out generation” constructed their own “paratexts” of the cut-out records in a stubbornly sensuous manner. In different cities of China, thousands of young people like Ruan Xiaoqi and Suo Chao had all embarked on their own journey of cut-out learning-by-listening, tirelessly trying out bands they’d never heard before one after another. Neither tour-guided nor limited by existing “music info”, their attempts to make sense of the vast and mysterious world of Western rock by touching the elephant while blind was an utterly profane approach to music appreciation and knowledge production. Lei Heng offered a somewhat Lockean analogy:

When you were like a blank sheet of paper, it was so joyful when you started hearing all these kinds of music, and knowing what they were about, and it was such a diversity... (Lei Heng)

In my interviews, the joy of knowing was a frequently mentioned topic in relation to cut-out hunting. This kind of enjoyment was distinct from the more immediate pleasure triggered by sensuous engagement with the cut-outs in ways which exploited their materialities as physical records and as musical sound⁴⁶; rather, it was predominantly generated from the process of knowledge building and linked to the cut-outs’ non-material materiality as “music info”, take Qiong Ying’s words:

Back then I really thought that the selecting of cut-outs was a quite pleasant feeling, you looked at them one by one and tried to figure out which genre they belonged to. It was not like how we do it now in a foreign record store where they have all the tags to mark different genres. When we bought the cut-outs, we hunted blindly. It was that kind of feeling, you know? It was a process of searching and learning at the same time, and slowly you built up your own mode of listening. (Qiong Ying)

However, despite the diligence and devotion of generations of cut-out “learners”, it was doubtful, or at least debatable, how much valid and shared knowledge of music was

⁴⁵ This was also a major difference between the market for the cut-outs and for pirated records (which were mostly Chinese popular music titles in the 1990s) as the latter always relied on existing mechanisms of marketing and promoting by the major music industries. In other words, pirated record dealers only sold what was deemed to be saleable. Thus the wide availability of locally produced pirated copies of “top” cut-out titles in the mid-2000s was also a proof of the significant influence of the informal economy of the cut-out business in China.

⁴⁶ Many, for example, mentioned to me the happiness of touching the records with hands, especially in comparison with digital files of music.

generated out of this self-taught process of “blind” cut-out listening, which was arguably based more on feelings than facts, and was conducted more through cramming than through in-depth understanding. Through devoted cut-out consumption, while Chinese consumers could learn and memorize band names, album titles, and genre terminologies, the more fundamental discursive system, consisting of interrelated historical references and cultural meanings, within which these texts were embedded was barely touched on. This explains why the cut-out market was filled with mistranslations: for example, the heavy metal band Pantera, originally the Spanish word for “Panther”, was mistaken in Chinese for “Pandora” (“潘多拉”); the British metal band Iron Maiden, taking their name from the ancient torture device, was translated as “Iron Lady” (“铁娘子”) and widely believed to be a reference to the former UK Prime Minister; in the case of the hit “Money for Nothing” by Dire Straits, not only the title was mistranslated as “money is useless” (“金钱无用”), but also the name of the band was taken literally as “scary strait” (“恐怖海峡”).

As a result, the bulk of “music info” in the Chinese context existed as bare signifiers attached to certain cut-out titles, while the deeper cultural mechanisms underneath this relation of signification were often overlooked: for example, rarely did my interviewees comment on the musical compositions, instrumentations, and lyrics of the cut-outs they owned, nor could most of them distinguish rock music genres from scenes, and say much about the scenic backgrounds of certain bands, or the relationships between different musicians. In the cut-out years, the most common ways to showcase one’s knowledge were by telling what a title was, which band it was by, and which genre it should be labelled, all of which were not necessarily related to the music itself on the record. Song Jiang raised this point in the interview:

In the cut-out “circles”, a lot of people didn’t really have a good taste in music, or the ability to properly appreciate music, they looked like that because they could memorize the names. Once you talked with them about music, they couldn’t say a thing. (Song Jiang)

The cut-outs’ materiality as “music info”, in this sense, tended to be separate from its materiality as musical sound. In other words, one could very possibly possess a large amount of “music info” while seldom understanding, or even listening to the music at all. In the cut-out subculture, this point was frequently employed to distinguish “real” music appreciators from “fake” ones who only made an effort to memorize terminologies. Wang

Xiaofeng (2006, 119), for example, commented on the shallowness of this local knowledge system as follows:

At the end of the day, what China's cut-out listeners actually listened to were nouns, not music. (Wang, 2006, 119)

This accounts for the ambiguity of vocabularies in the Chinese discourse of “music info” which in turn further made the experience of cut-out listening barely articulable. Although the jargons of music genres such as “post-punk” and “shoegaze” gradually appeared in the Chinese context in the late 1990s, their meanings remained vague and ill-defined, the labelling of an unfamiliar artist with a certain style was thus rarely exercised with full confidence. In the interview, Li Kui recalled countless times of confusion when listening to music mis-defined in terms of genre:

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 25 Album cover of アカシアの雨がやむとき by Kaoru Abe

The first cut-out I bought in Guangzhou was a CD by Kaoru Abe⁴⁷ (Figure 25). I asked: “what is this?” The dealer said: “see the harmonica? It's blues, take it if you give me 5 yuan!” So I bought it. I went back and listened, fuck, I was like: “what the hell is this thing!?” And do you know the 4CD box set by Painkiller? Back then I listened to that as heavy metal, I took it for granted because everybody said it was metal, who the fuck knew that was what they called “experimental music”? It was 1999, the Internet was still not a thing. That was the most interesting period of time. It didn't matter if you listened to folk music or post-rock, jazz, rock, whatever, we all listened together. We were all yet to form our own stomach, we were all listening fucking blindly. (Li Kui)

In a society having little discursive preparation for the arrival of Western rock, meaning-making in the process of cut-out listening was destined to be fragmented, contingent, and highly subjective. Although in the normal sense, it would be difficult to claim that the “cut-out generation” really “knew” the music whose titles they couldn't even pronounce, their knowledge was proved by their recognition and memorization of the very sounds, images,

⁴⁷ Kaoru Abe (阿部薫): Japanese saxophonist who plays free jazz/free improvisation.

and symbols of them. For the “cut-out generation”, to hear was their own, profane way of knowing.

5.6 “Tape-stripping”

A similar storyline of profanity also applied to the practice of music-making. While reportedly not all musicians were avid cut-out consumers, during the late 1990s, in the music scenes which took form simultaneously in various first-and-second-tier cities, the cut-outs did exist as a form of “musical currency” constantly circulating from one musician to another. Simply, the cut-out market was a gold mountain filled with inspirations too shiny for any music maker to miss, not to mention the music connoisseurs who were more than willing to guide them. Yang Bo (2014), for example, describes his friend, cut-out dealer and music critic Qiu Dali, who gained the reputation of Guangzhou’s “cut-out godfather” for his active involvement in local music scenes:

From the late 1990s to early this century, nine tenth of the bands who toured to Guangzhou would sleep and eat in Dali’s home, nine tenth of them would be half-sold-half-given some cut-outs by Dali. The reputation of “godfather” was because that Dali would recommend different music to bands with different characters. (Yang, 2014)

This was the context in which cut-out “tape-stripping” (“扒帶子”) became a prevailing approach to music-making in the Chinese music underground. When de Kloet (2005, 618) identified a surprising diversity of music scenes during his visits to China, he read the composition of their music styles as a “contradictory sign of localization”. Looking back now to those bands active around the turn of the century, the traces left by the globalization of Western rock were indeed more than obvious: for instance, the “fashionable bands” de Kloet identifies derived their style heavily from mid-1990s Britpop, and those of the “underground sound” were clearly the distant offspring of early-1990s Nu-metal. However, music-making in cut-out-inspired local scenes should not be reduced merely to the act of copying the West. As I will demonstrate in this section, the very practice of “tape-stripping” bore profane and unprefigurable qualities similar to those of cut-out listening. As a result of the absence of a sophisticated system of “music info”, Chinese tape-strippers were able to achieve creativity on their own terms.

The act of “tape-stripping”, or “song-stripping”, literally means to “rip off” the music from the records being played, that is, to transcribe music - often including both the notes and the arrangement - by ear, and learn to copy it by hand through countless times of repeated,

attentive listening. This practice dated back to the early 1980s when mainland session musicians initiated a movement of ripping songs off from pirated or copied cassettes of *Gangtai* pop and produced locally made covers for sale (Baranovitch, 2003, 13; Zhang, 2019). In Chinese, when used as a verb, “strip” (“扒”) often evokes unpleasant values and meanings, one of them is “to steal”⁴⁸. For some people, cut-out tape-stripping was equal to shameless copying which was in direct conflict with the romanticism of creativity and authenticity, not to mention that it only resulted in an awkward transplantation of foreign musical traditions. In the interview, Zhu Tong, musician and former cut-out retailer, shared with me his opinion:

For example, some bands thought that Rage Against the Machine sounded good, but they didn't really absorb their musical essence, you know? Because Rage Against the Machine grew up in the US, every day they could listen on the radio to jazz, blues, and country music, they had all these musical nurturings. That's why they could engage naturally with the musical forms they played, right? They could grow something from those roots, and they could innovate. For those Chinese bands, however, they simply grabbed the music, peeled its skin, but they didn't have the roots in themselves, that's why they sounded so awkward. (Zhu Tong)

Zhu Tong's words point out the reasons why, musically, cut-out tape-stripping was doomed to fail: the lack of previous music experiences and relevant “music info” in the Western rock tradition. By revealing this fact, his comment touches on the central points in the debates concerning the globalization of rock which was arguably achieved through inevitable copying. In his research, de Kloet (2005) observes a “Chinese gaze” upon the Western gaze of authenticity which further demanded Chinese musicians to localize rock. While arriving at a similar conclusion, I find the spirit of localization also within the practice of cut-out tape-stripping. Rock's local adaptation in the cut-out-inspired scenes, I argue, was not only because local bands needed to distinguish themselves from the West as a way to “safeguard authenticity” (de Kloet, 2005, 325), but also because they couldn't really copy the West in the “right” way.

As I found during fieldwork, what differentiated cut-out tape-stripping from tape-stripping of *Gangtai* pop in the 1980s was the fact that while the 1980s tape-stripping was mainly conducted by professionally trained veteran musicians (Jones, 1992), most cut-out tape strippers were young amateurs who were inspired to form a band by what they heard on the

⁴⁸ As in the term “扒手” which is another way of calling a thief.

cut-outs. In this sense, cut-out tape-stripping was first and foremost an informal lesson in music training. In fact, throughout the 1990s, tape-stripping the cut-outs remained the most common, if not the only, means for underground rock musicians to build up a repertoire of classic Western rock songs from acts such as Nirvana and the Beatles, and to update themselves with instrument-playing techniques and composition and arrangement skills. In my interview, Li Kui, who founded the Shenzhen rock band Plastic Man, declared that the only musical teacher he had ever bowed to was the cut-outs:

I'd strip whatever good stuff I came across, otherwise how? Tape-stripping is the skill that nobody can fucking teach you. For people like us who had no master to learn from but your own guitar, the only way was tape-stripping! (Li Kui)

Shi Xiu, leader of the Shenyang underground band Doomsday Leftalone, told me how cut-out tape-stripping unexpectedly gave him a means of earning a living:

-While I was doing this band, I also went to play in nightclubs and music bars, “running for gigs” (“走场子”), as we called it. This was because you had to feed yourself and you had to make money. In 2002, I went down south to Shenzhen and stayed there for more than a year, and I ran for a lot of gigs, that was when my cut-out tape-stripping really paid off. I found out that I could actually do loads of Western cover songs although my English speaking was not so decent. In places like Shenzhen and Shanghai, people loved Western music, so if you could do English songs you'd be more popular on the market.

-Whose songs were you covering back then?

-Like Pink Floyd, Dire Straits, the Doors, and so on. I remember there was a bar run by a Taiwanese boss, and I played a Pink Floyd song, the boss was astonished and told me he didn't expect a gig-running band from the mainland could play songs like those. (Shi Xiu)

However, just as cut-out records were not good teachers of “music info”, they could not provide high-quality music training either. This was evident to another major difference between the tape-stripping of *Gangtai* pop in the 1980s and of the cut-outs in the 1990s: while *Gangtai* pop songs were always performed by a conventional set of instruments which mainland session musicians were familiar with, the sounds contained in the cut-outs was much more varied, complex, and novel – especially when one consider the increasingly diverse kinds of effects pedals used in Western rock after the 1970s - and thus much less decipherable. Chai Jin, one of the early cut-out dealers in Beijing, told me an example:

So I sold this guy the debut album of Jesus and Mary Chain... but think about it, how can any normal person like that music after they actually listened to it? He was like, fuck, he came back to me the next day and said: “the cassette you sold me is a defect!” I said “where?” He said: “the sounds feel all very distant, it must be that the pressure pad inside the cassette had some problems...” (Chai Jin)

As cut-out video products (mostly VHS tapes) tended to be much rarer than audio ones on the market, it was frequently the case that Chinese listeners had to imagine how a particular sound was made by real people with their musical instruments; when they couldn't, they “improvised”. For example, in order to reproduce the sound he heard from some noise rock cut-outs, former cut-out dealer Zuoxiao Zuzhou reportedly “invented” a way of guitar playing in 1993 by attaching an iron clamp to the fretboard, only to find out many years later that others had done the same decades before. Still, Zuzhou was one of the lucky few who accidentally got it right. Li Kui, for example, told me a hilarious story of how he reinvented “Hotel California” single-handedly over one night:

I was singing in the bar and Xiao He came, he asked me: “Can you play ‘Hotel California’?” I said: “What the fuck is that?” He told me: “you know what’s hot in Beijing now? One band you have to listen to, it is called Metallica; and one song you have to know how to play, that’s ‘Hotel California’!”

I rushed directly to my friend who worked in the radio station, he was a huge cut-out collector. I asked him: “What is ‘Hotel California’?” He said: “you stupid! Remember the Eagles? Last time we went to buy cut-outs together, you said they sounded awful and didn’t buy it.” I said: “lend me the tape!”

I went back home with the tape and started stripping it. I did it for the whole night, but I didn’t know that they had three guitarists in the band... I thought there was only one! That was what you call puffing yourself up at your own cost, you know? The most painful tape-stripping I’ve ever done... Later when I first saw the Eagles playing live on a VHS tape, I was speechless, I said: “How come they have so many fucking people?!” (Li Kui)

Li Kui’s mistake turned out to be one that was quite commonly made. As I found out during fieldwork, by the mid-1990s, for most mainland Chinese listeners, the impression of what a proper rock band looked like remained as the classic four-piece line-up of local acts like Beyond, Black Panther, and in particular the Beijing metal band Tang Dynasty whose lead guitarist, Lao Wu, was arguably the first “guitar hero” in mainland China. This exemplifies the knowledge base upon which cut-out tape-strippers conducted their

copying. For instance, Suo Chao recalled how he took Nirvana for granted as a four-piece band before realizing that not all rock acts were like Tang Dynasty:

So I started hanging out in his place every day, it was at that time when I first had the idea to learn to play guitar. But then I still didn't know that Nirvana was a three-piece band! So I thought, because I couldn't sing, I'd better learn to become a lead guitarist, like Lao Wu did in Tang Dynasty, you know? Then I started learning guitar with him... in the meantime I followed him to start tape-stripping, copying stuff like Nirvana. It was after practising for a while that I finally realized that Nirvana were actually just three people, that was because I somehow managed to get a copied VHS tape of a live album called *Tonight Sold Out*. I was like, "fuck! They are three people! Oh, that's how they do it!" (Suo Chao)

The direct consequence of not knowing Nirvana was a three-piece band was that Suo Chao had to change his instrument from guitar to the drum kit in order to play in the Nirvana cover band with his guitarist friend. Just like the process of "learning-by-listening", cut-out tape-stripping was also bound to be a disorganized, self-reliant, and highly exploratory process. For some, the unprefigurative nature of cut-out tape-stripping gave birth to music of a true DIY spirit, a manner of "doing it without knowing what it is" which forced the player into a more creative approach. In the interview, Li Kui expressed his admiration for two musicians of his generation, Wang Lei (Figure 26) and Mamer, who made music in a radically "uninstructed" and unruly way from the cut-outs they had heard:

Wang Lei heard Nine Inch Nails on the cut-outs, and he went on immediately to make electronic music, very simple, with only an 8-track recorder, he just did it. What I'm saying is this power of taking action, I think that is brilliant. I've seen two geniuses of this kind who didn't give a shit about hardware at all: Wang Lei and Mamer. They didn't know a single English letter, Wang Lei didn't know any musical genres, neither did Mamer: after buying a drum machine, he would throw the instruction book right away, he worked it out with his own hands, he figured it out in his own way. (Li Kui)

For most cut-out tape-strippers, the outcome of their work was rarely a qualified duplicate of the original, authentic sound as heard on the cut-outs. However, the nature of this process, which was as much an imitation as a localized, improvised adaptation arguably gave rise to a new space for artistic experimentations, in many cases within domestic musical roots. In this sense, the localization of Western rock in China was also the product of a profane and creative drive which reflected the hidden negotiations, tactics and compromises made by Chinese tape-strippers in order to cope with the impossibility of

perfect imitation. To some extent, the cut-out records which appeared so out of context in 1990s China were used by the tape-strippers in a similar way to how Mamer treated his new drum machine: the instruction book thrown away, its raw materiality confronted directly with bare hands, and its mechanism of operation examined through countless rounds of trial and error. Looked at from another angle, these undecipherable instances of music became liberated through the ignorance of their users and thus gained greater “objective possibilities” for more immediate, experiential meaning-making. Profanity, in this way, was generated from the gaps of knowledge, hardware, and music experiences.

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Figure 26 Wang Lei on the cover of the first issue of *I Love Rock 'N' Roll*

The practice of cut-out tape-stripping, therefore, implies a profound dialectic, it powerfully demonstrates how profanity and creativity are inherently two sides of the same coin. For the average cut-out tape-strippers, when they attempted to play “Hotel California” with only one guitar or tried to copy Nine Inch Nails using just an 8-track recorder, creativity was realized in the form of unsophisticated, inapt imitation. Wang Lei and Mamer were musicians who pushed this very inaptness to the extreme; digging directly and intentionally into the sound itself without referring to any relevant “music info”, they stood out for a proactive state of profanity which led to a higher state of artistic creativity, as Yan Jun (2014, 145) neatly summarizes this point:

What’s at work here is a relation between imitation and failed imitation... What cut-outs and piracy can provide us with is only a fragmented landscape of contemporary music, therefore, it is impossible to follow, imitate, or synchronize with it, or I should say, what we achieve by our attempts will always be highly diluted. Under these circumstances, the musicians with greatest innovative ability will be stimulated to produce even more creativity, which is what we call originality... however, you can’t demand all the bands to have the ability to integrate different cultural and musical systems without the relevant background. (Yan, 2014, 145)

5.7 The Criticism of Music

Parallel to the nationwide expansion of the cut-out market and the tape-stripping scenes, various cut-out niche media outlets, including music magazines, fanzines, and radio

programmes, also began to emerge. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the work of the cut-out niche media producers - in particular, the so-called cut-out “music critics” - also manifested a distinct form of profanity which, while often judged as unprofessional and misleading criticism of music, engaged both affectively and critically with local politics.

As I learnt during fieldwork, most of the first generation of cut-out niche media producers only took this as a part time job: in the cut-out years, music critic was never a profession which one could rely on for a living, and most cut-out radio DJs were in fact not full-time employees but guest hosts invited by the radio stations. In this sense, they were not so much media producers as cut-out listeners/consumers. Yet, riding on the “spring wind of the reform” which fuelled the rapid expansion of China’s entertainment media industries, these grassroots media producers were able to share the knowledge they acquired from the cut-out world through writing and broadcasting, both of which went on to influence those who entered that world later. The first generation of cut-out “music critics”, in particular, could be considered as the first group of “graduates” who earned their degree from the school of cut-out learning-by-listening. They also became, in a way, the first group of “professors” who designed the syllabus of cut-out hunting for new generations of “cut-out youth”, or the “rock popularizers” (“普摇工作者”), as Qiu Dali (2001, 20) once claimed in a tone of self-mockery.

Reading through early cut-out music reviews, one can easily identify an introductory style of writing behind which was a strong sense of mission and responsibility; this corresponded to the claim made by many music critics I interviewed that the objective of their writing was primarily “introduction”, that is, to present to their fellow Chinese cut-out listeners a “new” band from the dusty history of Western rock, which they had dug out from the cut-out mountains. Take the example of Qin Ming who was the chief editor of *Popular Songs* in 1999:

-Do you still remember what your first published piece was about?

-It was on Red Hot Chili Peppers, published in *Music Heaven*. I remember accurately it was in 1997, and that was the time when I had got a more or less complete collection of all the albums they had released, like 80% or 90% of them, I had bought all the essential ones, so I was able to have a relatively clear overview of that band. So I wrote about the general state of the band, because no one had introduced them decently and comprehensively. (Qin Ming)

In the decade before the Internet opened up sources of information which had been inaccessible, cut-out music critics voluntarily took on the task of drawing down the entire elephant of Western rock. In the preface of the first volume of *Punk Time*, a zine designed to “introduce” punk culture, chief editor Yang Bo (1998, 1) announced his grand ambition which also served as a manifesto for the group of early cut-out music critics:

Apart from punk, what’s also in our plan are hippie culture, art rock, avant-garde music, and heavy metal. We will not only publish one issue for each genre; in the form of audio books, we hope to extract a compacted full view of the history of Western rock - which is as vast as the open sea - and present it all to you. (Yang, 1998, 1)

In reality, this grand mission of “introducing” and “popularizing” rock was carried out effectively thanks to the pricing mechanisms of the cut-out retail market. The result was a massive discursive system of Western-rock-related “music info” in the Chinese context which was built up in parallel with the rapidly expanding categories of “top good” titles on the cut-out market. Paradoxically however, it was also a principle shared by most cut-out music critics that the introduction of information should *not* be the sole objective of their writings. Reading through their pieces published in the 1990s, one frequently comes across statements made concerning the “true purpose” of music criticism which was usually seen as something beyond the mere transportation of “music info”. For example, in the epilogue of the same volume of *Punk Time*, Yang Bo made a distinction between what he considered as the “surface” and “inside” of music writing:

I need to explain that this book does not belong completely to the “music info” type of zine like *Music Heaven*, we want it to stay closer to the cultural level... I’d like to ask: what is music criticism? Does it have value regarding its own textual properties? What should its function be? Is it merely to let the readers know a bunch of names, dates, and running accounts of band histories? ... We do not mean to reject “music info” which is the skeleton and veins of music criticism, but we stand firmly against “information bombing”: we must leave necessary space for the elaboration of the ideas and concepts of music, and guide the reader to penetrate the surface and reach what’s inside... (Yang, 1998, 63)

Similarly, on various occasions, Yan Jun (2001, 87) also tried to provide a justification for the subjective and “cultural” qualities of music criticism, claiming that it is “ridiculous” for music criticism to be “objective and just”. In the preface of his essay collection *Noise Inside*, Yan Jun (2001b, 1) writes:

...that was when I started to treat it self-consciously as a unique way of

writing: the purpose of music criticism is to prove that everyone has his or her own way of listening and interpreting. Music criticism should establish itself on the basis of professional knowledge and detailed analysis, but it requires more crucially independent opinions and a deep understanding of history. It is equally important to have relevant knowledge, enthusiasm and sensitivity, and a style of writing. (Yan, 2001b, 1)

In a way, Yang Bo's and Yan Jun's statements were both targeting the shallowness of the transplanted system of "music info" which, as I have demonstrated, resulted from the ineptness of cut-out "learning-by-listening" to grasp the deeper cultural meanings of Western rock. Moreover, the extreme scarcity of "music info" was also responsible for a media environment in which the informational content of the stories themselves mattered more than how they were told, with the job of the authors limited to mere "transporters of information". This was apparently not a role which Chinese music critics were pleased to play. For example, in the epilogue of *Electric Ark* (《电动方舟》), the independent zine published in the bookstore he ran, Hao Fang wrote:

Within an environment where information is rare, to simply tell the stories is enough for a writer to win applause, but what I want to emphasize repeatedly is that I am not satisfied with just being an editor of information, I always try to go beyond this kind of role. (Hao, 1997, 48)

The solution they came up with lay in the emphasis on independent thinking, as Yang Bo (1998, 63) declared in *Punk Time*:

...music is only the means, but not the end - this book will stimulate you to think for yourself. (Yang, 1998, 63)

As a result, the 1990s witnessed a radical change of form in the writing on Western music: unlike the "edited translations" composed by their predecessors in *Reference News*, cut-out music critics initiated a more original, free-form, and value-laden kind of music criticism which was largely based on their own reflections on and experiences of cut-out consumption. This, in return, provided a fresher and more spontaneous body of knowledge for local cut-out explorers. Stressing the agency of the author, what early cut-out music critics advocated was the importance of a writer's subjective opinions, experiences, and feelings over the objective, fixed system of "music info" transported directly from the Western context. Between the "introduction" and "criticism" of music, they leaned towards latter almost unanimously. To some extent, this style of music criticism was closer to

social and cultural criticism and further from music recommendation, its affective and social functions placed over the more basic communicative and informative roles. Hao Fang, for example, famously called for the autonomy of music criticism as an “independent genre of writing whose existence needs not to be attached to music”.

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Figure 27 Front pages of *Punk Time, Vol. 1* (1998) and *Electric Ark* (1997)

Others took it to a more ideological and political level. Going through zines like *I Love Rock and Roll*, *Punk Time*, and *Popular Songs*, it’s easy to spot articles composed in the manner of Lu-Xun-styled societal commentaries, typically targeting the authoritarianism of the Communist Party-State or the suppressive role of traditional Confucian moral values. When reviewing music in the cut-outs, music critics such as Yang Bo and Qiu Dali often constructed their arguments in a manner which transformed the music under review into the Chinese context, through which their own political views were then expressed. To give one example, in his review on an album by the British post-punk act Killing Joke (Figure 28), Qiu Dali (1999, 25) linked themes of left-wing politics in their music to the Chinese democracy movement on “the square”:

The fact is, in a stubborn period of time, there was a group of hot-blooded youths who always liked to gather on the square, and together they sang out loud songs of Killing Jokes which were as tough as steel.

They stood for a kind of resolution unchanged by death and vengeance.

It is hard for us to imagine that Killing Joke actually released a new album titled *Democracy*, it included songs like “Savage Freedom”, “Pilgrimage” and “Another Bloody Election”. We have to understand what a group of stubborn and radical revolutionists they are.

What kind of music we own is determined by what kind of attitude we own.

This is the message to us from Killing Joke’s music. (Qiu, 1999, 25)

While Qiu Dali’s review of Killing Joke exemplifies the political agenda of early cut-out music critics, it also gives a typical example of the highly subjective, if not arbitrary, manner of their writing on music due to their inability to gain sufficient background

information and in-depth cultural understanding. With little knowledge of the details of the release, biography of the band, and lyrics of the songs (a large part of which appear to be a parody of the liberal democratic system in the UK), Qiu Dali bases his arguments only on the album and song titles. The link he draws between *Democracy* and “the square” is groundless according to the original music texts and relevant only in the local political context.

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Figure 28 Qiu Dali’s review of *Democracy* by Killing Joke, published in *Punk Time*, Vol. 2

Looked at from this angle, the cut-out music critics’ insistence on downplaying the role of information in music criticism was also a strategic compromise with the objective conditions where both the quantity and quality of available resources of “music info” were severely limited. The enlightenment ambition of early cut-out music critics, therefore, was bound to clash with the scarcity of information and the unsolvable linguistic and cultural barriers. While tireless cut-out learning-by-listening did bring more and more “new” bands and genres to light, it was far from sufficient to provide a comprehensive historical overview by piecing together fragments of information collected from cut-out hunting. Reading through what was published in the 1990s, it’s easy to spot incorrect information ranging from inaccurate, mistranslated, or misinterpreted data to blatant factual errors. In my interviews, most cut-out music critics, now in their 40s, frankly took the blame. Lu Da, for example, confessed that his early writings on music would appear to be quite disgraceful today:

It is now so shameful to read... I even wrote a history of heavy metal! God, to read it again today that piece looks so... it was completely a rambling, groundless text born out of my own imagination. Because I knew nothing, and I had no data at all. A so-called heavy metal history, I didn’t even mention Black Sabbath! It was total nonsense. I still hadn’t heard Black Sabbath yet back then, think about it, how dared I write such a thing! (Lu Da)

5.8 The Irony of Cut-out Consumption

The imperfection of cut-out music criticism, as a matter of fact, was both resulted from and itself a factor which had contributed to the poverty of “music info” in 1990s China. In the

cut-out period, while the number of available Western music records grew significantly thanks to the cut-outs, they remained mostly “raw” music data with little supporting paratext, and thus didn’t really provide the cut-out music critics with a reliable source to allow them to “go beyond” the role of transporters of information, Qiu Dali, for example, admitted in the interview that he always needed to “brace myself to read the texts and lyrics in the cut-out inserts in order to know a bit more about a musician”. In this sense, it is easy to understand why early cut-out music reviews were frequently blamed for the lack of so-called “hard info” - that is, valid factual details - and the abundance of subjective, emotional “soft info”, which often had little to do with the original music work at all. For example, Cai Jing, a Beijing cut-out collector, told me:

As for the reviews written by Hao Fang and the like, I rarely read them... I only want to read the kind of pure introduction of music, I want to read the “music info” kind of stuff. Because I want to establish a system through my own practice, I don’t need that kind of inculcation from the very beginning. (Cai Jing)

In my interview, music critic Zhang Tianshi responded to blame such as this as follows:

As for our music reviews, I think it was more about a human being’s basic desire to communicate, although it may be full of misunderstandings and mistakes. It’s simply that you wanted to express yourself. In fact, that was something which stayed at the level of hormones, it wasn’t even knowledge. I think those early music reviews which were established on the basis of the cut-out culture were to do with a sharing of feelings and hormones in nature, they were not knowledge production, because knowledge production has to be based on the availability of information, but the information we had was so incomplete and fragmentary... I think we were more of a hormone community. (Zhang Tianshi)

In this sense, the endeavour of knowledge construction undertaken by the cut-out music critics shared a profane quality with the practices of learning-by-listening and tape-stripping: it was affectively driven rather than knowledge-based, and evolved primarily in the context of local politics rather than the original Western ones. The unique style of cut-out music criticism which downplayed the role of “music info” was therefore an inherently contradictory gesture: it attempted to go beyond the shallowness of knowledge construction in cut-out consumption, only to end up reproducing this very shallowness in a different way. The group of “music critics” who played the role of the intellectual elite in the cut-out subculture were thus constantly struggling between the profanity of cut-out consumption and the reflection on this profanity. They were themselves trapped in the

“surface” - to borrow from Yang Bo’s terms - of the foreign world of Western rock, negotiating the uncrossable distance between the cut-outs and their paratexts, and failing to find a way to the “inside”. However, just like the dialectics of creativity and localization which I have discussed in the previous section, this profane style of music criticism also bore a precious value and meaningfulness in the local context. Compared to the cut-out tape-strippers, the dialectic implied in cut-out music criticism was not as artistic and as creative, but it concerned a reflective and critical approach to local politics which arguably only manifested itself after “music info” was no longer a luxury in China.

In reality, the “hormone community” (“荷尔蒙共同体”) which Zhang Tianshi described did not last long. Following the gradual popularization of the Internet, the once mysterious family tree of Western rock became just a few clicks away. As the turn of the century witnessed a sharp increase in the amount of “music info” ready to be translated and transported, the “main texts” of Western rock music were once again surpassed by their paratexts, and the giant elephant of the cut-out world finally revealed its full shape. The consequences were profound. Above all, the nature of cut-out hunting was forever changed: equipped with regularly updated digital maps in Chinese, the new generation of cut-out hunters became more like “diggers” in a Western collection scene who had a clear set of targeted “gems” in mind. Along with the demise of the authority of cut-out music critics whose previously made mistakes were all exposed to light, the rules of music criticism also changed, as a younger generation of writers, equipped with better English language ability and stronger internet research skills, took the stage. In the preface written for *The Bible of Rock and Roll*, promised to be the ultimate guide to cut-out hunting in the new century, Yan Jun, who would declare after a few years to never write any music reviews on rock, bid farewell to the decade-long journey of blind inductive learning with a bitter look back. The title of his article is “Bringing the World to Us”:

...information was yet to explode, and no pie was falling from the sky. We were just armchair strategists, imagining the history and typology of rock music out of the fragmentary and incomplete system of cut-outs and piracy. ... Black metal and free jazz were like meteor showers, we had to chase after whichever round we bumped into. After buying Wang Xiaofeng and Zhang Lei’s *A Guide to Occidental Popular Music*, many people were in despair as their record collection seemed so tiny: this is because the bigger the world we have, the smaller we ourselves will become... But how many of us will still use this book as a guide to the cut-out market? In fact, we have to realize that the desire to buy music records and the convenience of obtaining “music info” are rather in an

inverse proportion... To know more is not always better than less. (Yan, 2002, 1)

The relationship of “inverse proportion” which Yan Jun emphasized reveals the nature of cut-out learning-by-listening as a consumption practice relating to both music and information: for the “cut-out generation”, the joy of knowing was always deeply intertwined with the pleasure of listening, and their desire for the ideal, authentic textbook of “music info” was as urgent as, sometimes even more urgent than, their thirst for different sonic experiences. In the age of the Internet, when the objective conditions of the cut-outs’ profanity no longer held, cut-out consumption eventually metamorphosed into a refined, individualistic ritual conducted by the “compliant consumer” (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, 114) of modern capitalist society. In less than two decades, the “cut-out generation” evolved into a community of obsessive collectors whose major motivation in music consumption was to update the formats and editions of their existing record collection, as Shi Jin summarized in the interview:

We have all gone through this process from cut-out cassettes to CDs, from cut-out CDs to “complete discs”, from “complete discs” to brand new official CDs, and from brand new official CDs to brand new Japanese editions, this kind of progressive process. This is because a person’s desire will always grow along with their income level, this is very normal. (Shi Jin)

Seen in this light, the profane “unprofessionalness” of cut-out music criticism was a call addressed to their readers to relinquish their indulgence in consumption, and to return to their immediate and local conditions of living, it was thus an essentially political gesture in itself. 14 years after his claim to stimulate his readers to “think for yourself”, Yang Bo admitted that things didn’t go as expected, as he writes:

Thoughts can never be banned as long as people are willing to think. Therefore, those who want to ban thoughts have to ban existing materials that inspires people to think, for example books and rock music. However, so often in their efforts against these bans, people get addicted to reading and music themselves, and forget what on earth reading and music are supposed to be used for. (Yang, 2014)

Yang Bo’s lament exemplifies what Willis (2000, 40) terms the unintended “tragic irony” of profanity which stands as an essential built-in character of a profane culture: the forms and artistry of profane penetration “are often the very means through which what they seem to oppose is reproduced”. Driven by sensuousness and pleasure which are “powerful

resources for, and mechanisms of, penetration” (Willis, 2000, 37), profane cultural practices create greater possibilities of liminal and creative meaning-making, while also being responsible for the “unconscious blindness” (Willis, 2000, 41) which characterizes these uncoded and sensuous meanings. In this sense, the immediate thrill of experiencing the unprecedented and uncovering the unknown in the cut-out stores was bound to overwhelm the bombardment of political messages by the music critics. The direct impacts of hearing, seeing, and feeling the cut-outs as sounds, images, and information always preceded the critical reflections on the sociocultural implications behind them. Huyan Zhuo, in the interview, attempted to explain to me why the “cut-out generation” were not “political”:

For 99% Chinese people who listen to Western rock music, they didn't know what the singer was singing about. So the messages conveyed at a spiritual level, that was half of the messages in the music, had been blocked because of the language barrier. As a result, the only thing they could listen to is: “wow, this solo is so excellent!” Right? “This drum beat is well done! This bass line is well written!” In the end music became all these kinds of stuff. Therefore, all the political elements, we were never connected to them. Chinese listeners were not interested in politics, at most, it was a person's sensory, bodily emancipation towards freedom which happened in adolescence, and rock music worked for that. (Huyan Zhuo)

5.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the variety of ways in which sensuous engagement was formed between the cut-outs and their Chinese consumers, and illustrated the profound dialectics of profanity they implied. As I have shown, in their confrontation with the cut-outs which appeared rather out of context in 1990s China, the “cut-out generation” invented a variety of manual methods of cut-out repairing, and employed sensuous strategies to make sense through sight and hearing. They built up a local, experiential system of knowledge through each individual's blind, inductive journey of cut-out learning-by-listening. Among them, a chosen few, who spread their lessons of cut-out listening via the niche media, became cut-out music critics who initiated a uniquely “unprofessional” style of music criticism which downplayed the role of “music info”. Others who initiated local music scenes became cut-out “tape-strippers”, and although they had to make music through an uninstructed attempt at imitation that was doomed to fail, they nonetheless achieved artistic creativity by pushing this failure to the extreme. In all the cases above, the Chinese “cut-out youth” failed to use the cut-outs in the “right” way as

originally intended, they nonetheless exploited them in their own profane ways, through which new possibilities of sensuous meaning-making were created.

Having demonstrated a variety of cases in which knowledge gaps, confusions, and misinterpretations characterized Chinese people's engagement with cut-out records, my aim is not to argue that the project undertaken by the "cut-out generation" to comprehend, appreciate, and imitate Western rock music was a tragic failure, nor am I suggesting a relativist vision of profanity which, due to the lack of symbolic resources and guidance, depends randomly and contingently on whatever signals may be received by the human senses. On the contrary, while the profane forms of cultural items are not fixed, they are "precisely not arbitrary" (Willis, 2000, 19). As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the profanity performed by the "cut-out generation" was in essence a subcultural "penetration" of their own conditions of living on various grounds; once situated within its historical settings, the cut-out subculture becomes meaningful as a collective response to, and critique of, the social and cultural conditions of 1990s Chinese society.

6 Structure of Feeling: Emergence, Penetration, and the “Imagined Enemies”

6.1 Introduction

Having drawn a picture of the politics of materiality and value in the cut-out industry and demonstrated the dialectics of profanity in the practice of cut-out consumption, I focus the third and final empirical chapter on the structure of feeling (Williams, 1977) of the “cut-out generation”. While the ideal notion of structure of feeling, defined by Williams in an all-encompassing manner as a community of lived experiences, essentially overlaps with what I have discussed in the previous two chapters, it is employed here as a conceptual device to account for the historical and affective aspects of the cut-out subculture, and to provide a critical assessment of its political agenda in 1990s China.

This chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part situates the cut-out subculture in its historical context and, by depicting its contested politics of music taste and aesthetics, demonstrates that the cut-out culture both “emerged” (Williams, 1977) from and “penetrated” (Willis, 2000) its conditions of existence. In the second part, I unpack the structure of feeling of the “cut-out generation” by illustrating its manifestations in the different dimensions which constituted their lived experience. These include media discourses, material infrastructures, social relationships, and logics of practice. As I will argue, the emergent structure of feeling functioned as a pre-existing affective infrastructure on which the cut-outs landed and were re-contextualized in local politics. This affective infrastructure was embedded in and intertwined with discursive, material, and social dimensions of the cut-out subculture, and directed its subcultural penetrations towards the “imagined enemies” of the state and the market.

6.2 Emergence and Penetration

6.2.1 “Pseudo-folk” and “Saliva Songs”

Before it became a powerful “mythology” (de Kloet, 2010), rock was first a literal myth in mainland China. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 5, in the late 1980s, the idea of rock was first introduced via scattered, translated pieces of “music info” circulated through state-run magazines such as *Reference News* and translated book titles such as *The Glory and the Dream*. The fact that most Western rock music was first read about prior to being listened to made rock “something in the air”: it was enthusiastically imagined and dreamed of, but

never clearly defined and articulated. Gongsun Sheng, for example, talked about his pre-cut-out idea of rock:

I think it was a myth from the very beginning, it was a myth made up by words. Because you could see it in the newspapers, and sometimes in different kinds of tabloids, one piece here, one piece there... You had absolutely no idea what it was, but the inflammatory effects were strong. It was like, “wow, there was this emancipatory thing that really existed!”...and then rumours circulated and circulated, and all these rumours would in effect develop your imagination of it, and within this imagination there did exist something emancipatory. I think at that time there already were some introductory texts on rock in the West... like how The Who smashed their guitars and generated riots and screams, something like that. You would think: how can these things happen to my life? (Gongsun Sheng)

Li Kui, recalling his pre-cut-out years in Hunan, mentioned similar experiences of obsessively gathering “music info” from all available sources just to “have something to do with rock”:

In fact, we bought those books just to satisfy a craving, we didn’t know what it was, but it gave us the kind of feeling that “I am having something to do with rock”, you know? (Li Kui)

These stories show that the discursive system of the rock mythology had taken root prior to the arrival of the cut-outs in the early 1990s, and that it took root relatively independently of the listening to and consumption of rock music. In this pre-cut-out period, the collective imagination of and longing for the “rock” ideal, which was deemed “inflammatory” and “emancipatory” by the local youth, revealed an existing structure of feeling with a set of “emergent” meanings and sensibilities in formation. This sense of emergence can be traced back to the late 1970s when the non-official wave of *Gangtai* pop, represented by the iconic voice of Teresa Teng, swept over mainland China. An emergent “soundscape” (Smith, 1994; Shelemay, 2001) in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Teresa Teng’s love ballads, whose circulation was enabled by the practice of home taping, became a cultural form seized upon by the emergent structure of feeling against the backdrop of the then dominant Communist “red” culture. This set of emergent sensibilities, as the literature has shown (Jones, 1992; Jin, 2002; Baranovitch, 2003; Li, 2012; Liu, 2018), was characterized by the longing for authentic self-expression, the aversion to ideological inculcation, and the resonance with feelings that were intimate, worldly and romantic.

As China went through the state-led economic reform towards a “socialist market economy” in the 1980s, the sweet and soft sound of pop, once taking the progressive and transgressive role as the “sound of decadence”, eventually became the dominant soundscape itself, manufactured by the burgeoning *tongsu* music industry. Fused with the formerly dominant “red” culture, which had faded to become the residual, the dominant soundscape of pop gave birth to the “plebeian pop” genre, whose music language was heavily pop-inspired, but whose production, dissemination, and consumption were firmly under state control. Therefore, in early 1990s China, the label “pop”, against which the authenticity of rock was measured, contained at least two historically separate traditions⁴⁹. This point is illustrated in a quote from Zhu Tong, who dismissed “plebeian pop” songs as “pseudo-folk” (“伪民歌”), and *Gangtai* pop as “saliva songs” (“口水歌”):

At that time in China, there was nothing but pseudo-folk songs and saliva songs, none of those songs were really down to earth, they never described the things that existed beside you which you could genuinely feel. They were either the saliva type or the flattering type. (Zhu Tong)

These two labels implied crucial differences in terms of audience reception. Arguably, the term “saliva songs” was defined in relation to the new medium of karaoke, which was popularized in mainland China in early 1990s. Imported from Japan through Hong Kong, karaoke had taken a variety of localized forms “often connected with or subsumed under a larger-scale leisure event” such as dining and drinking (Fung, 2009, 42). By changing the primary status of a pop song from something to be listened to into something to be sung with, the karaoke boom in China effectively reshaped the aesthetic standards of pop so as to emphasize the quality of being easily learnt and sung. This new karaoke-inspired aesthetic which consisted of “a moderate, regular tempo, clear and predictable melodies, and clearly articulated words”, Baranovitch (2003, 46) points out, stood as “the very antithesis of rock”. In my interviews, the tradition of *Gangtai* pop was typically dismissed under the authenticating force of the rock mythology because of its commercial nature, with *Gangtai* pop singers considered as entertainment idols blindly worshiped by their “star-chasers”.

⁴⁹ There existed, in fact, considerable sociocultural and historical differences between the imported *Gangtai* pop tradition and the locally produced one. While I refer to them as a single *Gangtai*-influenced pop tradition, I acknowledge this “provocative distinction” (Huang, 2001, 2) and the related issue of place, belonging, and authenticity (de Kloet, 2010).

By contrast, regarded as the officially supported branch of the *tongsu* style, “plebeian pop” was often loathed as shameless party propaganda, and blamed for its obsequious conformity to authority and its betrayal of authentic folk music traditions. While having much less visibility on the cassette market, “plebeian pop” remained a genre heavily consumed by adults who were not interested in buying music records and one that was ubiquitous in the daily life of Chinese citizens, especially in family, school, and other common social settings. The main reason for this lay in the medium of television which came rapidly into prominence as “the medium of marketized China” (Zhu & Berry, 2009, 1) in the second half of the 1980s. In particular, televised festival galas with on-stage music performances, notably the *CCTV New Year’s Gala*, became established as important platforms where “plebeian pop” stars and hits were effectively promoted to a nationwide audience. In addition, by the mid-1990s, a large number of MTV programmes had been founded both on central and regional channels, and the most widely received was CCTV’s *China Music Video* (《中国音乐电视》) programme, which also engaged in the production of a large number of *tongsu* music videos (The Beijing News, 2013).

6.2.2 “Rock”

The soundscapes of *Gangtai* pop and “plebeian pop”, embodying the dominant and the residual in 1980s China, formed the backdrop against which the idea of “rock” took the stage as the new emergent. In the late 1980s, the hardly articulable desire of “having something to do with rock” held by young people like Li Kui and Gongsun Sheng who lived outside the capital city was driven by the same structure of feeling which fuelled Beijing’s rather elitist music underground, which gave birth to Cui Jian’s musically blended “rock” songs. Later, when the wave of “Chinese new music” swept over the nation, the music of Tang Dynasty and the “Three Idols” was immediately recognized as a more relatable style by the soon-to-be “cut-out youth”. Wu Song, for example, spoke about how he first heard Tang Dynasty in 1993:

...when I heard it, it just hit me. I couldn’t get the lyrics clearly, but I could feel that it was so, like what was able to move and affect you was springing out, and you know that this must be it... In fact, at that time we didn’t refer to this music with the concept of rock, we called it “Chinese new music”, therefore I had little conception of what rock was. But you could tell immediately after listening to it, you knew it was completely different from what you had listened to before, it was a different thing. You might not be so sure about what it should be called, but you knew right when you were listening to it: it had something real to do with your

life. (Wu Song)

Wu Song's words vividly demonstrate the "formally undefined" quality of the state of emergence. In early 1990s China, when the emergent structure of feeling was in formation against the dominant and the residual, nothing was fully symbolically settled. "Rock" was a free-floating signifier, which was yet to find the signified, and new sounds of music, be it Chinese or Western, were first to be made sense of as something "completely different" before it became a taste to be performed. The new element of experience which emerged in the music of Tang Dynasty was not yet given a name, nor could a person describe what it was like; however, for those who could feel it, it was certain what this thing was *not* or should *not* be like. This subtle layer of emergent sensibilities determined Chinese listeners' manner of reception of the first wave of Western music on the cut-outs which arrived a bit later. The reaction to the legendary Beatles provided a good case in point. Contrary to the band's reputation as one of the greatest acts in rock history, their belated sonic arrival left many Chinese cut-out consumers with a first impression characterized by disappointment and frustration. Song Jiang, for example, recalled:

At that time, all the Beatles albums I could find were their early releases, stuff like "I Want to Hold Your Hand", you know? I thought: "shit, so the Beatles was just a fucking ballad singing group, what of it?" ... It wasn't until I was able to listen to albums like the *White Album* and *Sgt. Pepper* that I changed my impression of them. This was one of the great misunderstandings of our time. (Song Jiang)

Song Jiang's disappointment was shared by many of his peers whose great expectations were betrayed by soft and sweet tunes like "I Want to Hold Your Hand" which sounded only too familiar: while the Beatles was supposed to be an inflammatory "rock" band, musically, their songs were not so different from the *Gangtai* pop ballads which the "cut-out youth" grew up listening to. In the interview, Gongsun Sheng reflected on this experience:

-...he said, "this is the Beatles", but everybody had known them, at least I had, I had read about them, but it was a completely different thing listening to their music from what I read about them.

-What was the contrast like?

-...those were basically outdated news reports on how astonishing the Beatles sounded and how shocked the audiences were, something like that. But when you actually listened to it, it was not astonishing at all, it was just something that was very tender and soft, and it was far from the

musical aesthetics of our time. If you think of the 80s, although there was still no such thing as the heavy bass, we had already developed sound timbres which felt very electronic... even the music of Cui Jian sounded richer and stronger. So when I first listened to them, I was like, “shit, how come this poor drum sound? What the fuck is this?” I didn’t expect it to sound so cheap and powerless... This was why the Beatles didn’t give me any shock at all. (Gongsun Sheng)

As Gongsun Sheng has now realized, the progressiveness of the Beatles was defined by their own historical time, but not his. Transferring the role of the Beatles - and of the “rock” tradition they represented - from outdated news reports into their own context of living, “cut-out youth” like Gongsun Sheng had associated with the Beatles an imagined sonic profile that was, and had to be, radically different from what they had heard and were hearing, only to realize that what used to be the Beatles’ music revolution had already sedimented into their music legacy and left a deep trace on pop music in Hong Kong (Fung, 2009). This failed expectation, as my interviews revealed, also occurred with to a number of other classic rock acts who were blamed for not sounding as “rock” as they should: for example, in Lu Junyi’s first encounter with Bob Dylan, he asserted disappointedly that “so this man who was regarded as God is just mediocre”; similar was Lu Da who claimed in anger that “the so-called psychedelic rock, drug music is nothing special” after his first listening to Grateful Dead.

Apart from the musical sound itself, a similar kind of misplaced imagination was also held for song lyrics. Lei Heng offered an example of how he tragically revealed to his friends the true meanings of a song by The Police:

The Police has a song called “Every Breath You Take”, what I did back then was, I found an English-Chinese dictionary and looked up every single word in the lyrics and translated them into Chinese. I mean, looking back now, you’d be able to know what it means right away but at that time you had no idea what it was about... So I claimed very impersonally that, the Police is actually just a Cai-Guoqing-ish (蔡国庆)⁵⁰ group. A friend of mine glared at me and asked: “why is that?” I said: “look, if you translate the lyrics, it’s all about those ‘I love you’ stuff, more or less.” (Lei Heng)

⁵⁰ Cai Guoqing is one of the most successful “plebeian pop” stars in the 1990s, a leading member of the song and dance troupe of the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission. He also made crossovers to the mainstream pop field, with his handsome appearance often likened to that of Taiwanese idols.

The moment of revelation and disillusion in Lei Heng's story resembles the moment when Song Jiang found out that the Beatles was just a "ballad singing group", both exemplifying the inevitable clash between the illusive imagining of the "rock" ideal and the actual sound of rock carried in by the cut-outs from the West. This clash was inevitable because the ideal of "rock" was inherently a local construction, it was defined primarily against the dominant and residual local soundscapes of pop, and had little irrelevance to the original, and authentic, rock tradition which grew in the West. In other words, what drove Lei Heng's aversion towards Sting's lyrics was first and foremost an affective urge before it was a symbolic distinction: the song was hated not because it was "pop" (as The Police was supposed to belong to the "rock" category), but primarily because it felt "Cai Guoqing-ish"⁵¹. This explains why, for Chinese listeners, the songs of Tang Dynasty sounded authentically "rock" even though they might not bear the label; and while The Beatles and Sting came with the label "rock" attached, their music didn't necessarily feel "rock" at all.

6.2.3 Radical Aesthetic

Only against this historical context can we now approach the subcultural "styles", in the classic CCCS sense, of the "cut-out generation". As Willis (2000, 34-35) reminds us, profanity only reveals its full meaningfulness "with respect to context", and this meaningfulness is manifest in the process of penetration through which the emergence is to be lived out. In the case of the "cut-out generation", this penetration was manifest in a decade-long historical process in which the emergent structure of feeling was realized in a set of aesthetic sensibilities which were cultivated in the process of cut-out consumption.

Just as in the case of the British bikeboys where "golden age" rock 'n' roll functioned to "parallel, hold and develop the security, authenticity and masculinity of the bike culture" (Willis, 2014, 83), the Chinese "cut-out generation" also formed their own distinctive tastes in music. During fieldwork, one of the most powerful testimonies to the peculiar music taste of the "cut-out generation" came from an opposing opinion. In my interview with DJ Wu Yong, long time denouncer of the cut-out subculture, he emphasized to me the

⁵¹ In fact, the song lyrics of "Every Breath You Take" was at least partly politically themed, as Sting claimed that is was about "Big Brother, surveillance and control". (Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/interview-sting-how-we-mock-our-most-serious-star-our-national-friend-of-the-earth-shouldnt-he-be-a-2320343.html>)

irreparable damage of cut-out consumption to one's mind and tastes by referring to the cut-out metaphor:

The saying of the “cut-out generation” is just so accurate. Once they listened to the cut-outs, they became mentally cut-out... The whole cut-out thing was *pianji* in nature. First of all, the practice of cut-out listening had psychological influences on your choice of music taste and they were in a way abnormal. It left considerable side effects, it left a bad mark on your habit of cultural reception in the future... and I haven't mentioned those so-called music critics at that time, they used a similarly radical way when introducing and spreading music, which imposed on you a very narrow-minded and radical view of music. (Wu Yong)

Wu Yong's choice of words turned out to be precise. In Chinese, the two characters “*pian*” and “*ji*” which make up the word “*pianji*” (“偏激”) mean respectively “unorthodox” and “radical”. As my fieldwork revealed, the music preferences of the “cut-out generation”, cultivated in the decade long practice of “gem-picking” and learning-by-listening, did lean towards a certain aesthetic orientation which was worthy of the name “unorthodox and radical”. Take the words of former cut-out dealer Zuoxiao Zuzhou (2013, 1) who has now become one of China's most successful indie rockers:

Back to the early 1990s when my brothers and I were still cut-out resellers hanging around the area of Shanghai CNPIEC, in those days our biggest aim was to sell the toppest goods for a high price. What are the toppest goods? I tell you, the toppest goods are those which sounded “the worst”, like how people describe my music now. (Zuoxiao, 2013, 1)

Zuzhou's seemingly blunt statement resonated with both the cut-out consumers and the cut-out dealers I came across. Music critic Yang Bo (2014), for example, admits in a retrospective essay that much of the music which once obsessed him on the cut-out market, looking in retrospect, was actually pretty hard to swallow:

To take a look back now, I should say I might never actually have liked the genre of grindcore that much, at least at the aesthetic level. There were so many cases like this, for example Lou Reed and John Zorn, or labels such as 4AD and ECM, back then I would never let go any of these titles as long as I saw them on the market, no matter how much they cost. Actually most of them were not pleasant to listen to at all. (Yang, 2014)

Yang Bo's confession proves the existence of a subtle layer of “unorthodox and radical” sensibilities underneath the practice of cut-out consumption, driving cut-out consumers like him to embrace sounds they didn't necessarily feel comfortable to hear. In another

interview, Yang Zhi's example vividly illustrates the significant effort the "cut-out generation" invested in the progression of their tastes:

I remember the first time I stepped into his store, I told him I wanted "something heavy". He just had some new stock piled on the table, so he gave me one. I plugged in the earphones and immediately felt the rumble noise in my head, I couldn't hear anything clearly! That was Pantera, he first recommended Pantera to me, I said this one was a bit too noisy, so he picked up another one, I listened to it and felt it was only a little bit better than the previous one, that one turned out to be Motörhead; I didn't know any of these bands back then. Still, I eventually chose Pantera, I chose the noisier one. It was the album with someone's face smashed by a fist (Figure 29), I bought it back home and listened to it for quite a while. (Yang Zhi)

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 29 Album cover of *Vulgar Display of Power* by Pantera⁵²

While Pantera and Motörhead belonged undoubtedly among the "unorthodox and radical", what Zuzhou refers to as "sounding the worst" was not only based on sound volume. Chao Gai, a devoted metalhead who would go on to become a cut-out retailer himself, recalled the progression of his own music taste:

It took me two years to upgrade from being a cut-out listener to being a cut-out dealer. In these two years, the most obscure level of my listening had reached the level of The Smiths, although I couldn't really understand much, haha, the heaviest level I could take had reached Suffocation, and the weirdest level had reached 4AD, Sonic Youth and Pixies... (Chao Gai)

Though the music of The Smiths and Suffocation bore no significant overlap in terms of style, for Chao Gai, the important thing was that none of them was easy to listen to. Going through descriptions of music considered to belong to the "top" category in both the "cut-out archive" and my interviews, I identified the following frequently employed terms: "heavy" ("重"), "dirty" ("脏"), "fierce" ("狠"), "weird" ("怪"), and "alternative" ("另类"). Diverse as these labels were, they pointed towards more or less the same set of aesthetic

⁵² Retrieved from: <https://www.discogs.com/Pantera-Vulgar-Display-Of-Power/release/2902337>

standards illustrating what Zuzhou referred to by “sounded the worst” (“最难听”), which in Chinese also bears the meaning of “the most difficult to listen to”. The practice of cut-out learning-by-listening, in this sense, was an endless practice of self-training in which one opened up his or her ears towards ever more difficult and novel sounds from the cut-outs. In this process, most of the enjoyment wasn’t generated because listening itself was pleasant: in the short term, the reward of cut-out listening came from the more immediate excitement of confronting something novel and stimulating; in the long term, joy was also generated from the sense of achievement and progression the moment one realized one could finally “get” the beauty of a once “difficult” style of music.

6.2.4 Constructing the Rock Mythology

Although not everyone I interviewed shared this “radical” approach, it did capture the music listening experiences of the majority of “cut-out youth” I talked with. The price hierarchies on the cut-out market provided the most direct evidence. Although cut-out records, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, came in all genres and styles in a highly unpredictable manner, after multiple rounds of filtering in the wholesale and retail sectors, the “top goods” would always end up being largely “rock-oriented”, to quote Nanjing cut-out dealer Shi Jin:

It had to be rock, it was always rock. ...on the cut-out market, at the end of the day all the “top goods” were rock. (Shi Jin)

As confirmed by most cut-out dealers I spoke to, even when the uncertainty of supply and demand was taken into account, titles with more “rock elements” were still attached to evidently greater commercial value than their pop counterparts. In general, the so-conceived “soft” music styles that tended to be excluded by de Kloet’s rock mythology – pop, country, and dance music, for example – ended up as “dross swill” whereas the “hard” ones were often celebrated as *the* sounds of the “cut-out generation” and thus endowed with a guaranteed “topness” on the market. The most typical case was the distinguishable style of heavy metal, along with its various sub-genres, which remained among the highest priced throughout the 1990s. As the cut-out industry further expanded, cut-out consumers like Chao Gai who were past their metalhead phase went on to search for more challenging sounds, resulting in the addition of new-comers in the “top goods” category, most notably punk, grunge, alternative rock, gothic/industrial music, and the so-termed “experimental music” in general. In parallel, fanzines and magazines with a focus on specific music

genres or sub-genres, to name a few, *Punk Time*, *Painkiller* (《重型音乐》), *Extreme Music* (《极端音乐》), and *Gothic Age* (《歌特时代》), replaced the classic guide of *Audio and Video World* – whose comprehensive coverage of all genres and primary focus on pop gradually became obsolete - as more specialized sources of cut-out “music info”⁵³. In his essay “I Miss the Violent Noise”, Yan Jun (2007, 28) summarized this historical involvement:

From the mid-1990s on, Chinese music fans who were growing with nutrition from the cut-out cassettes finally cast off their booster - namely the *Audio and Video World* - and threw themselves into the field of experimental rock and underground music. In this process of self-throwing, everything that was radical, extreme, and abnormal was welcomed and embraced. (Yan, 2007, 28)

An interesting case was the genre of jazz. Initially, the consumer base of cut-out jazz titles, similar to the classical ones, was a small group consisting mainly of well-educated adults earning a good salary, most of whom weren't self-identified “cut-out youth”. However, as the “top good” category gradually expanded, the style of free jazz came to be cherished by Chinese rock fans seeking more radical, avant-garde sounds. In the life stories of many members of the “cut-out generation” I collected, free jazz/free improvisation was almost always the first kind of jazz music they heard and, for some, still the only kind they stuck to. Lu Da explained to me in the interview:

We rock listeners also hunted for jazz cut-outs... for example free jazz, this really is the same kind of thing as punk. When I tried to listen to stuff like Louis Armstrong, like early Miles Davis, I simply couldn't enjoy them. We listened to jazz backwards, we jumped into free jazz right from the start, and gradually went back to earlier ones and found that they were actually also good music. This was the same as listening to rock, I started from Nirvana and Sex Pistols and then I traced backwards. Because when I first listened to the Beatles, I felt that they were a piece of shit, I just couldn't appreciate it at all, only later I found it good. (Lu Da)

In this sense, the “cut-out generation” grew their own aesthetic framework which was applied to jazz, and to all kinds of Western music they heard from the cut-outs. This aesthetic was inherently profane as it was constructed in a distinctively autonomous,

⁵³ By contrast, although a number of pop-focused magazines such as *Hit Music* (《Hit 轻音乐》) and *Modern Music Field* (《当代歌坛》) emerged in relatively the same period, they had barely any readership among cut-out consumers.

sensuous, and local manner, largely neglecting established aesthetic standards in the West where the music on the cut-outs was originally produced and intended to be consumed. This aesthetic celebrated the music that “sounded the worst” or “the hardest to listen to”, it encouraged Chinese listeners to challenge their previous listening experiences, constantly directing them towards music characterized by immediate sensuous stimulation and contrasting sonic novelties. This aesthetic was bound to be “unorthodox and radical” as it was defined against the “good sounds” of its time: the overlapping soundscapes of pop where the dominant and the residual resided.

The cultivation of this “radical” aesthetic was fundamentally intertwined with an attachment to the profane medium of the music cassette which stood as an alternative “sonic infrastructure” (Kielman, 2017) to the dominant mass media platforms. While the cassette had been manufactured on a large scale since its emergence in the 1970s, by the time the cut-out cassettes appeared in China, it had long ceased to be the revolutionary piece of technology it was in the age of Teresa Teng. It was no longer a fashion celebrated by the young people, but rather a secret kept by a minority of them. Yet the cassette remained a medium with a unique affordance which invited the investment of a considerable amount of human agency and “self-reference” (Huang, 2001, 4). Cassette listening was private and attentive, it allowed the listener to exercise active control over the music being played, and it often encouraged manual, creative labour to alter both its physical and sonic materialities. In a way, for the “cut-out youth”, the typical behaviour of “fiddling with our twin-cassette recorder in the cramped room” (as cited in the introduction chapter) was more of a hidebound gesture than a progressive one: they deliberately stuck to the old-fashioned medium of music in order to escape from the prevailing “good sounds” of their time. In my interviews, both the television and karaoke were frequently disavowed as not proper, “serious” ways of engagement with music. For example, when asked what the cut-outs meant to his life, Lin Chong answered by expressing his harsh dislike of the television:

I think some people really intended to use the cut-outs as a means of isolating themselves from the mass society outside, as a means of building their own spiritual world, like building a house. They felt safe hiding inside this house, because they could no longer be brainwashed by the fatuous tools of propaganda. There must have been people like this, in fact, I think I belong to this category, because I was just thinking about this last night: I never watched TV in mainland China, because as soon as someone turned on the TV and I heard the voice of the TV hosts,

especially those of the entertainment programmes, I just couldn't bear it for a single second. I'm not talking about the speeches they were making, that's a deeper level, I'm saying that I couldn't even stand the very sound of their voices... it was like you were completely ignoring it deep inside your bones. This is why I never watched mainland television, no matter whether it was the TV dramas or the fucking festival galas.
(Lin Chong)

In the eyes of the “cut-out generation”, pop was significantly re-defined and re-contextualized by its channels of dissemination and consumption. Rock versus pop, in this sense, was not a mere distinction of taste, but also a contest between infrastructures of listening. The contested politics of tastes, aesthetics, and sonic infrastructures in the cut-out subculture corresponded to de Kloet's (2010, 26) thesis on rock's rebellious gesture against the “perceived authoritarian character” of the Communist regime and rock's hostility towards forces of commercialization and marketization in reform-era China. In this sense, the decade-long process in which the “cut-out generation” cultivated their “radical aesthetic” through the profane medium of the cassette was a historical course of penetration in which the cut-out subculture directed its members to undertake a “lived assessment” of its time through the use of profane items (Willis, 2000).

This penetration, however, should not be reduced to a reflection or iteration of the rock mythology imported from the Western context by the cut-outs. Instead, I argue that the rock mythology which de Kloet observed in early 2000s was built up piece by piece in the very process of this penetration. In an article titled “In Yuanping, We listen to Sonic Youth”, published in the first issue of *Punk Time* (Figure 30). The author, under the pseudonym “*Niangziguan*”, wrote from a first person perspective, depicting members of the cut-out “circle” in his city:

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Figure 30 The article “In Yuanping, We listen to Sonic Youth”, published in *Punk Time*, Vol. 1

One day in late spring, I went to M's house. M tried to express to me his opinions on a festival gala which all the people in our country love and respect, he spoke to me gnashing his teeth in anger: “I'd rather watch a piece of shit I just dropped instead.” ... His ferocious facial expressions made me think of the scene of a rat suffering from rat poison in the shadows. We are fed up with the popular culture in China today, we feel

sick of it, we feel angry about lots of things, but what we feel more is helplessness, we find there's no way out. (Niangziguan, 1999, 55)

Here, the music of Sonic Youth found its meanings in contrast to “the popular culture in China today”, represented by the CCTV New Year’s Gala. The radicalness of “rock”, in this sense, was defined against the local sonic landscapes, and should be distinguished from its critical power in the original Western context. While the radical aesthetic of the “cut-out generation” demonstrated a significant overlap with what de Kloet (2010, 84) identifies as the “hard” sounds framed by the “hard forces” of the rock mythology⁵⁴, rock was chosen not because it inherently “carries a critique of its own means of production” (Frith, 1981, 11) but because it felt immediately challenging and strikingly different from the dominant and residual forms of music in 1990s China.⁵⁵ The cut-outs didn’t bring the rock mythology to China, nor was the profane meanings attached to the cut-outs a direct consequence of rock’s authenticating power. Instead, the contested politics of tastes and aesthetics of the “cut-out generation” bore specific historical roots and affective origins, themselves building blocks of the Chinese version of the rock mythology in the 1990s.

6.3 Structure of Feeling

6.3.1 Affective Infrastructure

Having clarified the historical dynamics which bred the “radical” tastes of the “cut-out generation”, I now approach their structure of feeling in a more comprehensive manner. When Williams (1980, 154) identifies the emergent, “new style” in his study of the Bloomsbury Group, he is referring to a much more concrete and comprehensive aspect of social life than what the term “style” denotes in the CCCS subcultural theories. The “style” Williams attempts to describe is ultimately a structure of feeling which permeates all aspects of life, so that it is manifest in values, habits, attitudes, emotions, social relationships, as well as in the “the expressive forms and rituals” (Hebdige, 1979, 3) which the term “style” in subcultural studies refers to. The Williamsian style, in this sense, can be

⁵⁴ This affinity can be further confirmed by the exclusion of titles by female musicians and non-English ones, which I will not elaborate here due to limited space.

⁵⁵ This case of “rock”, I believe, also conform to Williams’ original intention in coining the notion of emergence which refuses to easily define any element of lived experience under a fixed and reductive form.

seen as the style with a lowercase *s* while the CCCS subcultural “style” comes with a capital one.

Arguably, in the case of a subculture, both the “little *s* style” and the big *S* one are manifestations of a same structure of “practical consciousness” (Williams, 1977) lying underneath, which functions as a generative mechanism of the cultural practices, social relationships, and discursive formations constituting the subculture. I have, so far, mainly focused my analysis on the “big *S* style” of the “cut-out generation” as a music subculture, that is, its contested politics of music taste and aesthetics. I will now look beyond the symbolic level and broaden my approach to incorporate aspects of more ordinary, everyday lived experiences. In doing so, I aim to arrive at an “articulation” (Williams, 1977, 133) of the substances that constitute a structure of feeling: while the concept is designed as an elusive, pre-emergent, and formally undefined layer of social reality, I try to approach it as an affective infrastructure which was embedded in and intertwined with four “little *s* styles” of the cut-out subculture: rumours and discourses, material infrastructures, social relationships, and logics of social practices. While these aspects are not intended to be exhaustive, they are chosen in this study to tackle the key issues which defined and conditioned the political agenda of the cut-out subculture, that is, its historically situated penetration towards the “imagined enemies” of the state and the market in 1990s China.

6.3.2 The “Confiscated Cassettes”

As an affective infrastructure, structure of feeling is deeply implicated in the mechanisms of media production in a subculture. As I will show in this section, in the early period of the cut-out market, a distinctive set of Post-Tiananmen sentiments drove the fabrication of a peculiar kind of rumours which attached profane and “political” meanings to the then mysterious commodity of cut-out cassettes.

Admittedly, for anyone new to the cut-out world, one of the typical emotional experiences was the frustration, confusion, and anger at having to cope with a record both physically defective and musically incomplete. Lin Chong, for example, recalled his complex feelings toward the cut-outs he bought:

When I listened to that music at that time, immediately I felt a strong impact at heart, and then I felt loss and pity, you know, because I thought, why couldn't these records be officially imported by Chinese record companies? Moreover, none of those records could be played complete, it was such a shame! (Lin Chong)

This set of intense emotions was often accompanied by the inevitable question: why the cut? Before the emergence of the cut-out niche media – music magazines and radio programmes - in the second half of the 1990s, micro media, that is, word of mouth produced, developed, and disseminated by every participant of the cut-out business, was arguably the most powerful type of medium, effectively influencing the conditions of the market and the discourses evolving in the subculture. The severe shortage of reliable information both on the cut-outs themselves and on Western music left space for rumours of all kinds. In reality, before the cut-outs were named universally as *dakou*, their origin, referred to by many simply as “the truth”, was the biggest myth on the cut-out market in the early 1990s. Gao Qiu, for example, recalled the various versions of the “truth” he heard:

At first everybody said the cut was done by the customs staff, and then some said: “no, it was the Communist Party!” And then some said it was done by companies in Hong Kong... Now I know these were all wrong, for this I even went to ask a boss in Hong Kong on purpose, then I knew that the cut was done in America, and the holes were drilled in America.
(Gao Qiu)

Considering his position at the top of the cut-out pyramid, the fact that Gao Qiu himself had to consult his suppliers for the “truth” indicates how far the “truth” was from basically everyone in the business. While a motley variety of stories existed, their main plots were not so different. Reportedly, the most widely circulated version was that the broken cassettes which mysteriously appeared were originally “confiscated cassettes” (“罚没带”), or “customs cassettes” (“海关带”), whose damages were left by the Communist government officials as a mark of the “noxious weeds” of capitalism. Produced in and further boosted by the micro media of the cut-out market, these stories also functioned as a selling point for this mysterious commodity. Wang Xiaofeng (2006, 110) provides a detailed description in his essay “Dakou”:

Where on earth did the cut-out cassettes come from? When we first saw the cut-outs, everyone was guessing. Around the entrance of the CNPIEC building, you could easily hear different versions of rumours about the origin of cut-out cassettes, for example: some people in America somehow came to know that there was a group of people in China eager to hear the same kind of music as what they listened to, so they prepared a whole ship of cassettes and sent them all the way across the ocean to China. Unfortunately, as soon as the ship pulled in to shore, it was discovered by our Southern anti-smuggling police force. A ship full of cassettes, how evil! It must be the kind of rotten Western culture

employed to poison the mind of the new generation of Chinese youth in order to achieve the aim of “peaceful evolution”, they must all be destroyed! So they sent the cassettes to a brutal place and devastated these beloved records. Yet some people managed to hijack them on the way to the plastic factories and secretly put them out for sale. That was how the cut-outs gradually circulated from some port in Guangdong to the whole country... In the CNPIEC circle, there existed many versions of tales like this, and every one of us wished that we had a relative who worked in the southern customs, and imagined that we sneaked into their warehouse at night, and grabbed all the “top goods” at once. This is why in the early period of the cut-outs, they were also called “confiscated cassettes”. (Wang, 2006, 110)

Wang Xiaofeng’s story evokes a series of overlapping historical narratives. On the one hand, the evilness of these “confiscated cassettes” echoed the sense of illicitness and taboo-breaking in the time of Teresa Teng, whose music too was once condemned and banned as the “sound of decadence”. On the other hand, these stories also bore a certain degree of resemblance to black market tales in the Soviet regime such as the secret history of “jazz on bones” (see Troitsky, 1988; Ganley, 1996; Zhuk, 2010) widely circulated in the post-cold-war era. The largely fabricated but clearly politically charged subject of the “confiscated cassettes” rumours, in this light, drew from the typical post-revolutionary milieu and discourses in its theme, setting, and the tone of narration. However, on top of this, it was the post-Tiananmen sentiments which permeated the social atmosphere of the early 1990s that invested these rumours with credibility and enabled their wide dissemination.

As both a national social movement and a huge media event, the 1989 democracy movement, along with the dramatic military crackdown that followed, had become an important part of the formative memories of the 1960s-born or early-1970s-born “cut-out youth”. Many referred to this extensively during my interviews, and here I quote from Wu Song, born in 1973, who was in Nanjing when the movement happened:

I did feel the June 4th event, in fact it could be said to be my political enlightenment. At that time it was the second semester of my first high school year, before that I had no interest in politics at all... during that period, they also had events in Nanjing, a lot of hunger strikes and demonstrations, so in the afternoon I would often ride my bike to watch them, because our school was very close to the *Gulou* area... in fact, what moved me the most was not the so-called destiny of the Chinese people or the future of the country or stuff like that, it was that kind of passion, the kind of emotion that you could feel that people around you were trying to do something, to make some changes. I was 16, and I

remember being very excited... I was in fact just pretending to discuss those serious issues with those older than me, but what really moved me was that particular emotion, that particular atmosphere. (Wu Song)

As the movement came to its bitter end on June 4th, followed by mass arrests and an immediate tightening of political control, the atmosphere of the society turned into one filled with unspoken discontent, distrust and disillusionment, as well as fear and anger at the prospect of going back to the pre-reform era of closure and surveillance. While the political climate was gradually loosening up following Deng's Southern tour in 1992, the post-Tiananmen sentiments had become part of the structure of feeling of the "cut-out generation" during their formative years. During fieldwork, I found that a few of my interviewees, who were not aware of the real "truth", still believed that the "confiscated cassettes" story was true, while others expressed a more ambivalent attitude, stating that although in fact the credibility of the story didn't matter that much to them, these rumours made the cut-outs more mysterious and attractive as something to buy and to listen to.

Arguably, to circulate the "confiscated cassettes" rumours through word of mouth was an iteration of the post-revolutionary discourses, but it was also a gesture individuals actively and intentionally performed driven by their inner affective urges. In this sense, the feelings of anger, thrill, and the joy of revenge - the "confiscated cassettes" story, after all, had a happy ending - which were attached to the defective materiality of the cut-outs had already taken roots as an affective infrastructure in the formative experiences of the "cut-out youth". Landing on this affective infrastructure, the cut-outs were not only bound to be "political" but also had already become "political" before the rock music they contained was played. Therefore, they were affectively re-contextualized as a political taboo without actually touching upon existing political issues.

6.3.3 Infrastructural Poetics

In addition to discursive formations, another key site of this process of re-contextualization was material infrastructure which, in the case of the cut-out retail business, was characterized by pettiness, disorder, and an assumed illegality. As I will demonstrate, in 1990s China, existing political sensibilities blended with the distinctive sensuous textures of the cut-out retail infrastructure and produced a unique "poetics" (Larkin, 2013), which "penetrated" by confronting the imaginary of the state in a nonofficial manner.

In general, cut-out retail existed in three major types of business outlets in the urban Chinese landscape. Among these, the most commonly seen and far-reaching one was made

up of street vendors scattered all around the city who sold cut-outs by setting up so-called “ground stalls” (“地摊”). A cut-out ground stall consisted typically of a paper box or two, or a piece of cloth spread on the ground, where the records were displayed. For a day’s business, a vendor, who typically used his/her own residence as a warehouse for stock, normally took no more than 200 cut-outs for sale. At a ground stall, the dealer would sit or crouch down behind the commodities on display, ready to pack everything up and move whenever necessary. On the street, cut-out vendors could often be found alongside other vendors such as pirated book dealers, food stalls, and sellers of daily consumer goods. Their preferred locations included high-traffic areas such as overpasses, doorways of shopping centres, and both sides of busy streets.



Figure 31 Cut-out ground stall made with a portable bed⁵⁶

The second type of cut-out business outlets were rented counters in large-scale marketplaces including street markets, “small commodity” markets, and most notably electronics malls (“电器城/电子市场”). Typically, these were huge complexes of buildings organized into a multi-floor, flea-market-styled shopping centre. The “small commodity” markets were retail centres for daily goods and necessities, whereas in the

⁵⁶ Photo provided by Li Jianhong.

case of an electronics mall, one could expect to find computer spare parts, smuggled hi-fi equipment, and all types of non-legal audio-video products. From the mid-1990s on, these marketplaces became home to cut-out retailers who came together to form retail clusters where dozens of cut-out counters, usually no more than five metres wide each, shared a public space. During the peak of the cut-out period, famous retail districts with a burgeoning cut-out sector included *Dazimingzhong* (大自鸣钟) in Shanghai, *Wudaokou* (五道口) in Beijing, *Gangding* (岗顶) in Guangzhou, and *Huaqiangbei* (华强北) in Shenzhen. As many mentioned, experiences in electronics malls were by no means physically enjoyable: the mall was always crowded and noisy, there wasn't enough light, the air was smelly, and the ground was dirty. Walking inside an electronics mall one immediately felt a "rural and industrial atmosphere", as Hu (2008, 34) did in *Huaqiangbei*, which helped in a way to construct the wild, overwhelming, and even anarchistic experience of cut-out hunting. In the interview, Suo Chao described his adventures in *Gangding*, the so-called "cut-out heaven":

...I was like, fuck, I felt as if I was sleeping in a sea of cut-outs! It was so tremendous... a whole floor of the building was filled with - there must be over a hundred - small cut-out counters, can you imagine that? I was getting dizzy, I was a bit, like fucking stoned... Our record of cut-out hunting time was like eight hours? It must be close. I remember vividly that on the ground floor of the building there was a McDonald's, we would get something to eat there before the hunt, and we hunted and hunted and hunted, and then we felt hungry and went downstairs to get a McDonald's again, and a whole day had passed! (Suo Chao)

The last, and the most settled type of cut-out retail format was proper record stores, sometimes taking the form of the rented audio-video section of large bookstores. In the pre-cut-out years, the dominant products on sale in these stores were locally manufactured Chinese music cassettes. Upon their arrival, the cut-outs fell into a subtle grey area between the legal and the pirated which led to their semi-public status in-store: as frequently mentioned, cut-outs were often displayed in hidden corners which the shop owners would only reveal to trusted customers, and many retailers also mentioned the strategy of using official audio-visual products to "shield" the cut-outs for sale. Qin Ming, for example, shared his example in Changsha:

It was in one of the bookstores in Hunan Normal University... the shop owner spoke to me secretly, he said: "you have bought a lot of Chinese rock albums from here, now let me show you something." He opened a door and there was a room like this big, and on the walls there were all

cut-out CDs, I went immediately crazy, I was over-excited for sure. In the end I spent two or three hours and several hundred yuan there. (Qin Ming,)

This strategy was designed in particular to deal with the Cultural Bureau (文化局) who had the power to judge whether an audio video product was an illegal commodity. While big electronics markets and individual record stores usually held an officially issued business licence, namely the “Operation Permit for Audio-video Products” (《音像制品经营许可证》), they would often encounter the so-called “joint law enforcement” (“联合执法”) initiated by the local Cultural Bureau, who worked together with other departments including the Industrial and Commercial Bureau (工商局) and the police, to confiscate what was identified to be illegal, a process cut-out dealers termed a “bash” (“冲”). As I learnt during fieldwork, more than half of the cut-out retailers I interviewed ended their career in a fatal “bash”.

As for the street vendors who typically had no business licence, their natural enemy was an even harsher type of “law enforcers”: the so-called *chengguan* (“城管”), the urban management forces installed in each city. In southeast China, street vendors obtained the informal name of “*zougui*” (“走鬼”), literally “run devil”. As Zhang Shun, a former vendor in Guangzhou, explained to me, *zougui* was a slang term which originated in Hong Kong when street vendors informed each other of the arrival of the local police; “run devil” was in fact short for “run, there come the devils!” During fieldwork, many recalled thrilling and violent situations of cut-out vendors being chased, humiliated, or beaten by the *chengguan* who came to confiscate their goods. Zhang Heng, Zhang Shun’s *zougui* buddy, told me:

Back then when we sold cut-outs, every time the *chengguan* came the situation was intense, everyone immediately ran away, some hid behind the bushes, some ran into small alleys, and I ran with them. Some *chengguan* just came too fast, they would arrive jumping out of the car, it was almost like robbery. In fact, I never really cared that much about the goods being confiscated, they were not a part of me, right? But when this happened too many times, the conditioned reflex grew on you. After I stopped selling cut-outs, when I walked on the street and suddenly saw a *chengguan*, I still got startled, you know? ...once you saw them you immediately wanted to run! We did have to run very often, sometime several rounds in a single day, after each round, you saw some got caught, some got confiscated, people sitting on the road crying, these cases abounded. (Zhang Heng)

All three types of cut-out dealers, licensed or not, had frequently to move from one place to another. In order to secure a stable customer base, they usually exchanged their personal contact information with loyal consumers, in order to notify them their new trading spot. This explains why, contrary to the classic images of the Western record store as a site invested with a wealth of cultural and subcultural symbols, few cut-out retailers told me that they ever spent any effort on decorating their stores/stalls with banners, posters, or wallpapers. Simply, the high risk of being “bashed”, and consequently having to move places, proved that any extra cost on store appearance or on consumers’ instore experience was just an irrational investment. A store name, which was a necessity for their Western counterparts in order to produce a niche, subcultural feel, was also a luxury: for Chinese cut-out dealers who were destined to be chased around, their birth name eventually became their most useful brand. Against this background, the complaints about and disappointment with the banality of Chinese cut-out stores, as expressed by many in the interviews, made perfect sense. Wu Yong, for example, emphasized that the reason why he decided to open up his own record store in Beijing in 1995 was exactly that the cut-out stores which occupied the city at that time didn’t “deserve to be called a record store”:

I liked many of the foreign record stores, when I walked in, I often felt as if I was at home. However, entering a cut-out store in China, you felt no difference from all those marketplaces which sold shoes or hats or whatever. That’s why I decided to open a *Wuyong Record Store*, and let all music lovers feel at home. (Wu Yong)

Putting aside the pride and prejudice of the cultural elites, the “cut-out youth” I interviewed typically regarded the shabbiness of cut-out retail infrastructure as a reflection of its, to quote a few of my interviewees, “primitive” (“野生”) power of growth and expansion. This was perhaps best illustrated in Dong Ping’s vivid analogy, describing the cut-out market in his hometown Tianjin:

It was like those cut-out stalls just became all over the place overnight, like all of a sudden. It was like when you first discovered a cockroach at home, after two days, they would be fucking all over the place, you know? It was exactly this kind of feeling! (Dong Ping)

Indeed, no one could deny the extraordinary “liveliness” (Amin, 2014) and prosperity of the cut-out retail infrastructure. Throughout the 1990s, Chinese cut-out dealers ran their business as guerrilla warfare, managing to circumvent the powerful “law enforcers” through constant moving and hiding, while at the same time reaping the high financial gain

of the cut-out industry. Yan Qing, for example, told me that in the early 2000s the rent for his counter in *Dazimingzhong* was only 700 yuan per month, and he could make a daily profit of at least 300, which easily reached 3000 during weekends. In the stories from different cities, many cut-out stalls and stores were remembered for the crowded and bustling scenes of customers scrambling, and even fighting, to get hold of records they wanted. In many senses, cut-out hunting was more like a perilous and thrilling adventure than a leisure activity. Cai Jing, for example, described the famous chaotic scene of “opening first-hand boxes” (“开头箱”) in Beijing’s cut-out market:

He (the seller) would get two boxes of goods, once opened up, hell, everyone was like pigs fighting over food! Boom, all the records were scattered about, it was such a mess, people pulling and pushing, throwing punches, and crushing each other. He would stand there and watch, and say: “don’t fight, don’t fight...” (Cai Jing)

The typically chaotic scenes and massive flow of people further aggravated the perceived “primitiveness” of the cut-out retail infrastructure. The unpleasant look, smell, and other physical conditions which one experienced in the process of cut-out hunting formed a particular “sentient landscape” (Amin, 2014, 139) which was fused with the assumed illegal and transgressive characters of cut-out retail practices into a profane “poetics” (Larkin, 2013). As I learnt during fieldwork, the confrontational, often violent scenes of “bashes” had been associated affectively with the infrastructure of the cut-out business. For cut-out consumers, although the “bashes” rarely generated loss for them, the “primitive” qualities of the cut-out retail infrastructure, many of which were originally compromises with the threat of the “law enforcers”, were given a new layer of profane meanings: while bearing no intentional symbolic function, they became re-contextualized and interpreted as signs which conveyed a sense of illicitness and a feel of the underground. Wu Yong’s opinion was representative

...it felt a bit like some underground organizations, this feeling did exist. Think about it, when you went to a cut-out store, you wouldn’t expect to see a sign telling you what it was from the outside, right? (Wu Yong)

Best illustrating this profane poetics of the cut-out retail infrastructure, I found an essay in which the author, under the pseudonym *Baqizidi*, described his *Wudaokou* memories of cut-out hunting:

From 1997 on, Beijing’s cut-out market embraced its most glorious era: the *Wudaokou* era... at that time, *Wudaokou* was quite a desolate scenery,

on both sides of the not-so-wide road, there were all small stores selling cut-outs, the most famous one was a place known as the “iron house”. It was not a big space, but it hosted six or seven cut-out dealers, each one occupying a counter. The house had no window, there was only an iron door for you to enter and a ventilating fan to make sure that the people inside stayed alive. Within this gap between entering and exiting, and between life and death, you could hear sounds of cursing, bargaining, and music playing, all mixed up in the air filled with the smells of stale sweat, box meals, and cigarette smoke. The rotating blades of the fan cut through the light that went in, it was like a stage. This is so fucking rock, this is almost the *Wudaokou* version of Woodstock, absolute Utopia, absolute anarchy, and absolute Chinese characteristics. (Baqizidi, 2017)

From the bodily experience of being in the “iron house” which felt both stifling and lively at the same time, the author claimed to have sensed the spirit of anarchism and of rock when, at one moment, *Wudaokou* became Woodstock in his eyes. In this way, the materiality of the infrastructure produced a particular set of profane meanings through the ambient conditions it produced. These meanings were nowhere written but immediately sensed by the body. In fact, on this “stage” which the author described, the spirit of rock did not arise from the music of Western rock itself, rather, it arose from the bodily experience of living in the unique rock-ish atmosphere of the “iron house”. This, I assume, was the rationale behind the “absolute Chinese characteristics” which the author identified. In this sense, the cut-outs, and the Western rock music they carried, were re-contextualized in local infrastructures – both the material and the affective ones - and coloured with a distinctive sensuous meaningfulness.

These meanings, manifest in the senses of “absolute Utopia” and “absolute anarchy”, bore a political dimension which was clearly evident but in no way explicit. In this story, the “imagined enemy” of the oppressive state authority, while never completely revealing itself, existed in every corner of darkness in the “iron house” as the frontline “law enforcers” were ready to break through the iron door at any moment⁵⁷. Therefore, entering the “iron house”, one gained a chance to “dip into” (Hagen & DeNora, 2012) a nonofficial world which staged the imagined play of Woodstock anarchists confronting the Communist authority. The “iron house”, although located secretly, was after all a site open to all consumers. In this sense, cut-out consumption functioned to create a “liminal space”,

⁵⁷ In reality, they also did so, according to Tong Guan, one of the retailers in the “iron house”, their infamous den was eventually “bashed” in March 2003, thus also marking the end of his own retail career.

as theorized by Hagen and DeNora (2012, 454), in which “one poised between official society and nonofficial life”.

In both the cases of the fabrication of the “confiscated cassettes” rumours and the poetics of the cut-out retail infrastructure, the imaginary of the state was floating in the background: it was firmly embedded in the post-Tiananmen atmosphere which grew the typically post-revolutionary versions of the “truth”, and it was sensuously encoded in the felt textures of the cut-out retail infrastructure. We can therefore see the evidence of the emergent structure of feeling which sought penetration by continuously drawing people, in their everyday life, into confrontation with the imagined tyranny of the Party-State, which also stood as the subculture’s attempt to “think” (Willis, 2000) for its members against the socio-political conditions in post-Tiananmen China.

6.3.4 Cut-out “Circles”

Williams (1977, 133; 1980), in his work, pays extensive emphasis to the “sociality” of structure of feeling, which for example is exemplified in his analysis of the “friendship” in the Bloomsbury Group. For the “cut-out generation”, the affective infrastructure was also evidently manifest in and effectively defined the characters of their social relationships. The cut-out “circle”, as I found out, was a key site of the cut-out subculture not only because it related closely to the practice of cut-out consumption, but also because it generated a unique type of friendship which was affectively and ethically driven by the emergent structure of feeling at the turn of the 1980s to the 1990s.

Cut-out “circles” took roots in the home-taping culture. From the late 1980s on, centred upon the practice of cassette copying, informal networks of music listeners emerged in cities like Shanghai and Beijing (Li, 2007). Normally, these communities were based in an open space around the local branches of CNPIEC - the only official retail outlet for imported music records - as well as the “copying and recording service centre” (“复录社”) in universities. Gradually, the practice of exchange and communication generated senses of community. In my interview, Chai Jin described the cassette circle around Beijing’s CNPIEC:

At that time, buying and selling were of course important, because it was the commercial exchanges that sustained the circle, but more important was that after those commercial exchanges, more and more people would gather there, communicate with each other, and update each other about what was new. Can you imagine the feeling of fascination and longing

once someone brought a new message that XXX was having a new album out, and you still hadn't seen what the cover was like?... In the end it was not about buying, it was about hanging out and seeing friends.
(Chai Jin)

The early home-taping communities were a mixture of commercial and non-commercial relationships. While Beijing's cassette circle consisted mostly of one-to-one or many-to-many exchange practices, in Shanghai, the dealers of copied cassettes, locally called "copy bros" ("拷兄"), had already become private entrepreneurs profiting from a robust black market of home taped *Gangtai* titles. When the cut-outs arrived on a large scale, the "copy bros" became the first generation of professional cut-out retailers, and the home taping communities turned into the "critical mass" (Crossly & Ibrahim, 2012) for local cut-out "circles" which, by the mid-1990s, were commonly established in second-tier cities. Typically, these circles were built up by face-to-face relations formed in the situation of cut-out consumption, as each city's cut-out retail clusters became the sites of social gathering, as Taiyuan's Yang Xiong told me:

We kind of people all met each other at the doorway of cut-out stores, this was the only possible place, no other possibilities. (Yang Xiong)

One of the legendary cut-out "circles" was the *Soldiers' Club* ("军人俱乐部") circle which existed in mid-and-late 1990s Nanjing. Located near the central *Gulou* area, the *Soldiers' Club* was a state-owned property converted into a big marketplace for cultural goods, and this was where the first few cut-out stalls in Nanjing were located. The *Soldiers' Club* circle was formed by Nanjing's first generation of devoted "cut-out youth", mostly 70s-born male students or recent graduates. The circle would give rise to a vibrant underground scene in the late 1990s from which bands like P.K.14 and Seven Eight O'clock (七八点) rose to fame. During fieldwork, I visited Nanjing in April 2018, and interviewed five core members of the *Soldiers' Club* circle. One of them, Ruan Xiaowu, described to me the formation of the circle:

...we all met each other in *Soldiers' Club*. We really turned it into a club, making friends, giving speeches and sharing everything... I think it went all naturally so, it did not need someone to think "I want to know that person", it was just that we were all there for one single aim: we all loved music. Therefore, if you met a person once, you might have no reaction; then you met him a second time, you would nod to each other; and the third time, you two would start chatting... I think it was one of the characters of our time, the social atmosphere back then was like that, people could trust each other and there was nothing interest-oriented,

nothing profit-driven, it was just the kind of very pure relationship between one person and another, based on the joy of communication, no other reasons needed. (Ruan Xiaowu)

Evident in Ruan Xiaowu's narrative was an "atmosphere" which he regarded as specific to the old time. What distinguished this atmosphere, as others also mentioned, was an emphasized and celebrated moral dimension. Indeed, while in cut-out "circles" both music records and "music info" were regularly disseminated and exchanged, many stressed that they came together because of a strong set of social ties which involved not only the love of music, but also of commonly held values, beliefs, and political attitudes. Wu Song, a core member of the *Soldiers' Club* circle, emphasized the role of this community as a hub of political discussions:

We would discuss a lot of stuff beyond music... for example art, we would discuss films, and we would discuss life and the society, because most of us were not content with the society and the authority, at times we discussed these matters. You could understand it in this way: the cut-out circle was like a centre for word of mouth, because back then when we got together people would bring some news, news which we hadn't heard, because there was no Internet back then, so words circulated in this way and people would discuss them, and most of us would criticize, or curse the government, it was like giving vent to our emotions, because we were angry after knowing these things. ...we were all discussing this, nobody was like "I don't want to talk about it"; there was no such escapist, cynical type of person among us. (Wu Song)

This "political" dimension was connected to the moral dimension which demanded a "non-profit-driven" ethic, in my interviews, and often it was reflected in the emphasis on the authenticity of one's attitudes and opinions over their instrumentality. Words and deeds, in this context, were supposed to be genuine expressions in themselves, rather than a means to achieve other ends. Wu Song referred to a conversation he had with another member of the circle, Ruan Xiaoqi, which I quote in length:

I used to talk about this with Ruan Xiaoqi, I said to him that, we friends, when we were together, we should be like... like a kind of "new human beings" ("一代新人"). We need to completely throw away the worldly constraints we used to learn from the society, we need to eliminate all those hypocritical things, we were friends and purely friends, so we would be frank and honest to each other... it was like, after listening to rock we become a generation of "new human beings", we are completely different from before and we don't want those vanities and stuff, so if I didn't get what this music was about, I'd say directly that I didn't get it... this is why I think this Nanjing circle still maintains good

relationships today, we are still close, it's because we don't have all those worldly values, we had the idea of being a generation of "new human beings", we wanted to create a different way of communicating and a different kind of relationship between people. (Wu Song)

What Wu Song referred to as "worldly" and "hypocritical" here should be understood against the specific historical background of early 1990s China when the society in general went through a "change of heart" as the logic of marketization permeated everyday life, bringing into prominence a "new ideology" (Wang, 2000, 12) which "holds in esteem profit, wealth, and economic competitiveness". In this sense, Wu Song's emphasis on the "newness" of his friendship circle, characterized by frankness and purity, was a response to certain aspects of the "neoliberal subjectivity" (Anagnost, 1997; Zhang & Ong, 2008) which started to prevail in urban Chinese society along with the deepening of Deng's reform. It therefore came as no surprise that Nanjing's cut-out circle followed an "anti-consumerist" code of conduct, to quote Wu Song again:

Back then I was for sure more or less anti-consumerist, anti-materialist, and a bit puritan, it was common in our friendship circle. It was simple for us back then: we only consumed what was necessary, at that period it meant cassettes, namely music, and you kept the consumption of everything else to the lowest level. For example, we accepted the consumption of books and music, but not things to eat, to wear, to entertain... in fact even now, many of these old friends of mine refuse to buy a car or buy a flat, we still hold this attitude... I think people in the 1990s were mostly in pursuit of consumerism, but we were really, like subconsciously, instinctively feeling that: "no, we do not like this". (Wu Song)

This corresponded to one of the most frequently mentioned, stereotypical behaviours that stood out in the adolescent memories of the "cut-out youth": everyone used to skip meals in order to save money to buy cut-outs. An obvious link can be drawn from this anti-consumerist ethic to the classic "moral idealism of high culture" (Wang, 2001, 71) of the 1980s which was established on a fundamental dichotomy between "the material" and "the spiritual", a distinction which had deep historical roots back in the socialist era and generated intense intellectual debates during the 1980s (Larson, 1989; Wang, 1996, 41). This material/spiritual dichotomy was one which the "cut-out youth" often referred to, and was echoed over and over again in my interviews. Music, especially rock music, was always seen in this context as representing the spiritual and idealist side, while money and physical needs and consumption fell on the material side. Ruan Xiaowu, for example, claimed:

At least back then we saw music as higher than life, it was something like our ideal or belief. (Ruan Xiaowu)

Seen in this light, the “new” human beings which Wu Song envisioned was in fact an afterglow of the idealist 1980s before the state-led neoliberal project was initiated in full force aiming at a “socialist market economy”. In this sense, the “cut-out generation”, through their established social bonds, performed a set of ethic norms which belonged to the “liberal good old days”, thereby “penetrating” the dominant ideologies of their time. While the *Soldiers’ Club* circle stood as perhaps China’s most idealist cut-out community, this ethic dimension was also apparent in many other cut-out “circles” of the same period. Like the Post-Tiananmen sentiments, this ethic of moral idealism inherited from the 1980s was also a part of the pre-existing affective infrastructure which was to emerge and to realize its penetration via the cut-out subculture; while the “confiscated rumours” were directed towards the “imagined enemy” of the state, the ethic of the cut-out “circles” defined itself against the market and was thus, in the Chinese context, often understood to be less “political”. This explains why, as I will show in the following sections, while the state often existed as an enemy that was only felt or fabricated but not explicitly discussed, the penetration in relation to the market took a more conscious, active, and even confrontation form.

6.3.5 “Dealing in Support of Consuming”

The anti-consumerist ethic was most evident in the cut-out business itself when music, deemed essentially spiritual and idealist, was to be exchanged for money. Cai Jing, for example, described to me the struggle he once had:

You were thinking: this thing called rock music, or this thing called music, how can such a thing be hooked with money? We felt it was unacceptable because, how can you speak about money when we are speaking about culture? (Cai Jing)

The solution given by the cut-out subculture to this question was a bizarre “logic” of practice (Bourdieu, 1990) which was celebrated as an ethic standard in the cut-out retail market. Simply put, it was an anti-business way of doing cut-out business. This logic started with a commonly held oppositional binary, apparently echoing the classic 1980s material/spiritual dichotomy, concerning the materiality of the cut-out records. In the interview, Li Kui evoked this binary in order to explain to me why some cut-out dealers were successful while others were doomed to fail:

You have to keep in mind, once this thing becomes *goods* (货), it has nothing to do with *music*, really nothing to do at all... It has to be seen as *goods*, in your eyes, only in this way will you be able to make money!
(Li Kui)

Ruan Xiaowu, who joined the cut-out business as a retailer in the 1990s, offered to me a similar theory:

From a normal business point of view, those who love music simply cannot become good cut-out sellers. Like us, when we bought in stock, we only thought about this: I buy in new stock just in order to own these cut-outs which I dream of. ... But the business logic doesn't work like this, the business logic goes: I buy in a box of goods, how much do I need to sell can I earn all my cost back? As for what these titles are about, I don't care. (Ruan Xiaowu)

In the cut-out subculture, the unsuccessful kind of digger-turned-dealers which Li Kui and Ruan Xiaowu referred to were typically labelled with a self-mocking phrase borrowed from drug dealing: “dealing in support of consuming” (“以贩养吸”), that is, one sold cut-outs not for money, but rather only as a means to listen to more cut-outs. Liu Tang's example was representative:

My strategy was “selling in support of buying”, in the end I became a retailer myself. Think about it, back then I only had about 300 yuan a month to cover all my living expenses, and I spent all of them on either books or the cut-outs. But it was never enough, there was simply too much to buy and too little in your pocket, what should I do? So I borrowed 1000 yuan from my elder sister, that was how everything got started... because I myself was very hungry and curious, I wanted to listen to everything which I hadn't heard, that meant I had a large need myself... I would set up a “ground stall” near the entrance of the canteen or the front gate of our university, and later I started going to *Zhongguancun*. (Liu Tang)

This brought another distinction concerning the whole group of cut-out retailers: between those who sold the cut-outs as “music” and those who sold the cut-outs as “goods”, to quote Dong Ping:

There was a certain group of people who did this business because they liked the music, but there was also the other group, they did it only because it was a business, because there were people listening to it and buying it. The second group made up the majority of the cut-out dealers. I knew a few retailers who loved music themselves, but not too many, not a large proportion. I assume that those in Beijing, like Xiao Wei and Zuzhou, they sold it because they loved it, they were the “dealing in support of consuming” type, but that was rare in Tianjin, most dealers I

knew didn't listen to music at all. (Dong Ping)

The pattern Dong Ping observed was a typical one. Compared with the top sectors of the cut-out business which were barely accessible for common people, the entry barrier to cut-out retail business was much lower: if one wanted to be a cut-out retailer, he/she only needed to go to another retailer who would resell his/her stock. After all, due to the enormous diversity of titles available, competition between individual retailers was often not intense. In all three types of cut-out retail outlets, most dealers fell into the category of self-employed *getihu* who were individual-based or family-based; few matched the legal standards of an entrepreneur who must have at least eight employees (Tao & Ho, 1997)⁵⁸. The distinction between those who sold cut-outs as “goods” and as “music” conformed to the two main types of demographics which made up the cut-out *getihus*. On the one hand, part of this group came from an urban background, holding a legal household registration - the so-called *hukou* (户口) - in the city where they ran their business. This group consisted typically of well-educated youngsters with at least a completed high school degree, a large number of them college students or recent graduates who started their cut-out retail career on a “dealing in support of consuming” trajectory.

On the other hand, an arguably larger number of cut-out retailers were less educated, middle-aged people who bore the stereotypical image of *getihu* as “selfish, avaricious” peddlers (Hsu, 2006, 1). As I learnt during fieldwork, this second group came commonly from two kinds of background, they were either rural migrants who ended up running a self-employed career in the city, or local laid-off workers - a large proportion of them female - dropped by their former state-owned enterprises (as reported, this type was much more common in north China). For this second type of retailers, the love of music was seldom a motivation in their career choice, in fact, a considerable proportion of them were recruited into the business by their relatives or fellow-countrymen, and a large number of them had previously engaged in other kinds of retail activities, selling food, clothes, or various “small commodities”.

This explains why, as I discovered, the distinction between those who sold cut-outs as music and those who sold them as goods was closely intertwined with the politics of

⁵⁸ In fact, throughout my fieldwork, only three cut-out dealers are identified as satisfying the entrepreneur standard, and all of them based their business primarily in the higher wholesale sector.

knowledge and tastes: the former were normally treated as music connoisseurs or “rock preachers” who “knew”, often respected by new consumers as senior members of the cut-out subculture, whereas the latter were commonly dismissed as lowbrow illiterates who simply didn’t resonate with music and art. To quote my conversation with Liu Tang:

-Did you often pick gems during cut-out hunting?

-At first almost never, but later when I started going to the *Book Centre* I started finding gems. Because after 1995, a lot of people who didn’t like music, and didn’t “know”, appeared, they didn’t sell cut-outs because they loved music, they sold cut-outs purely for profit, most of these people were rural migrants. I started being able to pick gems because they didn’t “know”... They were just the nothing-but-money-making type, they would sell whatever they found profitable. (Liu Tang)

During fieldwork, most iterations of this distinction came from the cut-out dealers themselves. In fact, almost all cut-out dealers I interviewed considered themselves as the “selling cut-outs as music” type while condemning others as greedy businessmen who knew nothing about art. Take *Dazimingzhong* seller Yan Qing’s words:

I can tell you this for certain: in the whole building of *Dazimingzhong*, all the two hundred sellers did it for money, including me, but only two people listened to music. They didn’t really need to “know”, they only needed to learn which title was expensive and which title was cheap, how much this title should they sell for... they only needed to know this. But for me, I didn’t need you to “know”, because I would tell you what this title was! (Yan Qing)

Often, by self-identifying as the kind of sellers who “knew”, cut-out dealers went back to the typical moral standards of 1980s “high culture fever”, justifying their motivation for selling cut-outs as either to spread rock music or to connect with like-minded souls. For example, Dai Zong emphasized to me his sense of mission:

For us, perhaps this point of view is a dangerous one, people will easily criticize us, but back then we did think it was a business from which we could make good money, but it was not just a business... I was indeed holding this mission of spreading music, including the business I am doing now. Those who don’t understand will say: Dai Zong, you do this for money! Of course I do this for money, but there is always a subtext, a basic principle, which is: I hope to let this good music - music which I think is good - be heard by more people, this is my attitude. (Dai Zong)

Others claimed that even when they were doing cut-out business, they did it deliberately against the calculative, capitalist logic, placing genuine human relationships and the virtue of sharing over money-making, in Shi Qian's words:

It was not selling commodities, it was communication based on a common interest. It was making friends. Its aim was not profit but communication. Take retail as an example, it worked this way, of course not everyone came to you to make friends, if they were cold and detached, I just did business with them, but if they were warm-hearted, if they told me their situations, for example maybe you were a student, you didn't have much money, but you love music a lot, as long as you were genuine, in fact no matter you were genuine or not, if you said this, I would give you some discounts, it didn't matter! Once there was a student from Hunan, telling me he didn't have money, I said "it's ok, I send the cut-outs to you first", I had these experiences a lot. (Shi Qian)

Having made the points above, I don't mean to suggest that the cut-out dealers were blatant hypocrites who made money while claiming that they were not doing so. In fact, during fieldwork, these kinds of stories more often came from a cut-out consumer's perspective, praising retailers they came across for not being greedy and profit-driven, but belonging to the idealist "dealing in support of consuming" type. While this confirmed that many cut-out retailers did rely on a deliberately anti-business logic, doing their business in a consciously "unprofessional" way, it doesn't mean that the anti-business logic was put into practice for purely egalitarian purposes. To some extent, while not commercially successful, their sense of achievement and joy were generated by practising the subcultural values they held and by socializing and sharing music with kindred spirits, as Zhang Qing told me:

I was young back then, I didn't know much about how to make money, and I didn't treat money as that important, sometimes even when I did make some money, perhaps I would spend it drinking with those who came to buy cut-outs from me at lunch or dinner... looking back now, this cut-out thing indeed made me very happy in those few years, very very happy... In fact, in my whole life until now, those years were definitely the happiest time of my life: you were living with no worries, apart from worrying about the Cultural Bureau who would confiscate my stuff, nothing else. You didn't need to work many hours a day, but most importantly you loved it! When I was at the peak of my business, every time when I bought in new stock I bought in like a dozen boxes of cut-outs, and then I would lock myself in and select them first-hand on my own, I was so excited that I was like running around in the room, you know? (Zhang Qing)

To some extent, cut-out dealers who followed the anti-business ethic stood in the overlapping area of the two worlds operating under different logics of practice: one under the logic of subcultural penetration, the other of capitalist accumulation. In a way, these two worlds epitomised 1990s China struggling between its idealist past and neoliberal future. In this light, the business culture of “dealing in support of consuming”, of not acting like an astute and professional salesman, was a result of the past cast onto the present, a realization of the affective infrastructure sedimented in the 1980s and emerging in the 1990s, and thus a lived form of penetration directed towards the sweeping trend of commercialization which, compared with the fight against the “imagined enemy” of the state, took place on a more visible battleground.

6.3.6 Being “Political”

On this battleground, perhaps the most extreme performance of the anti-business ethic was the justifiable practice of cut-out stealing. During fieldwork, many recalled a widely circulated saying in the cut-out years: “to steal a cut-out is not stealing”, apparently developed from one of Lu Xun’s classic lines that “to steal a book is not stealing”. As I was told, cut-out stealing was a surprisingly common practice which would be proudly admitted to and justified by some, in cases where the cut-out retailer stolen from was too greedy, too calculative, and too “black-hearted”. Here’s a quote from Zhang Tianshi on one of the collective crimes in which he had participated:

Fuck, once Gongsun Sheng, Song Jiang, and I, we went to a dealer’s home, he was fucking greedy, very black-hearted, it was going way too much, he was just ripping us off, because he thought, “you would have to buy it from me after all.”... It was daylight robbery, even for those records with a deep cut, he asked 20 or 30 each! In the end I said: “fuck, let’s steal from him!” We took turns, and we took loads from him, Song Jiang was like, “fuck, take the dictionary!” We even took his English dictionary... We have all been wild when we were college students, I tell you this, because this was the rock ’n’ roll way of life. (Zhang Tianshi)

Although Zhang Tianshi drew on the anti-commercial spirit which was arguably one of the universal authenticating forces of the rock mythology, his justification of cut-out stealing as a part of the “rock ’n’ roll way of life” sounded specifically local. In the practice of cut-out stealing, a retailer was punished for not obeying the anti-business, “dealing in support of consuming” ethic and for doing business in the capitalist way. This practice was perhaps the most practical form of penetration in which members of the subculture resisted the logic of capitalism in a physically confrontational way. In essence, this practice was a

radical performance of subcultural identity, a practice of drawing boundaries through which the cut-out dealers who only belonged to the business world but not the subcultural world were identified and repelled.

From another angle, the practice of cut-out stealing was also the most direct clash between the two major social classes who built up the cut-out industry and subculture side by side. Between the two types of cut-out retailers belonging to the subcultural and the business world, the obvious generational, regional, educational, and thus cultural gaps largely corresponded to the hard reality of an emerging, clear class division: the former group fitted neatly into the soon-to-be “new middle class” (Dai, 1999) whereas the latter group commonly fell into two new disadvantaged social strata which Wang (2000) identifies, namely the migrant workers – typically former “surplus rural labourers” (Li, 1996), arguably the results of the impact of the reform on the agricultural economy - and the laid-off workers abandoned by state-owned enterprises (Cai, 2006). The penetration of the cut-out subculture, in this way, produced as side effects prejudice, oppression, and discursive violence against those who had already become the victims of China’s neoliberal turn.

The anti-business culture practised by the “subcultural” type of cut-out retailers thus resembles the counter-school culture among working class lads in *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977), which eventually brought them to working-class jobs and thus reproduced the existing class structure. Both cultures exemplified what Willis (1977, 119) terms as the “limitations” which impede the “full development and expression of” penetrations into a comprehensive critique of the underlying structural politics of the society. Indeed, the penetrations initiated by the cut-out subculture were far from complete and thorough. During my fieldwork, most cut-out consumers, including some self-identified dissidents of the Communist regime, did not view their cut-out consumption as a politically motivated act. As many admitted in the interviews, while they certainly felt discontent with the status quo, they “knew little about politics” back in the cut-out period (Wu Song). Even for the group of cut-out music critics who played the role of the intellectuals in the subculture, most told me that they didn’t arrive at a clear idea about different political positions, such as the left-right spectrum, until the early 2000s. In the interview, Gongsun Sheng made a distinction between what he called “social” and “political” resistance:

I think it (the cut-out culture) was more of a social sense of resistance, but not a political one... everyone was very angry, they cursed the police, cursed the Communist Party, cursed the government and so on, but I

don't think they had enough political awareness. Because back then, we seemed to have no distinction between the left and the right... there was no such thing as logic and reasoning, it was more of an emotional release... Back then I had little idea either, I also wanted to know, to make it clear what politics was all about. (Gongsun Sheng)

This distinction was relevant to the forms of penetration discussed above. In the everyday life of the “cut-out generation”, penetration was often practised in a predominantly affective manner, especially when it touched upon the explicitly “political” subject of the Communist state, in which case their resistance, if so labelled, was from the very beginning a boxing match in the dark. The cut-out subculture’s penetration as regards the Party-State was undertaken discursively, sensuously, and poetically, with the role played by the state in reality rarely being articulated or debated. By contrast, while the “imagined enemy” of the market, identified in the capitalist, instrumental logic of practice, was more directly confronted, the penetrations evolving around it were also conducted in a primarily emotion-driven way based on assumed spiritual/material binaries, with little critical reasoning involved. Therefore, despite being forceful and at times creative lived penetrations performed with faith and perseverance, the revolts against both the market and the state were ideologically limited and structurally skewed. The “cut-out generation” was never a subculture with a collective political consciousness, it was only “political” in an affective sense.

In Nanjing, apart from members of the *Soldiers' Club* circle, I also talked with 1980-born Shi Jin, who admitted that his generation of cut-out consumers, who also formed a community like the *Soldiers' Club* circle, was no longer as “radical” as Wu Song and his peers, who had by then become the “cut-out seniors”. During fieldwork, I discovered that younger cut-out listeners generally tended to emphasize that they were just “in it for the music” which had nothing to do with politics. Reflecting on this difference, Shi Jin explained to me:

In Nanjing, back in that period, to listen to the cut-outs was not only listening to the cut-outs, like Wu Song’s generation - we called them our seniors - they were at the same time very into art and literature... in fact, the cut-outs did not contribute much in shaping your thoughts, it didn't do much, it was mostly because the films you watched, and more importantly the books you read, that gradually your own worldview took shape. The cut-outs were only a vehicle, just like marijuana, it only leads you in, but it doesn't tell you anything... but once the circle was formed, it became a culture, in fact if you were listening to the cut-outs, you would directly enter a subculture, and then you wouldn't read ordinary

books, you would go directly into *1984*, or *Animal Farm*, or Wang Xiaobo⁵⁹, that's what they would recommend you to read. (Shi Jin)

Shi Jin's words are a good testimony to the infrastructural role played by the locally cultivated, historically accreted structure of feeling. During fieldwork, many admitted their own political worldviews were formed more as a result of the influences they received from literature or their more political active friends, but less from rock music itself. As an uninvited guest, the cut-outs - and the Western rock music they carried - which landed in 1990s China brought only a limited amount of critical and radical meanings from their Western context. What they brought in were the immediately and affectively powerful "objective possibilities" (Willis, 2000) which came to be realized in sensuous relationships formed with their human users. The penetrations performed by the cut-out subculture were in essence re-contextualizations of these objective possibilities within the affective infrastructure which emerged in the historical and political dynamics of 1990s China.

6.4 Conclusion

In my investigation of the structure of feeling of the "cut-out generation" in this chapter, I have employed the theories of emergence and penetration to specify the historical roots of the contested politics of aesthetics and taste in music in the cut-out subculture, and I have also tried to approach Williams' theory from bottom up, showing the essence of a structure of feeling by studying its manifestations in other tangible spheres of the subculture. As I have demonstrated so far, as a historically accreted affective infrastructure, the structure of feeling of the "cut-out generation" was deeply interwoven and forcefully interacting with a variety of other aspects of the cut-out subculture and effectively re-contextualized the cut-outs into local politics. It directed the cut-out subculture's penetrations towards the "imagined enemies" of the state and the market. These two kinds of penetration were lived out in relatively different ways and contexts: the ghost of the state, conceived to be oppressive and ubiquitous, tended to float in the background, manifesting itself in the rumours fabricated and circulated by the micro media and the felt textures of the cut-out retail infrastructure; the market, by contrast, was more consciously and actively revolted against through norms and ethics collectively performed both on the cut-out market and in the cut-out "circles". Neither of these two kinds of penetration, however, was conscious,

⁵⁹ Chinese writer who is often considered a representative of China's liberal intellectuals.

sophisticated, or thorough: while finding space and possibilities to breakthrough, they were simultaneously distorted and limited by their structural and historical conditions, ending up as affective responses but not political awareness. In this ways, the structure of feeling of the “cut-out generation” reflected, was conditioned by, and more importantly formed a profane response to, the historical context of 1990s China.

7 Conclusions

7.1 Overview

As stated in my introduction chapter, this study is driven by two aspirations: one theoretical, the other historical. Pursuing the theoretical aspiration, I have critically engaged with a wide range of fields and academic traditions, including British cultural studies, subcultural and post-subcultural studies, music and sound studies, material culture studies, and the anthropology of infrastructure. I have built up a conceptual framework of subcultural politics which is based on a reworked, profanity-inspired concept of “subculture”. This framework combines three main theoretical devices: a dialectical notion of “profanity” (Willis, 1978), which lays stress on the sensuousness and creativity of cultural practices, a perspective tracing the “social life” of things (Appadurai, 1986), which investigates the politics of value (and values), and a theory of “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977), which accounts for the historically situated affective infrastructure of subculture. Within this theoretical framework, there is the recurring theme of the materiality of cultural objects, the sensuousness of meaning-making, and the affective dimensions of social practices. I have demonstrated that these concerns are relevant and this framework is useful and possibly applicable to a wider class of “thing-centred” subcultures evolving around the circulation and use of certain cultural items.

In realizing the historical aspiration, I have investigated the cut-out subculture using a methodological approach inspired by Willis’ (2000) “ethnographic imagination”. I drew on empirical data from the “cut-out archive”, which I built with collected subcultural documents, and from a large sample of in-depth, life story interviews in which storytelling was facilitated by the use of “biographical objects”. I have collected, and presented in the last three chapters, empirical data on a number of key “sites” of the cut-out subculture, most of which have not been touched upon by previous research: I have drawn a comprehensive picture of the structure and mechanisms of the cut-out industry, and described the logics of practice of cut-out dealers occupying different levels of the industry. I have depicted the multitude of ways in which the cut-outs were consumed and engaged with by their Chinese consumers: how they were repaired, purchased, listened to, written about, and made sense of, and how they inspired practices of music-making. I have also illustrated the “structure of feeling” of the cut-out subculture by demonstrating its manifestations in music taste and aesthetics, rumours and media discourses, the material

infrastructures of the cut-out retail market, the social relationships which constituted the cut-out “circles”, and the anti-business ethic that prevailed in the cut-out business. These empirical findings were presented in a diversity of forms: excerpts of life stories, interview quotes, citation of subcultural texts, and pictures of subcultural objects. I have tried to organize them in a historical and ethnographic narrative, in order to give a vivid and thorough account of the “cut-out generation” as a subcultural phenomenon in modern Chinese history. Apart from the data presented in the thesis, which form only a small part of the full collection, my extensive fieldwork itself also contributes to the archiving of youth culture and music subculture in China and provides data and experiences useful to historians, sociologists, and media archaeologists who work in this field.⁶⁰

7.2 Limitations and Avenues

This study, as I must acknowledge, comes with its own limitations. First of all, while I have sought to balance the historical and ethnographic aspirations in my methodological approach, the final empirical investigation I undertook was limited in both areas. On the one hand, doing research with “ethnographic imagination” still inevitably differs from first-hand participant observation and it can do little to restore the richness of lived experience which has paled during the passage of time; on the other hand, the fact that there had been no institutional efforts towards the preservation and archiving of documents and materials in relation to the cut-out subculture has also limited the width and depth of my archival analysis.

Secondly, while I tried to achieve a large sample of in-depth interviews, the subjective nature of snowball sampling inevitably resulted in some bias. In particular, although I achieved data saturation in relation to the subcultural type of cut-out dealers who “dealt in support of consuming”, I had to base my arguments about the more common, calculative, and capitalist type of cut-out dealers largely on stories told by others. This is because the class, generational, and cultural divisions between these two types of dealers made it difficult for me to contact the non-subcultural type, whose participation in the cut-out business also, reportedly, tended to be brief and temporary.

⁶⁰ In 2016, I started a Wechat public account named *Cut-out Archive* (打口档案), on which I have shared extensive textual data I collected in this research. I stopped posting new articles on the public account when I began my fieldwork interviews in 2018, but I plan to restart it in 2020 and to share more data on the cut-out subculture.

Thirdly, due to the limit of space and the general structure of the thesis, I have much data unused, themes yet to be fully explored, and findings that call for further analysis. I list a number of identified themes, on which deeper analysis will serve as avenues for further research:

1) Digital shift: The influence of the Internet - which, reportedly, had been used by a minority of cut-out consumers before 2000 - on the cut-out subculture, and the emergence of the Chinese “download generation” in the mid-2000s, remains a field largely untouched by researchers. A comparative study of these two generations of subculture promises to be fruitful in terms of revealing the underlying infrastructural shifts, including that of affective infrastructures, which paralleled China’s post-2000 trajectory of development.

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Figure 32 Yang Bo’s review on three female grunge bands titled “Smashing the gender labels of rock”, published in Punk Time, Vol. 1

2) Gender and sexuality: As emerged in my fieldwork, my female interviewees did tell versions of “cut-out stories” which differed from those told by the male interviewees; moreover, the dimension of gender was also relevant to the hierarchy of value on the cut-out market and the music taste of the “cut-out generation”; in addition, the reception of Western glam rock bands and female rock artists also generated intricate politics of gendered meanings (see Figure 32). These empirical findings invite further investigation.

3) Sound culture: While placing my main focus largely on the non-sonic, or perhaps non-musical, side of the music on the cut-outs, the arguments made in this thesis will be further enriched and consolidated by an additional musicological approach, especially in relation to the practice of cut-out “tape-stripping”, local music scenes, and the politics of genres.

4) Spatial politics: In the thesis, the relation between the cut-out subculture and urban China is one which has largely been taken for granted. I have in fact little evidence to prove that this relation was an exclusive one, nor do I have space to incorporate an analysis of how this subculture was conditioned and enabled by China’s unique urban landscapes. Thus, the investigation of spatial politics remains a gap to be addressed by further research

on the subcultural politics of the “cut-out generation”, and more generally, on the theoretical framework of subcultural politics.

5) Subculture and youth: A similar assumed relation between subculture and youth is also visible in the analysis of the thesis. While I use the term “youth” throughout, I am aware of the sometimes misleading assumption of the youth-subculture interconnection (Hesmondhalgh, 2005) in cultural studies. Due to the word limit, I have employed the term “cut-out youth” as it was used in the 1990s to refer to all participants of the cut-out subculture. However, the fact that “cut-out youth” were not necessarily all young, and that the “cut-out generation” in fact consisted of several different generations deserves further analysis.

6) Multivocality of the cut-out subculture: In this research, I only have space to show some parts of the enormously rich diversity of the cut-out subcultural landscape. For example, compared with the typical “cut-out youth”, the cut-out classical and jazz fans came arguably from relatively different social backgrounds and pursued their own “top goods” defined by different cultural and aesthetic standards. In addition, after the mid-2000s, the groups of cut-out metalheads and cut-out hip-hop fans also demonstrated distinct politics at different levels. These taste communities are well worth further study.

In the remaining of this chapter, I conclude the whole thesis by summarizing and further elaborating on the findings of my three empirical chapters. I will go through those chapters, revisit the arguments made, reveal the links between them, and situate them within the broader historical context of China’s project of modernization.

7.3 Two Worlds

In 2000, looking back to the last decade, Qiu Dali (2000, 41), who had, by then, gained the reputation of “cut-out godfather”, wrote:

On this dumped plastic disc with a cut, some people have earned their money, built their houses, and bought their cars; meanwhile others have skipped their meals, lost their savings, and wasted their lives; it enables not only part of the population to become rich first, but also another part to become poor first; it not only assimilates some people materially, but also differentiates some others spiritually. (Qiu, 2000, 41)

This is Qiu Dali’s take on the politics of value in the cut-out industry. This view attempts to pose a grand binary, dividing the cut-out universe into two different worlds: the

commercial world and the subcultural one, with the former occupied by the cut-out dealers under the logic of capitalist accumulation, and the latter by cut-out consumers under the logic of subcultural practice. Reductive as it is, this binary ties together a series of mechanisms and relations in the cut-out industry, which I have illustrated in Chapter 4: supply versus demand, thingness versus knowledge, “conditions” versus “titles”, and Heping versus the rest of China. Qiu Dali describes a confrontation between the two worlds, and he declares the winner: while those in the commercial world successfully “became rich first” as Deng Xiaoping, the “chief architect” of the reform, ambitiously planned, those who stuck to the subcultural world had “lost their savings”, “wasted their lives”, and “become poor first”.

A parody of the propaganda from Deng’s neoliberal project, Qiu Dali’s words also point out the essential connections between the primitive growth of the cut-out industry and China’s drive towards a “socialist market economy”. His wordplay, we may acknowledge, does indicate the relations of power between the two worlds: throughout the 1990s, the cut-out business remained an almost ideal free enterprise; its development and expansion was a process fundamentally driven by the circulation of capital, and the cut-out industry existed as a hierarchical pyramid where a small group of scrap dealers and wholesalers set the rules of the whole game. Through the calculation of “price differential” and the arrangement of cut-out “units”, Heping controlled and constantly adjusted the commodity candidacies in the different regimes of value through which the cut-outs travelled, and it also constructed a hierarchy of price which was projected into the cut-out retail market. In this way, “technicians” in Heping effectively shaped the music taste of the “cut-out generation”: most of them, after all, only came to recognize the artistic value of a title when it became expensive.

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Figure 33 Qiu Dali’s article cited above, published in 2000 on *Vision 21*, Vol. 1

Yet the cut-out world, even on its more business-oriented side, was much more than a mere contest of capital accumulations: it was also filled with subcultural meaning-making. In each city where a cut-out retail market existed, knowledge was constantly produced from the bottom up: every cut-out consumer created their own “music info” through “learning-

by-listening” and “gem-picking”, and engaged in the circulation of this information through word of mouth as a part of the system of micro media. After cut-out niche media emerged in the late 1990s, this process of grassroots knowledge production was further accelerated and transformed itself into a grand enlightenment project of “Bringing the World to Us” (Yan, 2013). It was, after all, the cut-out listeners themselves who first attached meanings to different titles before some of them became “top goods”. It was also the cut-out consumers who engaged in the constant contestation of tastes and value against the “pre-arranged” structure imposed by Heping, and who actively re-defined and re-structured the regimes of value on the retail market. The cut-out industry was never totally programmed and controlled from above, because it was the production of new knowledge - invested with the creative power of human agency - that constantly invigorated the cut-out industry.

This leads us to the argument that the commercial world and the subcultural world were never clearly separated, and the logics of capitalist accumulation and subcultural meaning-making were always deeply intertwined. Those who belonged to the subcultural world always had to dance with shackles on, producing meanings under the rules of the market, and those who lived in the commercial world could only sustain this world by capitalizing the meanings made from the subcultural side. Through the ceaseless discovery of new “top goods”, a local system of “music info” was constructed from bottom up, and grew side by side with the cut-out industry itself. These co-evolutionary relationships, first, between the cut-out business and subculture, and second, between music’s value as commodities and as knowledge, challenge the clear-cut boundaries drawn in Qiu Dali’s article. These relationships also challenge the academic binary of authentic subculture verses commercial incorporation as held by the CCCS. The “cut-out generation” was both a subculture and a consumer culture, and it was in the use and exploration of commodity items that this subculture grew and flourished. As Sun Mengjin (2001, 8), Shanghai’s most influential rock radio DJ, once declared:

Nothing is more material, and in the meantime more spiritual, than the cut-outs. (Sun, 2001, 8)

Perhaps most telling is the fact that, as China’s most famous cut-out dealer, Qiu Dali puts himself not in the commercial world, but on the side of the cut-out consumers. Like many others who “dealt in support of consuming”, Qiu Dali self-identified with the idealist, the

spiritual, and the subcultural world while making a living in the cut-out business. In the interview, he explained to me his rationale for listening to incomplete cut-out records:

So each time I bought a cut-out, I had a kind of mentality: if an album has ten songs and two of them are ruined by the cut, I will listen to it as if it was an eight-song EP... Because if you turn those eight songs away, the CD will really end up becoming plastic scrap and probably turned into a plastic board or a plastic spoon we use, what a pity will that be! Therefore, I buy cut-outs as if I am saving the life of this music.' (Qiu Dali)

For Qiu Dali, buying (and selling) a cut-out record stood as a ritual of salvation to keep the music it contained from being “dismantled” into meaningless plastic scrap. While this moral commitment was invented partly to reconcile the conflict between the capitalist logic and the subcultural one, it also functioned as a bridge between the “thing status” and “music status” of the cut-outs, and it thus revealed the fundamental role played by the politics of materialities in the broader politics of value of the cut-out industry. In its circulation through various regimes of value, a cut-out transformed from a “thing” into a music object which was made up of a multitude of overlapping dimensions of materialities: musical sound, physical medium, and “music info”. This transformation of materiality was the source of both the commercial value and subcultural meanings which had “existed in potential” in the object, and was only “made visible” through its engagement with human users (Graeber, 2001, 47). Song Jiang neatly summarized this point in the interview:

The contribution of the cut-outs lies in that it was a story of primitive growth, nobody used to relate them to music; they came as rubbish in the beginning, but in China, they achieved the value which they could never achieve in America and Europe, right? (Song Jiang)

The commercial and the subcultural worlds built each other and relied on each other because it was the single music object - which possessed both a solid thingness and profound “non-material” materialities - that bound them together. The story of the “cut-out generation”, therefore, can well be told from a different angle - as a story of self-discovery, self-actualization, and transnational adventures - by the cut-outs themselves. While this study doesn't go that far, by pointing out the significant roles played by the various dimensions of non-sonic materialities of music in the making of a music subculture, it provides a unique case study which justifies a thing-centred approach to music and subculture studies.

7.4 Profane Circuits

This brings us to the second parameter of my thesis' empirical contribution: the dialectics of profanity in the practices of cut-out consumption. I will once again start with a quote in retrospect. As Shenzehn's *OCT-LOFT Jazz Festival* announced its ninth edition in October 2019, curator Tu Fei, one of the many "cut-out youth" I interviewed who had built their careers in the local music industry, wrote in the preface of the festival programme:

Jazz is actually a bit far from us.

It exists in our imagination. Most of the time, "Jazz" is only three Chinese characters, standing for a type of Western music which is hard for us to put across. We can't think with the mother tone of Jazz, and we rarely have the opportunity to learn it systematically. In our mindset, our blood, and our daily life, there is hardly any evidence to prove our affinity with it.

Sadly, we weren't able to cross paths with Jazz in our own life experiences, this is our limitation. Yet it also is, to think in reverse, our unique fortune: it leaves us the opportunity to engage with a cultural form as a blank slate and as an ignoramus, and to use it as a tool to voice our half-baked but eager self-expressions, thereby imprinting our own traces on it, intentionally or unintentionally. This is the unique chance given by our time. (Tu & Teng, 2019)

Tu Fei's words vividly summarize the profane confrontations which defined Chinese consumers' private and local relationships with the cut-outs. This profanity implies a dialectic partly in that it contains a feeling of awkwardness: not many cut-out listeners can, as Tu Fei does, openly admit and face the inherent distance and barriers between "Jazz" - or any other Western music styles cherished by the "cut-out generation" - and their lived experiences, yet the existence of this distance was irrefutable. In the history of modern China, the "cut-out generation" led a period marked by unprecedentedly dedicated and obsessive habits of purchasing, listening, studying, and copying of Western music, yet none of these practices was conducted in a confident and sophisticated manner. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 5, the "cut-out generation" failed to consume cut-out records in the way these commodities were intended to be consumed: they lacked the basic means to grasp the musical texts, weren't prepared with relevant music experiences, couldn't understand the cultural references being used, and could even barely read the English language. As a result, their self-built system of "music info" turned out to be full of mistranslations and misinterpretations, the cut-out music reviews which were supposed to

“introduce” Western rock were criticized as being arbitrary and misleading, and most of the music ripped off from the cut-outs by local amateurs didn’t pass muster as acceptable copies. Despite “wasting their lives” with the cut-outs, the “cut-out generation” and the music they loved never made a well-matched marriage.

Yet this didn’t stop the “cut-out generation” from exploiting to the full the available resources and their human agency to form a cultural relationship with the cut-outs. This relationship was one lived out in a primarily bodily manner, driven by pleasure, pragmatic wisdom and sensuous stimulation. The physical wounds of cut-outs were repaired by hand, cut-out record hunting was characterized by both visual and sonic methods of trial and error, and cut-out “music info” was gathered through the practical and inductive means of “learning-through-listening”. In this affective encounter, the defectiveness of the cut-outs became their unique profanity, around which profound dialectics unfolded: in the local music underground, artistic creativity sprang from the very ignorance and “unprefigurability” (Willis, 2000, 26) of the cut-out “tape strippers”; in the cut-out niche media, by downplaying the role of “hard info”, cut-out music critics invented an “unprofessional” genre of music criticism as a means of expressing their own critiques of Chinese society. In this way, Chinese consumers came into contact with the cut-outs as a “blank slate”, liberating the “objective possibilities” of the cut-outs from a pre-existing “cognitive framework”, and using them as their own profane medium for pleasure, meaning-making, and self-expression. Upon disaster depends good fortune, and within profanity lies the creative and critical potential of a subculture.

While this profane relationship can easily be linked with the appropriation thesis of the CCCS (Leong, 1992) or the hybridization model in globalization studies (Holton, 2000), it also allows an insight into the dialectical nature of cultural practices. There is, Willis argues, a sense of determinacy which lies in what he terms the “homological” relationship between the materiality of the cultural item and the agency of the social group engaging with it. The defective materiality of the cut-out records did form a “homological” relationship with the cultural sensibilities of their Chinese users despite the lack of cultural affinity which Tu Fei points out. The strong metaphorical resonance of the term “cut-out” itself stands as a solid proof of this relationship. Glancing through published texts and my interviews, I frequently come across passages in which the author claims to also “bear a cut” on themselves, Wang Xiaofeng (2006, 119), for example, writes:

When we look back to this completely foreign product and in particular the brutal cut each cassette or CD bears, we always cannot help but think: many of us have spent our youth with them, and more or less our youth has also been given a cut. Only when you look in retrospect, after walking past this period of life, you realize how conspicuous that cut actually is. ... Indeed, every generation bears its own characteristics, and the characteristic of our generation is that we all have a cut on ourselves. (Wang, 2006, 119)

Partly, this “cut”, which Wang Xiaofeng identifies as characterizing his generation, denotes a sense of disillusion, it implies the frustration of not being able to become who they wanted to become, and the awkwardness of not being able to use the cut-outs as they were made to be used. Yet apart from this, it also bears another level of meaning, as a symbol of illicitness and non-conformity. Through the defective materiality of the cut, the “cut-out generation” were able to live out a marginal, liminal, and alternative way of life which penetrated the dominant system of ideologies and values in 1990s Chinese society. The cultivation and realization of this illicitness was often a slow and unconscious process; very few people chose to listen to the cut-outs because they were defective, but after many years, they developed a set of aesthetics and cultural sensibilities: good music should always be “difficult” to listen to, and a record “looked better with a cut on it”.

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Figure 34 Image of a cut-out CD on the back cover of the first issue of *I Love Rock 'N' Roll*

This stands as one side of the “integral circuits” (Willis, 1974) which constitute a relationship of profanity, where the subject and the object are attracted by each other, locked into each other, and mutually shaping each other. While given a “cut” by the cut-outs, the “cut-out generation” were also, in Tu Fei’s words, “imprinting their own traces” on these objects. Arriving in China as plastic scrap priced according to its weight, each and every one of the cut-out records entered the cut-out industry with the same value. The “objective possibilities” of the cut-outs contained music of all styles and genres, bearing originally a wide range of potential meanings. Yet through the mechanisms of the wholesale and retail sectors, driven by the practices of knowledge construction and active listening from down below, cut-outs which bore certain “conditions” and “titles” were selected, categorized, and invested with meanings and value, thereby distinguishing

themselves from others. This process of selection and creation was conducted primarily through a local lens, often incompatible with the original cultural meanings they bore: sounds and images were judged according to the “good sounds” of 1990s China, and senses of “radicalness” were extracted from them as a means of subcultural expression. The cut-outs were re-contextualized into local politics, and were shaped and exploited under youthful and subversive local conventions. This gives the practice of cut-out consumption a subtle sense of confidence on top of its awkwardness, and it is with this confidence that Yan Jun (2002, 1) declared:

Some people say that rock music is a part of cultural colonialism, but it has already been owned by all the young people, and young people do not belong to any system of interest. They peel off and eat the sugar-coat, and fire the bullets back... From a utopian perspective, this deserves a try. (Yan, 2002, 1)

This process implies multiple levels of dialectics. Seen from a music studies perspective, one could say that people are not only affected by songs, but also “find songs that suit them” (Artiss, 2014, 47); and music not only is “shaped by” and “reflects the people”, but also “produces” them (Frith, 1996, 109). In the context of cultural globalization, we could say that the global comes powerfully to shape the local, but it is filtered through local politics and becomes part of a new sense of “locality” (Appadurai, 2013). The “cut-out generation” thus stands as a distinctive case of “peripheral youth” in the global age: through their engagement with the cut-outs, they not only participated in a dialogue with the West, but also initiated their own dialogues “within the East” (Pilkington & Johnson, 2003, 271). Finally, to return to the classic subcultural theses, we see a process in which objects enable an emergent structure of feeling to be realized; in this process, they give concrete forms and sensuous meanings to this emergence, while also being redefined by it and re-contextualized within it. It was in this two-way process of mutual shaping and meaning-making that the cut-outs launched “a full dialectical register” (Willis, 2014, 80) on the structure of feeling of the “cut-out generation”, and it was in this process that the “sub-ness” of this subculture was lived out.

7.5 The Politics of Hunger

The third and final dimension of this thesis’ empirical contribution emerged out of the definition and analysis of the structure of feeling which, as many believe, made the cut-out subculture “political” in nature. A few cut-out music critics have attempted to justify the

subversive potential of the “cut-out generation”, or seen this subculture as embedded in a broader course of radical cultural changes in contemporary Chinese society. In an essay titled “Farewell, the Cut-out generation”, Yan Jun (2004, 174) writes:

Under the CNPIEC’s monopoly on the import of audio video products, we were *hungry*... and the music cultures which belonged to youth of the whole world were like a roaring flood outside the floodgate. Through the cut-outs, they secretly sneaked in, and nourished the pale generation who were struggling in the cultural desert and the cultural dump. Yes, from then on, a culture neither the *Gangtai idols* nor the *CWA (China Writers Association)* could control began to fiercely grow. Both the *education system* and the *entertainment fashions* could no longer manipulate these kids who have found their new music, new game, new sense of belonging, and new wide world. (Yan, 2004, 175; my emphasis)

This narrative does its job in clearly identifying the two “imagined enemies” – the market and the state - which defined the “emergence” and “penetrations” of the “cut-out generation”. Meanwhile, the metaphors - entertainment fashions and the CWA – Yan Jun employs to represent these two enemies also indicate the manner in which these penetrations were undertaken. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 6, the penetration of the cut-out subculture was not confined to the performance of music taste, rather, and by definition, it mobilized lived experience as a whole. The cut-out subculture’s penetration towards the Party-State crystalized in the rumours of “confiscated cassettes”, which were collectively produced and disseminated by the micro media of the early cut-out market, and in the dark “poetics” of the cut-out retail infrastructures, where the image of the state was woven atmospherically into the bodily experiences in the cut-out “iron house”. The cut-out subculture’s penetration towards the market was realized in the idealist moral standards, which defined the friendships which arose in the cut-out “circles”, and in the anti-business way of doing cut-out business, which was practised by cut-out dealers who “dealt in support of consuming”. Therefore, the cut-out subculture was never just about the “new music” brought in by the cut-outs, it necessarily involved the “new game, new sense of belonging, and new wide world” which grew on a pre-existing affective infrastructure, and were lived out through Chinese consumers’ engagement with this “new music”. This affective infrastructure had profound historical roots. It stemmed from the “high cultural fever” of the 1980s which gave rise to the moral elitism held high in the cut-out subcultural world, and it grew and flourished on the debris after the unexpected crackdown of the 1989 democracy movement, which declared the bankruptcy of the utopian illusion of China’s

cultural elite that their enlightenment project could “go hand in hand with” the state’s project of modernization (Wang, 1996, 2).

However, to say that it was the historically unaccomplished political beliefs that directed the “cut-out generation” to penetrate the dominant system is to pre-impose a resistant agenda that was never there. Even in their most “political” gestures, the “cut-out generation” rarely felt as though they were in direct confrontation with the system, rather, what drove their politically relevant activities was in fact the feeling of hunger which Yan Jun evokes in his anticipation of the “new wide world” to be reclaimed by the “cut-out youth”. This sense of hunger, at times referred to as “thirst and hunger” (“饥渴”), has been used to define the “cut-out generation” almost as extensively as the defective materiality of the cut-outs. In my interviews, cut-out consumption was typically referred to as analogous to an unfulfilled, and possibly unfulfillable, desire to eat:

At that time everybody felt hungry, we were hungry for music, we were hungry for texts, and we were also hungry for music reviews, you always wanted to get all related with it, everything. (Wu Song)

The “cut-out generation” had a tough stomach, I always say that our stomach is made of iron, we could digest anything... you never knew what kind of rubbish you were gonna eat, and you had to eat whatever you were not familiar with... I think we were blessed in that particular period, we were blessed with thirst and hunger. (Li Kui)

I think it was a condition of illness, it was like you were never gonna feel full, your eyes were always shining whatever you were eating, you felt everything was delicious... you had never been satisfied, ever, so you were always curious, thinking, “I want more”. (Xu Ning)

The analogy itself illustrates the bodily-driven nature of Chinese cut-out consumers’ search for profane meanings. In a sense, the practice of cut-out “consumption” did indeed come with a physiological character: both music and “music info” were engaged with in a manner more appropriate to an instant, urgent, bodily need. This explains why this profane practice was bound to bear a sense of “irony” (Willis, 2000, 40): the exploitation and exploration of the cut-outs, however creative, stayed mostly at an immediately sensuous level. Listening to the cut-outs did not make one “political”; not to mention, the “cut-out youth” were most of the time only listening blindly. The cut-out subculture was never a politically conscious culture of resistance and rebellion as in the classic subcultural sense, their political agenda was essentially experiential and affective, and was realized only in a seen, heard, and imagined world of new sensations. This world appeared to be utopian and

nonofficial not because it was a politically driven project, but because it *felt* strikingly different. As Lu Da told me in the interview:

You know what I think it is? It's just that it provided you with a completely different kind of experience, that's what music could do. This is because we all have instincts, you can sense by instinct the emotions or some other stuff at a superficial level which this music brought to you. This superficial stuff stimulated you, and let you break completely away from the situations you were in. It's like all of a sudden, fuck, it's totally different, it's so refreshing. ... Think about it, we were so far away from the West, like me, I was just an ignorant kid in Taiyuan, and then suddenly all these things just fell down from out of nowhere right in my face, think about my conditions of life back then, my worldview back then, my reaction to them was bound to be very intense. In fact, the most shining part in the cut-out years was this sense stimulation, it was like you poured sulfuric acid into water. (Lu Da)

Ultimately, the hunger of the “cut-out generation” was a historically conditioned one: the early 1990s marked a unique moment when China was beginning to open itself up but was not yet fully opened. The cut-outs arrived just before the nation fully embraced all forms of Western cultures and liberal lifestyles, only to become a misplaced cultural object whose original cultural meanings were barely decipherable. They didn't bring formal cultural exchanges, but only a series of sensuous impacts which generated pleasure, curiosity, and imagination. In this sense, the “cut-out generation” were hungry not only in a physiological but more importantly a cultural sense: their voracious appetite was born out of the sudden awareness of the existence of a much wider and wilder world beyond their current diet, and of so many dishes which they had never tasted. This awareness itself was a by-product of Deng's opening-up project and its guiding ideology. Therefore, the “cut-out generation” never felt full until that project was completed. As China officially entered the WTO, firmly incorporating itself into the World Wide Web and the neoliberal global economy, the historical conditioning of this sense of hunger gradually ceased, and that was when cut-out consumption lost its profane magic. The “cut-out generation”, in this sense, was destined to end up as a material culture of obsessive record collecting which epitomized Bauman's “consumerist syndrome” (Rojek, 2004) in the 21st century. Here I quote from Cai Jing, one of the most famous “record kings” (“碟霸”) in Beijing's collection scene:

Sometime I think - and I relate this to China's economic development - because we have turned from a state of basically nothing into a state of material affluence in only three decades, and in this process it first and foremost gave a huge impact to what your body could take. You were

like dumbfounded, you couldn't stand it, it was all too fast. It was like when you ate, you were not digesting slowly, you were not gradually establishing your own system of tastes... instead, when you found something delicious, fuck, you were like chewing some with your teeth, while hiding some underneath your tongue, while holding some more with your hands and securing even more within your eyesight... our growth was in fact an unhealthy, pathological growth, it was disturbed by the sudden flooding in of material goods right in our face... I am an example of this failure and it has led me into this retaliatory consumption of material goods... That's why my home is like a warehouse with thousands of CDs in it, right? This is what I think, and I do not want to be a person like this. (Cai Jing)

7.6 The Silent Context

Seen in this light, the inherent paradox of the cut-out subculture was determined by the inherent paradox of China's neoliberal approach to modernization. In the course of the 1990s, the two "imagined enemies" of the cut-out subculture were by no means separate in the path China was taking. After 1992, the state-led "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" in Deng's blueprint was practised as China's only route to a modern, developed future. This route led China to the forefront of the world's economic stage, and it also pushed China into a world of symbols, values, and meanings which had previously only existed in a parallel universe called "the West". The search for profane meanings by the "cut-out generation" was defined and conditioned by this grand scheme: on the one hand, the ideology of opening-up constantly demanded that they, like all their peers, must reach out, catch up, and become Western and modern; yet on the other hand, growing up in a time when the economic reform opened up the consuming instincts of the nation, they became the first generation of the soon-to-be "new middle class" who were trained to make sense of the perpetually changing world through consumption, and to regard it as the only solution. The paradoxical practice of cut-out "learning-by-listening" served as a perfect epitome: the "cut-out generation" were attempting to be Western and rock, and to be "knowledgeable" and "cultural" through ceaseless listening and buying; they were dreaming of "the spiritual" all the time only to end up on the material side, because they had few meaningful, symbolic resources to rely on apart from their own human bodies and senses. As Wu Song said in the interview:

The cut-out, in itself, represents both a possibility of desire fulfilment, and a simultaneous reaction force to this possibility, it only made this desire more and more intense. (Wu Song)

However, while China was not ready culturally when the cut-outs landed as a cultural object, it was more than ready in the economic and infrastructural sense. Under China's embrace of the global economy, the scrap recycling business continuously supplied raw industrial materials for the burgeoning manufacturing industries in the newly opened up SEZs, safeguarding the nation's status as "the world factory" (Palko, 2005). Seen in this light, the primitive wholesale and scrap recycling businesses, based heavily on kinships and locational resources, was also a self-invented path to development by the "Jews of the East"⁶¹ in Heping, who, like their neighbours in the "e-waste villages" nearby, seized the opportunities brought by globalization. Meanwhile, the cut-out retail sector created unskilled jobs for both the rural surplus labourers and the laid-off workers left behind by the market-driven reform, and rendered them self-employed *getihus* who revitalized China's private economy. Last but not least, the very practice of cut-out consumption was a component part, although not the most conspicuous one, of China's urban "consumer revolution" which brought into every household consumer products such as music cassettes and the cassette recorder, as well as popular culture itself.

Therefore, the "cut-out generation" was a legitimate, if not so intended, product of the project of "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics"⁶². It also manifested, or concealed, various forms of social inequalities resulting from this neoliberal path. On the one hand, behind the politics of knowledge and ignorance which prevailed in the cut-out wholesale and retail sectors were China's significant, and rapidly increasing divides, marked by class and regional differences at multiple levels: although the "cut-out generation" barely read English, they were still much more "knowledgeable" than the petty low-brow *getihus* who they looked down upon, and even more than the dealers "doing *liao*" in Heping many of whom were completely illiterate. While for some, the cut-out record was deemed spiritually priceless, for others it was and could only be taken as a "thing".

On the other hand, in the global era, nothing else stands more accurately as what Willis (2014, 224) calls "the shit of capitalist production" than the cut-outs: the cut-out wholesale sector derived from the larger scrap recycling industry, which was itself part of the vast network of global waste trade, argued to be one of the dark sides of the globalization process in which waste generated from "the core" was constantly transferred to "the

⁶¹ A term reported to be coined by King Vajiravudh from Thailand to describe the Teochew people's business ability.

⁶² See also Kielman's (2017) discussion.

peripheral zones of the world-system” (Frey, 2012, 79; see also ISWA, 2014; Laha, 2015; Kellenberg, 2015). Seen in this light, behind the dark “poetics” of the chaotic electronics malls or the shabby cut-out ground stalls was the typical condition of “prosperous low-cost capitalism” (Hu, 2008, 41) in globalizing China which suggested, to use Sundaram’s (1999, 61) term, a harsh but lively state of “recycled modernity”. In this sense, the petty, calculative cut-out dealers who were looked down upon by the cut-out “rock preachers” and the chaotic, anarchistic poetics of the cut-out retail infrastructure were two sides of the same coin.

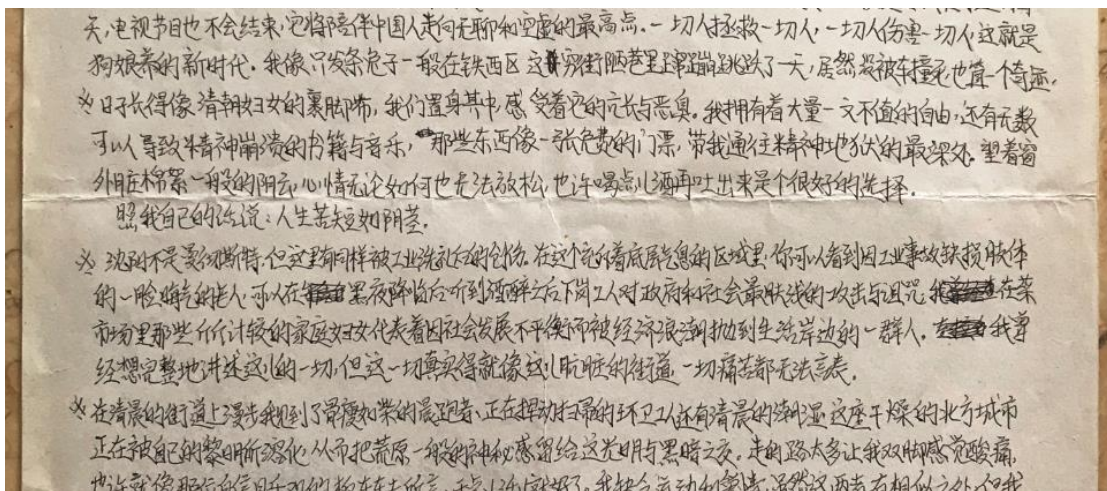


Figure 35 A Bai’s diary⁶³

For a small number of cut-out listeners, the cut-outs did spark a critical light when it presented a “looking-glass” (Gurnah, 1997, 121) by showing what other parts of the world were like. In the “cut-out archive” I built, a precious document is a diary written by A Bai, a “cut-out youth” from Shenyang which was the centre of China’s northeast “rust belt” under reform. In one paragraph, the author compared his gloomy hometown to the industrial city of Manchester which he had apparently only visited in his cut-out journey:

Shenyang is not Manchester, but here too there are the wounds of industrial suffering. In this area filled with the smell of the underclass, you can see the gloomy old men whose disability was caused by industrial injury, you can hear, after the night falls, the shallowest curse made by the laid-off workers to the society and the government, and those calculating housewives in the vegetable market represent the group of people thrown to the edge of life by economic waves due to the unbalanced development of the society. (A Bai)

⁶³ Document provided by Dong Bingfeng.

Still, most members of the “cut-out generation” weren’t able to draw links like this. Even when the cut-out subculture was at its most “political” moment, its penetrations barely touched upon the structural levels of politics depicted above. But this is by definition what profanity was about: for the “cut-out youth”, it was always much easier to sense Woodstock in *Wudaokou* than to relate Shenyang with Manchester. When Woodstock was evoked at the shabby cut-out counters in Beijing, the “cut-out generation” filled their life with profane meanings which they created through sensuous engagement with the cut-outs, and thereby they launched a living and lived out subcultural critique of their time.

For us, what makes the “cut-out generation” distinct and precious is that it vividly presents an alternative, subcultural side of China’s neoliberal project of modernization, both challenging and enriching existing narratives of 1990s China. Once we piece together its politics of value, dialectics of profanity, and structure of feeling, the “cut-out generation” reveals its “silent context” (Willis, 2014, 226), and presents a comprehensive and dynamic subcultural politics which is marked by liveliness and liminality, and powered by agency and materiality. Its realization and destiny reminds us what China has gained and lost, and its profanity lives through time.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Demographic Information of the Interviewees

Name	Birth Year	Gender	Date of Interview	Location of Interview	Location of Cut-out Stories	Cut-out Ids ⁶⁴	Sample
Li Jun	1973	M	20-Sep	London	Nanjing, Tianjin	3	Pilot
Yan Poxi	1982	F	24-Sep	London	Beijing	3 4	Pilot
Wang Lun	1974	M	13-Oct	Jinan	Jinan	2 3	Pilot
Yan Qing	1981	M	18-Oct	Beijing	Shanghai	2 3	✓
Ruan Xiaoqi	1972	M	23-Oct	Beijing	Nanjing, Beijing	2 3	✓
Song Jiang	1963	M	26-Oct	Beijing	Beijing	3 5	✓
Song Qing	1983	M	7-Nov	Beijing	Beijing	3	
Zhu Tong	1972	M	8-Nov	Beijing	Beijing	2 3 4	✓
Huyan Zhuo	1967	M	15-Nov	Beijing	Beijing	2 3 5	✓
Huangfu Duan	1982	M	16-Nov	Beijing	Shijiazhuang	3	
Lei Heng	1982	M	20-Nov	Beijing	Beijing	1 2 3	✓
Sun Li	1980	M	20-Nov	Beijing	Beijing	2 3	✓
Gu Dasao	1978	F	22-Nov	Beijing	Beijing	3	✓
Li Ying	1977	M	22-Nov	Beijing	Shanghai	3 4	
Chai Jin	1972	M	27-Nov	Beijing	Beijing	2 3	✓
Bao Xu	1974	M	8-Dec	Beijing	Beijing	3 5	
Dai Zong	1979	M	12-Dec	Beijing	Xian, Heping	1 2 3	✓
Zhang Tianshi	1970	M	17-Dec	Beijing	Beijing, Guangzhou	3 5	✓
Guan Sheng	1965	M	21-Dec	Beijing	Shenyang	2 3	✓
Xu Ning	1977	M	22-Dec	Beijing	Beijing, Shunde	1 2 3	✓
Gongsun Sheng	1973	M	25-Dec	Beijing	Lanzhou, Beijing	3 5	✓

⁶⁴The five “cut-out identities” include: 1) cut-out wholesalers and/or scrap dealers; 2) cut-out retailers; 3) cut-out consumers; 4) local underground musicians; 5) niche media producers (including radio DJs and music critics).

Qin Ming	1976	M	26-Dec	Beijing	Changsha, Shijiazhuang	3 5	✓
Qiong Ying	1982	F	27-Dec	Beijing	Tangshan, Beijing	3	✓
Zhang Qing	1980	M	27-Dec	Beijing	Tangshan	2 3	✓
Li Kui	1973	M	29-Dec	Shenzhen	Shenzhen, Changsha	2 3 4 5	✓
Yang Zhi	1979	M	31-Dec	Shenzhen	Beijing, Guangzhou, Heping	1 2 3	✓
Suo Chao	1981	M	1-Jan	Shenzhen	Hohhot, Shenzhen	3 4	✓
Lu Junyi	1970	M	7-Jan	Beijing	Shenyang, Beijing	3	✓
Ling Zhen	1973	M	7-Jan	Beijing	Beijing	3 4	
Wu Song	1973	M	25-Jan	Beijing	Nanjing, Beijing	3 4	✓
Liu Tang	1974	M	27-Jan	Beijing	Beijing	2 3 5	✓
An Daoquan	1976	M	31-Jan	Beijing	Shanghai, Beijing	3	
Wu Yong	1967	M	1-Feb	Beijing	Beijing	3 5	✓
Wang Ying	1980	M	4-Feb	Beijing	Beijing	3	
Hu Sanniang	1982	F	4-Feb	Beijing	Changsha, Beijing	3	✓
Dong Ping	1969	M	5-Feb	Beijing	Tianjin, Beijing	3 5	✓
Xiang Chong	1978	M	7-Feb	Beijing	Beijing	2 3 5	
Fan Rui	1970	M	11-Feb	Beijing	Beijing	3 5	
Li Gun	1980	M	11-Feb	Beijing	Beijing	2 3	
Jiang Menshen	1976	M	1-Mar	Beijing	Guangzhou	3 5	✓
Hua Rong	1975	M	2-Mar	Beijing	Hangzhou	2 3 4	✓
Sun Erniang	198?	F	4-Mar	Beijing	Beijing	3 4	✓
Jin Zhi	198?	F	5-Mar	Beijing	Beijing	2 3	
Li Shishi	1983	F	6-Mar	Beijing	Beijing	3 4	✓
Mu Hong	1973	M	12-Mar	Guangzhou	Nanchang, Guangzhou	3 4 5	✓
Lu Da	1974	M	13-Mar	Guangzhou	Taiyuan, Guangzhou	3 5	✓
Ximen Qing	1980	M	14-Mar	Guangzhou	Guangzhou	3 5	

Zhang Heng	1981	M	15-Mar	Guangzhou	Guangzhou	2 3 4	✓
Zhang Shun	1986	M	15-Mar	Guangzhou	Guangzhou	2 3 4	✓
Su Yuanjing	1976	M	20-Mar	Guangzhou	Guangzhou	2 3	
Shi Qian	1982	M	21-Mar	Shunde	Shunde, Hefei	1 2 3	✓
Wang Jin	1979	M	26-Mar	Shanghai	Shanghai	3	
Xie Bao	1981	M	27-Mar	Shanghai	Shanghai	3 4	✓
Xie Zhen	1974	M	27-Mar	Shanghai	Shanghai	3 5	
Hou Jian	1983	M	28-Mar	Shanghai	Shanghai	3	
Sun Xin	1976	M	29-Mar	Shanghai	Shanghai	3 4	
Zhu Wu	1970	M	31-Mar	Shanghai	Shanghai	3 5	✓
Jin Dajian	1973	M	1-Apr	Hangzhou	Hangzhou	3 4	✓
Ruan Xiaowu	1973	M	2-Apr	Nanjing	Nanjing	2 3	✓
Ruan Xiaoer	1971	M	4-Apr	Nanjing	Nanjing	1 2 3	✓
Shi Jin	1980	M	5-Apr	Nanjing	Nanjing	1 2 3	✓
Lin Chong	1971	M	6-Apr	Wuhu	Guangzhou	1 2 3 5	✓
Yang Xiong	1974	M	14-Apr	Beijing	Taiyuan, Beijing	3 5	✓
Shi Xiu	1974	M	14-Apr	Beijing	Shenyang	3 4	✓
Xiao Rang	1981	M	15-Apr	Beijing	Shanghai	3 5	✓
Yang Jian	1976	M	16-Apr	Beijing	Beijing	3	
Gao Qiu	1978	M	21-Apr	Beijing	Beijing, Heping	1 2 3	✓
Tong Guan	1975	M	22-Apr	Beijing	Beijing	2 3	✓
Cai Jing	1973	M	3-May	Beijing	Beijing	3	✓
Huang Xin	1980	M	29-Aug	Beijing	Beijing	3 4	
Shi Wengong	1978	M	22-Sep	Berlin	Beijing	2 3 4	✓
Chao Gai	1978	M	1-May-15	Beijing	Beijing	2 3 4	✓

Appendix 2: Interview Guide⁶⁵

A. Briefing:

- 1) Introduce yourself...
- 2) Is music still important to you today? Do you still listen/purchase/collect music or music records? What kinds of music do you listen to now?

B. Personal history:

- 1) When and how did your relationship with popular music begin?
- 2) When and how did your relationship with rock music begin?
- 3) When and how did your relationship with the cut-outs begin?

C. Cut-out consumption:

- 1) When did you first see/buy cut-out records? What did you buy and what motivated you to buy them?
- 2) Did you know why there was a cut back then? What about now? Did the cut affect your listening?
- 3) Tricks of cut-out consumption/hunting? What kinds of cut-outs did you often buy?
- 4) When/where/how often/how long did you buy cut-outs? How much money did you usually spend each time? Where did the money come from?
- 5) Did you have a sense of collection back then? When did you start collecting? How do you sort/store your collection? Do you consider cut-outs/complete discs valuable as music collection?
- 6) Any cut-out dealers which impressed you? Have you ever sold cut-outs yourself (go to F.)?
- 7) Any particular cut-out record which is important to you (can you play them)? Most expensive one you've bought? Biggest gem you've picked? What kinds of titles were considered as "top goods"?

⁶⁵ The original guide is in Chinese. Considering its length and trivialness, here I only translate a small part of it which was applied to the majority of my interviewees in relation to their identity as cut-out consumers ("Identity 3"). For the other four types of "cut-out identities", additional sections (E/F/G/H) were applied in addition to the translated ones.

8) When/where/with what device did you usually listen to cut-outs? Did you listen alone or with others? Did you pay attention to the lyrics? Any impressive listening experience (can you play them)? Is sound quality important to you?

9) Did you regularly buy and read music magazines/fanzines? What did you read? Did you regularly listen to the radio? Who was your favourite cut-out music critics/rock DJ? What kind of role do you think music critics/rock DJs played in the cut-out period? Have you ever written a music review yourself (go to H)?

10) When and how did the cut-out market in your area disappear? When did you stop buying cut-outs?

11) Do you listen to Chinese rock in the cut-out period? Did you often go to local rock gigs? What do you think of local rock musicians?

12) What was most important to you in your life apart from music? Did the cut-outs/rock music also influence other aspects of your life? What were the opinions of your parents/teachers/friends on the cut-outs and on rock music? What kinds of music did they listen to?

D. “Cut-out circles”

1) Was there a cut-out circle in your area?

2) Did you often go to cut-out hunting with friends? How did they influence you? Describe them...

3) Any important person/interesting people in your circle?

4) Who are the people that made up your cut-out circle? Age/gender/job...

5) Was your cut-out circle close to your local music scenes? Did you ever play in a band (go to G.)?

E. Cut-out wholesale & scrap dealing:

.....

F. Cut-out retail:

.....

G. Local music scenes:

.....

H. Niche media production:

.....

I. Reflections:

- 1) Do you consider yourself a member of the “cut-out generation”? What do you think of this label? What do you think distinguish this generation from others?
- 2) What was most important to you in the memories related to the cut-outs?

Appendix 3: List of Subcultural Documents⁶⁶

Title	Time	Topics	Titles of Sampled Articles in Chinese
<p>1. <i>Popular Songs/X-music Youth</i> (《通俗歌曲》)</p> <p>(Subtitled “No.1 Chinese rock magazine” from 1999)</p> <p>(2001. 9: special issue on the “cut-out generation”)</p>	1989-92 monthly	<i>Tongsu</i> music	“通俗歌曲并非绵绵之音的代名词”
		<i>Yaogun</i> : pre-cut-out rock music	“中国摇滚乐触动日本观众心弦” “列宁格勒的摇滚乐俱乐部”...
		Western music	“欧美摇滚热” “乡村音乐”...
	1997-98 bimonthly	Western rock	“摇滚 50 年: 精华二百张” “唱片秀”/“盒带大家谭” “摇滚新神话 枪炮与玫瑰” “黑色圣诞 黑色安息日”...
			Rock mythology in Chinese music
		Revisions of magazine content & style	“通俗变法特别告示” 1999.1 “社长感言” 2000.3 “本期导读” 2000.9 “致读者朋友们的一封公开信”
		Music piracy	“石破天惊 究竟谁在出盗版?”
	1999-2001 bimonthly	Underground music, punk music and the rock mythology	“酒吧打倒卡拉 OK” “他们是朋克, 我们是什么” “去地地下” “金属得罪了谁” “2000 年流行音乐十大垃圾专辑”...
		Music reviews and music critics	“关于音乐批评及其他” “实话实说”

⁶⁶ I only include topics and sampled articles of the first ten magazine titles due to time limit.

			“明天我们骂什么” “原信毕露” 1999.1 “乐评的理由”...
		Youth & everyday life	“学校” “关于摇滚的青春记忆” “Damn Youth” “把理想当汉堡吃掉” “成长中的幼苗”...
		Cut-out consumption	“一次清算” “我的打口梦” “打口带和啤酒的故事” “2000 年十大卡口专辑” “中国打口精品购物指南”...
		Mail-order	“邮购目录”
		Politics and news	“世界很不平静——2000 年时事生活总回顾导言” “时事 2001”...
2. <i>Audio & Video World</i> (《音像世界》)	1987-1999 monthly	Guiding themes of the magazine	“在全国音像管理工作会议上的讲话” “上帝特色宽容”...
		Western music	“对话摇滚乐” “甲壳虫乐队” “摩登谈话” “重金属硬摇滚” “三十个疯狂的昼夜——Kurt Cobain 自杀的前前后后”...
		<i>Yaogun</i> : pre-cut-out rock music	“中国摇滚 西部情歌” “摇滚 BOY 崔健”...
		Music piracy	“著作权法实施前答记者问” “曝光上海拷带非法交易市场” “猖獗的‘海盗版’音带” “大陆唱片业第一大案”

		Imported music (<i>Gangtai & Western</i>)	“引进带的冲击” “对目前音像市场上引进现象的再分”
		Music medium & music industry	“92 视听新动态” “音乐人的困惑和追求——中国音乐 的现状和未来研讨会发言摘要” “中国歌迷大裂变” “音像博士”...
		Rock mythology	“无法回避的偶像崇拜” “音速青年汇入主流音乐——独立性难保” “亚文化在商业夹缝中的出浮” “另类是一种病”...
		Mail-order	“音像小超市”
3. <i>Vision 21</i> (《视觉 21》)	1999	The “cut-out generation” & underground rock culture	“愤怒反抗电影” “这个杀手不太冷——颜峻其人其书其事” “摇滚名词解释 (吴虹飞)” “打口一代” & 漫画
4. <i>Sound</i> (《声音》) (Predecessor of <i>Impression</i>)	1996	Western rock music on cut-out market	“声音在蔓延” “不一样的怀念” “哥德部队第一军 Bauhaus”...
7. <i>Electric Ark</i> (《电动方舟》)	1999	Western rock music & culture	Preface “学校” “一种找寻” “在神话中永生”...
8. <i>I Love Rock 'N' Roll/ So Rock!</i> (《我爱摇滚乐》)	1999-2002 (Vol. 1-12)	Themes and Style of the magazine	Editor's Page “So Rock!唱片的宣言——一个国家的诞生”
		Western rock culture	“卡带文化” “乐迷杂志” “我来剥摇滚的皮”...

		Youth & Lifestyle	“继续、改变还是死掉” “Food+Sex+Money≠Life” “天生你才必有用——2001 热门职业选择指南” “狗日的生活”...
		Politics	“来自工业区的证据” “21 世纪的改革” “拒买日货——一个人的战争还是一个国家的战争” “中国加入 WTO 的主要让步清单” “左派 vs 右派：爱人民”...
		The Cut-out Market	“沈阳打口带市场的调查” “我那口子” “南昌打口英雄谱” “边区‘打口’” “打口故乡寻根记”...
7. <i>Punk Time Vol. 1-3</i> (《朋克时代》)	1998-2000	Themes of the magazine	“前言 后记” “礼伤往来: 编读对话”
8. <i>Free Music Vol. 1-4</i> (《自由音乐》)		Punk/underground culture	“关于朋克” ”扑火” “丧钟,为新音乐而鸣”...
9. <i>Heyday Rock Vol. 1-2</i> (《盛世摇滚》)		Western rock bands	“朋克基督: 关于 Ramones” “反祭奠的祭奠” “Too Fast to Live: 记 The Clash” “被道德遗忘的神曲: 追忆 Syd Barrett” “在原平, 我们听 Sonic Youth”...
		Chinese underground music scenes	“盘古的反明星态度” “祖咒访谈: 我不属于朋克时代”
		Chinese society & politics	“坐以待毙” “法国五月风暴口号辑录” “关于中国古代哲学与现代流行音乐的杂文”

			“吉他里面出不来自由” “奴隶的尊严”...
10. <i>TD-R</i>	2002	...	
11. <i>I Hate Rock N' Roll</i> (《我恨摇滚乐》)	2002		
12. <i>Impression</i> (《印象》)	2005		
13. <i>Music Heaven</i> (《音乐天堂》)	1992-1999 (Vol. 1-36)		
14. <i>Extreme Music</i> (《极端音乐》)	2000		
15. <i>Rock</i> (黑皮《摇滚》)	1994		
16. <i>Music Pocket</i> (《口袋音乐》)	2003		
17. <i>Random Sounds</i> (《杂音》)	1997-		
18. <i>R/Non-music</i> (《非音乐》)	2001-2003		
19. <i>Modern Sky</i> (《摩登天空》)	1999-		
20. <i>Painkiller</i> (《重型音乐》)	2000		