**Catherine Capdeville-Zeng, Rites et rock à Pékin.
Tradition et modernité de la musique rock dans la
société chinoise, [Rock and ritual in Peking. Rock
music's modernity and tradition in Chinese society]**

Paris, Les Indes Savantes (Asie XXI), 2001, 350 pp.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Michael Black

- 1 Catherine Capdeville-Zeng's book, an ethnography of the world of Chinese rock in the 1980s and early 1990s in Peking, throws us into the heart of "Rock society circles", with its protagonists of the time, including Cui Jian, Femmes and He Yong, who appear, with their moods and their ambitions, on stage and in the studio. While the title and the cover photograph prompt us spontaneously to associate the image of rock, generally rebellious and critical, with the events of 1989, the author immediately places her study in a more anthropological perspective. "This monograph on Chinese rock understands the music as a social construction particular to Chinese society. This is not about world rock, but rather about the idea the Chinese have of it and about their Chinese production of this music" (p. 10). Her regular presence in "rock fieldwork" brings her to the construction of a personal typography of rock groups—holistic, imperial and open—which she analyses in the course of eight chapters by means of classical contrasts (ritual and music, *yin* and *yang*, inspired by the Chinese tradition, or

hierarchy and equality or individualism and holism taken from Louis Dumont) in order to raise the question of the emergence of a Chinese individual whom she defines as a “relationship individual” who can express his emotions and communicate them to others.

- 2 Catherine Capdeville-Zeng begins with a presentation of the conditions surrounding the emergence and production of rock in China. The first chapter surveys the history of music in China, from the Confucian classic, *The Book of Music*, to the emergence of rock during the reforms, in traditional, political, musicological and social aspects. Rock is presented in three stages: its birth in 1982, a period of independent diversity between 1986 and 1989, and the “rock society”, known as the Circle of the Rock Community at the beginning of the 1990s. The second chapter is more sociological. It seeks to understand the careers of rockers, beginning with their family life (with its intergenerational tradition via the “artistic units” *wenyi tuanti*, the passing on of musical values and of respect for parental authority) and their education up to their insertion into the world of rock by means of the *zouxue*—tours of the provinces—which are an obligatory rite of passage.
- 3 Catherine Capdeville-Zeng uses her own typology of rock groups to present the main stages of their careers. Rehearsal (Chapter three) and recording (Chapter four) are analysed in a systematic manner in order, on the one hand, to describe the constitution of each group in its working situation, and, on the other, to show their personal as well as professional relationships within rock society. “A musical activity in which the various group structures appear most clearly because the musicians express their musical and social relations directly” (p. 79), the observation of the rehearsals of two groups, Femmes and Cui Jian, shows two contrasting types of musical groups, the former holistic and the latter imperial. Femmes are a community (in the sociological sense), based on a relations of “sociality”, whose principal characteristic is “creating in common” (p. 116), while Cui Jian is composed of a leader who directs, and an ensemble of musicians who perform. Recording, meanwhile, is illustrated with the help of an open group who work together regularly with members of the Circle, because it “makes it possible to link together and go beyond the two forms of rock group analysed and sheds new light on the question of individualism” (p. 114). This is the case, in the author’s eyes, of the composer and musician He Yong, who broke his contract after a disagreement, in order to create his own personal work, which brought him social approval.
- 4 The analysis of parties (Chapter five) and of concerts (Chapter eight) is interpreted as a dichotomy contrasting ritual (or social relations) with music (or emotion). While the interaction between the Circle’s rockers is fundamental, through the ritual in the parties, which are real places of integration and recognition, both musical and social, organised for foreign audiences in public places, listening to music as the expression of human emotions is favoured at the major concerts. Those given by Cui Jian in 1992 follow this pattern which temporarily reverses the relationship between ritual and music. The symbolic effectiveness of the music broadcast creates a social connection between the thousands of spectators at a large get-together (*datong*) which dissolves at the end of the concert “so that the division of rituals can structure society once more” (p. 316). The social and emotional, even brotherly, relations within each group are examined in detail in chapter six. Catherine Capdeville-Zeng offers the reader a complex system of social and financial status, going beyond their morphological

differences (egalitarian or hierarchical) and their *modus vivendi* (mutual help between friends (*pengyou bangmang*) or contractual relationships), which only situations of conflict or crisis (accesses of individualism or disagreements over pay) can alter. Finally, through a literal study of the lyrics of Cui Jian, He Yong and Femmes (Chapter seven) which “all spell out the problem of the struggle between the Chinese individual and the Western individual” (p. 286), the author shows the extent to which these composers question the dominant values (equality or hierarchy) of Chinese society. The various analyses of the musical stages of these groups and the place that the communication of emotion occupies in rock allow Catherine Capdeville-Zeng, in her conclusion, to return to the ideas of individualism and holism, as well as the influence of the West in this particular world which she places in the Chinese figure of *yin* and *yang* in order to explain the emergence of a Chinese relationship-individual.

- 5 Despite some methodological weaknesses, this is an interesting work for several reasons. Firstly, this study of rock in Peking, based on extended experience in the field, and sound knowledge of Chinese society, fills a gap in French publishing on contemporary Chinese culture. Moreover Catherine Capdeville-Zeng scrutinises the otherness of rock. She seeks to grasp the complexity of this musical world and shows how rock has constructed and defined itself socially and culturally in China, in a way which recalls Jia Zhangke's year 2000 film, *Platform* (*Zhantai*). Without overemphasising the influence of Western rock, she reveals the existence and production of a discourse on Chinese rock, whose first- and second-hand references are virtually nonexistent. She also underlines the great diversity and dynamism in its practice, illustrated in part by her typology of holistic, imperial and open groups, the methodological construction of which deserves more explanation. In her attempt to go beyond the notions of individualism and holism, which have already been debated at length in anthropology, and to present through the rocker a Chinese individual defined as a “relationship-individual” (p. 320), the author takes a comparative perspective. However, more comparisons between certain themes linked to the forming of rock groups and their ritual or emotional relations with others, whether music professionals or not (in particular Western rock groups, for example, or more generally the notions of rites of passage, of public space, of festivals and of the gender issue) would, to my mind, have better supported this research and enriched this analysis of rock as “a social construction particular to Chinese society” (p. 10).