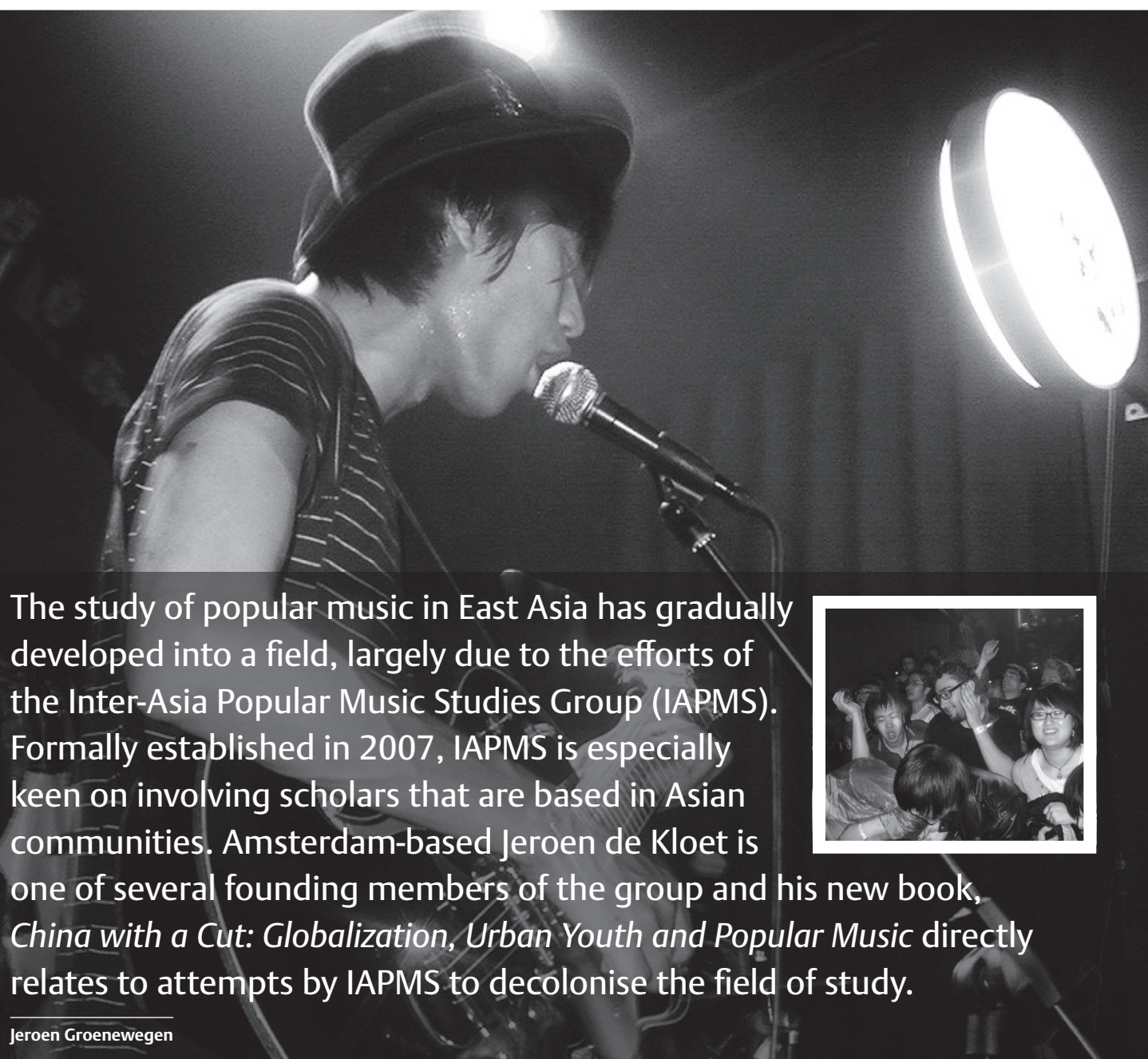


# Cultural forms are like snow, crystal clear when hardened, opaque when soft



The study of popular music in East Asia has gradually developed into a field, largely due to the efforts of the Inter-Asia Popular Music Studies Group (IAPMS). Formally established in 2007, IAPMS is especially keen on involving scholars that are based in Asian communities. Amsterdam-based Jeroen de Kloet is one of several founding members of the group and his new book, *China with a Cut: Globalization, Urban Youth and Popular Music* directly relates to attempts by IAPMS to decolonise the field of study.

Jeroen Groenewegen

**De Kloet, Jeroen. 2010.**

*China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 255 pages. ISBN 978 90 8964 162 5 (paperback).

*CHINA WITH A CUT* accuses 'students, friends [and] journalists' of reiterating 'the hegemonic gaze (and arrogance) of 'the West'' by demanding Chinese rock music to be authentic, that is exotic and subversive (p. 25). To identify and distance himself from this romantic inclination, De Kloet introduces the term 'rock mythology', which he defines as '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 (p. 26).'

Implicitly, the rock mythology criticises the outstanding scholarly works of Andrew Jones, Andreas Steen, Geremie R. Barmé and Nimrod Baranovitch, among others, for presenting Chinese rock as the voice of the oppressed people against the Communist state. This contra positioning becomes explicit in De Kloet's rebuttal of the perceived sell-out and decline of Chinese rock in the course of the 1990s (pp. 16, 18-19, 167). However, rather than examine its influence on Western (mis)representations, the majority of *China with a Cut* deals with how the rock mythology binds producers, musicians, and audiences together in the People's Republic of China (p. 26).

De Kloet first formulated this argument in his PhD thesis *Red Sonic Trajectories: Popular Music and Youth in Urban China* (2001). Although based on this thesis, *China with a Cut* is much better argued. It also contains a wealth of new information and at times new theoretical approaches. Its chapters are organised according to positions in the field of rock production. The first three chapters deal with musicians and bands that increasingly challenge the rock mythology. Chapter four discusses audiences and chapter five the industry and government regulation.

Borrowing Arjun Appadurai's notion of hard cultural forms, De Kloet argues that 'rock changes those who are socialised into it more readily than it is itself changed' (p. 28, quoting Appadurai 1996:90). In the first chapter, De Kloet substantiates this claim by discussing (1) how various 'hard scenes' position themselves within rock culture, (2) how they make claims to authenticity through styles and, finally, (3) how they negotiate a sense of place and locality. The discussion continues in the second chapter, 'Hyphenated Scenes,' framed by the

Above: A sweaty rock concert in the August heat. Photos by Photo-bluer via Flickr.

same three topics but these 'articulat[ions] of specific social identities in and through music' increasingly reveal the inadequacy and restrictiveness of the rock mythology (p. 41). Thus, comparing scenes enables De Kloet to argue that rock is more multifarious than often assumed, for instance in the way it engages with Chineseness.

'The stronger a sound rocks, the harder it becomes and the more involved it gets in the negotiation of place' (p.101, cf. 194). Underground deliberately misuses traditional instruments. Heavy metal borrows from chivalric Chinese folklore. Hardcore punk, 'the ideal embodiment of the rock mythology,' reuses Communist symbols and sounds but is simultaneously obsessed with the West and Japan (p. 61-62, p. 67). Hip-hop 'keeps it real' by rapping in local dialects interspersed with English words. By contrast, while folk-rock performs migratory experiences, the other hyphenated scenes pop-rock, pop-punk and especially fashionable bands rather stress their connections with a hip, cosmopolitan sound than with China.

The initial pages of *China with a Cut* make it clear that the 'popular music' of the subtitle means rock music and the first three chapters drive this point home. The hard and hyphenated scenes, as well as the majority of subaltern sounds of the third chapter are part of the PRC band scene. Furthermore, the female and south Chinese artists of the latter reiterate the rock mythology rather than challenge it, as De Kloet points out. Jeroen de Kloet deserves praise for identifying and criticising the rock mythology, as well as for foregrounding the sounds it silences. However, it proves difficult for him to transcend rock and its fixations.

'Seductive Sounds', the final section of 'Subaltern Sounds,' discusses pop music. However, instead of discussing a mainstream pop star, De Kloet discusses Anthony Wong (Huang Yaoming), a Hong Kong-based alternative or indie pop singer and producer. In De Kloet's narrative, Wong becomes the subaltern voice of Beijing rock, rather than that of the highly influential Hong Kong pop music industry that Wong is, arguably, more engaged in. This is remarkable given De Kloet's publications on the Cantopop star Leon Lai (Li Ming) (2008) and his forthcoming article *The Chinese wind in Hong Kong's music videos* (forthcoming).

These articles also sit uneasily with De Kloet's argument that 'neither in imagery nor in sound is there an articulated attempt to localise *Gangtai* pop (p. 130),' as does the footnote at the

end of this sentence that acknowledges the overt Chineseness of Jay Chou's (Zhou Jielun) music, the reigning king of Chinese pop. 'Shanghai rock bands, gay jazz singers, and controversial female writers hope to be less local than Beijing, so as to revive the cosmopolitanism of the old Shanghai,' which is at least as local as Beijing hardcore punk (p. 129). In other words, De Kloet's argument that the hard cultural forms of Northern China make more effort to localise their sound is unconvincing.

De Kloet amends his rock-centred framework by arguing that pop is not a soft but an opaque cultural form. Following Bakhtin and De Certeau, he argues that whereas rock is hegemonic, pop enables different, often conflicting readings and social identities and thus 'unfolds the *heteroglossia* of everyday life' (p. 131). While thought provoking, this celebration of pop ignores how mainstream pop is highly normative and conservative and organised around singular, unified pop stars rather than ambiguities and multiplicities. In these pages *China with a Cut* runs the danger of turning the hierarchy of Andrew Jones' *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* (1992) around, presenting pop as a liberation of hegemonic rock, whereas its power lies in critiquing such hierarchies (paraphrasing p. 199).

The scenes presented in the first three chapters, which 'proliferate around specific genres' are entirely absent in chapter four, which argues that 'genre plays an important role in technologies of the self,' but mainly discusses the pop-rock divide (pp. 41, 140). This suggests that the scenes are useful to differentiate and describe what, in the end, is a single multifaceted and entangled PRC rock scene. Indeed, De Kloet suggests that musicians in China have a greater flexibility to switch and blend genres and styles than in the West (p. 123).

That said, 'Musical Taste and Technologies of the Self' is refreshing because it explores the uses of music as a symbolic toolbox in the processes of self-identity and reflexivity (paraphrasing pp. 140-141). Surveys and the analysis of fan mail provide insight into how audiences use music to articulate identities and to manage moods and emotions. *China with a Cut* covers three generations of urban youth: the hoodlums (*liumang*) of the early 1990s, the saw-cut (*dakou*) generation of the late 1990s and those born in the 1980s (*balinghou*), rising to prominence in the early 2000s. Most of the data provided in chapter four was collected in 1997, but De Kloet argues that also younger Chinese face exceptional pressure from the family, the education system, politics and global capitalism, and hence similarly need music to vent and escape.

'Global capitalism and the Chinese nation-state can work very well together, producing [...] a hybrid mix of cosmopolitanism and neo-nationalism, a mix which serves as the lubricant for the shared accumulation of capital' (p. 175), argues De Kloet in chapter five. Nevertheless, in the face of the perceived commercialisation and internationalisation of the Chinese media, local companies are dominant in the music industry. Large transnational record companies have limited operations in the PRC, mainly because of piracy and the need to cooperate with state-owned publishers. Taiwanese and Hong Kong companies such as Red Star and Magic Stone signed Beijing bands in the mid 1990s because of their perceived authenticity but have gradually retreated, partly because of cultural differences. In this uneven landscape, foreign companies paradoxically stress Chineseness, whereas Beijing-based companies such as Modern Sky and Scream Records stress cosmopolitanism, argues De Kloet, turning the argument of the first three chapters on its head: 'The local travels well globally, the global travels well locally (p. 180, cf. 191).'

To De Kloet, the idea of the velvet prison, in which artists internalise restrictions, is appealing but of limited use because musicians, producers and audiences often find loopholes and workarounds to get records published. These include playing dumb, providing other lyrics, deliberate delaying and working with publishers with the right connections or in parts of China that are less strict. De Kloet's argument for a less top-down hegemonic and more playful and negotiable view of state-control hits home.

*China with a Cut* is a crucial work in the emerging field of the study of Chinese popular music. In the 1990s politics and rock were all-important. In 2003, Nimrod Baranovitch' *China's New Voices* describes ethnicity, gender and politics in PRC popular music of the 1980s and 1990s. De Kloet is the first to describe these themes in the music of the new millennium, adding much-needed perspectives from audiences and the industry. Furthermore, De Kloet opens important vantage points for researching transnational flows of both mainstream and alternative pop music.

Jeroen Groenewegen  
Leiden University  
J.W.P.Groenewegen@hum.leidenuniv.nl