

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### REVIEW ESSAY

---

#### **The Making of a Subcultural Revolution**

Xiaobing Tang, University of Michigan

Paul Clark. *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 368 pp. \$88 (cloth), \$26 (paper).

Paul Clark. *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 294 pp. \$90 (cloth), \$30 (paper), \$24 (ebook).

To read the two most recent books by Paul Clark, renowned for his earlier contributions to the study of Chinese cinema, is to marvel both at his vast and enviable knowledge of the subject matter and at the vast and fast-changing landscape of modern and contemporary Chinese cultural experiences and expressions. It is to be constantly amazed by the dots that the cultural historian connects, by the different terrains that he leads us through, and by the expansive vistas that he brings into focus. Students interested in almost any aspect of modern and contemporary Chinese culture (from film to fiction to music to dance to bodybuilding) will appreciate the wealth of materials and references contained in these two volumes. Similarly, scholars of the Cultural Revolution and the developments since will have much to think about and to address, because what Clark presents here is a richer and more complex narrative of recent Chinese cultural history than has heretofore been packaged or popularized. It is a narrative that underscores the continuing evolution of modern Chinese culture in the twentieth century and beyond.

It makes good sense to read Clark's examination of "youth culture" from the 1960s into the twenty-first century as a sequel to his patient cultural history of the Cultural Revolution,

which focuses on the decade from 1966 to 1976. The “assertion of youth identity” that he reconstructs in the first main chapter of the 2012 study, for instance, originated with the rebellious Red Guards, who became “sent-down youth” in the last years of the 1960s. “The developments in these years,” states Clark at the outset, “laid the groundwork for the emergence of youth popular culture in the 1980s and later” (*Youth*, 10). This groundwork took the form of new spaces being opened up for youthful expressions, either of political idealism or of personal sentiments. Such new spaces, or domains of possibilities, receive careful investigation from the historian in the final chapter of *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, where the structural tension between “public and private fictions” undergirds the narration of the ineluctable ending of the Cultural Revolution. Alongside a robust underground movement among the young of writing, storytelling, and even translation—which proved to be “in the long term the most significant” literary activity of the early 1970s (*History*, 226)—Clark also notes that many key and innovative writers of the 1980s and beyond, such as Han Shaogong and Jia Pingwa, made their literary debut in official publications in the final years of the Cultural Revolution.

Yet these two studies are not conceived of or organized in the same way, as they tell of different subjects and have divergent plotlines. The history of the Cultural Revolution, as Clark narrates it, begins with the orchestrated efforts made by what he identifies, aptly and later in the book, as the “cultural insurgents” to modern Chinese opera in the first half of the 1960s. One plotline of this history therefore revolves around how these insurgents, headed by Jiang Qing with the backing of Mao himself, created model operas with tremendous resources at their disposal, sought to institute and perfect them, and mandated systematic transplantation of model opera aesthetics and creative methods onto other forms of cultural production. In the process, these “Cultural Revolution insurgents” or activists ascended rapidly as “power-holders” and authorities, eventually turning into desperate “defenders of Cultural Revolution faith.” It is, in other words, a sad tale of a radical avant-garde project betraying itself and growing *tout court* conservative and “decidedly rearguard” (*History*, 217–235).

The protagonist of the subsequent tale about youth culture is, by comparison, both more amorphous and yet more constant. Different youth groups or identities, from the Red Guards of the 1960s to the “post-1980” generation, are profiled and treated in turn, but the main story is how successive “youth cultures” as a subcultural practice emerged during the Cultural

Revolution and gave rise to a “continuing quest for self-expression” by the young in the following decades (*Youth*, 5).

The concept of “subculture” is pivotal in this narrative, as it allows the author to characterize youth in terms of creative efforts at self-styling and distinction from the adult moral order. “Youth” reveals itself increasingly as a sociological, even demographic, category, rather than as a political identity or value, in the process. This is why Clark believes youth was “discovered” with the Red Guard generation, because even though it had been a highly valorized designation, youth “in the Maoist era was often regarded as simply a junior version of adult commitments and responsibilities” (*Youth*, 5). Iconoclastic Red Guards, most of them in their late teens, smashed the expectation of youth as preparatory adulthood, along with numerous cultural artifacts and social institutions. By the late 1990s, however, youth in Chinese society and public discourse became more narrowly defined and ever more similar to how youth is understood and managed in Western societies. The ultimate point of the story—of tracing the steady emergence of contemporary youth cultures—writes Clark, is to explain “how and why China has taken these paths to popular cultural modernity” in the twenty-first century (*Youth*, 3).

To keep this story a manageable one, the historian zooms in on three points in time separated by a twenty-year interval: 1968, 1988, and 2008. He also foregrounds three organizing themes, through which youth experiences and expressions are examined: spaces, bodies, and rhythms. The chapters therefore follow a markedly different structure than that of the history of the Cultural Revolution. Instead of a gradually expanding scope that shows the layered repercussions of a radical insurgency in the course of a decade, the narration of the emergence of youth culture is mobile, panoramic, and multifocal. What results is indeed a “moving picture of differently paced streams of development” over time (*Youth*, 7). It is also a richly textured and compassionate canvas of contemporary Chinese culture that few other accounts, in my view, have been able to deliver with such vividness, either in English or in Chinese.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 2, as the first main chapter of the book, is arguably the richest and most stimulating. Titled “Marking Out New Spaces: Red Guards, Educated Youth, and Opening Up,” it maps the tortuous emotional and intellectual journey of one generation of young men and women and demonstrates how “the Cultural Revolution origins of youth culture in China are unmistakable” (*Youth*, 10). When this generation was mobilized as Red Guards in a grassroots political movement, it found itself presented, mostly in the cities, with unexpected opportunities,

even imperatives, of expression. Some of its youthful expressions took violent and vicious forms, but “new spaces also opened up to such activities as publication, travelling around the nation, street theatre, plays and other artistic genres, and to more underground locations” (*Youth*, 13). A sense of liberation was exhilarating to the young at the outset of the Cultural Revolution and unleashed an unprecedented creative energy. From a distinct dress code to edifying street performances to an aggressive musical style, the Red Guards put their bodies on the line and asserted a unique attitude and identity. Furthermore, competing Red Guard publications broadcast youthful voices, and the nationwide “establishing ties” (*chuanlian*) movement helped broaden minds as well as connections.

When the national campaign to send urban youth to the countryside was launched in 1968 and the Red Guards became “sent-down youth,” they initially took with them their characteristic idealism and brought performances of model operas to remote parts of the country. Yet members of this generation of relocated urban youth soon began to express private and personal—or then politically incorrect—sentiments and longings through songs, poems, and stories. Such creations were enjoyed and circulated not in the open but unofficially, or underground, and they articulated a new sense of generational identity. “The music of sent-down youth’s lives in the late 1960s and 1970s was varied,” observes Clark, but it prepared for “the emergence of an even more distinct youth music in the mid-1980s, when Chinese rock music has its origins” (*Youth*, 39). Crucial developments in literature and film in the 1980s also owed much to the explorations undertaken by the sent-down youth in the countryside.

Between this chapter and Clark’s earlier work on the Cultural Revolution, there are notable resonances, such as his poignant rebuttal of the proverbial but misleading adage about eight hundred million people watching eight model shows during the Cultural Revolution. Some historic events and experiences are introduced in both studies, but the framing and emphases are different. While the focus of his groundbreaking account of the Cultural Revolution is on cultural experimentation and conceptual continuity, the main concern for Clark in the follow-up study is the expression and formation of youth identity and culture. A good illustration of the different emphases between these two studies may be the two images that Clark includes while discussing film viewing and exhibition practices during the Cultural Revolution in separate contexts. Both images show a woman mobile projectionist at work, but one is a black-and-white woodcut published in the *People’s Daily* in 1973 (*History*, 153), and the other is a historic photograph

(*Youth*, 45). The first depicts a group of happy villagers enjoying a revolutionary Peking opera; the second zooms in on a lone sent-down youth checking the projector in a rural setting. Distinct media and compositions speak volumes about divergent viewpoints and memories about the same historical experience. In order to make sense of them, separate narratives have to be developed.

Yet both studies share the same interest in seeing the culture of the Cultural Revolution as a productive and innovative experience, rather than reducing it to a synonym of terror, destruction, or sterility.<sup>2</sup> A statement at the beginning of *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, therefore, foretells the central thesis of *Youth Culture*: “Instead of simply a period of madness, the Cultural Revolution was also a time of considerable creative energy, official and unofficial, that built on earlier developments and made possible a reorientation in Chinese cultural discourses since the 1980s” (*History*, 4). The nature of this reorientation is spelled out toward the end of the second chapter of *Youth Culture*: “The youth culture that appeared in the circumstances provided by the Cultural Revolution was not accidental. It emerged from the social upheaval, disruptions, and experimentation of those ten years. . . . In these niches and cracks in the edifice of Mao’s continual revolution, a real revolution occurred” (*Youth*, 52).

Clark examines and appreciates the far-reaching consequences of this real subcultural revolution in the rest of *Youth Culture*. Its unfolding coincided with, and was aided in part by, the arrival in Chinese society of television, music cassettes, videotapes, and eventually the Internet, all of which opened up new sites of self-expression for the young. In the 1980s, a focal point of youthful expression, according to Clark, was “the rise of the body and sex in public discourse” (*Youth*, 57).

Chapter 3, “Bodies: Undressed, Fashioned, Admired, and Moving,” begins with an extended reading of Zhang Yimou’s 1987 film *Red Sorghum*, highlighting the valorization of a robust, passionate, and masculinist body that is projected powerfully on the screen. The film became a “youth phenomenon, with spin-offs in popular music, fashion, and art” (*Youth*, 63), Clark writes; it also stirred up public debates across the country. While presenting the debates, Clark demonstrates the same magisterial ease with which he covers the overwhelming number of sources that substantiates his study of the Cultural Revolution. In one paragraph, for instance, he begins with conservative complaints about *Red Sorghum* voiced first in Huhhot, Inner Mongolia, and then from the coastal city Tianjin; he counterbalances the complaints with an

enthusiastic endorsement of the film in *Liaoning Youth* of the northeast and ends with a comment on the provincial youth journal in Fujian. There are also moments the author recounts with the relish of an eyewitness. In July 1988 Zhang Yimou appeared at a rock concert in Beijing that featured music inspired by *Red Sorghum*: “When the familiar opening bars of ‘Little sister, go forward’ from the film started up, the youthful crowd yelled with excitement. Zhang Yimou himself performed. His croaking rendition could have come from Pavarotti the way the fans reacted. The whole audience joined in the chorus. It was a great night” (*Youth*, 70).

Through the assertive male bodies magnified in *Red Sorghum*, Clark sees a youthful body obsession that in the late 1980s expressed itself in a wide range of activities, from open fascination with nude art, to bodybuilding and break dancing, to jeans and T-shirts splashed with words, all the way to sports fans and soccer riots. By the turn of the new century, *cosplay*—shorthand for an online “costume play” that originated in Japan—provided a platform for some young people to make bold statements about their body. “In twenty years the worlds of bodily beauty and adornment had expanded hugely as realms in which young China could parade and celebrate difference and control over their own bodily identities, real or imagined” (*Youth*, 101). It is a story of expansion, of changes fomented by new technologies as well as exposures. It is also a story, as we will be reminded later, of the training of youth as adept consumers.

The following chapter, “Rhythms: The Soundtracks of Connection and Assertion,” is about music. After a quick survey of the rise of popular music in the 1980s, with a special note on the impact of Deng Lijun (a.k.a. Teresa Teng) and Li Guyi, the chapter turns to Cui Jian, known as the father of Chinese rock and roll, even though, as Clark points out, another rock group preceded Cui Jian’s by about six years. As in the previous chapter on bodies, the discussion of Cui Jian as a “countercultural rock singer” strikes the keynote of a youthful alternative and sets the stage for later developments. Other rock groups, such as Tang Dynasty and Black Panther, are introduced. Here again, the historian calls attention to the overlapping contexts, “international, technical, and industrial,” that propelled the growth of youth rock. Specifically, he refers to the karaoke laser disc player that became available in the mid-1980s and the so-called “*dakou* CDs” (imported music CDs with a hole punched on the edge) of the 1990s. The transition from the 1980s to the 1990s also saw the popularity of the Northwest Wind, a raw, reinvented folk style of singing, give way to a more international and differently unruly Korean Wave. In a rare speculative moment, the historian writes, “Twenty years on, the

Korean Wave could be seen as a great returning of Chinese cultural values through the vehicle of Korean modernization. . . . The Northwest Wind and the Korean Wave can paradoxically be seen as two routes to local pride” (*Youth*, 128). (Given his expertise in Chinese cinema, I find it a pity that Clark does not make use of Jia Zhangke’s 2000 film *Platform*, the soundtrack of which forms an excellent review of the 1980s.)

This chapter on the rapidly evolving music scene would not be complete without introducing the TV talent show *Supergirl* and its 2005 winner, the charismatic and androgynous Li Yuchun. Clark addresses many aspects of *Supergirl* as a youth cultural phenomenon, but “for our purpose the most significant element in *Supergirl* 2005 was the fans themselves” (*Youth*, 207). The young fans are significant because they now embodied a participatory, expressive, and prideful fandom. The TV program created not only a new youth idol, but also a “new kind of entertainment in which the audience had unprecedented influence” (*Youth*, 133). (For this discussion, Clark would have loved, I imagine, to include as visual aid a 2007 oil painting by the Shanghai-based artist Lin Bin, since the fantastic image invites us to contemplate the meaning of two youth idols greeting their respective fans from the same symbolic space [figure 1].)



Figure 1. Li Bin, *The World Is Yours*, 2007, oil on canvas, 180 cm x 190 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The fifth and penultimate chapter, “Spaces: Real, Imagined, and Virtual Arenas,” resumes a central theme of Chapter 1, but the construction of new spaces is now reconsidered through a different set of terms—“commodification, manipulation, and deterritorialization” (*Youth*, 142)—rather than through the tension between official vs. unofficial, or public vs. private. We begin with the dance halls and video parlors that mushroomed in the 1980s, and we end up with the Internet, blogosphere, texting, and online chatting (or Q culture) of the twenty-first century. A lengthy portion of the chapter is devoted to Wang Shuo, whose colorful (if not chameleon-like) identity as a prolific fiction writer, film scenarist, TV screenwriter, publisher, and consultant—and eventually a savvy website owner and blogger—we get to follow in considerable detail. Evidently, it is a career that has both relied on and helped expand the many opportunities that became available over the past three decades. Yet if in the 1980s Wang Shuo’s irreverent style expressed a blasé attitude among some urban youth, by the time he resurfaced in 2007, almost fifty years of age, he was more interested in turning his Internet gig into a “money making enterprise” (*Youth*, 158). His relationship to youth culture had become rather manipulative indeed. And not surprisingly, he would be outshined by Han Han, a novelist of the post-1980 generation and a media celebrity, “whose career was even more characterized by commercialism and commodification” (*Youth*, 159).

With the introduction of Han Han, Clark turns his attention to the rise of the Internet—to mobile phones, young bloggers, and malleable netizens. The rest of the chapter, as a result, reads more like a sociological survey and anecdotal account of youth behavior in the contemporary age than a cultural history. For the first time in the book, there is a sense that not all new spaces, virtual or imaginary, will provide a productive platform for youthful expression or experience. Teenage vulnerability to the allure of Internet games is noted. The public’s concern over profit-seeking and addiction-inducing Internet bars, as well as the authorities’ efforts to regulate them, can hardly be dismissed as “adult moral panic.” In the end, Clark feels compelled to cite the sociologist Don Tapscott, who has defended the “Net generation” in Western societies, in asserting that the Internet ought ultimately to be a positive development in the lives of China’s young. This belief may explain the hopeful title given to the concluding section of the chapter: “New Spaces, New Dreams, and New Socialization.”

In the concluding chapter, Clark recapitulates his main points and reflects further on the meaning of Wang Shuo. The trajectory of Wang’s continually evolving career points to a



“growing commercialism and fragmentation in culture” (*Youth*, 198). This fragmentation in culture may be the reason why Chapter 5 does not appear as an entirely cogent account of the contemporary scene, but it also seems to be the logical denouement of a drama about the emergence of youth culture as *subcultural* expressions and activities. Whether the “all-consuming” youth culture of the twenty-first century is a symptom or instigator of the general fragmentation is not clear. Nor may it be all that easy to tell cause from effect anyway. What becomes evident, however, is the need to reconsider more fully contemporary *mainstream* culture, which is apparently more capacious and generative than “adult or official orthodoxy” (*Youth*, 199), and to see it as the dialectical and indispensable interlocutor to various subcultures. The story line about the birth of youth culture during the Cultural Revolution and its robust growth in the 1980s, as reiterated in the concluding chapter, is loud and clear, because the mainstream culture of both periods seems well outlined and was conducive to—even well aligned with—youth culture. From the 1990s onward, the narrative about contemporary youth culture becomes more diffuse, because the contours of Chinese mainstream culture are yet to be sketched and clarified.

This is in fact a condition acknowledged by Paul Clark at the end of *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*. The rise of consumerism by the early twenty-first century, he asserts there, marks a more momentous break than did the introduction of the Reform era: “In an era of iTunes, private cars, and the Internet, the kind of assumptions of homogeneity and unified social purpose that lay behind both Cultural Revolution and post-1976 cultural production seemed to belong to another world” (*History*, 261). Yet in this new world, with its “all-consuming wake,” cultural fragmentation or diversity may mask—or simply mark—a different kind of homogeneity and mainstream consensus, just as in the Cultural Revolution, strident public culture and political uniformity bred a trailblazing youthful subculture. How to grasp this new condition—which Clark also describes as “popular cultural modernity”—and understand it in the context of the modernity project in China, as well as in terms of its global ramifications, is a task that awaits further efforts. It is as much a task for China scholars as it is for anyone with a stake in the future of our world.

*Xiaobing Tang is Helmut F. Stern Professor of Modern Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan.*

### *Notes*

- 1 By comparison, Cockain (2011), for instance, is a much more limited and rigid study of a related topic, even though the anthropologist also appears eager to debunk certain Western stereotypes of contemporary China.
- 2 This approach is also reflected in Mittler (2013), which approaches the cultural life and quotidian experience of the period by focusing on different senses and related media, such as “ears/sounds,” and “eyes/images.”

### *References*

- Cockain, Alex. 2011. *Young Chinese in Urban China*. London: Routledge.
- Mittler, Barbara. 2013. *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.