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Anarchy in the PRC! 'Beijing Punk'

By [Terrence Butcher](#) 7 January 2013

The 2008 Beijing Olympics were a startling coup for the giant Asian nation flexing its geopolitical muscles on the world stage, but Lei Jun could care less. The self-proclaimed Chinese skinhead minces no words in dissing the games in conversation and song, an act of social heresy in perfect lockstep with his passionately constructed identity as a punk rock outcast. Tattoos, ragged skinny jeans, and Ramones t-shirts don't comprise a sartorial image typical of the People's Republic of China, but any politically repressive society is bound to breed misfits, and Shaun Jefford's 2010 documentary *Beijing Punk* illuminates this previously ignored niche of contemporary life in the Chinese capital.

In the opening credits, Jeffords serves up footage of obedient Chinese soldiers marching in neat formation, along with massive political rallies, both evocative of *Triumph of the Will*, then immediately transports us to the frenzied chaos of D-22, Beijing's premier punk music dive. The club is owned by Michael Pettis, not a Chinese national, but an American – along with impresario Nevin Domer—pursuing business opportunities in China's loosening socio-political dimite. Pettis mentions his adopted country's yawning generation gap, perhaps comparable to that of America's "Greatest Generation" and their Frankenstein progeny, the much-discussed Boomers, but that doesn't mean that the Sino-punks have embraced English as their means of musical expression. The bands presented in this doc are singing, no, *shouting*, primarily in Mandarin, which, it should be noted, is the most widely spoken dialect on the planet.

Meanwhile, Lei Jun, ringleader of the "OI" outfit Mi San Dao seems to be a sort of spiritual godfather to the burgeoning local punk scene. Sporting the requisite Doc Martens and suspenders on his chubby, shaven-head frame, he mentions that his father is a renowned optometrist. I smirked a bit at that revelation, musing, 'here's another rich boy desperate for masculine street cred, playing dress-up, biding his time until he takes his seat in the upper-middle class' But Lei Jun, in his engaging, boyish manner, makes it clear that Chinese physicians are paid very meager

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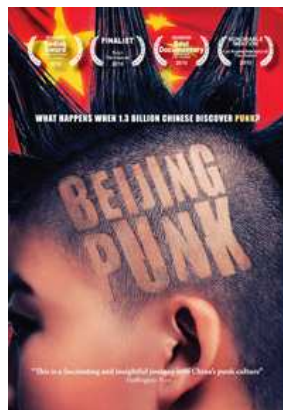
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Beijing Punk

Director: [Shaun Jefford](#)

Cast: Nevin Domer, Li Yang, Lei Jun, Xu Bo, Michael Pettis

(Seminal Films; US DVD: 20 Nov 2012)

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wages, and that he's on the cusp of outearning his prominent dad as a fledgling punk musician!

How paradoxical that this malcontent product of a society that wishes to hide his ilk in the cellar can become a successful capitalist via a subversive lifestyle, but if Lei Jun recognizes the irony of this situation, he never owns up to it. Nor do his rebellious boasts dissuade him from bragging about China's manufacturing prominence in the global marketplace.

Mi San Dao take inspiration from a bootleg video featuring the legendary speed metal stalwarts Motorhead, and while they watch eagerly, we notice the British group's fetish for Third Reich regalia. Lei Jun himself boldly proclaims Hitler to be a "great artist", and professes his admiration for the Nazi flag, which of course incorporated the controversial swastika, a symbol appropriated from ancient India. When questioned about German atrocities during World War II, including the genocidal slaughter of European Jewry, Lei Jun - who tours Germany with his band-casually utters terms like "mistakes" and "wrong". Most would consider his comments insufficiently condemnatory, and I place myself in that camp, but he wouldn't be the first ahistorical, self-absorbed Bright Young Thing preoccupied with his own milieu and era.

Later, when queried about what he would do as China's president, Lei Jun advocates free, legal drug use for all and the promotion of massive punk rock concerts. Would that make China a better place? It would be "better for me," he giggles. In a sense, his aspirations evince the same selfishness of the hundreds of millions of more conservative strivers among his countrymen, further eroding traditional Communist mores.

One quickly notices that most of the punk bands depicted in *Beijing Punk* are channeling decades-old working-class "Anarchy In the UK" tropes, as if 1978 Carnaby Street had been transplanted to 21st century Beijing. Spike, of the band Demerit, embraces his rough-hewn neighborhood in Tingzhou - reminiscent of the territoriality of violent street gangs - insisting he won't move as he gives an informal tour of the grungy apartment - including a particularly aromatic bathroom-he shares with his fellow band members.

During the look-see, director Jefford is frightened by nearby gunshots, but Spike and his buds seem to take a perverse pride in this Ghetto Baroque circus, though I'm skeptical that the unlikely prospect of stardom wouldn't drag them away. One of Spike's comrades, wearing flamboyantly round earrings that would go virtually unnoticed in San Francisco or Manhattan, labels himself "illegal", but he's crossed no borders; he was merely born in violation of his country's one-child rule.

Of course, copious amounts of liquor are consumed, but that's not the only libation of choice for Beijing punkers. Lei Jun and his pals are partial to Madame Pearl's, a codeine-laced cough syrup that presumably delivers a mellowing low. Irony rears its ugly head again when it's revealed that many club owners have become wary of Mi San Dao, as numerous fights have erupted at their gigs, though not necessarily involving the band. Couple this with the tendency of Beijing punks to avoid workaday jobs and you have a romantic cocktail of free-spirited bacchanalia and physical self-destruction. Live fast, die young, anyone?

Lest anyone imagine that Beijing's punk scene is an exclusive boys' club, the petite Shu Lu Atom will quickly dispel that notion. The widely respected drummer for Hedgehog is no shrinking violet, and her place in D-22's pantheon seems secure.

Beijing Punk's DVD 'package' is very spare, with no extras, and I would have appreciated more personal info about the musicians profiled, but the film itself is an informative *mélange* of stills, concert footage, and interviews, of appropriate length at 70+ minutes, and concludes with Demerit's hummable, anthemic "TZ Generation", the sole English-language tune in the movie. Now wouldn't it be great if we could see this on the once-relevant MTV? In prime time?

Our friend Lei Jun refers to the Communist Party Chairman as "the Monkey King", implying that loyal, incurious followers of the standard doctrine are no more advanced than simians. A harsh assessment, perhaps, but Lei Jun shares the scorn that younger generations so often express for their forebears. Chinese youth in this new millennium certainly don't enjoy the freedom of speech their Western counterparts take for granted, but their society is less restrictive than in years past, and it's inevitable that some will push the envelope. *Beijing Punk* suggests that no self-respecting punk would do otherwise.

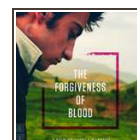
Readers interested in the Chinese music scene might also enjoy *China Underground*, by Zachary Mexico (*PopMatters*/Soft Skull Press, April 2009) [read excerpts here](#), and Jon Campbell's *PopMatters* column, [Foreign Devil](#)

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