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Prose

Welcome to the last leg of STU's global journey. Arriving in Melbourne, this issue is inspired by the tactile surfaces and transient nature of our streets and alleyways, an increasing number of artists using this landscape as an outlet for expression. This month STU has been art-directed by Melbourne designers, Qube Konstrukt. A young studio whose strength lies in their members diverse range of talents, mixed with a collaborative approach to design.

Stu Krew

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THE CHUNKS ARE COMING

Words + photos by Janine Googan

Wind your way through the chaotic clothing markets in Beijing, China. Squeeze past the fake Gucci bags, shuffle through pirated CDs of the latest Taiwanese pop stars, push aside the souvenir Mao lighters and you'll come across Chaos 13. A tiny punk stall where you can pick up t-shirts emblazoned with slogans proclaiming 'Beijing Punks are Coming'. It's a bold statement, accompanied by a revolutionary fist in the air, but you've sure gotta look hard to find it.

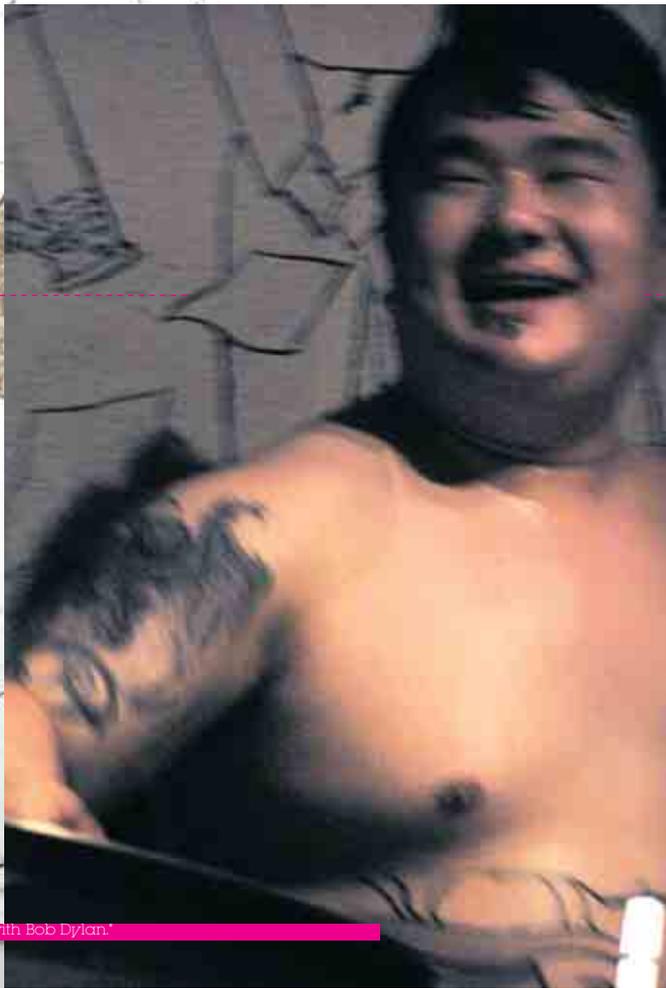
Enter the world of what I call 'Chunks': Chinese Punks. The sweet melodic tunes of Taiwan and Mando-pop might saturate the masses in China but if you dig beneath the surface, a gutsy alternative is bubbling away. Beijing's punk bands first came screaming onto the scene in 1995. As China's doors slowly creaked open and foreign influences began to have wider effect, the Chunks started to thrive. It wasn't long before a new generation of bands hurtled out of the mosh pits... These kids were straight out of school, sweaty and not afraid to live outside the norm.

Xiao Rong first picked up a guitar when he was 14. It was an initial jam session with



some friends in high school that led to the formation of the band, Brain Failure. Heavily influenced by the Sex Pistols and the Ramones, he eventually dropped out of school and threw himself into the punk scene. With ferocious energy, strong guitar riffs and fast-paced drums, topped off with Xiao Rong's deafening screams, Brain Failure have built up a steady following of fans and are renown for their passionate and frenetic performances. Xiao Rong reveals "we never give up on one gig ...if I feel like I didn't give 100% energy then I feel very bad."

SO MELB,



"For the most part
Chinese rockers have much more
in common with Guns N' Roses than with Bob Dylan."



...you can pick up t-shirts emblazoned with slogans proclaiming 'Beijing Punks are Coming'.



Hang on the Box, an all-girl outfit, have also been throwing a healthy dose of 'don't-take-no-shit' attitude to the youth of China. Likened to Bikini Kill, they mix riot grrl sounds with old-school punk. Combine this with often shocking curse-ridden lyrics such as 'rape you, rape you' or 'asshole I'm not your baby' and you've got yourself a band that has unknowingly become the poster group for girl power in China. These chicks possess a unique upbeat energy to their music that can really pack a punch.

These Chunks individually overwhelm, with their coloured hair, tattoos and way out dress sense, but when thrown into the huge melting pot of Beijing, it's easy to miss them. In a city that drowns you with its size, punk music is still a minuscule blip on the screen. Asking your average person on the street "Do you like punk music?" normally results in puzzled looks. Even in the universities it's hard to find someone who knows what punk music is, let alone like it.

Xiao Rong blames this largely on the lack of coverage. "We won't get in the major media. We also don't have any independent media, the radio is not free, and the TV is not free, there's no free speech, so the government decides what entertainment program will go on" he says, "I think that [people] just don't get any opportunity to listen to it or see a show."

Lee Crow, an American singer in the Chinese ska-band End of the World echoes this sentiment. "I think that there's just not enough exposure, and Chinese people could like punk music, and I'm sure there's a lot that would, if they had access to it". It's not an easy matter of strolling into your local music store to buy punk music. Hunting down music normally takes the form of pirated CD's sold in illegal music stores (occasionally someone's bedroom) and local punk music is mainly traded amongst friends. If you're looking for punk, it's easy enough to get, but there's no way it's going to be served up to you on a platter.

This can be largely attributed to the lack of small indie labels in China. The more successful bands have turned to foreign labels and sometimes don't even plan on releasing their albums in China. Shen Jing from Hang on the Box, who signed with the Japanese label Benton, laments: "I think China doesn't have any good labels for the rock bands... so I think we haven't any future in China".

Foreign influences in the punk scene are undeniable. But just how far these influences resonate politically raises more questions. In 1989 the Tiananmen student protests rallied around the anthems of Cui Jian, recognised as the father of rock and roll in China. His song 'Nothing to my Name' captured the angst and frustration of a generation and resulted in several of his shows being banned. Throughout the 90's, rock and punk music were often equated with the idea of rebelling against the Communist party. Against the revolutionary backdrop of Tiananmen Square and with the history of punk tied so closely to political struggle, it seemed an obvious connection. Over 10 years later, however, attempting to construct such an easy dichotomy is much trickier.

Are 'Chunks' today still fighting the romantic fight for "freedom"? Kaiser Kuo, former band member of Tang Dynasty, wrote in 2000, "For the most part Chinese rockers have much more in common with Guns N' Roses than with Bob Dylan...For most, rock is a metaphor for the American dream: money, sex & fame."

It's also possible for the political angle to be exaggerated for foreign media wanting to buy into the fear of China as a communist, and therefore oppressive country. When Hang on the Box couldn't play at the recent "World Disorder" tour in the UK last November, their record label claimed that they were refused visas because the Chinese government thought the girls were 'an inappropriate representation of Chinese culture'. In reality a much more mundane contractual difficulty was the reason behind the cancellation.

Jeph Marquardt, an American guitarist living in China compares the two countries: "I guess it the same as in the States, there are some bands that have real political agendas, like Bad Religion and Propagandi, and there are bands who just want to make people happy".

Whether they're playing for freedom, fame or just for fun, most 'Chunks' are happy just to scream their way into the future. Perhaps this is as punk as it gets, a colourful underground culture flying in the face of societal norms, existing far from the reaches of the mainstream and making music that gets the blood pumping and feet stomping. So grab that T-shirt while it's still in your sights, bargain down the price and head back out into the dusty crowds of Beijing.

* Created with assistance from the Australia-China Council which allowed me to spend time in Beijing researching this project.