

DRESS DOWN » DO IT YOURSELF » BARK LIKE A DOG » DOH A DEER » FLASH YO

LifeEtc.

There's a conspiracy between chefs, critics and restaurateurs, and the last thing they care about is you'

Janet Street-Porter Page 2



TravelEtc

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China girls

Good girls say: celebrate 80 years of the Party! Bad girls say: party, party, party! Welcome to the new cultural revolution. By Lijia MacLeod

I love my music, love my drugs and I love parties," gushes 23-year-old Shanghai DJ Maggie Sun. She wears a stark crew-cut, a T-shirt, baggy trousers and a ring through her tongue. "I party hard, as if it's my last day on earth. To enjoy myself, and have a good time whenever possible, that's my philosophy." China's ruling Communist Party is celebrating its 80th birthday today, and tributes will be intoned at the Shanghai girls' school where a young Mao-Tse-tung and fellow founding fathers convened in secret, under threat of summary execution, back in 1921. But elsewhere in Shanghai, the youth of the 21st century have other icons and other parties on their minds. The new revolutionaries are more likely to be punks than politicians.

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ents nationwide, seem to be dissolving in fleshpots such as Shanghai. For two decades, waves of "spiritual pollution" from the West have washed over China's waiting youth. They have proved more than ready to take the plunge. Until the early 1980s, most Chinese were still squeezed into seatless Mao jackets. Hair was straight, shoes sensible, and make-up rarely risked. A good night out meant a revolutionary sing-song at a mass meeting. But China's newly opened doors let in new role models such as Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop stars. The West soon began to penetrate.

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China girls – the New 'me' generation of young girls in China

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The stiff moral codes devised by Confucius, adapted by the Communists and imposed by parents nationwide, seem to be dissolving in fleshpots such as Shanghai. For two decades, waves of "spiritual pollution" from the West have washed over China's waiting youth. They have proved more than ready to take the plunge. Until the early 1980s, most Chinese were still squeezed into sexless Mao jackets. Hair was straight, shoes sensible, and makeup rarely risked. A good night out meant a revolutionary sing-song at a mass meeting. But China's newly opened doors let in new role models such as Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop stars. The West soon began to penetrate.

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When "bourgeois liberalism" encouraged students to demand democracy, Beijing cracked down. But private lives have since become private for the first time under Communist rule. Young people enjoy even-more daring choices of clothing and lifestyle, from skimpy tops to punk.

Emblematic of the current sense of cultural change is a contemporary literary heroine. Wei Hui is a writer who revels in the accolade of China's first banned pornographic female novelist". Her book, *Shanghai Baby*, is dominated by Coco, a sexually charged waitress who dreams of becoming a writer. Coco's personal life is turbulent: she finds her boyfriend dead of a heroin to return to his family in Europe.

Despite scathing reviews, this semi-autobiographical tale was an instant hit on publication in China 18 months ago. While it was the explicit references in the text to sex and substance abuse that aroused the censors' ire, it was Wei Hui's brazen self-publicism that ensured the book's success. Tabloid photographers jostled for revealing shots of the slender, long-haired writer, and sent her work underground. The publisher estimates that 130,000 legal copies were sold before the ban, and at least five million counterfeits.

"I was looking for a voice for my generation," explains Wei Hui, now 28, a graduate in Chinese literature from the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai, Wei Hui worked stints as a café waitress, drummer and journalist. "I wanted to write about the unorthodox lifestyles that have existed in cities for a long time. China is changing so fast yet, due to government restrictions, no art form has actually been reflecting that side of life."

Over in Beijing, Wang Yue, a punk singer, is doing her best. Even in her most "normal" outfit – boots, peaked cap, pierced nose, spiked dog-collar-she turns heads in a city restaurant. "This is nothing," says the 21-year-old. "Sometimes, people stop to have a closer look at me, as if I'm some kind of strange creature. Fuck them," she spits.

Wang dyes her hair purple, pink or orange, according to mood. "I dress up any way I like," she declares, loudly enough for her many enthusiastic eavesdroppers. "It's nobody else's business." But till 1997, it was her parents' business, as was inspecting her mail and diary. "I wasn't even allowed to lock my door!" Wang recalls.

And then rebellion dawned in a club named *Scream*. "A punk band called *Brainpillar* had their heads shaved," she remembers with awe. "They screamed and jumped up and down on the stage. That was the fucking coolest thing I ever saw." The gig changed her life. "I had never known there was such a great, wild world. I just went wild after that." She formed a group, *Hang on the Box*, Beijing's only all-female punk band.

Her lifestyle could not be more different from that of her parents' youth, and Wang never ceases to shock them. When her father, a Beijing policeman, spotted tattoos on her arms and legs, he literally shook with rage. "Don't you know that in China, before Liberation [1949], only gangsters had such tattoos!" he spluttered. When her mother learnt Wang was sleeping with a "foreign devil" (an English student called James) she nearly fainted. Wang and James fell in love after meeting at a nightclub and rented a flat in which to cohabit, before going their separate ways after a year.

"The difference between my mum and me is that I live for myself," Wang explains, "while she lives for others: my dad and me. I do whatever please me, without giving a shit what others think."

Wang's mother grew up with role models such as the selfless Iron Maidens of Dazhai, a brigade of peasant girls who carved out Communist dreams on the hills of central China. Wang and her friends have no such crosses to bear. Like growing numbers of Chinese who work for themselves or in the booming private sector, they belong to no state-run "work unit", the traditional method of Party control. Childhood memories of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre remind them of the futility of political dissent. Far better to focus on the self.

Wei Hui is aware that her novel will surprise UK readers when it is published here this week. "I think many British people still have a stereotyped image of Chinese women as shy, nice little ladies," she says. "And they might

think that Chinese women's position is inferior to men. But Coco is the one that controls the situation. In fact, we modern women seek both love and lust. We are very greedy."

After decades of state-sponsored Puritanism, Chinese of every age are seizing control of their private lives-despite the determination of the government to reassert the official moral code. A couple in Shanghai were recently jailed after being convicted of bigamy. The Party still bans condom advertisements, yet "adult health" shops appear everywhere, selling exotic condoms and fearsome dragon-headed dildos. Spicy stories of China's overdue sexual revolution fill magazine racks and bookshelves nationwide. "Sex sells in any country," says Li Yinghe, an expert on sex and women's concerns in Beijing. "I don't think Shanghai Baby has any literary value, but it does reflect a trend of affluent urban youth culture and changing attitudes towards sex. At the end of the Eighties, our surveys showed 15 per cent of people admitted to sex before marriage. The percentage is much higher now. Living together without getting married is also increasingly common."

DJ Maggie is certainly thrilling to Shanghai's new hedonism. Her boss once bought a bag of marijuana from southwest China. "I loved it," she says. "Everything else stopped, just leaving me very relaxed, very happy and very high." She claims that in her experience of the rave parties, private homes and underground clubs she frequents, nearly everyone is stoned. I'm surprised how many people turn up – it's all by word of mouth."

Next Maggie tried heroin, smoked from a pipe. The threat of execution for traffickers and cold turkey imprisonment for users has not inhibited an active drugs scene. When heroin proved "too strong", Maggie stayed with LSD and coke. "Drugs are the best gift from God to relieve our pains and sufferings," she says.

Wang Yue spends her modest income from the band's gigs and their first album, *Yellow Banana*, on clothes and drugs. At weekends, she raves from midnight till the morning after.

And like most unmarried Chinese, she still lives with her parents. Once Wang saw her father patrolling a street with two fellow policemen. "Dad!" she shouted, but he walked past without a glance. "He would be embarrassed in front of his colleagues," Wang explains. "I love my parents. But I would truly go crazy if I lived the same lifestyle as them, getting up early every day to go to some boring job, behaving yourself. No never!" She banishes the idea with a violent shake of her head.