



BEI JI NG BUBBLES

Punk and Rock in China's capital

北京狼花

Documentary film
Germany / China 2006
Length: 80 minutes

Original version with German subtitles/ Original version with English subtitles

Written and directed by: Susanne Messmer, George Lindt
Camera: George Lindt, Lucian Busse
Editing: Lucian Busse
Production: Lieblingslied Records
Distribution: Kloos & Co. Medien GmbH
Film scheduling: Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH

Available formats: MPEG 2@HL (1920x1080/Digital HD)
DVD / Beta Digital / Beta SP / MiniDV

**In German and Austrian cinemas
in April 2007**

For further information, cinema dates and press material please visit our Website:

www.beijing-bubbles.com



Synopsis

Beijing Bubbles is a documentary about the punk and rock scene in Beijing, a portrait of five bands in the capital of China. It is also a movie about being different in a country which is the most developing in the world today and in which everybody seems to be obsessed with social advancement and the accumulation of prosperity.

Contents

When most Western Europeans think about China, first of all economical growth, communism and traditional Asian culture come to their mind. From a western point of view it seems nearly impossible that there could exist also an alternative culture beside the common uniformity. In the metropolis of Beijing the Berlin filmmakers Susanne Messmer and George Lindt set off to search for individualism within the rigid structures of Chinese society and found a flourishing subculture. Kind of a video diary their film **Beijing Bubbles** takes the audience on a ramble through China's musical underground.

The documentary film attends five Beijing bands in their everyday lives: the punk band **Joyside**, the girl band **Hang On The Box**, the blues band **Sha Zi**, the rock band **New Pants** and the band **T9**, who combine rock with traditional Mongolian music. Despite their diverse music styles, they share the same attitude: They have retired from the world in which they've grown up. Particular attention is paid to their individual music, you see them perform on stage during their concerts and they give insight in their CD-collections. But beside their music the film also looks into their thoughts, dreams and ideals. All these musicians naturally and spontaneously let the two filmmakers join their everyday lives and gave up-front insights into their world. For the German filmmakers the encounters with them were like a kind of journey into their own past: "These musicians' passion and sense of humour reminded us of times in which punk in Europe was quite a big deal. We felt as if punk had moved to the other side of the globe. We grew up with punk, we experienced how it became an empty fashion – and we were touched to find out that its strange eccentricity, its holy seriousness and its lovely attitudes found a new right to exist in China."

Between the flying visits with the bands **Beijing Bubbles** delivers impressions of today's China and thus of the surroundings in which these musicians don't seem to fit in: the camera straggles through financial districts, cramped streets at rush-hour time and glistening shopping malls, but also through the slums on the outskirts, where people struggle to survive by collecting rubbish or trading on the streets. Restaurants and karaoke bars where China's youngsters enjoy themselves with saccharine mainstream pop contrast with parks where revolutionary songs are played. Beijing thereby is representative for the whole modern China – depicting growth and development, but also enormous social discrepancies within extraordinary political circumstances.

In form and content **Beijing Bubbles** catches a glimpse of life and society in Beijing behind common clichés. Stylistically it ranges also in a punk rock spirit. Due to the fact that most of the shots in public had to be done without filming permits, the often abrasive camera work is used as a stylistic device. The genuine pictures fall smoothly into place with the fresh sound of these five bands, which arrestingly accompanies the film. The result is an almost tangible impression of a counter-culture that forms tiny islands in the hustle and bustle of the big city.



Director's note

Beginning our research in 2004 we hardly knew anything about punk and rock in Beijing. We would have never believed what you can do in only a few weeks of shooting. But then everything was quite easy in this country in which we felt quite alienated at the beginning: we picked a few CDs, called a friend, who knew someone – and the same afternoon we had our first appointment with a band. The musicians invited us over in their rehearsal rooms or flats, went with us on a stroll through the neighbourhood or in a restaurant and in the evenings took us to their concerts. There we met members of another band, drank with them and made first interviews. They in turn took us to visit their parents, in Karaoke bars and other concerts with other bands. So it was quite like a chain reaction.

We grew up with Punk in Germany and being a pop journalist and label owner we were often disappointed, how the ideals of that music more and more became an empty fashion. So we were even more excited to find the spirit and enthusiasm of Punk alive and well in China. We even had the feeling that Punk's holy seriousness only in this country of restrictive traditions and pressure to perform well got its full right to exist. Maybe it was also that sympathy that all those musicians spent so much of their time and let us join their daily life. Suddenly we had more than 40 hours of material, from which we wanted to cut a rough energetic montage about a subculture in China, with music hardly heard in the West. And with people going their own way beside established and accepted structures in an authoritarian state – with dreamy ideals and a lot of courage.

Filmmakers

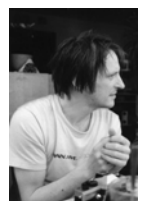
Susanne Messmer, born 1971, lives in Berlin and Beijing. She studied German language and literature, philosophy and social studies. Since 1995 she has worked as a music journalist, literary critic, reporter and columnist for several daily newspapers and magazines. Furthermore she was one of the founders of record label "Flittchen records". "Beijing Bubbles" is her first documentary, for which in 2004 she travelled to China several times and stayed there for four months– two of them with the help of a scholarship of the International Journalist Programme. Since November she is back from Beijing, where she has worked as a cultural journalist and learned Mandarin.



George Lindt, born 1971, lives in Berlin. Since 15 years he has been running his independent record label Lieblingslied Records and has been working as a TV journalist for five years. His first novel "Provinzglück" was published in 2005 at S.Fischer Verlag. "Beijing Bubbles" is his second documentary film. The first one, "Wir werden immer weitergehen", portrays subcultures in Hamburg and Berlin and is soon to be released on DVD.



Lucian Busse, born 1966, lives in Berlin. Since 15 years he has been watching the cities' subculture with his camera. In 1997 he founded the project „alien tv #1“, a live-cinema-concert-show. Since 1995 he has been working as an Editor especially for reportage and documentaries. In November he has finished work on his second China-related documentary film "Women at the wheel" from Fang Yu about the life of female taxi drivers in Xian.





The musicians



„We don't want to be a part of that society“ *Sha Zi*

If you ask Liu Donghong, singer of the band *Sha Zi*, when he played guitar for the first time, he can not remember exactly. „They told me that I was about three years old when I discovered my father's guitar, but it was totally out of tune and I never heard or saw my father playing on it.“ After his first guitar experience some years passed by until Liu Donghong founded his first band in 1996. He was 25 years old, in the meantime had bought his first second-hand guitar and had written numerous songs. For him Shazi, the Chinese expression for sand, seemed to be a good

name for a band in China – a country, where individualism has to be discovered in the first place. He says in China one human being easily can feel like a tiny grain of sand among millions of others, but on the other hand side, a single grain of sand in the gears sometimes can work wonders.

In the same year *Sha Zi* had their first gig at the University for Foreign Languages. Liu Donghong remembers: „I think, they had a lot of fun with us. All bands performing there played terribly poor. And we weren't any better“. For changing that, the band retreated to the Beijing western hills for the summers of the following three years – for low money they rented an ancient temple in Badachu, played together the whole day and only went back in town for some performances.

In 2001 *Sha Zi* released their first album „The Stars fall on my head“. Like until today all songs on that album were written in Mandarin from Liu Donghong. Some of his songs are simple love songs, some like „Fortune“ tell the story from the social plight China is in today. With his lyrics, which he often performs as a kind of rap, Liu Donghong ties up to the development of Chinese rock music as a culture of protest in the 80s as well as to the tradition of American Blues in the manner of *Tom Waits*, in whose lyrics the life of ordinary Joe often is discussed too. Liu Donghongs topics are the shady sides of the Chinese dream: he sings about outsiders, night owls and drinkers, the abased and offended, the stranded and harmed.

Still in 2004 *Sha Zi* often performed two times a week in some Beijing bars without requiring entrance fees. Today people have to pay to hear them play, but anyway are their concerts with mainly Chinese audiences well attended. As the first Chinese band ever Liu Donghong (vocals, guitar), Da Chuan (guitar), He Wenjin (bass) und Wang Bin (drums) went on a big tour through China in winter of year 2005 and played in nine cities. In 2006 they released their second studio album „The World Has Become A Fairytale“.



**„We need a quiet mood to think about music“
*Hang On The Box***

Hang On The Box were founded in 1998, but the cornerstone for the most successful girl rock band in China had been laid a few years earlier, when later singer Wang Yue and later bass player Yilina federalized in school. They became friends, caused a stir with their dirty jeans and black boots, hung around together and pooled their pocket money for the imported CDs you could buy in China that time. Already then, boys were irrelevant in their unity: From the very first both of them had decided that boys hadn't a good taste in music. In 1997 Wang Yue and

Yilina decided to found a girl rock band. Shortly after that decision they met Yang Fan in the record store, where both of them worked at that time. Wang Yue played "Should I Stay Or Should I Go?" from *The Clash* the moment Yang Fan came over to the counter and offered her a Lucky Strike. Anon the three girls began working on their first songs.

In July of 1998 *Hang On The Box* had their first gig: Wang Yue played the guitar and sang, Yilina played the bass and Yang Fan the drums. They performed "No Sexy" and "Asshole, I'm Not Your Baby" – simple, lively and funny songs Riot Grrrrl-Bands like *Bikini Kill* couldn't have written any better. Right from the start they have split their audience: Since their first gig *Hang On The Box* have ardent worshippers, but there are also a lot of Chinese men, for whom the image of self-determined and self-confident women, which the girls of *HOTB* represent, goes way too far.

But they have always kept their chin up and constantly developed their band. In 1999 16-year-old Shenggy joined the band as a new drummer, Yang Fan became guitarist. In May 2002 they released their first album "Yellow Banana" in China and Japan, where they went on tour soon after that. In July 2002 the second studio album "Di Di Di" was released. The following year in March *HOTB* for the first time went on a Tour through the USA, where they played in nine cities. Yang Fan left the band and was substituted for guitarist Xiao Gan. In September 2004 their mini album "Foxy Lady" was released, in which you can hear influences of Krautrock, Electronica and Hip Hop. In the Beijing studio of Blixa Bargeld *HOTB* have recently recorded their fourth studio album in 2006, for now again only in a threesome without Xiao Gan. So far they haven't found a title for the record yet, but it will be released in spring 2007.



**„I have isolated myself for a long time“
*T9***

Yiliqi, son of a Mongol and a Manchurian, founded his first band in 1996 – at that time he didn't take great interest in traditional Mongolian music. The band was named Qingpi, which means "slacker", and first of all was committed to Grunge. When in 1998 Yiliqi founded his second band *T9*, he was interested in *Rage Against The Machine* and other hardcore bands. But little by little Yiliqi grew bored of always being angry on stage and writing lyrics about drinking, frustration and fear of the future.



At the age of 21 time and again he remembered his father and his grandmother singing traditional Mongolian songs to him as a child. In those times he travelled very often to Xilinhot, hometown of his parents in the Inner Mongolia, which the family had left when he was 12 years old for moving to Beijing. In his former home town Yiliqi met Obsorung, a famous singing teacher, who taught him Mongolian Overtone Singing – a technique with which a single human voice can simultaneously produce two or more clearly audible tones. Besides he learned to play some Mongolian instruments like the Tobushuur and the Morinhuur. He had grown up with Mandarin as his mother tongue and up to that had only sung in English, but at that point he decided to furthermore only sing Mongolian texts. Even though T9s CD „Fix It“ and their concerts in Beijing were very popular, Yiliqi wasn't that much interested in rock music anymore. The time of the shooting of „Beijing Bubbles“, his band already played more and more music with traditional Mongolian sound.

Shortly after the shooting Yiliqi couldn't reconcile his new interests with those of a rock band anymore and finally T9 broke up. Newly he performs in Beijing bars with the *Hanggai* band, which interprets only Mongolian folk music. Later on, when they are good enough, he would like to bring in electronic music again. His new band colleagues all have come from Inner Mongolia, where they worked as professional musicians. In summer 2006 they recorded their first studio album.



„We are still underground“ *New Pants*

If you visit a concert of *New Pants*, you can hardly imagine that this creative band with its melodious, but thistly and wild interpreted hits in style of the famous *Ramones* has so many fans in China. Normally you have to sing saccharine pop-songs with catchy lyrics easily to sing along to have a mass appeal – the kind of music sung in the numerous Chinese karaoke bars.

Founded 1996, the *New Pants* released their first album „New Pants“ in 1998. It was chosen from the influential Hongkong music magazine MCB for the 10 most important Asian records of the 90s. In 2000 *New Pants* released their second album „Disco Girl“. The same year the music video to their single „I Love You“ was awarded „Best Music Video“ from Chinese TV-channel V. Not that remarkable, as in Chinese music television you don't see a video like that very often, where moving Plasticine men with scrubby hair bounce over the screen.

In 2002 „We are automatic“, the third studio album of the *New Pants*, was released, four years later they recorded their fourth one. Anyhow they have the same problem as the most Chinese underground bands: they can't live on their music. So *New Pants* keyboarder Pang Kuan (27) for example works as a graphic designer, singer and guitarist Peng Lei (27) runs a little shop for unusual toys and all kind of merchandising stuff from his favourite bands *Kiss* and *The Ramones*.



**„There is no use to be a hard-working man“
*Joyside***

At first Bian Yuan (vocals), Liu Hao (bass) und Xin Shuang (drums, later guitar) from *Joyside* were nothing more than flat mates. They had rent a cheap, damp basement flat in a shabby suburb of Beijing, drank together and listened to music of the *Dead Boys*, *Sex Pistols* and the *Germes* the whole day. When Bian Yuans' former band split up, whose name he even doesn't want to mention today, he got bored and started to write own songs about the lazy life of a drinker. He had come to Beijing from the ultimate West of China as an 18year-old for studies of

anthropology, which he had dropped already at that time, so there wasn't much to do. Some day in summer of year 2001 he just said to his mates „Let's found a fabulous punk band“: *Joyside* was born.

A few weeks later *Joyside* already had their first gig. Bian Yuan says it must have been a big party where eight or nine bands played. He has been very exited – and very drunk. Actually today he only can remember the 50 Yuan the band got from the organiser of the party, just as much as 5 Euro. Until today, it is unusual for them to get much more salary for their weekly gigs. Mostly it is just enough for the cab and a dinner in a cheap restaurant.

In 2004 drummer Fan Bo joined the band; Xin Shuang now played the guitar. In September 2004 *Joyside* released their first studio album “Drunk is beautiful” and went on tour in China the following year. In June 2006 the mini album “Bitches of Rock 'n' Roll” was released. When Bian Yuan is asked to think about what he got going with *Joyside* the last years, he only says: „Just look at us, how lazy we are.”

Recently *Joyside* had to face a little crisis and separated from their guitarist Xin Shuang. Whilst sorting everything out they performed as *Johnny Thunders' Teeth* from time to time with covered Rock 'n' Roll-Songs of the 50s. Meanwhile *Joyside* is back again. They want to become more sober and faster now. Asked for his plans for the future, Bian Yuan tells he would like to go to Africa to feed the lions there – or to dance with the devil.



Selection of international festival participations

- **Göteborg** Filmfestival (January 2006)
- **Thessaloniki** Documentary Festival (March 2006)
- Inter Doc. Film Festival **Ljubljana** (March 2006)
- DocAviv Filmfestival **Tel Aviv** (April 2006)
- **Philadelphia** Film Festival (April 2006)
- **Singapore** International Film Festival (April 2006)
- Achtung **Berlin** – New Berlin Film Award (May 2006)
- Orientalia Festival **Warsaw** (May 2006)
- International New Zealand Film Festival **Auckland** (July 2006)
- International Filmfest **Oldenburg** (October 2006)
- **Leeds** International Film Festival (October 2006)
- Exground Film Festival **Wiesbaden** (November 2006)
- **Oslo** International Film Festival (November 2006)
- Festival dei Populi **Florence** (Dezember 2006)
- **New York** Museum of Modern Art (February 2007)

Selection of press releases

- *Beijing Bubbles* reveals a side of China you've never seen and that its government is unlikely to want you to see. (*DOX Documentary Film Magazin*)
- A film that celebrates a barely recognised counter-culture which is building islands in the hustle and bustle of the big city. (*Göteborg Filmfestival*)
- Above all the film is bubbling with wonderful energetic and refreshing music kindling a longing for the sixties and seventies in the west before music was controlled by big Labels. (*Doc Aviv*)
- Although made on a manifestly tiny budget, pic by Teuton newcomers Susanne Messmer and George Lindt makes a joyful noise and scores some insights. (*Variety*)
- Susanne Messmer and George Lindt deliver an insightful documentary that shares the same low-budget DIY aesthetic as the film's subjects. (*Philadelphia Film Festival*)
- Overall it's an enjoyable jaunt into a country half around the world with music very similar to ours. (*PhillyIMC*)
- Beijing hardly springs to mind as a flashpoint for musical anarchy, but that only makes the hard rockin' discoveries in filmmaker George Lindt and music journalist Susanne Messmer's survey of the city's underground punk rock scene a sweeter surprise. (*New Zealand Film Festival*)
- A lack of understanding in society and being excluded from China's rapid economical growth, that's what defines the concepts about life of China's punk scene. (*hr online*)