Hong Kong Metal Scene: An overview and related issues

After the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, Hong Kong music in general lingered in the middle of influences from the English heritage, Mainland China, and local traditions. This is observed best in popular music made, and performed in Hong Kong’s local scenes. As a result of globalisation of 1990s and 2000s, Hong Kong’s local popular music scenes started looking to international music, including their immediate cultural backdrops of United Kingdom and People’s Republic of China among others such as Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and the United States of America (Ho 2003). Beside these external influences, Hong Kong popular music was also searching internally for national values, and traditions in order to construct a truly Hong Kong popular music tradition, and scene (Ho 2003). According to Ho, nationalism is present in contemporary Hong Kong popular music (Ho 2000). Even though this music rarely commented on politics, the identity started shifting more and more towards Mainland China and its people. This was a result of the Chinese rock music tradition and its role in constructing a political identity in Mainland China in the 1980s (Ho 2000).

Even with these cross influences with Mainland China or Taiwan, Hong Kong popular is music distinctively different than others (Witzleben 1999). It comprises of a collection of different influences. One of main aims of a national popular music movement in Hong Kong was to establish a musical culture around the Chinese
dialect of Hong Kong, Cantonese (Ho 2003). Thus, popular musicians from Hong Kong started choosing a juxtaposition of Cantonese and Mandarin over English in their lyrics (Witzleben 1999). This localisation effort resulted in Hong Kong popular to be exported to Mainland China (Ho 2003). As I mentioned, influence or export of music was not one way for Hong Kong. Hong Kong popular music was influenced by Chinese Mandopop, but more importantly Japanese popular music also made its way into Hong Kong, as it did for the music in Mainland China (Ho 2003). Other than these two main influences, Hong Kong popular music was indifferent to internationalisation (Witzleben 1999). However it is also important to note that in the mid-1990s, Hong Kong was under the effect of a ‘cultural imperialism’ led by the United Kingdom, and the United States of America (Ho 2003). With this complex network of interaction in mind, one has to state that even though Hong Kong exported its music over to the Mainland China or Taiwan, the success of Hong Kong musicians stayed and still stay in the Chinese diaspora, and could not yet make its way into an international popular music scene (Ho 2003). This intricate interaction back and forth also shows the ‘battleground for contesting Chinese identities of Nationalism and Communism (Chun 1996).

Even though rock music was a commodity, a product for consumption in the European and North American part of the world (Witzleben 1999), it stayed a tool for political and national identity construction in Mainland China, and by extension in Hong Kong (Ho 2000).

Metal music has a different situation in Hong Kong than rock music. Right after the handover in 1997, Hong Kong did not have an apparent metal scene. However, during mid-2000s different metal bands started to appear, and more importantly they started to promote different kinds of metal music in Hong Kong.
This promotion effort mainly comes from the actual musicians themselves, and there are rarely any outside help considering the organisation of such promotion. When one considers this, as well as other factors such as the population of Hong Kong, this music scene becomes an interesting area to research. This essay aims to demonstrate the metal music scene in Hong Kong, comparing it to Mainland China where appropriate, thus revealing the social agents present in this music scene.

Metal music around the world usually has origins in the underground scene, rather than the mainstream. Hong Kong metal is not an exception to this generalisation, even so that it is still mainly underground, and as mentioned before, similar to other popular musics in Hong Kong, the success of the bands remain almost completely in Hong Kong. There aren’t many bands with Hong Kong origins that tour worldwide, or even China. Hence, this makes this scene a closed-off one compared to their counterparts in other parts of the world, especially Europe. However, this does not mean that this confined scene aims only internal exposure. There are, in fact, bands that aspire for more worldwide exposure, and those are the bands that actually work towards promotion within the scene, and organise events, such as concerts, festivals, and album promotions, for both local bands, and international or in some cases Taiwanese bands. It is also interesting to note at this point that external bands that play in Hong Kong are either European or American, or as I mentioned Taiwanese. There does not seem to be many concerts hosting Mainland Chinese bands, or other bands from the South East Asia region.

It is worthwhile to look at the bands from Hong Kong, in order to start exploring the agents present in the Hong Kong metal scene. According to Encyclopaedia Metallum, or the Metal Archives, Hong Kong has twenty-seven active metal bands (‘Bands by Country’ n.d.). When this is compared to Mainland China,
China is listed to have 175 active metal bands at the time of this writing (‘Bands by Country’ n.d.). Actually considering the population difference between these two regions, Hong Kong seems to have a higher density of metal bands than Mainland China, however these numbers can only be starting points, as the Internet usage in especially Mainland China differs greatly from the rest of the world, thus considering the fact that Metal Archives is a community written database, the list only shows an initial overview of the scenes in question.

The styles, or genres, of metal played by these bands are also important for an overview of the scene in question. Again, according to Metal Archives, bands from Hong Kong are categorised as death metal, doom metal, black metal, heavy or thrash metal, progressive metal, and metalcore (‘Bands by Country’ n.d.). There appears to be seven death metal bands originated from Hong Kong, and six doom metal bands. From this list, the main metal genres played by Hong Kong-based metal bands emerges as death metal and doom metal, because the numbers drop considerably for other metal genres, such as there are five heavy metal and thrash metal bands, three bands each playing black metal and progressive metal, and finally the list shows only bands playing metalcore. This is significant because it also feeds into the argument for Hong Kong metal music scene’s influences and origins of these influences. These genres may all be considered as either Europe or United States of America originated, with especially metalcore being an American phenomenon for the most part. More importantly, one may argue that death metal and doom metal, alongside heavy metal and thrash metal are older genres especially than progressive metal and metalcore. From this, it is easy to see the lack of following trends in Hong Kong metal music scene. As a comparison, in Mainland China, the concentration shifts heavily towards death metal, and its varieties such as brutal death metal, and Gothenburg, or melodic
death metal, which was not the case for the bands from Hong Kong. Thus, this shows the relatively confined condition of Hong Kong metal music scene.

Before going into the self-promotion and organisation within this scene, which is the most striking and significant aspect of it, some bands will be discussed more in detail. First band is Xie Jia, or Eight Route Army, probably referring to the previous name of People’s Liberation Army during Chinese Civil War after World War II. This band plays, according to their music video of the song titled ‘Murk’, extreme metal (Xie Jia 2013), or more specifically as listed in the Metal Archives, black metal (‘Orthon’ 2013). Taking the ‘Murk’ video as the starting point, one can observe the musical qualities present in the band’s music. Musically, it has a distinct sound, which relies heavily on chromatic melodies, and odd scales different than the modernised versions of the Greek modes, that are prevalent in metal music made in Europe or United States of America, making it aurally different than most of the European black metal bands. The European influence is more apparent in the music video of ‘Murk’. The video comprises of the juxtaposition of war videos with the band shown as performing, with white make-up. This white make-up is the same make-up used by European black metal bands, which is considered ‘corpse paint’ rather than a type of make-up.

Eve of Sin is another band from Hong Kong, which state on their website that they play metalcore (‘About us’ n.d.a), however a reviewer from Underground Hong Kong organisation, which will be discussed further in later parts of this essay, talks about them as brutal, and extreme metal (Tim 2008). The reviewer also mentions the ‘wall of noise’ that Eve of Sin produces (Tim 2008). Eve of Sin is not listed on the Metal Archives database, even though they have been active since 2007. Despite this, the band writes that they are ‘set to bring musical hell to Hong Kong and the rest of
the world’ (‘About us’ n.d.a). The content of the songs seems to be ‘not about being upset and frustrated with life’, but ‘about being empowered by rage and turning that energy into fuel for the mind’. In line with this statement, Eve of Sin describe their aim of composing as creating songs ‘packed full of energy’. They are open about being influenced by different genres of metal, and they are claiming that they combine these elements with ‘a new and fresh perspective’. The band’s insistence on them being new and interesting is a striking situation, as they also state that ‘everyone in the band comes from humble backgrounds with an interesting story to tell’. This insistence I mention may stem from their aspirations towards worldwide success. A similar band to Eve of Sin is Thornslaughter, however with much less presence in the online English-speaking world. The Underground Hong Kong reviewer states this similarity in the structure and the fast-paced rhythms of the songs (Tim 2008). Unlike Eve of Sin though, this band is listed on the Metal Archives database, and according to their page, they play death metal, and they have been active since 2007 (‘Thornslaughter’ 2012).

The first doom metal band I mention in this essay is Molten Lava Death Massage. According to Metal Archives, the band plays stoner metal, a derivation of doom metal, and has been active at least since 2006 (‘Molten Lava Death Massage’ 2013). The band’s album ‘Eye of Ra’, published in 2006, has received two international reviews. That puts the band in a different situation then the ones mentioned so far. The band is quite interesting as one reviewer says that Mastodon, Sleep, Kyuss, and Acid Bath are influences for the band, and the album sounds ‘similar to that of the Palm Desert scene back in the ‘90s, yet it is from Hong Kong’ (Liebetrue 2007). Another reviewer though interprets this seemingly American sound of Molten Lava Death Massage in a completely different way. He implies that the
band comprises of ‘Hong Kong youngsters, English language class, and Egyptian symbolism’ (Hensch n.d.).

Irresistible Hearts is the only listed melodic death metal, or Gothenburg metal, from Hong Kong on Metal Archives database. This band formed in 2003 (‘Irresistible Hearts’ 2013), has an extended play and the music structure, and the sound produces is surprisingly European (‘重新計算’ 2012). This is a surprising quality because despite the general tendency of Hong Kong metal bands to hold onto their Hong Kong Chinese identities, most of the bands write their song lyrics in English. Hence, one of the few bands that actually sing in Cantonese having a completely Europe-influenced sound is a curious point.

BlackWine is a band from Hong Kong playing progressive metal and they have been active since 1998 (‘BlackWine’ 2013). According to Shashwati Kala, the band’s music is an eclectic collection of different and dated European influences, such as psychedelic guitar work, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple influence, and the pop style singing, without achieving the ‘progressive’ sound in any sense of the word (Kala 2013). At this point, one needs to also ponder over the implications present in the Hong Kong metal scene considering the fact that a band from Hong Kong could get such a review from one of the main Hong Kong-based bodies that are responsible for organising events regarding the underground music scene in its fifteenth year in their career, and still carry on an active gigging course. This band is similar to Irresistible Hearts in a way that despite the music that the band makes sounds mainly European, they sing in Cantonese. Their English-speaking Internet presence is close to non-existent, except for the Metal Archives entry and a review of one of the band’s concerts by Underground Hong Kong. This shows, when considered alongside the bands mentioned so far, except for Eve of Sin, the aspirations of the Hong Kong metal
bands. The bands in Hong Kong generally seem to be local ones, and they are adamant about staying local, and giving local concerts. I mention this here, before discussing Hyponic, the band which has the most international exposure, and contrary to what this essay argues thus far, the band whose success is beyond the borders of Hong Kong, Mainland China, and even South East Asia.

Hyponic is a funeral doom metal band, a derivative of doom metal, that has been active since 1996, and they have released two full-length albums, and two singles as of this writing (‘Hyponic’, 2014). Their music also appeared in compilations around South East Asia in places like India, Thailand, and Mainland China. Their music may be described as a slow, and almost drone-like doom with European and American elements as well as Chinese influences, and they sing in exclusively English (‘The Noise of Time’ 2012). They are one of the few bands from Hong Kong that have appeared in international press. An interview of the band appeared in the London-based magazine The Quietus in 2011 (Waldburger 2011).

Hyponic is a clear example of a band that is interested in the promotion of metal music in Hong Kong, as well as Hong Kong metal worldwide. The band members Roy Chan and Yat Wah Li’s ideas about the metal scene in Hong Kong represent a good account of it, including the state it was in in 2011 and the issues present. These are discussed later in this essay, however before going into those issues present in the scene, looking at the organisations, and the organising bodies in Hong Kong metal scene gives a better view of this scene.

There appears to be two important organising bodies present in Hong Kong metal scene. The first one I discuss is the Underground Hong Kong, which was mentioned before because of the reviews available on the company’s website. Underground Hong Kong describes itself as the ‘top source’ for the ‘vibrant and
diverse music scene’, and they state that their aim is to ‘help local artists kick-start their international careers and connect them to the world’ (‘About us’ n.d.b). Their main activity is organising concerts for these bands. According to the company’s website, Underground Hong Kong has hosted more than 430 bands in ten years time. The archive of organised events shows the type of events Underground Hong Kong is responsible for. The most important event appears to be the ‘Underground’ concert series, in which four-five bands play in a single night, and this series has reached its 115th iteration at the end of the year 2014 (‘Past Events’ n.d.). They also organise several different themed events as well, such as ‘Girls with Guitars’, ‘Heavy’, and ‘Anti-Social Media Underground’. The company also provides a platform for underground musicians to find each other, and help them form bands. Aside from the concerts, the most valuable service for the bands as well as local and international audience is the review section of the company’s website. They review albums and concerts of each and every band that they host, which thus becomes an important asset for anyone who might be interested to learn more about a certain Hong Kong underground band. The company itself describes their website as a ‘treasure trove of information on the local music scene, and it’s getting bigger all the time’ adding that they ‘have got thousand of reviews of live performances available’ (‘About us’ n.d.b).

Alongside the Underground Hong Kong, there is another collective that appears to be less organised in terms of company structure, but more enthusiastic about the promotion of Hong Kong music within Hong Kong. This collective calls itself the Hong Kong Metal Alliance. As the name suggests, they are exclusively interested metal music and its different genres, whereas Underground Hong Kong is interested in all kinds of music, but they are more focused on punk and metal music.
Hong Kong Metal Alliance describes the reasons behind its conception with the following paragraph on their website:

Hong Kong is known as a “Cultural Desert” where growth of art and expression is always hidden in the underground scene. The media tends to focus on mainstream standards resulting in a lack of creativity for exposing different types of music genres to the public. The Hong Kong market is always dominated by easy digestible tunes where Metal can actually be mistaken as Rock, due to their lack of knowledge. This didn't mean we should give up! (‘HK Metal Alliance’ n.d.)

The enthusiasm already comes across from the paragraph above, however the collective’s methods of promoting the events they are organising is what makes Hong Kong Metal Alliance a very interesting phenomenon. There are two types of events they organise: small festivals, where six-seven bands mainly from Hong Kong play in a single day and in a single venue, and concerts, where four-five bands again mainly from Hong Kong play in a single day and in a single venue. The interesting promotion method they opt for these events is the promotional video production among the usual media, such as flyers and social media. Hong Kong Metal Alliance produces short films for the festivals they organise, and they also produce little sketches, and funny videos to promote festivals and concerts (‘2Girls1Poster’ 2012; ‘DEMO’ 2012; ‘Wake up’ 2012; ‘Brotherhood of Anarchy’ 2014).

These two organising bodies are responsible for the events that make up the major part of the metal music events in Hong Kong, however there are several festivals that are organised on a regular basis as well. These festivals usually host international acts as well as Hong Kong musicians, however unlike their European and American counterparts these festivals are usually single day events where the band count does not exceed nine-ten, as opposed to 30 to 200 spanning one to four days in Europe and the United States of America. One of the regular festivals in Hong
Hong Kong metal scene is Extreme Metal Music Festival, which is being put on since 2005, and it hosts seven bands spanning two days in a single venue (Lo 2011). This festival is organised by the band Hyponic to promote extreme metal music in Hong Kong. In 2011, Taiwanese metal bands were hosted among the local bands in this festival, making it a larger event than just a local festival (Lo 2011).

Another metal festival in Hong Kong is Tomahawk Metal Fest organised over a single day, and hosts only a couple of bands (McKenzie 2008). This festival is organised by Trinity Records, which is a local record company that specialises in metal music since 1990s (Lee 2010). In 2008, the headliners of the festival were from Japan, making it an international event like Extreme Metal Music Festival (McKenzie 2008). The organisers with their company aspire to ‘inspire a new wave of Asian metal’, and the festival is aimed so that ‘the fickle, trend-chasing public’ will start understanding metal music (Lee 2010).

The final metal festival in Hong Kong I discuss is the most recent one, with the first one being organised in 2014, Heart-Town Festival. In comparison, Heart-Town Festival might be considered the biggest metal festival in Hong Kong. In 2014, there were bands from the United Kingdom and the United States of America, joining Hong Kong bands, and it was organised over three days and hosted sixteen bands in a 2000 people capacity venue (Frazier 2014). This festival also symbolises ‘the desire to be different from Mainland China’, and ‘the kindred spirit related to the democracy movements’ in both Hong Kong and Taiwan (Frazier 2014). Heart-Town Festival stands also as a testament to the promotional efforts all of the people I discuss in this essay, because according to Jimmy Liu, the organiser of Heart-Town Festival, ‘now, it seems like nine out of ten bands in Hong Kong are playing metal’ (Frazier 2014).
Starting off from the band Hyponic members’ ideas presented in *The Quietus* interview, there appears to be a couple of issues present in the metal scene in Hong Kong. First one is the introversion of Hong Kong audience in metal music. It appears from different commentators from both inside the scene and outsiders, metal music acts as an emotional release for Hong Kong audience. Lau Sir from Trinity Records argue that ‘the music and the culture of metal acts as a release’, and ‘when they’re talking with their family and friends they may be shy, but music is a way to let them express feeling’ adding that ‘it’s a kind of community, something of a therapy group – so you can express any negative emotions in the crowd’ (McKenzie 2008). Thomas Lee of CNN International also states his surprise in the tradition of mosh pits for ‘the otherwise shy Hong Kong audience’ (Lee 2010). Another opinion from an outsider is Mark Waldburger’s own experience of a The Flaming Lips concert in Hong Kong. He tells the experience like this (Waldburger 2011):

‘Wayne Coyne's imploring the Hong Kong crowd to reciprocate the energy and vim that was being displayed on stage ("Come on, motherfuckers! Let’s go!")), left me feeling a tad embarrassed and wanting to apologise to those wonderful Okies. Come on, motherfuckers. […] I suppose it would be unfair and culturally insensitive to expect a crowd in Hong Kong to react and interact like a London crowd.

I could write a whole other article railing against the cultural suppression of individuality and public catharsis. In general, culturally speaking, there is less of a willingness to let one’s hair down in public. But at the same time, I just couldn't understand the majority of the crowd’s reservation, as well as the strange looks that I received for shouting at the top of my lungs. […]

I feared that they would decide to just go straight to Japan next time. Although this may seem harsh and overly critical of the local crowd, it's not intended to be. […]

But instead I was stuck here, where a common form of gig was seeing your friend’s band play in a bar where the décor consisted of any stereotypical Western cultural symbol stuck to the wall (a New York taxi door here, a British phone box there), and where there were more people in the toilet than at the stage. Believe me, it is a lonely moment when you try and start a mosh pit with three guys. And fail.’

This also clearly demonstrates the view that the Hong Kong audiences are seen shy from both inside and outside the scene.

Another issue is the recentness of the metal scene in Hong Kong. Sunny, the owned of Trinity Records, describe the traditional musical development of a child from Hong Kong as follows:

‘Kids now start with Jonas Brothers. But what comes after Jonas Brothers? There needs to be something. Say, Green Day. Great, Green Day, but what are their influences? Metallica. Let’s research Metallica! Then they get bored and want something heavier ... Slayer! Slayer just had a great album!’ (Lee 2010)

This idea of recentness is supported by Roy Chan of the band Hyponic telling that the bands in Hong Kong most of the time used to cover songs rather than compose original pieces of music, however ‘due to technology and computers, bands have started recording more CDs’ (Waldburger 2011). Also Chan points out the fact that twenty years ago, there would only be one or two shows every six months in Hong Kong, but recently there are one or two shows every week. This is also supported by the existence of a much bigger festival than the ones existing in the summer 2014, Heart-Town Festival.

The final issue is the content of the lyrics of the songs. Starting from the Eve of Sin biography, there appears to be an emphasis on not writing emotional songs, but political songs, songs of rage, and songs with a message. Jimmy Liu states that the metal bands in Hong Kong are ‘are all singing about life issues’ adding that ‘they are not singing about love, they are singing about reform and political change’ (Frazier
2014). He concludes that ‘this is related to what's happening with China, and the increased social pressures since the handover’ (Frazier, 2014). Roy Chan has a similar sentiment, stating that Chinese people in general are angry with their government, and ‘a lot of Chinese bands write a lot of politically-themed stuff’ (Waldburger 2011).

In conclusion, the metal scene in Hong Kong showcases interesting features, mainly the members of the scene working hard at the promotion of their scene inside and outside Hong Kong with different agents focusing on different areas. Actual progress of this effort of promotion can be observer in a relatively short period of time, as Heart-Town Festival proves to be the fruit of such efforts. The complex network of influences in and out of the scene also emerges as an important issue. While many musicians from Hong Kong metal music scene aspire to be internationally known, there are several other examples that want to stay local, and there are actually people involved in promoting their music scene, and the local bands within Hong Kong only, especially Hong Kong Metal Alliance emerges as such an organising body in Hong Kong, as proven by the content of their promotional videos. Finally, metal music’s role as a tool for emotional release seems more apparent in Hong Kong metal music scene than it is in Europe of the United States of America, however this issue is also the most precarious one, as the ethnographic data regarding audience opinions and statements about their own experience when listening to this type of music are lacking, hence the conclusion that the Hong Kong audience is shy except during metal music concerts can only be capricious at best.
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