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Hermit Aesthetics in Chinese Metal Music: Subcultural Philosophy between Confucianism and Daoism

1. Introduction

Metal has been accompanied by prejudices and detractors since its inception. Often associated with occultism, Satanism, violence, sexual excess, and death, metal has been embroiled in controversy (Hjelm, Bogdan, Dyrendal, & Petersen 2009, p. 522; Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, & LeVine 2012; Moynihan & Søderlind 1998; Weinstein 2000, pp. 250-251). These controversial and transgressive tendencies made metal a target of moral panics over popular culture from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, & LeVine 2013; Richardson 1991).

However, since the 1990s, substantial studies on metal have emerged (Spracklen, Brown, & Kahn-Harris 2011, p. 209), represented by Deena Weinstein's (1991) *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* and Robert Walser's (1993) *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Metal studies have gained legitimacy as a field of study. Increasing research has explored its sociology (see e.g. Brown, Spracklen, Kahn-Harris, & Scott 2016; Kahn-Harris 2007; Valijärvi, Doesburg, & DiGioia 2021; Weinstein 2000) and aesthetics (see e.g. Cardwell 2022; Cope 2010; Unger 2016). Metal has gradually been recognized as “serious” and resistant music (Morris 2015), with its deep connections to specific philosophies and ideologies (Bogue 2004; Hagen 2011; Halnon 2006) and its ties to classical virtuosity (Hawley 2023; Walser 1993). As McParland's (2018, p. 172) observes, heavy metal is considered “serious” rather than “light” pop entertainment, raising critical questions about society, identity, and community in the global age.

This article seeks to expand the aesthetic research in metal music studies. It situates a musicological exploration of metal subculture within the Chinese context, an underexplored scene with aesthetics deeply rooted in Chinese culture and philosophies. The Chinese black metal band Zuriaake will serve as a case study, in terms of their prominent fusion of Chinese aesthetics with music. As one of the most representative bands in the Chinese metal scene, Zuriaake develops a series of aesthetic ex-

pressions and practices around the concept of the Chinese hermit (*yin shi*, 隱士). Specifically, their aesthetics draw on two dominant Chinese philosophies – Confucianism and Daoism. This article, therefore, aims to explore how Chinese philosophies, metal music, and subcultural expression interplay in the Chinese context.

In this article, Zuriiake's music, lyrics, and imagery will be analyzed using discourse analysis to offer a musicological and aesthetic approach to the Chinese metal subculture. The guiding question through the article is: how does Zuriiake construct a "hermit aesthetics" based on Chinese philosophies, and use it for subcultural articulation in the Chinese context? By addressing this question, the article fills a gap in the aesthetic and musicological study of subcultures and addresses the scarcity of research on Chinese metal music. Moreover, by exploring how Chinese artists develop a "hermit aesthetics," this article illustrates how Chinese metal constructs subcultural articulation rooted in Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions, extending beyond the Western heritage.

2. Navigating the Chinese metal subculture

Metal music was imported into mainland China from the West following China's reform and opening up in 1978. After over a decade of circulation among parties of overseas students, Chinese college students, and young musicians, metal first entered the public consciousness in mainland China in 1990 through the performance of Tang Dynasty and became an established genre around 2000 (Wang 2017, p. 4; 2018, p. 256). Since then, Chinese metal has developed a mature domestic scene with a loyal community and audience, local metal labels such as Mort Productions and Pest Productions, local fanzines like *Extreme Music* and *Painkiller*, and the annual 330 Metal Festival (Zhao 2023a, p. 352).

However, Chinese metal exists as a subculture within the Chinese context, both in terms of its relative popularity and its designation by the state (Zhao 2023b, p. 12). Firstly, the number of participants is small relative to China's vast population. According to data from Encyclopaedia Metallum (2024), there are 520 entries listed under the country for China, while the number of active bands is even smaller—particularly when compared to countries with smaller populations, such as Sweden (5,932 entries) and Italy (8,070 entries). Secondly, as a highly centralized nation, the Chinese government functions as the officially sanctioned arbiter of mainstream culture, exerting influence through both hegemony and censorship (Yang 2020). In this context, Chinese metal music faces significant censorship and restrictions, particularly concerning its expressive contents and visual styles, in a manner that is

unparalleled in Western countries. Furthermore, the revival of Confucianism in contemporary China has shaped cultural identity and moral frameworks in education and public life (Billioud & Thoraval 2015). Consequently, Chinese metal is perceived as a form of transgression against mainstream ideologies. Its extreme, anti-authoritarian, and individual expression stands in opposition to collectivism, centralism, and the Doctrine of the Mean, which promotes balance, harmony, and moderation according to Confucianism (Tu 1989). In this sense, Chinese metal exhibits “double marginality”, both to Chinese society and the global metal scene in a manner similar to that which Kahn-Harris (2002, p. 138) describes the Israeli extreme metal scene. This marginality is a key reason why the Chinese metal scene remains largely underrepresented in scholarly observations and studies.

Current research has given limited attention to Chinese metal’s deconstruction and reconstruction of Chinese identity (Wang 2018), the integration of Chinese heritage (Yan 2017), the elite and covert resistance (Zhao 2023a), the redefinition of masculinity (Wong 2011), the media of local metal communication (Zhuang 2019), and the practices of local metal bands (Mao 2021). Notably overlooked is the spectacular aesthetics that Chinese metal artists have developed in recent years. A prominent example is Zuriaake, a black metal band representative of the fusion of Chinese elements and black metal, employing traditional Chinese musical instruments and modes, local legends, classical Chinese lyrics, and traditional costumes in their works. By positioning their style around nature worship, ancestor worship, and a focus on Chinese culture (Zuriaake 2016b), Zuriaake has developed an aesthetic framework centered on the notion of the Chinese hermit, informed by the dialectical philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism. Notably, the notion of hermit serves as a localized expression of Chinese metal’s subcultural position, functioning as a form of covert resistance and a manifestation of authentic cultural and individual identity (Zhao 2023a).

These considerations raise further questions: Why do Chinese artists employ the specific notion of the hermit? How do they integrate this notion into their musical practices and expressions, imbuing it with philosophical and aesthetic significance? What does this do to their subcultural articulation and identity? To address these questions, the following sections will explore how the notion of the hermit is formed between the thoughts of Confucianism and Daoism in the Chinese context, outline the material and methods used, analyze how “hermit” is represented in Chinese metal music, and how the “hermit aesthetics” are constructed dialectically between the ideas of “entering the world” and “withdrawing from the world.”

3. The hermit between Confucianism and Daoism

In the Chinese context, the notion of the hermit emerged during the late Spring and Autumn and Warring States period (approximately 500 – 211BC) (Min 1993, p. 49; Vervoorn 1990, p. 19). Over the centuries, hermits have featured prominently in Chinese philosophy, poetry, and history (Vervoorn 1990, p. 14). The Chinese term for hermit, composed of the characters 隱 (*yin*) and 士 (*shi*), captures the essence of the concept from two angles. The first character, *yin*, implies hiding or seclusion (Jiang 1947, p. 1), which forms the foundation of the hermit identity (Hu 2007). The second character, *shi*, can be translated as scholar-official (*shi da fu* 士大夫), referring to the broad intellectual and bureaucratic stratum in ancient and imperial China, or the individuals who belong to this stratum. Eremitism was often the preserve of individuals from this stratum, who had the education and affluence to choose seclusion (Vervoorn 1990, p. 2). In this sense, it could be argued that being a hermit itself involves an element of class differentiation (Vervoorn 1990, p. 4). It also distinguishes the seclusion of hermits from the solitude of woodcutters, hunters, and monks (Chen 2001, p. 61), or the religious hermits in the West (Vervoorn 1990). Thus, hermits in the Chinese context are intellectuals who have the ability to enter, or were in the bureaucracy, but choose to live in seclusion and stay away from politics and mundane affairs (Hu 2007, p. 64). This withdrawal is often imbued with political and moral values (Jiang 1947; Vervoorn 1990), reflecting non-cooperation with authority under the centralized system and Confucian ideology (Hu 2002).

The hermit identity is tied to the contradictions faced by the scholar-official stratum in ancient and imperial China's political structure, which was shaped by absolute monarchy (Wang 1989). Since the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC) established the first unified and centralized empire in Chinese history, the imperial power had absolute restriction and control over all strata and classes (Min 1993, p. 54; Wang 1989, pp. 55-56). Intellectuals were cultivated and selected through the imperial examination system to assist rulers and maintain national unity and stability (Jin 2015, p. 2). Conversely, scholar-officials saw entering the bureaucracy and displaying their political talent as the goal of their lives and as a basis for survival.

Confucianism plays a pivotal role in the origin and culture of hermits, as Confucius was the founder of the scholar-official stratum (Feng 1993, p. 70). Since him, a stratum of scholar-officials emerged, not engaging in production work but serving as officials or lecturers (Feng 1993, p. 70). Moreover, since Confucianism became the mainstream ruling ideology in imperial China (approximately 134 BC) (Feng 1993, p. 486), scholar-officials were required to study the Confucian classics and aspire to moral perfection. According to Yu (2003, p. 25), when the Chinese scholar-

official stratum first appeared on the historical stage, Confucius tried to infuse it with a spirit of idealism. Confucius demanded that each of its members be able to transcend his own individual and group interests and develop a deep concern for society as a whole. This was to be achieved through self-cultivation (*xiu shen*修身), regulating one's family (*qi jia*齐家), putting one's country into order (*zhi guo*治国), and bringing about peace to the world (*ping tian xia*平天下) (Mencius 1996, p. 7A1). This process is called "entering the world" (*ru shi*入世) for scholar-officials, represented Confucianism's practical goal of actively participating in social affairs and fulfilling one's responsibilities and obligations.

However, the moral codes and political realities of scholar-officials often came into conflict. In times of political maladies, career obstacles, or social instability, many scholar-officials chose to abstain from the political center, and refused to continue to serve authority (Min 1993, p. 50). At such time, they turned away from Confucian ideals and adopted Daoism, a philosophy based on the thoughts of Laozi and Zhuang Zhou, emphasizing a naturalism of unity and spontaneity (Needham 1990). Daoism advocates not deliberately changing or interfering with the development of things, but respecting their natural development process and staying away from desires (Feng 1993). Becoming a hermit was a natural extension of these principles (Min 1993). The scholar-officials who withdrew from public life embraced the Daoist ideal of disengaging from worldly affairs, as captured by the classic phrase 不事王侯，高尚其事 ("He does not serve the king or [feudal] lords, setting his own affairs higher") (Vervoorn 1990, p. 23). Based on Daoist ideals, the "affairs" scholar-officials valued were, for example, "personal integrity and unwavering devotion to what is right, or the eradication of desire and complete identification of the self with the principle of order in the cosmos" (Vervoorn 1990, p. 3). This retreat can be seen as an attitude and a passive response to politics, namely the denial of authority and the reflective critique of the regime in power (Hu 2002, p. 10; Vervoorn 1990). This process is called "withdrawing from the world" (*chu shi*出世), namely a refusal to take part in public affairs (Vervoorn 1990, p. 8), and a retreat to a spontaneous, natural, and authentic life. Paradoxically, this retreat could elevate the hermit's moral standing, as society recognized their principled stance and dedication to virtue (Hu 2002, p. 112). In this sense, hermits can still demonstrate their influence and value on a moral level despite they are in marginal and subcultural status in society.

Thus, the notion of the hermit bridges Confucianism and Daoism, with the processes of entering and withdrawing from the world appearing oppositional but, in fact, complementary (Min 1993, p. 54). Confucius himself advised, "When the Way prevails under Heaven, then show yourself; when it does not prevail, then hide" (天下有道则见，无道则

隱) (Waley 1938, p. 135). This idea reflects the hermit's dynamic and dialectical identity, rooted in self-improvement during troubled times and readiness to re-enter the world when circumstances allow (Min 1993). By balancing Confucian and Daoist principles, hermits have found a way to regulate themselves even in a subcultural position, maintaining a delicate equilibrium between self, morality, and politics.

4. Material and method

The core analytical operations in this chapter employ concepts of discourse analysis. The music, lyrics, and images from Zuriaake's will be analyzed here. Knowledge about cultural discussions surrounding the notion of the hermit in the Chinese context is used to contextualize the investigation. The method of analysis used in this article takes inspiration from Machin's (2010) music analytical methods. They are to understand how the mechanism for musical meaning works, namely how the shared conventions and associations allow music to have meaning for us (Machin 2010). Music is considered a communicative element embedded within multimodal discourse, and one part of broader human communication (McKerrell & Way 2017). The concepts of discourse used here are generally found in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), by which the broader ideas communicated by a text are referred to as discourses (Dijk 1991; Fairclough 2000). Beyond the traditional linguistic-oriented CDA, visuals, sound, and lyrics are all able to communicate discourses multimodally, contributing to articulating ideological discourses in society (Machin 2010, p. 7).

The case study of this article, Zuriaake, was founded in 1998 in Jinan, Shandong Province. The band has three main members: Bloodsea, Bloodfire, and Deadsphere, whose real identities are unknown. Sometimes it has been expanded to four or five members at live shows. The musical works that the band has released include two full-length albums *Yi Qiu* (弈秋 2007) and *Gu Yan* (孤雁 2007), two Eps *Dong Mai* (冬霾 2012) and *Shen Ting* (深庭 2019), two single songs *Qing Ming* (清明 2013) and *Yao Ji* (妖祭 2015a), a split album (Zuriaake & Yngizarm 2005), and a compilation *Autumn of Sad Ode / Ghost Ritual* (悲賦之秋·妖祭 2023). The band performs regularly at the live venues in China, and had tours in Europe and Australia (Zuriaake | 葬尸湖 2019). Zuriaake is known for its fusion of Chinese elements and metal music, especially the integral aesthetics it has constructed around the notion of the Chinese hermit. Around this specific notion, the article will analyze the music and lyrics of the band's released works, the visual presentations of the band's costumes, stage settings, and patches, as well as media interviews conducted with the band, which are publicly available online.

5. The “hermit” represented in Chinese metal subculture

Building upon the connections between the notion of the hermit, Confucianism, and Daoism, a distinctive hermit figure emerges. Hermits are intellectuals from the scholar-official stratum who, for political or moral reasons, choose to retreat from the centers of power and live in seclusion in nature. Nature, particularly mountains and water, become central to their values, ideals, and artistic expressions (Tseng 2019). Though marginalized in both their social stratum and broader Chinese society, hermits maintain moral ideals and aesthetic sensibilities rooted in their past elitism. Their active embrace of marginalization reflect a rejection of authority and power. This image of the outsider has been adopted by Zuriaake, whose music, lyrics, and visual presentation develop a distinct “hermit aesthetics.”

One of Zuriaake’s most striking manifestations of the hermit image is their visual presentation, particularly their stage costumes. As shown in Figure 1, the band dons Asian conical hats with black veils, straw capes, and dark clothes—items that were practical for ancient Chinese hermits, providing protection from the sun, the rain, and the cold for hermits who needed to be outside in the wild, and shrouding their faces and bodies if they want to remain secretive or not be recognized (Zhao 2023a, p. 354). According to Machin (2010, p. 37), this look can be interpreted as a posture, by which the band connotes an unapproachable image and an indication of distance. Moreover, by shielding themselves from the veil, the band members avoid eye contact with the audience. This can be understood as there being no demand on the audience (Machin 2010, p. 40). The band’s performance is more self-contained, where the audience serves as witnesses to their rituals rather than participants. (See Figure 1).

The reason for using the hermit image on stage is that it contains rich symbols and resonates deeply with Chinese audiences. In an interview with Zuriaake (2015d), the band members stated that they intentionally presented symbols and fragments related to the hermit in their musical practices, hoping that the audience would connect with the idea of “escaping from the mundane and gaining spiritual freedom” through their imagination. Notably, Zuriaake integrates the hermit image with the mysticism, horror, and depression in metal traditions (Coggins 2018; Unger 2016; Walser 1993). By incorporating certain objects into their visual presentation, Zuriaake enriches their aesthetic expression with symbolic meaning. For instance, a white silk occupies the most prominent position on the stage of Figure 1. Through the strong contrast of the white silk and the black costumes, the silk creates a sense of salience and central symbolic value (Machin 2010, p. 48). In traditional Chinese culture, white silk was often used in suicides by hanging (see e.g. Zam-

perini 2001, p. 103), thus implying death and suicide. Also visible is the bell the lead singer holds in his left hand, which conveys a sense of ritual and mysticism and is associated with the spiritual and mystical practices incorporated in the metal genre (Coggins 2018; Partridge 2014). In Figure 2, the microphone is entangled with withered vines and hung with a white paper lantern. The white paper lantern can be seen as an echo of the white silk. White, in Chinese culture, is closely associated with death and mourning (Watson 1988, p. 112), and white paper lanterns are used to signify death during funerals. This symbol of death, along with the lifeless vines, creates a funeral, eerie atmosphere during live performances. The mist released on stage further enhances this atmosphere, contributing to a setting that is dark, mysterious, and timeless (Machin 2010, p. 46). The band thereby transports the audience to the wilds with a funeral atmosphere. (See Figure 2).

The hermit image is also adopted in Zuriaka's patches. A patch released in 2018¹ features a figure wearing the Asian conical hat and straw cape, fishing on a river with a simple bamboo rod. The image of a hermit fishing often appears in poems and paintings about hermits (Tseng 2019). Fishing was a means of sustenance for hermits and also conveyed the leisure and natural lifestyle of hermit life. Notably, the figure beneath the cape is a skeleton, one of the most common visual symbols in metal culture. This combination of visual elements from Chinese hermit culture and metal culture conveys an atmosphere of horror and mystery, while also confirming that the hermit has become a representative symbol for the band.

Examining Zuriaka's lyrics and music, the image of the hermit is equally evident. In the song *Gui Qu*² (Nostalgia) (归去 Zuriaka, 2016a), the lyrics tell the story of a hermit. Written in classical Chinese (here translated by the author), the lyrics describe two contrasting scenes: The first depicts a proud, brave man riding a white horse, his leather kettle filled with wine. "He draws his bow to shoot at eagles and wields his sword to slash through river waves." He laughs proudly, accompanied by a bamboo lute and an iron flute. The narrative describes a high-spirited figure skilled in both martial arts and music. The music begins with an increasingly rapid tremolo of the *pipa*, a Chinese traditional plucked string instrument which is also called the "Chinese lute". As the *pipa* slows, the *dizi*, a Chinese transverse flute, joins the melody,

¹ See the *River Metempsychosis Patch* at https://website.pest666.com/store/p247/ZURIAAKE_%E8%91%AC%E5%B0%B8%E6%B9%96_%28CN%29_-_River_Metempsychosis_Patch.html. Accessed 9 October 2024.

² The song can be heard on Spotify at <https://open.spotify.com/track/0MUrVbmjdg9Hxx1StBOBTv?si=3aaf3e62a650446d>. Accessed 10 October 2024.

adding tension. These two instruments echo those mentioned in the lyrics and reinforce the song's Chinese identity. While the singer performs, the *pipa* provides a complementary suffix after each sentence, enriching the depiction of the man's brilliant life. In the intervals between verses, the *dizi* continues the melody, adding a bright tone against the backdrop of guitar, bass, and drums.

The second half of the song transitions with the sound of rain, accompanied by the distant, sobbing sound of the *dizi*. The lyrics shift to a different scene, where the river and mountains are shrouded in rain and mist. On the murky surface of the river, a fisherman lets out a long cry. He fishes alone in the cold river, envying the white deer on the cliffs. In the end, he retreats, leaving only the endless evening rain. In this final section, the singer roars, mirroring the fisherman's cry in the lyrics. The song concludes with thirty seconds of rain sampling, leaving room for the audience's imagination.

Through these two contrasting scenes, the song depicts the life of a hermit. The first scene portrays a man from ancient China, as suggested by references to the white horse, leather kettle, bow, sword, and traditional musical instruments. The man had a rich social life, marked by his enjoyment of wine, music, and martial arts. In contrast, the second scene describes his life after withdrawing from the world, represented by elements like the river, mountains, fisherman, deer, cliffs, and solitude. There are no personal references such as "I" or "him," leaving the narrator or protagonist ambiguous. However, the highly personal details in the lyrics, the audience can gain a sense of the imagined shared identity of the hermit through narrative and representation (Machin 2010, p. 88).

6. The aesthetics of "withdrawing from the world"

In addition to the band's direct presentation of the hermit image in visuals, music, and lyrics, Zuriaake also constructs the "hermit aesthetics" through two dialectical philosophies as discussed in the previous section: "withdrawing from the world" rooted in Daoism and "entering the world" based on Confucianism.

When a hermit lives in seclusion in nature, mountains, water, and forests are the most common scenery in their daily life. Literature and paintings focused on nature have developed as a significant part of hermit culture (Tseng 2019). Chinese hermits often referred to themselves with expressions such as "the men of the cliffs and caves" and "the men of the mountains and forests" (Vervoorn 1990, pp. 6-7). In Chinese metal, nature is notably adopted as a theme, representing the real world, the self, and the destination of "withdrawing from the world."

The nature theme is most prominently manifested in the covers of Zuriiake's albums, including the artworks for *Gu Yan*³ (孤雁 2015c), *Yi Qiu*⁴ (弈秋 2007), *Dong Mai*⁵ (冬霾 2012), *Yao Ji*⁶ (妖祭 2015a), and *Autumn of Sad Ode / Ghost Ritual*⁷ (悲赋之秋·妖祭 2023). Zuriiake sometimes directly uses original works by masters of traditional Chinese painting as a tribute to Chinese aesthetics (Zuriiake 2015d). For example, the artwork for *Yi Qiu* features a work by the Chinese painter Liu Haisu. Notably, these albums adopt the style of traditional Chinese ink paintings, using black and white tones to depict natural landscapes. Chinese landscape painting is closely tied to the culture of scholar-officials (Tseng 2019). Traditionally, landscape painting was the most typical and loftiest artistic form, as well as the true voice of the Chinese artistic sensibility (Fong 1992). Through landscape painting, scholar-officials mirrored their authentic inner world and self (Liu 2022).

Furthermore, the nature theme in Chinese landscape painting is influenced by Daoist thought and eremitism. According to Daoism, the relationship between humans and nature, or the wider cosmos, is not a binary one; rather, they form a holistic and dynamic organism (Tseng 2019). Humans and nature can mutually reflect upon each other. Scholar-officials thus took natural landscapes, particularly mountains and water, as objects of aesthetic appreciation to experience the beauty of the exchange between nature and the individual personality (Tseng 2019). In this process, the landscapes of mountains and water take on dual connotations: in addition to being objects of painting, they also serve as a reflection of eremitism, which is fundamentally different from the mundane world of life (Lu 2022). In this context, the hermit's aesthetic taste and ideal become the highest aesthetic standard in Chinese landscape painting, which often conveys the beauty of loneliness (Tseng 2019). In other

³ See the album cover of *Gu Yan* at https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/%E8%91%AC%E5%B0%B8%E6%B9%96/%E5%AD%A4%E9%9B%81_-_Gu_Yan/536393. Accessed 14 June 2024.

⁴ See the album cover of *Yi Qiu* at https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/%E8%91%AC%E5%B0%B8%E6%B9%96/%E5%A5%95%E7%A7%8B_-_Afterimage_of_Autumn/174093. Accessed 14 June 2024.

⁵ See the album cover of *Dong Mai* at https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/%E8%91%AC%E5%B0%B8%E6%B9%96/%E5%86%AC%E9%9C%BE_-_Winter_Mirage/329566. Accessed 14 June 2024.

⁶ See the album cover of *Yao Ji* at <https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/%E8%91%AC%E5%B0%B8%E6%B9%96/%E5%A6%96%E7%A5%AD/502236>. Accessed 10 October 2024.

⁷ See the album cover of *Autumn of Sad Ode / Ghost Ritual* at https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/%E8%91%AC%E5%B0%B8%E6%B9%96/Autumn_of_Sad_Ode_-_Ghost_Ritual/1145181. Accessed 10 October 2024.

words, through physical emptiness and alienation, landscape paintings reflect the psychological seclusion of the hermits (Lu 2022).

This explains why the style of traditional Chinese landscape painting dominates Zuriaake's album covers. Through their recurring emphasis on the theme of nature, Zuriaake expresses detachment from worldly desires, an inheritance of the highest Chinese aesthetic ideals, and unity with the greater values represented by nature. These connotations further relate to their views on their subcultural status as metal artists in Chinese society: they deliberately distance themselves from the commercial market, mainstream culture, and popular preferences in Chinese society (Zhao 2023a). Instead, they pursue niche and refined aesthetic expressions. In this sense, their subcultural status is both a voluntary choice and a representation of elitism in their tastes and identities. The philosophical stance of "withdrawing from the world" thus becomes a defining feature of their artistic and subcultural positioning.

7. The aesthetics of "entering the world"

Even in seclusion, hermits adhere to their own morals and virtues grounded in Confucianism, reflected in their elite identity and critique of authority and mainstream society. This connection to political and secular life persists, allowing them to potentially "re-enter the world" and fulfill their duties when necessary.

Zuriaake's lyrics are all composed in classical Chinese, the language used by scholar-officials for most formal writing in China before the early twentieth century. Likewise, the typeface on all of Zuriaake's albums employs Chinese calligraphy, a form of art embodying the moral and ethical virtues of Chinese scholar-officials (Fong 1992). Zuriaake's songs *Gu Yan*⁸ (孤雁 Zuriaake 2015b), the band's most representative work, implicitly expresses their attitude towards the masses, mainstream culture, and their own marginality. The title *Gu Yan*, meaning "the lone wild goose," sets the tone of unsociability, loneliness, and pride. The song begins with a thickly textured male chorus, creating a solemn atmosphere that evokes a sense of gravity or foreboding. This male chorus has been running through the background of the song for more than a minute in the form of chords. The unified male chorus seems to symbolize some kind of homogeneous and unshakable object. According to Machin (2010, p. 100), deep sounds are often used to symbolize gravity or danger, evoking ominous feelings, as in thunder. As the keyboard plays the melody spo-

⁸ The song can be heard on Spotify at <https://open.spotify.com/track/7sCY6vWybay43sqjwieqBM?si=934d07bb85a641e6>. Accessed 10 October 2024.

radically, the *xun*, a traditional globular, vessel flute from China, makes a whimpering sound in the gaps between the melodies, thanks to the special timbre of the instrument's clay or ceramic material. After the guitar takes over the main melody, the lead singer roars out the first verse (here translated by the author):

*The sky gradually darkens,
A desolate wind blows bitter and cold.
A lone wild goose flies south,
As the setting sun sinks in the west.
Wild grass spreads across the empty plains,
White clouds return to pasture.*

The second verse becomes a narrative, with the road ahead full of obstacles. While the crows hesitate and choose to stay put, the lone goose takes a different path:

*Wings spread but never join the flock,
Though weary, still refusing to rest.
Atop lofty peaks, drinking pure dew.*

This contrast between the lone goose and the crows represents the difference between people with lofty ambitions and the masses, as well as the divergence between the band and the mainstream. The verse centers on the pursuit of moral ideals in Confucian philosophy, even in times of seclusion and frustration. Like hermits in seclusion, Chinese metal artists, while positioned on the margins, remain engaged with the real world, uphold a stance of critical elitism, and steadfastly resist conforming to the mainstream. In this sense, being a hermit is also a way of waiting to “enter the world” again.

8. Conclusion

This article builds on the analysis of Zuriaake's aesthetics surrounding the hermit figure, proposing a framework of “hermit aesthetics” within Chinese metal subculture, deeply rooted in Confucianism and Daoism. Zuriaake not only incorporates hermit imagery in their costumes, stage settings, lyrics, and music but also engages two philosophical strategies: “withdrawing from the world”, which emphasizes nature themes, and “entering the world,” reflecting elitism and critique.

Hermit aesthetics serves as a subcultural articulation for Chinese metal artists, particularly in the context of censorship and market pressures. Metal music, often excluded from mainstream media due to its

controversial imagery and lyrics, faces ideological challenges, with live performances and festivals frequently canceled under the pretext of “force majeure”, such as the safety issue of the venue or concerns of local institutions or governments. This marginalization leads artists to adopt a hermit-like stance, distancing themselves from official mainstream, popular preferences, and commercialized market. By embracing isolation, they transform it into elitism, showcasing high aesthetic standards, authentic expression, and classical virtuosity. The hermit image, further, reflects a subtle critique of political authority, allowing for covert resistance without overt dissent. Through this, Chinese metal artists balance their subcultural positioning while maintaining their integrity within the constraints of Chinese society. The hermit symbolism resonates with both domestic and international audiences, highlighting cultural authenticity.

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Images

Figure 1.
Zuriaake @ Roadburn Festival 2018-04-22 007



Note.

From *Grywnn* [Photograph], by Roadburn Festival, 2018, Openverse
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Figure 2.
Zuriaake @ Roadburn Festival 2018-04-22 009



Note.

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Hermit Aesthetics in Chinese Metal Music: Subcultural Philosophy between Confucianism and Daoism

This article explores the “hermit aesthetics” within Chinese music subculture, drawing on the philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism. Using the Chinese metal band Zuriaake as a case study, it examines how the band constructs its aesthetic framework around the notion of the hermit and employs it to articulate the subcultural articulation within the Chinese context. Through discourse analysis of Zuriaake’s music, lyrics, and imagery, the article argues that, in addition to directly integrating the hermit image with metal traditions, the band employs two philosophical strategies: “withdrawing from the world”, rooted in Daoism, and “entering the world”, based on Confucianism. This reveals how Chinese metal artists navigate their subcultural position by maintaining a balance between self, morality, and politics, akin to the hermits depicted in their music.

KEYWORDS: Subculture, Chinese philosophy, Nature, Elitism, China.

Hermit Aesthetics in Chinese Metal Music: Subcultural Philosophy between Confucianism and Daoism

Questo articolo esplora l’“estetica dell’eremita” nel contesto della sottocultura musicale cinese, sulla base delle filosofie del Confucianesimo e del Taoismo. Utilizzando la band metal cinese Zuriaake in qualità di case study, l’articolo esamina i modi con cui la band costruisce la propria cornice estetica attorno alla nozione di eremita e come essa usi tale nozione per articolare il proprio posizionamento subculturale nel contesto cinese. Attraverso l’analisi discorsiva della musica, dei testi e dell’immaginario degli Zuriaake, l’articolo sostiene che, oltre all’integrazione diretta dell’immagine dell’eremita nelle tradizioni metal, la band utilizzi due strategie filosofiche principali: “il ritiro dal mondo”, concetto radicato nel Taoismo, e “l’entrare nel mondo”, basato invece sul Confucianesimo. Ciò mostra come gli artisti metal cinesi determinino la propria posizione subculturale mantenendo un equilibrio tra il sé, la morale e la politica in una maniera molto simile all’eremita che viene raffigurato nella loro musica.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Sottoculture; Filosofia Cinese; Natura; Elitismo; Cina.