

Desiree Social Center: A liberated space in Wuhan

DC

March 2009

Last December I had the chance to travel to Wuhan with some other members of the Beijing Anarchist Study Group. Wuhan, which is known as the birthplace of Chinese punk, spawned a small network of anarcho-leaning youths with a strong desire for autonomy and free expression. This is the same scene that produced the magazine *Chaos*, which is probably the first anarchist publication to come out of mainland China in fifty years. *Chaos* carried articles on the situationists, green anarchy, and ran translations of Kropotkin, all alongside reports from domestic and international punk scenes. Though now defunct, its final issue was a complete translation of CrimethInc.'s *Fighting for our Lives*. It ambitiously tackled political issues, which is all the more impressive considering the repressive national context. The fact that the magazine wasn't suppressed (though it was printed illegally) is a sign of a thawing on ultra-left dissent in China, which has laid dormant for decades.

MD, who edited *Chaos*, is now in the process of cultivating a social center in the countryside just outside of Wuhan. Together with some friends, he found a large house with cheap rent right next to a hog farm. In Chinese they call it 我们的家, which means "our house", or Desiree Social Center, in English. MD had extended an invitation to us in Beijing so that we could come see what was happening and how we could help. We gave some talks on topics like Chinese leftism, D.I.Y., anarchist theory, and the Zapatistas. These were all decent, but what was really needed was a frank discussion on logistics and desire. We eventually got around to why the social center was formed.

MD explained that the Desiree Social Center was created in response to the general oppression of youth in Chinese society. Young Chinese people are forced into a schooling system that burdens them with intense competition. The Chinese school system instructs students that in order to get a good job and have a fulfilling life, the only option is to forfeit one's childhood to test preparations and grueling study regimes. Yet, the portion of students who make it into one of the country's colleges is incredibly small. Not only the educational system, but also the traditional notions of patriarchy and filial piety constrict young people in China. In fact, MD sees these forms of familial oppression as the root of problems in Chinese society.

The people in Wuhan got into punk rock because it was a way for them to move beyond the confines of family and society. In the beginning, the Wuhan scene had all the best elements of the

punk ethos: freedom, equality, transgressive communications, and ruthless anti-commercialism. As it got older, the scene got staler, until it is now a parody of its former rebelliousness. Now all the bands just want to make it big. The social center, on the other hand, is an attempt to reconnect to the roots of their rebelliousness, to organise resistance, and to create a space with meaning.

The center still struggles with its daily operations, as WF, one of the people who lives there, pointed out. Nobody involved in the center has ever tried something like this before. They get no money from operating the space; they don't sell anything. The center is out in the countryside and the distance from the city gives some people reservations about going out there for events at night. This isn't to mention the freezing cold of a winter without heat and the scorching heat of Wuhan's summers. In some appreciable ways, they're making it happen in the face of a lot of adversity.

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