And you thought your adolescence was rocky. Chun Sue’s was deemed too hot to handle by her own government. Chinese native Chun, now nearly 21, channeled her coming-of-age energies into Beijing Doll, a punk-rock novel based on her own diaries from her teenage years. “I began writing when I was in secondary school, which is like American high school, out of self-preservation,” the author says via email from China’s capital city.

Once published in 2002, Beijing Doll quickly sold well over 100,000 copies—Chun explains that it’s hard to calculate true figures, given the active pirated book market in China—but then the government yanked her literary debut from the shelves.

If being widely read is the best revenge, Chun is about to come out on top. Beijing Doll is now being published in 13 countries outside China, including a Riverhead paperback English translation in the United States in August.

Chun’s novel is part of what has been termed the “cruel youth” movement in China—a cultural wave identified by sometimes harsh realism. The heroine of Beijing Doll, also named Chun Sue (although Chun insists the book is completely fictional), careers through the underground music culture of Beijing, writing for music magazines, befriending band members and listening to both Chinese and Western bands. “I said I liked U2, Xiu Wei, Nirvana, Kafirs and computers,” the narrator recalls. “At the time, mentioning Nirvana showed you were hip. Not impossibly Passe, like now.”

The character also engages in casual sex, and presumably the combination of that freewheeling attitude—especially on the part of a young woman—and the book’s general nihilism led to the prohibition. But the government’s exact reasons for censorship remain unclear, even to the author.

“No one told me the real reason my book was banned,” Chun says. “I was told, ‘It is in a gray area. It is not positive enough.’”

One of the pleasures of reading Beijing Doll comes with the realization that music is music, no matter what language the lyrics. At one point, attending a show that includes Chinese bands called Underbabies and Cold Blooded Animals, the narrator is shocked by an erazorbit door charge of 50/RMB (about US$6.25), then comments in typically stream-of-consciousness fashion, “Like all bars, it was common for shows there to begin as much as an hour late. Ziyu bought two soft drinks. Thankfully not Pepsi, which damn near makes me puke.”

Chun describes those days as a high point for homegrown bands. “Nowadays Chinese rock music is not as well developed,” she notes. “Recently I listen to a lot of revolutionary songs by some U.S. groups that are very popular in China today: Anti-Flag, US Boom, Rancid, Distiller, the Ramones, etc.”

Her novel also offers a fascinating glimpse into the strict educational system in China. She explains that “secondary school is three years long, and it’s a time when students must study very hard in order to pass the necessary examinations so they can be promoted and attend University. There is huge pressure and stress … and a lot of competition because whether or not and where a student attends school depends on his or her performance on the exams. The pressure of society makes every student feel that his or her self-worth is based on going to University.”

She slyly adds, however, that “neither Mr. Bruce Lee nor Mr. Mao Ze Dong studied in University.”

Rather than going to University herself, Chun is a dropout. She has published a second book, Fun and Games, that was quickly banned in China and that she hopes to see published elsewhere a la Beijing Doll. She describes Fun and Games as “more an exploration of the entire society than Beijing Doll, which is a more personal work.” In the coming months she’ll travel to Norway for that country’s publication of Beijing Doll and to attend a literary festival; she’s working on a third novel, as well as a collection of poetry.

So there’s a positive ending to the turmoil of Chun’s adolescence after all, or maybe she’s just made the same progression most people do growing up, no matter the culture. When asked how she’s different today from the 17-year-old who first began writing Beijing Doll, Chun answers, “The major change in me is a psychological one. I grew up a lot. I understand now that being revolutionary is a feeling that comes from my heart, not dependent on how I look and what color my hair is.”

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