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## **The performance of identity in Chinese popular music**

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# Chapter 2: Genre and Classification

## §1 Chinese *Popular Music*

My working definition of popular music hinges on its relation to the mass media, and on considering its emergence and transformations in tandem with the masses (urbanization, adolescence, yuppies) and the media (phonograph, radio, MTV, MP3, MySpace). This working definition will remain undeveloped, because I have chosen not to focus on distinguishing popular music from other musics, but on subdivisions within popular music. However, this still involves addressing popular music's appellation of the mass, the popular and the People.<sup>1</sup>

I will discuss music and artists that I tentatively group under the labels sinified rock, fringe pop, and new folk. However, I hypothesize that rather than around genres Chinese popular is structured around the four organizational principles language-geography-ethnicity, generation, gender, and marketability. Is rock subversive, pop hegemonic, and folk conservative, and are these the right questions?

### Territories in Hyperspace

Genre seems to offer the most obvious way of subdividing and categorizing popular music. In 1982, Franco Fabbri proposed the following definition:

A musical genre is “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules.”<sup>2</sup>

Later Fabbri proposed the treatment of musics as “multidimensional cultural entities, which can be represented mentally as objects in an n-dimensional hyperspace.”<sup>3</sup> A hypothetical research team embarking on a project of mapping genres would first design a mathematical hyperspace with quantifiable aspects of music events as its dimensions, according to six categories of attributes proposed by Fabbri: the formal and technical, the semiotic, the behavioral, the social, the ideological and finally the economic and juridical. While new dimensions were still being added to the hyperspace, the team would begin assigning music events to coordinates. It would soon appear that these music events were spread unevenly, and could be divided into clusters by an algorithm. Finally, the team would describe the contours of these clusters in precise mathematical language.

This thought experiment is not as fantastic as it might seem. The vast amount of digitalized music that now exists has prompted databases and their users to build comput-

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<sup>1</sup> Middleton 2006:1-36.

<sup>2</sup> Fabbri 1982:1.

<sup>3</sup> Fabbri 1999:12.

er programs that improve categorization and searchability. However, the mathematicians involved in mapping projects argue that the results of projects such as those of my hypothetical research team are unlikely to result in known genres.<sup>4</sup> Fabbri predicted this by insisting on *socially accepted* rules, rather than objectively verifiable ones. In other words, the classification of music differs from biological taxonomy and the periodic table because in biology and chemistry, phylogenetics and atomic number provide objectively verifiable organizational principles. In music, there is no such principle. This will remain the case, because genres arise out of the social interaction of sounds, audiences and musicians. Unlike biological species or chemical elements, audiences and musicians interact with musical categories, and songs comment upon their own genre identity. In music, labels are not external and descriptive, but integrated in and emergent from the music event.

## Articulation

Rephrasing and expanding my hypothesis, I argue that in China genres are less pronounced and articulated than in the West. By articulation I mean the transformative process in which a cluster of music events transcends descriptive similarities (homologies in the hyperspace) and becomes a coherent and discernible discourse.<sup>5</sup> This means, among other things, that a cultural form can be performed by different people across time and space without losing its identity: a-go-go in Singapore, reggae in Berlin, Peking Opera in San Francisco.

If a cluster is fully articulated or galvanized, it becomes what Appadurai has called a hard cultural form: “a set of links between value, meaning, and embodied practice that are difficult to break and hard to transform.”<sup>6</sup> By foregrounding the pliability of genre, my hypothesis attempts to go beyond Jeroen de Kloet’s presentation of Underground, heavy metal, hardcore punk and hip-hop as hard scenes in China. He argues:

Scenes proliferate around specific genres, these musical collectives involve the participation of musicians, audiences, and producers, all of whom articulate specific social identities in and through music.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, next to aiding the organization and communication of large sets of information and complex esthetics by dividing them into more manageable chunks, another *raison d’être* of genre is its ability to connect sounds to social identities. Pierre Bourdieu and the Birmingham school have argued that in Europe, taste and genre are markers of so-

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<sup>4</sup> Duda 2000:454-456. Scaringella 2006:11. The solution Scaringella proposes is to teach a learning algorithm what genres are by supplying it with paradigmatic examples. This supervised approach defeats our purpose, because it presupposes knowledge of paradigmatic examples of specific genres. Cf. MIREX 2009.

<sup>5</sup> On genres as worlds, see Frow 2006:83-92.

<sup>6</sup> Appadurai 1996:90.

<sup>7</sup> De Kloet 2010:41. On hard scenes, see De Kloet 2010: 28-31, 37-74.

cial identity.<sup>8</sup> These studies, and many others inspired by them, invest music with social relevance by tying it to communities through notions of genre and style. This is the more political side of the concept of articulation, as formulated by Ernest Laclau and Stuart Hall:

A theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together with a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulate, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. ... it enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position.<sup>9</sup>

In China, according to a 2008 survey by Wang Jing, this articulation of social position through cultural products is problematic:

While market segmentation of tweens and youths in the West takes place primarily on the basis of their musical taste ... no such equation exists in China. Not only do Chinese youths have extremely eclectic musical preferences, but they bond quickly with singers who have a knack for creating a “chop-suey” musical experience. Loyalty to a single pop singer rarely occurs for long, and Chinese youth do not adhere to a stable set of mixed genres. Musicians who have a shifting fusion of styles stand a better chance of appealing to this fickle clientèle. This finding contradicts an additional assumption made by many transnational music marketers: that Asian youth, like their counterparts in developed worlds, are increasingly willing to follow a particular type of music (such as hip-hop).<sup>10</sup>

## Organizational Principles

Western musicology defines popular music by its difference from folk and art or classical music. These categories are based on the feudal division of aristocracy (art music), peasantry (folk music) and bourgeoisie (pop music), and thus reiterate European class divisions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Simon Frith argues that these carry ethical and esthetic connotations: folk values authenticity; art music, originality (or talent); and popular music – well, popularity.<sup>12</sup>

Exposing genre as a Eurocentric, 19<sup>th</sup>-century concept is not enough. To avoid presenting Chinese popular music as an indifferent blur, or worse still, falling into exceptionalism that presents China as the eternally unintelligible Other, I will briefly survey the

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu 1993;1996, Hebdige 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Hall 1996:141-142.

<sup>10</sup> Wang 2008:216.

<sup>11</sup> Koskoff 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Frith 1996:36-46.

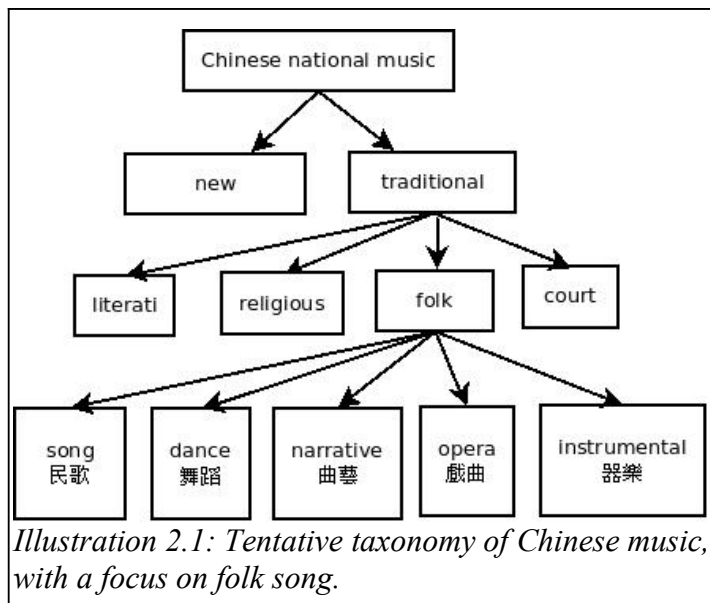
importation of genre into Chinese discourse, paying attention to alternative classifications.

First, Chinese terminology. ‘Genre’ is translated as *leixing* 類型 ‘typological classification,’ and ‘musical genre’ as ‘musical *leixing*.’ In colloquial speech, related terms such as *liupai* 流派, ‘school, lineage,’ and *fengge* 風格, ‘style,’ are interchangeable with *leixing*. None of these terms is restricted to music, and there seem to be no other Chinese expressions that can categorize or label music in ways comparable to genre.

Second, folk music classifications. The categorization introduced by the *Introduction to National Music* 民族音樂概論 (1964) still dominates folk music anthologies and overviews in the PRC today. Compiled by sixty Chinese musicologists in 1960 under the supervision of the Central Conservatory, this schoolbook argues: “In the course of its long historical development, national music has formed the five big categories of traditional music: song, dance music, narrative singing, opera and instrumental.”<sup>13</sup>

This project again attests to the ideologically informed decisions underlying seemingly transparent taxonomies. *Introduction to National Music* pits folk music 民間音樂 against non-folk music, specified as literati music, court music and religious music. Because Communist ideology deemed intellectual, political and religious culture to be re-

actionary, *Introduction to National Music* categorically excludes non-folk. Traditional music is folk music. The exclusion of religious music in particular has prompted post-1970s anthologies to add genres or insert a layer that shows that there is more to traditional music than folk music (see Illustration 2.2). The shift of emphasis in books such as *Introduction to Chinese Traditional Music* 中國傳統音樂概論 (2000) coincides with the reevaluation of imperial



China and Confucianism in the PRC of the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> More significantly, while discussing new music, *Introduction to National Music*, like most Chinese sources, neglects genre.

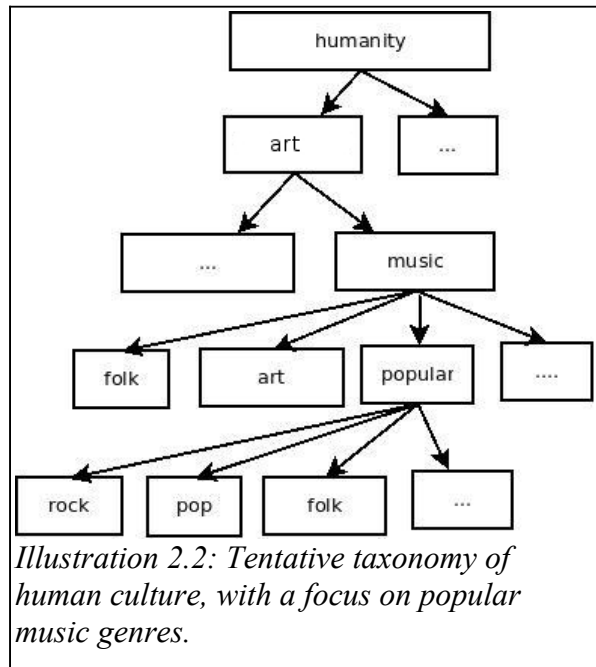
The few words the 1964 publication devotes to new music still apply to contemporary mass and popular music:

In developing national music, it is permissible and even recommendable to borrow from the useful experiences of foreign musics. Additionally, absorbing exter-

<sup>13</sup> China Music Institute 1964:2. Cf. Tuohy 1999: 52.

<sup>14</sup> Du 2000.

nal music forms (skills and techniques) ... is also effective and necessary. But the goal of absorbing and borrowing is to develop national music and create a new music that is socialist and national, and not to let foreign music dissolve national music. Therefore, all external experiences must be duly digested, and can absolutely not be rigidly applied. All external music forms (skills and techniques) must be made to suit the demands of national life, language, cultural tradition and esthetics, going through national modification.<sup>15</sup>



Thirdly, recent surveys with a focus on popular music, such as *Chinese Mass Music* 中國大眾音樂 (2003) and *History and Styles of Popular Music* 流行音樂歷史與風格 (2007), also ignore genre. Whereas the former stresses continuity between folk and popular music (cf. §4), the latter devotes volume one (367 pages) to the Western popular music genres of blues, jazz, country, rock, soul, latin, reggae, disco, hip-hop and New Age, while it divides the 177 pages of the second volume on Chinese 中國 popular music into the stages of Shanghai 1920s-1970s, Taiwan 1975-1990s, Hong Kong 1974-1990s, PRC 1979-1990s, and 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> Before anything else, the opposition of Western and Chinese popular music reinstates the primacy of geography in musical classification.

A fourth possible site of consecrating genres is award ceremonies. At least four-fifths of the Grammy Awards are awarded in genre categories. By contrast, categories in the trend-setting Taiwanese Golden Melody Awards depend rather on (1) profession (2) gender and (3) language. Golden Melody's main division into popular music on the one hand and traditional and art music on the other is similar to *Introduction to National Music*'s division into new and traditional music. Only a few awards within the traditional and art music category are motivated by genre (see Illustration 2.3).

The award ceremony's division into languages has a foundation in folk anthologies that subdivide the genres proposed by *Introduction to National Music*, or otherwise organize their material according to the overlapping principles of the language, geographic location and ethnicity of its producers: Peking Opera, Northwest Wind, Tibetan mountain songs.

<sup>15</sup> China Music Institute 1964:4-6. The book states that it excludes all music composed since May 4th, 1919, but Du Yaxiong and Seng Haibo point out that while early 1900s classroom song and piano adaptations are excluded, later folk genres and *erhu* tunes are included (Du 2000:3).

<sup>16</sup> You 2007.

Finally, like overview works and award ceremonies, many CD shops and websites explicitly organize music into the categories of (1) language-geography-ethnicity, (2) generation and (3) gender, with the third of these modified to distinguish between male singers 男歌手, female singers 女歌手 and group 組合 or band 樂隊 performances.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes all non-mainstream popular music is filed under the ‘band’ label, including solo albums of rock singers. This points to a final principle of organization: (4) marketability. Marketability addresses the gap I observe in the PRC between mainstream pop and the music classified as non-mainstream 非主流, alternative 另類, underground 地下 and rock 搖滾. In the following, I will evaluate the explanatory value of these four principles of organization as compared to that of genre.

## §2 Rock as Pop’s Other

I tentatively define rock in China *ex negativo* as non-mainstream popular music. I will first explore how far this unusual approach takes us in the interpretation of rock discourse in the PRC. Secondly, I will consider the challenge that Second Hand Rose presents to this discourse. Finally, does this challenge feed into a coherent and discernible subgenre of sinified rock?

### Polarization in PRC Rock Discourse

Rock is often positioned as ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ vis-à-vis the mainstream. For instance, in *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music*, Andrew Jones distinguishes “two broadly defined genres: officially-sanctioned popular music (*tongsu yinyue*), and underground rock music.”<sup>18</sup> The gist of this pioneering study is that since “genre is a function of ideology, not musical style,” pop and rock both claim to give voice to the People, with pop appealing to hegemony, and rock to authenticity.<sup>19</sup> From the outset, this dichotomy favors rock discourse. *Like a Knife* performs what Jeroen de Kloet calls ‘the rock mythology’:

a set of narratives which produce rock as a distinct music world that is, first and foremost, authentic, but also subcultural, masculine, rebellious and (counter) political. ... It is the rock mythology ... supplying the glue that binds producers, musicians, and audiences together; it is the basis of the *production* of the rock culture.<sup>20</sup>

De Kloet warns against the uncritical reiteration of this mythology in Western journalistic, political and academic accounts of Chinese rock. Nonetheless, implicitly comparing rock to neo-Marxist notions of false consciousness as both deceptive and thoroughly en-

<sup>17</sup> On generation, see De Kloet 2010:17-25.

<sup>18</sup> Jones 1992:3.

<sup>19</sup> Jones 1992:20.

<sup>20</sup> De Kloet 2009: 26. Compare De Kloet 2001: 31-34.

meshed in praxis, he argues that the mythology produces rock culture in China as well.

### Freedom and Truth

Lu Lingtao and Li Yang's collage of answers by the first generation of rock musicians to the question 'What is rock?' attests to the centrality of the concepts of freedom 自由 and authenticity 真實 in rock music discourse in the PRC between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. The reply of Second Hand Rose's first bass player Chen Jing is fairly representative:

I think it is a kind of explosion or embodiment of the self, and it is a true reflection of your own ability, your capability. It is just very authentic.<sup>21</sup>

After briefly mentioning the musical form, instruments, styles and precursors of rock, Xue Ji stresses freedom in the introduction of his 1993 book *Rock's Dreams Searching* 搖滾夢尋:

If you mention rock music, you can't avoid identifying its quality, which is the rock spirit. ... In philosophical terms, the rock spirit is the spirit of humanity's pursuit of the freedom of existence. In plain words, it is that which resists mass things through music, because following the masses means losing individuality, it means vulgarity 媚俗 and populism 流行. However if the rock spirit is simply understood as anger, as resisting the tradition, it ignores Chinese actuality 實際.<sup>22</sup>

The chapter on Chinese rock in Wang Yi's *Music in China at the End of the Century* 音樂在世紀末的中國 (1994) establishes the centrality of the rock spirit in Chinese dis-

Popular 流行	Traditional and Art 傳統暨藝術
Publishing 出版	
1 song 2 Mandarin album 3 Taiwanese album 4 Hakka album 5 Aboriginal album (music video)	(folk music album) (opera and narrative album) 26 traditional music album 27 classical music album 28 children's music album 29 religious music album 30 crossover music album
Personal 個人	
6 composer 7 lyricist 8 arranger 9 album producer 10 song producer 11 Mandarin male singer 12 Taiwanese male singer 13 Mandarin female singer 14 Taiwanese female singer 15 Hakka singer 16 Aboriginal singer 17 band 18 performing group 19 newcomer 20 music video director	31 composer 32 lyricist 33 arranger 34 producer 35 interpretation 詮釋 of traditional music 36 vocal rendition 37 instrumental rendition
Instrumental Rendition 演奏	
21 album 22 album producer 23 composer	
Special Mention 評審團	
24	38
Lifetime Contribution 特別貢獻	
25	39
<i>Illustration 2.3: Overview of the categories of the 19<sup>th</sup> Golden Melody Awards, held in Taipei in 2008. The categories between parentheses are those added at the 20<sup>th</sup> ceremony in 2009.</i>	

<sup>21</sup> Lu 2003: V.

<sup>22</sup> Xue 1993:i-ii. See also He Luping, in Xue 1993:192-206, and Jin 1989.



course, and its features of authenticity and freedom. Predating De Kloet's work and singling out Xue, Wang Yi argues against rock's "inflated myth of the rebellious spirit":

Rock had an important position in Chinese youth culture of the late 80s and the 90s – as it did in the West in the 60s. That is because 'rock music' was almost completely misunderstood to be a kind of spirit, and the music itself was almost relegated to being viewed as the packaging of 'the spirit.'<sup>23</sup>

Rather than centering around the conception of rock as a spirit or myth as opposed to a sound or style, these discussions, and hence the reception of rock, revolve around the desirability and effectiveness of protest music in the PRC, with assumptions regarding the critical function of rock in the West looming in the background.<sup>24</sup> The PRC's first rock star, Cui Jian, played a pivotal role in these discussions.

Cui Jian achieved success very suddenly, and in spite of lacking access to state media. In his inquiry into this phenomenon, *Cui Jian Screams From Inside Nothing-to-His-Name* 崔健在一無所有中吶喊, Zhao Jianwei reevaluates both Western philosophy and Chinese history. Zhao spends fifty pages arguing that the death of God, as declared by Nietzsche, left a vacuum that was filled by the American counterculture. He spends another twenty pages sketching the void left by the Cultural Revolution, and the inability of the popular mainstream to address this void. Everything leads up to Cui Jian's 1986 debut performance, which:

declared the beginning of a great cultural rebellion era 時代 led by music. ... it represented a rebellion against traditional culture and the pursuit of a humane and free spirit of the times.<sup>25</sup>

Zhao defines Cui Jian's music throughout as being about "freedom, authenticity and sexuality." He argues that rather than opposing Communism, Cui Jian is heeding Marx's call for realism.<sup>26</sup> Just like Andrew Jones' book of the same year, he mobilizes the lyrics of Cui Jian's song LIKE A KNIFE 像一把刀子 (1991):

Cui Jian says that Chinese rock is like a knife. Now he takes this knife up to cut one chunk of rotten flesh after another off China's body. The first chunk of dead meat is hypocrisy!<sup>27</sup>

But in 1993, Cui Jian sued Zhao Jianwei. He explained:

<sup>23</sup> Wang 1994:168-169. On Xue Ji, see Wang 1994:192.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Groenewegen 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Zhao 1994:245.

<sup>26</sup> Zhao 1994:287, 264-265.

<sup>27</sup> Zhao 1994: 274.

Zhao Jianwei is a theorist. He built this whole construct according to Western aesthetics. ... he has no right to pigeonhole me into the Chinese shadow of Western rock. It harms my image, and also that of us Chinese. Does our Chinese culture have no other option but to *copy* [English in original] others? ... If you just say that rock contains democratic, anti-traditional concepts, then that's only superficial form. ... Zhao Jianwei also didn't explain which tradition I oppose, he only says that I rebel against tradition. Why? Because Western rock is against tradition. ... I think my music is very simple, it opposes everything that makes people lose themselves, be it money, traditional concepts, the law or religion. This could even be rock itself ... maybe I don't know anything, but I know what I am opposed to. That is rock as I understand it. So when I saw this book's hypocrisy, I opposed it.

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Cui Jian refuses to have his music reduced to a specific political agenda. Instead he presents it as socially engaged and liberating in a personal but politically unspecific way. This ambiguity also lies at the bottom of his idea that rock is culture rather than politics, voiced for instance in the book-length interview *Free Style* 自由風格 (2001).<sup>29</sup> However, the culture-versus-politics angle only fuels the argument of Zhao Jianwei, who puts forward that culture and politics are intricately entwined.<sup>30</sup> In short, in the face of Cui Jian's ambiguity, the majority of Chinese critics, and presumably audiences, regarded Cui Jian and rock in general as not only outside of the cultural and political mainstream, but also as challenging it.

## Western Sources

As the quotes above show, it has been a successful strategy in Chinese rock criticism to present a politicized rock spirit on the basis of Western philosophy and counterculture and then explain how this essence should be expressed in China. Most information about rock in the West that enabled this strategy was disseminated through magazines, by early translations such as that of Morris Dickstein's programmatic *The Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (1977, translated 1985) and later by comprehensive works such as Huang Liaoyuan's *Overview of World Rock* 世界搖滾大觀 (1993) and Hao Fang's *The Wild Blooming of Wounded Flowers: The Bondage and Struggle of Rock 'n' Roll* 伤花怒放: 搖滾的被縛與抗爭 (1993, republished 2003). *The Wild Blooming of Wounded Flowers* in particular presents Western rock as anti-mainstream. Each of its chapters investigates a defining aspect of rock, namely: (1) demanding freedom; (2) participating in revolution; (3) transcending ethics; (4) avoiding ideology; (5) opposing Western Art Music; (6) challenging national divisions; (7) promoting intense emotions; (8) opposing religion; and (9) revealing the limits of rationality.

<sup>28</sup> Xue 1993:5-6.

<sup>29</sup> Cui 2001:38-40, Cf. 214.

<sup>30</sup> Zhao 1994:9, 171.

In the course of the 1990s and especially the 2000s more recordings and information entered China, through conventional publications, ‘saw-cut’ albums (*dakou*) and the Internet. The diversification of the material resulted in the notion of the ‘rock spirit’ becoming obsolescent, as it became harder to claim underlying ideological coherence. Nevertheless, Iron Chang’s *Sounds and Fury* 聲音與憤怒 (Taiwan 2004, PRC 2008) and many other sources still present rock as inherently anti-mainstream.

## Underground

The publication of Hao Fang’s *Radiant Nirvana: The Life of Kurt Cobain* 燦爛涅槃：柯特科本的一生 (1997) roughly coincides with the proliferation of the term ‘Underground’ 地下 in the Chinese media. Yan Jun’s article “Welcome to the Underground” 歡迎你來地下 (1999) promotes the contrasting music of grunge band The Fly, noise rock band No (led by Zuoxiao Zuzhou), folk singer Hu Mage and DJ Chen Dili. The article begins:

Ever since Cui Jian, Chinese rock has been seen as an alternative 另類, outsider’s 異族 and Underground sound. From Overload’s speed metal to Zhang Chu’s new folk, and even the new punk that has recently emerged: all are caught under the deliberately vague umbrella of “new music,” which serves to distinguish them from the worn-out rut of commercial love songs and [CCTV New Year’s] Gala songs. Moreover, for more than a year now the concept of Underground music has been heralded. People have taken almost everything that has not been absorbed by the commercial system or acknowledged by the mainstream rock system, and labeled it Underground. Its cultural significance exceeds the evaluation and classification 分型 of music itself. In these years of rock resuscitation, Underground has become a synonym for idealist, creative and extraordinary 異質 culture.<sup>31</sup>

Yan Jun himself was central in the heralding of the Underground, warning his readers against the co-opting of rock as an exciting symbol of rebelliousness.<sup>32</sup> However, the strongest evidence of rock as the anti-mainstream is *The Declaration of Shucun* 樹村聲明. The document, directed against the film *Beijing Rocks* 北京樂與路 (2001, d. Mabel Cheung), was drafted by Yan Jun and signed by most Beijing-based bands:

In our music, lyrics, behavior and attitude in life we have consistently protested against the harm commercial and mainstream culture inflicts on society and individuals. Therefore we see no reason to join in activities that would be self-contradictory ... The greatest joy of living and making music is striving to get as much

<sup>31</sup> Yan 2006a:318-319, Yan 2002:142-143.

<sup>32</sup> Conversation, Yan Jun, Beijing, 9 May 2004. Cf. Groenewegen 2005:48. Yan 2004:169-173.

freedom as you can, especially freedom of thought and spirit.<sup>33</sup>

## The Middle Ground of Second Hand Rose

Whereas Iron Chang answers his book's subtitle *Can Rock & Roll Change the World?* with a strong affirmative, Second Hand Rose's breakthrough in 2001 popularized the following sentence:

Big brother, so you play rock but what's the use?

大哥你玩搖滾，你玩它有啥用啊

Sung in Northeastern countryside dialect, the phrase portrays a stereotypical reaction of China's masses to the rock scene. The album *Second Hand Rose* 二手玫瑰 (2003) starts with the sound of a bustling audience and the announcement, "Please go inside, the show is about to begin," after which Liang Long sings this sentence and the heavy rock intro plus suona of the opening song *TRICK* 伎倆 kick in. This framing suggests that rock is already always entertainment. The novelty of Second Hand Rose lies in their ridiculing of the somewhat pretentious Underground ideology that dominated the Beijing rock scene at the time. The lyrics of the song elaborate this:

究竟搖滾是累壞你的身子兒呀  
還是累壞了你這個人兒呀  
看那愛情象個瞎子兒  
它必須找到位置說話

In the end, is rock wiping you out,  
or is it wiping you clean away?  
See, love is like a blind man.  
It has to find a place to speak from.

看來你是真的學會賣弄了  
要不怎么那么着人的喜歡  
可是你還是成了一個啞巴  
神神叨叨說着一些廢話

Sure you've learnt to show off.  
Why else does everyone love you?  
But you've lost your ear, your voice,  
stuttering strange nonsense.

究竟是成不了個有情的婊子  
還是裝不明白個有情的戲子

In the end, do you fail as love's whore  
or as an actor that can't play love?

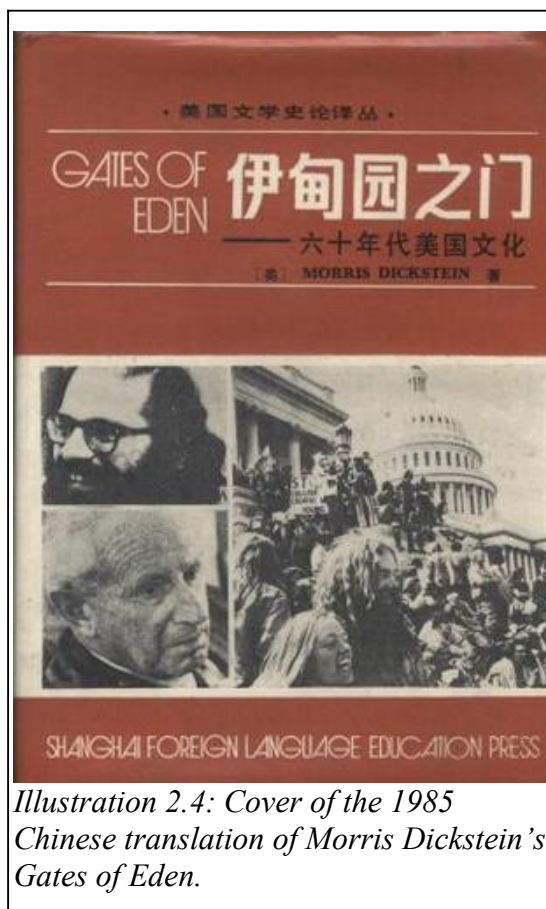


Illustration 2.4: Cover of the 1985 Chinese translation of Morris Dickstein's *Gates of Eden*.

<sup>33</sup> Yan 2002:258-261, full translation in Groenewegen 2005:152-154, discussion 76-78.

只是理想咋突然那么沒勁      Big ideals are so lame in the end.  
看着你我也再說不出什么詞兒      Looking at you, I can't say another word.

Rock's ideals, love, and by extension its rebelliousness, are tricks that are defined and confined by the position it speaks from, namely the stage, entertainment and the media. TRICK cuts through the hypocrisy of overemphasizing rock's political potential, as well as its anti-mainstream attitudes. Liang Long explains:

Liang Long: "I hate it when people call us an Underground band. In my book there's no distinction between under and above ground, I call them all rock music."<sup>34</sup>

Liang Long: "I think it is a big mistake of artists to always treat commerce as alien to it. Commerce didn't do it any harm. Without commerce there's no Dali or Beethoven. Rock music and artists should stop boycotting commerce and start considering how to join forces with it. ... To me rock has already ceased to be a subtext 潛台詞. It's not like when I first heard Cui Jian and I thought that that was what rock was, or when I thought that Tang Dynasty was what rock should be. I have been involved [with music] myself for such a long time now that these ideas have faded. As to what rock is, I think it is an attitude. But I think that, regardless of rock or something else, the one thing that must be there is a sense of responsibility. You can do anything, but you must have a sense of responsibility, either to society or to the People around you. That's most important."

Interviewer: "This is your interpretation of the rock spirit?"

Liang Long: "Yes, it's a kind of responsibility. When you discover serious problems, you need to articulate them. Because we are artists, we can only raise questions."<sup>35</sup>

Rather than proving that rock and pop exist next to each other as distinct articulated forms, Second Hand Rose transforms the pop-rock divide into a gradual scale of marketability, which they attempted to climb.

## Challenging the Underground

The rock mythology's anti-commercialism is unhelpful for record company owners. It was questioned throughout the 1990s by people such as Huang Liaoyuan and Shen Lihui, owner of the independent record company Modern Sky and lead singer of the band Sober. Although I agree with De Kloet that the sound and image of bands such as Sober

<sup>34</sup> Guo 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Guo 2003, amended on the basis of Dong 2005.

and New Pants started to move away from rock pretentiousness in the late 1990s, Second Hand Rose was the first to challenge the rock mythology head-on.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, rock performances were less clearly opposed to the dominant economic and political powers than rock discourse of the same period suggests. Medium-marketable bands such as Tang Dynasty, Brain Failure, New Pants, Sober, Muma and Xie Tianxiao performed songs with themes of indignation, anger, disillusion and hedonism without becoming politically outspoken. Tang Dynasty had a nationalist streak, yet this was not perceived to be in conflict with the rock mythology. Nor were the hedonism of Brain Failure and later Joyside understood as undermining the seriousness of rock. They were seen as pursuing freedom and truth, in contrast to mainstream music.<sup>37</sup>

Second Hand Rose's 2003 show in the state-owned Beijing Exhibition Center, where they also launched a wine in their name, and their signing to the commercial label Music Nation in 2006, put them clearly at odds with the Underground ideology. Historically, the success of Second Hand Rose marked the demise of the rock mythology. In 2004 the most influential Underground metal band Tongue fell apart. It was several years before their protégés Miserable Faith, famous for angry rap metal and their 2001 slogan "wherever there is oppression there is resistance," made a comeback with the ballad *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL DAY OF MY LIFE* 生命中最美麗的一天 (2006) and the reggae album *Don't Stop My Music* 不要停止我的音樂 (2008).

## Social Engagement

Second Hand Rose first rendered it ideologically defensible for rock bands to cooperate with commerce and claim social relevance at the same time. Their implicit call to bring rock back to the People is partly motivated by the emphasis on social awareness in the rock mythology. Liang Long:

Second Hand Rose is still critical. I believe that the basic quality of rock is to be responsible towards society and critical towards reality. If a band is not critical, they are no longer rock. They could be representative of another style.<sup>38</sup>

This continuity is also evidenced by support from heavyweights on the Beijing rock scene (see Chapter 1). Additionally, Second Hand Rose perform mostly in non-mainstream venues and festivals – for instance, annually at New Get Lucky to express gratitude for their debut there.

Second Hand Rose's frequent references to the PRC's political legacy also serve as a reminder that politics and the masses are interdependent. For instance, the lyrics of *ALLOW SOME ARTISTS TO GET RICH FIRST* criticize the economic inequality that resulted from Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy:

<sup>36</sup> De Kloet 2001:97. Cf. Wang 2007:220.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. De Kloet 2010:54-68.

<sup>38</sup> Li 2009.

我是一盒名牌的香煙	I am a box of brand incense.
我被塞進了窮人的口袋	I am trapped in a poor man's pocket.
我是一只貪婪的耗子	I am a greedy rat.
我被富人收養起來（來）	I am raised by the wealthy.
我是一盒治性病的藥	I am a box of medicine for clap.
我被愛人偷偷打開	I am secretly opened by lovers.
我是一個犯了戒的神仙	I am an immortal who violated a commandment.
我被老天踢了下來	I am being kicked out of heaven.
一群豬啊飛上了天	A group of pigs fly up to heaven,
一群海盜淹死在沙灘	a band of robbers drown on the beach.
我的兒子被做成了金錢	My son has been turned into money,
搖曳的花枯萎在河岸	freely swaying flowers wither by the riverside.

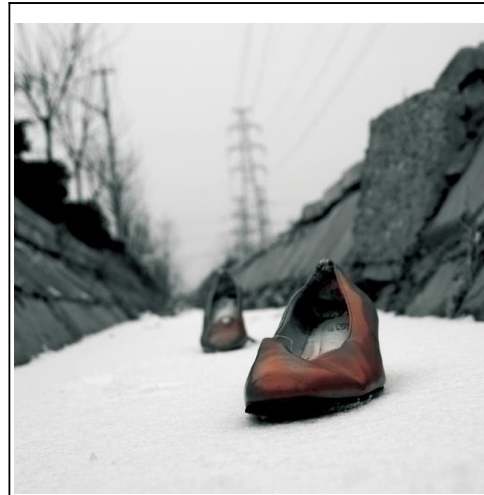
The song criticizes a political system that bestows status and wealth on pigs, whereas humans are changed into financial resources. They are forced to struggle to make a living, with both happiness (flowers) and freedom (Buddhist enlightenment found in reaching the other shore) remaining out of reach.

The critique of the absurd distribution of wealth made in *ALLOW SOME ARTISTS TO GET RICH FIRST* is further developed in *UNOFFICIAL HISTORY 野史* (2009). It narrates the sad faith of Brother Four, who overhears two righteous teachers and jumps into a wide river. If we assume that the two teachers are Capitalism and Communism and that this story takes place in the PRC of the late 1980s, Brother Four's leap into the river heeds the call to "go to sea" 下海, i.e. to go into business, even though Brother Four "can't swim." Musically, *UNOFFICIAL HISTORY* alternates between relaxing verses with a playful syncopated riff and a slow reggae beat on the one hand, and frantic choruses in double time with sounds of breaking glass, maddening wind instruments and raw, punk vocal delivery, on the other. After a klaxon-like dubbed suona solo, the song continues its relaxing pace:

這個史他就剩下四兒了	This history leaves Four behind.
那個史他就剩個六兒了	That history leaves a certain Six.
他們就在水的一方	They are on the other side of the water,
舉起了碧血洗的銀槍	raising silver guns washed in blood justly shed.
啪的一聲槍打響了	Bang! A shot rings out.
四兒的身子隨着隨着河水趟了	Four's body floats on the river, on the river.
他認為總得有人活着	He assumes there will be survivors in the end.
秘密就在他褲襠里永遠睡了	The secret sleeps forever in his trouser legs.

Although Brother Four could be a casualty of economic reform, I propose an alternative reading triggered by the numbers six and four. In China these numbers signify June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989, and the massacre that took place that night around Tian'anmen Square. But even taking the song in the most general sense, it asks us not to forget the human beings who were sacrificed for the current peace, freedom and prosperity. As such, it highlights Second Hand Rose's social engagement. After the music ends, we hear a stock phrase from martial arts novels:

不忘四哥恩情      Don't forget Brother Four's  
                                 kindness!



*Illustration 2.5: Cover of Second Hand Rose's 2009 EP Lover 情兒, which includes UNOFFICIAL HISTORY.*

## Sinified Rock as a Genre

In "Rock Aesthetics and Musics of the World" (1997), Motti Regev argues that local musicians participate in two Bourdieuan fields: that of global pop-rock music, structured around authenticity; and that of ethno-national identity, structured around the nation. "Making local rock music 'solves' the apparent contradiction of participation in both these fields."<sup>39</sup> In many parts of the world these local rock musics have developed into successful genres, sometimes gaining recognition outside their ethno-national locus of origin.

Sinified rock would be the corresponding genre in the PRC, as it similarly appeals to local youths by situating itself between rock and pop, and between global trends and rapidly modernizing local traditions. However, 'sinified rock' is also my etic term to address the connections between Cui Jian, Tang Dynasty, The Master Says, Second Hand Rose and others. In Chinese rock discourse, this lineage is noted but never developed into a unifying narrative, let alone articulated as a distinct position in the field. Why isn't sinified rock a genre?

Firstly, it is worth noting that identifying the 'absence' of a genre may reflect a Western inclination to project prefabricated notions of genre and categorization onto China. Although Regev stresses that communities are active hybridizers rather than passive recipients, he also posits Anglo-American rock as the source that has prompted local communities to articulate new identities and challenge older ones. Even if this is true – the Anglo-American influence is huge – such an approach obstructs understanding 'local'

<sup>39</sup> Regev 1997:2.



musics as anything other than peripheries of the center. Is sinified rock really firstly rock and secondly Chinese?

The notion of folk or national rock 民族搖滾 introduced by Second Hand Rose is closer than any other Chinese term to what I have dubbed ‘sinified rock.’ Although at face value it foregrounds ethnicity (as opposed to cosmopolitanism) rather than Chineseness (as opposed to other nations), it is clear that ‘national rock’ means ‘Chinese national rock’ in this context. More importantly, the term did not extend to other bands, even in the PRC. The weak cohesive potential of terms such as ‘sinified rock’ and ‘national folk’ across geographic, generational and other differences partly stems from the fact that bands which explicitly refer to their Chineseness nonetheless take inspiration from very different foreign genres: Tang Dynasty from heavy metal, The Master Says from funk, and Bu Yi from blues, to name a few. But the largest obstacle to genre articulation is geographical affiliation. Cui Jian was first associated with Northwest Wind, which itself was a short-lived form of locally defined ethno-national pop-rock. Tang Dynasty, The Master Says, Ear Slap, South City Johns, Madman and Hao Yun take pride in their Beijing provenance. Other potential sinified rock bands organize their collective efforts, such as compilation albums, along regional affinities. *One and Only Ningxia* 只有一個寧夏 (2005) contains songs by Su Yang, Bu Yi and Zhao Laoda. *A Tale of Two Cities* 雙城樂記 (2007) brings musicians from Hong Kong and Guangzhou together. *Underground Chengdu* 地下成都 1, 2 and 3 (2000, 2001 and 2004), Wuhan’s *Desert Travel* 荒漠旅行 (2004), and *Underground Shanghai* 地下上海 (2000) establish local scenes outside the rock capital Beijing and its traditions.

Second Hand Rose is the only sinified rock band with Northeast Chinese affiliations, on which Liang Long commented in 2009:

We also can’t be influenced by others, because Second Hand Rose has been very lonely all along. Many bands can perform together. We don’t know who with.<sup>40</sup>

There have been several moments that could have broken this isolation by articulating sinified rock as a genre. I will discuss a compilation album, a commemorative festival and a record label.

Liang Long spent most of 2008 organizing and recording a sampler with cover songs from two 1980s television adaptations of classical novels, *A Dream of Red Mansions* 紅樓夢 and *Journey to the West* 西遊記. Liang explains that the composers who worked on these series were still relatively untainted by Western popular music and had thus created popular tunes that were close to the Chinese musical tradition.<sup>41</sup> As a continuation of this tradition, *You in a Red Chamber, I Journey West* 你在紅樓我在西游 presented an ideal opportunity for Liang to bring artists together under the banner of national or sinified rock. However, the sampler contains no songs by Cui Jian, The Master Says,

<sup>40</sup> Li 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Conversation, Liang Long 2008.

Xie Tianxiao, Ear Slap, Hao Yun or Madman. Instead, Liang Long's choices seemed to be motivated by marketability, generation, gender and geographic regions. Next to artists of his own generation who stress Chineseness, such as Su Yang and Wan Xiaoli, the album also includes songs by the electropop outfit Yu Fei Men (female voice) and rap metal bands such as Miserable Faith and Liquid Oxygen Can. The latter is led by a singer from Northeast China.

The outdoor festival Radiant Road of Chinese Rock 中國搖滾的光輝道路, held in Ningxia in August 2004, presented an overview of four generations of Chinese rock. Ignoring the rock mythology, organizer Huang Liaoyuan invited only medium-marketable bands, many of which used Chinese sounds and instruments. They included first-generation bands, such as Cui Jian and Wang Yong; second-generation bands, such as Tang Dynasty and Zhang Chu; third-generation bands, such as The Master Says and Zuoxiao Zuzhou; and fourth-generation bands, such as Bu Yi, Su Yang and Second Hand Rose. Because some of the bands hadn't performed in years, let alone recorded any new material, the festival's importance lay primarily in its commemoration and historical consciousness. The Radiant Road of Chinese Rock remained an isolated event.

The independent label 13<sup>th</sup> Month specializes in music that I would group under sinified rock, publishing albums of Xie Tianxiao, Su Yang, Ma Tiao, Wan Xiaoli, Shan Ren and others. After its establishment in 2006, 13<sup>th</sup> Month lobbied for the creation of the category of 'best folk artist' at the 7<sup>th</sup> Sinophone Music and Media Event 華語音樂傳媒大賞. The inaugural award went to Wan Xiaoli at the ceremony in Hong Kong in July 2007.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, CEO Lu Zhongqiang states his commitment to medium-marketable sinified rock with promotional slogans such as "the more Chinese, the more fashionable" 越中國越時尚. However, rather than using 'national rock', 'sinified rock' or a similar term, 13<sup>th</sup> Month describes itself as promoting "groundbreaking" music. Genre labels are restricted to honorary titles, for instance Xie Tianxiao as "the new godfather of Chinese rock" (after Cui Jian) and Wan Xiaoli as a "subversive folktune singer" 顛覆民謠的歌手.

In the end, I cannot explain why no genre such as sinified rock has emerged. The compilation album *You in a Red Chamber, I Journey West*, The Radiant Road of Chinese Rock festival and the label 13<sup>th</sup> Month offer starting points for the articulation of the obvious connections between these bands. However, these connections seem to be less obvious within Chinese popular music. Thorough considerations of the late 1990s Beijing punk scene centering around Scream Bar and Scream Records, and of the new wave scene that has emerged around D-22 and Maybe Mars since 2005, would show a similar weakness of the binding power of genre in China. Sinified rock bands are unable to join forces within North China. They are unable to jump on the bandwagon of, or to offer an alternative to, the Chinese Wind, launched by the über-marketable Taiwanese pop star Jay Chou.

<sup>42</sup> Conversation, Zhang Ran, October 2008.

### §3 Pop and its Fringes

Genre in Chinese popular music may be a surplus effect of the interplay of language-geography-ethnicity, generation, gender and marketability dimensions on the one hand, and the process of foreign cultural forms adapting to Chinese popular music, on the other. Whereas I focused above on articulations of genre in low to medium-marketable Northern Chinese male-dominated rock bands, I will now discuss them in relation to medium to high-marketable female pop singers based in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

Iron Chang and many others compare mainstream music to a broad river that draws on the creative energy of a large river basin, one that includes foreign and subterranean sources.<sup>43</sup> Rather than stressing derivativeness, I propose a more positive interpretation of this trope by foregrounding popular music's success in seeking out, promoting and organizing new musical developments. In other words, the mainstream doesn't only absorb, it also throws distinctions into relief and hence contributes to articulation. Before turning to the careers of female singer-songwriters in the early 2000s, I will discuss Faye Wong's position in the nexus between several potential genres. How do genre co-optation and articulation interact in Chinese pop?

#### *Gangtai* as a Genre

Nimrod Baranovitch calls Faye Wong both a "Hong Kong female rocker" and a "*gangtai* singer."<sup>44</sup> But is the term *gangtai* sufficiently coherent to define Wong's genre identity?

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that *gangtai* music is quite coherent enough to be emulated outside its name-giving regions of Hong Kong and Taiwan. From there it has traveled to, say, Urumqi and Vancouver. Baranovitch defines it:

[Teresa Teng's] singing, considered the ideal in *gangtai* music at that time [early 1980s PRC] was soft, sweet, often whispery and restrained. The sweet flavor of her voice was enhanced by gentle vibratos, coquettish nasal slides, and a moderate, relaxed tempo. Most of her songs were based on Western harmonies, while the melodies often retained the traditional Chinese pentatonism. ... A Western influence manifested itself in many *gangtai* songs also in the use of Western popular dance rhythms. ... *gangtai* music of the 1970s descended from pre-1949 *liuxing* [pop] music.<sup>45</sup>

Secondly, *gangtai* is distinct from other popular musics, such as the invigorating songs for the masses 大眾歌曲 that dominated the PRC in the 1950s to 1970s and the *tongsu* 通俗 'officially-sanctioned popular' music that built on that tradition in the 1980s.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Chang 2008:26.

<sup>44</sup> Baranovitch 2003:220, 228.

<sup>45</sup> Baranovitch 2003:11.

<sup>46</sup> Jones 1992:17-20.

Thirdly, this distinction has social connotations, with *gangtai* articulating the desire of a young, urban generation for romance and freedom – as it did particularly in the PRC of the 1980s. That Teresa Teng was censored in 1983 illustrates that the CCP was aware of this connection. Furthermore, the opposition between *gangtai* and *tongsu* goes back to ‘decadent’ 1930s Shanghai popular music, which gives *gangtai* a similar historical background to fully articulated East Asian popular music genres such as South Korean *trot* 트로트 and Japanese *enka* 演歌.

However, this distinction lost its relevance in the mid-1980s, when *gangtai*’s slow tempi and personalized vocal delivery became synonymous with contemporary mainstream pop. Today, the *shuqing* 抒情 ‘lyrical’ songs of *gangtai* define mainstream popular music to the extent that there is no constitutive outside: the mainstream does not divide itself into genres or define itself vis-à-vis any external musical discourse, such as mass music or hip-hop.<sup>47</sup> For instance, in order to present 1930s Shanghai pop as a genre, Szu-wei Chen contrasts it with contemporary pop music. His article “The Rise and Generic Features of Shanghai Popular Songs in the 1930s and 1940s” employs Fabbri’s genre rules to describe what essentially is all pop music of that particular time and place.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in the 2000s, albums of superstars like Jay Chou are carefully planned to contain ‘slow songs’ 慢歌 and ‘quick songs’ 快歌, and more generally to encompass a wide range of potential genres, including hip-hop, country & western, Latin and the Chinese Wind. Although albums may be packaged around genre-related imagery, such as the cowboy on Jay Chou’s *On the Run* 我很忙 (2007), the genre in question is rarely manifest in more than two songs out of the ten an album usually contains. Mainstream pop stars and aspiring artists rarely record albums in a single genre, let alone base their career on them.

Above all else, the co-optation of genre dissolves links of articulation. Basile Zimmermann argues that DJs and electronic artists in the PRC are guided by the presets of their instruments, which are habitually labeled according to genre.<sup>49</sup> The lists of digital samples, rhythms and sound effects thus produced dissociate genres from ideological, cultural and historical components and render them interchangeable and combinable. This is not only salient in the



Illustration 2.6: Steinberg Groove Agent 2.

<sup>47</sup> Moskowitz 2010:3.

<sup>48</sup> Chen 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Zimmerman 2006:234-238, 283.

limitedly marketable music Zimmermann describes, but also in the Chinese mainstream. Pop producer Tan Yizhe, for instance, stresses that a producer should know and be able to play the basics of different genres, yet he rarely creates faithful genre songs.<sup>50</sup> Sitting in the studio with Tan while he asked a pop singer to shout the typical punk exclamation ‘oi’ a number of times over the final chorus of a pop song, I couldn’t help thinking of Zimmerman’s example of the Steinberg Groove Agent (see Illustration 2.6). Being the clichéd example of an articulated genre – hardened, distinctive and subcultural – punk ‘melted’ and was transformed into an ornamental sound effect.

### Faye Wong’s Ballads

Before moving on to Faye Wong’s genre-transgressing fringe pop, I want to attest to the centrality of the *gangtai* sound to her music. Wong’s greatest hits are ballads, such as her Cantonese breakthrough song *EASILY HURT WOMAN* (1992) and her Mandarin breakthrough song *I AM WILLING* 我願意 (1994APR). Later, *SKY* (1994JUN), *UNDERCURRENT* 暗涌 (1997FEB) and especially *APPOINTMENT* 約定 (1997SEPT) and *RED BEANS* 紅豆 (1998) became popular ballads. From *RED BEANS*:

還沒好好的感受 雪花綻放的氣候 我們一起顫抖 會更明白 甚麼是溫柔	Still without grasping the climate of blossoming snowflakes, we’ll shiver together and understand what warmth is.
還沒跟你牽著手 走過荒蕪的沙丘 可能從此以後 學會珍惜 天長和地久	Still haven’t held your hand and walked desolate dunes. Perhaps from now on I’ve learn to cherish how far heaven and earth reach.
有時候 有時候 我會相信一切有盡頭 相聚離開 都有時候 沒有甚麼會永垂不朽 可是我 有時候 寧願選擇留戀不放手 等到風景都看透 也許你會陪我 看細水長流	Sometimes... sometimes... I believe everything comes to an end, meeting and parting, everything has its time. Nothing remains stainless forever. But I... sometimes... rather linger than let go, waiting for us to see through the scenery. maybe then you’ll come and watch how droplets become a river.
還沒為你把紅豆 熬成纏綿的傷口	Still haven’t cooked for you, simmering red beans into lingering wounds

<sup>50</sup> Tan Yizhe, conversation 2008.

然後一起分享                      to share them together  
會更明白              相思的哀愁      and understand    lovesickness.

還沒好好的感受                      Still without grasping  
醒著親吻的溫柔                      the gentle warmth of a wake-up kiss...  
可能在我左右                      Perhaps it's only around me  
你才追求              孤獨的自由      that you pursue    desolate freedom.

Both *APPOINTMENT* and *RED BEANS* have meandering melodies that remain within a moderate vocal range. There's also a near-constant focus on this prosaic, single vocal melody, which is at first accompanied only by a few piano notes. Backing vocals only dub the main melody, if at all. Strings, as well as the percussion that enters either simultaneous with or immediately after the first chorus, mainly serve to drive the song to a climax, which coincides with the rising melody. Typically there is also a coda after the finale to the almost *a capella* first verse, securing the overarching centrality of the individual voice.

All of these elements set *APPOINTMENT* and *RED BEANS* apart from Wong's fringe pop songs and render them extremely suitable for karaoke. Additionally, *APPOINTMENT* was also recorded by Jacky Cheung, Jeff Chang and Where Chou, and *RED BEANS* by Jay Chou, Deserts Chang, Fish Leong, Ronald Cheng, Tanya Chua and Khalil Fong, among others. The continued popularity of the ballad in Chinese popular music most likely relates to karaoke and to listening habits that stress singability rather than danceability.

## Faye Wong's Fringe Pop

Although Baranovitch called Faye Wong a "Hong Kong female rocker," he can't possibly see her as a proponent of Chinese rock, because he argues that Chinese rock was a fad that declined just when Faye Wong rose to fame.<sup>51</sup> The classification merely suggests that Wong is not your average pop idol. To account for Faye Wong's alternative sound and cool image without blurring potential genres, I will call that side of her music 'fringe pop.'

In contrast to the ballads, which are slow to the point that rubato goes almost unnoticed, most of Faye Wong's songs have a clear groove, which in the beginning of Wong's career was often inspired by soul, and after 1994 increasingly by British alternative rock, integrating electronic and triphop influences towards the new millennium. Rather than the genre-defying nature of Faye Wong's "chop-suey" musical experience per se, I am interested in the uneven process of co-optation and articulation.

In tracing the sources of Wong's fringe pop, her covers of the Cranberries and her cooperation with Cocteau Twins stand out.<sup>52</sup> Whereas *Random Thought* contains a num-

<sup>51</sup> Baranovitch 2003:36-48.

<sup>52</sup> This started with two Cocteau Twins covers on *Random Thinking* 胡思亂想 (1994NOV): BLUEBEARD (the title track) and KNOW THYSELF AND EACH OTHER 知己知彼, from the Cocteau Twins' KNOW WHO YOU ARE AT EVERY

ber of ballads and pop rock songs, *Di-dar* (1995DEC) has a decidedly alternative rock sound, including the trademark high nasal ornaments of these Irish and Scottish female voices. This trend continued on the next album, *Impatience* (1996), for which Cocteau Twins composed the songs *FRACTURE* 分裂 and *REPRESSING HAPPINESS* 掃興 – songs they later recorded themselves as *TRANQUIL EYE* and *TOUCH UPON TOUCH* respectively. Faye Wong composed the rest of the songs on this album herself, and she continued to work with Cocteau Twins on later albums.<sup>53</sup>

In roughly the same period, Faye Wong got involved with the rock scene in her native Beijing. This resulted in personal contacts that turned into musical collaborations. Her then-husband Dou Wei composed and arranged songs on *Sky*, *Di-dar* and *Impatience*, and producer Zhang Yadong introduced electronic and triphop influences reminiscent of Björk, Portishead and Dido to her sound. Faye Wong offered these and other Beijing musicians one of very few opportunities to access the mainstream.

Faye Wong's relationship with the media adds to her fringe or alternative sound-image-text. In 1995 or 1996 she was photographed in her pajamas and with disheveled hair in a Beijing alley while she was on her way to empty a chamber pot. The photographer had interviewed the couple the day before, but had returned to play paparazzo. Wikipedia:

This photo caused a stir in the HK entertainment industry in whose eyes the contrast between her diva status in Hong Kong and a life in a small, shabby, less than sanitary house in Beijing was quite astonishing. Many from then on saw Wong as a woman who would sacrifice anything for love.<sup>54</sup>

The incident was detrimental to Faye Wong's already poor relationship with the entertainment media. In general, rather than the beautiful girl next door, Wong is enigmatic, taciturn and somewhat distant. She is reserved and notoriously difficult to interview. Whereas Teresa Teng hosted TV shows and Leslie Cheung's live shows contained dance routines and lengthy monologues, Faye Wong sings alone on stage, limiting interaction with the audience to the minimum of a few words of welcome and shaking the hands of fans in the first rows during the last song of a concert (after 1997, usually *AMONG PEOPLE* 人間, as live recordings suggest).

In the autobiographical rap in *EXIT* 出路 (1994DEC), Faye Wong sings: "I hate being a star but like to be noticed." Ironically, she performed the song at the 1994 Jade Solid Gold Songs Hong Kong 勁歌金曲香港 after receiving the award for most favored

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AGE. Wong also covered Tori Amos' *SILENT ALL THOSE YEARS AS COLD WAR* 冷戰 (1993SEPT), the Cranberries' *DREAMS* in Mandarin as *BREAK AWAY* 掙脫 (1994JUNE) and in Cantonese as *DREAM PERSON* 夢中人 (1994NOV, cf. *Chungking Express*).

<sup>53</sup> She also sang a duet with Elizabeth Fraser which came out on Cocteau Twins' *Milk & Kisses* (1996). Finally Wong included the co-written song *AMUSEMENT PARK* 娛樂場, and *NOSTALGIA* 懷念懷, a cover of *RILKEAN HEART*, on her 1997 album.

<sup>54</sup> Wikipedia 2010. Cf. Huang 2005:99-101.



*Illustration 2.7: Faye Wong singing EXIT at the 1994 Jade Solid Gold Songs Hong Kong. The lyrics read “I often offend people.”*

female pop star. Her short, fading pink hair and baggy black sweater, as well as the scarcity of her words of gratitude, further contrasted her with the Hong Kong-style glamor that dominated the event.

Whereas between 1994 and 1997 most fringe pop songs were in Cocteau Twins’ alternative rock style, in the late 1990s Wong’s music included more electronic and triphop influences, and in general sounded less alternative and more marketable. In this period Wong also recorded up-beat house, trance, Latin and bombastic rock songs.<sup>55</sup> The bombastic rock songs have appeared on almost every album since 1997 and are recognizable by Wong’s high-pitched voice over distorted guitars, heavy

drums, elaborate string sections and electronic sound effects. *HEADING FOR TUMI 開到荼靡* (1999) illustrates the aloofness of these songs:<sup>56</sup>

每只螞蟻都有眼睛鼻子  
它美不美麗  
偏差有沒有一毫釐有何關係  
每一個人傷心了就哭泣  
餓了就要吃  
相差大不過天地有何刺激

Every ant has eyes and a nose.  
Aren’t they beautiful?  
Do they ever deviate one tiny bit? Why bother?  
Every human cries when hurt,  
needs food when hungry...  
These differences aren’t earth-shattering,  
what’s the thrill?

有太多太多魔力太少道理  
太多太多遊戲只是為了好奇  
還有什麼值得歇斯底里  
對什麼東西死心塌地

There’s so much much delusion and so little sense,  
so many many games played only out of curiosity.  
Does anything still deserve hysteria?  
What’s left to put your life on the line for?

一個一個偶像都不外如此  
沉迷過的偶像一個個消失  
誰曾傷天害理誰又是上帝  
我們在等待什麼奇跡  
最后剩下自己舍不得挑剔  
最后對着自己也不大看得起

Not a single idol is an exception.  
Once-enticing idols disappear one by one.  
Those who offended divine reason are now gods.  
What miracle are we waiting for?  
After all, left alone, they can’t help nitpicking.  
After all, they don’t even like themselves very much.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. house in *CHILD 童* (1998) and *EXCEL 精彩* (1999), trance in *A BIBLE FOR TWO 兩個人的神經* (2001) and *NIGHT OUTFIT 夜妝* (2003), and Latin in *SMOKE 烟* (2003), as well as a number of remixes. Rock songs include *BORED 悶* (1997SEPT), *HEADING FOR TUMI 開到荼靡* (1999), *A HUNDRED YEARS OF LONELINESS 百年孤獨* (1999), *GOODBYE, FIREFLY 再見螢火蟲* (2000), *THE WINGS OF LIGHT 光之翼* (2001), *IDIOTS 白痴* (2001) and *TO LOVE 將愛* (2003).

<sup>56</sup> *Tumi* ‘roseleaf raspberry,’ literally: ‘bitter-edible.’ The liner notes explain it as “the last flower of the flower season.”



誰給我全世界 我都會懷疑 心花怒放 卻開到荼蘼	I doubt whoever promises me the world. Thought blossoms violently but heads for the tumi.
一個一個一個人誰比誰美麗 一個一個一個人誰比誰甜蜜 一個一個一個人誰比誰容易 又有什么了不起	One by one by one—who's the prettiest? One by one by one—who's the sweetest? One by one by one—who's the easiest? And what's so amazing about that?
每只螞蟻和誰擦身而過 都那麼整齊 有何關係 每一個人碰見所愛的人 卻心有余悸	Every ant who it brushes up against it's all sorted out —what does it matter? Every person runs into someone she loves but still fears...

C. Y. Kong's string arrangements in the bridge are compelling, and the use of a light distortion on Wong's voice in the verse, reproduced live by using a megaphone, adds to the sense of urgency. The final verse ends halfway, inviting the listener to articulate the next logical step – to ignore gossip and stop fussing over other people's private lives.

In “An Alternative Faye Wong?” 另類的王菲? (2002), Pan Wei argues that because Wong's first steps towards a more alternative sound and image resulted in media attention and record sales, the record company Cinepoly supported her move in this direction, which triggered a process that ultimately led to the low-marketable sound of *Impatience*. However, Pan also argues that even the alternative sound of *Impatience* is still highly marketable, because it is based on (1) Romanticism, namely the uncompromising pursuit of love, in both the music and accounts of Faye Wong's private life; (2) a carefree and indifferent attitude towards everything else in life; and (3) addressing the alienation of modern urbanity.

Although I agree with Pan Wei that Wong's music and image differ from what is generally understood by rock in China, I take issue with his uncritical reiteration of the rock mythology. After appealing to the rock spirit, Pan writes: “I never listened to [Cui Jian's] NOTHING TO MY NAME as a love song.” Precisely these reiterations of the rock mythology, of which Li Wan's “Seeing Through Faye Wong” 看透王菲 is another example, prevent the articulation of rock into a genre with a mainstream component.<sup>57</sup>

In conclusion, I argue that Faye Wong introduced coolness, authenticity and originality into mainstream Chinese pop music. Moreover, these elements were not co-opted completely and thus contributed to Wong's commercially successful distinctiveness. In other words, these elements suggested the viability of an alternative musical discourse. Even though Wong did not develop them into a coherent genre, she paved the way for the female singer-songwriters of the early 2000s.

<sup>57</sup> Pan 2002. Cf. Fung 2002. Li 2001:252-258.

## Singer-songwriters

Since 2000, mainstream Chinese popular music has seen a number of overlapping trends. Almost simultaneous with the appearance of boy- and girlbands such as F4, S.H.E., and Twins came the R&B of Wang Leehom, David Tao and Jay Chou. Then, after Jay Chou's Chinese Wind caught on around 2003, the first *Idols* TV shows became a huge hit. Producer Dong Yun-chang argues that around 2005 the practice of packaging models as boy- and girl bands had become too expensive. *Idols* winners (such as Chris Lee) brought a guaranteed audience, while still depending on music producers (such as Zhang Yadong) and other company personnel.

By the late 2000s the breakthrough of Taiwanese female singer-songwriters such as Cheer Chen, Deserts Chang and Joanna Wang, as well as the Taiwanese band So Dark Green, embodied a turn towards singer-songwriters 創作歌手. These singers write their own music, participate actively in the recording process and have explicit ideas about their image, freeing their record companies to focus on distribution and promotion. The trade-off is the relative slowness of singer-songwriters in publishing new material. The following paragraphs trace the history of this trend to Tanya Chua, Sandee Chan and Mavis Fan, who since the late 1990s have sought to introduce alternative, gothic and experimental sounds into the mainstream.

## Tanya Chua's Resilience

The Singaporean singer-songwriter Tanya Chua started her career with the English-language albums *Bored* (1997) and *Luck* (1999), later followed by *Jupiter* (2002). In 1999 she recorded her first Mandarin album, *Tanya* 蔡健雅, which contains both covers and Chinese versions of her English songs with lyrics by Taiwanese lyricists. The chorus of the main promotional song SO BORING 好無聊, for instance, changed that of YOU SORRY ASS! (1997) into:

好無聊 真的好無聊	So boring, so very boring.
我想面子沒有愛重要	I'd think love's more important than saving face.
好無聊 你好無聊	So boring, you are so very boring,
假裝一切都很好	pretending everything is ok.

YOU SORRY ASS! is a funny and upbeat break-up song that asserts Chua's resilience. BORING adds a dread of pretense, as it values sincerity over saving face, although she implies that she herself is also pretending by singing "I'm so very boring" in the final chorus. The song thus treats the unresolved conflict between Chinese notions of honor and face, and Western rock-related notions of authenticity. In ALL I NEEDED (2002), resilience lies in the contrast between the pathetic lyrics of unrequited love and the playful guitar picking, cheerful offbeat rhythm and vocal melody that unchangingly starts each phrase on a high note. *Faye Wong* 王菲 (2001) includes an adaptation of ALL I NEEDED as WAIT 等等, and an

adaptation of IT'S YOUR CHANCE (2001) AS WRONG NUMBER, both with new lyrics by Lam Chik that present Wong as teasing and self-assured rather than abandoned.

In the first few years of her career Chua wore jeans and usually presented herself as a folk singer. Later she mainly wore unobtrusive gray and black. In the article "Don't Misunderstand My Cool" 別誤解我的酷, she explains: "In the past I resisted packaging. I thought I was a singer-songwriter who relied on her music and thus didn't need to package herself. Now I have matured, and have started to understand how to enjoy being a woman."<sup>58</sup>

This shift in image relates to Chua's fluctuating success. Whereas her debut albums were well received, Universal decided to drop her in 2001. Chua made a comeback with *Stranger* 陌生人 (2003), which was successful also because the marketing of her new company, Warner, stressed her femininity rather than her independence. In this period her sound was dominated by folk-style ballads that asserted modern woman's ability to survive break-ups.

In 2006, however, Chua's contract with Warner ended and she continued with the independent company Asia Muse, doing all the production herself. In 2008, with her aptly titled album *Goodbye & Hello* (2007), she managed to land her second Taiwanese Golden Melody award for best Mandarin female singer. She had first won it in 2006 with *T-Time* (2006).



Illustration 2.8: Tanya Chua on the cover of her 2007 album *Goodbye & Hello*.

## Sandee Chan's Non-Committalness

愛上美麗的女生	噓！別說話	Falling for a beautiful girl.	Shhh! Don't speak.
希望美麗的女生	帶我回家	Hoping that a beautiful girl	will take me home.

Sandee Chan songs such as BEAUTIFUL GIRL 美麗的女生 (1999) explicitly appeal to lesbians. Or so it seems. In "The Perfect Lie: Sandee Chan and Lesbian Representability in Mandarin Pop Music" (2003), Fran Martin quotes a self-identifying lesbian Sandee Chan fan:

[BEAUTIFUL GIRL] seems to be the projection of masculine desire for a woman. Perhaps because I've always heard Sandee's lyrics from a very female, slightly ironic perspective, I haven't interpreted them in a *nü tongzhi* [lesbian] way.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Zhang 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Martin 2003: 274.

Martin argues that Chan is popular among Taiwanese lesbians because of her reticence 含蓄, referring to the “shhh” in the lyrics above and the “don’t ask, don’t tell” attitude among Chinese communities. However, BEAUTIFUL GIRL and Chan’s music in general sound upbeat and celebratory rather than reticent or implicit. Therefore it would seem that Chan’s appeal lies foremost in remaining non-committal, in considering various possibilities while keeping her distance through irony and pluralism. In terms of genre this means that Chan criticizes the conservatism and predictability of the pop industry, while equally defying being restricted by other genre discourses, most notably the rock mythology.

Chan has an ambiguous relation with pop stardom. After composing the song PERFUME 香水 for Nicholas Tse in 2001, she challenged Faye Wong’s ex-boyfriend in the ironic song NICHOLAS 尼可拉斯 (2004) to change his public ‘bad boy’ persona. Additionally, Chan has worked with pop stars such as Sammy Cheng and Jolin Tsai, while remaining independent herself – for instance, with the band Gold-Worshipping Girls.<sup>60</sup>

就躺在澡盆里面唱歌	Singing as I’m lying in the bathtub,
就躺在澡盆里面唱歌	singing as I’m lying in the bathtub,
虽然唱得很烂	although I sing very badly,
但是要唱得很大声	I have to sing very loud,
啦啦啦. . .	lalala...
要唱成一个人生歌王	I’ll sing myself into a king of songs about life!

The “lalala...” of Gold-Worshipping Girls’ KING OF SONGS ABOUT LIFE 人生歌王 (2004) sounds surprisingly joyful and relaxed compared to the ironic lyrics. To be sure, Sandee Chan acknowledges rock’s depth of authenticity, but rather opts for diversity and flexibility:

I think it is easy to make genre works 類型化的東西, for instance if you make hip-hop, dance music or ballads 芭樂歌 all the time, or if you make rock music all the time, even if you perform 做 Sandee Chan all the time... none of that is very difficult. But if you can perform different things aimed at different people, now that, to me, is difficult. ... pop music demands the formation of genre and labels 標籤化 ... As soon as you change genre you exceed its expectation, and your music becomes difficult to classify. And when it defies classification, it becomes very difficult to gain recognition. I know this, but I can’t control myself. ... Genre and label formation and individualization, all of that restricts mature development. ... So, I will pursue more interesting, more different things all the time. This way I accumulate many things, not only music but also things about life and also from a deeper layer, ideologies.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Consisting of Cola King and Veronica Lee. Lee is one of the founding members of the Hong Kong indie label People Mountain People Sea 人山人海.

<sup>61</sup> Chan 2008.



*Illustration 2.9: Sandee Chan on a promotional picture accompanying her 2008 album What If It Matters.*

Sandee Chan produced this video interview five days before the release of the album *What If It Matters* 如果有一件事是重要的 (2008) on her indie company Dollar. In the interview she continues to explain how she developed from minimalism with folk influences in 1994 to alternative rock, to more straightforward rock, to incorporating electronic elements (since 2000) and later also elements of classical music. Firstly, the interview shows the importance of genre to Chan. Secondly, it shows how she develops an esthetics of layering and sampling.

The chorus of *NICHOLAS* is backed by chain-saw sounds, and *BEAUTIFUL GIRL* also contains surprising samples. 1' 21 into the upbeat rock song there is a click as if a cassette deck is being started, and after this a low male voice says, out of

nowhere: “Rock.” In later albums, the layer of idiosyncratic samples becomes increasingly unrelated to the poppy vocal melodies and rock arrangements. The opening song of *What If It Matters*, *TRISTESSE* 離別曲 (2008), starts with a legato accompaniment based on Frédéric Chopin’s *ÉTUDE OP. 10 NO. 3*, interspersed with electronically generated extended glissandi – shooting stars (for *TRISTESSE* Chan worked with Annie, a classically educated Taiwanese DJ living in the USA). The sentences of the verse create a feeling of ostinato that contrasts well with the accompaniment. The song’s lyrics explicitly comment on genre confusion:

最美的時光 聽搖滾樂  
你的臉輕輕貼着我心臟  
不慌不忙  
青春的低頻將延續播放  
越叛逆越顯感傷  
你送了花 粉紅的花  
我的笑聲無邪的不像話  
再壞的傷  
不過就是七月里的陽光燦爛啊  
夏天偷偷刺了一道吻痕在肩膀

那么多愛 那么多幸福  
那樣的感覺變成一段 流行的歌  
最美的時光 跳舞音樂

The best of times, listening to rock,  
your face lightly clings to my heart.  
We are unhurried.  
Youth’s shockwaves still come forth,  
youth rebellion revealing pain.  
You give me flowers, pink flowers.  
My laughter sounds cherubic and out of place.  
The wound deepens.  
Yet the July sun is so splendid.  
Summer has secretly pierced a trail of kisses on my  
shoulder,  
so much love so much happiness.  
All that emotion becomes popular song,  
the best of times, dance music,

震動愛人不安分的心臟  
 清秀長發  
 年輕越搖擺越無限延長  
 不思議 如此閃亮  
 我卸了妝 粉紅的妝  
 曾經是害羞情侶的模樣  
 再壞的傷  
 不過就是你和我最好的照片  
 時間偏偏故意弄臟你我的臉龐

那么多愛 那么多幸福  
 那樣的感覺變成一般輕浮哼唱  
 蕭邦最恨 流行的歌

jolts the restless lover's heart.  
 Comely long hair,  
 youth swaggers into infinity,  
 unfathomable this beaming.  
 I remove my make-up, pink make-up,  
 the image of one-time shy lovers.  
 The wound deepens.  
 Yet it is the best picture of you and me.  
 Time gradually and purposefully dirties both our  
 faces.  
 So much love, so much happiness,  
 all that emotion becomes a trivial croon.  
 Chopin hated popular songs most of all.

Chan recorded *TRISTESSE* in duet with Hebe Tian, a member of the Taiwanese girlband S.H.E. This stresses its theme of the passage of time, because S.H.E. was extremely popular with high school students around 2005. *What If It Matters* won Chan the Golden Song Award for best female singer in 2009, a year after Tanya Chua.

### The Expression of Mavis Fan Herself

The story of Mavis Fan is one of decreasing marketability. In 1995 Mavis Fan gained instant fame as a child star with her 'little witch' 小魔女 series and the singing of cartoon tunes, often adapted from Japan. Songs such as *HEALTH SONG* 健康歌 (1996) addressed a gap in the market. However, when Fan grew up she wanted to make different music, which resulted in the end of her contract with Linfair Records and later caused her to suffer depression. In the late 1990s, Fan had a few karaoke hits as a pop singer but soon switched to jazz and electronic music.<sup>62</sup> In 2001, she explained:

What I want to do most of all is to make music and produce albums according to genres 音樂類型. That's because I like change and am very versatile. I can simultaneously like



Illustration 2.10: Mavis Fan on the cover of her 1997 album *Breathe Out and Get Ready* 稍息立正站好, containing *HEALTH SONG*.

<sup>62</sup> Fan's successful ballads include *SNOWMAN* 雪人 (1996), *DARLING* (1998) and *DISAPPEAR* 消失 (1998). In 2001 she recorded the jazz album *Actress at the End of the World* 絕世名伶 (Cinepoly). Despite favorable reviews, she moved on to experimental electronic music on *Prologue* 序 (Maya Music, with Happiness Wealth Longevity 福祿壽) in 2003 and then recorded the pop album *Is There Any Other Way* 還有別的辦法嗎 (2004, Willin), containing mostly sweet love songs, interlaced with jazz.



electronic music and rock music. While making jazz, I want to be a punk too. If possible I want to make a whole jazz album, then a whole electro album... Unfortunately the Taiwanese market won't accept it.<sup>63</sup>

After working with professional specialists from different genres and publishing her previous three studio albums with different and increasingly indie record companies, Fan started her own label, Vegetarian Fish, in 2006, and the rock band 100% in 2007. Sales figures seem to have become less important to her than self-expression, and presumably they have dwindled.



Illustration 2.11: Mavis Fan and her band 100% on the cover of their 2009 album *Innocent*.

*Breakthrough* 突破 (2007) revolves around Fan's coming into her own. The push for individualism is clearest on *THAT KIND OF GIRL* 那種女孩, where each sentence in the verse starts with "I" and the chorus ends on a repeated "be yourself" 做自己. *WHO CARES WHAT MUSIC IT IS* 管它甚麼音樂, from the ensuing *Innocent* 赤子 (2009), addresses genre explicitly. Every phrase of its shouted verses is answered by heavily distorted guitar in a blues structure as the drums pump a disco beat. The chorus:

管他什麼音樂	Who cares what music it is?
聽了就有蠢蠢欲動的感覺	Hearing it makes you want to wriggle!
管他什麼音樂	Who cares what music it is?
每天都是情人節聖誕節	Every day is Valentine's, Christmas,
歡呼的慶典	a cheerful celebration!

Faye Wong's introduction of coolness was one of the sources that inspired and enabled the careers of Tanya Chua, Sandee Chan and Mavis Fan. These singer-songwriters are aware of their volatile marketability and frequently comment on their genre position in music, lyrics and interviews. Although they have affinities with folk rock and they play in bands, neither Chua, Chan nor Fan defines herself as belonging to any genre. Additionally, connections between these singers have not yet been made explicit, and even the use of labels such as '(female) singer-songwriter' have remained limited. In general, these singers present genre as combinable and transformable at will, rather than as keys to communities to commit to and define yourself by. More recently, a younger generation of Taiwanese female singer-songwriters and bands such as Cheer Chen, Deserts Chang, Joanna Wang and Tizzy Bac have exhibited a similar attitude towards genre, albeit it with a more youthful, fragile and marketable sound and femininity. Rather than showing that

<sup>63</sup> Jia 2001:17.

mainstream music can only be co-optive, these examples suggest that Mandarin pop singers generate opportunities for genre articulation, but may not seek to develop them.

## §4 (New) Folk

Like rock and pop, folk seems to be a straightforward and established genre. In “Use and Ownership: Folk Music in the People’s Republic of China,” Helen Rees writes:

Specifically excluded here from definitions as “folk music” are products of the commercial, mediated popular music industry, along with recently developed genres—such as the modern Chinese orchestra—that borrow heavily from European art music and self-consciously seek to create a modern, urban, internationally oriented aesthetic.<sup>64</sup>

In this section I am interested in the folk music Rees excludes, and in investigating that class-based definition of folk music as ‘music from the peasantry’ which is commonplace in the West and which underlies Rees’ exclusion. A contrasting definition of folk or *minjian yinyue* 民間音樂, ‘music [from] among the People,’ posits it as the music of the Chinese nation. This approach would favor linguistic, geographical and ethnic boundaries over class divisions. It would also present popular music as modern folk.<sup>65</sup>

Sociologist Zeng Suijin develops this argument in *Chinese Mass Music: Mass Music Culture’s Connection to and Dissemination in Social History* 中國大眾音樂: 大眾音樂文化的社會歷史連接與傳播 (2003). Zeng’s elaborate typology centers upon mass music, which according to him is simultaneously the majority of Chinese music in any given period, the source of all creativity, and the true bearer of Chineseness (see Illustration 2.12).<sup>66</sup> Additionally, Zeng attributes innovation to the masses rather than to literati or composers.<sup>67</sup>

Folk’s ‘from among the People’ easily becomes ‘of the People.’ The definition of *min’ge* 民歌 – ‘folksong, People’s song’ – is contested precisely because it embodies a powerful claim to represent *renmin* 人民, ‘the People,’ as in the People’s Republic of China.<sup>68</sup> How do potential genres such as official folk, Campus Song and urban folk articulate their connection to the People? How does this affect their genre identity?

## Official Folk

Since 1984, the biannual CCTV Young Singers Television Contest has been a major stage for official vocal music in the PRC. Since 1986 the show has distinguished categories according to three main singing styles: bel canto 美歌, folk 民族 and officially-

<sup>64</sup> Rees 2009:42-43.

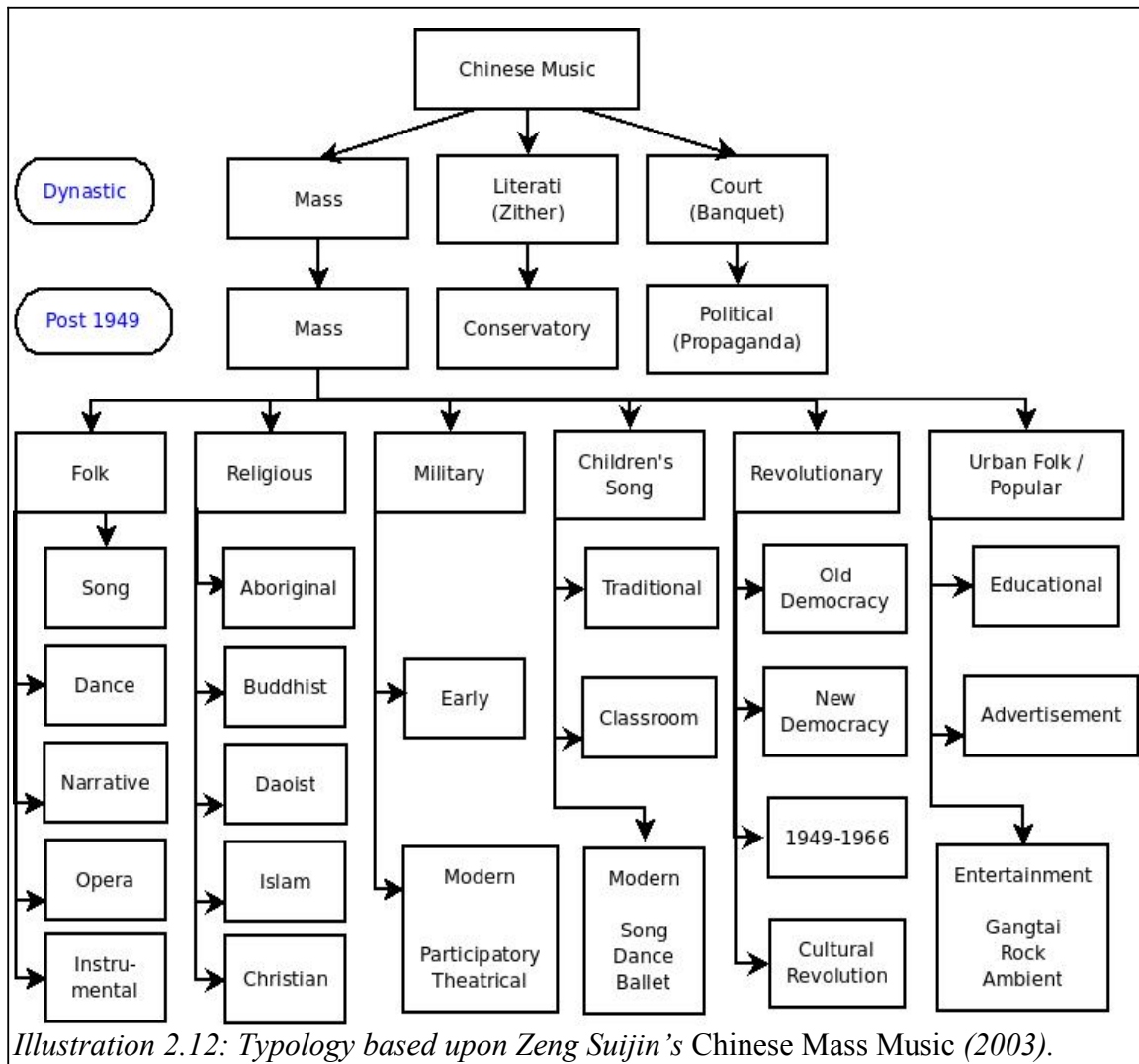
<sup>65</sup> Jin 2002:12-13.

<sup>66</sup> Zeng 2003:17-20.

<sup>67</sup> Zeng 2003:41

<sup>68</sup> See Hockx 1999, Chow 1998:113-132, Baranovitch 2003:67.





sanctioned popular. In contrast to TV shows derived from the *Idols* format, such as *Super Girl* (2004), the Young Singers Contest makes categorical distinctions between professional and non-professional singers. Before looking at important changes that were made to the format in 2006, I will provide a short history of the folk singing style.

### The Main Melody

In the 1950s, newly established folk programs at PRC conservatories provided momentum for the professionalization of a national folk singing style. The 1958 'battle of the native and the foreign' 土洋之爭 marked a watershed that established folk singing as an alternative for bel canto in official events and state-run media. In such events, educated folk singers such as the Tibetan Tseten Dolma embody the nation, propagating what is called 'the main melody' 主旋律. Baranovitch writes:

Official pop songs ... are usually sung either in Chinese artistic folk singing style (*minzu/min'ge changfa*) or in Western bel canto style (*meisheng changfa*). These

two orthodox styles of singing require formal training and immediately invoke the official [C]ommunist aesthetics of professionalism, as well as the seriousness and the sense of formality and authority that are inseparable from much of official culture on the mainland ... During the performance of official songs, the singers ... are denied individuality and transformed into the voice of a force bigger than themselves or the viewer/listener, a force that represents thousands of years of history and millions upon millions upon millions of people.<sup>69</sup>

Jin Tielin, professor at and since 1996 president of the China Conservatory, taught five out of the first seven best folk singers of the Young Singers Contest, including Peng Liyuan. Peng won a non-professional award in 1984, was the first to win the professional award in the folk singing style two years later, and is the wife of Xi Jinping, the current vice-president of the PRC (2010). Jin also taught Li Guyi, who later switched to a more breathy pop voice and became the most important PRC pop star of the 1980s, and Song Zuying, who despite the fact that she came only third in the Young Singers Contest 1990, in that year made her first of 19 appearances on the CCTV Chinese New Year Gala up to 2010.<sup>70</sup> The opening song of the 4<sup>th</sup> Ethnic Minority Movement Conference 中國少數民族運動會, LOVE OUR CHINA 愛我中華 (1991), sung by Song Zuying, is representative of official folk's stress on the unity of the nation in lyrics, music and imagery:<sup>71</sup>

五十六個民族,五十六枝花  
五十六族兄弟姐妹是一家  
五十六種語言匯成一句話  
愛我中華,愛我中華,愛我中華

Fifty-six nationalities, fifty-six flowers,  
fifty-six nations' brothers and sisters are one family,  
fifty-six languages blend into one sentence:  
Love our China! Love our China! Love our China!

In her 1995 hit SPICE GIRL 辣妹子, Song articulates her Hmong ethnicity more explicitly, partly by reiterating the Han Chinese stereotype of ethnic minorities as sexually less inhibited. However, the singing style, the orchestration and the borrowings of not one but various Chinese folk traditions in the composed song secure a sense of the unified nation. In subsequent years Song Zuying was rumored to have had an affair with Jiang Zemin, the president of the PRC between 1993 and 2003. Song was nominated for a Grammy Award (2006), held concerts at prestigious venues in Sydney (2002), Vienna (2003) and Washington (2006), and



*Illustration 2.13: Song Zuying and Jay Chou at the CCTV Chinese New Year Gala 2009.*

<sup>69</sup> Baranovitch 2003: 205-206.

<sup>70</sup> On Li Guyi, Cf. Baranovitch 2003: 15-16.

<sup>71</sup> The song was originally written for Wei Wei, who had developed from official folk into pop music and apparently deemed it too ethnic.

performed with the internationally renowned tenor Plácido Domingo at the closing ceremony of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. She also performed with the Taiwanese pop star Jay Chou at the CCTV Chinese New Year Gala in 2009.

Referring to the successes of Song Zuying and other pupils, a 2005 lecture by Jin Tielin stressed the importance of the folk singing style in presenting China both internally and to the outside world. To Jin, official folk is the inevitable and scientific pinnacle of all Chinese folk musics, regardless of their huge differences:

Vocal forms all over the country are strong in local flavor. However, they develop into national vocal music. That is why national vocal music in effect also represents the nation's fifty-six minorities. It is the native sound of the Chinese 中華 peoples.

...

Vocal training goes in three stages: the natural stage, the unnatural stage and the scientific natural stage. I aim at the scientific natural stage. The natural stage is prior to proper study; it's singing what one feels like. The unnatural stage is when through training the natural balance of the original vocal demeanor is broken; it's searching for methods, a new balance. In the scientific natural stage this method is found, and can be employed smoothly to the point where there no longer is any method.<sup>72</sup>

### Original Ecology Folksong

In recent years, scholars in the PRC have questioned this approach. For instance, the music critic Zhang Ping writes that:

Vocal training becomes a standardized production line. Singers become standardized products that the 'education industry' churns out indiscriminately. 'The art of singing' almost becomes 'the technique of singing.'<sup>73</sup>

The influential scholar Tian Qing portrays official folk as (1) devised by academics on the basis of Western esthetics and techniques; (2) claiming a scientific basis while (a) scientific standardization is both opposed to art and (b) the actual teaching, evaluation and esthetics are subjective rather than objective; (3) a movement that was successful in catering to the needs of urbanites in the 1950s to 1990s, but that is out of touch with the increased plurality of China in the 2000s, both in terms of musical style and lyrical content.<sup>74</sup>

The Young Singers Contest provides a focal point for this discussion. On the advice of Tian Qing, in 2006 the contest abolished the distinction between professional and

<sup>72</sup> Jin 2005.

<sup>73</sup> Zhang 2008a:142, Cf. 104-113 and Guo 2007:180.

<sup>74</sup> Tian 2004:10.

un-professional singers, replacing the category ‘officially-sanctioned popular’ 通俗 with simply ‘popular’ 流行 and, most importantly, adding the category *yuanshengtai* 原生态, ‘original ecology, unspoiled,’ for folksongs outside the official folk style.<sup>75</sup> These changes were informed by serious challenges in market share by TV programs in the *Idols* format, but also by the renewed prestige of Chinese folk traditions following the international success of Tan Dun’s compositions and UNESCO’s proclamation of four PRC folk music traditions as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.<sup>76</sup>

Original Ecology challenges the authority of the official folk style, and especially its claim to represent all of China’s vocal music. Critics responded to this challenge by arguing that Original Ecology should be a subcategory of (official) folk, that its performances cannot be compared and judged because they are too diverse and lack a scientific basis, and finally that staging Original Ecology performances compromises its naturalness and innocence.<sup>77</sup> Tian Qing defended the Young Singers Contest by arguing that judging art in all four categories is impossible yet entertaining, and that the television show helps to boost the prestige of local traditions that are rapidly dying out because of modernization by national (folk) and international (pop) musics.

Whereas in the other categories individual performers in suits, evening dresses and military uniforms sing to prerecorded music, Original Ecology singers perform in groups, dress in ethnic costumes and play instruments. It is a category for China’s ‘fifty-six ethnic minorities’ to showcase China’s musical, sartorial and linguistic wealth, as only the Original Ecology performances are in Chinese dialects and languages other than Mandarin (with Mandarin subtitles). At the same time the show is educational, because it frames performances in the context of an exam and evaluation by specialists. Yet the format’s attempt to establish a shared Chinese folk music is undermined by the inability of the contestants to speak Mandarin and to answer the exam questions correctly. In the 2008 Young Singers Contest, audience complaints led to a discussion of the embarrassingly low level of the multiple-choice questions. An expert in a military outfit explained that even though the singers were very knowledgeable in their own traditions but less so in others, the questions “are useful because we are a multi-ethnic nation-state.”

Whereas the bel canto voice of Western-style Art Music and the personal, breathy voice of popular music are discernible categories and perhaps even genres, Original Ecology is too diverse to be a genre. By contrast, what I have called ‘official folk’ does denote a recognizable and coherent music tradition. However, it claims to represent the People as a whole, and refuses to perceive itself as one genre among many. This dilemma also relates to the unresolved tension in official folk between elitist Western-style Art Music and the vulgarity of Songs for the Masses.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> *Sheng* 生 is an important term in Chapter 5. The translation is by Helen Rees (Rees 2009:48, 61).

<sup>76</sup> Kun Qu Opera in 2001, The Guqin and its Music in 2003, The Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang and Urtiin Duu – Traditional Folk Long Song in 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Li 2006; 2008.

<sup>78</sup> On the latter see Wong 1979.

## Campus Song

In the seminal *Who's Over There Singing Their Own Songs* 誰在那邊唱自己的歌, Chang Jian-wei argues that the Taiwanese modern folksong movement consists of three partly overlapping moments. Everything started with highbrow Chinese modern folksong 中國現代民歌, which inspired the radical leftist Summer Wave 夏潮 group, which in turn enabled commercial Campus Song:

Although they equally want to find alternative “songs of our own” outside of Western popularized music, Mandarin popular music and art songs, the difference in constituencies makes them develop structures that are relatively different, including in musical forms, discursive strategies, dissemination networks and social capital.<sup>79</sup>

Inspired by the Beat generation and Bob Dylan, influential essayist and poet Yu Guangzhong and composer Yang Xian introduced the concept of the ‘folk singer’ to Taiwan around 1975. Unlike the pop singer, the folk singer sings self-composed poetry to self-composed music. Debates in this period center on modern folk’s relation to anonymous, ancient and communal traditional songs.<sup>80</sup>

In 1977 the Summer Wave group experimented with informal outdoor concerts on the campus grounds of Tamkang University. Gradually, the original radicalism of anti-Western imperialism and Marxism gave way to a more moderate ideology of self-expression and an esthetics that valued being unglamorous.

By the late 1970s record companies had organized nation-wide singing contests



Illustration 2.14: Cover of the Campus Song compilation album Golden Rhyme Award Ten 金韻獎 (1982, Rock Records).

for students, resulting in profitable samplers, and around 1979 they signed Campus singers such as Jonathan Lee, Tsai Chin, Su Lai and Chyi Yu. Hou Te-Chien’s DESCENDANTS OF THE DRAGON (see Chapter 1) became a huge hit. The position of the political and cultural elite was that folksong should remain pure and untainted by commerce, and its lyrics should not be too dreamy and escapist. The head of the Government Information Office, James Soong, composed new lyrics for DESCENDANTS OF THE DRAGON that better suited the state of war Taiwan was still offi-

<sup>79</sup> Chang 2003:130.

<sup>80</sup> Chang 2003:67, 78-79, 87. Cf. Chang 2003:104-108. On the first experiments with outdoor concerts, see Chang 2003:127-129.

cially in. Whereas the elitist modern folk movement valued social responsibility and political fiat, and the Summer Wave group distrusted commerce, Campus singers felt that these demands restricted their art as well as their livelihood.

Chang explains how commercial success forced a split between genre purists and opportunists.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the marketing of the samplers as “the cry from the heart of this generation of young people” 這一代年輕人的心聲 ignored genre identity, and the careers of the Campus singers illustrate the co-optation of the folksong movement by star-driven pop music. Ex-Campus singer Jonathan Lee helped transform *Rock Records* 滾石唱片 from a magazine on Anglo-American popular music into one of the most influential record companies in the Chinese-language world, and became a star-making producer and songwriter in the process.<sup>82</sup> Although biographies have consistently portrayed Tsai Chin as an uncomplicated folk singer, she soon came to rival Teresa Teng in popularity and has published over 53 studio, live and best-of albums.<sup>83</sup>

Rather than focusing on these commercially successful artists, Chang Jian-wei laments the inability of modern folk and Campus Song to become articulate:

Modern folk was gradually curbed from a musical genre 音樂類型 into one of the many musical forms or marketing elements that record companies may employ. Moreover, it has been relegated to being a mere footnote to the individual character or specialness of singers.<sup>84</sup>

Thus Chang Jian-wei joins Ma Shifan and other Taiwanese intellectuals in eulogizing the early folksong movement as an authentic alternative to mainstream pop, much along the lines of the rock mythology.<sup>85</sup> By contrast, the anonymous author of *Distant Homesickness* 遙遠的鄉愁 shows how Campus Song writers, producers and managers became acquainted with or discovered pop stars such as Teresa Teng, Su Rui and Delphine Tsai and introduced to 1980s mainstream pop music, among other things, a renewed interest in nostalgia.

## Urban Folk

According to Jin Zhaojun, “Every nation 民族 has its own folk music, but the popular music we hear today has a clear origin: America.”<sup>86</sup> Other music critics also stress the connection between acoustic guitar music and the Western-influenced modernity of

<sup>81</sup> Chang 2003:198-201.

<sup>82</sup> On Lee’s importance as a songwriter, see Moskowitz 2010:73.

<sup>83</sup> Revisiting Route 61 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Chang 2003:213. Cf Chang 2003:187.

<sup>85</sup> Ma 2006. Chang’s narrative ends in 1982, after which he only discusses the politically interesting cases of Lo Dayou in the 1980s and the protest folk band Work Exchange in the 2000s. Cf. Revisiting Route 61 2007:203 (on fading folk and pop and Delphine Tsai), 183 (on a songwriter of Teresa Teng).

<sup>86</sup> Jin 2002:12-13.

China's east-coast metropolises. For instance, Yan Jun's "The Lamp of the Folktune" 民謠之燈 (2008) ends with:

Only in the city can there be true folktunes, because the city takes away our heart, producing distance and rendering the memories of home indistinct. Without distance, there can be no folktunes. ... The lamp always burns to transcend time and space.<sup>87</sup>

By contrast, when asked about recent Chinese folktune artists such as Zhou Yunpeng, Wang Xiaofeng replied:

Because there are no modern folktunes in China, questions concerning China's folktunes are false. Mostly, mainland Chinese folktunes are discussed on a level of commerce and not on that of music. All concepts used to define them are merely imported goods. These concepts lack content. I base myself on the idea that folktunes are rooted in reality 現實 and tradition, while I haven't seen these two aspects in China's so-called folktunes.<sup>88</sup>

Wang has a point when he argues that the terms 'urban folk' and 'Campus Song' were imported to the PRC from Taiwan and other places by record companies in order to package artists.<sup>89</sup> Rather than discrediting these efforts and musicians, below I will survey four strategies for claiming folk authenticity: idyllic perfection, bohemianism, documenting, and root-seeking. The four strategies highlight, respectively, (the projections of) the urban middle-class; (the autonomy of) the artist/artwork; contemporary social reality; and tradition. Although as concepts of folk authenticity they may conflict, in practice success lies in negotiating and mitigating any conflicts, rather than in choosing one strategy at the expense of the other three. Next to showing that folktunes are hardly a coherent genre, this is an attempt to map folktunes' diverse strategies in giving voice to the People.

### Idyllic Perfection

If you really write songs for the ordinary people but they don't like them, now that's a surprise.<sup>90</sup>

Two years before making this remark in an interview, Wang Xiaofeng wrote a short celebratory piece about the folk singer Hong Qi. The article praised Hong's debut album *Red*

<sup>87</sup> Yan 2008a. I translate *min'ge* 民歌 as *folksong* and *minyao* 民謠 as *folktune*. Yan Jun defines 'folksong' as traditional and 'folktune' as modern, but both terms have traditional roots and are used interchangeably today. Because official pop is labeled 'folksong,' in the PRC 'folktune' has a more colloquial and less official feel.

<sup>88</sup> Anonymous 2007. Cf. Wang's polemic with Zhang Xiaozhou over Wang Lei's album *Belleville* 美麗城.

<sup>89</sup> Li 2006a.

<sup>90</sup> Anonymous 2007.

*Snow Lotus* 紅雪蓮 (2005) as addressing what “is most lacking in the pop music of this era,” namely true emotions of the People, and it expressed appreciation of the transformation of Hong Qi’s image from a poet appealing to intellectuals in 1994 to that of a lower-class itinerant singer ten years later.<sup>91</sup> Hong Qi elaborated on this latter point when he was asked whether he was just exploiting folklore, or actually giving the lower classes a voice:

There’s no question about representing or not, because I myself belong to the grassroots class. ... Because I express a personal experience and because I have been in the living and cultural conditions of the lower class for a long time, therefore, when I express and narrate my own personal experience, I in fact simultaneously express and narrate the experience of many others.<sup>92</sup>

Hong’s remarks stand out because of their pretentiousness in claiming to speak for many, rather than portraying a single, particular experience. Also Hong background as a Uyghur raised by Han Chinese parents informs his efforts to bring various peoples together, for instance through his yearly memorial concerts for Wang Luobin, a Han Chinese folksong collector of dubious standards. Wang Luobin felt that the Uyghur folk songs he collected, edited and made famous since the 1930s were his property, and accused Lo Ta-yu of copyright infringement when he reused *YOUTH DANCE* 青春舞曲 (1983).<sup>93</sup>

Secondly, to Hong Qi, folk music is the music of lower classes in both the city and the countryside. He elaborates this when defining his New Folksong movement:

The New Folksong movement is defined by (1) being of the people 民間性, original and modern; (2) continuing, destroying, rebuilding and innovating; (3) being at ease, spontaneous, oneself and free. ... Another main point is that the New Folksong movement seeks poetic delivery and respects the beauty of language itself. Creatively, it emphasizes the relation between words and sounds and the beauty of rhyme. Spiritually, it advocates the openness of souls, pursues a healthy and optimistic lifestyle and rejects the negative and dispirited.<sup>94</sup>

To Hong Qi and many other singers, ‘urban’ and ‘folk’ are not mutually exclusive, and neither are ‘new’ and ‘folk.’<sup>95</sup> The main challenge to folk singers such as Hong Qi is not the politics of city-dwellers claiming to represent the countryside, but the problem of articulating a mainstream Chinese alternative to ‘Westernized pop.’ Hong Qi:

<sup>91</sup> Wang 2005.

<sup>92</sup> Guo 2007a: 182.

<sup>93</sup> Harris 2005. Cf. Chapter 5.

<sup>94</sup> Chen 2008.

<sup>95</sup> Baranovitch 2003:162-172.



I feel extremely shocked by descriptions of myself and other folktune singers as small-groupish 小眾. I want my songtunes 歌謠 to be heard by more people, to be popular on a large scale. But like so many other folktune singers who currently have a following, I lack works with a mass appeal.<sup>96</sup>

Successful singers such as Ai Jing and Dolan seamlessly blend folk, mass and pop music. Urban folk singer Ai Jing's signature song MY 1997 voices the aspiration of the Chinese People as a whole to travel to Hong Kong after the handover. Dolan's huge hit *The First Snowfall of 2002* 二零零二年第一場雪 (2002), combines nostalgia for the community feeling and mass music of the Mao Zedong era with the exoticism of Xinjiang folk traditions – the pseudonym 'Dolan' being a generic name for itinerant singers in China's outer Western regions.

Hong Qi, Ai Jing, Dolan and other folk singers with pop aspirations typically favor idyllic perfectionism. They present the untainted 'true, good and beautiful' 真善美 as eternally unattainable: it is nostalgically situated in the past, exotically in another culture, and/or erotically in an unavailable lover.<sup>97</sup> To varying degrees, this perfectionism is audible in the production of the studio albums of Chet Lam in Hong Kong and those of Pu Su, Wang Juan, Zhou Yunpeng, Wan Xiaoli and Zhu Fangqiong in Beijing, all of which stress slick perfection rather than the rough authenticity that is generally associated with folk.

## Bohemianism

According to Jeroen de Kloet, "what sets [PRC folk-rock singers] apart is not only their refusal to be glamorised, but also and mostly the importance attached to writing one's own songs and lyrics."<sup>98</sup> In "Avant-Garde, Cutesiness and New Folksong Together in the Trenches: The Year 2007 in Chinese Folktunes" 同一戰壕里的先鋒，小可愛與新民歌：中國民謠的二〇〇七年, the music critic Li Wan similarly stresses originality, and moreover compares trends in folktunes to literary genres.<sup>99</sup> The connections between a number of folk artists and poetry and avant-garde go beyond shared limited marketability to include explicit cross-references, the glorification of perseverance at the margins of society, and a knack for experiment.

In the 1970s, 'rusticated youths' 知識青年, urban youths who had heeded Mao Zedong's call to learn from the peasants, put poetry to music. These songs are among the earlier examples in the PRC of a long tradition of folk renditions of poems and the treatment of folk lyrics as poetry. Wan Xiaoli's adaptations of poems by Li Yawei and Gu Cheng, and the references on Zhou Yunpeng's album *Chinese Children* 中國孩子 (2007)

<sup>96</sup> Chen 2008.

<sup>97</sup> Li 2008a:49. Cf. Zhang 2007: 22-29. On nostalgia Cf. De Kloet 2010:79-81.

<sup>98</sup> De Kloet 2010:76

<sup>99</sup> Li 2008a:55-56.

to Allen Ginsberg and Lu Xun, are examples from the 2000s. In the 1990s, Zhang Chu gained success among students with his innocent demeanor, balladry and poetry.

Like that of most folk singers in the PRC, Zhang's music presents less the nation or tradition than an authentic, personal reaction to China's sweeping modernization and urbanization, as evidenced in album titles such as *To Be Lonely Is a Shame* 孤獨的人是可恥的 (1994) and *Factory for Building Airplanes* 造飛機的工廠 (1998). From THE SELF-KNOWLEDGE OF TEMPERATURE 冷暖自知:

走出城市 空空蕩蕩  
大路朝天 沒有翅膀  
眼裡沒誰 一片光亮  
雙腿夾著靈魂 趕路匆忙

Leaving the city empty and deserted,  
an avenue towards heaven without wings.  
No one in sight, vast sunlight,  
soul clamped between my legs, quickly moving ahead.

...

我沒法再像個農民那樣善良  
只是麥子還在對著太陽憤怒生長  
在沒有方向的風中開始跳舞吧  
或者繫緊鞋帶聽遠處歌唱

I can no longer be as kind as a farmer.  
It's just that wheat still grows forcefully towards the sun.  
In this directionless wind, let's start dancing  
or while fastening shoelaces listen to faraway singing.

THE SELF-KNOWLEDGE OF TEMPERATURE refers to the poetry of Yi Sha and Haizi, and in general Zhang Chu's lyrics embed pastoral longing in a decidedly urban, modern and perhaps even elitist perspective.<sup>100</sup> Even when Zhang devotes a song to blessing "workers, farmers, petite bourgeoisie, girls and police officers" (namely BLESS THE PEOPLE THAT HAVE FINISHED EATING 上蒼保佑吃完了飯的人民), or when he describes lower-class urbanites such as MISS ZHAO 趙小姐 and OLD ZHANG 老張, or describes the lower classes in general as ants (in ANTS ANTS 螞蟻螞蟻), he does so from a slightly patronizing distance that presents hardship and struggles as endearing and containing a purity and honesty that are no longer accessible to Zhang and his audience.<sup>101</sup>

Zhang Chu owes his success partly to the Taiwanese record label Magic Rock (a subsidiary of Rock Records), which produced and published his debut album. However, most PRC folk musicians of the 1990s and 2000s had limited prospects of upward mobility compared to Taiwanese folk singers from the late 1970s onwards. This has prompted PRC folk musicians to value perseverance at the margins of society. In a rare appearance on state television, host Lu Yu whipped up compassion by focusing on hardship, asking Xiao He and Zhou Yunpeng: "How much would you earn singing in the street?"<sup>102</sup> Longing for the life of an itinerant musician is also the reason why Zhang Quan of the influential folk band Wild Children pulled the plug on the River Bar in August 2003, saying, "I

<sup>100</sup> On "wheat," Cf. Crevel 2008: 105-107; on "without wings," Cf. Crevel 2008: 206-208.

<sup>101</sup> Du 2004. Wang 2007:231.

<sup>102</sup> Lu 2009.

never got used to a stage. It isn't the best way of singing."<sup>103</sup> Additionally, in the lyrics of folk music, migration and mobility are recurrent themes.<sup>104</sup>

The River Bar opened in March 2001 and was the first venue that focused on urban folk music. Previously, folk musicians had performed in Beijing Underground venues, such as Nameless Highground, alongside other newly introduced musics of limited marketability. Since 2003, they do so once again, now in D-22 and Dos Kolegas. But between 2001 and 2003, the small venue in one of Beijing's busiest bar streets became a hotbed for a folk scene that favored acoustic instruments in intimate settings, developing improvisation and audience interaction. Xiao He's first solo album *Birds that Can Fly High Don't Land on the Backs of Oxen that Can't Run Fast* was recorded in the River Bar. In *THAT'S NOT MY NAME* 那不是我的名字, he shout-sings:

我愛她 因為她是我的	I love her because she's mine.
后來我遲到了	Later I was too late.
以后每天我就拿着	Every day since I stood on the street
一個啤酒瓶站在街口	with a bottle of beer in my hands...
一群孩子圍着我	A group of children surrounding me,
向我喊着一個人的名字	shouting someone's name at me,
瘋子	'Madman!'
那不是我的名字	That's not my name.

Xiao He's debut album adheres to folk stereotypes concerning unadornedness and willed naiveté, capitalized upon by the packaging of the record company Modern Sky – the sound has hardly any post-production, and the container is of recycled paper in earth colors with hand-written lyrics. Poet Yin Lichuan's liner notes read: "Facing the worldly bar crowd, Xiao He's performance is as unhurried, involved and happy as in his youth when he was reclining against the hillside, herding sheep, facing the vast landscape." Both with his band Glorious Pharmacy and in other solo work, Xiao He's performances are much more eclectic, borrowing from jazz, World Music and experimental electronic music. Xiao He himself has described his music as 'free folktunes' 自由民謠.

Zuoxiao Zuzhou has been involved in musical experimentation since the mid-1990s, including the use of treated violins on *Temple Fair Tour* 廟會之旅 (2000) and extended overdubs on *Big Things* 大事 (2009). He has used artworks by Yang Shaobin and Ai Weiwei, and his music appears in the video art of Yang Fudong, Li Zhanyang and others. At the same time, Zuoxiao Zuzhou emphasizes that his songs make extensive use of folk instruments and subject matter.

I don't write songs for stinking intellectuals, yet they like me. I write for farmers, but when they hear it they think I'm [mentally] ill. Too noisy and the lyrics are

<sup>103</sup> Zong 2008.

<sup>104</sup> De Kloet 2010:81-82.

unintelligible. I am both frustrated and amused by this. I hope one day they will understand that I write songs for them.<sup>105</sup>

A similar tension between avant-garde and folk is apparent in the oeuvre of Dou Wei; the development of Wang Lei from his folksy debut album *Journey Man* 出門人 in 1994 to the technology-savvy World Music album *Belleville* 美麗城 (2003); and the sample-driven work of Liang Yiyuan since 2009. It is possible to maintain a Western-centric folk ideology and argue that these artists operate in a borderland between folk, avant-garde and World Music. However, it is more productive to accept that the reservations about modernity and its electronic instruments that are often associated with folk in the West do not resonate in China. From the outset, (urban) folk in China has been an attempt to redefine or even reinvent the past and the local within a thoroughly modern and globalized present. This renders it unproblematic that the elaborate use of electronics and digital sound effects is the norm rather than the exception in the various Chinese folk scenes. In short, techno-reluctance is often overruled by the pursuit of idyllic perfection, artistic freedom and experimentation, especially in the music of Xiao He, Zuoxiao Zuzhou and Liang Yiyuan.

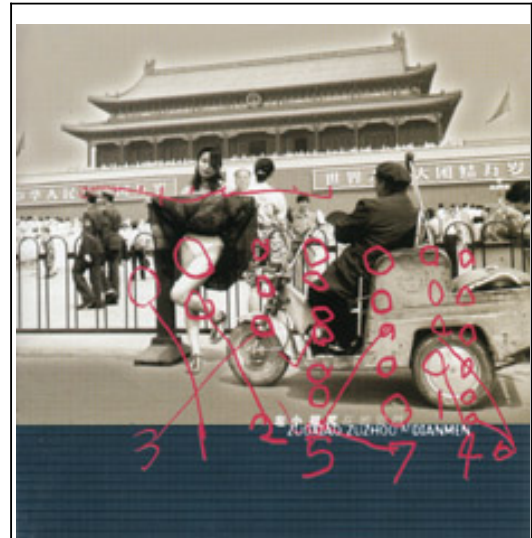


Illustration 2.15: Cover of Zuoxiao Zuzhou's 2001 album *At Di'anmen* 在地安門 (Taiwan version), using Ai Weiwei's artwork *Tian'anmen* 天安門 (1994).

## Documenting

The main difference between Xiao He and his precursor Hu Mage lies in Xiao He's stress on live performance and improvisation. Just like Xiao He, Hu Mage debuted with a predominantly acoustic folk album with a long title and suitably packaged by Modern Sky.<sup>106</sup> The process of home recording sparked Hu's interest in electronic equipment, and the subsequent albums *Killing Seven in One Stroke* 一把掌打死七個 (2001) and *Umpleg* 不插腿 (2005) consist of unsettling sound collages that perform the bricolage of rapidly changing urban China. In a 2002 interview Hu Mage said: "I often say I document life, which only refers to the small portion of the life I experience, or that I observe."<sup>107</sup>

Already in *SOME POTATOES ENTER THE CITY* 部份土豆進城 on his debut album, Hu ridicules the romantic views that intellectuals have of the countryside:

又放一些不太好聽 很吵的歌給我聽

Then [the cultured person] plays unpleasant, noisy songs for me.

<sup>105</sup> Guo 2007a:192. Cf. Yan 2004: 232, 253-254.

<sup>106</sup> *Everybody Has a Little Stool, I Won't Take Mine into the Twentyfirst Century* 人人都有個小板凳，我的不帶入二十一世 (1999).

<sup>107</sup> Jin 2003:207.

他說那是在讚美我們，他說他就是我們  
 可卻要把笑容墊在屁股下面的椅子上  
 又提到“虛偽”什麼的，  
 還說了一些城市的壞話  
 好多詞我都聽不太懂 只好歉歉的說：  
 這個，我說不好！這個，我實在說不好

He says they praise us, he says he is us,  
 but hides his smile on the chair under his ass.  
 Then he mentions “hypocrisy” or something  
 and says bad things about the city,  
 most of the words I don’t understand.  
 I can only timidly say:  
 [in dialect] This I couldn’t tell.  
 This I really couldn’t tell.<sup>108</sup>

Hu’s use of samples extends this parody to another trait associated with folk music: representing the daily life of contemporary lower classes. By using samples, artists such as Hu Mage and Liang Yiyuan grotesquely amplify the lyrical documentation of, for instance, Zhang Chu’s *OLD ZHANG* (1998) and Xiao He’s *OLD LIU* 老劉 (recorded with Glorious Pharmacy in 2008), whose lyrics respectively depict city life and echo a tragic news item.

The commonplace of documenting local life through music has been kept alive in recent years by artists such as the street musician Yang Yi, the Nanjing singer Li Zhi and the Taiwanese Hakka singer Lin Sheng-xiang. The last of these is salient not only because he captures Meinung village life by recording dialect songs in a local barn, but also because Lin Sheng-xiang and his former band Work Exchange participated in a so-far successful protest against the building of a dam in their hometown. This shows that documenting and preservation may also be the beginning of an emancipation. This emancipation begins with presenting the local and lower class not as undeveloped and backward, but as valuable and worth preserving. A next step would re-articulate the local and lowly as being entitled to power and rights. This would prepare a social critique of cultural capital(s), national politics and global modernization (in the case of Lin Sheng-xiang, the WTO). However, in the PRC, folk’s contributions to the emancipation of the local and lowly are relatively muted.

## Root-Seeking

Next to reflecting current reality, musicians have used folksong to regain contact with the past, which in China is a strong claim to legitimacy. Cui Jian’s 1991 reclaiming of the folksong *NANNIWAN* 南泥灣, made into a Communist propaganda song in 1941, is a high-profile example. Its impact is clear from the fact that it was censored. More low-key, Wild Children devoted their entire oeuvre to collecting and adapting North-Western Chinese folk tunes. Former band members Zhang Weiwei and Guo Long continue this project, while also performing with Xiao He. The authentic continuation of tradition is also an explicit purpose of the Xinjiang guitar player Zhu Fangqiong, the Beijing-based Xinjiang-Kazakh musician Mamu’er and the Beijing-based Mongolian band Hanggai. This also renders these bands suitable for World Music concerts in the West. Not only

<sup>108</sup> Cf. De Kloet 2001:76.

Lin Sheng-xiang, but also Wild Children, Mamu'er (with IZ) and Hanggai have performed internationally (Hanggai after being coached and recorded by the Briton Robin Heller in 2007).

The PRC Beijing-centered folk scene revolves around small bars such as the River Bar, Jiangjinjiu, Jianghu; folk stages on music festivals; labels such as 13<sup>th</sup> Month, Daomadan and Maybe Folk; and samplers such as *Flower Village* 花園村 (2004) and *Red Bulldozer* 紅色推土機 (2009). Despite the potential for genre formation, folk does not distinguish itself from other scenes and remains vibrantly in-between perfectionism, experimentation, documentation and root-seeking.



Illustration 2.16: Cover of the 2009 folk sampler Red Bulldozer.

## §5 Concluding Remarks

Publications on Chinese popular music are almost never organized around genres. The scenes that Jeroen de Kloet discusses in *China with a Cut* provide the most comprehensive survey of potential genres in Chinese popular music to date. However, the heuristic value of this categorization is debatable. Xiao He has more in common with “Underground artist” Zuoxiao Zuzhou than with fellow “folk-rocker” Zhang Chu. “Underground band” Second Hand Rose’s travesty of the rock mythology resembles that of the “pop-punk” band New Pants. These discussions extend beyond the Beijing band scene as soon as we ask whether Taipei-based 1980s Campus and 2000s singer-songwriters belong to folk, pop or any other scene.

Pierre Bourdieu argues that “the *boundary* of the field is a stake of struggles, and the social scientist’s task is not to draw a dividing-line between the agents involved in it by imposing a so-called operational definition.”<sup>109</sup> Here, my description of “the frontier[s] delimiting the territory held by the competing agents” reaches an ambivalent conclusion. On the one hand, language-geography-ethnicity, generation, gender and marketability go a long way towards explaining and mapping the uneven terrain of Chinese popular music. Rather than as representatives of genres, it may be more productive to regard Xiao He, Second Hand Rose and Faye Wong as representing, respectively, low marketability (frequently performing live to a few dozen people), medium marketability (regularly to audiences up to a thousand people) and high marketability (sporadically to tens of thousands of people). On the other hand, dispensing with the notion of genre altogether does not seem to be productive either. The potential of kinds of music to articulate collective senti-

<sup>109</sup> Bourdieu 1983:324.

ments and identities is also important in China; this happens, for instance, when the rock mythology binds the Underground together. The notion of genre is useful to identify in Peking Opera, sinified rock, 1930s Shanghai pop, *gangtai*, official folk and Campus Song the potential to function as standards around which kindred souls congregate – standards that can be reproduced across locations, moments, genders and degrees of marketability.

Bruno Latour foregrounds the way in which metrological standards such as the platinum kilogram function to discuss quasi-standards, such as best practice and stereotypes.

It is no use saying that those categories are arbitrary, conventional, fuzzy, or, on the contrary, too sharply bounded or too unrealistic. They do solve practically the problem of extending some standard everywhere locally through the circulation of some traceable document—even though the metaphor of a document might dim somewhat. ... the circulation of quasi-standards allow [sic] anonymous and isolated agencies to slowly become, layer after layer *comparable* and *commensurable*—which is surely a large part of what we mean by being human.<sup>110</sup>

Bruno Latour also argues that these standards are not given, but constantly negotiated, maintained and checked.

My argument on the usefulness of genre in understanding Chinese popular music ultimately ends in a discussion between universal standards and the particularity of specific locations. Genre enables comparison of Chinese popular music to music in other parts of the world. But at the same time, genre works differently in China than it does in many other places. This is partly because other ways of collecting collectives, namely around the four organizational principles, are more common, and musicians, gatekeepers and audiences have put less work into developing and maintaining genre standards. In the end, rather than tabooing the notion of genre, I hope this chapter has contributed to unraveling the larger issue of articulating collective identity through kinds of music.

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<sup>110</sup> Latour 2006:230.