

# China's Emerging Urban Folk Song Trends

By Shen Qing



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Last summer, an urban folk song titled “Miss Dong” became a household tune in China. Some say it represented a comeback for folk ballads after their heyday in the early 1990s. Urban folk songs in China can be traced back to the 1970s when they first emerged in Taiwan. Their fresh, simple and poetic style was introduced to the mainland in the 1990s, and later developed into campus ballads. The rise of campus ballads coincided with the state's decision to abandon its socialist policy of job assignments for college graduates in 1994, leaving many of them confused about their unpredictable future. Echoing their confusion and anxiety, the theme of bidding farewell to the innocent college days pervaded campus songs. Twenty years later folk songs came back with utterly different outlooks.

The current trend distinguishes itself from its innocent predecessors in its response to broader social issues beyond the campus. The emergence of this trend is attributed by many to surging social problems amid China's great urban transformation, which gives rise to shared confusions, frustrations or anxiety among urban youth. New folk songs with a critical stance are credited by some to have replaced rock music, which flourished in the 1990s, in a mild but piercing manner.

At the same time, China's pop music landscape has changed dramatically during the past decade. While the mainstream pop music industry is still waiting for some kind of breakthrough, the independent music scene is vibrant, especially within the genre of folk songs. Since the beginning of the new millennium, folk music has moved from underground to wider online visibility thanks to a constant surge of

Photo: Guang Hua



Zhou Yunpeng on stage

music websites like Douban Music, especially catering to those who seek alternative genres to mainstream ones.

Despite this general characterization, it is well to note that folk singers or folk songs are not a homogeneous group; rather, differences exist among singers responding to various issues with different styles. Evoking these differences is the main purpose of the following three sections, each targeting a specific group within the folk genre.

## Folk Song Mythology

China's new folk singers are famous for their intellectual aura. They are well-versed in modern Western literature and classical Chinese literature. For instance Allen Ginsberg has been cited by Zhou Yunpeng in his “Blind Men's Cinema”. Also notable is that his signature lyrical piece was granted the People's Literature Prize in poetry. Zhong Lifeng named his band after renowned Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. The die-hard fans of these singers are often referred to as *wenyi qingnian*, or urban youth with a refined taste in literature, art, film, and so forth.

A special characteristic of new folk songs is that they creatively draw inspiration from the exotic musical elements in ethnic minority regions and border areas such as Xinjiang, Tibet or Yunnan. This can be seen in Su Yang's interpretation of music from northwestern China and the Kazakh music of “Ma Mu'Er”. Indeed, the widespread incorporation of local musical elements into contemporary pop music has greatly enriched the expressive potential of new folk songs.

The iconic figure on the folk scene is Zhou Yunpeng. Born in the 1960s, he is often referred to as China's blind Bob Dylan. A singer, songwriter and poet, his songs cover various aspects of daily life, ranging from unemployment to house-purchasing, and even the Golden Week holiday. His visionless eyes, as recognized by many, have instead enabled him to see what is invisible to most people without visual disabilities.

In their celebration of purity and innocence, folk songs seem to negate any longing for rebellion, but Zhou's “China's Children” contradicts such a reading with its biting critique of the murderous nepotism of government officials. The song was released in 2007 and gained rapid popularity online. The song makes references to a fire where officials refused to let the children escape, a water disaster caused by the negligence of officials, HIV infections, coal mine disasters and a drugs scandal. The sad, dark voice of Zhou, accompanied by a simple, stripped-down and slow guitar sound, strengthens the gloomy atmosphere the song evokes, which makes it Zhou's most chilling piece:

*Don't be a kid in Kelamayi, where the fire burns your skin, breaking mother's heart*

*Don't be a kid in the town of Shalan, where it's too dark in the water, you can't go to sleep*

*Don't be a kid in Chengdu, where your drug addict mother leaves you at home for seven days*

Photo: Zuoxiao Zuzhou (<http://www.weibo.com/1680313495/z1lr7iq0E?mod=weibotime>)



A post on Zuoxiao Zuzhou's Weibo page condemning the forced demolition of his family home

*Don't be a kid in Henan, where HIV laughs in your blood  
Don't be a kid in Shanxi, where father becomes a basket of coal you  
never see again  
Don't be a Chinese kid  
They will eat you if they starve, not even comparable to the old  
goats in the wild who become threatening to protect the baby lambs  
Don't be a Chinese kid, fathers and mothers are all cowards  
In order to prove their cold blood they gave your chance of survival  
to the officials, at the last moment.*

Also implicitly critical of the government is Zuoxiao Zuzhou, perhaps the most outspoken singer on the folk scene. Agitated by his personal grudge against the local authorities in his hometown of Changzhou in Jiangsu Province, who were reportedly planning to demolish his family home, he wrote a song entitled "Nail Households" to support those who have stood up to the forced demolition of their properties. He also posted the song online which triggered an outpouring of support from his 2,000,000 followers on Sina Weibo, a Twitter-like microblogging platform.

Another piece related to the massive land appropriation in China caused an even more far-reaching online sensation. On his 2011 album "Zuoxiao Zuzhou" was a song called "My Son's Name Is Qian Yunhui", which was a collaborative effort with Qian's father as its vocalist. Qian Yunhui was a village chief who was crushed under the wheels of a lorry on Dec. 25, 2010 in his home village in Zhejiang Province. The death triggered a harsh online campaign over allegations that he was murdered due to his constant efforts in protesting against the construction of a power station and campaigning for compensation for farmers whose land was seized to make way for development. In the song, the weathered voice of Qian's father moans with grief and anger, as if he was pleading and weeping throughout the song:

*Long live the great Communist Party  
Redress an injustice for my son  
The wise and great Communist Party  
The Yueqing government suppresses its village fellows  
The injustice upon my son is as vast as the sea*

In most mainstream discussions folk singers like Zhou and Zuoxiao Zuzhou are heralded as more than musicians. They are "music citizens", according to one of China's most liberal-minded media, the *South Weekly*, of a rising civil society brewing in China. They are sometimes referred to as China's emerging online public intellectuals. When tracing the historical roots of the current folk song trend, Zhou and those following him tend to point to two rebellious sources. The first is the Modern Folk Ballad Movement in the 1970s in Taiwan, which was part of the protracted battle there against the authoritarian regime and the herald of a democratic order. The second source would be the protest songs of the 1960s in which Bob Dylan was a leading figure.

Despite their ostensibly rebellious posture, commercial success and public attention are too great a temptation to resist. Folk singers are imagined to distance themselves from sales figures and media outreach. It is commonly asserted that a folk singer who has moved towards the world of pop has lost his or her soul. Ironically, in reality a ticket to last year's national folk song tour was hyped to an astonishing 1,000 yuan. It is also reported that the tour, supported by tycoons, was intended to boost local business. Although critical of the deemed authoritarian government and sympathetic to marginalized groups, folk singers as the *de facto* beneficiaries of a consumer-driven market remain oblivious to the unimpeded flow of capital and the many lives it torments, such as those of migrant workers.

## Xiao qingxin Versus Shamate

Bypassing behemoth record companies such as EMI or Universal and independent brands, an increasing number of newborn urban folk singers are starting their careers online. Branding themselves as independent musicians on Douban Music, China's most vibrant music portal, they don't produce albums. Instead, they post their EPs online without ever circulating their music in physical copies. Projecting soft vocals accompanied by acoustic guitars, they sing about everyday urban life. Their songs are expressive of their subtle feelings and observations, and remain largely non-political. Their style is characterized as the *xiao qingxin* (young, pure and fresh) style, the most visible sub-genre of the so-called new folk ballads. Music critic Sun Mengjin contends that folk ballads should show concern for society and humanity, and the *xiao*

Photo: Author



Shao Xiaomao on stage

Photo: 风尚\_style  
(<http://qing.blog.sina.com.cn/t/4e8f785532001qi7.html>)



A typical *xiao qingxin* style

*qingxin* style of folk ballads have become too easy, with just a few guitar riffs and bits of life experiences.

Song Dongye, who rose to sudden fame last year, produces music of this style. His songs focus on the individual and his vision is different from his predecessors in its self-obsession. Hence, his songs resemble pop songs. Song is aware of his limits, namely the lack of a broader view of life

and society. He states that “We lead a life where there is nothing to worry about. I’m in a kind of despair. They (his predecessors like Zhou) tell a hundred stories in a song, and every sentence is a story, but I can only write one story, one person’s story in one song.”

Song’s self-deprecation reflects the paradox faced by urban youth born in the 1980s or 1990s. Living through external changes and transformation makes them paradoxically more self-obsessed. Such a tension is most keenly felt in one line of Song’s signature pieces, “Miss Dong”: “I fall in love with a wild horse but I don’t have a prairie in my house” — which can be interpreted as an allegory of his personal paradox.

*Xiao qingxin*, however, goes beyond a musical style and refers to the lifestyle of some urban youth. Born in the 1980s or 1990s, China’s first two decades of growing prosperity, they are well-educated, well-traveled and privileged with fine tastes. Their life is a mix of LOMO photography, traveling, faux-exotic coffee, and novels by Haruki Murakami. When it comes to their musical preferences, indie-pop used to be their favorite genre and the Taiwan-based singers Chen Qizhen and Zhang Xuan used to be their favorite singers. It was part of their attempt to distinguish themselves from the mainstream fondness for record company-based pop songs. The enduring mythology of folk songs also holds sway here, which dictates a certain distance from mainstream pop music. Hence, when indie-pop became more mainstream, their preferences, as the marker of their taste, shifted to folk songs. Those who pursue the *xiao qingxin* style remain aloof from the mainstream but never display any provocative stance towards it.

However, *xiao qingxin* singers do sometimes highlight their engagement and interest in political and social issues, a seeming reversal of their retreat to a “closed inner castle”. For example, Shao Xiaomao’s sensational song in 2011 called “Happiness and Dignity”, a top hit on the Douban billboard, touches on roughly all the heatedly-debated issues that year. But it is less of a political plea than a bowl of chicken soup for the soul; on the surface, she sings about resistance but ends on an uplifting and soothing note, suggesting that wounds could be easily cured and problems easily overcome:

*Please smile, hope the smile won’t be a mask of happiness  
Leap! Breathe the air of dignity  
Hold out your arms! May the world not refuse your outstretched arms  
Please believe I have the right to hope*

By so doing, the underlying restless and rebellious power is largely diluted into fragments of transient moaning.

In contrast to the *xiao qingxin* style, *shamate* is an online sub-culture among China’s blue-collared youth. Adorning themselves with spiky, inflated hairstyles dyed in bright colors, smoky eye make-up, pierced lips and outlandish outfits, their physical appearance is marked by a fusion of gothic and post-punk style writ large. When posing for pictures, they make constant efforts to contort their faces and twist their limbs in overly dramatic photos. Besides being obsessed with agricultural heavy metal groups like Phoenix Legend, a pop duo catering to the lower strata, *shamate* youth are considered culturally vulgar. Basically they are migrant workers in their 20s from China’s countryside, who end up in cities but remain disengaged from the relentless urbanization. In the eyes of those who fancy *xiao qingxin*, *shamate* are ridiculed as China’s most hated group with their botched imitation of urban modernity.

## Sounds from the Working Class

Deviating from these two types of folk song genres which dominate the current scene are Sun Heng and his New Workers Art Troupe. Despite the group’s explicit folk-song form, Sun is seldom considered part of the folk scene and is mostly unknown to urban youth.

In 1998 Sun Heng resigned from his job as a music teacher in Henan Province, arriving in Beijing as a street singer and casual laborer. One day he met a fellow laborer by the name of Brother Biao at a construction site. Brother Biao held out his hands that were covered by calluses and said to him: “I only have this pair of hands. But I rely on them to feed my children, my wife, and my parents. I work very hard every day and feel extremely tired. When I get tired, I drink wine. After I drink, I feel homesick. We come from the countryside to the city. We use our hands and sweat to build high-rise buildings and bridges, but so many people look down on us. I don’t

Photo: bbs.shangdu.com



Young migrant workers with a *shamate* outlook



understand it. I thought that as long as I worked hard, my destiny would change, but all year round is hard work. I don't have anything but these hands." This story was later compiled into a song titled "Biao Ge".

Biao Ge is not an exception. According to official reports, up to 2014 the number of migrant workers in urban China has exceeded 200 million, nearly twice the whole population of Japan. A considerable portion of them suffer from intensive labor, meager (sometimes unpaid) wages, local residents' contempt of their lower status and "vulgar" cultural tastes, and most importantly, exclusions from urban welfare systems.

On May 1, 2002, Sun and several of his friends who shared a love for singing established the New Workers Art Troupe. Basically, the troupe consists of workers and does not perform in bars and pubs that are frequented by well-off urban youth. Instead, Sun and his troupe perform at construction sites and factories for migrant workers for free. Initially the troupe didn't have broader plans except to entertain these workers. Later they started to embark on something empowering, to rekindle the workers' class consciousness and to represent and safeguard their own rights in labor disputes.

The troupe also intentionally distances itself from the lucrative music industry in their refusal to commercialize their songs. Instead they upload most of their songs online. Since 2004, they have released seven albums focusing on migrant workers' lives, struggles and longings. *Tian xia da gong shi yi jia* (translated as "All Migrant Workers Are a Family") was their first album. The royalties from this debut album raked in 75,000 yuan, which was then used to build the Tongxin Primary School for migrant workers' children in Pi village, more than 40 kilometers from the center of Beijing. The team later got involved in collecting donations such as clothes, books and other odds and ends, which they would then sell to the less fortunate at extremely low prices, all under the banner of Tongxin Mutual Beneficial Shops. In 2007, Sun and the other singers in the troupe began the Migrant Worker Culture and Art Museum, which includes such curiosities as temporary resident permits, fine receipts, and factory regulations.

Taking a bold step further to attract a larger audience, the troupe organized the Worker's Spring Festival Gala, a gusty rival to China Central Television's (CCTV) starry and glitzy Spring Festival Gala. In Sun's eyes, the extravagance of the CCTV gala event was alien to the workers' lives and experiences. The Workers' Spring Festival Gala was hosted by China's most civic-minded and outspoken TV presenter, Cui Yongyuan. Once posted online, the festival gala generated a million clicks. Sun has 150,000 followers on Weibo, China's most vibrant social network. Thanks to Weibo, Sun is able to reach out to a far wider network, respond to workers' call for public support and initiate online campaigns to condemn sweatshops and claim workers' rights. Currently Sun and his troupe are working on their fourth nationwide Worker Cultural Festival, in a bid to create a real platform for workers.

Some months ago Sun's wife, Lu Tu, a sociologist in labor studies drafted a post onto Weibo condemning a TV talent show in which the judge tried all sorts of tricks to force the migrant workers on stage to articulate their gratitude to the boss who in reality had been accused

Photo: 王江松的BLOG ([http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4d8d487901012pur.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4d8d487901012pur.html))



Sun Heng (right) and Xu Duo (left) perform at their Workers' Spring Festival Gala

of exploiting the workers. The audience's consumption of suffering experienced by the lower strata is never something new to reality shows, which tend to successfully translate the audience's sympathetic tears into higher ratings and ad income. Averse to its extravagance but overt hypocrisy, Sun and other worker fellows refuse to appear on this stage. Instead they want their own stage free from consumerist penetration, where they are able to foster a true awareness of their class status and subjectivity.

Sun's works are referred to as art activism for their engagement with social movements, a far cry from *xiao qingxin* and its characteristic individually-based bourgeois aesthetics. What the troupe is trying to create is a cultural representation which seeks to transcend social class and individual limitations, and to locate the experiences of an individual within the larger context. When talking about the personal changes he has undergone during these years, Xu Duo, another member of the troupe, said: "Initially my songs were all about my own emotions in my own world. I felt like an onlooker without a real connection to real society, but now I am abandoning myself and caring for my fellow workers."

With their class-based analyses and reflections of the social predicament rather than Zhou Yunpeng's civil society approach and the self-insulation of *shamate*, the troupe's works are a *de facto* response to the Indian theorist Gayatri Spivak's classic question "Can subalterns speak?" Members of the once anonymous working class have found expression in Sun's songs and are able to make themselves heard. Through accommodation or neglect, mainstream society is in the end able to pacify the potential threat of sub-culture. Are Sun and his troupe likely to be pacified by the government or the market? Time will tell.

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