The Making of Singer-songwriters  
*Exploring the Authorship and Ethos of Contemporary Folk Music in Mainland China*

**ABSTRACT** This paper addresses the importance of singer-songwriters to understanding China’s contemporary folk music ethos. Instead of considering singer-songwriters as those who perform their own material, this paper examines them as a discursive field that involves the notion of authorship. The first part of the paper revisits the history of singer-songwriters as a thickening process of the aesthetic and sociological voices in their singular authoritarian role. Drawing on Negus’s “unbundling” concept, the myth of singer-songwriters’ heightened investment of authorship is deconstructed via analysis of the dynamic relationships between the song, the performance, and the real author. We then demonstrate three kinds of authorship across three phases of the making of folk singer-songwriters, namely confession, parody and scenius. The analysis reveals why and how the making of singer-songwriters and the issue of authorship are useful to the understanding of contemporary folk ethos in China. Overall, the transformation of authorship in the making of singer-songwriters reveals the complexity of textual narratives, the expansion of performance approaches, and the enhancement of sociological agency in the evolution of contemporary folk music. Folk music carves out a distinctive space for reflection on the process of urbanization and its effects on the thought and practice of people of different cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds.

**KEYWORDS** folk music, authorship, folk ethos, Contemporary China

---

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary folk music is an evolving and embracive music genre, although it finds its deep roots in local traditional music culture. While Western academia has engaged in heated discussions of this interdependent relationship between contemporary folk and traditional music,¹ few studies have systematically examined contemporary folk and its interactions with other music genres in China. The current studies can be categorized into three types. First, most studies have focused on traditional ethnic folk songs (民歌, 民间歌谣)² and

---


² Yaxiong Du, *The Map of Chinese Folk Songs* (Hefei: Anhui Arts Publisher, 2013); Heping Yang, *Chinese Folk Song* (Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory Publisher, 2011).
excluded folk music that is mediated by the popular music industry. These studies have discussed the institutionalization of folk collections since ancient times, the relationship between folk music and the New Culture movement, and the Communists’ recuperation of ethnic folk music during the Yan’an period. The second kind of study has undertaken ethnographic research into certain ethnic musical communities in specific regions, such as Helen Rees’s work on the protection of “yuanshengtai”原生态环境 music in relation to ecological issues in Yunnan province and Baranovitch’s study of a folk rock band and its ethnic identity.

Thirdly, while most studies have excluded discussions of folk music in the popular music scene, Jeroen de Kloet and Jeroen Groenewegen shift their focus to contemporary folk music. De Kloet analyzes the urban sentiments and paradoxical authenticity of folk rock, and Groenewegen examines four strategies for authenticating folk songs about “the People.” Following these two scholars, this paper focuses on contemporary folk music and explores the fluidity and heterogeneity of its composition and development from a chronological perspective. In particular, it argues that the development of contemporary folk music is marked and driven by a continuous infatuation with the making of singer-songwriters. This point echoes with the critic Yan Jun’s observation. Whereas in the original article (2006) Yan Jun wrote that the advent of ethnic folk differentiates (contemporary) folk music from traditional folk songs, in its revised version (2014) he shifts the emphasis from ethnic folk to singer and songwriter without further explanation. Taking this shift as its starting point, this paper discusses why the image of the singer-songwriter is central to understanding China’s contemporary folk discourse, and how the authorship of singer-songwriters functions as a driving force behind folk music.

In this paper, the singer-songwriter is not viewed as an individual performing self-written material but is taken as a discursive field enveloped in the changing trajectory of folk authenticity and folk authorship. In other words, to use the singer-songwriter as a method is not to reiterate the myth of an integrated authorial image but to “torpedo” the authorship valorizing

6. Xiong Dong, 中国民谣地图. In 1918, intellectuals and students launched the “rescuing” campaigns during the “New Culture” movement to collect extinct and “censored” vernacular folklories from across the country.
the image. Following Keith Negus’s accounts of “unbundling” authorship, we examine why authorship is multilayered and inhabits “authorial voices” that are textual, musical, and social. The paper begins with a theoretical discussion of the “thickening process” of singer-songwriters’ authorial voices to probe into the heterogeneous bundling nature of authorship. Then, following Negus’s accounts of the unbundling concept of authorship, we map the trajectory of China’s contemporary folk music and demonstrate how China’s folk music emerges and develops in the making of singer-songwriters, and why it nurtures three kinds of folk authorships as the folk ethos evolves in three phases.

2. SINGER-SONGWRITER AS A THICKENING PROCESS: TEXT, PERFORMANCE, MEDIA

Generally, the singer-songwriter in the Anglo-European tradition is someone who writes and composes his or her own musical work on self-accompanied instruments (usually guitar or piano). This practice originated in the oral tradition in the medieval period, as seen among bards, poets, and songwriters, and later reached a heightened moment in the 1960s in folk music, with David R. Shumway asserting that the term and idea of the singer-songwriter came to public awareness in 1968. This bounded relationship between folk and the singer-songwriter established during the folk revival and leftist movements has declined since the early 1970s, when the notion of singer-songwriter was extended to country music and blues, among other genres. Thus, Tim Wise rightly points out that the term “singer-songwriter” should be considered not as a genre but as a “popular music format.” By revisiting the history of singer-songwriters, we explicate this “format” as the thickening process in which two layers of voice are added to the construction of an auteur image of the singer-songwriter. Figure 1 illustrates this point.

This authentication of singer-songwriters’ identity leads to the first aesthetic layer, which comprises both textual and performance aspects. From the traditional to modern folk revivals, the identity of the singer-songwriter has had a strong footing in the textual aspect.

15. Sweers, Electric Folk, 1–12. Sweers argues that Anglo-American folk underwent two Folk Revivals: the traditional revival culture (in the early 1900s) and the modern Revival (around 1960s). The modern revival has developed in two directions: the leftist folk in 1950s and early 1960s, and the poetic folk since the late 1960s.
19. Self-written material is preferred. During the Second Revival of the mid-1960s, a group of songwriters began to write and perform their own material. Unlike the songwriters who were employed to write songs and lyrics for others in Tin Pan Alley, those singer-songwriters sang their self-written material. For details, see Sweers, Electric Folk, 25–6.
Not only self-written material is preferred, but also a process of “ideological endorsement” further authenticates the self-written material. As Shumway and Wise note, while singer-songwriters of the 1950s and early 1960s had strong social awareness and focused on public issues, those of the late 1960s were attracted to private emotions and individual lives.20 Both ideological and self-written factors constitute the textual layer of the singer-songwriter’s identity.

The modern folk revival adds a performance layer to authenticate the role of singer-songwriters. In modern folk, the venue shifted from “concerts and meetings” to “coffee-houses and campuses and festivals”21 when the concepts of live and self-accompanied performance started to emerge.22 Musicians such as Bob Dylan shifted the folk ethos from socialist-minded folk music toward romantic subjectivity, and Warner-Reprise took the lead in the promotion of confessional singer-songwriters.23 While confessional singer-songwriters’ introspective writing and performances successfully erased the boundaries between the singer, narrator, and songwriter, electric folk musicians created a satirical and provocative style that strengthened and complicated those boundaries. Thus, the performance layer of sound was added to the traditional layers of vocals, arrangements, and instrumentation.

In addition to songwriting and performance, the thickening process of singer-songwriters’ identity extends to the second sociological layer. This point is inspired by Laura Ahonen’s accounts of “mediated authors” and Jason Toynbee’s discussion of “social authors.”24 While lyrics and acoustic performance are the major components of the aesthetic, singers are required to participate more deeply in the creative process and to use different media to authenticate their song and performance, ranging from music arranging to mixing, recording, and the managing of their works and careers.

The first aesthetic layer encourages songwriters to sing and perform their own works and to instill their own stylistic flavors into the song texts. The songwriters are not independent from the works once they are finished; rather, they enter into, activate, and authenticate the song texts through their vocal and musical performances. While the first layer does not always require the singer to be the songwriter,25 the second sociological layer not only fixates...

\[\text{FIGURE 1. Two-layered voices in the making of singer-songwriters}\]
on the relationship between singer and songwriter (in this case, singer-songwriter is often hyphenated instead of using a slash between singer and songwriter), but also solicits more sociological agency aside from singing and songwriting, such as arranging, mixing, producing, collaborating, and media management. In other words, a singer-songwriter thus undergoes a thickening process involving two-layered voices, including performing stylistic persona, amassing other voices, and coordinating other sociological skills. This thickening process demonstrates the fluid, multiple, and heterogeneous voices underneath the singular authorial image, thus complicating the notion of authorship for singer-songwriters.

3. MAPPING CHINA’S CONTEMPORARY FOLK TRAJECTORY IN THE MAKING OF THE SINGER-SONGWRITERS

Rooted in the long history of the oral and collective-creation traditions, China’s folk music is highly fluid and transformative, encompassing musical genres that range from traditional folk songs to ethnic instrumental music and contemporary folk music. We argue, however, that China’s contemporary folk differs greatly from its traditional folk, although the former constantly draws resources and inspirations from the latter. Contemporary folk has deep roots in minjian music 米间音乐 (folk mass music), consisting of the traditional Chinese minge 民歌 (folk songs), dance music, quyi 曲艺, xiqu 戏曲, and ethnic folk instrumentation music 民族民间器乐音乐.26

26. Minjian music 米间音乐 (folk mass music, our translation) includes many forms of Chinese traditional music, with its meanings changing along the development of music history. Scholars have referred to minjian music 米间音乐 as “folk music” 民间音乐 (China Music Institute 1964) and “mass music” 大众音乐 (Zeng Suijin 2003). According to Groenewegen’s study (2011, 55) of the book Introductions to National Music (1964), which foregrounds the “dominant folk music 民间音乐 anthologies and overviews” in China, minjian music is defined as folk music against non-folk music as a result of the “communism ideology.” The latter covers literati music, court music and religious music, and the former includes song, dance music, narrative singing, opera and instrumental. Similarly, music sociologist Zeng Suijin (2003) refers to minjian music as all of the “mass music” in secular world against that in court and literati societies. Zeng further breaks down mass music into several sub-categories, including the traditional Chinese minge 民歌 (folk songs), dance music, quyi 曲艺, xiqu 戏曲, and ethnic folk instrumentation music 民族民间器乐音乐. We agree with these scholars but propose an integrated term “folk mass music” as the English translation of “minjian music” (Groenewegen used tradition music to refer to minjian music in general), for we think folk mass music is more specific and inclusive to capture the ideological tensions mentioned above.

All of these subgenres of minjian music (folk mass music), in particular minge 民歌 (consisting of short songs with memorable melodies, mainly work songs, mountain songs, short tunes and long tunes) have travelled across different regions and circulated among the population for a long time. In the late twentieth century, folk music fluctuated drastically. This began with the intellectuals’ promotion of vernacular literature in the early 1900s, following a 30-year period of secular music under the arts propaganda of the Communist Party (1949–1979). Since the reform and opening up, folk music has experienced a gradual revival and transformation under a series of interactions with various popular music genres from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Euro-American areas. For more, see Suijin Zeng, 中国大众音乐: 大众音乐的社会历史连接与传播 [Chinese Mass Music: Socio-Historical Connection and Communication of Mass Music] (Beijing: Beijing Broadcasting Institute, 2003), 17–12, 143–4. China Music Institute, Central Conservatory Music, 民族音乐概论 [Introduction to National Music] (Beijing: Music Publishers, 1964). Also, Groenewegen, The Performance of Identity, 55.
Scholars have argued how leftism in Taiwan, urbanization, and nationalism in Mainland China propelled the emergence of contemporary folk and have noted how singer-songwriters flourished as a result of contemporary folk music. We argue, however, the concept of singer-songwriters is not the effect but the cause and momentum for the development of contemporary folk music. The idea of the singer-songwriter that took shape in the mid-1990s marks both the beginning and the threshold at which contemporary folk music came into being, even though the actual term singer-songwriter came into use around 2003. It was not so much the “romantic claim of folk culture” (be it cultural, communal and traditional) as the presence of an original creator and performer that witnessed the advent of contemporary folk. This could partly explain why the “prison songs” and “slang songs” in the 1980s (though the music contents might have fit the two central criteria of folk authenticity, including political correctness and grass-roots origins), were not included in the history of China’s contemporary folk music because the singers did not compose and write the songs but only sang the songs assigned by music editors. Then, the term “singer-songwriter” was literally introduced to mainland China around 2003, when Taiwanese singers Jay Zhou and David Tao were hailed more as singer-songwriters rather than singers. Since then, the term has grown in popularity in various online music communities, such as Douban and Indie China, as well as the major national music awards, to refer to those soloist musicians (sometimes with other musicians) performing their works with instruments as “singer-songwriters.” Till now, the term singer-songwriter can be extended to various music genres, ranging from folk, indie, and pop to world music etc.

Given the rich and complex development of Chinese folk music, we give a tentative mapping of Chinese folk trajectory in connection to other music influences (fig. 2). The folk

31. Prison songs and slang songs were popular in the mid- and late 1980s. Prison song was initiated by the famous male actor Chi Zhiqiang, who was in jail because of his immoral acts with other women. Upon release, the cultural promoter Zhou Yaping produced several songs based on Chi’s story and experience in jail; however, “the style eventually came to comprise songs by other ex-convicts and old songs by zhiqiang, educated urban youth who were sent during the Cultural Revolution to the countryside for reeducation through hard labor” (Baranovitch 2003, 16). Slang songs were set to folk tunes with simple and straightforward descriptions of ordinary people’s daily lives and used many colloquial and vulgar expressions alluding to sexual activities. Baranovitch, China’s New Voices, 2004.
32. Sweers, Electric Folk; Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication,” 63.
33. We conducted a chronological search for the term “singer-songwriter” on various resources, including the major search engines Baidu and Google, news media, and papers found on China’s key national information database CNKI (China’s National Knowledge Infrastructure). The result shows that the term was introduced in China around 2003, with the launching of new prizes for “Best Singer-songwriter of the Year” (Top Chinese Music Awards 音乐风云榜 in 2003) and “Powerful Singer-songwriter” (The China Music Awards 华语榜中榜 in 2004).
trajectory is mapped by the horizontal place line and vertical time line. Horizontally, there are three streams of major music influences for contemporary folk: pop from Hong Kong and Taiwan, *minjian music* (folk mass music) in Mainland China, and rock music from the Anglo-European countries. The short lines show the influence or the interaction between the genres. Although folk music’s major influence shifts from Taiwan folk music in the early 1990s to rock music in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *minjian music* has remained the crucial foundation and driving force for folk music through the period. Vertically, this map shows contemporary folk music undergoes a three-phase development and evolves into six main subgenres (marked in square box). They are campus folk and urban folk in the first phase (during the early and mid-1990s), folk rock in the second phase (in the late 1990s and early 2000s), and ethnic folk, world music and indie folk (sometimes indie folk could also mean bourgeoisie folk 唯美主义民谣) in the third phase (since the mid-2000s). We argue that each phase nurtures a particular image of singer-songwriter and folk authorship: confession, parody and scenius. To clarify, folk genre and authorship do not develop in a replaceable and independent manner but overlap each other, as the confessional approach and parodic approach also extend to the third phase yet may not be that significant as the scenius approach.

Given the close interaction and parallel development between rock and folk as is shown in the map, we argue there are four unique features of China’s folk music culture. First, though folk music, like rock, also values critical spirit, social awareness and anti-authoritarianism, the criticality of folk takes eclectic forms. Zhao Yong argues that Chinese society has been immersed in an atmosphere of cynicism since the early 2000s, as many young people experience growing life pressure and lack the courage to change the situation. Unlike rock music, which rebels against spiritual and ideological questions, folk music is infatuated with the
worldly and realistic problems of everyday life. Direct expressions of rebellion in lyrics are replaced by inward personal reflections and the sounds are milder with the guitars often unplugged and vocals plainly delivered. Zhao rightly notes that the angry outcry of rock music switches to the sad storytelling of folk music, with the grand narrative of rock music replaced by the micro-narrative and low-key lyricism of folk music.

Second, contemporary folk music debuts and develops with a highly individualistic presence and expression in China. As Li Wan argues, there are two things constituting the core of folk ethos: the first is to sing while playing a stringed instrument, and the second is to narrate the real substance of life. Though it is implausible to deny the existence and contribution of folk bands, soloist musicians performing and narrating their materials tend to gain a larger presence in China’s folk music history. This soloist tendency can be perceived in the large-scale emergence of soloist folk musicians since 2007, especially since many of those who performed with bands or were involved in the folk community started to perform, produce and release albums under singular names, such as Wan Xiaoli, Wang Juan, Xiao He, Song Yuzhe and Wu Zhuoling. Thus, unlike the folk in the West, which embraces the collective and participatory music-making in folk festivals, folk songwriting and performance in China tend to revolve around the axis of individualistic autonomous expressions, to provoke not so much social alliances as personal bewilderments.

Third, folk music progresses in a regressive way. Critic Yan Jun asserts that, influenced by the American folk music in the 1950s, China’s folk of the early 1990s emerged as a modern and commercial cultural product, detached from any grass-roots practices and traditional influences. It was around the early 2000s that traditional minjian music and grassroots sentiments were increasingly absorbed into folk expression. Yan asserts that China’s folk music progresses by “first great leap forward then back to roots.” Though aesthetically folk’s roots sensibility shifts focus to the life of ordinary and grassroots people, the production and consumption of folk music is a city thing and is “airlifted from city to city.” This occurs not only because folk is largely enjoyed by city dwellers and the urban bourgeoisie instead of the urban underclasses (such as farmers and unemployed people), but also because the city nurtures psychological needs that can be satisfied by folk music. Wei Xiaoshi argues that...
rapid urbanization accentuates the desire for reason and efficiency, which suppresses the motivation for morality, emotion and tradition that can be uncovered and satisfied with folk music.44

Last but not the least, the individualist quests and regressive aesthetics of folk music translate to the fourth feature of folk ethos, that is, the motif of finding home in cities. However, this home is not where people with different social backgrounds can peacefully rest their minds, but is always situated in a series of tensioned relationships under drastic social transformation, be it suburban and urban, natural and modern, or individualistic and collectivist. Next, we investigate how the changing folk ethos of finding home in cities is rendered in three consecutive phases through the individualistic presences of folk singer-songwriters and their negotiations of three kinds of authorships: confession, parody and scenius.

Confession

Chinese society of the early 1990s witnessed a booming market economy and rising consumerism. Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour of 1992 accelerated the shift from planned economy to market economy, which led to the intense commercialization of various fields in the 1990s. Dai Jinhua asserts that the publishing industry, which had been state-owned, started to embrace commercialization.45 Then the music industry, which used to be an affiliated section of book publishing services in the socialist planned economy, was penetrated by regional record companies from Hong Kong and Taiwan that introduced modern business models to the domestic music industry. The market craving for mass culture, the large investment of capital, and the rising power of commercial institutions, greatly promoted the development of the music industry. Popular songs, music stars, and record companies mushroomed at an unprecedented degree in the mid-1990s, known as the golden age in the record history of China’s popular music.46 Various music genres, including pop, rock, and folk, took shape then.47

Campus folk and urban folk thus emerged in this context, which was carefully planned and produced by regional record companies, catering to the people experiencing burgeoning consumerism and urbanization. Campus folk first became known to the public in the mid-1990s following a series of campaigns by Dadi Records, a joint-venture music company, and achieved huge market success.48 Producer Huang Xiaomao collected songs written by university students in Beijing, including Shen Qing, Gao Xiaosong and Yu Dong, and
produced a series of compilation albums titled *Campus Folk* around 1994. Though these compilation albums comprised various tracks by different singers, campus folk nurtured several important songwriters, including Gao Xiaosong, Yu Dong, Shen Qing, Ding Wei and Ai Jing. Unlike Taiwan campus folk musicians who resorted to leftism for inspiration, folk songs produced by Dadi Records were about the personal melancholy of the transient youth, pure friendship and sentimental love in universities. On the surface the melancholy was about reminiscing about good old times on campus, but actually it reflected huge anxieties among the graduates at that time. Qiao states that the year 1994 was a watershed moment for university graduates, for they would not be allocated jobs by the state but would need to find jobs themselves. This melancholic and helpless mood spread quickly in universities when the spirit of collectivist education and socialist imagination seemed to have suddenly collapsed, so campus folk helped comfort these anxieties and confirmed the identities that were about to change soon.49

Amid the melancholic atmosphere found in urban folk and campus folk, the concept of singer-songwriter took shape. Singers started to (or were requested by record companies) to write and sing their own works, instead of singing the works assigned by the record companies. More importantly, besides the textual autonomy of songwriting, the confessional approach to authorship—written from the first-person point of view under the pretense of frank exposure of personal lives, accompanied by the raw singing—was negotiated to authenticate that textual autonomy. This approach encourages the listeners to hear the collapse of the real and representation, and successfully evoked resonant feelings among university students, intellectuals, white collar workers and other city dwellers.

A good example here is Ai Jing’s debut as a performing singer-songwriter on TV in 1995, which integrates the textual and performance autonomy at the same time. Accompanying herself on a guitar on MTV, Ai narrated her childhood memories in a plain voice. As authorship is located at the intersection and dissolution of different authorial voices (both aesthetic and sociological), Keith Negus proposes the possibility of retaining both the “performing persona” and the “real author” and suggests a strategy for unbundling “different facets of an author’s identity.”50 Following his accounts of authorship, on the one hand Ai’s confessional approach successfully sutures the boundary between text and performance, real author and persona. On the other hand, Ai’s authorship is partially realized at the performance and textual levels, for the sociological autonomy of music making was still constrained and limited by the record companies. Ai’s autonomy as a “complete” singer-songwriter was required by producer Liu Zhuohui:

> When recording at Dadi, Ai Jing was not yet a creative singer-songwriter. She couldn’t write and compose; ninety percent of the songs were written by others. I encouraged her to write, but she only came up with lyrics. When we asked guitarist Eddie to produce for


this song, Eddie refused because he did not know Chinese. Then producer Wang Di asked Ai Jing to compose for herself, while Eddie jammed with her.51

Liu’s words imply that the making of Ai Jing’s singer-songwriter image is initiated by the A&R team. So, Baranovitch’s appraisal of Ai Jing’s “completeability” is a bit overstated when he claims Ai “ceased being just a singer who sings songs written by others (mostly male).”52 The making of independent female music figures is well planned by Dadi Records, following the global rise of “female singer-songwriters” in the 1990s,53 to create a Chinese version of Suzanne Vega.54 Another example is singer-songwriter Ma Ge from Dadi Records. Her song “Further, Further, Further” (远远的远) directly borrows the melody of the song “Fade into You” by Mazzy Star and sets the melody to a reggae rhythm.

Thus, the making of confessional and independent female singer-songwriters who write and perform their music is in line with the rise of professional and urban womanhood, which is clearly shown in the visual design and lyric content of performances. This “casualness and simplicity” is authenticated through the natural dress code (jeans and white T-shirt) on the My 1997 (我的1997) album jacket. But the jeans were more a fashionable and stylish clothing item instead of the daily outfit for ordinary people in the early 1990s. Sitting with a relaxed posture and wearing a checked stylish suit also gives Ai Jing a yuppie and professional look. The desire for urban lifestyles is vividly shown in her signature song “My 1997.” The lyrics read “1997, come quickly! So I can go to Hong Kong. 1997, come quickly! So I can stand in Hung Hom Coliseum. 1997, come quickly! So I can see the late night slot. 1997, come quickly! So I can see what the clothes are actually like in Yaohan.”55 Liu Fei makes a similar observation of the song “Professionals” (上班族), written by female singer-songwriter Ding Wei at that time, arguing that the song provides a typical narrative of Hollywood’s middle class.56 The independent look of singer-songwriters performing their materials appeals to the growing consumerism that spreads among white-collar workers, college students and urban bourgeois consumers.

Except for the positive mentality of embracing the rising market economy, in the 1990s there is another dark stream of the folk ethos affecting the mentality of city dwellers. Dai Jinhua argues that there are two noticeable groups of people that emerged during the great social transformation in the 1990s: the workers who were laid off by the state-owned

52. Baranovitch, China’s New Voices, 165.
enterprises and the rural migrant workers who worked and lived in urban areas with a rural household registration.57 Like these migrant workers and city dwellers, who came from small cities and villages, singer-songwriters Zhang Chu and Wang Lei dropped out of school at a young age and headed to the large cities to make music. Breaking away from the traditional value and cultural system, they felt dislocated while making a living and forging a new identity in cities. This sense of bewilderment can be found in Zhang Chu’s song “Elder Sister” (姐姐) and Wang Lei’s song “Going Out” (出门人). The song “Elder Sister” announces a departure from old values and familiar homes but expresses obvious confusion about the future. While Zhang Chu’s protagonist struggles with home in the past, Wang Lei’s protagonist is obsessed with home in the future. In the song “Elder Sister,” Zhang Chu uses a first-person narrative to express strong complaints about and disdain for authoritarian power and patriarchal suppression, metaphorically personalized in a brutal father image. Zhang Chu uses shouting singing when repeating the verse, “Elder Sister! I want to return home. Hold my hands, don’t be afraid.”58 However, the shouting sounds helpless, as the old home cannot be returned to. Zhang Xinying refers to this bewilderment as a typical syndrome of the “anonymous generation” which is neither born under the grand narrative nor summoned under a unified goal like the previous generation. With the bankruptcy of the traditional social identification system, the “anonymous” individuals start to observe, experience and express themselves from an inward and personal perspective.59 Moreover, this desire of leaving but not knowing where to go is echoed in the confusion of Wang Lei’s “Going Out.” The song “Going Out” first used the third-person narrative to observe the lonesome city wanderers at the station, and then switched to the first-person perspective to express lonesome feelings as one of the city wanderers. The hook sentences “I do not know where to go; I do not know to go where” are repeated in the chorus section. At the end of the song, the anxious question of “where to go” is not answered but is only temporarily compromised with a shared reassurance: “after all, everybody knows going out is not easy.” Indeed, people like Wang Lei are not alone. The MV of “Going Out” shoots the lonesome figure of singer-songwriter Wang Lei carrying and playing guitar while wandering amid the crowds of migrant workers in railway stations. No destination is shown, only forever temporary stops in new stations. Here, the “going out” not only hints at Wang Lei’s marginal status in the music industry of not signing with any record company, but also reflects the anxieties and confusions that exist among the “migrant workers” in big cities. Independent from familiar value systems and the institutional support of the socialistic planned economy, city dwellers and migrant workers are forced to be self-reliant and reconstruct their identities.

57. Dai Jinhua, 隐形书写 [Invisible Writing], 26.
58. The Chinese lyrics is “姐姐，我想回家，牵着我的手，你不要害怕”. (The English translation is the authors'.)
59. Zhang Xinying, “张楚与一代人的精神画像”.
60. The Chinese lyrics is “我不知道到哪里去，我不知道去哪里”. (The English translation is the authors'.)
Parody

The dark ethos of urban folk, typified in the music of Yang Yi, Zhu Fangqiong and Wang Lei, became stronger and merged with the expression of underground rock, forging the new ethos of folk rock and new folk in the late 1990s and early 2000s.61 De Kloet refers to this era as the “local turn” in China’s music industry, when regional record companies left Mainland China and many local independent record companies emerged. The music industry transformed its star-packaging mode of the early 1990s into a new explorative mode in the late 1990s and early 2000. This explorative mode was not a drastic separation of underground rock from the institutional networks of the dominant music industry, but should be understood as a “compromise of commercial interests” and a negotiation of “commercial fantasies” between the two parties.62 Because stardom packaging was too costly for local record companies, musicians were expected to become musically self-reliant and resourceful. Thus, though still conservative in its elitist and patriarchal cultural practices, underground rock witnessed a “democratic moment” in music making as more musical laymen from waisheng (non-Beijing) cities self-taught songwriting and instrumentation through dakoued (打口, saw-gashed) CDs and badaizi (covering music).63

Actually, this marginal yet explorative situation of rock musicians was deeply conditioned in the drastic social urbanization and transformation of the time. On the one hand, the deepening level of privatization of state-owned enterprises produced a massive unemployed or laid-off population. On the other hand, after China’s entry in the WTO, Chinese governments loosened restrictions on foreign investments and trade, which not only helped ease the pressure on social unemployment, but also stimulated infrastructure development and accelerated the rate of urbanization across the country. Though China has been among the world’s fastest-growing economies, the rapid development creates new social problems, such as the widening gap between rich and poor, growing real estate speculation, the massive increase of precarious laborers of the lower classes, as well as the rampant consumer culture in large cities. Harvey refers to this trend as “Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics” and argues,

While there are several aspects of Communist Party policy that were designed to frustrate capitalist class formation, the party has also acceded to the massive proletarianization of the China’s workforce, the breaking of the ‘iron rice bowl,’ the evisceration of social protection, the imposition of user fees, the creation of flexible labor market regime, and the privatization of assets formerly held in common. It has created a social system where capitalist enterprises can both form and function freely.64

63. Qu Shuwen, “Her ‘Vocal Authority’: the Semiotic and Cultural Soundscape of Chinese Female Rock Singers’ Voices.” Social Semiotics 3, no.28 (2018), 349–70. Dakou CDs refers to the cut-out CDs and cassettes that have been gashed with a saw to prevent resale in the Western countries, but that manage to be exported to China and be resold in informal shops. For more on dakoued culture in China, see De Kloet, China with a Cut, 19–24.
64. David Harvey, The Brief History of Neoliberalism (New York: Oxford University, 2005), 150.
In view of such dramatic social transformation, rock musicians responded by withdrawing to a utopian place at Tree Village in Beijing, thanks to its cheap rent and living expenses, and the communal convenience of creating, practicing, producing and distributing music under the spirit of “underground rock.” While Tree Village was nurturing the wild and violent rock sounds such as punk and metal music, River Bar emerged in 2001 to harbor the mild and eclectic sounds influenced by the ethnic and folk music from northwestern China. Though drastically different in sounds, Tree Village and River Bar not only have certain audiences overlapped but they also share two things in common. First, both scenes were packed with waishengren (外省人, non-Beijingers) dropping out of school or made jobless in their hometowns, to learn and play music in Beijing, many of whom did not have the required temporary residence permit (暂住证). Second, the unstable, poor, precarious living conditions kept folk and rock musicians close to the life of the underclass and critical of the consequences of dramatic urbanization, such as poverty, inequality, rootlessness and alienation.

Though River Bar existed for only about two years, it nurtured many folk musicians, such as Wild Children, Zhu Fangqiong, Zhao Yiran, Zhang Qianqian, Wan Xiaoli, Xiao He, Wang Juan, Zhou Yunpeng, IZ and Bu Yi. They were referred to as the “underground and grassroots writers” and the inspirers and precursors for the new folk and folk rock in the early 2000s.

Nevertheless, commercial indifference and musical indifference of the underground musicians sometimes reiterates the folk myth that there is no distance between art and life: sincere folk expressions should be authenticated by musicians narrating their own stories, that is, stories of their private lives. As critic Li Wan argues,

What sets them apart from pop music is not only their refusal to be glamorised, but also and mostly the importance of writing one’s own songs and lyrics . . . The core of folk music is authenticity/sincerity . . . to achieve that, first, a confessional and autobiographical approach is an important strategy; second, the storytelling method needs to be sincere and not pretentious, to create a plain way of talking.

Actually, Li’s accounts of folk authenticity reflects the folk ethos in the early 1990s but fails to capture the interesting experiments with narratives and approaches to performances among folk musicians in the late 1990s, when they start to borrow vocabularies from minjian music and fuse them with those of rock and pop music. Actually, the autobiographical and confessional approach (in Ai Jing’s songs) has become increasingly rare among male singer-songwriters since the late 1990s. In new folk and folk rock, it is difficult to explicate “one’s own” when the lyrics and tunes are borrowed from collective works such as local

---

65. This period, from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, is known as the underground rock period. For details, see Shuwen Qu. 中國獨立音樂的话语流变与场景重构 [The Discursive Mapping and Scene Reconstruction of China’s Indie Music]. Literature and Art Studies 11(2017): 115–28.
66. Jun Yan, 灰飞烟灭 [Ashes to Ashes], 155–9.
67. Frith, Performing Rite, 39.
“flowers” tunes (a type of mountain song). Sincerity in songwriting has gradually been replaced by the parody in performance under the guise of a plain way of talking. The ramifications for the folk ethos further complicate the authorship of folk singer-songwriters in this period.

Like what we have mentioned, authorship is anchored not in the positioning of one author but in the negotiation of the song, performance, and real author. Following [first name] Richard Thompson’s idea on authorship, Negus asserts:

There are mediations between the real author, the song, and a performance. In authoring and presenting songs to the public, musicians are continually negotiating and quite often deliberately seeking to confl ate or contest the distinctions between on stage/off stage, public/private, artist/art work, documentary/drama, and real/imaginary.69

The uses of “mediation” and “negotiation” here hint at the core feature of authorship: it rests not on a certain figure but on the dynamic relationship between the real author, the song, and the performance. To torpedo this “dynamic relationship,” Negus suggests a strategy for unbundling “different facets of an author’s identity” into five categories of authorial voices: “narrator,” “character,” “implied author,” “persona,” and “real author.”70 The narrator is someone who tells the story, while the characters may be the “types or stereotypes” of people in the song whose identity is revealed through their actions, speech, and traits. The implied author addresses the sensibility of the song, realized through the organization of the song’s delicate vocals, melodies, and arrangements.71 The persona refers to the public image, which is constructed via both the song performance and social practice. In other words, one’s public image is present not only in the song performance, including the textual, musical, and vocal aspects, but also through one’s public identity on and off stage and within and across media. The real author can refer to one person or many people, depending on “a series of position takings” that constitute a real author’s identity in the field of cultural production.72 When a song is produced by a team of creators, the real author’s identity is realized through the collective contributions based on various sets of authorial attributes, voices and experiences.

Thus, to understand the authorship we should hear not the blurring but the collapsing of these authorial voices; we should undertake not the assumption of consonance but the exploration of tension among these voices.

Following Negus’s accounts of authorship, the folk ethos acquires new meanings when the sincere and simple troubadour of urban folk (and campus folk) changes to the sarcastic and parodic storyteller of new folk (and folk rock). If old troubadour Zhang Chu is evading an artificial persona, the new storyteller Hu Mage is purposefully embracing it; if urban folk and campus folk focus on the truthful feelings of the confessional self and urban life, new folk and folk rock offer a surrealistic depiction of the lonesome postmodern subjects and alienated urban experiences. The fractured voices illustrated in Hu Mage’s works exemplify the new authorship of folk singer-songwriters.

70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 616.
72. Ibid.
Rarely disclosing his real name, Hu Qunfen, in his two solo albums, *Everyone Has A Stool, Mine Not Taken To The Twenty-first Century* (人人都有个小板凳, 我的不带入二十一世纪; 1999) and *One Palm Killing Seven* (一巴掌打死七個; 2001), singer-songwriter Hu Mage impresses critics and fans with his experimental narratives and vocal performances. Fans of Douban believe that Hu Mage creates a new possibility for grassroots temperament and secular sensibility.73 Critic Li Wan comments on Hu’s lyrics this way:

Hu Mage’s lyrics are not lyrical, quite different from the normative folk narratives, for there are always multiple points and multiple clues in narration, with sophisticated motives and staggering directions. The words, emotions and things in the lyrics are quite different from those in common poems.74

This “secular sensibility” is achieved through visual, acoustic and narrative factors. Visually, the album jacket of *One Palm Killing Seven* depicts a faceless wooden figure in a weird dressing style, wearing a red qi̇pao (Chinese traditional one-piece dress), an oversized checked coat, and a welcoming belt with the inscription “One Palm Killing Seven.” This bizarre clothing represents an assembled image of ordinary people of different genders, cultural, and social backgrounds. Acoustically, Hu experiments with a new way of singing. Beyond any bard’s poetic fantasy, his singing switches among monologue, dialogue, murmuring, and laughing, accompanied by his spontaneous guitar playing and field recordings of kitchen noise, vendor shouts, and film dialogues. A fan named “eu” describes the rich composition of the album *One Palm Killing Seven* soundscape as follows: “A wooden guitar with hundreds of pieces of timber, specially adjusted recordings, funny and ironic falsettos, rich and complex arrangements, and idiosyncratic samplings.”75 Narratively, in *Everyone Has A Stool, Mine Not Taken To The Twenty-first Century*, Hu gives a panoramic sketch of ordinary people from different walks of life, including a migrant worker, an office worker, two Sichuan cooks and an intellectual (most of them are contemporary lower class). Hu’s preference for ordinary people and their lives can also been found in *One Palm Killing Seven* in which Eu makes a list of different characters, including a hypocritical professor in “Devil Professor” (鬼子教授), a cheating couple in “Durex no. Five” (小样杜蕾斯五号), and a laid-off worker in “Windows no. 2050” (小样 windows 2050).76 While carefully hiding himself behind these characters’ voices, Hu’s vocal tone alternates, half talking and half singing with his strong Hubei accent, between narrative points of view in the first, second, and third person, creating a theatrical parody of Chinese socio-cultural life.

For this reason, we consider Hu does not “document” the ordinary life in Groenewegen’s word77 but actually parodies the daily life. Instead of making the simple and regular records of realistic life scenes, or depicting a character in a journalistic way, Hu makes collages of
different sound materials, exaggerates the traits of the characters to make them unnatural, and creates drama in realistic scenes to problematize the relationship among different characters. In the song “Some Potatoes Enter the City” (部分土豆进城), Hu depicts an awkward conversation between an intellectual and a migrant worker,

He says I am hardworking, brave, kind, simple and have no desire, 他说我勤劳勇敢善良朴实没有欲望
He shows me an exercise book that he has written a lot of words, 他拿出一本写了很多字的练习本给我看
And plays songs not very nice but loud. He says he is one of us. 又放一些不太好听很吵的歌给我听，他说他就是我们
He notes it is a compliment, 他说那是在赞美我们
but hides a smile on the chair under his ass. 可却要把笑容垫在屁股下面的椅子上
He then mentions about “hypocrisy” or something, 他提到虚伪什么的
as well as some bad words about the city, 还说了一些城市的坏话
and I can’t understand most of the words. 好多词我都听不太懂
I can only timidly say: 只好默默地说
[in dialect] “This I can’t tell. This I really couldn’t tell.” 这个我说不好 这个我实在说不好
“This I can’t tell. This I really couldn’t tell.” 这个我说不好 这个我实在说不好

This dialogue presents uneven cultural capitals between a migrant worker and an intellectual, with the latter taking a dominant and privileged position in the conversation. The hidden smile belies the intellectual’s flamboyance of the talking. Though the migrant worker replies, “I can’t tell,” the timid tone (character) that is enveloped in Hu’s dialect (real author) and is ended with a meaning laughing (implied author), not only evokes the listeners’ sympathy with the worker but also encourages the listeners to criticize the privileged position of the intellectual. As Butler argues about the subversive potential of gender parody, “practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears a deprived, phantasmatic, and mimetic—failed copy, as it were.” Likewise, the parodic effect of this song ridicules the uneven power relationship between two social groups, creates the sympathy with those subaltern, and deconstructs the naturalized legitimacy of the privileged.

The parodic practices are the new strategy of the new folk and folk rock singer-songwriters to negotiate a polyphonic and performative soundscape, that is, the soundscape of theatrical, parodic performances of the life of the ordinary people, hooligans, buffoons, poets, intellectuals and others. The ethos of new folk and folk rock is not to hear the performer confessing his or her secrets, but to tacitly acknowledge that he or she is making up stories. This strategy can also be found in Hu’s peer musicians, such as Wan Xiaoli and Xiao He.

Indeed, this performative/inauthentic turn is at the core of the liberation of the folk singer-songwriter’s creativity in the new millennium. It frees the real author from the constraints of the folk mythology in which musicians were expected to and be credited for exposing their private lives.

We do not go so far, however, as to claim that the performance of identities is independent of the singer’s “body and/or identity.” Groenewegen comments on Xiao He’s performance, “If we peel off the different layers and frames of subjectivity like masks or clothes, we find not a naked face or body, but nothing.” Instead, we argue that the real author is still there. By peeling off different layers of the authorial voices in “Some Potatoes Entered City,” we see not the independence of the performance or the real author but the dynamic entanglement and mediation between the real author, the song, and the performance. On the one hand, Hu Mage adopts multiple roles and enjoys greater sociological autonomy in music production, making the idea of “real author” more accessible than in campus folk. On the other hand, authorship in folk rock is actually more complex and involves more conflicting authorial voices, because these singer-songwriters adopt, perform, experiment with, and migrate between different authorial voices in their narratives and performances. More importantly, the rich and parodic voices performed through singular images reveal the self-reflexivity and criticality of new folk and folk rock singer-songwriters who are freed from the constraint of confessional authorship to experiment with the narrative and performative possibility. Thus, Hu Mage distances himself from the previous “anonymous generation” who failed to find out “where to go.” Rather, Hu and his peers bravely dive into the world of anonymity, observing and parodying suppressed voices, ridiculing and interrogating the existing relationship, trying and experimenting with different identities, uncovering and telling (sur-)realistic stories, and emphasizing the experience and desire of many ordinary people. Also, home—for urban folk and campus folk, either an embraced new place in city or an escaped old land at hometown—occupies an in-between space in cities for new folk and folk rock. In Hu Mage’s “Two Sichuan Cooks in the Bar” (两个川厨在酒吧), two Sichuan cooks’ anxiety and complaint over the eaters’ growing interest in Shanghai cuisines over Sichuan dishes is finally appeased, when the two cooks imagine driving their tractors to the moonlight and frog choir until they slept. Home is not an either/or physical place but an imagined space resting between urban city and rural land.

Scenius

Almost at the same period that folk rock regenerated the folk ethos with more grassroots and dialectic expressions, another folk sub-genre, ethnic folk, emerged, greatly expanding the geographic imagination of folk music and laying the foundation for the third type of folk authorship: the scenius approach, adopted by world music solo musicians. World music, as a genre created for commercial promotion, emerged in China in the mid-1990s with the release of Sister Drum by Zhu Zheqin (Dadawa) and He Xuntian. Following Zhu Zheqin, Sa Dingding updated the expression of Tibetan culture and blended it with multicultural influences from Tibetan Buddhism, Sanskrit, and other ethnic minorities. It was not until the late 2000s that world music became more popular and many bands/artists emerged to play in major international world music festivals, such as Gangzi, Hanggai, Haya, Shan Ren, Mamuer, Xiao He, Song Yuzhe, and Wu Na, even though seventy percent of China’s world music market is said to be dominated by Mongolian musicians and bands and to lack

versatile expressions from other ethnic minority groups. Unlike Mongolian bands’ usual quest for Mongolian identity, the scenius approach, characterized by the artistic efforts of Song Yuzhe, Xiao He, Mamuer, and Li Daiguo, represents another stream of world music in China since the late 2000s. We focus on this stream not only because it regenerates the meaning of folk authorship, but also because it echoes the emerging social psychology of the growing new nationalism.

World music in China is based on ethnic folk which includes folk instrumentation, folk tunes, and local ditties. The “national recollection plans” of the Cultural Revolution recalled folk songs in ethnic regions, providing a rich inspiration for the development of contemporary folk music, such as “songs for educated youth” in the 1970s and prison songs in the 1980s.81 Contrary to the personal quests of the aforementioned four folk subgenres, ethnic folk musicians resort to collective and leftist tradition for expression, with pioneering ethnic folk musicians, such as He Li, Hong Qi, Zhang Zhi and Ma Tiao who are from northern or northwestern parts of China. “Idyllic perfection” and “root seeking” are the common themes of the ethnic folk music.82 The narratives of these songs are expressed in an impersonal or plural form, that is, the collective “we” and “you.” Personal affairs are diluted and sublimated by a passionate love of nature and beauty, and there is a strong feeling of alienation against urbanization and idyllic longing for hometowns, which is vividly shown in the folk song Yellow River Ballad by Wild Children. The lyrics are as follows:

Yellow River keeps rolling
It passes home and the city of Lanzhou
Moon shines over the iron bridge
I sing to the Yellow River
Whenever I wake up
I miss home and the city of Lanzhou
The fragrance of the sophora flower
And the goodness of my girl
Yellow River keeps rolling


81. During the “Up the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement” of the late 1960s and early 1970s, educated urban youth were sent to mountainous areas or farming villages to be re-educated by farmers and workers. Being away from home and separated from their loved ones, educated youth composed new songs or rewrote the lyrics of old songs to express their sorrow and bewilderment. These songs were called “songs for educated youth.” As the depressing thoughts and private emotions expressed were not in line with the dominant ideology, “songs for educated youth” were not allowed to appear during formal occasions. It was not until the late 1980s that “songs for educated youth” resurfaced (Li Chunbo being a representative figure) and were absorbed into popular music (prison songs, in particular). For more details, see Jun Yan, 灰飞烟灭 [Ashes to Ashes], 156.

82. Groenewegen categorizes four strategies for claiming folk authenticity in folk rock and ethnic folk: idyllic perfection, Bohemianism, documenting (Li Zhi and Hu Mage), and root seeking (Wide Children). He identifies idyllic perfection as the politics of city dwellers moaning for the loss of the countryside (Hong Qi); Bohemianism as the intellectual tradition of folk renditions of poems (Zhou Yunpeng); documentation as the approach of recording dialect songs, street sounds, and barns; and root seeking as the adaption of northwestern Chinese folk tunes. These approaches exhibit overlaps. Groenewegen, “The Performance of Identity,” 89.
It passes home and the city of Lanzhou 流过了家，流过了兰州
Vagabond keeps singing and singing 流浪的人不停地唱
Singing that ballad of Yellow River 唱着那黄河谣

The lyrics of this song are adapted from a traditional folk song that Wild Children collected during their travels in the northwestern part of China in the early 2000s. The first pronoun “I” represents less a confessional individual and more an impersonal collective pronoun referring to any modern vagabond who leaves the country and lives in the city. In the performance of this song the lead singer’s voice is submerged in the collective and forceful singing of the band members, which foregrounds an allied collectivism under the melancholy of missing home and idyllic nostalgia. More importantly, the collectivism of Wilder Children can be seen not only in their brotherhood and united performance on stage but also in their boy-gang communal practice of running the “River” bar and making music together.

Here, the aesthetic and sociological creativity of ethnic folk music mentioned above lays the foundation for the scenius efforts later adopted by world music solo musicians, such as Xiao He, Huan Qing, Mamuer, Lin Di, and Song Yuzhe.83 They played in rock bands in the early 2000s and became solo musicians to perform either in bands or as singer-songwriters. The transformation of their musical identity was generally based on their travels, their collection and archiving of folk songs and tunes in remote areas of China for many years. Following the collective and impersonal ethos of ethnic folk, the scenius approach of world musicians, such as Song Yuzhe and Li Daiguo, further complicates the issue of folk authorship and the folk ethos through a seemingly individualistic approach.

The term “scenius” was coined by musician and producer Brian Eno and was further developed by Will Straw in his study of the influence of dance music on rock authorship. He asserts that the original rock “genius” has been replaced by the “scenius”, that is, the collective creative force producing “movement in particular directions and leaving individual contributions to that movement to be seen as minor and transitory.”84 The genius inscribes the musician’s personality in music, while the scenius pastes various music texts on the musician’s personality. In other words, the authorship of scenius approach is reinforced by the musical and sociological layers of authorial voices, embracing multilayered personas and non-singular real authors in music-making. The musicians can easily fit into other music projects or music gigs and not be limited to a fixed music genre or a stable musical position. As such, if the urban folk troubadour sets his or her feet in a fixed boundary of text and space, the scenius travels intertextually and deterritorially.

First, the scenius approach expands the aesthetic aspect of authorship. Singer-songwriters are considered less as real authors than as bodies of deposits, as a result of their constant

83. Xiao He started his alternative rock band Perfect Pharmacy 美好药店 in early 2000, but later entered the folk scene to become a pioneering figure. Song Yuzhe also played in a rock band first, but later switched to his world music project Dawanggang 大忘杠 in collaboration with various musicians.

84. Straw examines how British musical celebrity Norman Cook changes his name for different music genres, which in turn adds asset value to his name. Will Straw, “Authorship,” in Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture, ed. Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 207.
negotiations with other texts or music inputs. Musicians are not the creators of music texts but the inscribers of the spectacle. This idea of the scenius echoes Attali’s concept of the “spectacle of the body,” or the body as the attribution of the European vagabond (jongleur) in the Middle Ages. This deserves to be quoted at length:

The jongleur had no fixed employment; he moved from place to place, offering his services in private residences. He was music and the spectacle of the body. He alone created it, carried it with him, and completely organized its circulation within society... The jongleurs played from memory, an unvaried selection of melodies of their own composition, either very old peasant dances drawn from all over Europe and the Near East, or songs by noblemen or men of letters. If a melody was popular, numerous texts were based on it. All these styles functioned essentially within the same structures and were used interchangeably by the jongleurs, who effected a permanent circulation between popular music and court music.

Jongleur in Attali’s terms refers to the music itself, and more importantly, the “spectacle of body.” The jongleur is not narrating stories about himself, but the spectacle, an organized place and time in his memory. The music is imprinted onto the memory of his itinerant travelling as a result of a cultural circulation and a spontaneous collage. While the idyllic vagabonds who are obsessed with their hometowns, the final designation of the music is far from clear for jongleurs.

World music singer-songwriter Song Yuzhe is a jongleur in the exploration of musical intertextuality. Song started playing in punk and rock bands during the underground period. Out of total frustration with underground rock’s hope of changing the society, he left the rock scene and expanded his musical knowledge and experience by traveling and learning various types of folk music from different social and musical backgrounds, especially the oral tradition in the ethnic regions in North and Northwest China. With these experiences, he released the album Wild Tune Stray Rhythm (荒腔走板) with the famous world music label Jaro in Germany in 2013. Jaro’s official page introduces Song Yuzhe and his music project Dawanggang this way:

Dawanggang... Philosophical stories and poems about animals, children or wizards, embedded in musical textures from guitar, horse-head-fiddle, ghijek, throat-singing, jaw harp, drums, percussion and samples, combined and played in ever-new variations... Dawanggang blows up borders between Singer-Songwriter, Asian folklore, multi-ethnic Sound-Art, Chinese opera and contemporary rock.

This short introduction sketches out the musical intertextuality of Song’s works. Song mixes different literary genres, stirs up the conventional orchestration of folk instruments, and

85. Attali, Noise, 14.
86. Ibid.
87. The underground period refers to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when regional records left Mainland China and small local records emerged. Non-Beijing rock musicians gathered in Beijing to adopt a Bohemian and collective way of music making. Both rock musicians and labels negotiated the “explorative” modes with the music industry. See the “parody” section and fn 65.
crosses the border of fixed identity and art forms. The music emphasizes direction rather than destination, and deterritorialization is at stake rather than the authority and origin of the music materials.

Like the jongleur, Songs’ body is the transitory deposit of time and space embodied in music that is borrowed and absorbed later by other jongleurs. This point is best illustrated by Song’s live performance, when he prefers to explain his thoughts and approaches to the music-making process. In March 2013, one of the authors attended a Song Yuzhe show called “Eight winds blowing away the lotus” (八风嚎散了坐金莲) at Shenzhen Old Heaven bookstore. During the performance, Song Yuzhe explained his band Dawanggang as follows:

Dawanggang is not a personal thing but the result of unofficial and free cultural circulation with other ethnic musicians. Music is made along the journey, in the tent, train and on the hills. I am just a small character if you by chance capture my shadow in it.89

The only instrument he used that night was a handmade “eight-string banjo,” comprising a banjo equipped with pipa strings and a horsehead. The instrument sounds like a pipa when unplugged but manages to produce bass and electric guitar sounds when plugged into five effect pedals. Song Yuzhe had his own interpretation of these do-it-yourself eight strings. According to him, the eight strings represented the eight immortals 八仙 in Chinese mythology. While the theme of the show originated from poet Su Dongpo’s poem “Eight winds do not shake the purple-gold lotus,”90 Song Yuzhe made a reverse version of the poem, implying that the tenacious power of the winds affected people’s minds. At the same time, he used his signature distorted vocals and forceful banjo strumming to create a mournful musical sensibility. The song performance sounded as if the real author was battling the “eight winds” with Song’s banjo and singing, moaning for the alienation and deterioration of good spirituality in society.

Just as Song Yuzhe assembled his eight-string banjo instrument with materials from different resources, he re-appropriated local ditties, Xiqu and northwestern folklores, and ethnic music instrumentation into his works and performances. The song “White Cap” (白帽子) is a good example here, a collage of different times, spaces, and texts. Song explained that he stole the melody from a Kazakh musician’s Mamur and mixed it with the lyrics “Ten Words”（十字） that he overheard years later from a group of old men singing “gansu mihu” (甘肃省, a type of traditional folk songs in Gansu province) in Dunhuang. Obviously, Song is not so much the originator of the music text as a social author of the thickening process. His music is the “spectacle of body” inscribed with multiple, fragmented, ambiguous, and open-ended texts/voices/images.

89. Quote from his comments during the show in March 2013 in Shenzhen.
90. This is from a literary allusion to Su Dongpo’s poem. The poet Su Dongpo wrote a poem to Buddha to express his meditation of Buddhism. It reads “Almighty Buddha is glowing over the land, and eight winds cannot break his purple-gold lotus” (稽首天中天，毫光照大千，八风吹不动，端坐紫金莲). He sent his attendant to give the poem to Buddha across the river. The “eight winds” refer to “praise, ridicule, slander, repute, benefit, misfortune, joy, and bitterness.” Buddha, however, replied, “Bullshit.” This made Su Dongpo very angry, so he crossed the river to confront Buddha. Buddha answered, “If eight winds do not shake you, why bother to cross the river for a fart?”
Second, the scenius approach of the singer-songwriter also points to the sociological aspect of authorship. The scenius is a collective force that allows musicians to move across music projects, switching roles as singer, guitarist, and bassist. Song Yuzhe and Xiao He are free to work with other bands as drummers or guitarists. They do not permanently belong to a band or occupy a fixed musical position. In Song Yuzhe’s music project *Dawanggang*, the normative band includes an Indian singer, a horsehead fiddle player,91 and saxophonist Li Tieqiao; but these people are subject to changes according to varied themes and performance contexts.

The scenius practices, however, do not erase Song’s role as “social author.” According to Toynbee, the prime job of “social authors” is to solicit a collective surplus from musicians.92 An effective social author can select, edit, and integrate creative works and forces as a social organizer. Song expects his folk music project to abandon the narrative and perspective of “I,” or the singular self, in its musical expression. He is not interested in finding himself any more than he did in his early days playing rock in Mutuigua 木推瓜 in the early 2000s. When one of the authors asked him if he considered himself as the author of these music projects, he asserted that he took on sixty to seventy percent of the creative jobs and played the central role of the thematic narrator of *Dawanggang*’s works. But he hoped there would be no author for *Dawanggang* in the near future when it evolved into a bigger creative project.93 Song Yuzhe outlines his idea of the “social author” this way:

I hope *Dawanggang*, as an open and unfixed music space, goes on even without me. What matters is the sound . . . for instance, in *Wild Tune Stray Rhythm*, everyone can improvise based on a simple theme in different performances. It would be fine if someone went astray in his or her creation.94

Indeed *Dawanggang* is not entirely unfixed because Song Yuzhe explains that the project is based on three themes: the Himalayas theme, the “Aşık” theme, and the “Liberating No Man’s Land” theme. Scenius counts on these themes for musicians to improvise and create together. Thus, social author still exists for editorial control, even though scenius expands the repertoire of real authors, the possibility of musical texts, the scope of performances, and the imagination of spaces.

More importantly, among these themes, Song’s scenius approach is deeply connected to the “Hikaye” oral culture tradition in Central Asia under the strong musical influence of Kazakh ethnic groups in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Ethnomusicologist Wei Xiaoshi notes that the singing wanderers of eastern Turkey are called “Aşık” who accompany their songs with a lute, and their songs are usually adapted from the Turkish epic story (also known as Hikaye). Instead of resorting to a definite origin, every Aşık strives to develop his unique adaptation and performance of the Hikaye with half of the original story

---

91. Horsehead fiddle, also known as the morin khuur, is a traditional Mongolian bowed stringed instrument.
93. Email Interview with Song Yuzhe in February 2014.
94. Ibid.
and half of his life story. Inspired by the “Aşk” spirit, Song Yuzhou’s musical endeavor crosses the geographical boundaries of the ethnic group and country. Dawanggang depicts a lonesome man traveling in the desolate lands of China and Asia, but home is neither located in the fixed perimeter of an urban city or country nor in the total deterritorialization of national boundaries, but in the collage and assemblage of Chinese and Asian spaces. In a sense, this deterritorialization and reconnection of spaces marks a difference with the ethnic folk of the early 1990s, when Baranovitch notes that ethnic folk musicians tried to strike a balance between the “separatist” and “integration” ideologies. Whereas world music is neither drawn to this dualist ideology nor keen on a fixed ethnic identity but rather negotiates a fluid, interconnected and transnational ethnicity, that is, Chinese multi-ethnicity and Asian imaginary exemplified in Song’s scenius endeavors. This partial deterritorialization can also be conceptualized in part in Ho’s view of China’s new nationalism in the post-socialist era, that is, to integrate China into the international arena and embrace “economic nationalism in an overall transnational orientation.”

After Wild Tune Stray Rhythm, Song released his next album Collection of Short Broken Songs (断歌集). The introduction of the album reads, “Traveling in search of music, one collects words and scattered melodies whose meanings don’t need to be dwelt on, and whose essence can be concentrated in short songs, I call them broken songs.” Even though Achilles Sourlas, the co-producer of the album, is excited about the mixing of exotic sounds in the album, as he writes,

What makes a difference is the incorporation of field recordings, meticulously collected over a decade from places with distinctive cultural identities such as Xinjiang and Tibet. These are transformed into structural elements of every song and are strategically placed in-between sections, intros, openings and solos. The result is a rich—and to me, as a Westerner, definitely exotic!”

Song Yuzhe, however, demonstrates his critical attitude towards the danger of self-orientalism and exoticism. Guilbaut has argued about the “resisting” potential of world music to challenge dominant Anglo-American music aesthetics and institutions through manipulating rhythm, speed, mixing, and lyrics. This album challenges the established norms of Western-oriented world music, such as not setting the exotic melody in the rhythmic context of evenly divided electronic dance music. Unlike the usual instrumentation that includes drums, brass, and synthesizers, the album features Chinese short poems accompanied by a solo banjo guitar, and instruments of ethnic minority groups. In the song “Gan Zhanzi” 鍾担子, Song’s forceful

---

singing is combined with a mix of field recordings of slow chanting, ringing school bells, and the mechanical repetition of the Mandarin school’s gymastics broadcast. We can feel the incompatibility of the field recordings and grasp the uneasiness of the musical atmosphere through Song’s bitter and suppressed singing voice.

4. CONCLUSION

The singer-songwriter is a recurring theme in popular music because, as a discourse and format, it creatively expands and complicates the authorship of popular music. Shuker asserts that "the concept of the auteur (broadly, author or creator) stands at the pinnacle of a pantheon of performers and their work." As the production of popular music is likely to be a more affordable and accessible activity than film production for individuals, it is much easier to pin down the creative process to one person. The singular authoritative image of the singer-songwriter, who is actually at the intersection of various authorial voices, produces a heightened investment in, and heterogeneous bundling of, authorship. This is the critical factor in rethinking China’s folk singer-songwriters, although they share similarities with Chinese traditional quyi singers in terms of autonomous songwriting and instrumentation. But while quyi singers embrace the disjuncture of roles, by jumping in and out of the roles of narrator, character, singer, and performer, the contemporary singer-songwriter sutures the gaps between roles and voices. Thus, our analysis first navigates the tradition of the singer-songwriter and offers a theoretical framework for rethinking the discourse of singer-songwriter at the global level. Then, its unfolding of multilayered singer-songwriters’ voices provides an alternative lens for rethinking China’s folk ethos.

The self-reliant presence and entrepreneurial image of singer-songwriters reflects the rising entrepreneurialism in China’s music industry, with singer-songwriters integrating more and more creative jobs. The exploration of folk authorship illustrates an expanding possibility and intense interaction of voices, narratives, and performances, and a growing interest in local musical culture. Specifically, folk authorship shifted from confession in the early 1990s to parody in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and to the scenius in the late 2000s. Campus folk and urban folk in the early 1990s witnessed the textual autonomy of songwriting under the stardom packaging of confessional singer-songwriters. While the emergence of independent and confessional singer-songwriters echoed the growing fantasy of consumerism among the urban bourgeoisie and white collars, it also reflected the anxiety and confusion of city dwellers and migrant workers. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, folk singer-songwriters were much more liberated in aesthetic experimentation and negotiated additional space for songwriting and

performances. The narrative space was less obsessed with personal stories and private emotions, but more with the heterogeneous voices and theatrical performances of ordinary people from different social backgrounds. Moreover, sincere confessions were complicated by ironic performances. The diverse yet contradictory voices presented through singular images reflected the emergence of a fragmented self in the face of drastic changes in Chinese society. Since the late 2000s, due to massive globalization and increasing urbanization, the scenius encourages musicians to free themselves from the constraints of personal sentiments to express intertextually and travel deterritorially in the spectacle of texts, voices, instruments, and landscapes. In this process, the scenius authorship embraces the sensibility of “aesthetic cosmopolitanism,” not only through encounters with foreign cultures, but also by revisiting the local history to express the ethno-national uniqueness.

REFERENCES


Yang, Heping. 中国歌种 [Chinese Folk Song]. Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory Publisher, 2011.


