

Lijuan Qian¹

¹Affiliation not available

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Abstract

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The articulation of humanism is a recurrent theme in various Chinese literature and arts over the history. One of such well-known cases is the classic novel *Journey to the West* (*Xi you ji*) dates from the 16th Century which stresses the issues of freedom, fighting with the authorities, the loss of belief, and the importance of self-direction. Various adapted versions from this novel popular over since then which hinted strong desire to humanism expression under China's tight central governance. The recent interpretation of nationwide impacted products is an online novel *The Wu Kong's Biography* (*Wukong zhuan*, written by Zeng Yu, pseudonym Jin Hezai, 2000) which adding the ambitions to challenge the authorities, an imaginary compensation of the young people in China (Liao, 2017). The great popularity of the novel leads to the release of its film version *Wu Kong* in 2017. Even the theme song of this movie "Equaling Heaven" (music and sung by Hua Chenyu, lyrics by Jin Hezai) brings a real hit in Chinese popular music scene. It was performed by Tibetan singer Zahi Bingzuo, the 2017 winner of *The Voice of China* in his final song-battle in that show (Qian, 2017: 57-8) and then Hua Chenyu in the TV talent show *Singer* (*Geshou*) in 2018. The humanism articulation of the song, same as in the novels and movie, shown well in the song: When I were young and wild, were worthy of it, who would give me a belief? ... I could still smile before dawn... ignore the fate decided by the god and I would say the fate follows my heart. 1 Humanist articulations are part of a trend in Chinese pop song that dates back to the 1980s, when that genre first reappeared as an indigenous entertainment genre within China itself. As a transitional phrase during which multiple pre-existing and newly emerging social

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When I were young and wild, were worthy of it, who would give me a belief? ... I could still smile before dawn... ignore the fate decided by the god and I would say the fate follows my heart.¹

Humanist articulations are part of a trend in Chinese pop song that dates back to the 1980s, when that genre first re-appeared as an indigenous entertainment genre within China itself. As a transitional phrase during which multiple pre-existing and newly emerging social, political, and cultural forces came into negotiation with one other, it's not surprising that the pop songs of this time drew on varied musical and cultural inspirations.² Indeed the ideas of humanism were actively brought forward by two generations of pop musicians, one middle-aged and the other younger, as an articulation of their own generational identities.³ This chapter aims to explore the contribution these pop musicians made in seeking to balance self-expressiveness and political engagement in a nation gradually materializing from a long revolutionary period but not yet fully integrated into cultural and commercial globalization. I ask, how did they narrate humanist issues such as personal choice, the questioning of one's beliefs, and the role of self-direction in pop songs?

The Rise of Humanism in 1980s' China

The 1980s was a decade that saw Chinese intellectuals place great emphasis on new practices in cultural fields. The wider attempt to push China into modernization drove the intellectuals to search for the cultural causes which had led to backwardness in the economy, politics, science and technology (Gan, 2006: 4). Among the various types of cultural ethos that exerted the main influence on Chinese intellectuals and associated musicians were an existing Marxist humanism and the newly imported existential humanism of Jean-Paul Sartre (Lin and Li, 1994).

Sartre characterizes existential humanism as “the relation of transcendence as constitutive of man with subjectivity”, adding that “what is at the very heart and centre of existentialism, is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realises himself in realising a type of humanity” (1973: 47). The Chinese translators of Sartre's work argued that existential humanism encouraged and inspired European intellectuals spiritually to recover from the trauma of World War II (Zhou and Tang 1988: 2), hinting that it might hold the same function for Chinese intellectuals after their long suffering during the Cultural Revolution. Much literature produced during the period, particularly the movement of Scar Literature (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学), echoed this ideological trend, showing a “creative self” and the expression of an “un-alienated” human nature (*renxing*) (Wang, 1996: 32, 34). Instances include the novels *A Teacher in Charge of a Class* (*Banzhuren*) (Liu, 1979) and *Stones in the Wall* (*Ren a, ren*) (Dai, 1980).

Moreover, the juxtaposition of individualism in existential humanism and collectivism in Marxism humanism appears as the main characteristic in the humanist articulation in the field of culture. As pointed out by Barmé, “during the 1980s, the issue of individualism—the philosophical and political importance of the autonomous self—enjoyed only a short period of relatively open contention. And the nature of doubting the party systems provoked government bans and denunciations from 1983 onwards” (1999: 239). Chinese readers from the beginning learned that Sartre's philosophy was controversial. For instance, it propagated self-transcendence and self-realization, emphasizing subjectivity rather than the objectivity of the Marxist humanism dominant in China (Wang, 1996: 28). Those radical intellectuals who advocated existential humanism thus aroused severe criticism from those responsible for orthodox ideological policy. No matter the underlying difference between Marxist and existential humanist ideologies, the main tendency was for Chinese intellectuals in this decade to turn to humanism as a means of helping them relieve their memories of suffering and to emancipate from their own alienated selves.

The Rise of Humanism in 1980s' Chinese Pop Songs

Composer Fu Lin who was active in Chinese popular music since the 1980s described the composers in his generation were used to write songs with “conceptual words” (*gainian ci*).⁴ Fu's notion of “conceptual words” here has a double meaning. It has a strong association with the symbolic words used in revolutionary songs, for instance, the revolutionary youth very often used the symbolism of the sun to hint at their passion for Chairman Mao (Wagner 1995). Its second meaning points to Chinese traditional literati aesthetics, where it was also customary to objectify emotions through use of such metaphors. Such an example is found in the song “The Sentiment of the Leaves for the Root” (*Lüye dui gende qingyi*, 1986; Ex 1).

Ex 1 Excerpt of Lyrics from “The Sentiment of the Leaves for the Root”⁵

Do not ask me where I am going,	<i>Buyao wen wo dao nali qu,</i>
my heart is longing for you; ...	<i>wode xin yizhe ni; ...</i>
I am one of your leaves,	<i>Wo shi nide yi pian lüye,</i>
My root is in your soil,	<i>wode gen zai nide tudi,</i>

To this point, Fu understood the rock song “I Have Nothing” (*Yi wu suo you* , 1986; Ex 2) from Cui Jian, the most influential rock musician in the 1980s, as signifying a breakthrough in the way of expressing emotion from “conceptual words” to direct “outcry”. Although Cui himself has stated that “I Have Nothing” is merely a male-female love song, this piece was widely taken by Chinese scholars as emblematic of humanist expression in the pop song of the 1980s, pointing to its messages of human nature, existence, and self-consciousness.⁶ It was also taken by several Western scholars as a marginal cultural expression which contained an anti-state message. For instance, Baranovitch interprets the title phrase “I Have Nothing” as the articulation of spiritual and material impoverishment of Cui’s disillusioned generation (2003: 32-33), and Jones hears it as an allegory of the deprivation of the generation’s emotional and political rights (1992: 137).

Ex 2 Excerpt of Lyrics from “I Have Nothing” (Ling, 1994: 409)

I want to give you my aspiration,	<i>Wo yao gei ni wode zhuiqu,</i>
and my freedom,	<i>haiyou wode ziyou.</i>
but you always laugh at me,	<i>ke ni que zongshi xiao wo,</i>
saying I have nothing.	<i>yi wu suo you.</i>

Yet, in pointing to Cui as countercultural antihero and breakthrough songwriter, current research apparently neglects several pre-existing and newly emergent pop song genres which also signal the rise of humanism in the decade. Compared to an older generation who had been taught to devote themselves to serve the nation at the expense of personal sacrifice, the young generation appeared to doubt the meaning of this devotion after exposed to the influence of Western humanism. The various newly emerged song genres during the period stand as a new way for young musicians to articulate humanism in their understanding. Significantly, these songs mostly appeared within mainstream expressive culture and attempted “positive” political engagement. The examples given in this chapter are a pop-style lyrical song (*shuqing gequ*)⁷ “Blood-Stained Dignity” (*Xue rande fengcai*),⁸ a public welfare song (*gongyi gequ*) “Fill the World with Love” (*Rang shijie chongman ai*), and a Northwest wind song (*Xibei feng*) “My Beloved Hometown” (*Wo reliande guxiang*).⁹

Signaling Humanist Transition: “Blood-Stained Dignity”

“Blood-Stained Dignity” was a state-commissioned song written in 1986 to commemorate the soldiers who died in the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979-89). Instead of the middle-aged musicians usually assigned to write official songs, it was written by two young men, the musician Su Yue and the lyricist Chen Zhe. Chen had lost a close friend in this war. For this reason, the lyrics had actually been finished before the song was formally commissioned.¹⁰ The content of the song can be read as a conversation between a couple about to be separated (Ex 3). In verse 1, the man (soldier) comforts his partner, telling her not to be sorrowful if he dies because he will have devoted his love to his country. In verse 2, the woman answers she will not be sad if it happens because she understands his devotion.

Ex 3 Excerpt from “Blood-Stained Dignity” (Li, 1992: 183-184)

I may not be back anymore after I say goodbye, Can you understand?	I may not be back anymore after I say goodbye, Can you understand?
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Unlike those songs in typical official category, “Blood-Stained Dignity” keeps a gentle and calm tone to narrate the mood of its military subject. More conventionally in revolutionary films and songs, such themes are treated affirmatively and forcibly through vigorous sound and exaggerated images, suggesting that heroic triumph is about to unfold from concerted action. Yet China has a long history of describing a wider set of heroic archetypes and valuing the spiritual qualities of a real hero. In 96 BCE, for instance, the historian Sima Qian wrote in the “Biographies of Assassins” (*Cike liezhuan*) section of the *Record of the Historian* (*Shiji*): “The desolate gale freezes River Yi. The doomed hero has made his death wish” (1989: 895). This death wish is expressed in a very calm and elegant way in “Blood-Stained Dignity”, as its lyricist Chen Zhe explained:

I thought, don’t be so stupid, don’t be so false, people are not so noble. They just do what they have to do. It [going to the battlefield] was for our home [nation], for everyone... In such a moment, the strong power which belongs to a man is revealed, very plain, but very determined. After the Tiananmen demonstrations, I realized that it was a kind of high, lofty human nature which the Chinese people pursued at that time.¹³

If many soldiers in the front line of the war thought this song expressed the real feeling and meaning they experienced when they faced death, the song’s combination of authentic-seeming human expression and message of lofty beliefs in fighting for justice endowed it with a blurred patriotic meaning that extended beyond its original propaganda function in the Sino-Vietnamese war and allowed singers and listeners alike to draw new meanings overtime from the second section of its lyrics: “If it happens, do not be sorrowful, the flag of the republic shows our blood-stained dignity.” For instance, in the 1989 Tiananmen demonstration, when soldiers and students fought one another, both groups sang this song, each believing that they were sacrificing themselves for the greater benefit of the nation.¹⁴

In the social background of the mid- and late 1980s, using a grief-stricken tone to express patriotism, not only brought the memory of Chinese audiences to the suffering they had endured during the Cultural Revolution, but also functioned as a way for them to question the unacceptable realities of the present. Feeling sorrow for the decline of the nation rather than for individual suffering is obviously based on traditional Chinese literati ideology and values. The intellectual groups were worried by both the backward economy, as compared to the Western world, and by the decline in culture, as compared to China’s previous history. The highly controversial TV documentary series *River Elegy* (*He shang*, Su and Wang, 1988) explains why they conceived this pessimistic and sorrowful mood.

Nowadays, the intellectuals are finally getting rid of the stigma of the “Stinking Ninth”¹⁵ (*chou laojiu*). Their social status seems much higher than before. But poor economic conditions and spiritual depression and distortion still accompany them. Did spiritual depression result from the turbulent modern history or the poverty and backwardness during recent decades? They may not be the only causes. Behind them, it is the spiritual pain of the nation. The whole pain is for the decline of civilization (Episode 3 “*Ling guang*” (Spiritual light) in *River Elegy*).¹⁶

Finding an Universal Language: “Fill the World with Love”

Also an officially approved song, “Fill the World with Love” was written to celebrate the International Year of Peace in 1986, directly inspired by the US pop song “We Are the World” (1985) and the succeeding Taiwanese version “Tomorrow Will Be Better” (*Mingtian hui geng hao*, 1985). The head editor of China Audio and Video Head Office (Zhongguo luyin luxiang chubanshe), Wu Haigang, invited a composition group to write lyrics for this purpose. The assigned composition team copied the aim of raising money for public welfare and the group-singing format of these two song examples.¹⁷ This song was designed to be performed by 108 pop singers, the first time a big group of pop singers had gathered together in any such official performance (You, 2019: 346).¹⁸

Its published notation names five lyricists: apart from Chen Zhe, lyricist of “Blood-Stained Dignity” as overall coordinator, Guo Feng gave advice on revisions, Sun Ming and Xiao Lin each contributed to several lines of Part I of the song, and Wang Jian,¹⁹ the only middle-aged composer in the team, provided a draft, of which only the title was finally retained (Lin, 1994: 665). The practice of “collective composition” was commonly found during the Cultural Revolution and refers to multiple meanings in the Chinese context, but its prime aim is to avoid any the emergence of a distinctive musical style belonging to any particular composer or area and thereby enhance its supposedly universal national characteristics as an official song.

Because four out of five composition members are young musicians, this song was positioned as an articulation of the young generation during the mid-1980s. Following a long period of spiritual suffering during the Cultural Revolution and in the quickly changing social transformations that ensued in the subsequent Opening-up, China was really in a period when Chinese needed to introspect on the past and look for spiritual guidance as to where they should go.²⁰ The young generation conceived the feeling of loss and the need for self-comfort and self-direction. Chen Zhe added his own words on this point:

At that time, [the spirit] of young people was wandering.... [The revolutionary faith of] Mao Zedong was gone and the new belief hadn’t been set yet.... The temporary small shops run by entrepreneurs crowded across the square outside People’s Hall. They hosted different exhibitions and sold clothes. That was the general scene at the time. That means all things belonging to the past were gone. Unlike today, at that time, you were not someone, you were nothing.²¹

To accommodate these thoughts, this song was designed as a large-scale song suite of minutes, far longer than the average pop song (Ex 7). Its overall structure of three parts could be heard as a narrative of a whole experience of the transitional period. Part I expresses retrospection on past experience, referring to the Cultural Revolution. Here words like “far away”, “decades before”, and “the past is already behind” refer to the attitude of the young generation towards a painful collective memory, suggesting people’s spirits were gradually recovering from the destructiveness of the Cultural Revolution. Part II opens with a very soft and delicate description of the people’s efforts at mutual comfort, which points out the needs of the current generation. Use of a chorus suggests the role of social cohesion in helping the young generation heal the gloomy memories of the past, and shares their experiences more collectively with audiences who may have had common experiences. Part III uses a lively tone to depict a future scenario in which everyone will share true love. Here the sentence “let the world fill with true love” is repeated several times, to stress the main theme of conceiving love to finish the whole narrative.

In contrast to official songs of a previous era that loudly declaim hate (for class enemies or other targets) or love (for Communist leaders or labor heroes), the song relied on gentle, calm means of expression. In Part II, for example, the instrumentation maintained a quiet and soft feeling, avoiding a dense texture or a loud, strong arrangement in the melody.²² A four-bar introduction on the piano gives a sequence on three descending pentatonic scale steps. Verse I—sung by all the children and female singers—keeps a very stable and smooth vocal line, over a simple piano accompaniment providing an arpeggio at the end of each word. The melody and arrangement of the interlude are the same as those of the introduction. String instruments play sustained chords on the first beat of every measure. As a whole, all the music, arrangement, and vocal style contributes to sustaining the intended soft, gentle and smooth feeling.

Ex 7 “Fill the World with Love” (Lin, 1994: 667-670)

Part I

(Verse)

When I think back, it seems far away,	<i>Xiangqilai shi nayang yaoyuan,</i>
as if it happened decades before,	<i>fangfu dou yishi congqian,</i>
the dream has never been broken,	<i>na buceng pomiede menghuan,</i>
it is still deep inside my heart.	<i>yiran yincangzai xinjian.</i>
Who is it calling without words,	<i>Shi shui zai momo huhuan,</i>
triggering the passion in our hearts,	<i>jiqile xinzhongde bolan,</i>
we may never realize,	<i>yeru hai cong wei ganjue,</i>
the past is already behind us.	<i>women yijing zouguo zuotian.</i>

(Chorus)

O, year by year,	<i>O, yinian you yinian,</i>
we move toward tomorrow,	<i>o, women zou xiang mingtian, ...</i>

...

Part II

(Verse)

Gently placing my hands on your face,	<i>Qingqingde pengzhe nide lian,</i>
to wipe away your tears;	<i>wei ni ba yanlei ca gan;</i>
my heart belongs to you forever,	<i>zhe ke xin yongyuan shuyu ni,</i>
which tells me I am not alone.	<i>gaosu wo buzai gudan.</i>
Gazing deeply in your eyes,	<i>Shenshende ningwang nide yan,</i>
without needing to say any more;	<i>bu xuyao gengduode yuyan;</i>
holding your hand tightly,	<i>jinjinde wozhu nide shou,</i>
this warmth still does not change.	<i>zhe wennuan yijiu wei gaibian.</i>
(repeat once)	

(Chorus)

We share the joy,	<i>Women tong huanle,</i>
we share the suffering,	<i>women tong renshou,</i>
we have the same expectation;	<i>women zheng cun tongyiyangde ai;</i>
we share wind and rain,	<i>women gong fengyu,</i>
we share the aspiration,	<i>women gong zhuiqiu,</i>
we treasure the same love.	<i>Women zhengcun tongyiyangde ai.</i>
Regardless whether acquainted or not,	<i>Wulun ni wo ke ceng xiangshi,</i>
regardless near or far away,	<i>wulun zai yanqian zai tianbian,</i>
bless you sincerely,	<i>zhenxinde wei ni zhuyuan,</i>

We share the joy,	<i>Women tong huanle,</i>
may you be happy and secure.	<i>zhuyuan ni xingfu ping'an.</i>

(repeat once)

Part III

(Verse I)

You are coming and he is coming,	<i>Ni zou lai, ta zou lai,</i>
we are coming together,	<i>women zoudao yiqi lai,</i>
in the colorful world,	<i>zai zhe bingfende shijie li,</i>
we feel thrilled.	<i>xinchao zai pengpai.</i>
You are coming and he is coming,	<i>Ni zou lai, ta zou lai,</i>
we are coming together,	<i>dajia zou dao yiqi lai,</i>
in the colorful world,	<i>zai zhe bingfende shijie li,</i>
there is infinite love.	<i>you wuxiande ai.</i>

(Chorus)

Ah, let the world,

fill with true love,

ah, let the world,

be full of sentiment and love. (repeat once in verse I and verse II, and repeat three times in verse III) Ah, year by year, Ah,

As the performance of the song was the first time for young musicians to make their voices in officially proved public stage in China, the senior administrators in the China Audio and Video Head Office reminded the composition team about the political sensitivity of this song, mentioning that it would be censored by state cultural officers in advance of the performance. To address such an underpinned political line, the song adopts the theme of “love” to be accepted by both an older generation who stood in a dominant political position and a younger generation eager to speak out their real feelings. The theme of “love” acted as the cohesive force for them all, although they may have had different understandings and interpretations of the term “love” itself. For the middle-aged generation during the decade, the concept of “love” was usually directed towards the Communist Party, the nation, or one’s career aspirations, and treated mainly as a kind of lofty “love”. The young musicians, meanwhile, were pursuing a kind of general “love” among human beings, including mutual love, care, trust, and help. Moreover, the “love” they envisaged also extends to the celebration of self-identity and the value of the individual, both of which notions had suffered long oppression and alienation.

Another cohesive power of the song among the two generations was the combination of individual and collective ideologies. Reviewing the lyrics shows this fusion of individualism (“I”, “my”, “your”, “you”, and “he”) and collectivism (“we”, “share”, and “world” appear frequently). Moreover, even the singular terms can be interpreted as referring to the whole generation rather than to just one person or group. Hearing the lyrics this way draws on a point made by two Western scholars in their analyses of Cui Jian’s “I Have Nothing”. In his analysis, Andrew Jones argues that, “The singer’s ‘I’ becomes *our* ‘I’, and then merges with a collective ‘we’” (1992: 138). Timothy Brace also suggests substituting the words “We have nothing” for “I have nothing” at each occurrence as the title describes “the feeling of today’s Chinese youth” (1991: 63, 54). Noting this way of listening links songs like “I Have Nothing” and “Fill the World with Love” to an

ideology already apparent in revolutionary songs: the leftist song writers of the 1930s “almost invariably chose to write of the struggles of workers, oppressed women, and exploited children in terms of a collective ‘we’” (Jones, 2001: 123).

The first live performance of the song in Beijing Worker’s Stadium also suggests such an incorporation of individualism and collectivism. Given chance to show their personal styles, singers were arranged to sing line-by-line in turn in the verses of Parts I and III. The different vocal styles can be heard in these solos, including rough Western rock, sweet folk song, and typical pop. They were arranged seemingly randomly on the stage rather than in a neat line or in clear order. Some had the most fashionable hairstyles at that time and some wore sunglasses. After every such short solo, the live audience of over 10,000 warmly cheered.²³ To build a collective identity, all the singers wore identical jackets, males in yellow and females in pink, with a “united” T-shirt underneath. In the chorus, the singers downplayed their personal styles to produce a blended, harmonious sound. The male performers stood shoulder to shoulder and the female performers held hands with each other. Most of them lifted their arms together at the end.

“Fills the World with Love” sets a start to a new genre of public welfare songs, one that addresses the goodwill of the general people towards rebuilding shared ethical values and spiritual needs. Similar songs afterwards include “The Devotion of Love” (*Ai de fengxian*),²⁴ “Longing” (*Kewang*),²⁵ and “Peace be with You” (*Zhu ni ping’an*).²⁶

Healing Historical Scars: “My Beloved Hometown”

Unlike both “Blood-Stained Dignity” and “Fill the World with Love”, the Northwest wind song “My Beloved Hometown” came from a non-official context. However, the song shares characteristics with those others written during this transitional period, providing a third perspective on the ways that 1980s’ songwriters handled the juxtaposition and negotiation of individual desires and social forces.

Understanding Scar Literature is a way to understand the seemingly contradictory expressions of Northwest wind songs. Scar Literature is a style that emerged at the end of the 1970s and has been described as being largely negative in portraying the sufferings and trauma of educated people during the Cultural Revolution (Chen, 1996: 160-161). To a large extent, the genre was tolerated and accepted by the Chinese Communist Party because its prime concerns are “love” and “faith”; its practitioners “embraced love as a key to solving social problems” (Liu, 2003: 24).

Like Scar Literature, Northwest wind songs were strongly impacted by the established terms of expression of Socialist Realism, which encouraged them to adopt a positive stance from which to praise the much-enhanced material conditions of today as compared with those of before 1949 or, subsequently, during the Cultural Revolution. Songs like “My Beloved Hometown” shift to a worried tone when faced with portraying an underdeveloped reality, which has been read as endowed with an anti-state political meaning by several Western scholars (for instance, Brace, 1992: 162). Indeed, the first part of the lyrics directly describes the hometown as a poor rural place with low straw huts, bitter well water and a small dry stream (Ex 8). The Northwestern folk vocal style plus the use of the timbre of the Chinese traditional double-reed instrument *suona* strengthen the feeling of desolation.

Ex 8 Excerpt from “My Beloved Hometown” (Lin 1994: 534-536; English translation from Baranovitch, 2003: 21).

My hometown is not at all beautiful,	<i>Wode jiaxiang bing bu mei,</i>
low straw huts and bitter well water,	<i>di’aide cao fang kusede jing shui,</i>
one small stream that often gets dry,	<i>yitiao shichang ganhede xiao he,</i>
I continue to long for the small village.	<i>yilian zai xiao cun zhouwei.</i>

Such concerns were familiar to the songwriters and those around them too. “My Beloved Hometown” was written in a private music salon called Damucang in 1987.²⁷ Before the draft of the lyrics was shown to

other musicians, the manager of salon Liu Weiren approached lyricist Meng Guangzheng (Figure 1) to check whether he dared to release such a work. Meng explained: “I visited my wife’s hometown, and I found it didn’t look as beautiful as I had been told. But I wish the village can become pretty.” Composer Xu Peidong (Figure 2) was interested in the draft. In their collaboration, the lyricist and musician incorporated the multiple ideologies of the time into the song in a way that they hoped might not raise official objections but carry a new pop song style. For instance, the first line of the lyrics was originally, “My hometown is not such a beautiful place” using the word “place” (*difang*). Yet “place” was a keyword in official songs, such as “In the Place of Peach Blossoms in Full Bloom” (*Zai na taohua shengkaide difang*), where it always carried a positive gloss. In order to avoid running counter to that official norm, Xu Peidong changed the phrase to the more straightforward words: “My hometown is not at all beautiful”.²⁸



Figure 1. Meng Guangzheng in Damucang salon (copyright: Liu Weiren, used by permission)



Figure 2. Xu Peidong in Damucang salon (copyright: Liu Weiren, used by permission)

Meng and Xu also took efforts in the song to adopt the overall shape of Socialist Realist artworks, where, as noted, a negative opening could be deployed if it was followed by a more positive presentation of mainstream ideology. Thus, in Part II of the song, and after a slow and sentimental salute, “O, hometown, hometown”, the feeling shifts to the expression of deep sentiments for the hometown: “I kiss and kiss the soil of my hometown never too much, I love and love the water of my hometown never too much”. This transition was then followed by a slogan-like expression: “I will use my sincerity and perspiration, to change you into a fertile land and beautiful water”. The music suggests the same contradiction. The main arrangement uses a happy, disco-oriented rhythm throughout, although the start seems to express a worrying and sad feeling.²⁹ Overall, this song suggests that the listener can expect a happy and promising future if they apply love and faith to any current worrying realities, and thus identifies itself as mainstream culture, albeit a new way of working with those values and symbols.

These features of “My Beloved Hometown” are typical of the other Northwest wind songs: two-part lyrics with a large-scale former part expressing worry and sadness and the final part positively embracing the future, and a combination of a sad and nostalgic melodic tone and contemporaneous, happy rhythmic mode and instrumentation. For instance, “The Moon of the Fifteenth Is Rounder than That of the Sixteenth” (*Shiwude yueliang shiliu yuan*) and “Yellow Plateau” (*Huangtu gaopo*) both echo these same general social concepts of universal love and revolutionary faith.

Conclusion: Breakthrough as a “New” Mainstream

The emergence of individualism in the pop songs of the 1980s marks the rise of humanism in China, and shows that it extended significantly beyond the minority musical space of rock music. In contrast to a collectivist ideology in which all were expected to behave in set ways, putting the homeland and the party line above their personal doubts or desires, the pop musicians created a new narrative that offered comfort with regard to the painful memories and spiritual wounds of the past. The songs explored in this chapter—“Blood-Stained Dignity”, “Fill the World with Love”, and “My Beloved Hometown”—indicate how these musicians projected their feelings of sadness, confusion, and worry in a calm, soft, and direct way, and their emergent articulation of self-direction can be seen as an important indicator of how Chinese intellectuals of

that period hoped to find and build a new future for themselves and for the nation by enlisting mainstream expressive and political channels. They thus stand apart from songs like “I Have Nothing” which shared the same ideological analysis but did not present collaboration with mainstream state forces as a means forward.

With events in June 1989, these collaborative dreams were for the most part shattered, and the pop music mainstream in China turned slowly but inexorably toward commercial entertainment ends, but, for a few years in the late 1980s, pop musicians’ songs pushed onto the political stage. They enabled young people to assert their equality with the older generation and began to take over the function of revolutionary songs in embracing social issues, ideological connections, and spiritual guidance. For instance, immediately after the premier of “Fill the World with Love” on May 9, 1986, an official newspaper assessed the performance as a political articulation of important social issues, gathering together pop singers who, it claimed, usually behaved like “a heap of loose sand”.³⁰ Following this official statement on the song, music critics and scholars started to re-evaluate the role of pop songs. For instance, scholar Liang Maochun claimed that “Pop [*tongsu*] songs are best suited to expressing the key issues of the times, including political issues” (Liang, 1987).

The content assessed here may help address Western misapprehensions of the history of Chinese music, which can both overestimate the social impact of rock and under recognize the progressive political content of certain mainstream songs in the mid- and late 1980s. It also suggests that it may be worth a close look at the mainstream popular musics of other periods and the ways it reflects (or denies) the ideologies of its creators or draws together (or apart) contrasting generations of listeners. The Chinese intellectuals may no longer be setting the pace in mainstream songwriting and the social disruption of the Cultural Revolution is certainly receding, but this does not automatically mean that those writing and performing subsequent sets of repertory possess less complicated ideologies or future ambitions.

Endnotes

1. All translations of song titles and lyrics, related interview notes, and TV documents, are the author’s own, unless stated otherwise.
2. Chinese pop songs of the 1980s were close but not exactly identical to Western pop songs at that time. Melodically, these songs were rooted in the Chinese folk song and lyrical song (*shuqing gequ*), which were well known in the revolutionary era and before, for instance, in the adoption of a de-localized traditional music style and a preference for high pitches and fast speeds. Meanwhile, they were rhythmically and instrumentally updated to Western popular music ideals to appeal to the interest and aesthetics of ordinary people. As such, the 1980s’ pop songs can be seen as transitional between the style of the lyrical songs of the revolutionary era and the more radically Westernized pop song styles of the 1990s and afterwards.
3. The middle-aged musicians were those born in the 1930s-40s, and they introduced and launched local pop music writing in the early 1980s. Their works combined the melodic writing of revolutionary songs with some aspects of Western pop music in rhythm, vocal style, or instrumentation. On this foundation and with the support of the middle-aged musicians, a younger generation of pop musicians (born in the 1950s-60s) emerged and performed from the mid-1980s.
4. Interview with Fu Lin, Beijing, 1 September 2008.
5. A cipher notation is available at <http://www.gepuwang.net/gepu/44572.html>, accessed 4 May 2017.
6. Interview with Jin Zhaojun, Beijing, 23 August 2008.
7. Generally speaking, official lyrical song during the 1980s developed from the lyrical songs of the 1950s and 1960s which emphasized emotional expression, showing this characteristic via expressive melodies and highly-skilled composition synthesis of Chinese classical music, traditional folk music, and Western musical techniques. The lyrics usually praise the prosperity of the nation and the people’s merits (Qian, 2011: 46-58, 253).
8. “Blood-Stained Dignity” was written in 1986, lyrics by Chen Zhe, music by Su Yue.
9. The term “Northwest wind” literally means the style of Northwest China. The genre combines folk characteristics (mainly melodic patterns and vocal delivery) of the Northwest with a strong, fast, disco-rock beat in the “easy listening” style typical of the so-called *gangtai* pop songs of Hong Kong and

- Taiwan during this period (Baranovitch, 2003: 19).
10. Interview Chen Zhe, Beijing, 29 December 2009.
 11. Interview with Fu Lin, Beijing, 1 September 2008.
 12. The notation is transcribed from the live performance in the 1987 Spring Festival. 春晚回忆1987--Xie Ran De Feng Cai - YouTube, accessed on 16 December 2020.
 13. Interview with Chen Zhe, Beijing, 29 December 29 2009.
 14. The description is both from documentary collections of The Tiananmen Square protests and also interviews with the musicians who claimed themselves were on sites during the protests.
 15. “Stinking ninth” was a term of abuse applied by ultra-leftists to educated people, especially in the Cultural Revolution; see Schwarcz (1994: 177).
 16. River Elegy. 大陆经典禁片《河殇》(3小时完整版) - YouTube, 1:46:56, written by Wang Luxiang, accessed on 14 December 2020. Also refers to the book *He Shang* (Su and Wang, 1988)
 17. Interview with Chen Zhe, 29 December 2009.
 18. In the “Resisting Spiritual Pollution Campaign” of 1983-84 there was a rule that no more than three popular musicians were allowed to play in any official performance.
 19. Wang Jian was also the lyricist of “The Sentiment of the Leaves for the Root”, discussed above. It is interesting to note that message that the song’s romantic title (“Fill the World with Love”) came from this middle-aged woman rather than from any of the four younger male lyricists.
 20. Interview with Xu Peidong, Beijing, 27 August 2008.
 21. Interview with Chen Zhe, Beijing, 29 December 2009.
 22. The live performance is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCQBxZMcYPA>, accessed on 14 December 2020.
 23. Interview with Cai Guoqing, one of the 108 singers in performance, on the program *Yishu rensheng* 艺术人生, China Central Television 3, 4 October 2012. The live performance can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCQBxZMcYPA>, accessed on 14 December 2020.
 24. “The Devotion of Love”, lyrics by Huang Shiqi, music by Liu Shizhao, sung by Wei Wei in 1989.
 25. “Longing”, lyrics by Yi Ming, music by Lei Lei, sung by Mao Aming in 1990.
 26. “Peace be with You”, lyrics and music by Liu Qing, sung by Sui Yue in 1994.
 27. Damucang salon was held in the outskirts of Beijing every two weeks for about two years from March 14, 1987. The role of the salon was to encourage innovative song writing. Composers, lyricists, and singers nationwide were invited there to communicate, share new works, and find potential collaborators.
 28. Interview with Xu Peidong, Beijing, 27 August 2008.
 29. The song is on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGGPE2QJs7E>, accessed on 17 December 2020.
 30. The content of the article was taken from the recollections of my interviewee Chen Zhe, Beijing, 29 December 2009. For better understanding the description of ‘a heap of sand’ in Chinese context, refers to (Poole 1993).

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