

Birth of a scene

As the Ditan Park Folk Festival (Sat 8 and Sun 9) enters its second year, it's become clear that folk is the latest hot genre for in-the-know music fans. **Jennifer Conrad** and **Gissing Liu** find out more

It's a regular Sunday night, but a scene you might not know exists. At Jianghu Bar, a tiny space in a *hutong* off Nanluoguxiang, young Chinese music fans sit crowded around wooden tables sipping wine or tea while folk musician Li Xintong plays acoustic guitar. Later, other musicians are compelled by their friends to go onstage and offer a song or two. At one point, the owner, Wang Tianxiao of the band Slap, joins on sax. It's the kind of musician-friendly environment he imagined when he created the bar.

'In 2006, I travelled in north-west China with some musicians and stopped in Lhasa for nearly four months,' he remembers. 'After that, I wanted to open my own bar. Musicians have a hard life. Jianghu provides a stage so they can concentrate on producing music instead of where their next meal will come from.'

If Beijing's rock scene is like that of New York City in the 1970s, folk can be compared to NYC's music scene in the late '50s and early '60s, which nurtured the likes of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez – a burgeoning bohemian movement during a time of rapid social change with casual gigs in small bars and cafés.

'Look back to 1960s America,' suggests Qu Hao, who manages folk acts and helps book the acts for D-22's Sunday folk night. 'Folk stepped onto the stage then rock developed afterwards. I think China will follow the same process.'

For Hanggai's Ilchi, the rap-metal of his first band, T9, wasn't fulfilling anymore. And so, in 2003, he and guitarist Xu Jingchen began returning to Inner Mongolia to learn about the traditional music of the grasslands.

Today, his band Hanggai mixes in rock influences, configuring the drums, bass and guitar to fit Mongolian music. 'I never planned for my music to develop this way,' Ilchi says. 'But the only thing that stuck with me was the Mongolian style. As time goes by, I feel more and more responsible for protecting the culture.'

The perpetrators of this new brand of folk (terms such as 'Chinese alt-country', 'new folk' and 'Chinagrass' have been tossed around, but nothing has stuck) aren't afraid to pull from Western music or update traditional songs – they're as likely to cite Pink Floyd or Leonard Cohen as influences as they are older Chinese folkies. But virtually all of the musicians sing in Mandarin (or a minority language).



What the folk? Fans cram into Jianghu Bar

Time Out folk party!
In celebration of the folk scene Time Out Beijing is hosting a special one-off gig featuring Hanggai and Xiao He. The show will take place at Obiwan on Saturday 29 and cost just 50RMB

Zhang Quan founded Wild Children with Xiao Suo in 1995 after the pair returned to Lanzhou to study the music of the region. The band played their first gig in an underground roller rink in 1997. 'Once, we fixed two Chinese waist drums together then cut one in half to distinguish the tone of the two drums because we didn't have money for a better tabla,' he remembers. Xiao Suo passed away in 2004, but the band is considered a seminal folk act.

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Wild Children in 2001 on the old Sanlitun South Street. The bar set itself apart with musicians who played original music, not covers.

'Our band had shows at River Bar once a week,' remembers Zhang Quan, who now performs as a soloist (while some other members of Wild Children became part of Glorious Pharmacy). 'Each Saturday, we invited a famous underground band to have an unplugged show. After the invited band finished, other players would jump onstage to play into the night

– sometimes the audience stayed until sunrise.'

You can split today's folk acts into two groups: the singer-songwriters offering up their feelings with acoustic guitar (which is sometimes called 'campus folk') and the groups that modernise minority instruments and traditional music techniques.

'I don't think the musical instrument is the key factor,' says Ditan Park Folk Festival organiser Liu Yaodong, who also runs a guitar shop on Gulou Dong Dajie. 'Some musicians use minority instruments because that's a better way to express their ideas, but the guitar is the most basic folk music instrument in the world.'

One of the most popular acts of the storyteller-and-guitar variety is Wang Juan. 'Most of my songs take inspiration from travel, running, swimming, going to the gym – or even sitting in a car,' she says. 'When my body is in a state of movement, my mind can concentrate. Most of my songs are my instant feeling, but it's abstract when made into a song.'

Wang Juan believes it's still difficult for folk musicians to support themselves with music, but, hopefully, that will soon begin to change.

'In recent years, more folk musicians have been discovered because of the expansion of the internet, economic development, the efforts of culture-savvy people, and the quality of the musicians,' says Qu Hao. 'The future is bright.'

Or as Xiao He, who has been playing around town since the 1990s, puts it: 'There's more of an audience, folk singers are getting more money – and they are getting fat.'