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The story of folk

Folk explosion

Rock stars might get all the glory, but to really experience Beijing bohemia, check out the folk scene. **Jennifer Conrad** and **Gissing Liu** find out why folk is the new rock

We're not going to lie: as much as we love Beijing rock 'n' roll, if we read one more article rehashing the same clichés about the burgeoning rock scene, we're going to scream.

Largely ignored by the Western press, some of China's most interesting music is coming from its folk musicians, who often combine traditional techniques and ethnic minority instruments with modern songwriting. What's more, these gigs are packed with hip

young Chinese fans, all baying for the next glimpse of folk's hottest bands.

Last year, the first instalment of the Ditan Park Folk Festival was a refreshing antidote to May's more rock-heavy festival season. Drawing 3,000 people over two days, the atmosphere was laidback as kids played in the park and attendees sprawled out on the grass in pure folkstasy. Even the rock festivals aren't immune to the folk invasion, and this year both the Midi and Strawberry festivals

host several folk acts, proving there is more to it than just niche appeal.

We can provide the introduction, but it's time to get out there and see it all for yourself.

Setting the scene

Beijing's stages regularly see musicians reinvigorating traditional music from all corners of China. Here are some of the top acts from across the country.

Mamer

From Xinjiang
Instruments *Dombra* (a stringed instrument Mamer calls 'the soul of Kazak'), *kobuz* (another string instrument), Kazak wind instruments.

The story An ethnic Kazak from the north-west corner of China, Mamer (both on his own and with his band Iz) draws on traditional songs but makes music that sounds thoroughly modern. 'I'd like to produce music which is suitable for the present – a new musical style with traditional minority elements,' Mamer tells us. Close your eyes during one of Iz's sets and you could be listening to progressive New York noise rock.

Hear for yourself Pick up Mamer's solo album, *Eagle*, with a guest appearance by Bela Fleck on banjo, or check out Iz's album *Iz 2007*.



Xinjiang

Gansu

Key albums

Incantation by **Wild Children** (songs that blew in from the north-west with incanted vocals and multi-part harmonies); *We Can't Help Kissing Each Other* by **Low Wormwood** (soothing tunes from the Lanzhou band); *In Distance* by **Wang Juan** (a pretty collection of songs from singer-songwriter Wang Juan); *Birds That Can Fly High Don't Land on the Backs of Oxen That Can't Run Fast* by **Xiao He** (Xiao He's first album set the bar high); plus *Red Bulldozer*, a compilation album conceived by blind folk artist **Zhou Yunpeng** to raise money for blind children.

Shanren

From Yunnan and Guizhou
Instruments *Xianzi* and *qinqin* (four-stringed plucked instruments), *xiangu* (a traditional drum), guitar, bass.

The story These south-western boys, whose name means 'mountain men', mix minority instruments and perky plucking with a hippie jam-band feel. 'When we have shows, we see the atmosphere of the venue then decide whether to use electric or acoustic instruments,' says guitarist and vocalist Qu Zihan. 'We hope to learn more traditional Chinese music, but it takes time to learn it from the origin.' Their gigs provoke a lot of dancing – and occasionally inspire male audience members to rip off their shirts.

Hear for yourself Watch them at the Midi and Ditan Park Folk festivals, and at Jianghu on Fri 7. *See listings.*



Yunnan

Hanggai

From Inner Mongolia and the Mongolian parts of Qinghai and Xinjiang

Instruments *Taobuxuur* (two-stringed lute), *morin khuur* (horse-head fiddle), cow and horse bells, Buddhist bells, shaman drum, vintage four-string banjo, *sanxian* (three-stringed lute), guitar, bass, customised drums.



The story

Singer Hurcha, who looks like a linebacker stuffed into traditional Mongolian dress, cuts a commanding figure as he shouts the band's

name: 'Hanggai!' It's an old Mongolian word for an idealised landscape of mountains, rivers and trees. The band's rollicking take on Mongolian folk gives the feeling you're drinking the night away in a yurt. With a side of throat singing, they've become one of China's most popular indie bands abroad, touring in the US and Europe. They're currently at work on a new album, co-produced by Ken Stringfellow, who has played with Big Star and even REM.

Hear for yourself See them at the Midi and Ditan Park Folk festivals, and at *Time Out's* folk showcase; buy their album *Introducing Hanggai*.

Xiao He



From Originally from Hebei, He Guofeng, or Xiao He as he's better known, has been a staple on the Beijing folk circuit for a number of years.

Instruments Guitars and minority instruments, but mostly his elastic voice that

draws on traditions including Peking opera.

The story The folkie from another planet, Xiao He's largely improvised shows are as much performance art as music gig. As far as the development of his signature sound – with shrieks, taunts, song fragments and acoustic guitar – the artist, who is also part of the group Glorious Pharmacy, says 'it's a long story, which connects to my diet, health, daily timetable and hormones. It changes all the time and is characterised by freedom, independence and craziness. I just like to watch and see.'

Hear for yourself Watch him at the Midi and Strawberry festivals, and pick up his two-disc album *The Performance of Identity*.

Zhang Quan



From Gansu
Instruments Guitar, *dombra*.

The story Headliner of this year's Ditan Park Folk Festival, Zhang Quan was a founding member of Wild Children, one of the original folk bands on the scene. 'I didn't know the term

"folk music" until long after I knew the music,' says the musician, who grew up in Gansu and Qinghai. 'I learned the farm culture of the Yellow River, and this music is the only way for local farmers to express their feelings. Anyone who grew up in that environment has this music in their blood.' Today, Zhang Quan plays as a solo artist, making beautiful use of the *dombra*.

Hear for yourself Catch him at the Ditan Park Folk Festival (Sat 8) and at Mako on Fri 21.

Where to hear folk

These venues have regular folk gigs where you can discover new talent

Jianghu Bar

A cosy *siheyuan* off Nanluoguxiang, this is the place to watch Chinese Bob Dylans in action.

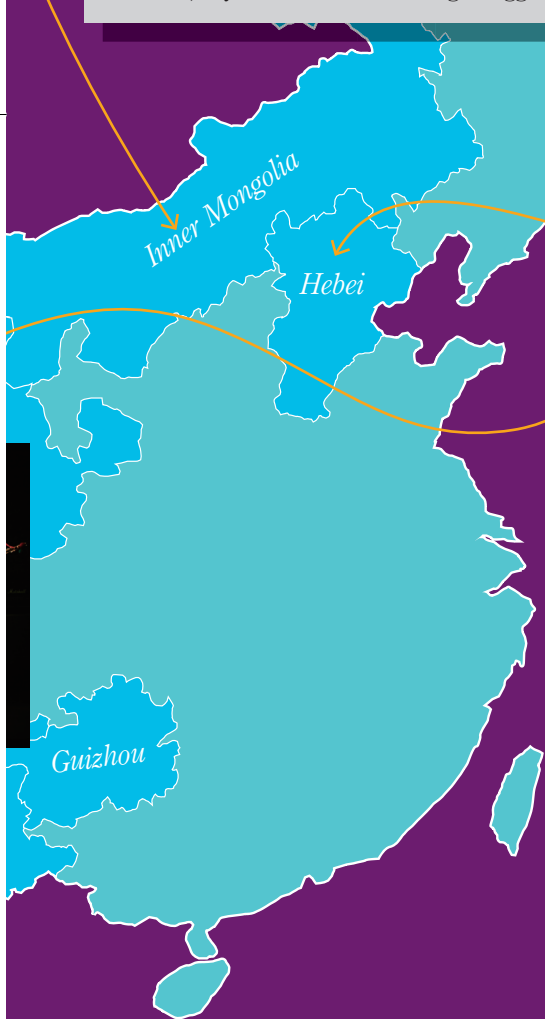
7 Dongmianhua Hutong, Dongcheng district (132 6922 7168; jianghu.bj.cn). 东城区交道口南大街东棉花胡同7号

Jiangjinjiu Bar Watch the best folk acts in this chilled bar. 2 Zhongku Hutong (between Drum and Bell), Dongcheng district (8405 0124). 城区钟库胡同2号

Mako Live House This new live music venue has already hosted gigs by Hanggai, Mamer and Bai Shui. 36 Guangqu Lu, Chaoyang district (5205 1112/3). 朝阳区广渠路36号红点艺术工厂

Tiny Salt Tiny Salt overcomes its mall setting with a good sound system, black décor and a cool loft. SOHO Shangdu North Tower, Third Floor, Room 2308, 8 Dongdaqiao Lu, (5900 0969). 朝阳区东大桥路8号SOHO尚都北塔B座3层2308

Zuiyuefeng This tiny bar run by musicians regularly hosts folk gigs. 18 Andingmen Xi Dajie (6405 4482; www.zuiyuefang.com). 安定门西大街18号(二环边北锣鼓巷口东30米) Kelly Zhang



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).



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

What the folk? Fans cram into Jianghu Bar

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.

Many trace the origin of Beijing's alternative folk scene to River Bar, opened by members of

– 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.

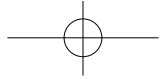
'In recent years, more folk musicians have been discovered because of the expansion of the internet, economic development, the efforts of culture-savvy people, and the quality of the musicians,' says Qu Hao. 'The future is bright.'

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.'

Many trace the origin of Beijing's alternative folk scene to River Bar

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



Midi and Strawberry

Lawn party

What will you buy at this year's Strawberry Festival?

Of course, music festivals are about the music, but half the fun is checking out the booths different companies set up, buying things from the flea market and soaking up the vibe. Strawberry Festival and Modern Sky record label founder Shen Lihui gives **Gissing Liu** a preview of what to expect.

What sort of booths will be at the Strawberry Festival?

There will be a special square where you can go to meet new people, and Douban [a Chinese social networking site] has a booth for people to swap unwanted items. Dell is sponsoring an internet experience centre. And the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art will have a booth selling items from their gift shop.

What about food and drink?

Absolut Vodka is creating a special cocktail made of strawberry juice and vodka. There will be a lot of different food and snacks, but we're waiting on final confirmation from the vendors.

Can anyone set up a blanket and sell things on the lawn at Strawberry?

We don't encourage the audience to bring stuff

'Music is the core of our festival, but Strawberry is a big community as well'



to sell since you need a booth licence from the government, but we don't ban people from selling their own stuff.

What is the atmosphere like?

Music is the core of our festival, because Modern Sky is a record company with more than ten years of history. We have strict criteria to select bands for the festival, and we work hard to find new bands. However, Strawberry is a big community as well. You can meet friends and do your own activities. It always attracts a lot of beautiful girls too!



Midi memories

As the **Midi Festival** celebrates its eleventh year in business, *Time Out* talks to the stars who were there from the beginning

The talent

Yu Yang Yu Yang was the former vocalist and guitarist for Iron Kite until they split in 2003. He currently plays under his own name.

Xiao Rong The lead singer of rock band Brain Failure is playing his ninth Midi this year.

Gao Hu The Miserable Faith frontman has played the festival since its very beginning.

What were your early experiences of the Midi Festival like?

Yu Yang (YY) I joined in a couple of early Midi Festivals when Iron Kite still existed. I can't remember the first one, but we played in a kind of warehouse in the old Midi School campus. It was quite simple. You can see it in the documentary *Post-Revolutionary Era* [on Youku].

Xiao Rong (XR) The first time I played [in 2001] it was held in the dining room of the Midi School. It was just a three-day show, but drew about 1,000-2,000 people on each day.

Gao Hu (GH) 2000 was my first year. It was an era of hot blood; we had the chance to meet pioneers from different fields. There was free beer, and it was like a party. I felt new times were coming.

What is it about Midi that you enjoy?

YY Midi Festival was the first music festival in China. I've seen it mature year on year; I've seen the difficulties it has encountered, but I like the attitude it has. It's not a festival with big names, but it has a pure rock music attitude. It's not gorgeous, but I have a strong connection to it.

XR Because the stage was created only for rock music, it makes this a great show for the fans.

GH Midi is pure compared with other festivals.

How has the festival changed?

YY The field gets bigger, the history gets longer, the audiences get more mature, but the feeling in your heart doesn't change.

XR Technically, I can see Midi improving every year. And I believe there's still room to get better.



GH It has developed like all Chinese rock music: turning from rage to love.

Is there any year that really sticks in your mind?

YY The best one was in 2008. The festival was held in the Midi School, and the field was quite small. It was raining and all the audience were holding up umbrellas; some of them hung plastic cloth to keep off the rain. It was really crowded, and that made it even more exciting.

XR 2004's Midi was my best experience; it was the one in the Sculpture Park. It was unusual and it was rock 'n' roll. It had everything.

GH We always think that last year's show is the special one, and that next year's will be the best.

MUSIC FESTS: NEED TO KNOW For full details on the Midi (Sat 1 to Tue 4), Strawberry (Sat 1 to Mon 3) and Ditan Park Folk (Sat 8 and Sun 9) festivals, see Music listings (page 65). Also, don't forget to check out our folk showcase at Obiwan on Sat 29 with Hanggai and Xiao He

On the record

MUSIC
special

Who knows more about the city's music scene than its record store clerks? **Jessie Levene** and **Nina Chua** meet the obsessives behind the counter to find out who they think we should be listening to this festival season. Photography **Chen Chao**

Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity* immortalised the obsessive record store clerk of the mid-'90s, but what of 2010 Beijing? The capital's small record shops are the best places to pick up the latest from interesting new bands or learn your Chinese rock history. As such, we set out to meet the city's music store gurus and discover their top music picks.

Xiao Zhan, Rockland

'For me, mainstream music just isn't captivating; it doesn't have depth,' says Xiao Zhan, explaining why he opened Rockland six years ago. With his thick-rimmed glasses and Beatles-style haircut, Xiao Zhan looks every inch the geeky music store clerk. An oasis of cool within the rather tacky environs of Qianhai, Rockland boasts an impressive selection of second-hand and new CDs, with a focus on the underground and alternative. Be sure to take advantage of Xiao Zhan's superior knowledge of the local rock scene.

Xiao Zhan's top Chinese albums:

In Distance by female folk singer Wang Juan (45RMB); *Bai Pi Shu* by punks PK14 (45RMB); plus the self-titled debut from Carsick Cars (45RMB). 'All these albums have real ideas

in their music,' says Xiao Zhan.

May festival pick: 'Midi. I plan to see some of my favourite rock bands – they should also be good live.'

Rockland 2 Nanguanfang Hutong, Xicheng district (6657 1926). Open 2pm-midnight daily. 西城区南官房胡同2号.

Wang Zhuohui, Free Sound Records

Free Sound Records's owner Wang Zhuohui, 38, is a veteran of Beijing's music store scene. Open for eight years and counting, the store's revenue mostly comes from pop music sales, but Wang's real passion is rock. 'When I was young, I mainly listened to pop,' he recalls. 'Then, when I was 18, I heard Cui Jian, and fell in love with rock and roll.' The Godfather of Chinese rock is still

'When I was 18, I heard Cui Jian, and fell in love with rock and roll'

Wang's favourite Chinese musician. This old-school vibe is also visible in his store; stepping into Free Sound Records is like stepping back in time. Strip lighting, peeling posters and a vintage Sharp ghetto-blasters give the place a decidedly retro feel, but on the shelves it's a different story. Beijing's best labels are here (Modern Sky, Maybe Mars, Screaming etc) as well as music mags, DVDs and old LPs and cassettes.

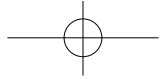
Wang Zhuohui's top Chinese albums:

The Red Flag by Cui Jian (20RMB) ('When this album was released it was very controversial'); Wang Yong's album *Wang Sheng* (30RMB) of Tibetan and traditional Chinese folk; and Tang Dynasty's first album, *A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty* (40RMB for CD and DVD).

May festival pick: 'At Midi I plan to see the metal band Miserable Faith. At Strawberry, the reggae band Longshendao – I saw them play last year and was very impressed.'

Free Sound Records 40 Dianmen Xi Dajie, Xicheng district (6613 6182) 10am-8pm daily. 西城区地安门西大街40号.





Beijing's music clerks

recordings from the Himalayas.

May festival pick: 'Midi – I want to see Yaksa, a brilliant metal band who are great performers, and Xie Tianxiao, who is also known as the second godfather of Chinese rock.'

Music Store 66 Dongsì Nan Dajie, Dongcheng district (6513 8637). Open 10.30am-11.30pm daily. 东城东南大街66号.

Xiao Hui, Yinxiang Chaoshi

Fresh-faced Xiao Hui, 22, from Inner Mongolia, has been working at Wudaokou's Yinxiang Chaoshi for one year. Having majored in music at university, he moved to Beijing after graduation because, he says, 'there is so much musical talent in the city and I wanted to be a part of that'. As well as his job at the store, Xiao Hui is a sound engineer for nearby rock and metal venue 13 Club, so it's no surprise that his own tastes also tend to run in the same direction – he cites Beijing metal band The Falling as his favourite Chinese act.

Though local chain Yinxiang Chaoshi's stock mostly consists of pop and DVDs, the Wudaokou branch boasts a healthy selection of records from China's independent labels – Modern Sky, 13 Month and others – and the store is very popular among Haidian's student music fans. Just down the street from D-22 and 13 Club, drop by on your way to or from a gig to pick up a bargain.

Xiao Hui's top Chinese albums: *Cold Blooded Animal* by Xie Tianxiao (22RMB) ('Chinese rock 'n' roll akin to Nirvana'); *Water* (48RMB) by Shanghai folk/rock band The Honeys; and *Chapter One* by Chi Ren (40RMB) ('a folk/rock band with a very local Beijing sound').

May festival pick: 'The heavy metal festival at 13 Club – but since I work there, I've seen most of the bands already.'

Yinxiang Chaoshi 137 Chengfu Lu, Haidian district (6256 2680). Open midday – 11.30pm daily. 海淀区成府路137号.



Sun Yichao, Music Store

Sun Yichao is the kind of guy you see at the back of the room at electronic gigs, standing with arms folded and a serious expression on his face – someone who, in his own words, 'knows how to appreciate music'.

Originally from Heilongjiang, 26-year-old Sun has worked at Music Store for three years. A fan of everything from metal to minimal house, his eclectic tastes are reflected in the stock of his workplace, which boasts a wide selection of music from both inside and outside of China. Less grungy than some other record stores in Beijing, at Music Store you can listen to almost everything before you buy.

Explaining why he picks Xiao He, the current darling of Chinese folk, as his favourite artist, Sun says that, 'after Cui Jian, [he] is the most revolutionary Chinese musician,' and 'conveys his thoughts and ideas not just through the language of his lyrics, but also through his melodies'.

Sun Yichao's top Chinese albums: Xiao He's *Birds That Can Fly High Don't Land on the Backs of Oxen that Can't Run Fast* (58RMB) ('It opened the door to Chinese folk'); *Winter* (110RMB) by DJ Yang Bing ('A non-commercial but very full of character minimal house record'); and *Touch Tibet* (225RMB), a Modern Sky compilation of songs that mix electronics with field

