



Asima, her Pimp and a Melancholic Boss

by [Jeroen Groenewegen](#)

After twenty years of frustration and marginality, Zuoxiao Zuzhou recently reinvented himself as trickster and became a cult-hero.

[Zuoxiao Zuzhou](#) 左小祖咒 is one of the most prolific and provocative musicians of the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) of the last twenty years. Although criticality is rare in Chinese mainstream popular culture, Zuoxiao's recent success as cult-hero proves that Chinese youngsters are interested in socially engaged music. That said, Zuoxiao owes this success to humor and parody, and a turn towards a less pointed social critique and a more hedonistic sound. As such, this recent success engages with a larger cultural trend in which youngsters cynically participate in the status quo.



Rock and Its Frustrating Confrontations

«Rather than as a generation of patricide with bright flags and as challengers of the established esthetics and ethics», writes He Li of the bands The Fly and Zuoxiao Zuzhou in 1997, «they are more aptly described as escapees from the twofold trap of mainstream ideology and commercial civilization» (He 1997:84). The article, titled «Rock Orphans» 摇滚孤儿, employs a psychoanalytical framework to interpret Zuoxiao's piercing shrieks and slowly descending howls on his debut album *The Missing Master* 走失的主人 (officially released in 1998) as a reaction to the loss of a sense of direction among Chinese youth in the 1990s:



At first glance, the album cover looks like a traditional painting. Also the opening and title song, which is available at Zuoxiao's official website, starts like a song of the literati, the educated class that dominated dynastic China. But its derail into noise and screaming musically illustrates He Li's suggestion of patricide and a subversion of tradition.

Written around the same period as He Li's article, Wang Xufang provides a more straightforward description of Zuoxiao Zuzhou:

[Zuoxiao Zuzhou] dresses according to rock [clichés]: shoulder-long hair, dark sunglasses, a ring with a big skull, black leather jacket, black jeans, black big-nosed boots. The artists [of Beijing's East Village] say he never takes his sunglasses off, no one has looked him in the eye. He says rock music is not a form, and insists that there's no separation line between the arts of dressing up and being involved. «I am irascible 暴躁! I live in rage 愤怒!» During conversation, he several times uses the word

«revolt» 叛逆, to emphasize that he is «non-popular culture»: «I deliberately sing in an inharmonious, provocative voice, in order to make everybody uncomfortable, otherwise it's not rock music! I refuse to lower my music to level where they can understand it. I don't care whether they accept it or not» (Wang 1999, 263).

Born in Nanjing, Zuoxiao first moved to Shanghai to sell illegal saw-cut cassettes and CDs, and in 1993 to a dilapidated village on the outskirts of Beijing to make music. Zuoxiao and visual artists dubbed the village «East Village» and tried to emulate this New York hotbed of art in the capital of the PRC. In *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music* (2010), Jeroen de Kloet presents Zuoxiao Zuzhou as defining of a scene he calls «the underground»:

In the summer of 1996, three bands – [Zuoxiao Zuzhou], The Fly and Zi Yue – gave a joint performance in Beijing. With hindsight, the performance might well be considered the public birth of underground music ... What links these three bands with other bands ... is their critical stance towards Chinese society, in most cases combined with an experimental sound (De Kloet 2010, 43).

Especially the experimental sound serves to distinguish «underground» from other scenes De Kloet identifies in the PRC, such as metal, hardcore punk and folk-rock. I will discuss Zuoxiao Zuzhou's connections with artistic avant-gardes later, as well as my doubts whether dividing Chinese pop and rock in scenes or genres contributes to a better understanding of Zuoxiao Zuzhou's music. Here, my focus is on Zuoxiao's rebelliousness in the 1990s.

The lyrics of only half of the songs of *The Missing Master* appear in the booklet, and of those lyrics a number of words are changed. This is a strategy of the record company to get the album past censors. Zuoxiao describes the recording of his second album in his 2010 autobiography *Melancholic Boss* 忧伤的老板:

I knew a lot of lyrics could not be printed, so I articulated them extremely clearly. The record company was shocked and demanded a second mix, reducing the volume of the vocal tracks, effectively covering my mouth. And during mastering they pumped up the high

frequencies, making it still less intelligible, almost reducing it to a squeaking iron gate (Zuoxiao Zuzhou 2010, 68).

Despite all this effort, there doesn't seem to be much to hide. Almost all of the omitted words on *The Missing Master* relate to sexually explicit content that would almost certainly not be censored in the PRC today. For instance, «ass» and «genitals» were changed in the booklet into the nearly synonymous «behind» and nearly homonymous «daily habits», respectively. Moreover, the lyrics are deliberately vague rather than pointed critiques. Verses such as those of «Six Flowers» 六枝花 (audio [here](#) >> track 8) were not in the booklet and mostly paint a general impression of despair and absurdity:

□酒是瓶子的脉搏
 肛门由瓶子制造
 瓶子 肛门是难友
 瓶子 肛门 酒
 谁是谁的朋友
 谁会死在谁手
 不要留下活口
 不要弄坏瓶口

*booze is the bottle's pulse
 the anus is produced by bottles
 the bottle and the anus are fellow sufferers
 bottle anus booze
 who is whose friend
 who will die by whose hand
 don't leave blabbermouths
 don't break bottle necks*

The second album, *Temple Fair Tour* (1999) opens with absurd and hilarious directions to a John, with Zuoxiao assuming the role of the pimp (audio of «Pimp» 皮条客 [here](#) >> track 1). But it also contains a number of songs that go beyond describing a politically unwanted state of subjectivity, immorality and gloom, and that use politically charged terms. Track two, the dance track «Humiliationism 羞辱主义», (audio [here](#) >> track 2) introduces politics in its chorus: «The last time, the last time of Communism: love's juice. The last time, last time of Capitalism: love's zipper.» Communism and Capitalism work in tandem to unleash base human desire, is what «Humiliationism» seems to suggest.

Track three develops this theme further (audio [here](#) >> track 3). The prominent rock critic Yan Jun wrote of «Bitter Ghost» 苦鬼 that it marked the beginning of Chinese underground music (Zuoxiao Zuzhou 2010, 61). In the song, Zuoxiao Zuzhou represses his voice to the back of his palate in a vocal technique reminiscent of Tom Waits.

With this husky, old man's voice Zuoxiao first sings to a slow three quarter beat, a distorted accordion, vaguely dissonant samples and a low, reverb-drenched guitar solo. He recounts that a girl told him that his sister will come home early if she can't find a customer, and that she will steal iron (from a state-owned company) to buy him a local Pepsi rip-off.

□ 每一个亿万民众失业的年代
 我们学会解释自己的把戏
 领导们总说：
 «人多，锅小，我们挺好！
 有的国家还在战火里纷飞咧»。
 你叨着烟投降 跺着脚地想着窍门
 人民被迫投降 人民越级上访
 我投降在襁褓里 在出神地望着你

*In every period when billions of people are laid off
 we learn to interpret our own tricks
 Leaders always say:
 «Many mouths and little food – we're doing great!
 In some countries the flames of war are still flying around.»
 With a smoke dangling in your mouth you surrender
 reluctantly thinking of knocking on the door
 the People are forced to surrender. The People petition to
 higher authorities
 I surrender in rags, and stare at you spellbound.*

The lyrics of track four, «Injustice» 冤枉, finish the political triptych (audio [here](#) >> track 4).

你试图通过长时间的沉默来贮备力量
 以便疏通思想来宣扬他们高尚的灵魂
 你已经行动，为了自在 自在是自由
 自由是人权 可人权是政治！
 同志，你糊里糊涂地走上了政治的舞台
 你企图通过短时间的狂啸来创立经验丰碑

以便打开隧道通告他们：
 «旅客同志们，十二节车厢已经失火，
 十一节车厢的马上就要烧到你们啦！」
 诸位，我们在地下，不是地下精英，是过道
 你不是诗人，你不爱政治，我也不是朋克
 我们只是第十三节车厢里的流浪汉

*I try to summon strength by being silent for a long time□,
 All just to dredge thought for advocating their noble souls
 You already act, to be at ease. Being at ease is freedom.
 Freedom is a Human Right. But Human Rights are politics!
 Comrade, you have stumbled onto the stage of politics.
 By whistling insanely for a moment I try to establish a
 monument of experience.*

All just to open a portal to announce them:

*«Tourist Comrades, carriage twelve is on fire,
 passengers of carriage eleven, the fire will get to you any
 moment!»*

*Ladies and gentlemen, we are in the underground. Not the
 underground elite, just a passage.*

*You're no poet, you don't like politics, I'm no punk either
 We're just the vagabonds in carriage thirteen.*

The fifth song of *Temple Fair Tour* is instrumental. After an intense sample from Peking Opera, a short, straightforward bass riff and a computer-generated dance beat provide the basic, relaxing narrative of the song, with a number of heavily distorted guitars and other noises in the background. Intermezzos in which the dance beat pauses and erratic rhythms on hand drums take over, suggest that the difference between state of the art avant-garde and central Asian folk music is infinitely small. Where words fail, music takes over—a maxim that also runs through Zuoxiao's autobiography.

Now, the lyrics of this series of songs mention politically sensitive terms such as Communism, Capitalism, the People, petitions, injustice, freedom, Human Rights and the stage of politics. The fact that Zuoxiao uses words that are generally taboo in the state media suggests that he has a world view that differs in important aspects from the officially-endorsed interpretation of China's past, present and future. But how this world view differs is not immediately clear – the music offers noisy accompaniments and idiosyncratic and ambiguous anecdotes rather than a concrete and coherent

counter-discourse. As such, Zuoxiao's engagement with society in this period seems to be one of defiance. In his autobiography Zuoxiao explains his attitude towards politics:

Even if I want to oppose something I won't depend on external forces. I am just an individual, expressing intuitive, emotional things. I wrote on Temple Fair Tour: «you already act, to be at ease. Being at ease is freedom. Freedom is a Human Right. But Human Rights are politics!□Comrade, you have stumbled upon the stage of politics.» Artists have a hard time really understanding politics. I think Bob Dylan and Bono don't even get it. But when others listen to your songs and read your lyrics, they will tell you that you're political (Zuoxiao Zuzhou 2010, 39).

The stress on individuality is a common strategy in China and elsewhere to avert social responsibility and pressure. Notably, China first rock star [Cui Jian](#) has always upheld that he represents himself and no one else, even if his «Nothing to my Name» – 无所有 became an anthem of the 1989 Student Protests. Although defying music's social significance can be useful, it is also obviously untenable. After all, music's ability to bring people together seems hardly incidental, unexpected or peripheral. Also Zuoxiao's songs don't exist in a vacuum but appeal to an in-crowd of listeners that enjoy being shocked with dissonant sounds, unconventional vocal techniques and transgressive words. The focus of social engagement in this earlier period is on this in-crowd of underground musicians and avant-gardistic visual artists, which I will discuss more below. Moreover, «Injustice» makes the external/internal forces of the in-crowd part of its musical reality by addressing the underground community directly in its last lines, using the official sounding expression *zhuwei*, 'everybody (present as this official event), ladies and gentlemen.'

So far I have presented Zuxiao Zuzhou's remarks without evaluating their veracity. This is not because I believe that author intent has the last say in the interpretation of a song or artwork. Also Zuoxiao's songs often mean other and different things than what Zuoxiao says they mean, and not only because listeners bring their own associations and histories into play. For instance, Zuoxiao's discourse on the relation of music and politics is ambiguous at best and might even be contradictory. I could smooth these contradictions out in a neat discourse, for instance by appealing to the clichéd rock rebel, which Wang Xufang reiterates in the quote above. In any case, Zuoxiao's contradictions illustrate his stumbling upon the stage of politics. And in a more general sense, I believe that these ambiguities and the interpretational leverage they offer the listener are crucial to Zuoxiao Zuzhou's public

persona, and perhaps even to stardom in general. So, rather than editing them out, I take Zuoxiao's performances in interviews to be part of his stardom just like his music, regardless of their aptness, credibility or coherence.

Between Folk and Elite



On «Injustice» Zuoxiao presents the underground as heroic troublemakers on the public transport system, in the last carriage of a (subway) train headed for an unknown destination. On his next album, *Zuoxiao Zuzhou at Di'anmen* 左小祖咒在地安门 (2001), he develops both his political outspokenness and his chronicling of the Beijing rock scene, engaging with his social environment through poetic commentary. The music becomes less frantic and Zuoxiao delivers his lyrics in a calm and authoritative voice, making them more prominent than they already were. He explains:

In the song «Of» 的 I mention a number of Chinese rock bands. They are quite representative of that time, but were encountering all kinds of difficulties. Everyone existed in an extremely complex environment and I already noticed that there were lots of subconscious conflicts within Chinese rock. Everyone was restless, a whole crowd subconsciously craved amnesty [i.e. public recognition], while they simultaneously couldn't deal with money correctly. Furthermore, false grass-roots sprang up, and many lacked self-understanding. They represented intellectuals, because in China real rock represents intellectuals, but they lost their sense of direction. So I wrote: «They [the rock band Tongue] sing: who can solve these inner conflicts of the People», to describe a widely present sense of restlessness and dazedness (Zuoxiao Zuzhou 2010, 70).

Zuoxiao clearly identifies with the out-of-town musicians that make up a substantial part of the Beijing rock scene, reproaching them for lacking understanding of their audience. As such, *Di'anmen* seeks to reestablish contact with a larger community that consists not only of rock musicians and intellectuals, but also of «ordinary» people, or to use a more politically sensitive term: of the People, as in the People's Republic of China. This is clear from the title of the album, which translates better as «Zuoxiao Zuzhou at the Gates of Earthly Peace» and hence seeks to transplant the lofty and detached centrality of the Gates of Heavenly Peace (i.e. Tian'anmen), with more popular, folksy and earthy locations, events and concerns. It is also clear from the lyrics, which are written in a more colloquial and readily understandable style. For instance «Representative» 代表 (available [here](#) >> track 2) describes how Russian and American leaders step down to give way to a younger generation and goes on to ask when Jiang Zemin will «do what Yeltsin did». These changes suggest the development of Zuoxiao Zuzhou towards folk, even though the music of *Di'anmen* is dominated by MIDI rather than acoustic instruments associated with folk, such as the guitar. This raises the question as to what society Zuoxiao's music engages with.



On the one hand Zuoxiao Zuzhou has always had a strong link with intellectuals and visual artists. Zuoxiao participated in the famous performance art piece «Adding Another Meter to an Anonymous Mountain» 为无名山增高一米 in 1995, during which seven artists that lived in Beijing East Village undressed and lay down on top of each other on a nearby hill. Zuoxiao has used artworks by Yang Shaobin and Ai Weiwei on his album covers, and his music appears in the video art of Yang Fudong, Li Zhanyang and others, as well as in many (independent) feature films. In 2006 Zuoxiao released *The U.S.A. 美国*, an album with soundtracks he made for films of Jia Zhang-ke (*The World 世界*), and the literary writer Zhu Wen (*South of the Clouds 云的南方*).

Additionally, Zuoxiao spend most of 2010 working on the soundtrack for the Chinese blockbuster of Gu Changwei titled *The Era of Magic 魔术外传*. In 2010 Zuoxiao also published an album with tracks to accompany Ai Weiwei's artworks, and also Zuoxiao's participation in a number of Ai's high-profile political activities (for instance in the documentary *Stewed Pork 老妈蹄花*) and Ai's words of praise in reviews of Zuoxiao prove their continued and multifaceted collaboration. More recently, the writer and public intellectual Han Han was instrumental in introducing Zuoxiao as an authentic and artistic singer to a younger audience with a post on his well-read [blog](#) on 8 march 2010:

Although I also like [the social website] Douban and [the Taiwanese singer-songwriter] Cheer Chen a lot, they are in fact just mass cultures that are not yet overly commercialized and that are more relaxed and relatively top grade. But Zuoxiao Zuzhou's works are really very small-groupish 小众. They can never produce the above

characteristics. It's normal that you all don't accept him, because there are songs on his albums I don't like either... The crux is that those songs I do like, I like an awful lot. Some artists want to influence the masses and some appeal to other artists. I think [Zuoxiao] wants to be the latter.

Despite Han Han's words and these connections in general, Zuoxiao has often reiterated the Communist adagio that art should serve the people:

I don't write songs for stinking intellectuals, yet they like me. I write for farmers, but when they hear it they think I'm [mentally] ill. Too noisy and the lyrics are unintelligible. I am both frustrated and amused by this. I hope one day they will understand that I write songs for them (Guo 2007, 192. Cf. Yan 2004, 232, 253–254).

In short, Zuoxiao simultaneously (1) argues that rock is for intellectuals, (2) identifies with rock and (3) hates intellectuals. Rather than accusing Zuoxiao of being muddled, I believe Zuoxiao deliberately performs the polysemy of a star persona and attempts to engage more varied audiences. This polysemy is directly related to Zuoxiao's crossing over into other genres than rock, and can also in other ways be identified in his sound, especially in his use of choruses.

Especially *I Can't Sit Sadly By Your Side* 我不能悲伤的坐在你身旁 (2005) marks a change towards a broader audience. In its title song Zuoxiao distances himself of the pessimism of social critique prevalent in the Beijing band scene. This is not to say that his music ceases to be experimental and political, but that it embodies hope and optimism, also in the form of love songs and a duet with the Taiwanese alternative pop star Sandee Chan. The opening song «Listening Like a Child» 像孩子似的倾听 (available [here](#)) starts with two digitally generated cello melodies. The upbeat drums and acoustic guitar that enter next are slightly out of synch, creating a sense of heterophony. Heterophony is common in Chinese folk music, and appears when similar melodies are superimposed with slight differences in the rhythm, timing and dynamics. In «Listening Like a Child» the impression of heterophony is enhanced by a chorus of male voices later in the song, that sing the main melody after Zuoxiao does, but also not in perfect synchrony with each other. A nervous, syncopated electric guitar riff and sustained organ chords that mark chord changes finish the atmosphere of opportunism against all odds. To me, without actually naming them, «Listening Like a Child» performs the uneasy happy-go-lucky of China's migrant workers and their over-sized confection suits.

From *I Can't Sit Sadly By Your Side* onwards Zuoxiao makes abundant use of choirs. These choruses present a sense of collectivity, in ways similar to the official music of the masses 大众歌曲 that dominated the PRC in the Revolutionary period of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Although his music occasionally refers to this period's forms of mass social engagement, Zuoxiao's use of choruses is very different. Rather than erasing individuality in the service of Communism and (national) unity, choruses with Zuoxiao retain tension between the individual and the collective. It does so through heterophony and the use of less and particular voices, sometimes of other well-known singers, which render individual voices distinguishable. Additionally, in Zuoxiao's music too many things are happening simultaneously to give a sense of unity and shared telos. The ending of *I Can't Sit Sadly By Your Side*'s title song is a case in point. On top of its elaborate string arrangement, first Zuoxiao Zuzhou repeats the main line of the song in low voice that foreground his out-of-town accent. Then a folksong-like yodeling enters in the background, and also a chorus of female voices repeat a variation on Zuoxiao's main vocal line in staccato with lots of sound effects (mainly reverb) and semantically empty filling syllables to the slow three-beat. The finale this adds up to is disjunctive and even chaotic rather than unified.

Related to this appeal to social engagement through difference-in-collectivity is the increasing centrality of cultural identity in Zuoxiao's music after *Di'anmen*. On the album *The U.S.A.* (2006), of which the booklet contains pictures taken in Amsterdam, Zuoxiao has recorded a version of the Mongolian rock song titled «Ulan Bator Nights» 乌兰巴托的夜 (audio [here](#) >> track 3). In his 2008 double album titled *Do You Know Where the East Is?* 你知道东方在哪一边? the exotic and ethnic beauty Asima features prominently, as she did on *I Can't Sit Sadly By Your Side*. Also the use of (Chinese) folk instruments such as the *dongbula*, the *guzheng* and the acoustic guitar on songs such as «Blessing» 恩惠 ([here](#) >> track 4), «A Tryst Makes a Myriad Things Bloom» 野合万事兴 ([here](#) >> track 3) and «The Melancholic Boss» 忧伤的老板 ([here](#) >> track 4) has prompted several critics to call Zuoxiao a modern folk musician, a description that contrasts sharply with He Li's suggestion of patricide in the mid 1990s, quoted above (Cf. Zuoxiao Zuzhou 2010, 119).

For instance «The Melancholic Boss» starts with static noise and then an upbeat, energetic plucked guitar melody, supported by accents on a second guitar and answered by the bright sound of various bells and light cymbals on every off-beat. As a whole the intro suggest a walk on a sunny, winding country road. As heavier percussion sets in and Zuoxiao sings the first verse the atmosphere becomes nostalgic. The first chorus is supported by the broad sound of the two-stringed horse-head fiddle (*matouqin* 马头琴), and followed by a bridge with both a snippet of a folksy vocal melody and overtone singing. Upon the second verse, a slow computer-generated breakbeat and a string arrangement give the song a more modern and cosmopolitan sound. Overtone singing and folksong return in the second,

extended bridge, but are subdued by a solo on acoustic guitar. As the song reaches its climax after the third chorus, a female voice introduces high vocal ornaments, that are, like the horse-head fiddle and overtone-singing inspired by Mongolian music traditions.

In an interview, Zuoxiao explains that he grew up listening to the 1980s PRC pop star Li Guyi, Taiwanese campus song and Revolutionary songs, and says:

People that understand me, that listen to my music think that I'm not influenced by tradition, that I started with Western rock right away, very avant-garde. In fact it's not so. I've listened to traditional music all along (Li 2009).

Rather than arguing that Zuoxiao Zuzhou crosses genres, I submit that the shifting qualifications of his music as underground rock, experimental music, new folk and pop confirm my doubts about a generic approach to Zuoxiao's music. This is not because Zuoxiao defies genres, but because, as I have argued elsewhere, genres work very different in China, interacting with other notions that are meaningful in creating social groups in the PRC, such as geography, generation, gender and marketability or income (Groenewegen 2011).

Tricking the People

Some of the changes in Zuoxiao Zuzhou's sound relate to his production methods. In the 1990s he performed his songs with the band NO and published them with the label Badhead, that the Beijing record company [Modern Sky](#) 摩登天空 had established for underground bands. However, after a number of changes, NO disbanded by 2001. Given his bad experience with censorship by record companies described above, Zuoxiao decided not to work with Badhead or any other record company anymore, and to produce, publish and sell his albums himself. Zuoxiao was so infuriated that he published a completely revised edition of *The Missing Master* in 2009.

Zuoxiao recorded his first solo album *Zuoxiao Zuzhou at Di'anmen* with the help of Tongue's keyboard player Guo Dagang. Unfortunately they both lacked experience in production and hence produced an album that relied on relatively crude MIDI technology, something of which Zuoxiao himself has been very critical. Zuoxiao realized that a good production requires investment – hiring musicians, technicians, a studio, equipment and so on. Next to restrictions relating to the outbreak of the disease SARS in 2003, difficulties in arranging investment, production and distribution are the main reason for the gap between *Di'anmen* (2001) and *I Can't Sit Sadly By Your Side* (2005). According to his autobiography, Zuoxiao invested all his money in the production, and when it was finished he set the price to 150 RMB – two to three times as expensive as legally imported, trend-setting albums of

Western pop stars and 15 or more times as expensive as illegal CDs that were on sale everywhere on the street. But Zuoxiao's marketing strategy seems to have worked. «Half a year later I received a lot of business proposals. A number of mainstream singers wanted me to write songs for them, produce albums, and curators also looked me up ... Next year I bought a big house (Zuoxiao Zuzhou 2010, 84–85).» Subsequent albums also cost 150 RMB and his 2008 album *Big Deal* 大事 was even priced 500 RMB, according to Zuoxiao to annoy critics of his previous scheme, but also because he felt his production was up to international standards. Zuoxiao defended himself to criticism of being greedy by offering all his music for free download on his website. The lyrics of «Blessing»:

阿丝玛和她的孩子们得到过你的恩惠
 尽管你说过多五百元你也不会富
 尽管你说过少五百元你也不会穷
 她和她的孩子们得到了你的恩惠

*Asima and her children have received your blessings.
 Even if you said that another 500 RMB wouldn't make you rich.
 Even if you said that 500 RMB less wouldn't make you poor.
 She and her children received your blessings.*

I Can't Sit Sadly By Your Side is relatively poppy, and the soundtrack album *The U.S.A.* more so. The second CD of *Do You Know Where the East Is?* starts with «On Method» 方法论 in which Zuoxiao Zuzhou honors his nickname «dissonant singer» 跑调歌手 by screeching high and off-key for eight and a half minutes ([here](#) >> track 1). Still the song marks the start of Zuzhou's success in a different way, namely as a trickster of officially-endorsed social reality. In the following quotation Zuoxiao refers to Jiang Zeming, the president of the PRC between 1993 and 2003, as «Old Jiang», which is a homonym with «old ginger», a euphemism for the libido of middle-aged men:

In 1997, as soon as you turned on the TV you saw Old Jiang ... The initial idea was quite simple: Old Jiang is hot, I said Old Jiang is more redhot than I am, I should write him a song ... I selected Old Jiang's best speech, and kept it like that ... I worked many years on it, and in 2007 I settled on this version. I had lots of previous versions, which I would perform every show. Many liked this song of mine. I thought that lots of things aren't clear. When I write serious songs they don't like it, don't accept it.

Seeing that Old Jiang had success I hitched a ride. Old Jiang's hot, why shouldn't I jump the bandwagon. Old Jiang is everyone's. Then I was accused of being reactionary. I said, now that's funny, I didn't change a word, reactionary in what way? So in 2007, I saw them [government officials], and only after they decided that I'm not reactionary, I could publish my album. Later I told them I'm not avant-garde. They said: «you're too modest, teacher Zuoxiao, you're too modest, and you say you're not avant-garde?» I said, «I'm really not avant-garde, in the past [the 1970s], many sang Mao Zedong eulogies [composed of his poetry], right?» ... when I received an award for the best album of the year by South China Weekly [in 2008] I told them it's a joke that I made it, that it shouldn't be like that. The story of my life is [serious] like this and then I irresponsibly make a mess of things, and they start liking me (Li 2009).



«On Method» is a parody, and marks an important change in how Zuoxiao's work engages with society and its problems. In previous instances where Zuoxiao has employed cynicism the subtext was serious.

«Representative» parodies the political apathy of Chinese citizens by commenting on Yeltsin's decision to step down with «what's it to you, at most those that despise him will lose all hope» and «yes, it's nothing special, at most it's an internal affair of Lakoff's country», without offering a clue on who Lakoff may be. By contrast, the parodies and jokes of *Do You Know Where the East Is?* don't add up to a coherent argument by exaggerating and thus discrediting the opposite position. In songs such as «You Never Put My Mind at Rest» 你一直沒让我的脑子休息过 hedonism and sexual desire seem to trump seriousness.

The title is sung throughout the song by a chorus of female and children's voices, contrasting sharply with the verses in which Zuoxiao in an optimistic voice sings a parody on loyalty in friendship among men, especially when

women are concerned. The telephone sounds, samples of laughter and the ridiculously repetitive, cock-holding solo of the bridge finish the cheerful yet perverse sound of «You Never Put My Mind to Rest».

Cultural identity plays a major part in the Bacchanal that is *Do You Know Where the East Is?*, because contrasting and mashing up dynastic, Communist and capitalist symbols and sounds help to show how wonderfully and frighteningly absurd China has become. Jiang Zemin's speech in «On Method» centers on «pushing the great project of establishing socialism with Chinese characteristics into the 21st century». But the ultimate example is «Bragging out Loud» 大话喷子 where Zuoxiao sings the chorus in an increasingly hysterical voice to a disco beat, quoting 1990s Eurodance hits (audio [here](#) >> track 5):

红军渡赤水
是我搭的桥
主席在陕西
吃的麦当劳
一夜没睡
软卧白费
此时此刻
可口可乐

The Red Army crosses the Chishui River [during the Long March, 1934-1935]

It's me who built the bridge

*The chairman went to Shaanxi province
and had McDonalds*

Stayed up all night

Waisted a soft sleeper

At this very moment

Can Drink Can Fun [Coca Cola]

Big Deal (2008) retains its predecessor's humor, but is more poppy in its vocal delivery and arrangements. Zuoxiao Zuzhou doesn't sing off-key any more and most tracks are three minute love songs with catchy melodies, albeit not without perversion. «I want to call you a good girl, embrace you tightly so as not to confuse you with any other good girl», sings Zuoxiao calmly in the opening song, supported by an acoustic guitar riff, an overly produced drum track and later a female chorus singing a syncopated, scattered melody.

The critic Zhang Xiaozhou has aptly remarked that Zuoxiao has changed from «strange» 怪 to «flirtatious» 骚, and consequently criticizes *Big Deal* as musically inferior and basically a sell-out (Zhang 2008). I agree that the production is dominated by slick, electronic sound effects and the fact that Zuoxiao Zuzhou focuses on studio recordings that are later performed live by hired hands has impaired his life shows somewhat. But on the other hand, *Big Deal*'s slick production works, and the album contains brilliant tracks such as «Money Song» 钱歌, «Conning, Conning» 忽悠, 忽悠 and «The Touching Parts» 动人的部分 that are delivered in a lazy and relaxed voice, laconically emphasizing the venomous black humor of the lyrics.

The music adds to this slickness that doesn't hide the roughness at its edges. For instance, the signature melodies of «Money Song» are smooth and picked up by various (simulated) wind instruments that are both vulgar and over-produced. The song starts with a dubbed trumpet harmony produced by a synthesizer, and later contains ornaments with the sound of digitally-generated light flute, to lead up to a saxophone solo (animated [video clip](#)).

The rhythm breaks off after each of the two sentence of the chorus (the final lines in the translation below), stressing their apparent juxtaposition:

朋友啊朋友
如果说爱你有点轻
说不爱你有点重
什么时候把欠我的钱还了?
不要说你什么时候欠过我的钱了
给我个面子我什么时候不让你尊敬我?
我知道我的存在让你感到压力
我知道我的行为让你感到自卑
我知道我的言语让你感到渺小
可是我的钱哪为何不让你感到恶心?
不借钱给朋友就会失去朋友失去钱
借钱给朋友又会失去钱失去朋友

*Friend, oh friend
Saying I love you is too little
Saying I don't love you too much
When will you pay back the money you owe me?
Don't say: when did I ever lend anything from you.
Just give me face, when did I not earn your respect?
I know that my existence stresses you out
I know that my behavior deflates your self-esteem*

*I know that my remarks make you feel tiny
But, my money oh, why doesn't it disgust you?
Don't lend to friends and you'll lose your friends, your money
Lend to friends, and you'll lose your money, your friends*

At times the music foregrounds sounds and instruments associated with manipulation and fakeness, and it exaggerates musical clichés to the point where they become incredible and hilarious. Especially «Conning, Conning» ([video clip](#)) and «The Killing Medicine» 杀人剂 (audio [here](#) >> track 8) seem to be deliberately inauthentic and fake: the former with cheap disco music and keyboard presets, the latter by exaggerating features from 1980s army songs and their marching rhythms, choruses and trumpets.

Not surprisingly, precisely these songs are most critical of contemporary Chinese phenomena: «Conning, Conning» of the power of news «to create its own truths, which means it's absolutely not true» and «The Killing Medicine» of deliberate medical malpractice. Finally, the last song of the album, «Beijing Pictorial» 北京画报 is a fourteen minute long chronicle of current affairs that mentions in passing Yang Jia who murdered six Shanghai police officers in 2008 out of frustration with the justice system, but that focuses more on the aspirations of «ordinary people» to go abroad, strike it rich and marry.

Concluding Remarks

In many respects Zuoxiao Zuzhou is not representative of Chinese popular music. Especially his continued social engagement seems to be in sharp contrast with younger generations, which Andreas Steen has described as early as 2000 as engaged in a «rebellion of denial directed against heavy ideological involvement of any kind» ([Steen 2000](#)). I agree with Steen that since the late 1990s gradually fewer bands adopted a rebellious rock stance, and that this is partly due to a cultural climate in which fundamental political change seemed impossible (regardless of its desirability), and demanding it ridiculous. Angry rock stars that persisted in their act, such as Xie Tianxiao, seemed to become increasingly conscious of their performance as offering temporary release. Nevertheless, Zuoxiao's recent success as cult-hero proves that Chinese youngsters are interested in socially engaged music, provided that it is entertaining 好玩, cynical and humorous rather than indignant and insisting on revolt. This development can be related to the success of humor and parody since 2001, and the rise of bands such as Second Hand Rose and the New Pants especially. Significantly, the rap metal band Miserable Faith, which had been one of the most outspoken bands with their 2001 song «Wherever There is Oppression There is Resistance» 哪里有压迫哪里就有反抗, changed their sound completely and made a comeback with the ballad «The Most Beautiful Day of My Life» 生命中最美丽的一天 (2006) and the reggae album *Don't Stop My Music* 不要停止我的音乐 (2008).

This trend in the mode of social engagement across the music scene relates to wider cultural developments that partly fall outside the scope of this paper. Let me just point towards the films of the Hong Kong comedian Stephen Chow. Chow's humor is described as *mo lei tau* 無厘頭 «silly, nonsensical», and this term also appears in reviews of Zuoxiao Zuzhou's latest albums. For instance, when asked what he thinks of stardom, Zuoxiao Zuzhou celebrated his loose canon:

This is a mo lei tao time, so a lot of mo lei tao people can take a liking of Zuoxiao Zuzhou. Because mo lei tao is most difficult to copy. And really, I'm more than mo lei tao, because I'm also split, yet at the same time full of friendliness. They don't know when I'm a moron and when I'm a Buddha. All of my works are like that (He 2010).

Also Chow's tricksters are more than just silly. They invariably save the day and, against all odds, become the hero of the story. The cultural critic Zhu Dake argues that Stephen Chow's characters and their «naughtiness» 整蛊 are models for a generation that came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and presents them as potentially subversive (Zhu 2006, 342–345, 374–377). The writer, blogger and sports car racer Han Han that helped Zuoxiao gain success as trickster is a trend-setting exponent of this generation. In contrast to Zhu, Yan Jun sees the cynicism and lack of ideals of Chow's roles as counter-productive to any change. He argues that since the 1990s Chinese intellectuals and artists have increasingly viewed themselves as both critical outsiders to and successful participants in the mainstream, and that Stephen Chow's heroes' typical attitude of ridicule-yet-win reinforces this self-perception, which Yan finds dangerous (Conversation, Yan Jun, September 2008). A similar discussion revolves around the criticality and commercialism in Feng Xiaogang's films (Gong 2009).

In sum, although Zuxiao Zuzhou is by no means the most mainstream and best-selling Chinese singer, his music is widely known and moreover is part of larger social and cultural developments that respond not only to political freedom (and the lack thereof), but also, and perhaps even primarily, to changes in desires, inter-human relations and world views that are induced by China's economic transformation, urbanization and modernization. The ambiguities of Zuoxiao's case warrants a more thorough discussion of what modes of criticality and social engagement are possible at this moment, both in China and in popular music more generally. For now, I hope that Asima has seduced you to click on the links provided throughout this article and get immersed in the world of her pimp and melancholic boss.



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