

A commentary by Pan Keyin in Beijing Scene

Red China Blues Woman



Her uncle was a famous Red Army general and revolutionary martyr - but she was thrown out of the Red Guards. She trained as a classical pianist at the prestigious Central Conservatory - but made her name as a leather-clad rock and roll rebel. She went on to pen surrealist novels that have become cult classics. Now she sings a particularly Chinese brand of blues in New York. Her name is Liu Sola - and you ain't seen nothin' yet. Liu Sola sits on the living room sofa in her mother's Beijing apartment and says to me "I'm black." Now, my mother is Japanese but my father is black and I grew up in the United States: I know something about being black and I know that the 43-year-old musician and writer sitting in front of me is in fact not at all black: she was born in Beijing to a family of Han Chinese high-ranking Communist Party officials. But when I listen to her music - a distinctive blend of Asian opera and folk blended with African-American blues and jazz - I know what she means. In the early 1980s Liu was one of the first generation of mainland musicians to wear black leather jackets and play rock music but it wasn't until her first visit to the U.S. in 1987 on a writing exchange fellowship that Liu discovered her "blackness." On that trip, she visited Chicago, Columbus Ohio, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Memphis, Nashville, New York, and Washington DC. She listened to the music of Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin. She saw Junior Wells perform in Chicago. When she returned to the U.S. in 1989, Liu headed for the Mississippi Delta where she became a blues groupie, living in a motel and joining blues men and women at juke joints, hotel lounges and performance halls. "The very first time I heard the blues - that's when I knew. It instantly struck a chord with me. I believe I feel music like a black person," Liu says. She notes the similarities between Chinese folk music and the storytelling tradition of African-American blues.

Red China Blues

While Liu Sola's childhood was not without its share of blues-inducing tragedy, she has an unlikely family background for a blueswoman. Her uncle, Liu Zhidan, was a general in the Red Army before his death and martyrdom in 1936. Her father was also a high-ranking leader, but the family's political fortunes declined when his closest comrade-in-arms Gao Gang was accused of treason by Mao and persecuted to death in 1955. Liu's mother's written account of the controversial affair was denounced by Mao and resulted in her parents' exile on a rural pig farm for almost two decades. Liu and her elder brother and sister were left with a relative's family in the capital. Despite the chaos around her, a precocious 5-year-old Liu began studying classical piano. She also studied Peking Opera, but her vocal pitch was too low and she turned instead to Chinese folk songs. Liu's teenage years are best represented by the film *In the Heat of the Sun*. The Jiang Wen film portrays a gang of mischievous schoolchildren left to their own devices during the Cultural Revolution. Liu explains, "Everybody's parents were in the military. Us teenagers, left on our own, were sitting around outside playing Beatles songs. After the Cultural Revolution ended, I luckily passed the entrance exam for the Central Conservatory of Music." In 1977, Liu entered the Conservatory where she studied composition. "We were trained in Western classical as well as traditional Chinese music. But we were not allowed to study modern composition." She produced a piano suite, *The Book of Songs*, based on China's earliest poetry collection. For her graduation thesis, she composed a symphony dedicated to her famous uncle. The symphony was performed in 1985 by the Central Opera House Orchestra and broadcast on Beijing Radio. Although Liu studied composition and piano, her heart was in rock and roll and her head was in existentialist fiction. She read novels by Jack Kerouac, J.D. Salinger, Albert Camus and Joseph Heller - works first available in translation on the Mainland in the early 1980s. After graduation in 1981, Liu began her writing career, publishing several controversial short stories and novels. Her first novel, *Ni Bie Wu Xuanze* (You Have No Choice) was completed in 1984.

You Have No Choice

The term "Catch-22" has entered the English language to describe a frustrating situation in which one is trapped by contradictory rules or circumstances. "Ni bie wu xuanze" has similar connotations for Chinese people. As Liu elucidates, "It is a common Chinese saying, it is something we were all feeling, but nobody dared to say. It appeals to Chinese people in my generation and especially to those younger than me. We often have to do something we

don't want to do in order to do something we want to do." Ni Bie Wu Xuanze charts the experiences of music students and uses this as a microcosm of society. The story opens with the narrator, Li Niao, contemplating dropping out of school. She seeks advice from an eccentric but caring teacher. The advice: "Ni bie wu xuanze." The two main professors in the story, Jin and Jia, are symbols of authority and the absurdity of contradictory regulations. The students have a range of attitudes to art and life: some strive to find their own authentic voice in their music, some are motivated by more materialistic aims. The novel perceptively captures the tensions in Chinese society between repression and creative endeavor and gives voice to the feelings of futility, frustration and aimlessness felt by Liu Sola's generation. It has since been lauded for giving expression to the views of the so-called lost generation - urban Chinese born during and after the Cultural Revolution. Ni Bie Wu Xuanze became a cult classic among urban youth, and remains required reading of all urban hipsters despite being out of print on the mainland. Some critics have called the story is China's first surrealist fiction; others have denounced it as 'irrationalist', but despite its controversial nature, the book won the 1988 Chinese National Novella Award. During this period Liu was also learning to rock and roll. She formed an all-female band. "In school, we were taught classical music - Western as well as Chinese. There were those that were into Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie, but I was opposed to the whole notion of 'pop' - commercial music with no substance. Back then, our music sounded a bit like Pink Floyd." Liu's celebrity at the time rivalled that of the present Mandopop singer Faye Wong (Wang Fei). She recorded three albums of her own songs which became best sellers not only on the Mainland but also in Taiwan and Hong Kong. She also wrote music for film, theater, and television. In 1988, she went to Hong Kong and completed a rock opera version of her novella Blue Sky Green Sea. Produced by the Taiwanese musician Hou Dejian, the rock opera was recorded with the Chinese Central Symphony Orchestra and a rock band from Hong Kong. Despite her popularity both as a musician and as a writer Liu wanted to leave China: "I just felt so incredibly out of place in Beijing." She went to London in 1988, and continued her work as a writer, singer, composer, and dramatist. She started a reggae band (called Sola) with English, Japanese and Chinese musicians. She wrote and performed in a theater piece called Memories of the Middle Kingdom, in which two innocent Englishmen are hauled through an absurdist version of the Cultural Revolution. Her experiences in London also helped shape a novella entitled Hun Dun Jia Li Ge Leng. The novella was first published in Hong Kong in 1991, and only became available in China in 1994. An excellent English translation is available from University of Hawaii Press (see the end of this article for contact information). Of the title, translator Richard King explains in a postscript to the translation that hundun is an ancient term for the primordial chaos that preceded all things. Jia means "plus" or "and". Li ge leng are syllables often used to vocalize instrumental accompaniment for operatic singing - a Chinese version of do re mi - but in Beijing slang the word has come to signify old and unhip people who like opera and by extension, bullshit. In Chinese it is a superb title for a novella that mixes profanity, political jargon, classical and operatic Chinese references, Cultural Revolution slogans and rock lyrics. Hun Dun Jia Li Ge

Leng is a collage of memories, narrated in the stream of protagonist Huang Haha's consciousness. Huang is an emigre Chinese artist in London, but most of the novella concerns memories of events in Beijing. In 1992 Liu was accepted into the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. During the year-long course she also composed several pieces of music for theater and dance music including a major modern dance score based on the classic Chinese opera Snow in Midsummer. Since then, Liu has continued writing fiction but has become better known for her inventive and highly experimental music.

Blues From The East

Liu's first album was released in 1994. Entitled *Blues From the East*, the record is a fusion of Asian and African-American traditions, blending elements of funk, R&B, techno with oriental opera and Chinese folk music. The motley crew performing on the album includes Wu Man on the pipa (a traditional Chinese stringed instrument), jazz vocalist/keyboardist Amina Claudine Myers, Parliament/Funkadelic drummer Jerome Brailey and Last Beat rapper and story-teller Umar Bin Hassan. The album is based on two Chinese parables: "The Broken Zither," and "Married to Exile" which tells of a Chinese Emperor's mistress who is betrothed to a Mongolian chieftain as a peace offering. *Blues from the East* is a blues album that reveals the similarities between Chinese and African-American story-telling traditions. The album climbed to number nine on the Billboard world music charts in 1995. One of the few opportunities for mainlanders to hear *Blues From the East* was a broadcast of some songs on Zhang Youdai's "Midnight Blues" radio show in 1996. Zhang says Chinese listeners criticized the pieces as "too noisy," "not Chinese," "not music" and "a bastardization of Peking Opera." Liu retorts, "If analyzed in the Chinese sense, these comments are definitely legitimate, but I see music differently." Liu's notions about music are not populist, nor likely to find approval at the Central Conservatory anytime soon. Liu comments, "I think in terms of using my body as an instrument. Your body resonates in a different way depending upon how you hold yourself. Air flow for singing comes from a different part of the body. I have this kind of physical feeling for music - I call it a kind of qi, (roughly translatable as 'life force' or 'essential energy') but most black people understand it as soul." Like Beethoven who is said to have seen musical notes as colors (C as blue for example), Liu says she has a visual sense of music. Liu makes a similar claim on the album notes of her third album *Haunts*: "The structure of this music comes from emulating handicraft designs. As I trace out the outlines of a chair or a necklace, at the same time I hear witches, jongleurs, fox-demons, and Buddha's screaming at me all together." After finishing *Blues from the East*, Liu wrote the musical score for several films, plays and TV productions. She composed the soundtrack for Michael Apter's documentary on Tiananmen, *Moving the Mountain*. Liu's second album, *China Collage*, was released in 1996. In the liner notes, Liu says makes

references to Jimi Hendrix, African music, jazz, blues and rock & roll. Nonetheless, China Collage still sounds very Chinese, but it Chinese music gone psychedelic. Now based in New York where she finds the arts world more encouraging of experimentation than in London and Beijing, Liu has just released her third album, Haunts. The album starts off with "Daddy's Chair," nine-minutes of oriental melodies laced with blues piano. Liu's solo vocals are child-like and otherworldly, like something between Bjork and Enya. The piece "Drunk on Images" is a perfect example of Liu's vocal expressionism, mating modern classical piano and Peking operatic vocals in an interpretation of the classic Peking Opera "Guifei Zuijiu" (Drunken Beauty). In "Labyrinths," Liu moves between operatic and Native American chants with Native American percussion in the background. The title track, "Haunts" is aptly named: Liu's deep satin vocals possess the listener's mind. Listening to Haunts is both a happy and melancholy experience. It is good to know that Liu Sola is revitalizing Chinese traditions by experimenting and mixing them with artistic traditions from other places. But it is sad that Beijing does not yet offer the creative encouragement and freedom necessary to keep Liu and many other Chinese artists from settling abroad. Chaos and All That is available online from University of Hawaii Press at www.hawaii.edu/uhipress/books. Haunts and China Collage CDs are available in limited supply from Beijing Scene, call 6532-6428 or email beijingscene@bigfoot.com.