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How Folk Music Shaped Taiwanese Identity

By Eugene Cheng

When we talk about folk music, it's either to mention the Woody Guthries and Joan Baezs of our unvisited nostalgia or to dismiss whatever Mumford & Sons are doing these days. But it's important to remember that folk music's reach extends beyond roots music revivals of the western world.

Eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder was the first to understand the link between traditional music and cultural empowerment. Herder viewed languages and customs as showcases of unique cultural values. This includes the music and dances passed down through generations.

Cities and industry may take us forward, but volkslied (folk songs) takes us back. What was once considered only suitable for the uneducated and peasantry and transformed into signifiers of authenticity and people's shared heritage.

By the 1960s, the American roots revival had utilized that collective spirit towards political dissent and civil rights activism. With guitar and harmonica at the ready, artists like Bob Dylan created countercultural anthems that reimagined older blues, slave spirituals, and colonial ballads. Folk music became both a symptom and a cure of American discontent.

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, an island nation barely larger than Vermont was listening in. Taiwan was in a weird place in the 60s and 70s. Having lived through Japanese colonialism until post-WWII, Taiwanese residents had to quickly acclimate themselves to their new Chinese Nationalist rulers, the Kuomingtang government (KMT).

Quick—and totally not comprehensive—history lesson: the new leadership arrived in Taiwan after losing ground against the Chinese Communist Party in their bids claim legitimate Chinese sovereignty on the mainland. The KMT still enjoyed international recognition until 1971, when the United Nations voted Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China as the UN's "only legitimate representative of China."

In addition to Taiwan's diplomatic losses, locals also suffered under a 38-year period of martial law that saw the KMT imprisoning and executing political dissidents. Democratic institutions were suspended while state censorship was the status quo. Most notably, the use of the native Taiwanese Hokkien language—spoken by the pre-KMT locals—was criminalized.

Faced with political and cultural strife, Taiwanese youth fought back by emulating their American folk counterparts. The roots of Taiwan's folk movement can be traced back to the "Tamkang Incident."

In 1976, Tamkang University held a folk music festival that showcased mostly Western music. Singer-songwriter Lee Shuang-tze famously took the stage uninvited, holding a Coca-Cola bottle. According to eyewitnesses, Lee denounced their disappearing Taiwanese identity. "We should sing our own songs," he announced, before smashing the Coke bottle—a symbol of Western influence. He then performed "Mending the Net" (補破網), illegally sung in his native Taiwanese tongue.

"When I see my net, my eyes are red, the hole is very large;

I want to mend it, but I don't know how, does anyone understand my pain;

If I let this go today, it will be forever hopeless;

For my future, I need to find out how to fix my net."

After receiving boos from the audience, he reportedly sang Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind" and abruptly left.

This incident was the catalyst for Taiwan's Campus Folk Song Movement (校園民歌), led by students who tried to carve out their distinct identity amidst increasing political isolation and Western cultural integration. Artists like Yang Xian and Ara Kimbo reached into traditional poetry for lyrical inspiration, while others gravitated towards musings on simpler themes—love, friendships, nature.

All this contributed towards a self-reflection that allowed for both emotional release and social commentary. Take "Catching Pond Loach" (捉泥鰍), a deceivingly simple tune about a Taiwanese pastime.

"The pond is full of water, the rain has finally stopped;

The mud alongside the fields are full of pond loaches;

I wait for you, day by day, to catch pond loaches with me;

Big brother, can we go catch pond loaches?"

By the time the 70s rolled around, there was an influx of young Taiwanese men who received scholarships to study abroad. Many of these individuals participated in political activism back in Taiwan and were subsequently arrested by the KMT. This provides an unfortunate reason for the older brother's absence in "Catching Pond Loach."

The Campus Folk Song Movement played a pivotal role in shaping Taiwanese perceptions of its own identity, intertwined with its own take on Chinese nationalism and global influences. You can also hear campus folk songs in contemporary Taiwanese pop music, with pan-Asian superstars like Jay Chou and Crowd Lu drawing from the same musical and social themes that inspired Lee Shuang-tze's fateful Coca-Cola demolition.