

= Nothing to My Name =

" Nothing to My Name " ( also known as " I Have Nothing " ) is a 1986 Mandarin @-@ language rock song by Cui Jian . It is widely considered Cui 's most famous and most important work , and one of the most influential songs in the history of the People 's Republic of China , both as a seminal point in the development of Chinese rock and roll and as a political sensation . The song was an unofficial anthem for Chinese youth and activists during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 .

Both in its lyrics and instruments , the song mixes traditional Chinese styles with modern rock elements . In the lyrics , the speaker addresses a girl who is scorning him because he has nothing . However , the song has also been interpreted as being about the dispossessed youth of the time , because it evokes a sense of disillusionment and lack of individual freedom that was common among the young generation during the 1980s .

= = Historical context = =

By the late 1970s , Western rock music was gaining popularity in mainland China . After the Cultural Revolution ended in the mid @-@ 1970s and the government began a period of economic reform called gaige kaifang , many students and businessmen went abroad and brought back Western music . Chinese singers began performing covers of popular Western rock songs .

At the same time , Chinese society and the Chinese government were quickly abandoning Maoism , and promoting economic policies that had a more capitalist orientation . Many Chinese teens and students were becoming disillusioned with their government , which they felt had abandoned its ideals . Because of the rapid economic changes , many of them felt that they had no opportunities and no individual freedom . These developments formed the background against which " Nothing to My Name " appeared in 1986 .

= = Music and lyrics = =

= = = Musical style = = =

Cui Jian was heavily influenced by Western artists such as Bob Dylan , The Beatles , The Rolling Stones , and Talking Heads ; in the late 1980s he even performed with a hair style modeled on that of John Lennon . In " Nothing to My Name " and other songs , he intentionally altered the sounds of traditional Chinese musical instruments by mixing them with elements of rock music , such as electric guitar . He also purposely divorced his musical style from that of the revolutionary songs and proletarian operas that were common under Chairman Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution ? for example , he performed his music very loud , as high as 150 decibels , just because Mao had considered loud music disruptive to the social order .

In genre , the song is often called the first work of Xibeifeng , a 1980s music style originating from Northwest China . Cui himself , however , considers the song " pure " rock and roll .

= = = Lyrics and meaning = = =

Throughout the song , the narrator addresses an unidentified girl , asking " When will you come with me " , and lamenting the fact that she laughs at him for having nothing to his name . He tells her he wants to give her his hopes and bring her freedom , that " the earth is turning under your feet " and " the waters of life are flowing free " , yet she persists in scorning him . He asks why she laughs at the pack he carries on his back , and he wonders why he keeps on going , with nothing to his name . At last , he tells her that he has waited for a long time , and that this is his final plea : he wants to grab her by the hands , to " take you away with me " . As he sees her hands tremble , and her eyes " overflow with tears " , he asks her , " Do you really mean to tell me , you love me as I am ? "

Interpretations of the song 's meaning vary from one listener to the next ; some people view it as a

song about love and desire , while others understand it as a political metaphor , the lyrics being addressed as much to the Chinese nation as to a girlfriend . University of Florida scholar Jonathan Matusitz describes the song 's lyrics as a means of expressing politically sensitive ideas that could not be stated through any other medium . In this interpretation , the lyrics near the beginning , " I 've asked you without end / When will you go with me / But you always laughed at me / for having nothing to my name " ( " ??????? / ?????? / ??????? / ????? " ) are taken to express the " humiliation and lack of individuality , possession , and personal freedom " , the " sense of loss and disorientation " among China 's youth in the 1980s . Ethnomusicologist Timothy Brace has described this common analysis of the song lyrics as " recast [ ing ] the setting of this piece from that of a boy talking to his girlfriend to that of a youthful generation talking to the nation as a whole . " The ambiguity is heightened by the structure of the phrase y? wú su? y?u , an idiomatic chengyu . It literally means " to have nothing " and has no grammatical subject . Therefore , it can be interpreted as meaning " I have nothing " ( implying that it is a song about two people ) , or " we have nothing " ( understanding it as social commentary ) .

The narrator of the song worries that the girl he is addressing will ignore him because he has nothing to give her ; likewise , the song 's audience in the 1980s ? young students and workers ? were also suffering from not having resources to marry , to be with their girlfriends and boyfriends , or to attract members of the opposite sex . The lyrics also express Western concepts of individualism , and were some of the first popular song lyrics in China to promote self @-@ expression and self @-@ empowerment . This put the song in stark contrast with older music , which had emphasized conformity and obedience . As the narrator , later on in the song , confidently proclaims to the girl that he will " grab her hands " ( " ??????? " ) and then she will go with him ( " ?????? " ) , he suggests in the end that she can love the fact that he has nothing ( " ?????????? / ??????? " ) . On one level , this suggests that the song is about " love conquering all " , but the line has also been interpreted as threatening , and suggestive of an unorthodox and " Dionysian " mix of love and aggression .

Just as Cui adapts traditional Chinese sounds and instruments to a new format , in " Nothing to My Name " he also reappropriates traditional Chinese lyrical tropes . The lines " The earth under your feet is moving / The water around your body is flowing " ( " ?????? / ?????? " ) are reminiscent of the use of natural imagery in classical Chinese poetry and music , but here are intended to evoke the events going on around the song 's listeners , and to provoke them to rebel against the established order .

= = Release and impact = =

Cui wrote " Nothing to My Name " himself and first performed it on a televised music competition in May 1986 , with his band ADO . The song was an instant success , creating a " sensation " and turning Cui into a cult figure among urban youth . It was one of the first examples of Chinese , as opposed to imported , rock and roll music to gain popularity in China . The government @-@ controlled People 's Daily gave the song a positive review , despite its politically sensitive message . The song was included on Cui 's 1989 album Rock ' n ' Roll on the New Long March , released by the China Tourism Sound and Video Publishing Company . ( The version of the album released overseas was called Nothing to My Name . ) By 1989 , it had become a " battle song " or " anthem " among the youth movement .

Cui performed the song live at the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 . The performances by Cui and other rock artists during the protests have been described as " a revolutionary few days that rocked a nation , " and many protesters sang " Nothing to My Name " to give voice to their rebellion against the government , and their desire for personal freedom and self @-@ expression . Brace describes how , during Cui 's Tiananmen performance , students " jumped to their feet and began to sing , " a practice that had rarely happened at music performances in China before then . Not long after Tiananmen , Cui was restricted to playing in small venues ; he did not play before a large audience in Beijing again until 2005 .

Cui has become known as the " Father of Chinese Rock " , and " Nothing to My Name " has

become his most famous song . It has been described as " the biggest hit in Chinese history " and the beginning of Chinese rock .

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