

STAGE



Zhang Huoding enjoys great popularity among Chinese Peking Opera fans. Her upcoming performances include shows later this month in Beijing and in New York in September. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

SET FOR SHOW

Zhang Huoding, a veteran yet low-profile Peking Opera artist, will perform at the closing ceremony of Meet in Beijing Arts Festival. Chen Nan reports.

FOLK CULTURE

Li sings a different tune

By CHEN NAN

Li Zhi is one of the few singer-songwriters in China who can quickly sell out tickets to each of his concerts. But he has never performed on TV, rarely does interviews and always keeps a low profile.

During the past 10 years, he has been exploring ways of being an independent folk singer-songwriter by relying on social media to spread his music and interact with his fans.

Li held a news conference in Beijing in early April to launch his upcoming national tour, titled *Kan Jian* (Seeing). Starting in Shenzhen on May 23, Li will perform in five cities, including Beijing, Shanghai and Wuhan.

Li showed to the media a photo depicting him half-naked, a tattoo on the center of his chest in the shape of a Chinese map. The photo seems to hint at his ambition to conquer the country.

"Press conferences are so not my style. But lots of my friends encouraged me to have one, as a way to celebrate my 10 years in the music scene. So I wanted to give it a try," says Li. 37, said at the recent media event.

He has nearly 200,000 followers on micro blog Sina Weibo.

Since 2004, Li has released seven albums, including the newest, *1701*, which was played online more than 2.5 million times within a week of its debut in November.

Li first rose to fame on Douban.com, a popular Chinese social networking website. His folk tunes and poetic lyrics about his personal life and observations about society won him thousands of fans online.

With an entrepreneurial spirit, Li established his own team to promote his music. His concert on Dec 31, 2014, sold an unprecedented 3,600 tickets within 13 minutes. The concert was also webcast live with more than 100,000 people paying to watch.

With the Internet revolutionizing the music industry worldwide, Li promoted himself internationally, and his songs can be purchased on iTunes and other platforms.

Li has stirred some controversy with his comments about the current music scene in China.

"People take it for granted that folk and rock singer-songwriters should cater to a minority taste and lower their tickets price. I don't think so," says Li.

Tickets for his national tour cost as much as 880 yuan (\$142).

He adds that there are few independent singer-songwriters in the music industry "because their attitude and spirit are not independent".

"An independent singer-songwriter should have a clear understanding of his music and his audience, rather than counting on images designed by the record companies," he says.

He adds that his idols are Cui Jian, Chinese godfather of rock 'n' roll, and rock singer-songwriter Xu Wei. "Being real to myself is the core of being a singer-songwriter, no matter you are in China or anywhere in the world."

Born in Jintan city, Jiangsu province, Li bought his first guitar in 1995 at age 17. In 2004, he borrowed 5,000 yuan from his friend and made his first album, *The Forbidden Game*. One of his songs, *Mr Van Gogh*, was a big hit after its release in 2007.

"His melody and lyrics are good but his singing technique needs improving. I believe what makes him special is the realism in his music," says Lao Lang, a famous Chinese folk singer.

Li now lives in Nanjing, and says the city inspires him.

"It's a shame that I have not written any good lyrics in a long time. I will go back to Nanjing after the tour and think about it."



Li Zhi, folk singer-songwriter.

While traditionalists often complain that ancient Chinese art forms are facing extinction, Zhang Huoding, a Peking Opera actress, is reviving the old practice.

Despite keeping a low profile in the media, the performer has become one of the country's most-loved opera artists, thanks to her melodious singing voice and outstanding performances. Not only have the elderly followed her career with keen interest, youngsters have also given her pop star-like status.

On May 28, at the closing ceremony of the ongoing 15th Meet in Beijing Arts Festival, one of the largest art festivals in China, Zhang will present classic works created by Peking Opera master Cheng Yanqiu (1904-58), including *Reunion in the Dream* and *The Jewelry Pouch*.

Zhang will make her debut at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City in September by performing two shows, *The Jewelry Pouch* and *The Legend of White Snake*.

"In 1930, Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) brought Peking Opera to the United States for the first time and his art surpassed the language and cultural obstacles. I believe Zhang will carry on the legacy by displaying the charm of Peking Opera to American audiences," says Fu Jin, a professor at the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts, a top institution for traditional Chinese performing arts.

"When you go to Zhang's shows, you can feel the warm atmosphere of the audience, which reminds you of the golden era of Peking Opera," Fu says.

Wearing a navy blue blazer and a short, tidy hairstyle, 44-year-old Zhang recently participated in a media event for the festival at the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts.



“I am not an ambitious person. I have very few shows every year.”

Zhang Huoding, Peking Opera actress

IF YOU GO

7:30 pm, May 27-28. National Center for the Performing Arts, 2 West Chang'an Avenue, Xicheng district, Beijing. 010-6655-0000.

ater Arts.

Despite her fame, she has led a simple life and has never used social media platforms such as WeChat and micro blog.

She spends most of her time with her students and taking care of her 3-year-old daughter.

"I am not an ambitious person. I have very few shows every year so I guess that's why audiences want to see me," says Zhang, who left China National Peking Opera Company in 2010 to become a professor at the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts.

When asked about the upcoming shows, Zhang says many works of the Cheng school, one of the four

major schools in Peking Opera, are tragic stories, and she likes the role of Bai Suzhen in particular, the lead character in *The Legend of White Snake*, which is a personified snake spirit married to Xu Xian, a human.

"I was attracted to the role of Bai. She is crazy about love," says Zhang, who performed the whole work for the first time in 2000 when she was with the China National Peking Opera Company. "The classic work contains a tragic love story, lots of martial arts ... so I believe that American audiences will like it."

Compared with many Peking Opera actors, who learned the traditional art when they were young, Zhang, who came from Baicheng city in Northeast China's Jilin province, studied Peking Opera at age 15. A late start is considered a disadvantage for Peking Opera actors and actresses, who need to train their bodies and voices early in life.

Zhang failed three times when applying to Peking Opera schools but her obsession with the art led her to keep trying until in 1986, she made it to a school in Tianjin.

In 1989, Zhang started learning the performing style of the Cheng school with renowned Peking Opera master Zhao Rongchen (1916-96), which ushered her into a clear career path.

Her first Peking Opera teacher was Zhang Huoqian, her elder brother, who is a veteran *wu sheng*, or the warrior role of Peking Opera.

Zhang Huoqian once said in an interview that he didn't expect his sister to be so popular as an opera actress since "she didn't display any great talent when learning Peking Opera in the beginning".

"But what made her special is her shy and calm personality, which fits the style of Cheng school," he said.

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The Jewelry Pouch, performed by Zhang Huoding.



Adam Young will tour China in May. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

IF YOU GO

7:30 pm, Thursday. MasterCard Center Huiyuan Space, 69 Fuxing Lu (Road), Haidian district, Beijing. 400-610-3721.

MUSICIAN

Owl City comes to China for new gig

By CHEN NAN

Adam Young, better known by his stage name, Owl City, has swept the world with his electronic and melodic tunes ever since he emerged as a one-man band from the basement of his parents' house in a small town in Minnesota, the United States in 2007.

After two successful tours in China in 2009 and 2013, the singer-songwriter will return in May with performances in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

"Chinese fans were so rapt in the performance, I almost felt like they were able to take in more of the subtleties of the concert than other audiences I'd played for," says Young, recalling his shows in China in 2009.

As for the upcoming tour starting on Thursday, he says fans can

expect that "new songs, old songs, deep cuts and B-sides will all make appearances throughout the show", including *Fireflies* from his debut album, *Ocean Eyes*, which shot to No 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and went platinum four times over.

He also wrote music from some animated movies, such as *The Croods*, *The Smurfs 2* and the newest *Minions*, which Young describes as a "rewarding challenge".

"I enjoy making music for motion pictures because I have to do my homework and make sure every word counts. I have to make sure every decision I make is for the good of the movie," says Young.

"Batman has always been my favorite super hero. There is something so dark and brooding about the character that I've always loved."

With four full-length albums

“The crowd, the smoke, the lights, it's all very alluring ...”

Adam Young, musician

released so far, Young has transformed from making music by himself to collaborating with other musicians.

In the summer, he will release his fifth studio album.

"When I began creating music, I did it entirely for fun and I had no formal training or any idea what I was doing to be honest," he says.

Over the years he taught himself

to be a producer, writer and engineer, and his involvement with collaborators has taught him the value of learning from other people who are excellent at their craft, he says.

Describing himself as "introverted", Young says he has always preferred to be alone. But there is something that happens when he steps onto the stage.

"The crowd, the smoke, the lights, it's all very alluring, and I feel that I can almost hide behind the music I am playing. The music does all the hard work, and I can just kind of float there in a strange suspension of consciousness," he says.

"I still get butterflies before every show but it's not a bad thing. In fact, I have learned over the years to appreciate them because it is a good indicator that I indeed care very much about the performance, which is a feeling I hope I never lose."