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SUBS

SUBS is an anomaly on the Chinese independent music scene. They stand out because no other band of their stature has remained fully independent. SUBS is a regular headliner of large-scale music festivals around the country, most notably MIDI, the first such fest in the country. Throughout their career they've consistently refused to sign with record labels, or work with a manager of any kind to guide their path through the rapidly ossifying Chinese indie music industry.

Full disclosure: I joined SUBS as drummer in 2014. But this interview goes way, way deeper into Chinese punk history. Vocalist Kang Mao and guitarist Wu Hao—the band's two founding members—met in Wuhan, China's punk capital. At the time Wu Hao played in Shitdog, China's first hardcore band, and Kang Mao ran a short-lived university dive bar called Boys Toys, which was the epicenter of the Wuhan punk scene for a six-month stretch in the late '90s. She also sang in the all-female band No Pass, which along with Hang on the Box in Beijing, was responsible for introducing feminist punk and riot grrrl concepts into the Chinese punk ether. Kang and Wu moved to Beijing in 2001, forming SUBS shortly after. They're counted among China's most popular and respected rock bands today. I sat down with the duo recently for a long chat about their tumultuous history at a coffee shop in Sanlitun, Beijing's upscale nightlife district, just to ramp up the irony.

*Introduction and interview by Josh Feola.
Translation assistance by Emma Sun.
Photos courtesy Kang Mao and Wu Hao.*

MRR: Kang Mao, you're originally from Lanzhou. When did you move to Wuhan? How did you first get into the music scene there?

Kang Mao: I moved to Wuhan in summer of 1997, for college. [Music writer and sound artist] Yan Jun was a friend of mine in Lanzhou. When I moved to Wuhan, I got really bored, so Yan Jun gave me a few numbers to call. He told me those were the people who were playing music in Wuhan, among which there was [VOX club/label founder] Zhu Ning. I gave him a call, and he gave me an address of what was maybe the earliest rock venue in Wuhan. It was just a rehearsal space, it didn't even have a name. It was inside a storage warehouse for really large sponges, like for industrial use.

MRR: What about you Wu Hao? You're from Wuhan originally. How did you get into punk?

Wu Hao: Back in those days there was this radio show where everybody could record their own demos and send it to the show, and if they thought it was good you'd be selected to play on the show. It was called "Spring of New Music." That's also when the idea of independent music first became a thing in Wuhan. I was selected by the radio show, and they organized a bunch of people who were selected to have a talk, a salon, on the show, where people could call in on an audience hotline and participate. During the show Zhang Hai, the vocalist of a band called SDL, called in and told me, "Oh, the music that you talk about, I also like it. Let's meet up." I was really excited. Through Zhang Hai, later on I met Wu Wei from SMZB, who introduced me to a bunch of people in town playing in punk bands.

MRR: What was your first band?

Wu Hao: My first band was me on guitar, Zhang Hai on drums, and Liu Xiao on bass. We didn't have a band name, we would just play. Zhang Hai eventually quit because he wanted to play guitar himself, and he didn't

want to drum any more. So it was me and Liu Xiao, we were looking for a drummer for the longest time. At first we named ourselves Mao Mao Band, then we changed our name to Fantômas, after the '80s French movie. Liu Xiao moved to Beijing, but around then a bunch of people moved from Nanjing to Wuhan, including Wang Junping and Shi Xudong, and that later on became my next band, Shitdog. Actually it wasn't called Shitdog at first, it was called Angry Dog Eye.

MRR: Kang Mao—a bit after this you became active in the Wuhan punk scene as a musician and as the operator of an illegal DIY venue called Boys Toys. How did you get started as a musician and how did you get the idea to open a club?

Kang Mao: I actually started playing drums before I went to college. Whenever there were friends wanting to cover a famous Chinese rock song, I'd go play drums with them. That couldn't even be called a band, I was just drumming for my friends. After I moved to Wuhan, I would always go to the sponge warehouse to practice drumming, and that's where I met a lot of people. I already knew a lot of people in that scene by 1997. By 1999, I met three girls—Hu Juan, Yu Xiao, Zhang Yan—and we decided to form our own band, No Pass. Later another friend, Liang Yan, replaced Zhang Yan on guitar. In the summer of '99, after school started, I suddenly found school really boring, and I heard that two students who graduated from my university were trying to start their own business. So I found them and talked them into opening a bar with me. That was Boys Toys, it was three of us running the bar. By then, the Wuhan punk scene had already emerged, and Boys Toys became *the* venue to host shows.

MRR: How did you meet Wu Hao?

Kang Mao: There was a bar in Wuhan called Chameleon, that's where I first met Wu Hao. It was at a rock show. I remember when I walked



in, seeing Wu Hao, I thought he was was hot, he kept to himself. I thought, “That guy looks dangerous.” [laughs] After that, Wu Hao started to act strangely towards me. After a party, he would try to convince me to hang at his place to continue the party. Usually we would spend up to an hour on the street with him trying to drag me to his place, and me saying, “No, I don’t wanna go!” I thought he was really annoying and pervy. [laughs]

MRR: Haha... Eventually I guess it worked?

Kang Mao: We kind of stopped interacting after that, because I thought he was too dangerous and I never wanted to go to his house. It wasn’t until the summer of ’99, when I started doing Boys Toys, that I moved out of my college dorm to an apartment on the outskirts of Wuhan. I majored in Computer Science, so I was one of the very few people who had a computer of my own at that time. That attracted everyone from the punk scene to come over to my place to play computer games. Wu Hao loves computer games, and that’s how we became best friends. But we never really set the romantic relationship until the spring of 2000. One day all of a sudden, we just did it. [laughs] And started dating from then.

MRR: What was your motivation for opening Boys Toys?

Kang Mao: That was an exciting time, because back then in Beijing there was a punk club called Scream, and in Guangzhou there was a venue called Unplugged. Both of them were really famous nationwide. But in the middle of China, we were missing a venue that could hold live shows, and as one of the founders of this venue, I felt really proud. Most importantly, it was the venue that hosted all the punk bands in Wuhan. At that time, the biggest bands in Wuhan were punk bands. But as one of the managers of the bar I had to deal with so many different things. For example, Zhang Hai would always take off his pants at the shows, and whenever he’d do that someone would always call the police. And when the police showed up, I’d have to deal with them.

MRR: Can you share a crazy story or two from that time?

Kang Mao: Boys Toys was located right outside the wall of a university, actually in the middle of the wall because that wall itself was a building, and Boys Toys was inside it. Whenever the shows would end and it got really late, all the boys from the scene would get really drunk and start smashing beer bottles on the street. Later at night, when there were no cars, they’d whip

out their dicks and walk around pissing all over the street. Actually Boys Toys only existed for about six months, but during that period of time, every possible thing that could be smashed at the venue was smashed. Whenever people came to play, I never charged them for beer, they always drank for free. Because of that, my two other partners were really mad at me. They really wanted to make money, and they had no idea about what direction I was taking it in. By the time Boys Toys closed, we only had two glasses left, everything else had been smashed. All the toilets were smashed, everything was smashed. Because when people would get drunk, they’d just start smashing shit. [laughs]

MRR: Did you have any problems with the authorities?

Kang Mao: The property belonged to Huazhong Normal University, so we paid rent money to the school. But we also had to pay tax to the relevant government bureaus. Whenever the bureau people came in to check on us, we’d just pretend that we were a normal little bar that didn’t do shows, just sold a few cocktails, even though none of us knew how to make a cocktail. But there was a little door in the venue that led to a second-floor space, which is where bands would rehearse and where the pants would come off. But whenever people came in for

inspection I'd lock that door and say, "It doesn't belong to us, it's not part of our bar."

MRR: When and why did you move to Beijing?

Kang Mao: In 2000 No Pass went to play in Beijing and stayed in an area where a lot of musicians lived, Tree Village (Shu Cun). During that trip the rest of the girls disappeared, they ended up in all kinds of musicians' beds, and I went back to Wuhan alone. I felt bad, because my circle of friends was really small, and I thought it was really hard to find more people to keep the band going. And also, by that time, in the punk scene, a lot of bad things started happening. To me, punk was a thing that widened my horizons. It was something really pure and innocent to me. But the people who kept talking to me about punk at

that time, they'd do things that were against what they talked about. You'd see close friends fighting over a few bucks, fighting over a girl, really beating each other up. And I thought the circle was too small, I needed to go to a bigger city, to Beijing, to expand. So I moved here in October of 2001.

Wu Hao: In '98 or '99, Angry Dog Eye released a cassette tape. After a year we got a new drummer, Fei Lang, and we recorded a full album as Shitdog. We finished recording that in 2000, and in 2001 we went to Beijing to try to find a record label to release it. The band had never been to Beijing before, but Wu Wei and Zhang Hai had been to Beijing. I really wanted to get this album released, even though deep down I really resisted the idea of moving to Beijing. I had gone myself once, and I didn't like the vibe. Even though there were a lot of bands, it still

felt like people were doing it to be trendy. It was all about the looks, what jacket you were wearing, how you pose on stage. That's not my idea of rock'n'roll. But I still believed we should at least try to release the album, so we went to Beijing.

MRR: What was your lifestyle like when you first moved to Beijing?

Kang Mao: When Wu Hao first moved here he was staying with his friend, and then I came to live with him. His friend's apartment was paid for by the company he worked for, it was a tiny two-bedroom apartment on Chunxiu Road in Sanlitun. His friend had a girlfriend, and moved in with her, so we had the apartment to ourselves. Wuhan was perfect for punk, because the city is so hot, everything's cheap, and the people there don't follow the rules. Wuhan was also one of the few places in China that you could easily get cheap secondhand

stuff, and that helped a lot of young, broke punks. It was so different in Beijing. Whenever we left the house we'd have to spend 10 kuai (about \$1.50) on transportation, and that was way too expensive for us at the time. Also we discovered a huge difference between us and the people in Beijing, when it came to playing punk. They'd always talk about what kind of Levi's jeans you should wear, or what kind of spikes look better. In the winter of 2001, out of financial pressure, I got a normal job, as a copywriter and event planner. And in January 2002, the landlord kicked us out of the apartment, because we weren't supposed to be living there.

MRR: Why did you decide to start SUBS?

Kang Mao: Shitdog split up, I think because that big, imaginary road they saw ahead didn't exist. They came to Beijing with a really great piece of work, and they imagined a record label would sign them and



release it, but it didn't happen for them. So I think out of the pressure of life, they split up. But it's better for Wu Hao to tell this story.

Wu Hao: Shitdog broke up for many reasons. For one thing, there were huge differences in lifestyle between Wuhan and Beijing. And then there was financial pressure—we had to make a living in Beijing. But most importantly, our vocalist, Wang Junping, was having relationship issues. Besides music, there were other factors that would really affect a band's career, like romantic love, and brotherhood, friendship between brothers. And Wang Junping couldn't continue, because his love life was having problems. I believed, and I still do today, that Shitdog was China's first, and best, hardcore band. To this day I still think Shitdog was the best band in China.

Kang Mao: I agree!

Wu Hao: We saw a lot of other metal and hardcore bands, they only had the look, the empty structure of it. It was all pretentious. They didn't have the power or strength. But Shitdog had it all. That's why, after Wang Junping couldn't continue, me and Shi Xudong still had the passion to do something. And by that time, Kang Mao's band No Pass had also broken up, and she didn't have anyone to play music with in Wuhan. We were in a relationship, and we wanted to live together, and I had this place to crash in, so I told Kang Mao to move here, at least we'd have a place to stay. So then the three of us started SUBS, that's how it all began.

Kang Mao: Our first apartment in Beijing was in Sanlitun, and it was really close to a lot of venues so we could always walk to see shows. But a lot of bands back then, when they got on stage and played, they really looked like they were just rehearsing. We'd get so frustrated. We wanted to form a band that could wipe them off the stage. So in our tiny apartment in Sanlitun, Wu Hao would play his electric guitar without an amp, and I'd sing without a microphone, just sing into my fist. That's how we would practice. Then we started looking for a drummer. Of course the first person that came to mind was Shi Xudong, and he said, "Fuck yeah, let's do it." We were also looking for a bassist, and we found [former PK14 bassist] Sun Xia. Then we got kicked out of our place by our landlord, and we moved to a place in the southwest corner of Beijing. Sun Xia would come over, and Wu Hao would instruct her what to play. SUBS formed in February of 2002, and very unfortunately, that April, Sun Xia had an internal brain injury, and she couldn't play any more.

MRR: What were early SUBS practices like?

Kang Mao: I was still working that normal job back then. In those days, we practiced in a space on the east side of Beijing. I'd have to change into sneakers on the bus on the way to the rehearsal space. We'd practice from 10pm until after midnight. To save money, me and Wu Hao would make counterfeit bus passes, but they would only work on night buses. We would have to circle the entire city to get home because only buses with certain routes would fall for our fake passes. [laughs] After we started rehearsing, a lot of people would come and watch us, because word got out that even when we were just practicing, I would roll around the floor. Because we had all been in bands and had been on stage before, we weren't in a rush to play shows, we really wanted to write better songs.

MRR: What was your first show?

Kang Mao: It was February 20, 2003, at a venue called CD Cafe. Someone organized a show in memory of a musician who'd died, Sun Shu. We were told that we could play with the rest of the bands, even though our name wasn't on the poster. We played



at the end, when all of the bands on the poster had finished and people had started leaving the venue. We only played four songs, but everyone there was extremely shocked, because they'd never seen a band play this way. A few days later, there was a review of our performance in a music magazine called *Non Music*. So that show was very successful.

MRR: Why did SUBS choose to never sign to a label?

Kang Mao: Actually these days, the shows that SUBS play are slightly commercial. Because we still need to get paid by music festival organizers or event organizers to make a living as musicians. But in the '90s, when we first started playing, the punk that we understood was anti-commercial, against obeying the rules of normal society. I know now I seem like a normal adult, I'm not a fighter who argues with the rest of the world all day. But still, I want to protect the original motive, the reason I wanted to make a punk band originally. The reason why we never signed with a label is that, back when we started, the labels that existed then, what they could do we could do so much better. And now, there are industry bigwigs that pretty much have a monopoly on the independent music scene. Seeing that, comparing that to the original motive for me to make music, it's gone way too far. That's why we still won't sign.

SUBS: What have been the best aspects of remaining independent, and what are some of the worst drawbacks?

Kang Mao: As big record companies grow, the survival space for independent musicians gets smaller and smaller. Because these big record companies have total control in deciding what products to export, and they occupy all the music festivals. They're even taking over live music venues. And it's only going to get worse in the future. So it's harder and harder for us to survive as independent musicians. But the good thing is, I get to tell myself that the punk in my heart still lives. I'm doing this for the same reason I did it 20 years ago.

MRR: Which companies do you think are monopolizing the Chinese music scene today?

Kang Mao: I guess Modern Sky is the one company that comes closest to my idea of an industry monopoly. Because they're trying to take over all music projects, festivals, trying to sign every single band out there. Actually, doing commercial shows is not completely bad for a band, even though that's what a punk band is against at the beginning. But if taking a commercial gig makes the musician's life a little bit better, and it's not against what their music stands for, why not? But companies like Modern Sky are trying to take over everything. They turn everything into their product, including the bands.

MRR: As your attitude towards commercial shows has changed over the years, so has your music. Sound-wise you've shed a lot of your punk / hardcore edge. What about the idea or ideals of punk has stayed with you for your entire career?

Kang Mao: That's a hard question to answer, because if I answer it as an adult, I'd need 10,000 words to give all the history to explain it. But honestly, for me, what punk is...it's an entirely different possibility of what my life could be, that I saw when I was eighteen. And that's it. It's a life that was completely different from the frustrating reality I lived in at the time.

Wu Hao: To me, what punk is... Everyone, when you're sixteen, seventeen, in front of you are all kinds of roads. Some people choose to go on to heavy metal, some choose to go towards Guns N' Roses, some choose punk, some choose Britney Spears. For me, punk will always be the road I chose when I was sixteen.

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