

C-pop star Cai Xukun (aka kun) is about to takeover the world

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i-D spoke to the Chinese phenomenon in the midst of a sold-out US and UK tour.

英美公演期间, i-D 对话了这位来自中国的现象级音乐人

By Tássia Assis

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"I'm feeling awesome. I'm feeling very good. We got a show tonight," says a calm and confident voice on the other side of the line. I'm talking to the 20-year-old Chinese megastar KUN born Cai Xukun a phenomenon trailblazing the music industry in his home country. That serenity is not the first thing you would expect when listening to his music - an inebriating blend between R&B and electronic beats, with lustful lyrics that invite the mind to wander. With his bedroom eyes and pouty lips, its easy to paint KUN as just another brooding heartthrob, the kind who holds a carefree smugness while pouring his heart and hormones out. But his thoughts reveal a much deeper essence, and invite us into the mind of a meticulous artist.

“今晚的演出真的太棒了, 我现在觉得非常地开心。”电话那端, 声音沉着且自信, 正在连线的KUN是一位来自中国的现象级歌手, 在音乐领域极富开创性。话语里透露出来的尽是平静, 但如果聆听他的音乐, 情绪则完全不同。R&B和电子节拍的迷幻混合, 配以朦胧性感的歌词, 畅游在他创作的音乐世界。看着他迷离的眼神和微翘的嘴唇, 人们很容易认为KUN是一个略显忧郁的万人迷, 全情付出、魅力四射的同时又显得高傲而漫不经心, 但是他内心深处却住着一个老灵魂, 带领我们进入他严谨细致的艺术世界里。

During our call, the young singer was preparing to wrap up his first overseas tour. Following three concerts in the US — with stops for New York and Los Angeles sold out within minutes — the final sold out gig happened last Friday, 12 April in London. While his name might be a novelty for those who aren't familiar with C-pop (an umbrella term for the varied styles under Chinese popular music), KUN has been a leading force in the billion-dollar industry with his slew of talents and dedicated fandom (endearingly named IKUN — a translation of the expression love KUN in Mandarin.)

电话采访时，这位年轻歌手刚刚圆满完成他的首次海外公演。美国设有三场演出，其中纽约场和洛杉矶场皆在几分钟内售罄，4月12号伦敦场的门票也在上周五售罄。不熟悉C-pop（对中国流行音乐市场上各种音乐形式的概括性名称）的人或许从未听过他的名字，但KUN的才华和他热忱乐迷的支持已使他成为这个行业的领军力量。（KUN的粉丝昵称是IKUN——在普通话里谐音为“爱坤”）。

With over 22 million followers on Weibo, a self-composed and produced EP, multiple No.1 singles on the most influential Chinese music charts (Pull Up, the first single from his EP, retained the position for eight consecutive weeks on the Billboard China V chart), and two successful participations in survival shows under his belt, KUN's now ready to take over the world.

KUN在微博上拥有超过2200万的粉丝，他亲力亲为制作的EP，在中国最具影响力的音乐榜上获得了多项第一（EP中的第一首单曲《PULL UP》，在Billboard中国连续霸榜八周），他曾两次在偶像生存类节目中脱颖而出，KUN正在迎来属于他的时代。

Despite being only 20 years old, he defines himself as “an old soul”. KUN discovered American hip-hop and R&B classics like Stevie Wonder at a young age, while browsing on the internet. I think [finding those artists] just came from myself. I love old music, old singers, he adds. Back in 2013, he had the opportunity to study abroad in Simi Valley, a small city near Los Angeles, where he deepened his affinity for American music and culture. It shaped what I do now. Every experience in my life influenced my music and made me who I am.

尽管只有20岁，他却称自己拥有一个“老灵魂”。KUN在很小的时候，浏览网页时发现了美国嘻哈和蓝调音乐大师Stevie Wonder。他说到：“我觉得在了解那些艺术家的时候就是自我寻找的过程。我喜欢具有年代感的音乐，还有以前的歌手。”2013年时，KUN在离洛杉矶很近的一个小城市西米谷市学习，在那里他对美国音乐和文化有了更深入的了解。“它使我成为了现在的我。生活中的经历都会对我的音乐产生影响，并且使我成为了今天的我。”

Over the past four years, KunKun — as he is affectionately called by IKUN — has been relentlessly forging a solid path of his own. He first stepped into showbiz through brief acting stints in the Chinese productions Half a Fairytale and Lock Me Up, Tie Him Down. However, it was his participation in Anhui TV and MBC Korea's 2015 reality show Super Idol that launched his musical career.

过去的四年里，坤坤——IKUN们对他的爱称——艰难地走着他自己的路。他初次涉足娱乐圈是在电视剧《童话二分之一》，《完美假妻》和《女刑警李西西》中崭露头角。直到他参加了安徽卫视和韩国MBC电视台合力打造的偶像真人秀节目《星动亚洲》，他才真正开启了他的音乐生涯。

Super Idol spanned two seasons of extensive training in Korea, where 30 trainees fought for a chance to debut in a 10-member Chinese idol group later named SWIN. Although KUN made it to the finals and debuted in 2016, he withdrew a year later due to management issues, and focused on producing solo works. I was always thinking I can become an idol in China, but I learned a lot of things in Korea. They are really good at dancing and some artists have a really cool vibe on stage. I learned those things and brought them back to China, he recalls.

《星动亚洲》共有两季，30名参赛者在韩国接受大量声乐、说唱、舞蹈等的训练，争夺最后的10人偶像组合的出道名额，即SWIN。虽然KUN最后成功出道，并在2016年首次登台演出，由于合约问题以及他更想专注于个人发展，一年后他退出了SWIN组合。“我那时候想，我也可以在中国成为一个偶像。我在韩国学到了很多，他们的舞蹈真的很棒，有些歌手的台风特别酷。我在那里学到了很多，并想把学到的带回中国”，他回忆道。

In 2018, the opportunity to participate in iQiyi's Idol Producer came up. The Chinese show was based on South Korea's prestigious franchise Produce 101, and gathered 100 competitors that would later be narrowed down to form a 9-member boy group. Coached by prominent names in the industry such as Lay Zhang (from K-pop group EXO) and Jackson Wang (from K-pop group GOT7), they underwent four months of training with weekly eliminations that were decided by the public. A lot of talented, young people had been waiting for this moment for a long time. I'm very lucky to have been one of them and to have had the opportunity to share my music with people," KUN humbly points out.

2018年，他迎来了一个参加爱奇艺制作的选秀节目《偶像练习生》的机会。这个节目参照了韩国大获成功的选秀节目《Produce 101》的模式——从100位参赛者中选出9名组成一个男子团体。节目指导老师是著名歌手张艺兴（韩国EXO组合成员）和王嘉尔（韩国GOT7组合成员）等，他们在四个月的训练中，由全民制作人投票实行每周淘汰制。“很多有音乐梦想的年轻人已经等这个机会很久了，我非常幸运能成为其中一员，让我有机会和大家分享我的音乐”，KUN谦虚地说道。

However, his presence in the show was one of the most awaited, with some contestants openly admitting to being longtime fans. KUN says he “wasn’t so popular before,” but his million followers on Weibo at the time contradict that statement. With perfectly groomed ash blond locks, a blue velvet jacket and a revealing mesh shirt underneath (gifted to him by IKUN), his first appearance at the show was already an event in itself. For the first round of evaluations, he performed the sultry I Wanna Get Love his first self-composed track and drew sighs from the audience with his sex appeal and charisma. However, a modest demeanor offstage and an easy laugh (especially when the judges pointed out the suggestive lyrics of the track), showcased his genuine sweetness and hardworking nature — the traits that ultimately enraptured the public’s hearts.

有些参赛者大方的表示自己很久以前就是KUN的粉丝了，所以KUN的表演成了大家最期待的节目之一。KUN说，“以前并没有很受欢迎”，但是他微博上的100多万粉丝好像跟他说的没有很多人知道有些矛盾。精致的妆发，深蓝的天鹅绒外套，透漏着小性感的渔网内搭（IKUN赠送），他一出场就引起了一番轰动。第一次评级中，他表演了《I Wanna Get Love》——第一首自己作曲的歌——性感的外表和舞台上的魅力引起其他练习生的阵阵赞叹。良好的偶像自觉和腼腆的笑容（尤其当评委指出歌曲里性感的歌词）展示出了他本性可爱和工作努力的优秀品质，成功抓住了全民制作人的心。

Idol Producer was a raging success, gathering over 100 million votes on its final episode. Of those, 47.64 million votes were solely for KUN who placed first. Due to the surge of new artists rising from Idol Producer and other similar programs in China, 2018 was dubbed "the first year of the idols' reign" in the country, and KUN arguably stands as the face of this new generation. It was a big moment where people got to know about me, but actually I was just doing the same thing as I usually do, he says, in his characteristic brand of perseverance and humbleness that paved his way to become China’s No.1 pick.

《偶像练习生》节目取得了巨大成功，最后一期观众投票超过了一亿。其中KUN以绝对优势的4764万得票获得第一。《偶像练习生》和其他同类型节目为娱乐市场注入大量新生力量，2018年因此被称为中国的“偶像元年”，KUN毫无争议成为新生代的代表。“那时候越来越多的人知道我，但我还是一如既往，做着我想做的事”，KUN说道。他的坚持不懈和谦逊努力，使他成为中国的No.1。

The top nine trainees from the show formed the boy group Nine Percent, whose debut album *To The Nines* was the second most sold digital album of 2018 in China, and landed a No. 2 position on the Billboard China V chart. To clarify, the countrys music industry holds 96% of its revenue from digital releases, and 75% of that number comes solely from streaming sales. Tencents QQ Music, one of the biggest streaming services in China, also revealed Nine Percent as their Top New Artist of 2018, and the music video for *I Need a Doctor* held a place at the Top 10 Most Watched MVs in the platform.

人气最高的九位练习生组成了男子团体Nine Percent，首张专辑《TO THE NINES》斩获2018年中国数字音乐专辑畅销榜第二名，空降中国版公告榜第二。需要说明的是，中国音乐市场96%的收入都来自数字音乐，这其中75%来自流媒体销售。中国最大的流媒体服务平台QQ音乐透露说，Nine Percent是2018年人气最高团体，《I Need a Doctor》的MV在平台播放量稳居前十。

When I'm doing solo [work], I can do what I want, my own style, what I like. But when I'm with the group, I'm the leader — so I need to take care of all my members," KUN points out. He also mentions that it's important to find balance between all their different personalities. "I wouldn't say it's difficult, it just takes more time."

KUN聊到，"当我solo的时候，我可以自由地创作，做我自己的风格和我自己喜欢的东西。但是和团队在一起的时候，我是队长，所以我需要照顾到所有的成员。"他还提到在队员不同的性格间找到一个平衡是很重要的。"也不是说很难，只是需要多花点时间。"

KUN's expertise in balancing different matters, whether it's the vibe of a team or his own creative skills, doesn't come from today. His first EP, *1*, released on his birthday last year (August 2), displays full-fledged commitment to all aspects of making music. Besides composing, writing and producing all three tracks, he also took care of the album cover. Instead of a picture of his face (initially chosen by his team), he chose an intriguing image of a blue 3D bust of himself coming out of a placid, limitless ocean — like the birth of a new species; a visual translation of his fluid, enticing blend of hip-hop and R&B.

KUN平衡各种事务的专业能力，无论是在处理团队事务上的能力上还是他自己的创作力上都并非现在才形成的。他的第一张专辑，《1》，于去年(八月二日)他的生日发行，彰显出他对于音乐的全身心投入。除了作曲，填词和完成了三首歌曲的制作以外，他还负责了专辑的封面设计。他并未选择(最初由他的团队选择的)自己的照片，而是选择了一张耐人寻味的图片，是他在一片平静、无边无际的海洋中的蓝色3D半身像——颇有新物种的诞生的感觉，这是他将hip&pop与R&B以动态和极具吸引力的方式融合的视觉呈现。

A self-confessed perfectionist, the idol holds sturdy work ethics. "I work really hard and try my best to do my job. I love to learn new things," he claims. The music video for Pull Up, the sleek, sensuous single out of his first EP, was edited by him and incorporated many of his ideas, like the soaking wet dance shots. Even though the water was dirty, such scenes were necessary to convey the aesthetics he had in mind. "It's part of my perfectionism," he adds with conviction.

KUN承认自己是个完美主义者，他同时具有坚定的职业道德。“我努力地工作并尽我最大的能力去做好它，我也很喜欢去学新的东西”，他这样说道。《Pull Up》是他第一张专辑里的一首华丽又性感的单曲，MV由他完成剪辑并纳入了他的许多想法，比如在湿水中的舞蹈镜头，这样的场景对于传达他心目中的美学是必要的。“这是我完美主义的一部分”，他坚定地补充道。

However, KUN doesn't let this desire for excellence stop him of trying new things. Developing his skills in as many aspects of the industry as possible is "the way I can share with people my sense of art," he explains. "When you try to do new things, you get new ideas, and that can inspire you and make you stronger".

然而，KUN并没有让这种追求卓越的欲望阻止他尝试新事物。他解释说，尽可能多地发展自己在行业内各个领域的技能，是“我与人们分享自己艺术感受的方式”。“当你尝试做新的东西的时候，会有新的想法萌生，这能激励你，让你变得更强大。”

In front of the cameras, his magnetism attracts the viewer like moths to flames. Expressive looks, smooth movements, and a velvety, occasionally rough voice evidence a star power that is hard to ignore. Such is his dominance that it's easy to imagine the spotlight as his natural habitat. "I think I have a lot of energy when I'm making music, when I'm on stage. I'm like a lion," KUN says. I ask if he identifies with his Zodiac sign, Leo, and he agrees. "Maybe because I'm a Leo, I love performing, love to see people come to my stage." But when the lights go down KUN prefers to retreat into his own world. "I'm a quiet person, and I want to be alone and enjoy my own world, so that's what I usually do".

在镜头前，他的魅力磁场之于观众的吸引力像是火之于飞蛾。极富表现力的神情，流畅的动作，柔和却磁性的声线，是他具有令人无法忽视的明星魅力的证明。他在舞台上的统治地位让人不难想象他天生为聚光灯而生。“当我做音乐的时候我觉得我有巨大的能量，当我站在舞台上的时候，我就像是一头狮子。”我询问他是否认同他的狮子座的属性时，他选择认同。“也许是因为我是狮子座，所以我喜欢表演，喜欢人们来看我的舞台。”但是当聚光灯退去的时候，KUN更享受回到他自己的世界。“我是一个安静的人，我享受独处，享受我自己的世界，我通常也都是这么做的。”

In order to nurture that introspective side and refresh his ideas, the singer enjoys visiting museums and attending any kind of musical performances — from festivals to opera houses. "I listen to everything, but what I'm doing right now is more like my own style, KUN's style, you know?" Aside from the aforementioned American classics, he cites Nirvana and Radiohead as his current influences, as well as Lana del Rey and Billie Eilish. "They're dark, right? I like the night, I like darkness. It's a part of my soul," he says.

为了使自己保持内省，发掘新的灵感，这位歌手很爱参观博物馆，参加各种类型的音乐表演，从音乐节到歌剧院。"我听各种类型的音乐，但我现在做的更多的是带有自己风格的音乐，KUN式风格，你知道的。"除了上述的美国经典曲目外，他还提到了Nirvana 和Radiohead，以及 Lana del Rey 和 Billie Eilish。"他们的曲风有点暗黑对吧？我喜欢夜晚，我喜欢黑暗。这是我灵魂的一部分"，他说。

It provides space for imagination. And I always get inspired when it's quiet, late at night. It's just a great moment for me to create new things. Sometimes, I can write songs with a melody I heard in a dream. These creations haven't seen the light of the day yet. "Maybe soon," he teases.

"夜晚会提供想象空间，我总能在夜深人静的时候得到启发。对我来说，这是一个创作的关键时刻。有时候，我会用梦中听到的旋律写歌，这些作品还尚未问世。"应该快了"，他开玩笑说。

Singles like Wait Wait Wait offer further insight into what comes to play at KUN's inner world. The track's uplifting melody contrast the frustrated resignation of the lyrics, where he decides that "carrying the weight is better than to let you go". The music video was directed by Dave Meyers — who's worked in Ariana Grande's God is a Woman and Camila Cabello's Havana — and plays with dreamy CGI to tell a simple, yet effective coming of age story. KUN moves through scenarios inspired by Chinese arts and culture, plunges into deep unknown waters, gets trapped inside a box, and finally finds redemption as he breaks through his own limitations and orchestrates a multitude of beings.

像《Wait Wait Wait》这样的单曲可以进一步洞察KUN的内心世界。歌曲中鼓点欢快的旋律与压抑挫败的歌词形成了鲜明的对比，歌词中他认为"宁负这重压前行也好过放弃"。这支MV由曾参与Ariana Grande的《God is a Woman》和Camila Cabello的《Havana》的拍摄工作的Dave Meyers执导，并用梦幻般的CGI技术讲述了一个简单却令人印象深刻的成长故事。受中国艺术和文化的启发，KUN在画面中来回穿梭，跳入深不可测的水域，被困在一个盒子里，最终他突破了自己的局限，打破桎梏，在他指挥众多红色生物奏成的交响乐章中找到了救赎。

The young star has recently explored yet another side of music with his first DJ track, the booming EDM track Bigger. He started to produce his own remakes two years ago. "DJing is really a good way that I can show people my music sense. It's different from when you're singing and dancing, a different vibe, but I enjoy it." Incorporated into his overseas tour setlist, KUN likes the response his DJ sets have been getting internationally. "The audiences are very passionate, they enjoy my DJ set and are good at dancing as well. That's cool".

这位年轻的明星最近用他的第一首 DJ 单曲——节奏感极强的 EDM 舞曲《Bigger》开启了他在音乐上新的可能性。两年前，他开始自己改编曲子。"DJ打碟真的是一个很好的向人们传递我的音乐感受的方式。这和你唱歌跳舞的时候不同，不一样的氛围，但我也很喜欢。" KUN把《Bigger》融入到此次公演中，这场DJ打碟的国际化，让他非常开心。"观众们非常热情，他们非常享受，也能在现场嗨起来。这样挺好的。"

Currently, KUN is preparing the release of a music video for his new single, Hard to Get, which has also been performed in this tour. Coming out on April 27, the video is set in a blue and red nightclub that enhances the track's moody trap beats and KUN's melancholic, pinning delivery. "I just finished the music video in New York. It's coming out soon, I'm so excited. It's one of my favourite songs, actually.

目前，KUN正在为他的新单曲《Hard to Get》MV的发行造势，这首歌在此次海外公演中也已作为表演曲目呈现了出来。该MV将于4月27日正式发布，以红蓝灯光相间的club为背景，增强了歌曲的情绪化的节奏，以及坤式忧郁、间断的方式交付。"我不久前在纽约完成了MV的录制，这支MV马上要和大家见面了，我很激动。事实上，这也是我最爱的歌之一。"

Amidst a fully packed schedule until the rest of the year — including a huge tour in China where he expects to play for over 10,000 people — KUN hopes to find time to release a full album, and to come back to the west as soon as possible. His manager isn't shy when disclosing goals of breaking through globally. "It's so funny, he was texting me this," KUN adds with a laugh.

在今年已经被排满的行程里——包括国内的一场大型巡演，预计将超过一万人次，他希望能抽出时间发行一张完整的专辑，如果有机会，也希望能再次前往英美公演。他的经纪人在透露KUN要面向全球发展的目标时并无一丝畏缩。"太有趣了，他是发短信跟我说的这些"，KUN笑着补充道。

Keeping true to his low-key, steady nature, KUN himself seems more determined in showing to to the world as many of his creations as he can, no matter what the outcomes might be. "Maybe one day I will even make a film by myself. I just like to do everything, all for my music, all for my art".

保持低调、稳重的天性，KUN自己似乎更下定决心要向世界尽可能多地展示他的作品，无论结果如何。"也许某一天我甚至会自己导一部电影。为了我的音乐，为了我的艺术，我乐意做任何尝试。"