

With her EP *gao dan dan*, Helena Gao explores a music of in-betweenness, a way of being elsewhere without feeling lost

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I love telling the story of how I discovered this or that artist. And when I say love, I mean it without the slightest hint of irony, which may seem suspicious coming from someone who spends his free time writing music reviews for very few people. But there you have it: it happens to be true. Yes, yes, I take immense pleasure in telling these stories whenever the opportunity arises.

In Helena Gao's case, the story of discovering her music begins where more than 75% of music discoveries begin today: with the unexpected appearance of a track playing in the middle of an Instagram story.

This time, it was in a story posted by my friend Shushu that her music reached my ears. Shushu, incidentally, also contributed to a very cool feature on Helena Gao's very first EP, which I am about to review from a personal perspective.

Before that, let's go back just a little. Let's go back to my meeting with Shushu, since, without even knowing it, she was the person who allowed me to discover the *gao dan dan* project.

I met Shushu at the beginning of 2018, when she was studying in Paris, that beloved French capital several thousand kilometres away from her home, China.

That day, she was in a club in central Paris, a club called Le Klub, and this time I would very much like to tell you that I invented that detail ironically, but no: it is genuinely the name of the club, and the irony comes entirely for free, like that little spoon taped to the side of a jar of honey. You see the image?

That night, I remember the encounter fairly precisely. Shushu was in the middle of the dancefloor when I noticed her. If I mention this detail, it is because being alone in the middle of a dancefloor seems to me a beautiful representation of what it means to be both at the heart of something and on its margins. It is to inhabit that in-between space, a little like being abroad, in fact: being elsewhere, but not entirely at home. Being at the heart of a place without necessarily feeling familiar with it.

I am not claiming that I understood any of this at the time; truth be told, I understood nothing at all that night. I simply saw Shushu in that club. I was with a friend and suggested that she stay with us if she wanted to. That was more or less it.

The beginnings of friendships—and I want to insist on this—are almost always ordinary, while we keep expecting them to come with some mythical or extraordinary story... But that is almost never the case. Friendships often begin like this, with a barely formulated sentence in a tiny club. And that night, the club (or Le Klub, remember!) was hosting a Coucou! night, which at the time had become a well-established name on the Paris underground scene. I was there because Swan Meat was playing that night B2B with DJ Heroin, artists I loved (and still love, by the way).

At that point in the story, I did not know whether Shushu was already making music or had only just started. I no longer really remember, so I would rather talk about it carefully, because whenever we tell a story, there is always the temptation to say too much, to cast ourselves as the privileged witness of someone who knew another person before everyone else did. No, I am not the person who saw everything coming (at least not when it comes to Shushu's career). I saw nothing coming at all. I only saw a person standing alone on a dancefloor, in the in-between spaces of that Paris club, facing artists we both loved.

After that night, we became friends. We went out to other parties and, little by little, I learned that she made music, that she was starting to DJ, and that she knew the Shanghai underground scene very well, a scene that was beginning to attract a lot of curious people here in Europe. The following year, we even invited the Shanghai-based Chinese label Genome6.66Mbp to Paris, a collective Shushu eventually joined. It was club music that connected us.

It was music (club music) that connected us.

And I am deliberately putting that sentence here on its own, without adding anything to it, without any other linguistic artifice, because perhaps it sums up everything I have been trying to say from the beginning.

I remember with great joy the moments we spent together, sharing nights in clubs with our whole circle of friends from that time. I know the phrase “great joy” may sound strange, because it is so poor in meaning. But some emotions do not always have rich formulas with which to express themselves in words.

Okay, I know my introduction is particularly long. Introductions are always long for those who are not inside them, but this introduction reflects what I am about to develop about Helena Gao's EP and what she has been able to explain in certain interviews.

What she was able to say in those online interviews reminded me, by way of a mirror, of my encounter with Shushu and what lay beneath it.

What Helena Gao's EP reminded me of is perhaps less a story (the way I am telling it to you now) than a structure of stories that move.

At its core, her EP is about (not in its lyrics) what it means to be in two places at once, in Shanghai or Denmark; what it means to find yourself among others, in the middle of a club

thousands of kilometres from your hometown; what it means to live through those cultural and social interstices in which one does not find a true sense of belonging; what it means to discover that these places (a club or a city) can become new spaces for encounters; what it means to feel the independence of being at home while ultimately being elsewhere; what it means to turn stories into encounters or encounters into stories; what it means to be far away, or simply not quite from here; what it means to relive emotions after encounters made on one side or the other of the planet.

There is a little of all that, but above all there is an entire structure of stories that can then be written... and that move from one track to another.



Review of Helena Gao's EP *gao dan dan*

At home, elsewhere

Sometimes, feeling at home means precisely not being at home. This may sound paradoxical, but I think you have all experienced this feeling before. It can happen when you visit certain foreign cities, when you stay in apartments that do not belong to you, or during conversations whose references you do not entirely understand.

Yes, you can feel at home in places other than home. That feeling may even pass through you when you find yourself in one of those music clubs, surrounded by people you know almost nothing about, but with whom, for one night, you briefly share something precise, beautiful, intense enough for everything else to become secondary.

That feeling exists, and it has very little to do with belonging in the traditional sense of the word. I think it comes from something else. It comes from our ability, for a moment, for a night, to be surprised by the question of exactly where we stand.

That is what I recognised in Helena Gao's EP *gao dan dan*, even before I understood what the artist was trying to tell through it. The EP (through the subject matter of its tracks, but above all through the languages used) seeks to tell a story of belonging in spaces where, theoretically, we would not expect to find it.

In fact, the EP seems to highlight, in a particularly subtle way, what allows this sense of belonging to be built: in-between spaces, unexpected encounters, identities that are discovered less in the intimacy of a mirror than in the gaze of others, somewhere between two places, two languages, two versions of oneself. It does not speak of one specific place, but of the stories that certain environments have been able to enable and provoke.

That, then, is what interests me about *gao dan dan*. We never really talk about places, but rather about what they make possible. We can think of a club, an apartment, a bedroom, a street, a city, or a language used to sing. These are places as starting points, but never as final destinations. They are points of passage, from which an encounter, an emotion, or the story of a song can begin and continue elsewhere. With *gao dan dan*, Helena has produced something rare that I will try to develop here: the tracks are to be read as movements, within which stories (sung stories, here) emerge as we move from one to another.

The club

From what I have been able to learn about Helena Gao, the world of the club seems important. I therefore paid particular attention to this environment, which I also know very well, both in my reading of the record and in listening to it.

A club is never merely a place where something happens. It is often a place from which something can begin to move. An encounter can begin in a club without necessarily remaining there; a conversation in a club can continue elsewhere; a relationship that began in a club can turn into a memory, a song, a new story. The club then becomes, too, a destination like a country we travel to, stay in, and eventually leave, but it becomes, above all, a starting point, as I explained earlier.

A Chinese-Danish artist who grew up in Aarhus and now divides her life between London and Shanghai, Helena Gao spent a long time experiencing her Chinese identity as something to conceal rather than a belonging to explore.

In an interview with the media outlet RADII, she explains that this reclaiming really began when she started writing in Mandarin and also when she began spending time in Shanghai's underground scene.

This evolution therefore has nothing to do with an aesthetic exercise. For Helena, it is a way of transforming and erasing a singularity once experienced as an insecurity, turning it into raw material for artistic creation.

What is remarkable is that this reconciliation did not happen through a return to her origins, as can sometimes be seen with other artists. No, here, that reconciliation first came through music, through musical composition, and also through immersion in an underground club scene.

In several interviews, Helena Gao liked to present her sonic world (at least the one of the EP) as an illustration both of movement (towards a night out), of waiting (before arriving at the club), but also of that strange (and almost inevitable) emotional comedown that follows the party. She adds (and I think this is a very important detail, if not a crucial one, in understanding gao dan dan) that a large part of our existence unfolds between the events to which we retrospectively attach particular importance. I am talking here about our existence beyond certain intensely lived moments, whether in a place of celebration or at other moments in our lives.

This description of her music could quite easily be seen as a nice promotional phrase. You know, the kind of sentence that publicists and writers like me might put in italics in an article or press release before moving on to something else. But to me, these details are essential to understanding and expressing the record. This idea of transit, waiting, and the (post-night) descent contains an interesting creative intuition, because club music (and, by extension, Helena's music) is not necessarily music that talks about the party. Club music can also tell us about what brings us to it, what we are looking for there, what we take away with us when the lights come back on, go out again, or when it is already daylight outside.

On the EP gao dan dan, the dancefloor (or the club environment) is not necessarily explicit, but it exists in the background and thus becomes a provisional territory, a place where identities are not so much affirmed as put to the test.

But careful: when I say "provisional", I do not mean insignificant or lacking in real importance. It is provisional because it becomes the starting point for other stories.

You enter a place, stay there for a few hours, and what happens there can follow you even after you have left that same place. So, to return to the idea of the club, it is not simply somewhere we occupy for a certain amount of time; it is a place from which stories can begin.

An encounter can take place in a club and continue on a phone, then afterwards in the intimacy of a bedroom or a bar, in another city, or simply in the memories and recollections of the person who experienced it.

I do not know whether the name Sarah Thornton means anything to you, but she is a renowned sociologist and ethnographer who has worked extensively on club cultures, raves and subcultures, particularly on mechanisms of social distinction and the construction of identities within these musical scenes. If you do not know her work, I recommend taking a look if you are interested in these subjects.

If I mention her, it is because in 1995, in her book *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*, she described club culture (or, let's say, club cultures) as spaces where forms of belonging, hierarchies, but also and above all forms of collective recognition are shaped.



This therefore supports what Helena Gao's EP seems to express (in my view). But with Helena, it is probably necessary to shift that perspective slightly. Her club is not simply a place where one feels part of a clearly defined musical scene. No, it is a different place, a place from which some of her stories, the stories behind some of these tracks, were born.

Before going any further with this commentary, let's return for a few seconds to the musical dimension of this proposition.

The EP, entirely produced by Helena, blends different musical influences (which one might broadly describe as Scandinavian pop EDM) with patterns from China's new underground electronic scene, not to mention, of course, the two languages used in her songs.

This hybridisation between two geographical territories and the culture she carries is not a juxtaposition, with a backdrop on either side. Rather, this blend confirms the coexistence of two genuine sensibilities seeking, hand in hand, to produce a third territory, backdrop, space.

This third space allows us to read the EP *gao dan dan* in an entirely new way.

We have the music, the languages used in these different songs, Helena's personal relationship with China and Denmark, and also the world of the night, that place that does not allow you to feel entirely at home, nor entirely elsewhere.

The EP is a space made of several places, where several stories are born, several identities, and above all several trajectories—trajectories that can meet before each setting off again in another direction. And from all of this, the different songs were born.

I know, I know, all of this may sound abstract, but it will become less and less so as we talk in detail about the different tracks.

“wo sao ni”: the first real step in the story

Let's take the opening track, “wo sao ni” (literally, “I'm going to scan you”).

The track draws on a very common practice in Chinese nightlife (though not only there, obviously), which consists of exchanging WeChat details by scanning the QR code of someone you have met and adding them to your contacts.

How could one not see this as a playful nod to such a deeply rooted contemporary habit in China?

Naturally, when listening to the track, it is easy to imagine two people who have met and who, after a few uncertain words, end up exchanging their WeChat profiles via that QR code to be scanned.

What this implies is that the encounter can continue elsewhere, in another place, at another time. Technology, this “scan”, actually provides a new rite of passage.

In her interviews, Helena spoke about the moments that exist before and after the club. For me, the phone is an extension of the dancefloor, a device that allows the encounter enabled by the place itself to continue.

wo sao ni could therefore tell the story of two individuals meeting in a place that we might once again imagine to be the dancefloor or the corner of a bar in a club. The moment our two individuals give themselves the means to meet again, they begin to belong to a new space. The QR code becomes a doorway between two places: the place of the night and the still-undetermined place where the encounter will continue... In a few words, it creates the story's ellipsis.

All it takes is a gesture, a scan ("wo sao ni"), for the idea of one place to leave us for another, even though at first the song may seem to be telling nothing more than a practice. In fact, it tells us much more than that. It opens up narrative and interpretive possibilities and moves us, without our realising it, from one physical space to another.

Between "*wo sao ni*" and "*lao shi*": making the case that the next track may be the consequence of the previous one

The music written and produced by Helena sometimes gives me the impression that it wants to favour ambiguities of meaning rather than follow a progression that has to be emotional and unambiguous.

In the interview with RADII (yes, the same one), Helena also explained that she wanted to make productions capable of being melancholic, stimulating, direct and gentle at the same time... In other words: to work across several emotional territories, to once again represent different spaces of experience.

I think that is a brilliant idea because it allows us to reject the notion that a song must necessarily make us choose between euphoria and introspection, when it can be both, or something else entirely.

For example, the track "*lao shi*" opens up another space of understanding, which could very well connect with the continuation of the first track. Here the song plays with the language of desire, learning, and seduction.

From the very first lyrics, we find physical attraction and the idea of having this person back in one's bed, along with a fascination for their know-how and their mystery. Here, we feel as though we are living through the next (and potentially logical) stage of the first track (which implicitly suggests that there was an encounter, in a place. A club? It does not matter.)

Perhaps you are beginning, little by little, to understand that it is possible to listen to gao dan dan not as a project made up of independent songs, but as a series of movements, a sequence of places in the background, temporalities, and relationships that sometimes seem to answer one another.

wo sao ni would then be the moment of the encounter. lao shi, meanwhile, would be the moment when the encounter leaves the public space and enters the intimate one. The following tracks could very well move this story towards other emotional spaces, other forms

of relationship. nan peng you could represent a later stage in this thread of fragments of stories, as could bi shu shan ni.

What matters here is not whether the tracks truly tell the same story, but whether they obey the same logic of transit, movement, and place, and whether there has been a transformation between the place where they were triggered and the moment when we listen to them.

I know... perhaps it is not entirely clear yet, so let's go further before moving on to other elements of the EP.

If wo sao ni presupposes one place, lao shi presupposes another. We meet someone we scan in one place. We find ourselves facing this lao shi somewhere else, with all the imaginings that implies.

niu bi tells the story of a woman (Helena?) who sees herself as the protagonist of an extraordinary life. We find the idea of independence, self-celebration, a declaration of confidence... These are emotions triggered because this person's state of mind has moved from one state to another; there is therefore also, metaphorically, the idea of moving from one (psychological) place to another. The idea of transit is present once again.

nan peng you tells of the feeling of no longer wanting to be in a relationship while still hoping to receive a message from the person one still loves. We move twice over, both through a place (a bed, the hollow of a sofa, where our memories return, where our desires live) and through the place of memory. Indeed, all these memories move us into places where the encounter took place, where the memories remained. Once again, there is the idea of moving through a space, here a memorial one, to which we can no longer truly return but to which we would like to go back.

You see?

On language: turning the change of language into another movement

I read that some Chinese-speaking listeners had interpreted the title lao shi as a reference to a relationship between a teacher and a student. In fact, everything is a matter of linguistic understanding and contemporary idiomatic usage, because the expression can absolutely be used playfully. It is a very specific idiomatic expression tied to the newer use of language among a younger urban Chinese generation.

It is true that it can be tempting to reduce this episode to some supposed controversy over the limits of language use as a form of provocation in pop music. But that would miss the point and its subtlety. I am explaining this because I have taken a little interest in questions of idiom and language.

Allow me this digression.

A song does not merely carry lyrics from one language into another. In fact, it also carries (and this is the most interesting part here) interpretive contexts that are not always compatible with, or understood by, people who do not come from the same territory, the same socio-cultural world.

Here too, changing language means changing territory. I am not saying that every language necessarily corresponds to a clearly bounded culture, because that would be precisely the opposite of what is happening here, but I am saying this because a language always comes with its whole set of usages, references, intimacies, and ways of looking at a situation.

The movement proposed by the EP is therefore also linguistic, cultural, and emotional. We do not merely leave one place for another, but move from the story of one place into the story that follows. We move from one way of understanding the world to another way of apprehending it. The track *lao wai* echoes this particularly well, in a way that is rather meta, admittedly, but also very interesting.

I will come back to that later, because I would like to end by pointing out that, like any language, Mandarin is not preserved from all transformation, waiting to be used in accordance with some authentic representation of Chinese culture. No, Mandarin is also a living language, shaped by the codes of Chinese pop culture just as it can also be shaped by codes from Western pop culture... It can take on new forms, whether those of desire, humour, but also those arising from the idiomatic freedoms taken by an artist who refuses to artificially separate her different belongings.

There is something particularly bold, and I love it, in considering that a language can accommodate emotions and behaviours that do not necessarily correspond to the expectations of everyone who speaks it. That is what makes a language alive. That is what working with language means; and in music (we see it a lot in rap), that is what creates new forms of poetry.

On the feature with Shushu: showing how the story also moves through purely musical encounters

The connection between Shushu and Helena Gao seems almost self-evident to me, given how their worlds and themes resonate with one another, both intimately and musically. To me, this connection goes beyond the simple function of a feature. It bears witness to the continuity between relationships formed in clubs and those that continue through music. It is a way of turning an encounter into something that lasts.

Now, we could extend this idea into a more general perspective.

Since stories begin in certain places, they can also change form when we leave them.

An encounter can become a conversation. A conversation can become a memory. A memory can, in retrospect, become a song. So why not imagine that an encounter between two artists from a similar musical world could also literally become the music itself?

In any case, it is another way of looking at the logic of the record.

The territory of music produces the encounter. The encounter produces the artistic relationship. The relationship produces a song. And that song allows the sung story (the story of *lao shi*) to circulate once again through new spaces.

Bringing the listener into this circulation, this multiple space of transit

To develop my idea and my commentary so far, I have indeed spoken at length about the club as a place that allows us to understand and make explicit the state of passage in which the social postures we know become less fixed and new forms of relationship can emerge.

Yet Helena Gao's music is not a rite of passage in the strict sense, at least not in its anthropological understanding. However, it shares an essential property with rites of passage. It temporarily suspends certain categories in order to allow other ways of being together.

Remember that Helena Gao's experience, as expressed in certain interviews, is marked by geographical distance, cultural differences, linguistic misunderstandings and also, to a certain extent, emotional contradictions. In her EP, she does not claim to provide an answer to them; she organises them musically.

With its seven tracks running for around fifteen minutes, *gao dan dan* works more like a sketch of a world than a work that would exhaust all its possibilities (and that is probably for the best, in the end). Because, in fact, this brevity brings coherence and validation to the subject I have been discussing from the beginning. The record is interested in moments of transition, and it does not aspire to turn them into destinations.

The EP is therefore not so much the image of an artist who has finally found her home. It is the portrait of an artist discovering that a home can be temporary, multiple, collective, built together... perhaps with her listeners?

Because what is a dancefloor, a foreign city, a language one learns to inhabit? What is a person met in the middle of a club, to whom you ask for their QR code so you can scan it? What is the memory of an ex you loved deeply, when the only territory left to us is the images in our minds in which we sometimes find ourselves again? What does it mean to believe that our life is extraordinary if, the next day, we miss someone and our whole life seems depopulated? What does it mean to feel the desire for adventures with a stranger if, deep down, there is someone we cannot quite manage to forget?

Because these questions are somewhere there, in transit, inside Helena Gao's EP. They are there behind the lyrics, the writing, the stories that emerge from the notes of her pop music.

And these questions are ones we all carry, questions that pass through the interstices of life. Whether the day after a night out, or months later, it does not matter.

Perhaps there is one final movement to understand in *gao dan dan*, perhaps even the most important one. It is the one that leads to us. Because when Helena translates these experiences into songs, she makes these stories leave their spaces of origin for a second time.

We do not really need to have been in such-and-such a place in Shanghai, to have met the person who inspired this or that song, or to have the same desires or nostalgias as her in order to be moved in turn by what they produced.

No, we do not really need any of that, because this EP does it for us. This record creates a story that all of us have lived somewhere along the way, and it allows that story to continue into a space where it was never really destined to arrive.

One might think that all these things are foolish, but they nevertheless share one common property: they allow us, if only for a moment, to be elsewhere without necessarily feeling lost.

Because sometimes, by reliving these stories in our own way, through music, that is precisely where the feeling of truly being at home begins.

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→ **Listen to the EP on Bandcamp:** <https://helenagao.bandcamp.com/>

→ **Follow the artist on Instagram:** <https://www.instagram.com/gaohelenagao/>