

BANDING TOGETHER

Southern China's Julian Zhenren beats off competition from nine other music groups to win a major contest, **Chen Nan** reports.

After a five-hour bus journey and a four-hour flight, four young men made their first trip to Beijing from their hometown, Lianping county, Guangdong province. Instead of visiting tourist attractions, like the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, they walked into a live house venue located in downtown Beijing, where they were going to perform the next evening.

The band, named Julian Zhenren (after a mountain in their hometown), comprising guitarist and singer-songwriter Ouyang Haopeng, trumpet player-singer Mai Haipeng, drummer Wu Feng and bassist Ye Wanli, was among the 10 finalists of the 2018 Original Band Contest, which was held at Tango Club in Beijing on Nov 10.

Organized by Taiwan-headquartered Rock Records and Xiami, one of the leading music streaming platforms in China, the contest, which kicked off this April, attracted more than 500 Chinese bands to apply.

After a four-hour battle, in which horns sounded the musical attack, riffs were exchanged and percussive blasts were sent forth, they stood victorious. To the victor, as is often said, go the spoils, which, in this case, was the opportunity to record their own songs signed to the Rock

Records label, including collaborations with veteran producers as well as promotion of the finished product — a prize worth 1 million yuan (\$144,000).

"This is our second time performing together onstage. Five months ago, we performed about 20 minutes in a live house venue in Shenzhen," says Ouyang, 26. "It's an incredible experience for us."

Two of their songs they performed were in the Hakka dialect, one of which is titled *Yeyou Shen*, literally translated as "nocturnal wanderer", after a mythic character in *Shanghaiing*, or *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a collection of legends written more than 4,000 years ago.

In the Hakka dialect, *yeyou shen* refers to "those who fool around and do nothing", Ouyang says. He wrote the song based on a real event that happened about 10 years ago, when one of his schoolmates was stabbed by a hooligan wandering around outside the school.

"Soon everyone in our small county knew about it and it was the first time that I lost a friend forever, which is still overwhelming and shocking to me now," Ouyang recalls.

After the band performed the song, one of the judges of the contest, Gao Qi, the leading vocalist and songwriter of the Chinese rock band, Over-

load, says: "I am impressed by the song though I don't understand the Hakka dialect. When I read the Mandarin translation of the song's lyrics, I was surprised by the wild imagination. They turned a sad story into something poetic and fictional."

Gao adds that while the simple guitar-driven melody repeats itself, the song takes him to the mountainous area of the small county.

The other judges include some of the country's veteran indie musicians, including singer-songwriter Hao Yun and songwriter-producer Zhang Yadong.

Before forming the band five months ago, Ouyang worked at a film and television company in Shenzhen as a designer. He returned to his hometown and started teaching art at a local primary school two years ago. Trumpet player-singer Mai and drummer Wu are both music teachers at the local primary and middle schools in Lianping county. Bassist Ye works at a musical instrument store in the county.

"We are childhood friends and we all still have our regular jobs. As teachers, we have summer and winter vacations, which enables us to make our own music with lots of free time," says Ouyang, the self-taught singer-songwriter, who has formed many bands



Trumpet player and singer Mai Haipeng of Julian Zhenren, an indie band from Guangdong province, sings the song *Yeyou Shen* at the Original Band Contest held in Beijing on Nov 10. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Paul Yan (center), a judge of the contest and a music producer from Taiwan, awards trophies to some of the individual winners, including singer-songwriter Ouyang Haopeng (first right).

since high school.

"After the debut performance in Shenzhen, we decided to take it seriously. We enjoy performing onstage and getting the audience involved," Ouyang says.

"We heard about the contest through Xiami and just decided to send them a recording

because we have about five original songs.

"We didn't expect that we would be able to enter the first round of competition held in Guangzhou, let alone win the overall competition in Beijing. However, this is just a beginning."

The second prize of the con-

test was awarded to Chengdu-based rock band, Monkey Legion, while the third prize was scooped up by Fuzhou-based pop band, Mint Green.

"One of the best parts about being at a contest is that we perform to lots of people and get their immediate response, which is always rewarding," says Fu Han, lead vocalist of Beijing-based rock band, Queen Sea Big Shark, one of the most popular indie rock bands in China. The band, which formed in 2004, closed the contest by performing four of their hits, including *Be Wild*.

Rock Records and Xiami launched the Original Band Contest for indie singer-songwriters and bands in 2015.

"It's getting bigger and better all the time. We've seen thousands of young Chinese bands, who play original and real music live. We've traveled around the country to see their performances. It's exciting," says Paul Yan, one of the

judges of the contest and a well-known music producer from Taiwan, who is credited with producing the album, *A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty*, for Chinese rock band Tang Dynasty in 1992, as well as Chinese rock musician Dou Wei's album, *Yanyang Tian*, or *Sunny Days*, in 1995.

A former judge of Taiwan's Golden Melody Awards, Yan moved to Beijing in 2005 and describes it as a city "full of rock 'n' roll".

"Compared with the 1990s, we now have more bands and more live house venues across the country. Young people, obviously, build on a thriving local scene with their original and diversified music," Yan says. "Though the bands are influenced by the Western acts, they keep coming back to their own cultures and figuring out a way to express themselves."

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